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Digging for Meaning Research from the Oxford School of Archaeology

A Podcast



Episode 2

Professor Chris Gosden on: *'The History of Magic'*

(Dr Sainsbury: You are listening to Digging for Meaning - Research from the Oxford School of Archaeology.)

My name is Chris Gosden, I work in the School of Archaeology in the University of Oxford and I'm going to talk about the History of Magic. Once upon a time, many years ago now, I worked in a place in Papua New Guinea called New Ireland. I was excavating a cave site, which turned out to be 35,000 years old. But also I was interested in the colonial history of the island. And I asked one day for people to come with me up to a series of old historic villages, so I could map them and record them. On the way back from our day trip, we deviated through the rain forest a little bit because my friends said they wanted to show me something interesting.

We got to little glade in the rain forest, and there lay a whole series of stones that looked a bit like stalactites lying in the grass. My friend said that on occasions, these stones can move around. And they have to be careful of them because they move very fast and they can break your leg. They also said that people who know how can look at the motion of the stones and the stones will allow them to predict the future. I said, 'Oh I'd love to see those stones move.' and my friend said they wouldn't do it if white people were around. This is one small instance of a whole series of magical forms that I've encountered over the years in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere.

Papua New Guineans are extremely adaptable, they have traditional magical forms traditional magical beliefs, but people also have developed magic to try and help them rob banks or to get their children into university and they're really quite serious about the latter. Magic has been practiced for many tens of thousands of years and in all parts of the inhabited glob. There are instances of magic in all areas. So that for instance, in the Bodleian Library, which is the university library of the University of Oxford, there are 80,000 records of astrological diagnoses from the late 16th century to the later 17th century.

These were records kept by three astrologers in London and the home counties, and each one of them is recorded meticulously. So a client will come to the astrologer and ask them about a particular problem very often a health problem, but also to do with career, to do with lost objects, to do with people who are missing and the astrologers made an astrological chart, which shows the position of key planets and stars and so on at the moment in which people were interested and they provided the diagnosis: The medical ailment, what it was about the movements of the planets, or the stars that was causing someone to be ill, or what they might be able to say about their present and future on the basis of these cosmological movements.

The three astrologers practiced openly, this wasn't something that they did in a hidden way. There was a whole range of people came and consulted them from members of the aristocracy to Shakespeare's landlady and there's every sign that they took their astrology seriously. In notes, along with these diagnoses, they compare between cases, they try and improve on our diagnosis that they made previously, try and refine it and make it a little bit better. And the people who came to them,

there are 80,000 observations, as I mentioned, 60,000 people, so a number of different people came more than once.

Astrology is practiced through to the present, there are now a great range of apps, you can get to tell you about the influence of heavenly bodies on your life and we know that astrology through historical records and archaeology goes back to ancient Mesopotamia, over five and a half thousand years ago. And there are archaeological instances, which might indicate that people were recording things like the phases of the moon up to 40,000 years ago. These two instances, the movement of the stones, and astrology, can stand for many, many magical practices around the world and magic forms an extremely important part of human life, past and present, but has been relatively ignored.

My definition of magic, one of the first things that people ask about magic is what is it, my definition of human magic is that it's human participation in the universe. People feel that they are open to the universe, either through the astrological bodies influencing them or they are able to read the world in various ways, as in the motion of the stones in Papua New Guinea. Magic co-exists has done for a very long time with both religion and science. Religion is obviously a belief in a single God or more often, many gods and science is slightly more recent, but encourages us to stand back from the universe to take a more objective view of the universe and its forces to understand it in an abstract way, often in order to be able to influence or alter the shape of the world.

Each of these three practices magic religion and science, I would argue, form what can be seen as a triple helix along the lines of the genetic double helix. They are three strands of human behavior, which are interlinked and interlocks and each are important aspects of human life. And whereas the histories of religion and the histories of science have been extremely well explored, the history of magic has been much less so and people tend to think of magic as something that is or should be dying out, that's only practiced by the ill educated the ignorance people in parts of the world where they're cut off from the mainstream of human history. I think all those notions are both objectionable and wrong. People in the present in the Western world, over 75% of people surveyed in places like Europe, and the states say that they have some form of magical belief and of course, many of us believe in religion, and pretty well, everyone in various ways believes in science. So it's not a question that you have to choose one of these beliefs and practices over the other two. That they all coexist, and that each does rather different things. Magic gives us a sense of kinship and oneness with the universe, religion, a sense of transcendence and awe, through belief in some sort of superior being or beings and science emphasizes the importance of reason and our ability to understand the world and abstract and theoretical manner.

What I've tried to do in a recent book, which I've called the History of Magic, is explore these various different histories, and just as science and religion are culturally and historically embedded, so is magic. So there are many, many forms of magic around my central definition of 'participation', and magic is being constantly invented and then reinvented. What I've attempted to do in the book is to survey the last 40,000 years or so, looking at various different magical instances and something of the cultural background from which they came.

The earliest object that I talk about is the so called Lion Man from Stadel Cave in Germany, which is little ivory figure, it's made from mammoth ivory, not from elephant ivory, and this ivory tusk was carved into the form of a human figure with recognizable arms and male genitalia, but also the head of a lion. Now, it's hard to know, impossible to know what people were doing 40,000 years ago, but one possibility is that this object was seen to combine the capacities of humans, lions and mammoths all in the one object, and could be used to mobilize some of the physical power of the lion and the mammoth as well as some of the attributes of the human being.

And one of the great things about magic is that it tends to break down what we might otherwise see as divisions between species. So it's a non-linear view of the world. So rather later instance, recovered from archaeology, is at the site of Star Carr in Yorkshire in the United Kingdom. At the

edge of a lake, there are people living there in the so-called Mesolithic period, that period before farming had started, and they left behind a whole series of traces of structures and stone tools and animal bones and so on. But including in these are a series of deer frontlets, the front part of our deer skull together with the horns, and these had holes bored in them, and it appears that people wore them on their own heads, possibly breaking down the distinctions that we might normally see between people and deer. And it's been said for instance, that may be, this was part of a hunting magic where people imitated deer and were able to get control over them, but it might be that deer are in some way totemic or important to the group as a whole, and by putting these deer frontlets on their heads, people weren't imitating deer but in some way they were becoming deer.

And we definitely know that from Siberia present day Eastern Russia that there are a whole series of shamanistic practices, practices by shamans, which have been going on for the last several thousand years. And from historical records, ethnographic records of shaman, we know that in these cases, at least shaman can become animals, often powerful animals like bear and by inhabiting the soul of a bear, they are also able to travel into the spirit world, and there in the spirit world, all the powers of the universe are laid out. So that the good things that happen to people but more particularly the bad things that happen to people- disease, disease to reindeer, animal from which people live the incursion of outsiders, such as Russian settlers taking their land- all of these things to indigenous Siberian groups are seen to have some sort of spiritual basis, some sort of spiritual origin, and therefore to make people well, again, to make the reindeer well, again, it's necessary to travel to the spirit world to negotiate, to intercede with the spirits in order to try and put things right. And this is an extraordinarily risky procedure. Not everyone, only people with the right personal characteristics and training can think about doing that. And occasionally, of course, people who enter the spirit world get stuck there and are unable to come back again. And in our terms, they would then die or possibly go mad. Whereas an effective shaman has the power to enter that world but also then to come back relatively unscathed. So in these shamanistic practices, people are again blurring the boundaries between human and non-human, the spirits; the world in which we inhabit now on the world beyond the world of the spirits, which in some ways more powerful.

In many cultural instances, the ancestors are extraordinarily important. So we know from Shang Dynasty China Bronze Age China, roughly between around 1600 and 1000 BC. We know in Shang Dynasty China that people attempted divination in order to speak to their ancestors and from the Shang onwards, people developed extremely sophisticated forms of divination by which you take either the shoulder blade of an ox or the under shell of a turtle, and on that you would write a question which could receive a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Will the Queen give birth to a boy? Will we beat a particular set of enemies? Will the harvest be good? And then the diviner would apply the Bronze Age equivalent of a red hot poker to the scapular or shell and it would crack on the sound that it made a 'bu' sound would be the sound, the voice of the ancestor coming through, and the shape of the crack would tell you the answer to your question either 'yes' or 'no': the Queen will have a boy, yes.

So people expended a lot of effort in interceding with the ancestors. And we know, from preservation of Shang tombs, we know of particular ancestors. So there's a queen of the Shang called Fu Hao whose tomb was excavated intact, and she had a whole series of bronze ritual vessels in her tomb, as well as the bodies of her attendants who'd attended her in life. People in the then living world communicated with Fu Hao, in her spirit world after she died, but she in turn in the spirit world was set up to feast her ancestors, so that she would attempt to intercede with earlier generations of ancestors and we can think of a whole sort of stratigraphy of ancestral connections with previous generations talking to even earlier generations. And once again, the spirits, the ancestors, were able to influence and affect the lives of the living and in turn the prestige of the ancestors, how well they were thought of, depends on how well they were able to intercede with even older ancestral powers and maintain the wellbeing of their living descendants.

And in many parts of Africa, ancestral spirits of various kinds are extremely important and people will question spirits through divination, they will set up statues, which to us might seem representations

of their ancestors, but to them was a real instantiation of the ancestor, it was the ancestor, and they would ask questions give offerings. Sometimes, slightly unusually to us, with what Westerners have come to call 'Nail Fetishes', you would bang a nail into the carving of the ancestor and ask your question, and maybe the power of this act then required an answer from the ancestor.

Aboriginal people in Australia, famous for having extraordinarily close relationships with the land, so in terms of my definition of 'participation', they are strong participants in the landscapes in which they live. And in those landscapes, desert or more temperate landscapes, lie the actions and the power of ancestral figures and people feel that their songs and stories and genealogies are not so much about the land, but derived from the land. That people are talking the land, people are singing the land. And famously there are these, what are often now known as song lines, which cross the continent, often going many, many thousands of kilometres. And people can sing not only their own country, and its thought that the rhythm of the song evokes the topography of the country in which they live, they can evoke and sing their own country, but they can also evoke country that they've heard about, but never actually been to a seen. So the song lines are forms of landscape, forms of ancestry, which stretch out from where people are in the here and now right across the continent, in ways that we, as Westerners, find, quite confronting difficult to understand, but extraordinarily interesting.

As I said, at the beginning with the instance of things like astrology in the West, right through to the present, people practice magic, and there are some extremely interesting hybrid figures. So, Isaac Newton, one of the most famous of the early, early-ish, scientists, was described by the economist John Maynard Keynes, as not the first of the scientists but the last of the magicians. And this is because Newton, not only was interested in what we would now call physics - light, gravity, motion, whole range of things- but also he put an enormous amount of effort into alchemy, turning base metals into gold are trying to do that, biblical prophecy and also to some degree, astrology. And for Newton, it wasn't as if he did his day job, which was science and then went off in these slightly eccentric pursuits, which was magic, he possibly were searching for a grand theory of everything, much as physicists today, and saw these various different attempts- definition of physical laws, but also alchemy, astrology, and use of the Bible- as all part of one on the same means of investigating the universe and giving oneself the power to alter the universe.

So rather than magic having died out a long time ago, and rather than magic needing to die out, I think we can acknowledge not just the rich and varied histories of magic, but also the power of magic in the present. I think most of us would admit, at the moment, we're in a time of some crisis, the ecology of the planet is breaking down through human action on it, particularly over the last few hundred years. And there's vast human inequalities, some extremely rich people, many, many extremely poor people and we definitely need new ways of approaching our lives, new ways of approaching our relationship with the world and one possibility is to reinvigorate magic in new ways. Not to go back to some older form of magic, but to think about the participatory qualities of magic. The fact that magic gives us a sense of kinship with the world, a sense of kinship with the universe. Often, which can be seen as sentience, is living, even the bits of it, the rocks and so on, that we might not normally think of as sentient. If we understand the world as a series of living entities, then we may feel a duty of care towards it. And just as we care for our family and close friends, then we might think that we need to clear for the world. So rather than asking, what can we take from the world? And how can we take it, maybe we need to think about To what extent and in what ways we are custodians of the world. How we, as ancestors of generations to come, can pass the world on in a good state, to those that will come and those that should be able to enjoy the world in the way that we've been lucky enough to over the last few centuries. So my argument about magic is not a purely historical one, but is one that allows us to explore our relationships, present and future, with the world around us. Thank you very much.

(Dr Sainsbury: Thank you for listening to Digging for Meaning. For more information about this topic, or for any of our other episodes, please go to our website at arch.ox.ac.uk/podcasts.)