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## Magic: The Basics

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Introduction:

## A Magical World

On midsummer nights in ancient Mesopotamia, ritual experts would perform a long and complex ceremony to undo harmful magic. Calling on the gods of night and on Night herself, “the veiled bride,” they would burn images representing a wizard or witch in a brazier, turning those beings’ wicked power back against them in order to protect their clients, who might be wealthy nobles or even kings.<sup>1</sup> When the Persian king Xerxes assailed Greece in the early fifth century BCE, the historian Herodotus relates, his great invasion fleet was stymied for three days by unrelenting storms. Finally, his priests quelled the tempest on its fourth day through incantations and sacrifices; “or perhaps,” Herodotus casually remarks, “it abated on its own.”<sup>2</sup> In fifteenth-century Europe, one magical text recommended that a sorcerer bite the heart out of a dove with his own teeth and use its blood to cast a love-spell.<sup>3</sup> Another, rather more respectably, laid out a rite invoking the Christian god to grant its practitioner knowledge “of any art whatsoever, and wisdom, memory, eloquence, intelligence, and understanding.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, some Europeans imagined that demonic witches were concocting poisons by mixing the juices of serpents, toads, or spiders with the boiled fat of murdered babies, that they could impede sexual intercourse, and that they could conjure hailstorms to destroy crops.<sup>5</sup>

Far beyond the boundaries of Europe, sorcerers in Han China (third century BCE-third century CE) also made use of both poisonous insects and evil spirits in their spells, while during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor in the eighteenth century something like a witch hunt broke out in response to fears that wandering sorcerers were stealing people’s souls by magical means, and at

the dawn of the twentieth century participants in the Boxer Rebellion believed that spiritual entities would make them invulnerable to European weapons.<sup>6</sup> Among the Azande people of central Africa in the early twentieth century, healers would cure bewitchment by making an incision in their patients and apparently drawing out bewitched matter into a poultice. In modern South Africa, witches may attack someone by mixing graveyard earth with a magical potion and placing this concoction near the victim's house, while healers will craft their own potions and call on protective spirits to turn this harmful power back against the witch herself.<sup>7</sup> In other parts of Africa, conmen who make fantastic amounts of money via internet fraud or other means are often thought to be in league with occult forces, and people believe that witches now use invisible airplanes for their nighttime journeys.<sup>8</sup> In the modern Caribbean, migrant laborers have turned to spells to fortify themselves when traveling abroad for work, while other people have used magic to keep distant lovers faithful, or to kill sexual rivals living in foreign lands.<sup>9</sup>

Magical beliefs and practices remain strong in modern Europe and North America as well. Occult societies of Rosicrucians, Theosophists, and others have flourished in both the Old World and the New. In the late nineteenth century the famous Madame Blavatsky proclaimed the esoteric wisdom supposedly revealed to her by hidden Tibetan mahatmas, while in the early twentieth century the infamous Aleister Crowley, labeled "the wickedest man in the world" by the British press, combined sex and drugs with magical rites.<sup>10</sup> In Spain, *curanderos* dispensed love magic and healing charms, particularly against the evil eye, well into the twentieth century, and in 1926 a healer in the Netherlands was said to receive patients "almost daily."<sup>11</sup> In 1976, a court in England fined a man for sending a parcel containing a chicken's heart pierced with needles to his neighbor, who claimed it was a form of witchcraft meant to kill him.<sup>12</sup> In the early

2000s, a Gallup poll showed that more than twenty percent of people in the United States believed in witches, twenty-five percent believed in the power of astrology, more than forty percent believed in demonic possession, and more than fifty percent believed in psychic or spiritual healing. All told, nearly three quarters of Americans believed in at least some kind of “paranormal activity,” compared to only half who believed in evolution.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, witches do exist in the modern world – self-proclaimed and proud. The neo-pagan religion of Witchcraft, also known as Wicca, developed in England in the mid-twentieth century but soon achieved great success throughout the Western world, especially in North America. Its followers stress its spiritual components but also assert their ability to work real magic. While Wicca and other forms of neo-paganism often emphasize their rootedness in the natural world, so-called techno-pagans embrace modern gadgets and gizmos into their rites, and neo-pagans of all kinds have found ways to adapt or develop rites for urban living, crafting spells to secure a parking place or to ensure a good WiFi connection, for example.

What are we to make of this array of examples that spans centuries and continents and still, of course, only scratches the surface of what has been or could be called magic across all of human history? Intriguing connections abound, from seemingly parallel practices in very different contexts to similar reactions (often fear or derision, but also wonderment) expressed by widely separated societies and cultures. Some scholars contend that magic is so broad and diffuse a category that it becomes useless as a subject for any kind of analysis. What real similarity is there, after all, between a rite intended to heal an injury or illness and one intended to confer wisdom, secret knowledge, or a glimpse into the future? What comparisons can be made between

practices that explicitly call on supernatural spiritual entities and others that employ items from the natural world – herbs or stones, wooden wands, or engraved metal images? And what connections really exist between complex rituals performed by experts in some craft, perhaps learned from arcane tomes written in obscure languages, and other acts that might be as simple as a muttered word, a gesture, or even a baleful glance?

Obviously, this book takes the position that magic is a discernible aspect of human culture, and therefore a topic for serious analysis, however obscure and by definition occult it may be. The critics, however, have a point. Throughout much of history, magic has been a label and very often an accusation applied by certain people to the practices of others, whether that be members of one society deriding the rites and rituals of foreigners, or some powerful group within a society disparaging the behavior of the “common folk.” The problems that color our perception of magic become even more complex when we consider other, potentially more sinister labels such as sorcery or witchcraft. It is mainly (although by no means exclusively) in the modern period that certain people have tried to reclaim these terms as emblems of positive and powerful identities. But they have been, and in some places still are, serious and potentially deadly accusations. Of course, this does not mean that people in the past did not claim great and mysterious powers, but they often referred to themselves by somewhat narrower titles: healer, diviner, exorcist, priest. Another valid complaint is that the term magic and many of its commonly employed cognates are Western in origin. We have to be wary whenever we translate practices from other societies into Western terminology, and we must realize that Western structures of thought may not fully apply to them.

Nevertheless magic seems to be here to stay, both as a category for academic study and, with endlessly variable connotations, as a term in common discourse as well. The point of this book will be to try to give some coherent form to those variations. We'll start, as we must, with words and definitions. No action is inherently magical. Instead, it comes to be understood as such only when some group of people declares it to be so and gets others to agree. While part of this book's focus will always be on the global scope of magic, when it comes to the words used to label this phenomenon the story will mainly be a Western one. This is inevitably so, in part, simply because this is a book written in English. More importantly, scholars from Europe and North America have done by far the most work to frame the academic study of magic in anthropology, history, religious studies, and other fields, and they have drawn mainly on the cache of words and concepts that Western history provides. Moreover, because of colonialism, imperialism, and lingering cultural hegemony, Western ideas and Western words now very deeply affect systems of thought, belief, and practice around the world. This, of course, further muddles our understanding of what magic can be, but as we'll see, that very uncertainty can become a place to start fixing our notions of the magical.

From words we'll switch to actions, framing the goals that the use of magic can be thought to achieve and the methods by which it is thought to be practiced. We'll also consider who typically is thought to employ magic, as well as the nature of the powers on which they are believed to draw. Then we'll move to reactions, examining how various societies have responded to what they have regarded as magical practices and practitioners. Again, while the overall focus will be global, a good deal of attention will be given to Western Europe, both because the European witch hunts from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries are probably the most spectacular

(and certainly the most intensely studied) “reaction” to a set of perceived magical practices the world has ever known, and because the Christian condemnation of magic as diabolical continues to influence reactions around the world, as some evangelical pastors now inveigh against magic in Africa or Latin American as harshly as medieval preachers ever did.

In many societies, almost everyone will engage in some magical actions, at least on occasion, but they will not necessarily think of themselves as magicians for doing so. Also, however, across many cultures those who perform magic take it on, or have it ascribed to them, as a kind of identity. There can be many connotations, positive or negative, associated with that identity, and we’ll explore in particular the connections of magic to otherness and to gender in a number of contexts. We’ll also look at the vexed issue of whether magic is real. A staple of serious scholarship is that academics need not believe in magic themselves in order to study it and to assert that belief in its reality has been a very important force throughout history and into the present day. We’ll go beyond that, however, to explore how some kinds of magic might “really” (that is, empirically) work, and why so many people have believed in magic over time.

Finally, we’ll explore magic in the modern world. This book isn’t set up as a history and isn’t meant to be read that way, but a key aspect of magic, certainly in the present day and to some extent throughout history as well, is how widely it has been thought of as “traditional” or even “primitive” and most definitely not modern. Thus the concluding chapter on “Magic in the Modern World” frames not just a historical period but an important topic within the overall subject of magic.

I make no promise that, by the end of this book, everything you need to know about magic will have been made perfectly clear. One of the most basic elements of magic, we'll see again and again, is its inscrutability. We are dealing here, after all, with the occult, and it wouldn't do if at least a few shadows didn't remain even after much light has been cast. Throughout history and across cultures, magic most often exists at the point where the comfortably understood gives way to the mysteriously uncertain. That is what provides much of its allure and power. That is also what makes it such a fascinating subject to explore, and through which to explore a part of the human condition.

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<sup>1</sup> Tvzi Abusch, "Witchcraft Literature in Mesopotamia," in *The Babylonian World*, ed. G. Leick (London: Routledge, 2007), 373-85.

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 7.191.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual from the Fifteenth Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 82.

<sup>4</sup> Julien Véronèse, "Magic, Theurgy, and Spirituality in the Medieval Ritual of the *Ars notoria*," in *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. Claire Fanger (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 57.

<sup>5</sup> *Errores Gazariorum*, in Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 161.

<sup>6</sup> Xiaohuan Zhao, "Political Uses of Wugu Sorcery in Imperial China: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 8 (2013): 133; Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

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<sup>7</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, abridged edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 102-4; Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 139-41.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 56-57, 63-64.

<sup>9</sup> Lara Putman, "Rites of Power and Rumors of Race: The Circulation of Supernatural Knowledge in the Greater Caribbean, 1890-1940," in *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*, ed. Diana Paton and Maarit Forde (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 252-53.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 394.

<sup>11</sup> Enrique Perdiguero, "Magical Healing in Spain (1875-1936): Medical Pluralism and the Search for Hegemony," in *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe*, ed. Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 133-50; Willem de Blécourt, "Boiling Chickens and Burning Cats: Witchcraft in the Western Netherlands, 1850-1925," in *ibid.*, 98.

<sup>12</sup> *Times*, 19 June 1976, pg. 3.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/16915/three-four-americans-believe-paranormal.aspx#2> (accessed on Feb. 5, 2017); <http://www.gallup.com/poll/170822/believe-creationist-view-human-origins.aspx> (accessed on Feb. 5, 2017).