

Just Out of Reach: An Ethnographic Theory of Magic and Rationalisation

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To appear in *Implicit Religion*

Abstract:

Perceived in their ideal forms, rationalisation and magic might seem to oppose one another. In this paper, however, rather than placing these forces in sterile opposition, we instead explore the social and relational dynamics through which rationalisation - the dominant epistemological force of modernity – in certain cases provides the conditions of doubt, opacity, and unknowability that makes magical thinking manifest in the everyday mundane. We explore such theoretical suggestions through ethnographic research conducted in Orkney and Cyprus. By examining connections between rationalisation and magic as these historically unfolded in these two different island settings, we initially provide a depiction of how the project of rationalisation led to the decline of magic in our two fieldsites. Then, by focusing on everyday manifestations of magical thinking, we nevertheless proceed to showcase how rationalisation and magic appear to sustain one other through an unresolved, generative tension, emergent of the incapacity of the former to fully sublimate the latter in its requirement to ‘know’ the world. The trajectory of rationalisation means that there is nothing unknowable in the world, and yet, from the position of any given person, there is no knowable whole. It remains out of reach. We conclude by discussing how the tensions inherent in the relation between rationalisation and magic allow for further theorising about the dimension of unknowing that permeates contemporary public epistemologies and subjectivities.

Keywords: magic, rationalisation, epistemology, memory, Orkney, Cyprus

Magic and the Ambivalence of Rationalisation

It would be fair to say that magic has an awkward relationship with rationalisation. If rationalisation is the reliance on technical means and calculations to act upon and organise the world without recourse to spiritual explanation, then surely magic is that which must give way.

Moreover, it would likewise be fair to say that the discipline of anthropology maintains an awkward relationship with the notion of magic as a whole. As Woolley (2018, 22) has pointed out, ‘magic’ as a descriptive term has often been associated “with the past and with folly, in opposition to the efficacious naturalism of the present.” Anthropology has

historically played a key role in this portrayal of magic as something to be superseded, as shown by Jones (2017) in his careful tracing of classical anthropological treatments of magic and the lingering influence of “the early intellectualist emphasis on false causal belief” (2017, 137). Yet even within those classic anthropological texts which might appear to consign magic to a primitivism – to a time out of time with which the contemporary, developed world can only ever be allochronic (Fabian 1983) – there is an ambivalence surrounding magic’s potential.

Frazer, for example, famously undertook the enormous work of cataloguing ritual practices and customs in a way that subjected magical thinking to an understanding that it was a form of hypothetico-deductive reasoning. From this perspective magic, implying the absence of a proper understanding of the natural forces at work in the world, could only ever be a failed form of reasoning, to be displaced by science. Yet the continued mass circulation of Frazer’s conclusions in the abridged version of *The Golden Bough* (1922) has granted his work an ironic afterlife. As Pels (2015) notes, the detailed compendium Frazer offered served as key source material for two 20th century European trajectories of magic: High Magic, derived from a reading of *The Golden Bough* by practitioners such as William Butler Yeats and Alastair Crowley, and the emergence of Wicca. The potential for magic’s enchantment (allegedly displaced by science) to come to life from the page was, it seems, greater than Frazer had imagined.

To draw on a somewhat different example of the classic anthropological ambivalence towards magic, whereas Frazer saw magic as a failure of causal reasoning, Evans-Pritchard (1937) in his study of the Azande, makes clear that the explanation that an event was caused by witchcraft is not a result of ignorance about the physical causes of the event, but rather indicates the inadequacy of causal explanations. What we see here is a recognition that while such causal explanations might satisfy ‘how’ questions, they do not adequately address the ‘why’ questions – the proximate physical process that caused harm is apparent, but *why* did such a physical occurrence happen to a particular person at a particular time? Yet while on the one hand what Evans-Pritchard is identifying here is a crucial problem of the limits of knowledge, the problem is nonetheless foreshadowed by the sceptical oversight of the anthropologist: “witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist” (1937, 63). The magical mode of explanation is offered as something unsatisfactory from the perspective of a rationalised society while, *at the same time*, Evans-Pritchard (noting analogous concepts of

luck) recognises that the crucial problem of the inadequacy of causal explanations is just as real for his presumed audience as it is for the Azande (1937, 148).

Recognising that such ambivalences may be potentially revealing, this paper sets out to explore the relationship between magic and rationalisation, arguing that processes of rationalisation may provide a particularly fertile ground for modes of magical thinking. We do this from the perspective of ethnographic fieldwork in two different contexts: Orkney, an archipelago off the north coast of Scotland, and Nicosia, Cyprus. While comparison between Northern Europe and the Mediterranean provides interesting grounds for contrast and connection, with each site enmeshed in distinct historical trajectories, crucially for our purpose what both of these fieldsites offer is an opportunity to bring the apparent secularisation of Europe into deliberate dialogue with anthropological theories of magic. In this way, we focus our attention on the ways in which magic might emerge as a salient category in the everyday lives of people who, in one way or another, are considered to be non-religious.

Here, we take our cue from Weber's account of rationalisation in his lecture to students at the University of Munich in 1917, "Science as a vocation." Strikingly, what he insists upon is a sense of humility in our approach to knowledge in a rationalised world. On the one hand, rationalisation involves a recognition that the world is knowable and calculable: "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means" (Weber [1917] 1946, 139). Yet at the same time, the nature of extreme specialisation within a modern division of labour, and the ever expanding scope of the field of knowledge, means that each of us can only ever apprehend a tiny fragment of this knowable world. Weber drives the point home by contrasting the necessarily limited knowledge of his audience with the holistic knowledge of the 'savage':

Unless he is a physicist, one who rides on the streetcar has no idea how the car happened to get into motion [...] The savage knows incomparably more about his tools. When we spend money today... How does it happen that one can buy something for money, sometimes more and sometimes less? The savage knows what he does in order to get his daily food and which institutions serve him in this pursuit. The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore,

indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives.

Rationalisation therefore occupies an uncanny position in relation to knowability. Potentially – and here is the analytical promise of a focus on the anthropology of magic in the context of apparently rationalised settings – one might follow this by insisting that a core characteristic of rationalisation is opacity: the opacity which arises in the space between the complexity of a knowable world and the tiny scope of knowledge that each individual can possess within an increasingly specialised universe. In this space, might we plausibly say that what emerges is a cognitive and social gap – a space of unknowing – which can, under certain circumstances, be occupied by forms of magical thinking?

Orkney: dynamics of unbelief in Scotland's 'haemorrhage of faith'

Narratives and practices of atheism and unbelief are increasingly gaining traction on global scale (Lee 2012, 2014). The rate of decline in religious affiliation, participation, and belief within Scotland has been well documented by Field (2001), who describes a “haemorrhage of faith” from the 1970s onwards: he draws on opinion poll data showing that while 85 percent of Scots claimed to believe in God in 1976, this had fallen to 73 percent in 1997. Over a similar time period Scottish church activity decreased from 24 percent weekly attendance in 1972 to 17 percent in 1997, and these trends have continued in the period since: Clements (2017) notes that for each person saying they attend religious services, around two report that they never attend. Scotland is therefore a country in which religious belief, and in particular the previously dominant form of Presbyterian Christianity, is waning in its social significance. Orkney broadly follows these social trends (see Bruce 2014, 22-26), in contrast to other island communities (notably Gaelic speaking communities in the Western Isles of Scotland) where the rate of decline has been slower.

The community of Rousay (the Orkney island where Irvine is based) provides an acute illustration of these trends. The kirk occupied a prominent role in island life prior to the Second World War. However, between 1933 and 1958, the level of church attendance declined by two thirds. While overall population decline accounts for some of this loss (the population of the island decreased from just under 600 in 1931 to 338 in 1961), the fall in involvement with the church outstrips this decline markedly. By the 1970s, the Kirk Session (that is, the body of elders governing the church) regularly recorded concerns about the small

size of the congregation and difficulties in recruitment. In 1995 the last kirk on the island closed, and since then services have been held in a room in the former Manse (where the minister, when there was a minister, would have lived). These have become increasingly sporadic, and as of 2018 there are no regular services on the island. (As was explained to Irvine when attempting to find a church service one Sunday at an early stage during his research, “you’ll find folk are no very religious here.”) The one annual service which does attract a high proportion of people on the island is an open air service at the war memorial on Remembrance Sunday, commemorating the war dead. Many who attend this do so irrespective of religious belief: to quote one atheist attendee, “people gave their lives, it’s about paying respect; you do that even if you don’t believe in God.”

The dwindling away of the church reflects the high number of people who declare themselves to be atheists, saying that they “believe in nothing” or that “it’s all nonsense” (frequently using stronger language). However, while the decline of religion may be taken as a sign of an increasingly disenchanted view of the world, in fact the relationship between religion, irreligion, and rationalisation is not so straightforward. One factor that we need to take account of is the historic role that religion itself plays as a rationalising force, a point which has been made especially about the way in which its Protestant forms attacked the false attribution of efficacy to ritual behaviours as “superstition” (Thomas 1971; Keane 2007). Rendall (2009) points out that Kirk Sessions up to the 19th century were active in suppressing such practices, punishing those found to be engaging in ‘superstitious practices’, such as leaving offerings at pilgrimage sites, or resorting to healing or divination.

Of course, one can argue that this emphasis upon reason and the rejection of the mysterious is itself the source of a naturalised, secular view of the world that no longer requires religious legitimation (see especially Carroll (2007), whose analysis is grounded in a close reading of Weber ([1905] 1930)); that Protestantism provides the foundation for the disenchanted non-religious view of the world. Yet at the same time, it is important to note that the decline of religion removes a key source of censure for discussing and entertaining apparently ‘magical’ practices. The point to be made here is that secularisation is both part of a process of increasing disenchantment *and* the dissipation of a key source of that disenchantment. These conjoined dynamics are important to bear in mind as we consider how people might emphasise their atheism while still reflecting upon magic’s potential.

In Orkney, a key element in conversations which touch upon belief is an awareness of the historic reliance of the islanders on the environment in which they lived: “Of course, folk

were so much more dependent on the land and sea back then.” In a context where agriculture remains the primary economic activity, with fishing an important secondary activity (though on Rousay today, employment is found more on fish farms than on trawlers), there is an awareness of the connection between the elements and your livelihood. This particular conversation, with somebody involved in livestock farming, emphasised the appeal of magic for past generations: “If your survival depends on these, let’s call them forces of nature, then that’s out of your control. Folk before, now they must have thought of them as some mysterious forces. They’d want some way of trying to get a handle on them.” This kind of conversation captures well the “self-conscious distancing from a past or a situation regarded as naive” (Benavides 1998, 187) which was so often a feature of conversations about the magical: such thinking was located and rationalised as a historic form, explainable by way of the limited means of understanding available in the past. Yet crucially, this reflexive attitude to the past can also be applied to the present. Returning to the conversation cited earlier, he continued: “But how much do we know now, really? There’s still so much, I sometimes wonder if we know as much as people used to really.”

Such a pivot reflects that employed by Weber in his lecture on “Science as a Vocation:” in contrast to the ‘mysterious’ world in which past generations lived, we live in a world which is rendered knowable – and yet we are left in doubt as to how much we can truly claim to know within this field of knowledge. To quote another, who had made his living from the sea and attributed the apparent dying off of traditional knowledge both to scientific progress and to in-migration from the rest of Britain, those who lived in the past “had respect. If you don’t respect the elements [...] So much of this folklore was just having respect and you might say we’ve lost the superstition but I think we’ve lost wur respect too.”

Cyprus: Orthodoxy, modernity, and magical annulment

Religion in Cypriot society, where atheists and religious non-believers add up to less than two percent of the island’s total population, presents a socio-political landscape rather different than that of Orkney. Even so, in recent years, an aversion to religious doctrine socially manifests in ways which evade the label of “atheism.” More specifically, several Cypriots make a distinct separation between Christianity as a religious doctrine and social institution within Cypriot society, and as a set of values and beliefs they use to navigate everyday life. The reason for this dichotomy can be primarily attributed to the Church of

Cyprus' involvement in the island's political life ever since it became a republic in 1960. The Church's imbrication in Cypriot politics is evident by a historical trajectory through which religion and nationalist identity became intertwined. In the aftermath of the 1974 Turkish invasion, religion adopted an active function in Cypriot society in the manner by which it partook and thus affirmed particular national narratives (Roudometof 2009). In return, Christian Orthodoxy became a national mechanism of strategic essentialism through which individuals and collectivities affirmed their national identity and culture as a reaction to a historical trajectory of Ottoman and Turkish conquest.

Nevertheless, attention must be given to complex assemblages of national memory, narrative and historical commemoration (Hadjipavlou 2007; Papadakis 2003), through which relations between religion and political life are diffracted and currently refigured in Cypriot society. The rigid dichotomies between Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots and, connectedly, between Christian Orthodox and Muslims which were forged in the aftermath of the 1974 Turkish invasion (Bryant 2004), are being reconfigured by a cultural climate of cosmopolitanism between the two politically divided parts of the island. In such sense, an intensifying disdain and rejection of the implication of the Church of Cyprus in the island's political affairs stems from its part in propounding and connecting religion with an active ethno-nationalist narrative. In other words, religious disenchantment in Cyprus can be understood as a result of the Church's activities, which extended beyond and, in the eyes of many, transgressed a spiritually-focussed religious function.

Moreover, although Cyprus is still considered to be a devoutly Christian Orthodox country, and although individuals do not strictly identify as atheists, discourses of unbelief are gaining traction as a stance people adopt in their private lives, or in public. The divide between mainstream Christian orthodoxy and religious disenchantment was neatly articulated in an interview Kyriakides had with an individual who owned a bookshop specialising in religious publications. "Growing up, religion and God was an important part of everyday life. Believing and praying to God gave people hope and taught them to deal with life and everyday problems. But people, especially young people, want proof nowadays – they want proof God exists, or this miracle happened, or that this person is a saint. But God has nothing to do with proof, he exists in each and every one of us, and all around us."

The description given by the man reflects the intricacies of religious life in Cyprus: firstly, God appears in the man's narrative as a guiding, supernatural force, and his existence is not correlated with the institution of the Church of Cyprus. More importantly, in the

context of this article, the man's frustration with people wanting 'proof' of God's existence denotes the permeating relevance of rationalisation as an epistemological lens through which Cypriots survey the notion of 'God.' The rise of such epistemological stances attests to a core tenet of rationalisation and disenchantment, namely the inversion between God and the individual: according to such inversion, it is not the individual who is subsumed and defined by an all-existing God. Rather, the notion of godhood is relegated to a historical construction and put on the table as an artefact to be examined, questioned and contested through individuals' quests of discovering the true nature of their worlds.

The rejection of present manifestations of the historical connections between God, Church, and State, as means of regulating society is the first step to such process of discovery. Take, for example, the letter published in mainstream public media, of a 29-year-old Cypriot man asking the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus to excommunicate him. Referring to the Archbishop by his citizen name, the man wrote that his "belief in the Christian god has been irrevocably shaken to its foundation by my exposure to philosophy, scientific theories, and social sciences" (*Philenews* 2018, Kyriakides's translation from Greek). Narratives of disenchantment as articulated by the 29-year-old are indeed indexical of the manner by which individuals within Cypriot society are intentionally developing a sense of self-reflection, aimed at constructing modes and ways of dwelling, thinking and acting, which evade those of religious scripture.

Folkloric and ethnological literature demonstrates how magic and spells occupied a central role in Cypriot society. As Cypriot ethnologist Ionas Iona writes, "Binders" – Cypriot healers – "even throughout the 1960s, had a fully activated position in Cypriot society" (2013, 188). As Ernesto de Martino ([1959] 2015, 3) writes for southern Italy, and likewise for Cyprus, binding "indicates a psychic condition of impediment or inhibition, and at the same time a sense of domination, a being acted upon by a force that is as strong as it is mysterious." As Iona describes, binding was the predominant form of Cypriot magic, which entailed gifted individual who, through spells, could withhold and release peoples' bodily energy. Binding was an essential ingredient of Cypriot rural life. Individuals and families would go to binders to aid them in their objectives, which almost always had a direct impact and connection to hierarchies of wealth and prestige within a village community, such as solidifying a marriage between a man and a woman, or putting a curse on someone's crops, health and/or sex life.

A rapid decline in magical customs is the result of these numerous, interconnected socio-historical processes. The aftermath of 1974 invasion resulted to massive redistribution of population, which ultimately resulted to intensifying already existing processes of urbanisation. The Church of Cyprus' ascendance as a political actor implied that previously magical practices, and individuals conducting them, understood previously to be normative and intrinsic to the functioning of society, were now labelled as heretical. Moreover, the later emergence of the European project and Cyprus' effort to join the EU (which it did in 2004) gave rise of narratives of modernity and socio-technical advancement, in which magic apparently had little role.

Interactions between these processes and historical trajectories lead to rapid dissipation of magical practices across the island. Asked whether they believe in magical practices followed by their ancestors not that long ago, most Cypriots will declare that such practices are superstitious, and belong to a bygone era. In his ethnographic analysis of modern understandings of magic in Cyprus, Vassos Argyrou identifies the denunciation of magic as a strategy deployed by the Cypriot elites in order to affirm and at the same time situate themselves in certain narratives of modernity. As Argyrou writes (1993, 257), "By denouncing magic in the name of Western science and rationality, the elitists are in effect denouncing the traditional Cypriot culture and social order in the name of an imported 'modernity'; they are seeking to impose the modernist worldview on the whole of Cypriot society and thus legitimate the social position and power that modernity has established for them." The rapid annulment of Cypriot magic hence resulted to a historical void, which Cypriots survey and ponder, remembering magic as remnant of as a 'past' Cyprus.

We agree with Argyrou that the public denunciation of magic is an intentional act of attaching oneself to the version of a contemporary Cyprus. Nevertheless, as Nils Bubandt (2014) writes for the case of Indonesia, once we accept that magic is becoming socially disembedded, the ethnographic conundrum becomes *why* and *how* processes of rationalisation which apparently undermine magical thinking can create circumstances of the very doubt which is at the heart of magic. For example, Højer (2009) describes how narratives of the loss of knowledge in the context of post-socialist Mongolia generate a conscious sense of the gap between the historic understanding of sources of spiritual power and the present-day absence of such ways of knowing amid social transitions of the twentieth century. Yet crucially, he sees such absence as a creative force: the fact that this is concealed knowledge is the source of the potency and intrigue that contemporary magic possesses,

directing people towards a compelling unknown. Relevantly, Bubandt's suggestion to his own provocation, of how magic's persistence exceeds that of social function, is that magical thinking persists through elements of doubt and opacity essential to being, engendered through every day intersubjective dynamics. In the following section, we supplement such insights by showcasing how magical thinking in contemporary Cyprus and Orkney emerges through instances and contexts in which persons encounter historical trajectories and places of dwelling which retain opaque qualities irreducible to modern narratives of disenchantment.

Layers of unknowing

“But what do you mean by magic?” There's a long pause in the conversation; the anthropologist wonders whether they've asked the wrong question. “Well I suppose I mean [...] well, magic [...] like Eynhallow.” To those familiar with Orkney, this small ‘holy island’ is rich in stories and mysteries (see Mooney 1923). The idea of “islands that come and go” is a well-known theme in Orkney – stories of how sometimes, in the humid summer days, you catch a glimpse of what seems to be land rising out of the sea, just before it vanishes. In folklore, Eynhallow shares a family bond with these strange sightings: once upon a time Eynhallow was itself a coming-and-going island, rising from the sea only to disappear, until it was won over from the shape-shifting finfolk by the use of holy salt. Still the island retains an uncanny quality: in 1990 two people were said to have disappeared into thin air after 88 were counted off an excursion ferry to the uninhabited island and only 86 were counted back on.

But it is not only the stories surrounding Eynhallow that make it a figure of magic. It is also the sense of it being simultaneously proximate, yet remote. The nursery rhyme is well known, relayed to me by older people on the islands:

Eynhallow frank, Eynhallow free
Eynhallow stands in the middle of the sea
A roaring roost on every side
Eynhallow stands in the middle of the tide

The island looms near, just between Rousay and the Orkney Mainland; and yet, surrounded by the elemental forces of the “roaring roost” – the riptides rushing past, the meeting point of the great energies of the Atlantic and the North Sea – it seems inaccessible. It fits perfectly with another explanation of the qualities of magic offered during conversation in Orkney: “a sense of wonder [...] but just out of reach.”

The important idea of magic as *a quality of the landscape* is attested to by the many stories that surround the Neolithic chambered cairns and standing stones, everyday presences on an island which advertises itself as the ‘Egypt of the North’ on account of being densely packed with ancient tombs. The folklore attached to such sites is rich and well recorded (see Muir 1998). For example, one well known story regards the Yetnasteen, a seven foot monolith, which was said to have been a giant, turned to stone: after midnight each New Year’s Day, the rock awakens and goes to the nearby loch for a drink. Other stories tell of ‘trowies’ (fairies) dwelling in the mounds. Yet, importantly, many layers of unknowing intervene in any given ‘encounter’ with the storied landscape: Protestant Christian attempts to rid the populace of superstition; population displacement due to clearance (Thompson 1981) and emigration; population change due to incomers from beyond Orkney (Forsyth 1980); and secularisation. None of these strips the landscape of its potency, but each contributes to a sense of distance from its meaning, placing it somehow ‘out of reach’.

The idea of the inaccessibility, and yet immediacy of the past is perhaps most apparent on the Westside of Rousay. Rousay was the only part of Orkney subject to the large-scale clearances that completely transformed the geography of Highland Scotland. Today, the Westside bears the marks of that clearance, enclosed grazing land dotted with crumbling stonework, the shells of the dwellings of crofters who had to make way. Yet discoveries here on this largely uninhabited part of the island generate intrigue precisely through their suggestion of mystery. Lee (2015) documents the discovery of apparently magical offerings in the structures of the abandoned houses, and it was explained to me that in the course of repair work to the dykes [walls] after cattle had damaged them by rubbing up against them, you might find “all kinds of things” in there: hair, old bottles, and so on, raising the possibility that these were magical depositions.

Similarly, people Kyriakides talked to who said they do not believe in spells or magic, proceeded to nevertheless say that the Northern part of the island, which is under Turkish rule since 1974, is saturated with magical rituals and women reading coffee (*καφετζουές*). Some of these interlocutors also said there is rumoured to be a witch in the province of Morfou, which is also in the Northern part of the island. When I asked a woman if she specifically knew where in Morfou the witch was she said no, but also said that I “shouldn’t get ‘tangled’ (*μπλεχτείς*) in such things.” Cosmopolitanism and politics of reconciliation between the two sides of Cyprus have increased ever since 2003, when the borders opened to the public, allowing them to freely move between the two sides. Nevertheless, in such narratives, the

Northern part of the island occupies a space of liminality (Papadakis 2000), unknowability and opacity, through which magical thinking flourishes. Amid such narratives, belief or unbelief in magic is not an epistemological statement. Rather, what not believing implies, as per the advice given above, is to not get involved with milieus where magical activity takes place.

The historical void created by the sudden dissipation of Cypriot magic is hence potent, courtesy of the inability of people to comprehend and sublimate the historical recollection of such past Cyprus, permeated by magic, into contemporary social imageries. Take the opinion offered to me by a 35 year-old-woman when asked about her knowledge of Cypriot magic. “I don’t know much about it except what I know from my mother and grandmother” she told me. “To be honest it makes me feel uneasy, knowing that people were doing those things even 50 years ago. My grandmother once told me that when she was growing up people didn’t have an understanding of the world. They would see a tumbleweed blowing with the wind and they would say it was the devil. It makes me feel uneasy that people would think that.” In this case, the question of belief is not put on the table. The issue here is instead the prospect of a world in which people believe and do magic. The version of Cyprus narrated to the woman by her grandmother, and from her to Kyriakides, is not reducible to the recollection of a ‘past’ Cyprus in which people believed in spells. The narrative of the woman conveys, rather, a temporal image of an otherwise world which one surveys through an accumulation of social memory. While such temporal image is approachable through such accumulated corpus of memory, it remains ultimately inaccessible and unknowable. Under such circumstances, magical efficacy and thinking emerges exactly through the opacity which surrounds the prospect of its very existence, past or future.

What emerges is a sense of the latent possibility that can come to occupy apparently forgotten or hidden geographies (see also Irvine 2018) precisely on account of their ‘out of reach’ qualities. In Orkney, working back through these layers to understand the occluded landscape seems to generate new forms of interaction: for example, given the closure of the island’s kirks and the decline of island churchgoing, it is not altogether surprising that an archaeological site should become the setting for an island wedding rather than the kirk. Kasselstrand (2018) documents the rise of humanist weddings in Scotland; given legal recognition in 2005, they are now more common than Church of Scotland weddings. A crucial factor in the choices around humanist weddings, according to Kasselstrand, is creating a sense of personalised meaning. One important element of this meaning-making in Orkney

has been the way in which the Marriage (Scotland) Act 2002 set in motion the possibility of outdoor weddings, allowing people to forge connections with and at archaeological sites in lieu of the kirk. Here it seems that non-believers are personalising the sacred through the immanent possibilities of ancient things.

Meanwhile, in recent decades modern standing stones have joined their ancient counterparts. The work involved in quarrying and erecting such stones makes this by no means a flippant undertaking, though neither is it a phenomenon that in all cases can be taken too seriously. Modern stones might be said to be “watching over us, helping us as they’ve always done,” but in another case might be said to have been erected more playfully, a landmark to direct tourists to what was built as a holiday home.

Fleming (1973) described the Neolithic cairns of Orkney as “tombs for the living,” arguing that we should focus our attention not just on the dead inside, but on the social role the structures played as signalling systems. And indeed, such monuments remain ‘tombs for the living’, but it is difficult to argue for a unifying social value in the present day. Rather, in their ‘out of reach’ state, they surely reflect the individuation at the core of contemporary rationalisation and magic: a resource for personal meaning. This logic is well captured in a mixed media sculpture exhibited at the Stromness Museum and produced by Mike Copper in response to an archaeological dig in Orkney, The Ness of Brodgar, “Offerings to a Forgotten God,” a structure of wood and antler on which to hang said offerings. As explained in the artist's statement:

The beliefs of the Neolithic Orcadians are long gone [...] What must it have been like to have lived in a world seemingly animated by forces beyond comprehension [...]? Feel free to imagine your own forgotten god, create your own arcane rituals [...] But beware; your imagination may lead you to unexpected places.

Yet of course, such individualistic (re-)inventions are not without impact: the sense of Orkney as a place that attracts incomers with imaginative fantasies, imposing their own visions onto the landscape, can itself contribute to the dynamics of occlusion through population change and the perceived loss of traditional narratives.

The limits of knowledge

In 1846 the Free Church minister Rev George Ritchie confronted George William Traill, the Orkney landowner responsible for the clearance of the Westside of Rousay, about his mistreatment of tenants. When Traill stated that the land was his and he had a right to do with it as he pleased, Ritchie replied (quoting Psalm 24), “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” A year later, Traill was dead, having suffered a heart attack on the toilet in his London club. Given the prophetic nature of the minister’s declamation, it is not altogether surprising that when the story is relayed today, it is rarely without a supernatural element. For some, the minister’s words constitute a curse; for a couple of others it was an example of (or at least entangled with, and therefore generating explanation of) precognition of death, a phenomena known in Scotland as ‘Second Sight’: “ye ken how some folk get a vision of someone before they die, they see what’s going to happen to them.” Where such precognition was described, it was said to be a particular gift some possessed, involving dreams or visions of another person’s grave, funeral, or corpse. As when discussing the gift in relation to Ritchie, what was interesting was that those who described it did not necessarily believe it themselves, but at the same time were unwilling to wholly reject the testimony of those who did.

The circulation of such stories – with however much of what Benevides (1998) describes as “self-conscious distancing” – raises the question of what is knowable and who can know it. Here, “I don’t know” does not foreclose the possibility that someone else may.

Conversation one evening recalled someone who had died suddenly, without warning. “Who knows when they go to sleep if they’re going to wake up. You can live healthy, and still just drop dead. Any of us could be the next to die [...] could be you.” Death is a constant presence – and in a farming community people have direct and regular experience of the death of livestock as well as humans – but at the same time a great unknowable. In this conversation, scepticism about the knowability of death was as much directed towards the medical experts who might claim to predict who is more and less likely to die on the basis of lifestyle as to those who had the power of precognition. It was within such talk that second sight entered the space of unknowability; subject to derision, but also a source of intrigue and rumour, the idea of a capacity to “see that you’re dying,” said to run in some families, probes the gap between the promise of a rationally comprehensible world and the uncertain conditions of life and death.

What is at stake here is a question of potential in the space between what can be known, and knowledge held out of reach – just as earlier we saw the potential between the

perceptible landscape and the landscape ‘just out of reach’. For further illustration, we will briefly discuss how the logic of potential finds expression in two techniques in Orkney: the first, which acts upon the body, is healing. The second, which acts on the landscape, is divining.

“He was some healer, you know” – the remark, dropped into a description of a long deceased member of the community, came as something of a surprise from someone who had previously rubbished both magic and religion to me as nonsense, and therefore unworthy of study. “Oh, I see that got your attention, your ears pricked up just then!” The tone was, tellingly, teasing, reflective of the playful way such topics were discussed, but the theme of attributing the healing abilities to particular individuals recurred on a number of occasions.

The recognition of a tradition of healing, combined with contemporary awareness of alternative medicine such as Reiki, opened up a space of potential: on the occasion when I was able to observe and experience a healer at work, this involved hands moved slowly over the body, sensing until a warmth is felt at the point which is in need of healing. The hands then come to rest on the afflicted part of the body, transferring healing energy to it.

As was explained to me, “You can’t be so quick to dismiss things. Now me, like I said, I don’t believe in anything, but I figure I’ll give it a go [...] And it made a difference. Now is that just the placebo effect? I’m not one for the supernatural, but I think there’s always been folk to go to, healers, stories about people with healing hands, whatever, where do these stories come from? It’s interesting, there’s a lot we can’t explain.” What’s striking about such a statement is precisely the way in which explicit unbelief, scepticism, and deliberate deployment of a scientific explanation sits side by side with a sense of unknowing.

A similar attitude surrounded the use of divination with rods to find water, reading the potential of the land. During the period of fieldwork, such ‘dowsing’ had been in the news following media reports that several water companies employed the technique; as Woolley (2018) notes, these reports generally treated the practice as a vestige of irrationality and superstition. Yet when Irvine discussed this with people in Orkney – even with those who defined themselves as non-believers and who vehemently rejected religious belief as ‘nonsense’ – it was generally met with a shrug. Especially in rural areas and outlying islands where farms and households need to drill wells for groundwater supplies, people are aware that divination is a technique that some use to locate the best place to bore for water, and that they have in all likelihood used water from wells located on the basis of such techniques.

Hence the frequent reply: “But it works.” Of course, one important thing to note here is that ‘magic’ is an externally applied term for what is simply considered *practical knowledge*; “No, I didn’t say anything about it being magic. I just said it works” – though crucially, it only works for those with the ability to do it. Some have it, some don’t. Here, the sense of what is ‘magic’ can be turned on its head, as in the following conversation with a contractor: “You turn on your tap, oh look, there’s water! That’s magic. You don’t even think about where it comes from, do you? But where do you think we get the water from? We have to drill for it. And you think we’re going to stop finding the water the way that does the job just because someone says so who’s probably not got the first clue about where the water comes from and how you get it?”

Correspondingly, such subjective contradictions and anxieties can be seen as giving way to a sort of ontological and narrative play, or perhaps one can say “insincerity” (Seligman et al. 2008) within Cypriot society, where belief in magic is not ultimately abandoned, but is rather triggered under certain circumstances and contexts. Take, for example, perhaps the most prominent manifestation of magical belief and social perceptions in Cyprus today: the evil eye. Belief and use of the evil eye stretches back to the Greco-Roman period (Wilburn 2016, 100) and was predicated on a central emotive dimension of Greek society: envy (*φθόρος*). Nowadays, images of the evil eye saturate Cypriot jewellery, home decorations and clothing. Such use of evil eye amulets can be understood as disembedding it from the social-temporal milieu out of which it originally developed, instead reducing it to a stylistic, material form of the everyday mundane. Nevertheless, I have thus far been narrated numerous incidents in which belief and use of the evil eye was reactivated according to the stroke of circumstance. On one exemplary occasion, after one woman randomly encountered another woman her husband dated before her, went home and adorned herself with a bracelet which carried a mosaic of the evil eye to protect her from potential envy. When I asked her whether she thought the other woman cursed her, she replied she wasn’t sure, but that something about the woman’s demeanour and the manner by which she said goodbye to her disturbed her.

The transformation Cypriot society has undergone in the last five decades has had tremendous impact on the position of magical customs and practices around the island. Nevertheless, instances such as the one narrated above demonstrate the manner by which magical materiality and memory become re-activated in contemporary Cyprus, under specific conditions which can be understood as probing the limits the knowability. What was

previously 'public,' performative magic has now been relocated in the realm of the private. What was previously a form of knowledge connecting to specific rituals and practices, now manifests as an existential state of uncertainty emergent of certain incidents and events. Magical thinking here does not manifest as a state of clarity asserting the existence and efficacy of magic, but rather emerges through a generative tension between the realms of the experiential and the unknowable. Following Seligman et al. (2008, 51) one can say that superstition in contemporary Cyprus is not necessarily an indication that certain practices and beliefs belong to a past era, but rather a cognitive modality of "believing and not-believing simultaneously."

The opposite of magic

Ethnographic examinations of the term subjunctivity (Good 1994; Seligman et al. 2008; Kyriakides 2018) gesture to the manner by which such modes of thinking and acting are predicated on maintaining an intentional, receptive stance to possibility and change. Operating in the subjunctive mode, and remaining porous to the possibility of magic, can hence be understood as an essential ingredient of perpetuating and affirming magical thinking amid a rationalised modernity. Nevertheless, and as we have attempted to show, under certain circumstances and contexts, subjunctivity is not necessarily the result of a subject which remains open, but rather of a subject which is *pried* open by the premise of an otherwise world of potential. Magical efficacy in contemporary worlds emerges through the cracks of rationalisation and history - in other words through the inability of the rational, knowing subject to completely know and understand the premise of magic as this historically and socially unfolds. Contemporary forms of magical efficacy signal a subjective anxiety and dissonance engendered between, on the one hand, the notion of a knowing subject as articulated through narratives and social processes of disenchantment and, on the other hand, through an ontological tenet of existence which dictates that the human subject is intrinsically occluded in the manner by which it dwells in, and perceives the world (Kyriakides 2016).

The term "theological correctness" (Barrett 1999) has been used to describe multiple layers of representation in religious believers' conceptualisation of God: for example, how a God conceptualised in abstract ways during explicit reflections on theology comes to be conceptualised in naturalistic and anthropomorphic terms in implicit reflection on God's actions in the world. In many respects, what we are exploring are the permutations of

theological correctness and incorrectness among those who define as non-believers: how an explicit identity of unbelief may exist alongside elements of enchantment and magical thinking which may not appear consistent with the articulation of rationalist frameworks of non-religion.

One classic anthropological approach to such apparent contradictions is the ‘compartmentalisation principle’ which Bastide (1955) used to describe how participants in Afro-Brazilian rituals were both Catholic and fetishist: hence, the ways in which people engage in apparently dissonant behaviours without inner conflict. However, bearing in mind the often constitutive nature of such contradictions in social life (see Berliner et al. 2016) what we have been discussing here is whether such dissonance, rather than representing a failure of rationalisation, is indeed a *characteristic* of rationalisation. In this regard we follow up on the recent emphasis on the knowledge of magic as an ‘absent presence’ (Højer 2009; Bubandt 2014) by placing this directly in relation to unbelief, which is taken here not to be a knowing rejection, but a form of doubt which generates a space of unknowing. At last, here we return to Weber’s concept of rationalisation as a form of certainty which generates its own doubt: the universe is deemed completely knowable, yet the nature of knowledge from any given point of view is so fragmentary that a void opens up between this transparent and knowable universe and the tiny scope of knowledge that any given individual can possess.

Mills (2013), in a re-reading of Evans-Pritchard’s rendering of witchcraft among the Azande, attempts to invert the dictum “witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist” (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 63) by calling into question the opposite of witchcraft: namely, the expectation that human actions should proceed naturally to the fulfilment of intentions. Yet of course, in as much as these intersect with the intentions of others, and the constraints of the physical world, such actions are likely to be disrupted before reaching their fulfilment. Hence Mills’ reformulation (2013, 29): *persons*, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist.

In many respects, our argument here is similar: taking our cue from what we see as Weber’s recognition of the uncanniness of rationalisation, and recognising the complex relationship between unbelief and unknowing as explored in our fieldsites, in place of a sterile opposition between rationalisation and magic – with the former insisting that the latter cannot exist – we are drawing attention to the characteristics of unknowing that permeate both. The trajectory of rationalisation means that there is nothing unknowable in the world, and yet, from the position of any given person, there is no knowable whole. It remains out of reach.

De Martino ([1959] 2015), in his sensitive depiction of magic in the south of Italy, dwells on a similar point to that made by Mills: the self is not autonomous, but is affected and constrained by forces that are strong and yet mysterious. Magic (such as binding, discussed above) operates in relation to this sense of being-acted-upon. Yet for De Martino, magic remains a point to be passed by as we climb the mountain of rationalisation: it is simply that circumstances endure that favour the continuation of magical thinking to meet the demands of the day. Should circumstances of natural and civil order arise, “the kingdom of obscurity and shadows will be chased back within its boundaries... and it will cause the specious light of magic to fade, a light that uncertain men in an insecure society, for practical motives of existence, substituted for the authentic light of reason” (de Martino [1959] 2015, 188). It is here that we are in need of a reformulation along the lines of Mills’: the certain self (as opposed to the uncertain self), inhabiting a secure world of knowing, has no need of magic – but what if that certain self cannot exist?

Acknowledgements

This research has been supported by the grant “Magical thinking in contexts and situations of unbelief,” part of the Understanding Unbelief programme, funded by the John Templeton Foundation (JTF grant ID# 60624) and managed by the University of Kent.

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