



TRANSLATION

## The illusions of “magical thinking”: Whose chimera, ours or theirs?

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### Preface (2021)

The “ontological turn” has been in fashion right from the start in anthropology; and its challenges (and misunderstandings) arise whenever two minds meet (for example, the inquiring anthropologist and her interlocutor) and there is a misalignment between their metaphysical beliefs. I tried to face up to some of those challenges at an interdisciplinary conference titled “Magical Thinking and Food Today” held in Paris on October 19–20, 1994, organized by the French anthropologist Claude Fischler. I am grateful to Carlos Londoño-Sulkin and Luiz Costa for encouraging me to publish the unearthed English version of that talk and thus place it in a contemporary theoretical light.

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I have a brother-in-law who did a medical residency in the science of dermatology. He told me: “You know there are only two things you need to know to do dermatology—if it is dry, make it wet; if it is wet, make it dry.” I once gave that advice to a colleague of mine in anthropology, who replied: “You know there are only two things you need to know to do anthropology—if someone asserts it, deny it; if someone denies it, assert it.” Dutifully, I hope to “do anthropology” here today. Since one of the central premises of this conference is that “magical thinking” is a fundamental psychological process that has relevance for our contemporary attitudes and practices concerning food, I will play my anthropological part by

raising some doubts about the very idea of magical thinking in modernist thought.

What is the idea of magical thinking? As far as I can judge, it is the idea of a psychological process that produces in the “magical thinker” an inflated sense of the power and objectivity of subjective states. It is the idea of a psychological process that leads the magical thinker to confuse (internal) consciousness with (external) reality, to project mind into matter, to confound symbols and things, to interpret figurative speech as literal truth, to endow mental connections with material causal effects, and to invest personal sensations and experiences, including emotions (e.g., disgust or dread), desires (e.g., envy or hostile intentions), and moral evaluations (e.g., guilt and shame) with a capacity to generate natural (physical or biological) consequences. Thus the magical thinker is thought to have an “enchanted” or “super”-natural sense of reality, although it is a characteristic feature of most modernist writings on the topic, from Tylor to Freud and from Frazer to Piaget, to view magical thinking as an inferior or less mature mode of thought and/or to disparage “super”-natural perceptions as naive realism, as fake objectivity, or as the fanciful reification of meanings and internal states.

Now, for the sake of argument, I want to suggest that despite the popularity of the idea of magical thinking in the writings of many psychologists and social scientists, magical thinking does not exist as a fundamental psychological process. I want to propose instead that reality testing is unavoidably a metaphysical act, and that the idea of magical thinking is an invention or fabrication of modernist thought, a by-product of secular (largely materialistic) metaphysical theories about the true causal forces in nature, and ultimately a figment of our own bridled contemporary imagination. I am going to insinuate that the sooner we lose our modern appetite for the idea of magical



thinking the better, and that for the sake of our intellectual health the time may be right to recover a more premodern sense of taste for the way subjective experience and personal consciousness are related to the objective world.

Before asserting or denying anything, however, let me note that what I will have to say, especially about my own subjective experiences over the past twenty-five years in Orissa, India, is merely a footnote to that marvelous presentation by Charles Malamoud on “Food, Pollution and Purity in Traditional India” that you heard earlier in this session. For in South Asia today premodern or ancient sensibilities continue to thrive and the old stories and moral texts about food, sanctity, and family life practice discussed by Malamoud are not relics; rather those texts and stories play their part in the formation of contemporary Hindu folk consciousness. My remarks are also likely to seem pertinent to some of Paul Rozin’s formulations about the role of contagious and sympathetic magic in the food domain (the idea that “you are what you eat”), although my main reason for engaging in this playful scholastic exercise (“if someone asserts it, deny it”) is to draw your attention to some serious difficulties with the idea of magical thinking as a basic psychological process.

### Magical thinking: A modern invention?

My central proposition is that (a) the appearance of magical thinking as a fundamental psychological process underlying the judgments and reactions of other people(s) is an illusion in the eyes of the secular modern scientific observer, rather than in the head of the magical thinker; and (b) this illusion, in which the thought process of some other(s) appears to be magical, typically occurs whenever there is a special kind of misalignment between the metaphysical beliefs of the observer and the observed.

What kind of misalignment? In particular, I want to propose that the attribution of magical thinking (e.g., the attribution of a confusion of subjectivity with objectivity) seems to occur whenever the attributing observer has a relatively more narrow (more mechanical, more materialistic) view of how reality operates than does the thinker who is observed. The attribution that others are engaged in magical thinking occurs because the attributing observer is prepared (and perhaps even eager) to privilege his or her own (relatively narrow) metaphysical beliefs as a standard for defining what is natural, objective, or real, thereby contrastively defining everything in excess of that standard (other peoples’ relatively broader views of reality) as supernatural, subjective, and made-up.

For example, observers with a *moderately* narrow view of what’s real (here I have in mind most anti-religious, pro-science “enlightened” secular humanists of the modern age—you and me?) will perceive magical thinking (e.g., a confusion of figurative speech with literal truth) in the sacred texts and theological discourses of the major religions of the world. Observers with a *very* narrow view of what’s real (here I have in mind most modern philosophical materialists and all those anti-dualist neurologists who believe that anything as hidden, imperceptible, elusive, and mysterious as an idea, or mental state, or subjective experience is epiphenomenal, outside the realm of temporal-spatial location and material causation and thus effectively unreal) will perceive magical thinking almost everywhere. Indeed, when one’s view of the really real becomes narrow enough, it is not just gods, angels, souls, and spirits that seem hidden, fanciful, subjective, and out of sight. It is not just talk of heaven and the afterlife that seems like an illicit substitution of bits of subjectivity (a wish or desire) for objective reality. With a narrow enough view of what’s really real even the commonsense claim that someone lifted their arm “because they wanted to” (the commonplace invocation of that “occult” force called “agency” or “free will”) can seem like a magical notion.

My argument, then, is that with the advent of modernism the idea of the mental life as purely subjective (as merely personal, arbitrary, emotive, as only “in the head” or “in the eye of the beholder,” as “mad” rather than “visionary”) took hold because it was the corollary of the massive metaphysical reduction of the idea of objective reality which had already taken place in secular thought. Alternatively put, the modern tendency to attribute magical thinking to others (or even to disavowed or “superstitious” aspects of ourselves) is largely an outgrowth or by-product of the historical narrowing of our “official” metaphysical beliefs about the true forces of reality. In effect, one tell-tale sign of a modern mentality is the very large number of things that are interpreted as merely subjective, “made-up,” crazy, or unreal. Having inherited a rather narrow view of the really real, it is no wonder that modern observers are baffled by the inclination of less narrow-minded (so-called) magical folk to treat mental states (e.g., an “evil eye”) as powerful, objective, and as part and parcel of a seamless objective causal structure of the natural world.

To reiterate, I want to suggest that there is no fundamental or inherent psychological process that is the cause or basis for what gets labeled magical thinking. The real



phenomenon of interest in this domain is relational or contextual and not fundamental or basic. It is relational or contextual because the real phenomenon of interest in this domain has to do with the character of the clash or misalignment between the metaphysical beliefs of the observer and the metaphysical beliefs of the observed, a clash or misalignment that leads the observer to make an (asymmetrical or one-directional) attribution of magic to things other people think of as real.

Baldly stated, if there is any real confusion to be reckoned with in the literature on magical thinking it is likely to be our own failure to recognize that magical thinking is not a name for some kind of (fundamental) process of thought but is rather a context-dependent judgment that arises out of a special kind of discrepancy between the ontological points of view of the observer and the observed. Thus, in the dialectical spirit of anthropological debate ("if someone asserts it, deny it"), I wish to propose that it is not the magical thinker who is confused or irrational, and that, in most cases, the appearance of magical thinking in others is illusory or merely apparent.

### Some merely apparent modes of thought

The problem of other people's apparently irrational modes of thought (and false beliefs) is a classic one in anthropology. There are many examples where the apparent irrationality (or false beliefs) of "others" turned out to be just that, merely apparent, not really real.

And there are many examples in anthropological research where, in the initial stages of interpretation, that apparently irrational mode of thought was interpreted as an indicator of some fundamental psychological process, such as "mystic participation," or "excessive concreteness of thought," or even "excessive abstractness of thought" or "magical thinking." Only later was it realized that the sense of apparent strangeness or peculiarity experienced by the anthropological observer was due to limitations in his or her understanding of what was really going on. The appearance of irrationality was an illusion created by the limited conceptual framework of the researcher, a by-product of modernist assumptions about what is subjective and what is objective, about what there is out there in the real world.

For example, the late nineteenth-century anthropologist Louis Henry Morgan, an expert on kinship systems, subscribed to the cultural evolutionary view that the mental processes of "primitive" peoples were exceedingly abstract, general, and undifferentiated, which explained why "prim-

itives" were so prone to overlook distinctions when it came to classifying kin. Morgan was struck by the fact that (for example) in the Dakota Indian language "father" and "grandfather" were designated or labeled with the same term. Since Morgan (and the English language) lexically distinguished between "father" and "grandfather," the Dakota appeared to Morgan to be very abstract or undifferentiated in their thinking.

Morgan's attribution of undue abstractness was later found to be wanting. As the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber put it (1909: 77), Morgan's attribution

has its origin in the point of view of investigators, who on approaching foreign languages, have been impressed by their failure to discriminate certain relationships between which the languages of civilized Europe distinguish, and who, in their enthusiasm for formulating general theories from such facts, have forgotten that their own languages are filled with entirely analogous groupings or classifications which custom has made so familiar and natural that they are not felt as such.

For example, the distinction between older and younger siblings, or between older and younger cousins is not lexically coded within most Western European languages, although it is marked and lexically noted by many non-European languages of the world.

Or consider the historical anthropological debates over whether the rules of logic (e.g., the rule of the excluded middle, the principle that something cannot be both itself and not itself at the same time) play a part in the thinking of "primitive" peoples. The anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1910) argued that the mind of the "primitive" was governed by an alternative non-logical mental process called "mystic participation." As evidence he pointed to ethnographers' translations of assertions by South American Indians in which the Indians were said to have asserted "we [A] are red parrots [not A]" or to have claimed that "sorcerers [A] are bush cats [not A]" (my brackets).

Lévy-Bruhl eventually recanted. Today most anthropologists believe that the laws of identity and noncontradiction are relevant and important for understanding so-called "primitive" thought. Examples of the apparent violations of the idea that nothing can be both A and not A at the same time (e.g., "we are red bush cats") are treated either as metaphors, or as parallel descriptive systems (e.g., there is no contradiction when we assert that "table salt is sodium chloride," because we are describing something at two different levels of analysis), or they are treated as



bad translations. The ethnographic literature is filled with bad translations.

It is very easy to produce a bad translation. Even when you have fluent command of a language, it can be hard to know what someone really means when they speak in colloquial terms and there is always a great deal of interpretive work that has to be done to get the translation right without making the speaker look confused, ignorant, or ridiculous. Consider, for example, some ethnographer from the planet Mars trying to represent what I mean when I use the English expression “my stomach has shrunk” in the context of declining an offer of food. What do I mean? Am I making a causal statement? Am I saying that I do not have an appetite *because* my stomach has shrunk? Am I claiming that if you actually measured my stomach, you would find that it is now smaller than it has been in the past when I had a desire for food? Am I claiming that if I were to eat right now my stomach could not possibly physically expand beyond its current measurable circumference? Would it be irrational for me to continue using the expression if it should turn out that both those claims were false? The Martian ethnographer could easily make me look foolish or irrational if he translated my statement literally. Yet I suspect such an appearance of foolishness would only prove that the Martian had gotten the translation wrong. All I really mean to say is that “I have no appetite.”

Or let us look at the kind of evidence that is sometimes pulled out to make the point that children and “primitive” peoples are magical thinkers, in the sense that they are unable to distinguish words from things or symbols from referents and cannot dissociate names from the objects they denote. Here is an interview, which I view as a nice caution and corrective, conducted in Liberia by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981: 141–42) with two men, Sembe and Aamah, from the Vai culture. Sembe and Aamah are asked whether one can interchange the names of the sun and the moon, that is, call the sun “moon” and the moon “sun.” Aamah argues: “Anything that God created we cannot change. We cannot change a man into a woman.” Sembe rebuts: “They are not going to change a man into a woman. They are going to change the name.” Aamah retorts: “I can’t agree. You never named a woman ‘Sembe’ and I cannot change the name of the moon to the sun.” Later he comments as follows: “There are two things in the world. A thing can be and a thing can be talked about. The thing that is cannot be changed. Anything God created, His talking, the names He gave to things, cannot be changed.” Aamah is asked whether he can buy a soft drink

with the name “dime.” He replies: “I can buy a soft drink with the money itself but not with the name.”

As Scribner and Cole point out, the Vai distinguish between names and things but reject on theological grounds the idea that names are arbitrarily assigned to or should be dissociated from their referents, just as we might hesitate to name our son “Juliet” and might criticize any parent who did so. It is not a difference in basic thought process that is at issue in such cases of attributed magical thinking but rather a difference, a misalignment, in the substantive metaphysical beliefs about natural law (including natural moral law) of observer and observed, as those beliefs here apply to language. I suspect that if we were to closely examine those metaphysical beliefs, we would quickly discover that a central and distinctive concept in secular modernist metaphysics is the idea of the “arbitrary” or “merely conventional.” Given that distinctive (even peculiar) metaphysics it is no wonder that, from the perspective of a modern observer for whom “arbitrariness” is assumed to be everywhere, a premodern or antiquarian commitment to the idea of natural law (e.g., the idea that for every object there is a natural or proper name or purpose, ordained by God) is bound to appear “magical.”

### Food and magical thinking: Mixing chicken with prasad

Now I wish to consider a subjective experience of my own, which occurred in 1983 while I was living in the orthodox Hindu temple town of Bhubaneswar in Orissa, India, where I have been conducting research from time to time since 1968. This experience is especially relevant to the theme of this conference because it will have the appearance of “magical thinking” to a modern observer and it concerns dietary restrictions and food.

Bhubaneswar is a community that continues to this day to carry forward many of the ancient and medieval traditions concerning food, pollution, and sanctity that were described in Charles Malamoud’s lecture. In Bhubaneswar what you eat, how food is prepared, and by whom are matters of great concern. Husband and wife do not eat together. Adult males prefer to eat alone. There is no “family meal.” In that community you not only “are what you eat,” you have a moral obligation to “eat what you are” and in some sense “you are who you do and do not eat with.” Individuals within the Hindu joint family are differentiated by status and display their differential status (among other ways) through food. Eating is largely conceived of as an



offering or as an oblation giving to a deity (the God or universal spirit) which dwells within and thereby animates your body. In Bhubaneswar some of the most serious moral violations are transgressions of diet and of various food taboos (e.g., a widow eating fish or some other "hot" food, or a brahman eating beef).

While conducting fieldwork in Bhubaneswar in 1983 I had the following personal experience, which enlarged my modern anthropological imagination. There were three members of the community I had worked with at great length. I knew that they held divergent views about certain topics and I wanted to get them together in a kind of "seminar" situation so I could see how they would handle each other's ideas. But if you have people together for several hours at your home in India you must serve food, and these three people came from very different social statuses and backgrounds and consequently had very different dietary restrictions. Under most circumstances they would never eat food together. So how could I run my "seminar"?

The way to solve the problem was to serve "maha-prasad." This is the remains or leftovers of the food that has been offered to the God (Lingaraj, a manifestation of the Hindu god Siva) who resides in the local temple. It is leftover food in the sense that when food is offered to the God in the temple, the God (Lingaraj) consumes or absorbs its essence. What remains, God's leftovers, can be eaten by any Hindu, ecumenically, regardless of status.

So maha-prasad was purchased from the brahman cooks at the temple. We had the seminar. We ate the prasad, which consisted of rice and vegetables. At the end of the day, as our discussion was concluding, there was a great deal of uneaten prasad. My wife, Candy, noticing this, casually remarked: "What are we going to do with all this leftover rice? I guess I'll cook some chicken and mix it with the rice and we can have it later for dinner."

Now, when our three Hindu friends heard this, they said something like this: "Candy, you can't do that! That is not just leftover rice. It is prasad. Lingaraj (God) is a vegetarian. He will be insulted if you mix chicken with his prasad." (In Hinduism the divines are sometimes classified by whether they are vegetarians or meat-eaters, and the male gods tend to be vegetarians and the female goddesses tend to be meat-eaters, which is also a way of marking their differential social status). A few hours later my wife, proceeding within the terms of her own secular metaphysical framework and practical culinary interests, had cooked a chicken and mixed it in with the "leftover rice" (the prasad). When dinnertime arrived I looked at this

preparation of food and I said: "I can't eat this. Lingaraj will be insulted." Not only that, but I also experienced a sense of dread that if I were to eat this, something bad would happen. After all, I thought and I felt, this was Lingaraj's community and I had been working in this community for many years with his blessings. It seemed ungrateful to eat this nonvegetarian food. I did not want to insult Lingaraj. I actually felt a bit afraid to do so, and I was a bit amazed by my feelings. At that moment I had gained access to some kind of sensibility that came upon me as a surprise.

Now what kind of sensibility was it? What kind of cultural knowledge had I gained that led up to this? Well, there are many things I would have to tell you about local Oriya Hindu theories and beliefs and ways of classifying things, and that would take many hours. But very quickly I will touch on a few things, and when I finish, I hope you will see that what you might initially be inclined to call "magical thinking" is basically a locally rational way of engaging the world embedded in an alternative classificatory and metaphysical belief system.

First of all, the object before me was not simply "leftover rice." That was the way my wife, operating within one familiar cultural framework, saw it, but that was not the only way the object might be seen. The object was "maha-prasad," food first offered to a god and then passed on as remains down through the status hierarchy or great chain of beings. Receiving these remains or leftovers and incorporating them into one's own body is a way of elevating one's own nature and showing respect for the divine, and so a moral category is brought to bear on the process of eating food. To treat Lingaraj as a meat-eater would be insulting to the patron god of the town. This was his town (he was the landlord, he was the mayor) where I worked by virtue of the willingness of local people to talk to me, and they had talked to me because they believed (correctly) that I had an interest in their lives and in their god.

Secondly, implicated in the eating of prasad were other moral concepts, such as solidarity and loyalty. Only members of a common moral community partake of prasad. Indian Christians will not touch this most ecumenical of Hindu foods, because it is "Hindu food." So prasad marks an in-group/out-group distinction.

Moreover this prasad was vegetarian food. Vegetarian food has a special significance within the terms of a cultural system where foodstuffs (classified as "hot" and "cold") are ranked in terms of purity and impurity. In this community distilling your own spiritual essence is a major goal in life and what you eat is related to your socially



recognized ability to literally approach divinity or be in the presence of a god. It is believed, for example, that souls do not reincarnate as vegetables but may reincarnate as animals and so killing and eating an animal is a pollution that lowers your standing in the moral hierarchy of divine beings. Having lived and worked in India for some years I had begun to understand the local classification of people (male, female), social statuses (Brahman, untouchable), life stages (youth, adulthood, old age), physical and psychological experiences (anger, serenity, diarrhea, vomiting, pregnancy, menstruation) in terms of purity and pollution, hot and cold states, and hot and cold foods.

Some of the inner rationality of that system of classification has to do with a certain substantialized view of mind-body connections. So, for example, when it comes to understanding Hindu thought in eastern India, the principle “you are what you eat” is fine, as far as it goes, but it is really subordinate to a much broader principle, which is “you are what you do.” Eating is merely an instance of “doing,” and by doing the right things you can alter your substantive nature; your physical nature constantly evolves (or devolves) through the virtue (or vice) of your “doings,” including what you eat. The basic idea is that conduct is an expression of material nature and that material nature is altered by conduct. That the causal arrows run both ways (conduct to substance, substance to conduct) is an essential part of this way of thinking.

Moreover this way of thinking is far less alien than it may seem. When we hear neurologists or cognitive scientists speculate that brain structures are “use-dependent” or that neurological pathways are set down by conduct, or that neurological thresholds are “experience-sensitive,” or that people who have different inclinations have different brains, are we not being invited to substantialize our view of human nature the way the Hindus do? And yet we do not view the discipline of cognitive neuroscience as magical thinking largely, I think, because we buy in to its metaphysical beliefs about the human nervous system.

If time permitted I would elaborate on the particular local metaphysical beliefs and classificatory systems that lend significance to food in Hindu India. There is a humoral theory (perhaps inherited from Galen) which comprehends the human body as composed of basic elements (wind, phlegm, etc.) in various combinations. It is believed that the balance of elements not only influences how you feel (agitated or calm, pleasant or unpleasant, expansive or contracted, open or closed, full or empty) but can be altered by what you eat. Thus, what you eat is a measure

of your character and your willingness to control and improve your natural and moral standing in the divine hierarchy of beings.

I could accumulate these kinds of observations about the internal logic of a system that might appear magical to modern observers who fail to appreciate the relevant metaphysics. There are karmic ideas about the intimate connection between actions and outcomes, which, in the light of the health behavior movement in Europe and the United States may soon begin to seem plausible to “Western” observers. And there is an ever-present consciousness of the history of an object. This process-oriented narrative awareness of the nature of an object is reminiscent of some of the examples of magical thinking discussed by Paul Rozin. In Orissa, India you never look at an object without thinking about how it got there. Is it not true that you would relate differently to the plate you ate off of at lunch today if you had been provided with a list of names, identities, and moral character of everyone who had eaten off of that plate before? If you knew the way the franc notes in your pocket had been spent over the last ten years, the kinds of virtuous or vicious objects and activities on which the money had been spent, wouldn’t that historical knowledge particularize the nature of your monetary notes and alter your attitude towards each one of them? This historical or narrative mode of perception, in which you refuse to detach process from product and presume that there is an inherent causality or proportionality between the means and the ends (if the process is contemptible, then the product is contemptible; the end does not justify the means), is a possible and plausible way of seeing, and being in, the world. If you actually were to acknowledge, contemplate, and thereby reexperience the killing or slaughter that produced the fur coat on the clothing rack or the slab of steak in the grocery store you might well alter your consumptive behavior.

In any case, these are the questions I have raised in my designated role as anthropologist, denying what others assert: Precisely why should any of this way of thinking be reduced to some basic psychological process called “magical thinking”? Why should it be viewed as an inadequate or inferior mode of thought? Why should it be interpreted as some kind of confusion (of subjectivity with objectivity, means with ends, words with things)? And the answer I have offered, asserting what others will surely deny, is that magical thinking is an illusion and that our fascination with the chimera of magic is merely a measure of the narrowness of our modern view of what is really real.



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