t. m. luhrmann

Persuasions of the Witch's Craft

Ritual Magic in Contemporary England

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For my parents

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Persuasions of the Witch's Craft

Contents

PART I

Speaking with a different rhythm: magicians in the modern world

1

What makes magic reasonable?

WILLIAM has been witch, kabbalistic initiate and solitary magician. He was born into a prosperous English family between the two World Wars. He was an only child. His father died soon after he was born, and as a young boy he was raised by his mother and aunt. He remembers that it was a strict but loving household. Rather shy by nature, he seems to have led a conventional and retiring life, first in private schools and then at Cambridge. He graduated with a classics degree, and took a comfortable job in the Foreign Office in London.

In the sixties, when new therapies, values and lifestyles appeared like apples in the market, William came across a popular psychological technique for controlling one's dreams and decided to experiment. For a while he went to sleep each night determined to 'visit', while dreaming, a friend he knew in a distant town. He always failed. One night, in the twilight between sleep and awareness, he heard a voice saying 'sacrifice to Zeus'. He decided that this was a voice of guidance, possibly the voice of God, and that if he followed the instructions his dream experiments might work.

So William set off for Silbury Hill, to sacrifice to Zeus at dawn. Silbury Hill is an ancient mound near one of Britain's most impressive stone circles. It is a drive of several hours from London. He arrived before dawn and clambered to the top of the grassy hill. To his pleasure, he lit the fire with the first match. He then sacrificed a steak. The Athenian divines traditionally were given meat. His classical education helped him with the invocation. When he got back to London he broke his fast – apart from the charred beef heart he had also sacrificed and eaten on the hill – and went to sleep, and dreamt that a sword was being forged for him with a blade the colours of the rainbow. The next night, he dreamt easily of visiting his friend. It was his first step into magic.

'These people wholly worship the devil, and often times have conference with him, which appeareth unto them in most ugly and monstrous shape.'[1] Something like an anthropology emerged in Hakluyt's sixteenth-century collection of voyagers' tales, rich with anecdotes of the spice and silk trade, of explorations of the torrid Americas and the frozen Russian wastelands, of

[1] David (1981: 563).

poison-darting Native American Indians and guru-worshipping Indians. Savages fascinated early modern Europe, as counterpoint to an encrusted civilization. Lafitau and Rousseau were among many who saw in 'natural man' the way to understand and criticize themselves. Anthropology was fully born only later, in the colonial heyday of a society which needed to assimilate different cultures while maintaining its own hegemony.[2] As a discipline it has progressed through many phases: grand theories of speculative evolution, attacks upon the complacency of biological determinism, sweeping attempts to understand the nature of Mind. In all these phases, anthropologists have focused on the distant and more primitive, and claimed that through their very exoticism, the near and apparently more complex might be better understood.

The world has changed for anthropology. The primitive societies are slowly vanishing, and the foreign governments have become more wary of inquisitive intruders. Ever more anthropologists are turning inward to study their own society. But they have tended to focus on the immediate problems of urban life: ethnicity, acculturation, religious revitalization. Few have continued to ask traditional anthropological questions, to look for the exotic and learn from it about the familiar. This study looks at ordinary middle-class English people who become immersed in a netherworld of magic and ritual, and asks a classic anthropological question: why do they practise magic when, according to observers, the magic doesn't work?

In England several thousand people – possibly far more – practise magic as a serious activity, and as members of organized groups.[3] They are not conjurors, hired to produce rabbits at children's birthday parties. Their magic involves a ritual practice based upon ideas about strange forces and the powers of the mind. These are people who don long robes and perform rituals in which they invoke old gods to alter their present reality. They read tarot cards and cast astrological charts and may feel more holy on Beltane than on Good Friday. It would be incorrect to think of them as 'only playing' at their magic, or as joining their groups for the same social reasons that lead many people into Freemasonry. Many of them take this magic as both a religion and a pragmatic

[2] Pertinent references on the emergence of anthropology include: Hodgen (1964), Pagden (1982), Berkhofer (1978), Burrow (1966).

[3] This figure is an educated guess, based on the percentage of occultists I met who had taken correspondence courses (about a third) and the number of people who had taken the major correspondence courses (about four thousand; but some of those lived abroad, and many of them had only ordered the course, or taken the first lesson or so and then dropped it, and so the significant figure is probably closer to one thousand. Thrice that figure is three thousand). By most standards this is an extremely conservative estimate. Figures given by occultists range from 80,000 witches (Farrar and Farrar 1981) to 6000–10,000 'Chaos Magickians' (Chris Bray, who runs the Sorcerer's Apprentice course, gave this figure on 7.5.87). All these numbers seem grossly inflated to me. Nevertheless, because groups are secretive and fluid, there is no way to estimate numbers with accuracy. Moreover, there is a great range of involvement, from the casually interested to the practitioner who spends nearly every evening in a magical group meeting. By 'serious activity', I mean someone who belongs to a group which meets regularly: my prototype is a coven, a small group of people who call themselves witches. Such groups, as will be seen, often take a year to join and can be quite stable. There are many people who are very interested in magic who are not members of such groups.

result-producing practice, and some of them have practised it regularly, in organized groups, for over a quarter of a century.

In the United States the number of participants is impressive. Adler's reliable report of paganism in the United States – not quite the same thing as magic, but close[4] – suggests that there may be 80,000 self-identified pagans or members of Wicca [modern witchcraft] in America.[5] Starhawk's *Spiral Dance* (1979), a manual for witches we shall encounter frequently in these pages, sold 50,000 copies between 1979 and 1985.[6] 1985 saw at least fifty major American festivals with a pagan focus, attended by hundreds or thousands of people. Some 40,000 people have taken part of a correspondence course offered by an organization called the Church and School of Wiccan.[7] There are hundreds and hundreds of groups, stores, journals, and events.

To return to England, the focus of this book, these numbers scarcely indicate the wider popular sympathy. There, interest in the occult has ballooned during the last two decades. The largest mail order occult store, The Sorcerer's Apprentice, has over 25,000 customers who have placed at least two orders with them over the last thirteen years. Many of these regular customers buy once a month; most, the proprietor said, buy at least once a year. The store turns over between 800 and 1000 items each week – books, magical robes, incenses – and employs ten people full time.[8] Their catalogues advertise crystal balls and talismans the way other catalogues offer exercycles.

CANDLEMAGIC STARTER KIT: Code P132. Basic outfit introduces you to traditional candlemagic property. 12 × 8″ asstd. candles; candle-oil; 4 candleholders; tapers and book. Have all you need to get to grips with potent form of magic. 19 items! Book shows how to work a variety of candlemagic rituals.

WAX IMAGE DOLLS: Code P63. Cure sickness, capture love, heal and hate with image dolls. Made from traditional formulae incorporating natural wax, herbs. By making an image you can work magic on that person perpetually. 6″ male or female dolls supplied ready to be personalized. Doll prepared with all accumulators, herbs, essences, ready to go. Natural wax colour. Some shamans keep shelffuls of dolls to control all their acquaintances.[9]

Mysteries, the largest shop for occult items in London, also caters to the wider range of alternative, self-development, spiritualist interests. They opened in

[4] Paganism is the loose title for people who practise a nature-oriented religion which usually involves magic. Many of the groups discussed in this book are Christian, and explicitly not pagan. In fact, I use the term 'pagan' to identify certain sorts of nature-worshipping groups which do not initiate their members into a closed fraternity. There is a significant difference between American and English practices in their symbolism and conception of their practice, but Adler speaks about roughly the same category of magic-oriented practitioners and provides a useful comparison.

[5] Adler (1986: 418). J. Gordon Melton conducted a survey of self-identified pagans in the States in the early 1980s and asked them if they owned a copy of a certain book, *The Golden Dawn*, of which no more than 15,000 copies had been printed. The book is more or less a staple on the magical bookshelf. Melton extrapolated a figure of 40,000 from his response.

[6] Adler (1986: 419).

[7] Adler (1986: 423).

[8] Conversation with the proprietor, Chris Bray, on 7 May 1987. My sense is that Bray is a businessman and that the figures are probably accurate.

[9] 1987 Sorcerer's Apprentice mail-order form.

1982; trade doubled every six months for several years, and they have expanded to three times their original quarters. They see two to three hundred customers a day.[10] The Aquarian Press, a popular printing press committed to publishing magical material, some of it quite arcane,[11] has so far published 10,000 copies of a beginner's book on magic: Marian Green's *Magic for the Aquarian Age*. The 1987 *Quest List of Esoteric Sources* cites some forty British suppliers of occult goods, and about a hundred British 'esoteric' magazines, journals and newsletters: for example, *The Pictish Shaman*, *The Moonstone*, *The Cauldron*. One of these magazines, *Prediction*, has a circulation of 32,000 and is sold by major newsagents. 'By the quantitative indices of books published and organizations founded, there can be little doubt that public interest in the occult has grown rapidly since the mid-sixties.'[12]

The groups I am discussing are only part of the multifarious occult. Modern magic is a mixture of many different activities and ideas: paganism, astrology, mysticism, the range of alternative therapies, even kabbalism – a Jewish mysticism grafted onto Christian magical practice in the Renaissance. People practise as individuals or as members of groups which come and go in a fluctuating population, although some groups have stayed intact for decades. The groups are astonishingly diverse. But there is a working definition of the practices, or at least the ones I saw. Practitioners think of themselves as, or as inspired by, the witches, wizards, druids, kabbalists, shamans, of mostly European lore, and they perform rituals and create ritual groups in which they invoke ancient deities with symbols taken from Sir James Frazer, Thomas

[10] Conversation with the proprietor, 7 May 1987.

[11] For example, they publish unusual texts from the late nineteenth century, when a well-known magical group was founded, and from the Elizabethan era, another period of great interest to magicians. These texts have included an obscure text by John Dee (*The Heptarchia Mystica*, ed. by R. Turner, 1986), the letters of a not-very-well-known member of the nineteenth-century group, who happened to be interested in alchemy (*The Alchemist of the Golden Dawn: the letters of the Revd. W. A. Ayton to F. L. Gardner and Others 1886–1905*, ed. by E. Howe, 1985), the Masonic encyclopaedia written by an earlier contributor to the formation of the nineteenth-century group: some of its entries are unusual for a Masonic work, and this is due to the author's magical interests (*The Royal Masonic Cyclopedia*, by Kenneth Mackenzie, intro. by J. Hamill and R. A. Gilbert, 1987). It is somewhat extraordinary that a popular market exists for these texts, but clearly it does. The first impression tends to run between three and four thousand copies for major books.

[12] Galbreath (1983: 20). Galbreath is speaking of America, but uses sources that indicate concomitant English growth. It should be noted that some cast doubt on the notion of an occult revival. Jo Logan, *Prediction*'s editor, certainly agrees that media coverage of magic and witchcraft has increased dramatically in recent years, but thinks that the number of practitioners has remained more constant: previously, people were more secretive (7 May 1987). Chris Bray, the archmage behind the Sorcerer's Apprentice, also says that there are far more 'dabblers' these days, but no more 'serious' occultists (7 May 1987). Academic doubt has been poured on the question of whether the occult has been 'revived' by Galbreath 1983: he questions what counts as a revival, and whether there hasn't always been a public interest in the quirky. There is no doubt some truth in these caveats and qualifications. However, I find it highly unlikely that there were as many magicians in the 1950s as there are today. One reason is that far fewer people knew about the occult as something to do, whether they did it seriously or not, and another is that the risk of getting involved was higher and more inhibiting, because the social cost of public knowledge of involvement was greater. In any event, contemporary interest is considerable. In America, even the Pentagon seems not unaffected. In 1984 it was reported that the Pentagon had spent millions on investigating extrasensory phenomena in the name of national security (*The New York Times* 10 January 1984).

Bulfinch, E. Wallis Budge and Jessie Weston. They identify with the mystical religions of Eleusis, Orphism, Mithraism, even of Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich. And they have two marked characteristics. First, they tolerate a surprising spiritual diversity. Central to the ethos is the notion that any path to a religion is a path to a spiritual reality, and whatever symbols and images one chooses are valid. Groups and their practices are creative, syncretic, their rites often an amalgam of Egyptian headress, Celtic invocation and Greek imagery. The only dogma, they say, is that there is no dogma, and feminist witches, kabbalistic Christians and neo-Nordic shamans socialize well together. Second, they practise what they call magic. They often describe themselves as magicians, perform what they call magical rites, and talk as if they expected those rites to have effects. Not all people involved in these groups would use the term 'magic' to explain their activities. I use the term as a convenient shorthand, because they all practice what most of them call magic, even if they do not immediately think of themselves as 'magicians' but as kabbalists, witches and the like.

While I am interested in the reasons behind the current 'revival' of witchcraft, or the explanation of why some people, rather than others, have become involved in practice, an even more interesting question concerns the process that allows people to accept outlandish, apparently irrational beliefs. 'Belief' is a difficult term, and I shall try to avoid it until the final chapters. But the question is how people come to make certain assertions and to act as if they were true. Magicians are ordinary, well-educated, usually middle-class people. They are not psychotically deluded, and they are not driven to practise by socio-economic desperation. By some process, when they get involved with magic – whatever the reasons that sparked their interest – they learn to find it eminently sensible. They learn to accept its core concept: that mind affects matter, and that in special circumstances, like ritual, the trained imagination can alter the physical world. Many non-magicians find that theory fatuous or false. But the Janus face of the outsider's bafflement and the insider's nonchalance is not unique to magic. Modern magicians are interesting because they are a flamboyant example of a very common process: that when people get involved in an activity they develop ways of interpreting which make that activity meaningful even though it may seem foolish to the uninvolved.

Understanding how someone comes to find magic persuasive is, roughly, the same problem as understanding how someone can become a priest in a community of unbelievers. More generally, it is the problem of describing what happens as an undergraduate turns into a lawyer: the way she alters her perceptions, interpretations and ideas as she grows older. The youth has one set of habits for interpreting events, and these habits may evolve into a quite different set for the adult. In many cases, the later set is less common to outsiders. An atheist may not understand what a college friend is talking about after he becomes a priest. A literary critic learns to be sensitive to ways of conceptualizing the written word that the historian may find meaningless. The real issue is not that magicians become comfortable practising an irrational

activity, but that when someone becomes a specialist, he finds his practice progressively more persuasive through the very process of interpreting and making sense of his involvement; this changing understanding may become progressively more opaque to outsiders. Magic makes the issues particularly clear because magical practice is hard to confirm empirically and is socially unsupported, and so the challenges to finding it persuasive, one might think, are particularly strong.

Magicians raise another question. They maintain their jobs as civil servants, businessmen and computer analysts. If anything, they become more effective at their jobs. Yet they rarely suggest that their clients use magic in their transactions, and they rarely confuse the magical circle with, for example, a foreign policy affair. All people move between different parts of their lives with ease – anthropologist and father, politician and grandmother, executive and socialite. Social theorists have ways of referring to the phenomenon that one acts like a mother when mothering and like a banker while banking: we talk about different discourses, frames of reference, social roles, and the like. There seem to be distinctive ways of talking, acting and – one suspects – thinking in different situations. But how this happens and what it involves is still unclear. Magic presents this problem in particularly sharp outline because the contrast between the role of wizard and computer scientist seems so extreme.

Why do people find magic persuasive? This, the main theme of the book, has been a central problem in social anthropology since the earliest days of the discipline. It arose because magical rituals seem to be intended to do things which, observers say, they cannot possibly achieve. How do practitioners continue to practise in the face of constant failure? They perform rituals which seem to be about producing an effect, to the anthropologist the rituals cannot possibly produce that effect, and yet the indigenous natives perform the rituals generation after generation. Explaining this puzzle has been the major task of the anthropology of religion, for at the bottom of the puzzle, at its inmost core, lies the issue of how people believe in a god whose existence cannot be proven to an unbeliever's satisfaction.[13]

There have been two major approaches to this problem in the anthropological literature on primitive societies, and though there have been efforts to overturn them, their assumptions still underlie much anthropological thought. Either, it is said, the ritualists are making claims by their rituals, and the claims happen to be false and one's task is to explain the perpetuation of the falsehood, or the ritualists are not making claims at all, and one's task is to explain what it is that they are doing.[14] That is, either they really believe that magical theory is correct

[13] One might also say that a central task in sociology has been to explain how the elimination of magic was ever possible, and how it was that Western society moved into its rational mode. This is the task that Max Weber undertook in his *Sociology of Religion*.

[14] There is a third explanation: that magic works. Or, more specifically, that the peculiar states and practices associated with ritual practice are associated with extrasensory events, and that these events – or at least the states – may well exist. There has been some serious, worthwhile literature on this subject, usually associated with shamanic practice: Winkleman (1982), Noll (1985), Prince (1982), Bourguignon (1974), Harner (1980); there are also some hesitant remarks in Hallpike (1979).