

# Magic as a Process of Social Discernment

## Introduction

When we hear of magic, we usually think of it as something shameful or inferior. If a fellow Westerner employs magic, we think of it as eccentricity at best, or we recognise it as sheer perversity or an attempt at working a trick for wicked ends. This is perhaps because we are not far from the magical mentality. We have our own little jokes about some rituals that we use: not taking an umbrella along on a picnic so that the farmers might get some rain; using “body english” to steer a golf ball on the putting green; or following a “system” that successfully predicts the winners of horse races. Magic for us leaves a sense of shame or disappointment because we think it is bad science or against true religion. This point of view has been shared by anthropologists in the past, who have studied primitive magic and called it “the bastard sister of religion”,<sup>1</sup> as an arrogant attempt by man to control nature or his own destiny. Daily, it is called a horror and an enemy by hospital personnel who see magic rivalling true science in the healing of people’s lives.

In this paper, I suggest that magic has complete legitimacy in its own right as a system of discernment and meaning. Of course I do not mean by this that all magic is good or lawful, nor do I mean that it should resist genuine science or true religion, but I suggest that [in principle] magic might be seen as a discernment tool of the society that employs it. Within that society magic needs no defence, but since outsiders have given it a bad press, this is an attempt by another outsider to say a good word for magic. While observing magical rites and hearing stories of magical happenings in the Yangoru area of the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea, I did not get the impression of something evil or ignorant in magic, but the feeling that I was encountering a set of terms of reference used in this culture for people to discern, to explain and to deal with things happening to them.

Magic tends to be a complete system, and so its separate events should not be judged by other standards. It might seem incredible to us that a man roasting a little package over a fire believes that he is thereby directly attacking another man, but it would be just too insensitive to judge the usefulness of this action by some standard beyond its own cultural context. There is little of the mechanical image in a tribal society that would serve as a model for interpreting magic as a mechanical thing. Village life is not filled up with machines that give predictable responses.

Mr. Allen Freudenburg of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, has suggested to me that "why" questions were best handled by the vernacular *yehe ye na?* (literally, what happened question-marker) and the pidgin *olsem wanem?* (like what, how) both of which more closely reflect the meaning "what happened and then ...?" The intimacy of the connection between cause and event as suggested by the standard translation *bilong wanem?* (because of what, what connection) mostly serves to satisfy the European mind. If the absence of alternatives is the hallmark of the primal mentality, then a closely reasoned tracking of an event to its cause is simply unnecessary. The meaning of magic is not exhausted once you have pointed out that it is not one of the physical sciences.

## A Definition

Magic is an all-embracing process of social discernment. By discernment I mean the psychological process whereby man, as an individual or in a group, tries to interpret and read meaning into all the data of which he is aware in a particular situation. Traditional solutions have been established for recurring problems, and discernment involves applying these in a way that is relevant and adequate to the data now known and later to be discovered. The truth of this process for the participant lies in its usefulness for providing him with a course of action he considers profitable. In terms meaningful to the culture, magic satisfies a need to know what is happening to oneself, and how one stands with others. Further, it offers a certain causality and a way of handling the world.

In the tribal village situation, magic works with high effectiveness. Magic does in fact use certain scientific procedures: various explanations are sought and given relative evaluations; the test of effectiveness determines whether rites survive; and accuracy of performance is demanded (although word-of-mouth transmission of magic down the generations rules out too precise a notion of accuracy in performance.) On the other hand magic reaches over into the area traditionally associated with religion by Western scholars. Magic seeks fundamental explanations of a man's position in the world; the world of spirits is involved in its rituals and

meanings. If magic is to be understood sympathetically then, it can neither be defined simply as a set of rituals, nor as a tool in the hand of an arrogant man trying to manipulate the world.

My distinct impression on viewing magic in its context was that there was more than the operation of a tool here. Magic does not fall into the category of an instrument in the objective world where one thing has a fixed relation to another thing and is the same for all contexts at all times. Magic is definitely a *social fact*, a concrete performance based on the relationship of one person to another person. It goes further and describes man's relationship to the world as thoroughly social in the sense that human responses are expected of the physical world. And it seems to be based on an understanding that personality strength goes beyond the apparent physical limits of an individual man. Man's personality is able to be extended through spirits or by other means and thus able to cause effects in the world.

In summary, magic consists of assigning a personal character to events in the world and giving a meaning to things that calls forth a personal response in actions and/or words which are held by the society to be spiritually powerful of themselves. The focus in magic is on the performance of these words or actions so that they give a feeling of satisfaction primarily to the user.

## Types of Magic

An amazing thing about magic is its great variety. There seems to be magic for everything. It is so pervasive that it obviously indicates a whole outlook on the world. That is why I have referred to it as a "system" and an "all-embracing process". One magical event calls forth a subsequent event, and one form of magic is used to explain another piece of magic, or remove its influence, or discover its source. Magic is the way the culture is satisfied to explain things that occur.

Although magic is a continuing cyclic system, it is appropriate in this discussion to isolate two basic moments in the cyclic pattern: magic of *explanation* and magic for *effective action*. It is to be understood that these are not really two different kinds of magic, for explanation is sought in the context of wanting to do something, and effective action, as previously stated, is not an instrument as much as it is a stretching out of the feelers of a personality. In describing these two "types" of magic, I will try to make the case that the real significance of magic is in seeing it as a social discernment process.

First, it might be helpful to have a more complete description of what some particular magical rites in a village involve. The following accounts were given to me with few reservations of secrecy by an old man in the Yangoru district (East Sepile

Province, Papua New Guinea). They were given in the presence of women and children of the family, and the actual performance of the rites was completely public. They would not seem to be rites of particular cultural significance, but of simple daily usage. Hokmofie of Kiniambu first told me the following myth:

Yenkle and his son Yisause would always eat dry food, merely taken from the garden and cleaned. His wife Winuei and his daughter Yafonuei would always eat cooked food. Yenkle came and beat his wife when he found out about her trickery in hiding the good taste of cooked food from him and his son. In the course of the beating she lifted up her leg and fire came out of her vagina and cooked the man and the bush, and left only the grassy plains of today.

Accordingly, when you burn your hand or find any such painful ailment, you can blow on your hand and say,

Winuei koit koit, Yafonuei koit koit,  
sueia koit koit, kauia koit koit ...

This does not bear much translation as it is only the form of recitation of pairs of significant names: Winuei and Yafonuei come from the myth; *sueia* is pitpit and *kauia* is the rib of the sago palm, both items having been burnt by the fire in the myth; the "koit koit" element of the spell seems to be mainly a rhythmic device as well as a blowing element. The whole spell finishes with two good blows. The chant goes on for ten or twenty minutes naming further pairs of items burnt by the mythical fire.<sup>2</sup>

The connection between the myth and the ritual formula here would seem to lie in the understanding that fire, potentially as explosively troublesome in village life as women and sex, has now been domesticated. It changes the quality of daily life when under man's control. The man who has knowledge of this myth and ritual, thereby controls the power of fire, and by such a personal application of his power as breathing on the body, he brings ease to the burning sensation of a swollen tropical sore, a cut, or any pain felt to be similar.

Hokmofie refers to his house as a kind of hospital, because people are always coming to him with their ailments, and free of charge, he works appropriate magic for them. For someone who comes to him, he gathers some leaves from the coral tree and forms them into a cone which he holds before his mouth and into which he recites the spell in a whispering voice. The leaves are then rubbed onto the person with the complaint. This magic can be used for many ordinary sicknesses, and for chicken pox, which is when "a spirit has spit on you".

This shows the form for much of the magic used by Hokmofie in his village. There is a singsing to assist in carrying heavy loads which refers itself to a myth about the first men and animals coming out of a local hole in the ground:

Pompo wiang wiang, hompilomo wiang wiang,  
Yawei wiang wiang, Nankilomo wiang wiang ...

Again, this chant is not translatable but is rather a listing of pairs of names of men and animals that goes on and on. The first two names here are names of birds, and the "wiang" imitates a bird's call. The latter two terms in the formula are names of significant men who came out of the hole together with the birds. The invocation of the birds occurs here with this presumed knowledge of their origins and thus a control of their powers of being very light. The ancestors are invoked as the very epitome of power and ability to get things done. It is expected that the ancestors who share a common identity with the magician will, by the invocation, share their power. This spell is whispered over the leaf of a betelnut tree, and this is used to strike the load to be carried, and then thrown on the road to be used. This piece of magic "would be good too to make a car get out of a bog". There are similar magical spells for many needs, which use connected pairs of names of things or men.

Hokmofie found it very difficult to understand why I was interested in his magic. He refused to tell me any love magic because he was firm that I should never employ it. It was thus an act of generosity on his part to tell me his spells, as he presumed I would use them to my own advantage. He must have felt a certain disappointment at my meanness in not telling him some of my own spells. Alternatively, he would have to scorn my lack of magic.

Bronislaw Malinowski, in his essay, "Magic, Science and Religion",<sup>3</sup> makes much of the fact that magic serves as a dramatic expression of the performer's intentions or desires. The magic I witnessed was done with an attitude of concern and confidence, and there was one young man who told me that he would never bother with his grandfather's magic again, because, although done with confidence, there was no sign of caring in the old man's ministrations. Magic is established for a world which is viewed as being founded on person-to-person relationships, and when it degenerates into mechanical performance, it becomes empty. There are other forms of magic which help people discern what is happening to them; enable people to establish how they stand with others; and suggest ways to manage their lives and deal with their particular circumstances. I shall consider these within two broad groups: Magic of explanation and Magic of effective action.

## **Magic of Explanation**

### **Personal Worries**

The most common concern that gives rise to the practice of magic in Yangoru is sickness. Although there does seem to be such a thing as

“simple sickness” in village life, where a small accident is encountered or a brief ailment contracted, anything unusual about the sickness will make people think of causation by some sort of personal agent. If a sore will not go away, or an eye suddenly swells up, or if there is a feeling that the sickness is just staying too long, then it is time to consider who has cause for complaint with the sick person, or who thinks they might have cause.

If the sickness is not very serious, and a passionate dispute with someone else is not obvious, then it seems that the cause of the sickness is sought with the spirit world. A skilled confessor is called in to enquire, “Where did you go before contracting the illness? What did you do in this place? Did you cut a special vine there?” Such questions seek out an offence against the guardian spirit of the family and its locality, or determine whether there has been some trespass on a sacred place. If these territorial spirits are linked with the affliction, then something from the location is collected, has a formula recited over it, and is placed in a bowl of water so that by the addition of heated stones, steam from this water can be directed over the sick person.

Another kind of sickness,, perhaps one associated with a feeling of failure in enterprise, might be laid at the door of the spirit of someone recently departed. If the afflicted person becomes conscious of a pattern of lack of success in his life, then his thoughts will be led to review any possible acts of impiety against his deceased parents or grandparents. If the mourning rituals were not properly performed, then he should be led to make good this lack so that his sickness will be removed. This and the immediately preceding case clearly venture into the field of religion, dealing with unseen, more powerful spirits. Magic and religion stand side by side in the repertoire of “Cures of Illness”. It seems to me that magic and religion arise from the same mentality. There is no basic difference in the way a user thinks that magic or religion should be employed in this society. There is a religious root to magic for it is given to man, by personalities now thought of as spiritually powerful, for the sake of influencing a realm of special control and power. I suggested in my definition above that the main difference is that magic is “near-sighted” in that it is careful in practice and concerned first for one’s personal satisfaction. Religion focuses on the more “remote” aspects; the satisfaction of the other.

Some less serious sickness is attributed to the foolish breaking of someone else’s prohibition. If magic has been worked for the success of a new garden and someone rashly enters the garden before the prohibited time is over and the garden made safe for all, then the “heat” of the magic, its close association at the moment with the names of distinguished spirits, will cause sickness. A man wishing to protect his betelnut from thieves will put a sign of taboo around the base of the tree, and include with it the wish that a good

set of boils or perhaps even a broken leg will be visited upon any trespasser. There are many other taboos which will cause sickness when violated. In one instance, a baby's ears which seemed to be trimmed off the top at birth, were traced back to the father's action of carrying a tabooed knife and trimming a pig's ears while his wife carried the child in pregnancy.

When a sickness turns grave, or shows an ominous persistency, the discerning mind of those involved turns from these more fretful kinds of magic to the grimmer types of magic, sorcery or witchcraft. The witch (*sanguma*) seems to be associated with hysterical forms of sickness in the Yangoru culture, and perhaps can be discerned as the cause of death where sorcery simply does not seem too likely. But the whole concept of *sanguma* proved difficult to explore.

Sorcery (*poisen*) is considered rife in the Yangoru area. Much time is spent in meeting over seriously ill people in an effort to force hidden disputes to emerge, as well as to scrutinize and evaluate all kinds of debts from the past, so that some settlement might be reached. The mourning period after a death includes three days of such discussion. An individual will venture forth into the forum and remind someone else of a vivid disagreement that fellow had with the sick person in the past. He places a little stick in the ground to establish his point. The accused party, to clear his name of sorcery in this case, must come forward with a description of how this dispute of the past has been successfully repaired, and then he can remove the accusing marker. So the process goes on until some feeling is allowed to grow and remain about a personal difficulty that must be afflicting the sick person. There is a ritual available to express contrition on the part of any party who feels they might have caused the dispute. For this, a large fern leaf is split along its rib to allow a hole through which a person might pass. The dispute is spoken over the leaf which is then passed over the head and down, shedding it like a used garment. Thus the dispute is symbolically left behind. Otherwise an appropriate compensation can be offered; or the final solution of avenging sorcery can be applied.

It is in sickness, then, that magic can be seen at its most systematic, as a cultural vocabulary to discern cause and procedure when some understanding is needed. As to the actual performance of magic such as sorcery, it seems to be all a matter of repute. One man must gather the leavings of his victim as the materials of sorcery. It is up to a "bigman" to proceed with the magic. He uses a messenger to send the materials to the actual operators—the *yehwontuo*, the man who performs the incantation, and the *mowintuo*, the man who does the roasting of the symbolic article in lime or fire. With the magic taking place at four removes from the actual dispute, there becomes serious question whether sorcery is not purely a matter of social discernment, whether it is at all based in

ritual fact. Neither this man nor this one nor this one nor this one could ever be pinned down to a "yes" or "no" answer to the question, "Did you work poison?" But the social process goes on; the process of remembering disputes, making accusations and defences, and all the while there is a presumption that magical rites of sorcery have occurred.

### **Natural Events**

It does no good for a Westerner to argue with a villager that statistical science allows the purely random happening. While everyone knows that trees fall daily in the bush, and that motor accidents are bound to happen, there is a stage of concern about these events that can bring them under the scrutiny of the community as a magical happening. They become person-to-person happenings rather than physical occurrences. If a young man happens to be where a palm tree falls during a storm, or is walking on the highway at night and knocked down by a car, the question becomes, "Why have these normal daily events suddenly become deadly? What social event has occurred to put wrath into nature?" In the same way an isolated clap of thunder or a sudden rush of wind must be interpreted in personal terms: it is someone trespassing in a spirit place.

In this magical view of the world, many things are surprising, but little seems to be impossible. People can see a bandicoot run along a log and then turn into a lizard. Then it becomes time to wonder, "Who has just done what?" As with Western farmers, a bad season on the farm means time for a lot of soul-searching. But in a tribal situation, the causes for a crop failure are sought in personal areas: Has someone worked magic to bring harmful insects into the garden? Did someone work a spell that was effective with the spirits of the locality to cut back growth? Has some rainmaker been at work, for whatever reasons he might have, to cause the crop of the neighborhood to spoil?

I believe the point in all of this is not the arrogance of a man who thinks that he has the tool to control the universe, nor is this all concerned with the precise and secret performance of the ritual. But rather, this kind of magic with regard to natural events is concerned mostly with discerning what is wrong, given the expectation that natural causes have motivations that are similar to one's own personal motivations. The Westerner is able to share his scepticism about the effectiveness of this kind of magic when a practitioner tries to exercise his powers in public. If there is a celebration going on and it starts to rain, the men who fancy themselves as rainmakers wait around for the first sign of the slackening of the shower. As they perceive their moment they will cry out, "Hoi!" as the operative word to command the rain to cease. This is generally greeted by others in the celebration with a lot of muttered cynicism about people making



outrageous claims for themselves. But it is a chance for the rainmaker to improve his reputation if the elements obey him.

Let us now turn to the other moment of magic, not the way it is generally handled and discussed in society, but the moment at which an individual or small group of people sets about the task of taking some effective action through magical means. I do not believe that this is in fact such a different matter from the role of magic in explanation of events. It seems to me that the image of a Western individual with highly specialised knowledge is a picture of remote and isolated action. But I think the magical specialist, for all his awe-inspiring power, is still completely a part of the on-rushing social intent. He is doing what people expect of him, performing when they expect it of him for motives with which they can readily sympathise. The magician is a specialist too, with esoteric knowledge, but his most important skill is to discover what his society expects of him at any time.

## **Magic of Effective Action**

### **Magic on Things**

There is one whole clearly recognised area of magic that has to do with objects in the village. The making of drums, spears or houses; the planting of gardens; the encouraging of growth on trees and the carrying of heavy burdens. These are all matters requiring skill, but which are rendered successful only for those with the proper magic. These actions, if done in private, might not seem to fit under the heading of social discernment, and if they are done with confident reliance on their efficacy, they might seem to be more a tool. But it is the element of confidence in one's ability as a man in society that would seem to be the key to the magical gestures. "Be a man" is an injunction I often heard around the village, and it meant, not any super-virile, aggressive and emotionless display that might possibly follow in our Western society, but the capable fulfilment of tasks that fall within the role of a man in village society. A boy becomes a man when he can share the village burden of hunting, carrying or house-building.

It can be easily understood that to take a tree from the bush and to be able to fashion it into a drum that can sound for miles is a genuine skill and probably requires particular graces of dexterity, patience and luck. For this magic, there is required secrecy and taboos of food and sexual intercourse. This is meant to sharpen the operator's skills and to provide him with the self-assurance that will benefit his task. This might seem an elementary procedure to Westerners who are used to seeing athletes "psych themselves up" before performing. But the young and those without skills in this area are struck with wonder when they see such competence in

action. It is obviously a gift to be able to do this, and the access to the gift is presumed to be the mastery of magic. We could translate the idea of magic here into western terms as a careful cultivation of talent to accomplish a work of art.

When the leaves are assembled for thatching a house, the job begins by wiping a bundle of threads from the inside of the leaves all over the frame to be covered. This bundle is fastened to the posts of the house so that the job will go without any hitches and there will be enough leaves to finish the job on hand. A man who has watched his betelnut trees grow steadily to his own height, thinks that it will be ideal if they bear fruit now rather than waiting until the height of the slender trunk makes harvesting too difficult. So he ties a piece of conglomerate stone to the leaf pod to simulate pregnancy. These two places of magic are not done with an accompanying incantation. They show men expressing concern about their livelihood in matters of lesser importance. They are concretized, publicized expressions of concern that the rest of the village can sympathise with and approve of. To live a life free of such magical performances would show a man of limited aspirations and resources of personality, a man who "just doesn't care" and thus who is not much of an asset to village life.

### **Action of People**

Although today village people have no hesitation in saying that sorcery is an evil bit of inheritance from the past that should be put down by law; the act of sorcery is nevertheless not just the crime of an isolated person, but more of a genuine judicial system now somewhat outmoded by larger political realities. As I described the process of sorcery above, many influential personalities must mediate between the victim and the man who wants the magic to be worked. It is said that the desire for an act of sorcery must first be presented to a leading man of the village. It is up to him to evaluate the behavior of the intended victim: is it the kind of intransigent behaviour that will lead only to undermining village life? The sentiment about this is canvassed by the leader who is skilled in the consensus government required in the village. If the verdict states that the offender has long shown dangerously offensive tendencies, then the magic is invoked. First, it is hoped that the victim will contract a very serious sickness that will lead him to review his life. Here again is a chance for the community to review his case publicly and deliberately. The magician finally is allowed to seal his work and the man dies. But clearly this kind of magic compares with a public execution, on behalf of the state. Only the abuse of this power, or the coming of a new and more comprehensive system of justice, makes this practice evil.

As for the manner of operation of this piece of deliberate magic against someone else, it should be clear that a slow and

solemn process of excommunication would be nothing less than fatal for a village man who knows and desires nothing different from his tribal life. There is a simple phenomenon which operates in village life: "i gat tok" (there is talk) which mean some anonymous "they" disapproves of something and has been talking about it. Even as an outsider to village life, I have sometimes found my own actions completely circumscribed by being told "i gat tok". It has the same effect as we sometimes see with a campaign in the mass media: it can ruin someone's life. It is sorcery above all that makes me think of magic as a process of social discernment. Perhaps there is some fine art of poisoning involved when people get sick; and I have seen a socially approved dramatic reproduction of a sorcerer at work with his magic, where the magician became passionately enthusiastic about his power; but the event still belongs to the community and is far more a matter of politics than of the physical sciences.

There are other forms of magic worked on people too. A major example of this is the magic to turn other people's thoughts towards oneself. This can be love magic, where a charmed article is put in someone else's clothing, or in the path they must walk. More importantly, there is a magic needed before any major social undertaking where it is necessary to gather money and valuables from the appropriate side of the family to distribute this to the business partner or to the other side of the family. Such collections are necessary for major festivals honoring the dead, for marriage payments, payments for the birth of children and first menstruation, and for many other occasions, and even some modern undertakings. For marriage and for the funeral memorial festivals, the principals work some magic, or have a package prepared for them, which they bury in the middle of the forum that will see the distribution of the valuables. This draws the thought of the family towards their enterprise. The family's compassion is further aroused by seeing the sorry shape of the principals as they observe the appropriate taboos of food, drink and washing. It is said the magic works through the agency of such spirits as a dead father, who is able to go in a hidden way and draw the attention of the others, who are at a loss to know why they feel themselves so influenced.

Someone who works this kind of magic will be enormously pleased with his cleverness and power if the results are good. But I think an outsider can see how much this magic relies for its effectiveness on being a socially appropriate display of anxiety about the matter at hand, and how it must be personally fulfilling as a channel for expressing one's great hope for an end. All of this helps to make magic something real, something to be relied on persistently throughout life.

## Conclusion

This then is my attempt at a defense of magic as it occurs in a tribal setting. I do not think it should be dismissed as a silly or harmful deception, supplanting science and an enemy of true religion. To some definite degree magic meets science on the criterion of what really works. Hokmofie, mentioned earlier, is willing to say that his magic is just the same thing as the work of the hospital. This might not solve some of the serious problems faced by hospital personnel in trying to work with the magical mentality, but it is a realistic place to start. Magic further implies some basic understandings of what a man is, what the scope of a personality might be in this cosmos, why he lives and dies. These understandings seem to conflict seriously with Christianity at times, and I have seen people of themselves, resolutely alter the whole social process of sorcery because it was in conflict with their Christian self-understanding, and they had a better hope. However, in the non-analytical approach of the tribal man to life, magic is a loose category that preserves and fosters much in the line of achieved scientific knowledge and religious understanding in the service of a deep humanity.