

# **The Nature of Magic: an anthropology of consciousness**

**by Dr. Susan Greenwood, Book launch at Treadwells, Covent Garden, May 2005**

## **Questions, questions, questions...**

I wrote *The Nature of Magic* to answer some questions that I wanted answering (those of you who know me know I'm one for asking questions...!).

I was one of those awful children that were always asking questions. I remember saying to an RE teacher at school, who had just carefully explained that God made the world, 'Well, if God made the world, who made God'. She gave me an exasperated look and just told me not to ask stupid questions.

On another occasion, when I was much younger (about 5), I asked a question of my primary school teacher. I can't remember what the question was but I do remember the answer: it was 'Susan, are you up the pole?' It would be very romantic to interpret this as her seeing some sort of shamanic vocation in my eager, young face - that her response referred to a sign of a shamanic cosmological central axis - but unfortunately I think she just wanted to shut me up. Probably just as well!

So as a celebration I'm going to **Start this talk with a question.**

- this is my own question but it's one that anthropologist, biologist and psychologist Gregory Bateson would understand:

**What links boggart (nature spirit) stories, a ghostly cavalcade led by a goddess or god, cyborgs, and Covent Garden?**

We'll come back to that question... or rather we'll go on a roundabout tour, using other questions and looking at problems, by way of answering it.

I'm going to talk about magical consciousness, the main theme of *The Nature of Magic*

**What is Magical consciousness?**

I probably don't have to explain too much about what magical consciousness is to this audience. Perhaps it's something that many of us think we know about but when we sit down and try and explain it - perhaps the words don't come. It's something that's difficult to put into words; concerns what 19th century psychologist William James called 'the ineffable'.

- magical consciousness is difficult to describe - it's an **experience**, maybe of

... a spiritual feeling of connection - seeing a sunset over the sea, the moon (full moon tonight...) being in love or emotionally *engaged*;

Mystery, of profound connection, spiritual insight, deep understanding, communion with other beings or Being, a feeling of expansion, being in touch with something greater, loss of ego-self.... the list continues....

Magical consciousness is developed through magical practice - which might involve meditation, rituals, or going on a vision quest, amongst a hundred other examples - you all know what I mean.

'Magic' and 'consciousness' are both difficult terms academically:

a) **Magic** has meant different things at different times - during the Renaissance it was considered to be a way of contacting God; later during the Reformation it came to be seen as false religion; it has been seen by some as a form of pre-science (before we really knew what was going on). Not going to talk more about that here - like teaching Grandmother how to suck eggs...

There's a prejudice against magic in the social sciences - seen as irrational, superstition; okay in small-scale, non-western, tribal peoples but not in educated westerners; certainly not in academia - it's not taken seriously. Magic isn't examined on its own terms - its reduced to sociological, cultural, or psychological explanations.

b) **Consciousness** can't be pinned down or measured - it's ambiguous. Science doesn't deal well with ambiguity. Reduces explanations for consciousness to the individual human brain, in many cases; it was left to philosophy to explain.

Is consciousness located solely within the human brain or the human mind, or is it something wider - does it expand outwards in nature; do other beings experience consciousness as part of a wider universe? This is the view being developed by those interested in what's called 'the new physics' - Bohm, Capra and others.

My answer to this question is 'yes' - consciousness is wider than the individual human mind, wider than the human brain; here we can go back to Gregory Bateson (*Mind and Nature: a necessary unity*) who said that mind is in nature: not only in the head (we are nature) but also out there in our environment; and we share minds with trees and sea-anemones (for example) through stories.

Stories create links between personal mind and the wider consciousness or consciousnesses.

So, our brains are not the originators of consciousness but merely the *transmitters* of it (a view taken by transpersonal psychologist Stanislav Grof - see his book *The Holotropic Mind*).

And if you don't believe that it doesn't matter - just suspend disbelief and imagine that it's true (we're talking about worldviews here not absolute truths) so we can explore magical consciousness.

## **So what is 'magical consciousness'?**

Magical consciousness, as I've defined it:

- above all it's an **experience**
- an aspect, dimension, strand of consciousness that allows for creative participation - through the **imagination** - between human beings and spirit - of deities, ancestors, and all manner of other-than-human people - from hedgehogs to prawns.

Magical consciousness works through connections. How? Through seeing things in terms of patterns of communication (and this is an important clue to the question I asked at the beginning...).

If we see 'consciousness' as something wider than just our own minds; as something that enables us to connect with other beings through our imaginations - there are no limits: we can change shape, shape-shift, with all manner of beings - and thereby gain knowledge. We can experience what it's like to be an owl, for example. We can feel what it's like to have feathers and to feel the air moving through our feathers when we fly. Magical consciousness is a source of knowledge that has been devalued and trivialized in Western societies.

Connections are made through our personal minds linking with other minds in a wider consciousness or consciousnesses.

- through **participation**, an ancient concept in philosophy which means that things 'take part' in something bigger...

The term was developed by philosopher Lucien Levy-Bruhl to refer to mystical thinking - a unity of thinking that made associations between things based on the idea that energy suffuses everything. Levy-Bruhl initially said that this was how non-western peoples thought.

This started something of an aggravated debate in anthropology in the early 20th century with various celebrated anthropologists claiming that Levy-Bruhl made native peoples more mystical than they really were. Levy-Bruhl then modified his position but what he said about participation still remains relevant.

Anthropologist Stanley Tambiah developed Levy-Bruhl's notion of participation to argue that people everywhere have two co-existing orientations to the world:

- a. *causality* (logical thinking: abstract, separated, focused)
- b. *participation* (analogical, holistic thinking: works with patterns and connection, though myths, ritual, and symbols) - basis of magical consciousness.

Causality and participation do not form a dualism but rather an 'entwining' - we use both, probably slipping in and out of each with ease without really realizing.

We're looking at magical consciousness so we're interested in participation rather than causality. How to examine participation? Lots of examples in the book, but I'll talk about one:

*The trance-dance of Gordon the Toad* It's hard to write about this kind of experience because writing is the wrong code (in Bateson's terminology) of expression. The written language, and the spoken language are the wrong codes for expression - it's incommunicable in words.

What is the message of the dance? Bateson would say that it's about communication. The dance is a participatory communication between shaman and spirits whereby Gordon invokes the spirits he works with; he moves over and lets them in and in the process both Gordon and the spirits are set free (Gordon's words). Gordon says that he feels a world that thinks and its presence humbles him and sets him free'.

- he is 'bringing through' and giving corporeal expression to the non-corporeal. The dance is an *expression* of magical consciousness; an *experience*. And this is why it is so difficult to write about.

- but the communication with spirits enable Gordon to do the work that he does in environmental education; it enables him to be a shaman in a practical sense as performing a social role.

I'm going to backtrack a bit here:

## **How did I come to write *The Nature of Magic*?**

I was a bit of an odd child! But apart from that, I thought animistically - perhaps all children think animistically. Certainly we're encouraged to think in this way - up to a certain age that is, and then we're expected to grow out of it. Trouble is - I didn't, and I expect most people in this room didn't either (and we just kept quiet about it...!).

What is animism? It's the view that sees all things in the world as alive and possessing spirit and/or soul. For Aristotle, soul was equivalent to psyche - the 'principle of life' that animates a living creature (it's only lately that psychology has developed as a discipline to study psyche in the human head as if that was all it was...).

- we can easily see ourselves as being alive as having the 'principle of life', and the dog,

the cat, but stones, and mountains that might be a little more difficult; and this table and the chairs is even more difficult (the more processed things are the less alive they seem).

I remember asking a student on my altered states of consciousness course at the University of Sussex to imagine that a stone was alive. She could just about imagine that, with a great deal of effort; and when I asked her what she thought about the stone now that she had imagined it was alive, she could handle that - just. But when I asked her what she thought the stone thought of her, well that finished her! She thought I was mad (and perhaps I am, but that's another story!).

Back to me being a weird child - I played with worms in my sandpit; I grew saplings from apple seeds and whitebeam seeds; apricot and peach trees from stones. I loved watching young horse chestnut leaves unfurling from a tightly closed sticky buds and I imagined things.... Like most children I used to talk to things - the worms as well as my toys...

But I digress. How do we come to lose this animistic world?

Our Western culture encourages us to separate ourselves off from the natural world; nature and the earth have been devalued. Culturally, we've valued other approaches that control and dominate nature - for economic and political reasons.

And we've valued rationality and disengaged reflection on the world above intuition and sense experience of engaging *with the world*. Culturally we've lost our sense of soul. But maybe if we're into magic we haven't.

- certainly the people I've worked with as an anthropologist haven't lost their sense of an animated, connected, magical world.

## **So, what's the Problem?**

As an anthropologist: how to explain my experience and those I was conducting 'participant observation' with - shamans, pagans, druids, witches, magicians - within a social scientific framework that doubts, doesn't accept, the existence of magic *on its own terms* (that is, not reduced to sociological or psychological (in the sense of relating only to the individual) explanations)?

We don't have a scientific framework that incorporates magic - as an expanded animistic awareness - as a form of knowledge.

This was a problem that I came up against in my PhD research. I wanted to explain the world of magic to the world of academia and vice versa. I saw myself as a communicator between two, largely separate, worlds

I ended up in an academic court having to fight for the views contained in my PhD because my examiners thought I wasn't a 'proper anthropologist'; I'd 'gone native'. I won the case (the spirits were with me that day, as were a number of amazing friends), the PhD was eventually awarded, and the result was published as [Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld](#) (published by Berg in 2000).

That book led to more questions and eventually *The Nature of Magic*. What was 'nature religion'? How did practitioners relate to nature? Was it how I related to nature? The

whole experience of conducting fieldwork and writing it up was an adventure that took 9 years...

When I was writing the book it felt as though it was writing me. You're not supposed to write anthropological ethnographies like that. And even if you do, you're not supposed to say that that's how you've done it! It's a bit like admitting to a crime. It felt as if it was writing me - like I had to get into the space of magical consciousness in my own mind in order to *experience it*. And then write from that place (helped by a number of spirits that had come to me in the process of conducting fieldwork - you're certainly not supposed to admit to that!).

Back to the first Question (or perhaps I should say 'forward to the past')

### **What links boggart (nature spirit) stories, a ghostly cavalcade led by a goddess or god, cyborgs, and Covent Garden?**

You've probably guessed the answer: the link is 'magical consciousness', and it's now quite obvious really, or I hope it's obvious...

*Boggarts and other spirits of nature stories* can relate us to the participating land. Through the eye of magical consciousness, the land is made up, as eco-philosopher David Abram says, of multiple intelligences. As Abram puts it:

Magic is participating in a world of multiple intelligences with the intuition that every form one perceives - from swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself - is an experiencing form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations that are very different from our own (Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 1997: 10).

This is an animistic view - seeing the world as animated and having soul - it's about connection.

*The 'ghostly cavalcade'* refers to an old European mythos - commonly termed the Wild Hunt - that represents the cyclicity of life; it is symbolic of the connections between the living and the dead, the hunter and the hunted; as well as light and dark, and all manner of other distinctions.

- myth is a 'language of magical consciousness' - it gives the experience a framework in which to expand. I've used the example of The Wild Hunt but there are many others that have similar or different themes, they all work in the same way.

*Cyborgs* well, that was a bit of a cheat - just put that in to keep your interest. Refers to Donna Haraway's critique of the Goddess as a relational symbol in postmodern technological societies... How human beings relate to technology, a very processed form of nature...

*Covent Garden* Nature in the City; not just pristine obviously magical places such as Stonehenge or Avebury. Magical consciousness is how we think in all sorts of situations and places, including here.

Jonathan Raban wrote *Soft City* in 1974; explained how we all create meaning through our own personal reference points:

A black-fronted bookshop in south Kensington, a line of gothic balconies on the Cromwell Road... 'symbols denote a particular quarter - the underground may, for example, turn into an object of superstition, an irrational way of imposing order on the city: the Piccadilly Line is full of fly-by-night and stripe-shirted young men who run dubious agencies' (Page 169).

Bateson called this personal map-making 'ideation', a way of imposing order on the world.

Witch Chris Penczak (in *City Magick: urban rituals, spells, and shamanism*) takes it one step further when he describes the city as a 'powerful landscape of magick' by imbuing it with magical power:

- mechanical spirits may manifest physically in the form of subways seen as great electric serpents, akin to underworld gods, like the great king worm burrowing under us (I had to get the worm spirit in somewhere!); they can take us to other dimensions
- tall buildings may function as cosmic axes for interconnecting realms, like the World Tree, linking deities, humans, ancestors, and giants...
- graffiti might be magical sigils...

This is 'abduction' - magical consciousness - *recognizing the patterns*.  
Looking for the pattern that connects, Bateson asked:

What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose, and all the four of them to me? And me to you? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and to the backward schizophrenic in another?

This is what he calls 3rd order connection; connection in terms of stories (*Mind and Nature: a necessary unity*). Stories help us connect; help us make sense of our world.

And now we know the answer to the question (I hope!): Magical consciousness

## **To Conclude**

Magical consciousness is about recognizing the subjective patterns that come to us through our engagement with our everyday here and now world as well as the cosmos.

- it isn't something inherently mystical (although it can be interpreted in this way)
- it's a part of being human, a part that has been denied by Western societies.

Magical consciousness is about reconnecting with souls as psyche - the life principle - the souls of everyday lived experience.





This work is an anthropological study of magic and consciousness conducted through an examination of nature spiritualities. Often collectively termed nature religion, nature spiritualities are concerned with developing intense personal relationships with nature, as demonstrated by my own encounter with the Snowdonian elements above. By contrast, this work is an anthropology of consciousness in the making as an awareness of the relatedness of all things. So, what is nature religion? Catherine Albanese, in her epilogue to *Nature Religion in America*, says that it is an elusive form of religion, Unorganized and unacknowledged as religion, it is given the right places to look everywhere apparent. 'Magic' and 'consciousness' are concepts that are often fraught with prejudice and ambiguity respectively. Greenwood develops a new theory of magical consciousness by arguing that magic ultimately has more to do with the workings of the human mind in terms of an expanded awareness than with socio-cultural explanations. She combines her own subjective insights gained from magical practice with practitioners' in-depth accounts and sustained academic theory on the process of magic. She also tracks magical consciousness in philosophy.