BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The enhancement of enchantments in Melanesia

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Comment on Jones, Graham M. 2017. *Magic's reason: An anthropology of analogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

As Graham Jones (2017) argues, “magic” has played a central role in anthropological theorizing, highlighting the supposed irrationalities of non-Western cultures. He substantiates this claim in an ethnohistorical analysis of the mutual influences between French entertainment magicians and some of anthropology’s founders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Stage illusionists waged a science-based campaign to expose the trickery involved in displays of supposedly supernatural powers in the ecstatic rites of North African ‘Isawa Muslim Sufi mystics. The colonial narratives that these encounters generated contributed to Tylor’s and Frazer’s “intellectualist” constructions that pitted the enchanted “primitive” non-West against the disenchanted “modern” West. Boas, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, and Tambiah, among others, are credited with overturning that evolutionary paradigm, although, Jones argues, traces of it continue to reverberate in some quarters of anthropological thought. Inspired by Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Jones extracts from this analysis a historical dialectic of analogy and disanalogy both within the magic institutions of single cultures and in comparisons between whole societies.

Nonetheless, Jones’ scenario does not capture the complete story. It was during the periods when Tylor and Frazer devised the magic–science juxtaposition that both categories were also routinely contrasted in anthropological writings with “religion.” I suggest that this more complex magic–religion–science nexus decisively shaped both the early and the later anthropological stereotypes of the non-West and the West: for example, in classic treatises of Durkheim, Hubert and Mauss, Boas, Freud, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, and others. In the spirit of Jones’

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captivating account, I offer the following amendments based in an ethnographic shift to Melanesia, which, like Africa, has been identified with “pagan” religion as well as magical beliefs and practices.

First, Jones credits Malinowski’s functionalist theorizing for the eventual overturning of the evolutionary intellectualist perspective on magic (chap. 6) with good reason; hence, Malinowski’s influence bears close scrutiny. Malinowski (1922, 1935) demonstrated the embedded culturally specific rationales of Trobriand magical practices (*megwa*) in the full range of economic, kinship, political, subsistence, and ritual contexts, positing the key function of assisting in the organization of collective activities. As Jones notes, Malinowski’s explanation of Trobrianders’ belief in the efficacy of *megwa* spells—i.e., their psychological role of alleviating anxieties in areas beyond Islanders’ technical expertise—confounded the simple rational/irrational dichotomizing of non-Western and Western peoples. However, in doing so, Malinowski reinscribed the rational-technical versus irrational-affective antinomy within Trobriand culture itself—an instance of the perpetuation of traces of the evolutionists’ intellectualist assumptions in modern theorizing.

Further, it will be recalled that Malinowski ([1925] 1948) adopted Frazer’s differentiation of magic from religion and both from science. Trobriand magic, in Malinowski’s view, was an impersonal, instrumental practice separate from any religious propitiation of spiritual beings. For him, magic’s efficacy resided in words.

This power [of magic] is an inherent property of certain words, uttered with the performance of certain actions by the man entitled to do it through his social traditions and through certain observances which he has to keep. The words and acts have this power in their own right, and their action is direct and not mediated by any other agency. Their power is not derived from the authority of spirits or demons or supernatural beings. It is not conceived as having been wrested from nature. The belief in the power of words and rites as a fundamental and irreducible force is the ultimate, basic dogma of their magical creed. (1922: 427)

This is tantamount to the “Presto” theory of magic that Jones assimilates to the intellectualist viewpoint of Malinowski and his theoretical predecessors. Here Malinowski reproduces the colonialist, Frazerian view of non-Western people’s irrationality, albeit different from that of religious devotion. In fact, Malinowski ([1916] 1992) devoted his first treatment of Trobriand culture to religion—i.e., the life of *baloma* spirits—before turning to the study of Islanders’ magical practices in fishing, gardening, *kula*, sailing, sexuality, and so on, purged via disanalogy of anything of a religious nature.

In his hugely influential reinterpretations of Trobriand magic, Stanley Tambiah (1968, 1973) expanded upon Malinowski’s basic claims about the efficacy of magical words accepting the nonparticipation of *baloma*. In a recently published volume (Mosko 2017), I demonstrate that knowledgeable Trobrianders credit ancestral *baloma* as the ultimate agents of their magical practices in conformity with anthropological theories of sacrifice. Magicians offer up detached components of their persons (spells) to elicit life-giving “blessings” (*bobwelila*) from *baloma* of Tuma, the invisible land of the dead. In turn, the “life” of the ancestral spirits is dependent upon the oblations of their living descendants. Through the performance of

sacrificial (i.e., religious) “magic,” Islanders and their ancestors mutually sustain one another. This radically revises Malinowski’s interpretation of Trobriand *meg-wa*, upturns anthropological treatises based upon it, such as Tambiah’s, and complicates the narrow dynamic that Jones outlines between magic and science.

Melanesia provides another potential qualification to Jones’ ethnohistorical account of the magic concept in early anthropological thought. Malinowski and others who contributed to the eventual overturning of the evolutionist-intellectualist viewpoint accepted the presumption that the magico-religious practices observed in postcontact circumstances reproduced customs unchanged “from time immemorial,” despite the Islanders’ early experiences of the vicissitudes of colonialism, Christianity, and capitalism. The mutual influences between French entertainment magicians and early anthropological theorists over the nature of ‘Iswana religiously inspired performances outlined by Jones suggest that the situation in North Africa was similar. Ethnographic research conducted subsequently by Melanesianist (and Africanist) scholars argues that many seemingly “traditional” magical practices examined in postcontact contexts arose at least partly from villagers’ engagement with exogenous forces. In Melanesia, the most famous and dramatic ethnographic illustrations are the magico-religious “cargo cults” and millenarian movements that enchanted the inhabitants of many regions, particularly after World War II. All major analysts agree that cargoism is not a mere continuation of preexisting cultural patterns but a complex transformation involving traditional and exogenous elements. On this point, Jones’ account of ‘Iswana ritual practice appears to affirm the assumption of the Western magicians and anthropologists he criticizes that they had witnessed a wholly traditional pattern.

Admittedly, Melanesians were not visited by secular entertainment magicians. However, they did encounter agents of modern Western rationality who displayed the technical skills of magical-cum-religious illusion. Melanesia, like Africa, was colonized from early stages by Christian missionaries caught irretrievably in conflicting impulses of enchantment and disenchantment. Deeply involved in promoting a spirituality that incorporated magical elements in ritual performances, they simultaneously professed allegiance to secular Western rationality in denouncing the morality and efficacy of local magic. Priests, ministers, and pastors justified their own presence on ultimately self-contradictory claims: renouncing the spirituality of local populations on rational grounds while professing their own superior spiritual authority on faith-based grounds. The whole prospect of converting religiously “pagan” Melanesians to Christianity was doomed to produce responses that were undesired (i.e., irrational from the missionaries’ perspectives).

Missionaries were not the only early colonialists caught in the tensions between enchantment and disenchantment analogous to those that Jones describes. In 1875, Italian naturalist Luigi d’Albertis—the first European to settle for a time in the Roro-Mekeo region of coastal New Guinea—used simple stage tricks in his dealing with villagers. But unlike French stage magicians, d’Albertis attributed his powers to personal command of spirit allies. D’Albertis also terrified villagers with his daily use of dynamite, gunpowder, rifles, and pistols on his forays into the bush to secure thousands of bird and other specimens, attributing his pyrotechnical prowess to command of superior magic. On at least ten occasions, he used his munitions to threaten people into doing his bidding. When he encountered resistance, he staged

contests between himself and local “sorcerers” to demonstrate that his magic and spirits were the more powerful. Villagers identified d’Albertis as a nonhuman *faifai* (“nature-spirit”)—a status that he fully exploited.¹

In the midst of people who have never seen or heard of a white man, the most potent means of defence possessed by the latter is to act upon their superstitious fears. . . . Make them believe you are something more than they; that you are not made of the same flesh and blood; make them as much afraid of you sleeping as waking; in a word, inspire them with a wholesome dread of approaching you at all. (1881: 397)

D’Albertis claimed his greatest regret was that his sleight-of-hand skills were not more extensive.

Soon after d’Albertis’ narrative was translated into English, British colonization began. When the Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Strait visited Mekeo district in 1898, C. G. Seligman declared, “The belief in magic and sorcery is at least as firmly rooted in the Roro-Mekeo region as elsewhere in the Possession, and certainly bulks more largely in the daily life of the people of this area than in other parts of British New Guinea with which I am acquainted” (1910: 278)—a viewpoint which he and subsequent ethnographers have taken as evidence of the traditional precolonial hierarchy of chiefs and official sorcerers of peace and war. Accompanied by W. H. Rivers and A. C. Haddon, Seligman arrived on the scene amid a rebellion led by chiefs and sorcerers against resident government and church representatives (Mosko 2009). The precipitating cause was another large-scale dysentery epidemic associated with an El Niño drought and famine. In Mekeo cosmology, all human deaths are the result of “sorcery” (*ungaunga*, *faia*) perpetrated by living adepts in league with ancestral and other spirits. In this case, Mekeo blamed Catholic “sorcerers” and the government for causing this new large-scale sickness. The government agent Charles Monckton documented his four-month encounters with local magicians in a widely read tome, *Some experiences of a Melanesian resident magistrate* (1920). To discredit and subjugate the insubordinate leaders of the uprising, Monckton pitted his military-cum-sorcery against theirs, performing stunts of sleight of hand (following d’Albertis’ playbook) and threatening to use his powers against the people if they disobeyed him. He publicly attributed his superiority and his immunity to the locals’ magical attacks to the greater supernatural powers in his employ—in contrast to the self-identification of French illusionists in North Africa with scientific-technical skills.

Although space does not allow further documentation, the early activities of Catholic missionaries tended to harden and inflate villagers’ certainties that their own indigenous beliefs regarding ancestral and other spirits were ontologically true. To the missionaries even today, villagers’ ancestral spirits are real, evil beings in league with Satan since, in their lifetimes, they did not know Jesus—which is significant when it is considered that the Sacred Heart missionaries have monopolized the education of generations of Mekeo youth.

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1. There was a downside to d’Albertis’ supernatural identification, however, in that villagers held him responsible for the devastating epidemics of pneumonia and measles that erupted during his stay.

As a supportive amendment to Jones' otherwise excellent ethnohistory, most likely both African and Melanesian colonial agents (including early ethnographers) presumed that indigenous magico-religious beliefs and practices, especially their intensity, were indicative of precontact ritual life. Ironically, these seemingly irrational behaviors were often prompted by the colonial presence, intentionally or unintentionally encouraged through foreign agents' actions and rationalized in terms of superior religious and/or magical power. Entertainment magicians no doubt played a role in the development of early anthropological notions of magic as an analytical category. But in some colonial contexts there were other purveyors of Western disenchantment whose mixed messages actively enhanced preexisting enchantments.

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