
The phenomenology of magic experiences

Mircea Lăzărescu
Victor Babeş University of Medicine

The existence of peculiar behavioural patterns whereby people endorse the fact that reality has invisible dimensions is irrefutable. The feeling that a higher ranking world exists which is, in certain ways, similar to ours, but has total command over what happens on Earth, governs the inner universe of certain people, who thus become obsessed with worrying not to upset in the least bit the entities populating that higher level of reality. This condition – wherein “magic thinking” emerges – being brought to an extreme, the people suffering from it fall prey to very serious obsessive-compulsive disease forms. The present study explores in its essence this “magic” condition, pointing out that such phenomena appear in connection with beliefs in the sacred, sorcery, magic, charms, superstitions, etc., and probably as a consequence also of some deeply embedded ancestral memories related to the sacred. Because rituals – felt to be necessary in order to preserve or recover harmony in man’s relationship with the sacred – have been persistently repeated over and over again throughout human (pre-)history, the whole complex of “magic” experiences may have been biologically and psychologically encoded through heredity. This means that, through repeated functioning, the cerebral structures may have physiologically encrypted – at the interface between brain and mind, in discrete molecules and tissues – their interconnections with the mental-psychic functions. All phenomena related to the sacred can thus by no means be ignored in psychopathology, creativity in general being inescapably connected with these invisible dimensions ruling, or just influencing, to a larger or smaller degree all of human life.

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P psychopathology, much like natural anthropological experiments, does not ignore any essential aspect of human existence. Hence when a delirious patient states that he feels bewitched (be it noted that in obsessive behaviour magical thinking and magical rituals are said to emerge), one is tempted to probe the manner in which magic and sorcery developed in human culture, which their major features are in history and in natural language.

With these, a whole dimension of man is revealed behind clinical psychiatric symptoms. A short survey over this field will thus be undertaken here, with focus on the phenomenology of magical experiences.

Magic thinking



agic has been interpreted in culture as a phenomenon that is parallel with religion, by which man attempts to accomplish extraordinary things that surpass the common and the natural. This way man came to be convinced that he has the power to accomplish these things by deepening his special, esoteric knowledge, which allows him to manipulate supernatural forces. Magic was thus, from its very beginnings, close to gnosis and other particular sciences like alchemy. The period in which magic flourished the most in Western culture was the Renaissance, when it recovered and further developed the Hellenistic heritage that had been transmitted through the Hermetic corpus. It was then correlated not only with alchemy, but also with mnemonics and the Kabala. At this time, magic blossomed under the patronage of the Florentine Platonic Academy led by Marsilio Ficino, being professed by great personalities such as Paracelsus and Agrippa von Nettesheim; by agency of Giordano Bruno’s theory about the invocation of eros (Culianu 1994), the practice of magic gave rise to the doctrine of mass manipulation from a distance, and it left as its legacy the myth of Doctor Faustus.

The rationalism of the centuries following the Renaissance labeled these sciences as occult, and it correlated them with the secret societies and the brotherhoods of the initiated. Unlike the

Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to mlazarescu39@yahoo.com

religious beliefs and practices that involve in the collective ritual the whole assembly of believers, magic cultivated individualism. Already during the time of Antiquity, Simon the Magus opposed St. Peter by setting all alone public demonstrations of miracles that surpassed the forces of nature, thus contrastively juxtaposing them with the beliefs in wonders made by God. In the European Renaissance, the Magus, that is the one who practiced white or black magic, studied and operated individually, precisely like the alchemist and the adept of mnemonics. And that was the case even though he was implicitly integrated into a brotherhood. The Gnostic individualism that was cultivated by magic and the associated sciences caused them to have a special dimension in the field of human experiences. In this connection, the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung interpreted alchemy as the symbol of a spiritual effort to obtain an inferior perfection, by agency of the self's synthetic individuation. (Jung 1970)

Magic in this context was gradually correlated with a positive psychic state, and the "magic state" was interpreted as a particular experience that was marked off by charm. In this same direction, namely of a positively charged understanding of the phenomenon, evolved also the idea of spell, which no longer caused illness and death: on the contrary, it triggered experiences leading to ecstasy. This class of positive experiences, which is usually correlated with a contemplation of the beautiful, points to certain manifestations that can be met in psychopathology; we shall now explore the latter.

Sorcery. Magic, sorcery and the practice of charms have as a purpose obtaining different states of affairs, by manipulating a special causality, which transgresses the natural with its normal space-time. Thereby out-of-the-ordinary events are obtained, which otherwise are difficult or impossible to generate. This very aspect entered common speech terminology whereby, for instance, one comes to qualify an exceptional musician as a "magician who bewitched the audience." However, during the Renaissance the practice of sorcery was not appreciated in these terms. Various authors considered sorcery (Palou 1992) as a popular form of magic. The sorcerer,

and especially the witch of the Renaissance, operated alone, individually, just like the magicians. But the purpose was not, as in magic or alchemy, obtaining superior knowledge, the philosopher's stone or the homunculus. Contrariwise, the goal was, predominantly, exerting an action over another human being. In sorcery, one operated usually in the direction of matters such as love, sickness, exhaustion and death. Like the magician, the sorcerer needed specific occult knowledge, becoming an initiate thereof. Likewise, he was part of a sect, the brotherhood of sorcerers. The spell was cast by enacting ritual procedures that operated by agency of various ingredients, essential here being a material that was in contact with the person over whom the action was exerted. The alternative was to operate on his/her effigy. The procedure was accompanied by the uttering of special verbal formulae. In this way, the causal force of words was being used. This was a force that was thought to act at a distance and instantaneously, "with the speed of thought," and not locally and contiguously, as do natural processes. This force was always to a large degree used by man, in religious practices it being common also in prayers or invocations. It is present also in oaths, curses or abusive language, or in what one calls in Romanian "descântec" (magic spell; or disenchantment, if it is directed against illness or against other evils), a phenomenon that is considered as being a benign form of sorcery.

Unlike the magician, the sorcerer essentially relies on the intercession of malevolent supernatural entities, which he in fact invokes, and they help him. The reason for this state of affairs is a pact that the sorcerer makes with these entities, and according to it, he is required to obey them in exchange for their services. In extreme cases, the sorcerer may even be required to sell his soul. This entire scenario being put in place, the spell may act from a distance, and it will bring on a transformation in the addressee. We are dealing here with a modification of the latter's psychic state, which he does not understand and cannot get rid of, he finally reaching a stage wherein he is dominated by the power of the spell. The negative aspect held against sorcery was usually that it caused in the victim a sickness



Frederick Sandys, *Morgan Le Fay* (1862)

that brought death. Also, it was accused of inducing various other states correlated with love or unnatural dependence on another person.

The bewitched is subject to the power of the spell. He is under the power of the spell, of the sorcerer and possibly of the one who was commanded to dominate him. This dependence has a markedly interpersonal character. In the alternative wherein the relationship is unmediated, it is expressed by the fascination and hypnosis that a dominating person exerts, who can require from and suggest to the one hypnotized everything he/she wants. Thomas Mann masterfully described the situation in his novella *Mario and the Sorcerer*. But in classic sorcery, what was essential was the action at a distance, which transgresses natural space and time, just as only the evil thought can do, when being carried by the sorcerer's word and ceremony.

The tradition of sorcery, by which one acts from a distance over another person in a negative way, implies a deep and maybe perennial layer of the human psyche. By attachment and love, for

human beings resonating from a distance with another is natural, even without the intercession of sorcery or parapsychology. This action of the eros from a distance was theorized also by Giordano Bruno – as has been mentioned – thus the contemporary mass media being anticipated. Due, perhaps, to this archetypal level of interpersonal dependence and resonance, the theme of sorcery keeps on being present in psychopathology even today. A number of delirious patients – especially from the group of those suffering of paranoid and mystical delirium – feel and state the fact that they have been bewitched. Sometimes they can even accuse a specific person from their entourage. A Mediterranean and Balkan variant is that of what in Romanian is called “deochi” (approx. “evil eye”). The subject feels “different,” in any case “he does not feel well,” being convinced that someone else looked at him “with an evil eye.” The phenomenon is attested also in DSM IV (1994), the chapter on transcultural pathology under the designation “mal de ojo.”

Magic experience and psychopathology

The feeling of “being bewitched” evidences the perception of an impression of psychic change that is difficult to define. Psychopathologically, one can speak about a symptom from the area of depersonalization. However, such special experiences even in states of normality are labeled as “states of being under a spell” or “bewitchment.” Most often one speaks about the spell of love. Yet also about the spell of music. The idea of casting a spell points now to a spiritual state of being transposed in the register of another reality. Usually, one compares this condition with the atmosphere of a fairytale, populated with elves; fairy ambience, from a marvelous universe. And when “the spell is broken,” man relapses into the common prosaic reality.

The psychic atmosphere of the magic spell, therefore, does not refer to the ambience proper of the religious belief, but rather to that of a tale, that of fiction. Mircea Eliade emphasized that the time of fictional narratives is a special time that is correlated with mythical time, i.e. the time of

origins, to which the ritual invocation of myth is pointing (Eliade 1978). The bewitched man gets out of the current space-time and enters that of the fairytale, of the narrative of fiction or legend.

The perspective of the spell and bewitching is of the same category as that which charms refer to. What one understands by "casting spells" (Romanian "a face farmece" – lit. "to make charms") is equivalent to a bewitching that is not very obnoxious, the procedures thereof being the same. What is more, the significance of the experiences felt by the one "becharmed" (bewitched/under a spell) is also the same. In this case, however, we are closer to the register of current life. Many of the worldly things, of daily life, may possess charm and so they "becharm" you. In actual fact, the notion of "charm" is derived from the Greek "pharmakon," which meant a "drug," medical or poisonous, which modified the psychic or physical state of a human being (Bailly 1894; Onions 1970). Hence the term "pharmacy."

We can now turn back to the question of magic and of thought and behaviour labeled as magic in psychopathology. As we have mentioned above, the problems encountered in magic and the language that refers to it are also found in the field of sorcery, spell casting and charms. However, they also emerge in the field of superstitions, these being derived from a religious attitude. Invoking the sacred has always been essential for cultural man. This kind of man feels the precariousness of his existence and actions here, on Earth. If man did not have the feeling of being protected by the supernatural forces that he constantly calls forth, he could no longer do anything at all. Any of man's essential acts of behaviour, from obtaining the daily bread and up to war, have been accomplished for thousands of years under the protection of these forces. Opening up to the freedom of choice in actions is felt as being a crushing event, if one cannot hope or believe in someone who is there to help one and to protect one against unexpected and unforeseen misfortunes. This dimension of man is so essential, that it is impossible for it not to be ingrained in the nature of any man; it is probably also governed by certain cerebral-psychic structures. Superstitious man crosses himself before crossing a street on which cars

move to and fro, or before going into an airplane. He feels the need to thus protect himself against possible misfortune.

In the psychopathology of obsessive mental states a phenomenon known as "magic thinking" is described. The subject is worried, for instance, that something bad – like an accident – might happen to his wife who has just left on a trip. In certain cases, this thought may keep on recurring in his mind involuntarily, obsessively. And, from a certain point on, the subject may have the feeling that, by the very fact that he thought about a possible accident, the possibility for it to actually occur increased. And then the idea crosses his mind more and more persistently that the accident already took place. He tries then, in a compulsive manner, to check out and make sure that it did not happen. This array of obsessive-compulsive experiences occupies most of his time, dominating him.

In this scenario we are dealing with a scheme whereby what is enacted is the possibility to cause events from a distance by agency of thought; in magic, such an act is usually accompanied by the uttering of certain esoteric expressions. But, in essence, the scenario is the same, by transgressing space-time and causing a special event to happen to a person with whom a connection has been established. Psychopathological analysis evidenced that, in such cases, the problem lies firstly in the fact that thought took a shortcut, by the so-called "jump(ing) to conclusion(s)," which occurs also in certain delirious states. The fleeting emergence of an idea, which is possible in the multitude of thoughts of the normal ideational flux, is brought into relief and then suddenly passes on directly to a conclusion, jumping over the filter of intermediary reasoning and verification. And then this idea becomes fixated in an obsessive or delirious manner.

Why is this psychopathological phenomenon called "magic thinking"? Probably owing to the existence of the feeling that one acts from a distance by thought. Traditional magic did not proceed quite in these terms. Not even sorcery or the art of charms had such procedures. We are dealing therefore with a linguistic pun (or paronomasia) whereby something is borrowed from the phenomenology of the entire set of these

human experiences, without distinguishing among them which is which, in order to identify a psychopathological symptom.

Magic ritual. The obsessive magic ritual consists in the subject's feeling compelled to carry out a series of simple, useless and absurd motor acts, before engaging a commonplace behaviour. For instance, he takes three times three steps forwards and backwards, before crossing a doorway. He carries out this ritual compulsion feeling that, if he were not to do it, a great misfortune might happen. Sometimes compulsive rituals are extremely complicated, lasting hours on end. For example, before leaving home the subject carried out numberless times various movements, counts and ceremonies. Everything is beyond the subject's control and will. He feels constrained by this "compulsive" state. What evil would there unfold if he were not to carry out the ritual? The subject cannot specify. But in any case, it must be "something extremely bad," which is felt as causing anxiety to a dramatic degree. One should notice that such rituals take place, quasi-symbolically, when entering another room or when leaving home. In any case, such occur before a small change of the status quo sets in. Moreover, one should also notice that the obsessive ritual is correlated with numbers. It must be usually carried out for a fixed number of times. For many obsessive subjects there are felicitous and nefarious numbers. For instance, even numbers may be felicitous. If he has the impression that he accomplished the ritual for an odd number of times, the patient must start over and carry it through one more time.

In the general anthropological perspective of culture, the complex of problems related to rituals is essential in the field of religion. Only by reciting, by psalmodizing the sacred history of myth – in a ritual context – can the divinity be invoked. A sort of ritual behaviour is carried out also by the magician when he engages in his specific operations; as well as by the sorcerer or the one casting charms. But these rituals have as

a purpose producing something, good or bad. The little ritual of the superstitious person is carried out in order to avoid something bad, a misfortune. Preventing evil from happening by a ritual of invocation has, in principle, the same significance – this implies asking for support or protection from the superior powers with a view to successful action.

The obsessive ritual refers not to positive action, but to preventing certain unknown misfortunes from happening, to hindering the action of an inexplicable danger, of a terrifying threat. That is why, with obsessive rituals, we enter the area of psychopathology.

Creation needs, in general, cooperation with the powers superior to the common human condition. It needs contact with the "genii" (the "tutelary gods" or "attendant spirits") and with "godly enthusiasm." But man's invoking the superior entities and forces may have various objectives: protection against misfortunes, the natural unfolding of daily life, love and health. Psychopathology cannot ignore spiritual states that are correlated with this universe of invocation, in all its forms, hence also in the forms present in the area of magic, sorcery, charms and superstition.

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