

Not-knowing magic:

Magical memory and ineffability in Cyprus and Orkney

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Our research explores the modern status of magic in two different European island settings: Cyprus and Orkney. By historically and ethnographically addressing the gradual dissolution of magical traditions in our respective fieldsites, our aim is to explore the means and instances by which magic continues to manifest in narratives and everyday practices. By exploring the current epistemological and social standing attributed to magic in Cyprus and Orkney societies, we wish to enrich anthropological understandings of the manner by which magic emerges from the conditions of unknowing that permeate processes of modernity whilst nevertheless remaining external to it. We approach such objectives by critiquing the implicit suggestion contained, but often not articulated or theorised within anthropological literature, that humans ‘know’ magic. Through our ethnography, we attempt to show that magic in these two islands does not persist through the ability of people to understand or rationalise magic as a thing of the past, but rather emerges through an awareness of historical, social, and cognitive incompleteness, accumulated and contained within dormant magical memory. We hence wish to identify and further theorise a central, modern tenet of magic: the unknowability contained and nourished in social and cognitive processes, through which the possibility - future and past - of magic is thought of and narrated in disenchanted worlds. As we suggest, not-knowing, in such sense, does not merely signal lack of knowledge but a mode of thinking and modernity specific to Cypriot and Orcadian modernity.

Keywords: magic, modernity, disenchantment, memory, knowledge

Introduction

Anthropologists have gestured to the manner by which modernity does not annul modes of thinking which can be understood to be magical, but rather articulate them in new ways (Geschiere 1995; Meyer and Pels 2003; Jones 2017). In the case of the West, such ethnographic insight connects to a sustained rethinking of Levy-Bruhl's (1923) notion of 'primitive mentality,' namely that 'magical thinking' (Shweder et al. 1977; Gell 1988; Rayner 2016) is not a mentality specific to non-modern societies but that it can, under the right circumstances, universally manifest in human perception. Although such critique has aided in relocating anthropological explorations of magic in 'disenchanted' (Weber 1946) societies,¹ the historical dimensions of magical thinking are often not addressed, in favour of understanding such cognitive state as a mental faculty intrinsic to humanity as a whole. While acknowledging and in certain ways embracing such suggestion, of importance to us in this article is exploring the historical and social transcendentals of magical thinking – in other words, the social and historical conditions which provide the impetus for magical thinking to manifest in modernity.

We approach such objective by ethnographically and historically exploring the modern standing of two local corpuses of magic which are widely considered annulled in our respective fieldsites: Cypriot binding spells, and Orcadian fairy lore and magic inhering in the unseen. As the comparison laid out in this paper shows, despite their geographical and historical difference, Cyprus and Orkney display similarities in the manner by which magic comes to be entangled with narratives and processes of modernity in our respective fieldsites. As we show, the peripheralised positions Cyprus and Orkney occupy in relation to global processes of social change, alongside the force of religious institutions (Presbyterian

Protestant in Orkney, Orthodox in Cyprus) have created the conditions for the annulment of canonical magical traditions.

Yet, as we show through narratives collected in our fieldsites, storytelling and recollection of binding and fairy magic in Cyprus and Orkney creates a fleeting space of epistemological ambivalence and magical dissociation in the lives of our interlocutors. Such dissociation is at the same time one which allows our interlocutors to retain a distance but also entertain the possibility of magic being real and powerful. By analysing such narratives, we hence wish to gesture the manner by which historicised forms of magic provide a ground of radical (self-)doubt and not-knowing, upon which magical thinking flourishes in Cypriot and Orcadian modernity. As we further suggest in the conclusive parts of the article, the attempts of our interlocutors to verbalise and express such state of not-knowing does not necessarily indicate lack of knowledge or wilful ignorance of one's world, but rather constitutes a creative act of attempting to situate one's self beyond the contours of modern reasoning.

Our starting provocation in this introduction is that a continuum between knowledge and knowing is often unproblematically assumed, and even encouraged in ethnographic conceptualisations of magic. Although anthropologists have denounced structural functionalism as a conceptual paradigm which empties magic of its affective and ambivalent dimensions (Siegel 2003; Goslinga 2012), recent literature still leans towards in depicting relations between humans and the magical as ontologically complete. In an ethnographically and conceptually rich anthology, focusing on the ways by which spirits acquire social lives, the editors of the volume suggest that interactions between humans and nonhuman spirits depend on 'the work of a semiotics of knowing' according to which,

The really "real" is neither produced nor found but often equivalent to or fathomable through the tangible, audible, and seeable, where "evidence" of

it lies not in the illusion of the “real” but in ways of being, perceiving, and knowing that are just “common sense” to those who practice them. Furthermore, the two domains (human and nonhuman agency) may be mutually constitutive (Espírito Santo and Blanes 2014: 26).

Indeed, one of the central tenets of magic as a form of mentality is that entities, practices and events do not disrupt, but are rather smoothly integrated into the fabric of reality and the social order of things. We hence agree with the above passage that belief and use of the magical in the everyday can be regarded as commonsensical for those whose experience it. The authors are also correct to suggest that human-spiritual interactions, as forms of knowledge, include “‘ineffable’ domains’ (Espírito Santo and Blanes 2014: 25) which Western epistemological underpinnings cannot accommodate. Despite the fact that anthropologists have been consistently trying to empty the category of magic from Western presuppositions, ‘knowledge,’ as an analytic lens often reifies an arguably modern, Euro-American perspective of thinking and acting in the world.

Yet, contained within the suggestion that magic constitutes a form of knowing and common sense to those practicing it, is also the underlying assumption of a socially shared corpus of knowledge. In other words, to ‘know’ magic through perceived experience, one must have at his or her disposal an active, cultural depository of idealised forms of experience and performance, which act as transcendentals and pre-empt magical thinking and doing. As we will show, the ethnographic and methodological challenge which we face in our fieldsites is that of addressing how magical thinking manifests under conditions where magic, as a unified corpus of bodily practice and knowledge ‘stutters’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1986), and where magical experience presents itself as fragmented and erratic.

We are, of course, dealing with different fieldsites: the modernity of Cyprus and Orkney does not correspond to cultural settings in which human-spiritual interactions and performance of magical forms occupy an important part of daily life in the general population. Nevertheless, something else strikes us as problematic in the suggestion that the human and the spiritual are ‘mutually constitutive’ - namely that such perspective does not seem to accommodate the possibility of such supernatural entities and forces existing outside of human magical consciousness, society, or time. Otherwise put, contained within the suggestion that embodied experience and human-spiritual interaction constitutes a form of knowing, is arguably a form of ontological idealism according to which the existence of spirits is predicated on such interactions which in turn allow them to become present in human perception.

More recently, Marshall Sahlins invited anthropologists to rethink the notion of political economy by acknowledging that the origins of political economy is not the emergence of the state, but the long-before established relationships between humans and spiritual entities which Sahlins refers to as ‘metahumans’. As he writes,

The issue is not what people “believe” – *it’s what they know...* Human communities are in the necessary position of entering into social relationships with these beings, using common grounds of intentionality and shared means of communication, to influence them in people’s favour (2015: 9-11, our emphasis).

Once again, Sahlins’ depiction of society is the result of the organic unfolding of a human-spiritual economy where the underlying theoretical assumption is of such human-metahuman relations as means of knowing the world. Such ‘crisp’ perspective of the world is implicitly reiterated in ethnographies which conceptually explore magic through the notion of

‘ontology’, which likewise dismisses the space of cosmic unknowability inherent to magic, instead emphasizing the importance of human-spiritual relationality in the construction and maintenance of worlds (Kyriakides 2016).

The issue here is not that such ethnographic perspective legitimises magic as a form of knowledge, but rather that that such conceptualisation of knowing collapses any ontological distinction and between the human and the magical. We can think ethnographic perspectives such as the above as ones in which ‘the *I know* takes up all the room’ (Favret-Saada 1980: 229, emphasis in original), because they do not account for the ways in which the unfolding of magical knowledge is predicated on the pre-existence of ontological opacity and, moreover, serves in reinforcing such cosmic dimension. As philosopher Tim Morton writes, in emphasizing the affective and spectral dimensions of magic and reality, ‘reality is mysterious and magical because beings influence each other aesthetically, which is to say at a distance’ (2016: 16-17). Morton’s ontology can be understood as a critique of a metaphysics of presence which underlie much of Western epistemology and, arguably, anthropological conceptualizations of the magical.

Our theoretical stance hence proceeds through a reversal, whereby bits of magical knowledge which manifest within modernity constitute events and spaces of not-knowing, and during which memories and narratives of magic present transient occasions which tap into the ‘outside’ (Kapferer 2002; Jensen 2013) of knowledge in order to accentuate the incomplete understanding humans have of their worlds, and also of themselves. Such theoretical stance departs from those in which the magical seamlessly emerges through socio-material interactions between humans and spirits. Rather, our concern is addressing the existence and power which magic attains by becoming immersed in the flow of time and history, and by achieving a certain distance, rather than presence, in human perception. In the next sections

provide historical overviews of the Cypriot and Orcadian magical traditions this article focuses on. We proceed to explore and problematise the relation of such magical traditions to Cypriot and Orcadian modernity.

The dissolution of magic in Cyprus

Occupying the same spot in Nicosia's old town for the last 65 years, the old man speaks proudly of the way he carried his business of selling flowers through decades of a shifting cityscape. 'There were no asphalt roads back then, no cars.' What is now referred to as the 'old part of town,' contained within the star-shaped Venetian walls of Nicosia, was some decades ago one of the handful commerce centres of the island. Conversation with N often steers towards my ongoing ethnography and routinely involves a particular question he asks me whenever my research comes up: 'What's new? Did you find the mages?' [*Ἰντα νέα; Ἡβρες τος μάους;*]

Magicians were, according to rumours and stories circulating the island, a handful of individuals distributed across Cyprus accorded supernatural powers and ability to conduct spells of considerable prowess such being able to 'bring down the dead' [*να καταβάσσουν τους νεκρούς*] or predict one's future. N's question can be interpreted as one of genuine interest. At the same time, his constant probing on whether I have located any mages is provocative and part teasing, for he knows there are not mages left in Cyprus. More specifically, folklorist Paraskevas Samaras (1985: 276) writes that the last two mages in Cyprus were those of Peyia and Silikou – two villages near the city of Paphos and the Troodos mountains respectively.

Beyond these especially powerful individuals, narratives and folkloric literature depict the island's daily life as saturated with binding magic referred to as *yities*.² On another occasion,

N narrated one of the most prominent rituals of Cypriot binding magic which often took place in Cypriot villages, the purpose of which translates in English as ‘taking out your fear’ or ‘extracting your fear’ [να σου φκάλουν τον φόο σου]. As detailed by N, the impetus to having the ritual was a person, usually a child, having a growing feeling of anxiety about ‘something’ – in other words, some abstract form of fear. The purpose of the ritual, and the healer, was to solidify the form and origin of this fear in the perception of all those involved in the ritual. The performance of the ritual involved the healer heating and pouring liquid solder into a clay bowl or saucepan filled with water. Depending on the shape alloy would form in the water once it solidified, the healer would discern the origin of your fear and expunge it from your person through a spell.³

The extraction of fear was one of the multiple rituals and naturalistic perceptions which, in their interaction formed ‘a system of understandings, behaviours and practices, which were activated according to symbolic abduction and understanding of the universe’ (Ionas, 2013: 425). More specifically, folkloric and ethnological literature showcases that the cultural idiom of ‘fear,’ combined with that of ‘evil’ were granted a certain vitalism and acted as the axis according to which understandings of everyday life and sociality were shaped and enacted in the everyday. As Cypriot ethnologist Ioannis Ionas writes, ‘fear towards evil was a daily obsession for which people constantly had to pay attention to’ (2013: 3). Binding thus contained an implicit cosmology of itself, concerned and directed at withholding and/or releasing a person’s strength (*δύναμην*) to achieve desirable results. Binding rituals usually involved a piece of red or white ribbon, which the person conducting the spell tied in a ribbon and placed under a rock or hid somewhere, until he or she decided to annul the spells potency by cutting the ribbon with a knife whose handle was typically made out of black goat-horn, thus unleashing the energy previous restrained by the spell. Rituals of binding and protecting one’s self against evil maintained such popularity that ethnologist Paraskevas Samaras (1985:

276, Kyriakides' translation from Greek) writes that 'there is no Cypriot village that does not have someone, man or woman, at least specialising in the extraction of fear, as well as in other binding spells.' Binding was used for various objectives and purposes, such as battling illness (wards, hiccups, infected wounds, etc.), binding an opponent's tongue so he or she would not be able to direct curses at you, or binding an opponent's hunting rifle so no prey is killed. In return, if one suspected that he or she was under the influence of a spell, they could recruit the services of a binder in order to conduct a counter-spell – a *λυτικό* (meaning to dissolve) the influence of the first spell.

Vassos Argyrou (1993: 262) writes that magic 'brings into sharp focus one of the most salient features of Cypriot village life: the power of the community to shape and control the lives of its members.' Indeed, it becomes clear, by examining descriptions of such rituals and spells, that magic permeated all stratas of Cypriot rural life. Cypriot magic largely a social, mundane affair, enacted according to collective values and hence served in reproducing social structure. Binding spells was not an isolated occurrence but connected to an overall mode of cosmological engagement and social agonism. Such binding rituals, and their connection to idioms of 'evil' and 'fear' convey the manner by which magic was engendered out of the flux of life and sociality of Cypriot communities, filled with competition over marriage prospects, health, and social status (Loizos, 1975; Sant Cassia 1982). As Ernesto de Martino writes for Lucanian magic 'binding...[is] undoubtedly connected to the immense power of everyday negativity' (2015: 85). Fear, evil, and jealousy in rural Cyprus could potentially come from all directions, and magical binding was the manner by which such social cosmos was mediated and dealt with, through material forms and performative acts. More than cultural knowledge, *yities* connected to and affective cartography of suspicion and misfortune, which could never at any one point of time be entirely laid bare in the perception those involved.

The rituals described until now have mostly vanished from Cypriot everyday life and are largely confined to folkloric accounts. When I first asked to interview him, the first thing N said to me was that, even when it was the case that healing rituals and spells were prominent in Cypriot villages and rural communities, he ‘never really believed’ in them. As he continued to say, in his opinion, ‘It was a social event more than anything else – something people did back then.’ The word commonly used nowadays to talk about magic and spells is ‘*δεισιδαιμονία*’: superstition.

The decline of magic can be understood as the result of a number of interrelated social processes and events which took place in the mid to late 20th century, such as colonisation by the British, the establishment of the Cypriot Orthodox Church as a leading political actor (Irvine and Kyriakides 2018: 207-211), the rupture of the 1974 Turkish invasion, and the subsequent displacement of population which led to urbanisation of the southern part of the island. As several anthropologists have pointed out, modernity in post-war Cyprus in many ways equals a ‘rejection of the past’ (Papadakis, Peristianis and Welz 2006: 5) and a politics of forgetting, in which the past manifests not merely as a temporal period, but as an assemblage of cultural practices and traits. Vassos Argyrou (1996) argued that modernity in Cyprus is a marginal project motivated by an ideal version of modernity provided by the centrality of an Imperial West. According to such process of perpetually striving to reach such ideal version of modernity, images of the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ become essentialized in order to represent the transition from the former to the latter.⁴ The essentialisation of the past in Cypriot historical consciousness is one which also serves in stratifying and situating the corpus of *yities* as part of such bygone historical period. ‘People did these things before the war, when most of them lived in villages’, another interviewee said to Kyriakides about *yities*, ‘when Cyprus was filled with superstition.’ On occasions such as this, the manner by which people speak and think about magic alludes to a near-forbidden memory of past, pre-

war Cyprus, before the 1974 Turkish invasion and consequent onset of modernity and Europeanisation.

Orkney: Sacred geographies and mythic dwelling

Over drinks one night, two men began to debate the location – or rather the existence – of a ‘fairy mound’ on grazing land which one of them was now working. ‘Fairies? You mean trowies? No, nothing like that.’ In Orkney folklore, Trowies or Trows are small creatures said to live in mounds and venture out after dark. The enquirer was insistent: while out walking over a decade ago, he’d been shown a mound by a previous landowner, who had described it exactly that way. You could see from the facial expression of the farmer being asked that he was somewhat taken aback. ‘No, I don’t mind [remember] him ever saying anything like that.’ There were several mounds in the vicinity, right enough: Neolithic chambered burial cairns and Bronze Age burnt mounds. But nothing that had been described in that way. They continued to discuss the location, poring over the known landscape in their descriptions; but where there might have been trowies, there was only bemusement, and eventually dismissal: ‘they’re jist archaeological sites anyway. Ye’d be better off talking to an archaeologist’. If people used to believe that they had a supernatural quality, surely nobody did now. All the same, the unknown was a source of concern; you wouldn’t want to plough through it without knowing what you were doing, and not only because you’d have to let the County Archaeologist know. ‘Some things are jist better left alone.’

Talk of trowies and the places they might dwell references an Orkney canon of magical beliefs; places in the landscape to be left unworried and unploughed to avoid misfortune. As Marwick (1991: 260-265) has argued, and as is generally understood on the islands, such beliefs reflect a historically Norse worldview of a landscape only partially civilised, a

proximate wild inhabited by non-human creatures. However, such beliefs also bear relation to longstanding Highland Scots fairylore of ‘subterranean’ creatures inhabiting the land in parallel with humans, such as the beliefs described in the clergyman Robert Kirk’s late 17th century manuscript *The Secret Commonwealth* (see Hunter 2001). One material sign of these largely hidden presences was the ‘elfshot’ (or, occasionally in Orkney, ‘trowshot’). This elfshot was the means by which the creatures were said to do harm to cattle; nevertheless discovering such elfshot in a field, which archaeologists today identify as Neolithic arrow heads, was seen to be a fortunate occurrence (Marwick 1991: 270), and the objects were considered to be charms, worn for luck and for protection against malevolent influences, and passed on down the generations as heirlooms (Edmonds et al. 2017: 113-114).

One key element of tales of Trowies is their capacity to narrate misfortune. Sickness in livestock, sickness among children, and even the sudden disappearance of people; such have historically been facts of life in island communities, and these are the themes which figure in stories about the nocturnal activities of Trowies and their potentially malign impact. Yet it would surely be a mistake to treat these as totalising ‘explanations’ of misfortune – as Bubandt (2014) has argued in relation to witchcraft, a paradigm of treating such phenomenon merely as explanation domesticates doubt, leading us away from what is most urgent: the perplexing and disturbing. Indeed, what such narration of misfortune gestures towards is the excess of vagueness and indeterminacy of misfortune itself - its absence of stable meaning (Bubandt 2014: 43).

The dissipation of expressions of magic can be understood as intensifying, rather than eroding, this absence of stable meaning. Rieti (1991: 51), in her study of fairy-lore in Newfoundland, describes ‘the perpetual recession of the fairies’, highlighting that the relegation of fairy-belief to a time always just before the present is, in fact, a longstanding

phenomenon, and that a key characteristic of fairy-lore is the way in which such talk about fairies indexes their absence, a motif which enables reflection on the obscuring distance of time and change. In the context of Orkney, discussion about trowies are frequently a means of talking about absence; whether it be a recognition of the better understanding of mounds as archaeological remains, or a sense of the movement beyond superstition. The reminiscences of Alexander Marwick, who lived on Rousay and died in 1889 end with the reflection, ‘In those days superstitions prevailed among the people to a great extent. But when the home brewed ale was less used the superstitions died away’. Indeed, tales about trowies often end with explanations of their absence. The Rousay tale of Jock O’Knowe, in which a man becomes trapped in a knowe after seeing the trowies dancing within, ends with a reflection that the trowies all set sail for Westray, but their eggshell boats sank, and they were all drowned. A similar account of drowning from the Mainland (that is, the largest island in Orkney) tells of the daring escape attempt by trowies seeking to remove themselves from ‘a plague of ministers’ (Protestant clerics), crossing over a rope stretched from the Mainland to the neighbouring island of Hoy, but all were lost when the rope broke.

The circulation of stories such as this might be said to point towards what Tambiah (1990) refers to as ‘participation’ in a sacred geography, a relationship with a landscape mediated by human and non-human agencies where dwelling implies expressive action and intersubjective recognition of the world around. Tambiah’s notion of ‘participation’ draws on the Melanesian ethnography of Leenhardt’s ([1947] 1982) idea of the mythic landscape ‘as a dynamic totalistic weaving of nature, society, myth and technology’, where ‘the mountains, rocks, trees and animals were seen as familiar... discrete presences in which the living were implicated’ (Tambiah 1990: 106). Yet, conversations, like the one above, indicate the limits of such ‘totalistic’ understanding, and instead present knowledge of the mythic landscape as

partial and fragmented; imaginings reconstructed from chance encounters with meanings that protrude from a past which can only be partially recalled.

The significance of such participation in the landscape is also complicated by Orkney's continued draw for those beyond the islands as a place whose physical remoteness offers opportunities for spiritual encounter beyond the everyday. One clear example of this is the midsummer solstice gathering held most years over the past decade on the island of Egilsay, established by a member of a family once resident on the island but now living "south" (that is, in mainland Britain). The focal point of the solstice gathering is the lighting of ritual bonfires on the shore around midnight, with the shaping and lighting of the fire, and movement in relation to it, directed by members of the gathering as sacred acts. What is striking, from the perspective of historic ways of knowing in Orkney, is the way that such a performance revives and reinvigorates a traditional ritual practice with magical connotations – the Johnsmas fire (see Brown 2006: 204-5) around which people would dance and jump, and which was seen to have a revitalising power for those plants and animals brought up to it (Marwick 1986: 111-112). Although such practices are thought not to have persisted beyond the mid-nineteenth century, here they are an integral part of the engagement the islands for those drawn to them (predominantly from London and other cities in England).

Here it is precisely the peripherality of the islands which creates the conditions for spiritual encounter. Yet for those from the islands, such peripherality is itself a product of historical processes that have led to the de-centering of a 'powerhouse' (to use a word deliberately chosen by an Orcadian informant with an enthusiasm for the archaeology of the islands) which occupied a prominent role in the Neolithic revolution and in Viking sagas. That the islands are defined as peripheral because of their distance from urban centres in the UK is seen as a designation that undermines both the prominence of the islands' history and also

their future economic potential (Watts 2018). The question of Orkney's peripherality, then, reflects upon the distancing of the present-day landscape from both what it was and what it could be: Many layers of unknowing intervene in any given 'participation' with the storied Orcadian landscape: Protestant Christian attempts to rid the populace of superstition (Rendall 2009); population displacement due to clearance (Thomson 1981) and emigration; population change due to incomers from beyond Orkney (Forsyth 1980); secularisation. The uncanny and magical qualities of the landscape arise from the sense of a historical consciousness at the limits of understanding.

Magic and the outside of modernity in Cyprus and Orkney

The narratives presented above convey that for both, Cyprus and Orkney, 'modernity' presents a historical trajectory and the formation of a political economy which correlates with a project of self-subjection which demanded othering and negating past forms of magical thinking. As we have argued elsewhere (Irvine and Kyriakides 2018) magical thinking (re)emerges in present-day Cyprus and Orkney due to the inability of modern regimes of knowledge to fulfil their apparent promise to render the world wholly knowable. Such 'failures' of modern rationality gesture to contradictions which emerge in the in-between of the modern imperative to know the world, and the proclivity of such imperative to produce ambiguities and epistemological blindspots which, on the contrary, accentuate one's awareness of his or her incomplete understanding and lack of agency.

A suggestion theorised by Edward LiPuma (2001) is that 'the magic of modernity' offers a shifting space of possibility in which novel forms of magical experience and enchantment emerge. Indeed, a common thread among those theorising magic and modernity is adopting a dialectical approach in which 'modern discourses position magic as their antithesis,

reinventing it in the process' (Pels 2003: 4). As exemplified by recent theorisation of consumerism (Moeran and de Waal Malefyt 2018), such forms of magic emerge and are firmly rooted within narratives of modernity and capitalist appropriation (Hornborg 2016). As Bruce Kapferer cautions, thinking of magic through the space of possibility offered by modernity poses the 'danger of reintroducing modernist thought of an extraordinarily modernist kind under the guise of being up to the minute and currently relevant' (2002: 16). In such sense, the critique of ethnographic perspectives articulated above which, as we caution, restrict ontological conceptualisations of magic to an internal dialectic with humans, can also be articulated in the case of magic and modernity - namely that the inclination of anthropologists to theorise magic *vis-a-vis* modernity has resulted in a conceptual paradigm in which the term modernity has become a fenced dwelling ground for thinking and theorising magic.

Perhaps, then, instead of focusing on the manner by which modernity produces 'new' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) forms of magic, we should address the manner by which spaces, artefacts and practices of the past provide spaces of possibility which remain external to modernity (Stewart 2012; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Taneja 2018). Despite the fact that Cyprus and Orkney are saturated by practices such as tarot-reading, crystal healing and new-age magick, the two forms of Cypriot and Orcadian magic which we approach here remain highly codified, and their practice is considered socially transgressive. A hypothesis to entertain is that, unlike modern derivatives of magic which can be seen as confined in the realm of the self and the modern field of 'spirituality' (Heelas 2008), historicized forms of past magic maintain a certain degree of externality to modern discourses and epistemologies. With this in mind, and addressing the provocation that anthropologists should "undertake the ethnographic task of tracing how modernity is experienced as succeeding or failing under the conditions of witchcraft" (Bubandt 2014: 20) and, in our case, magic, we proceed to pose the

question: if such forms of magic mark a space of ambivalence and ontological not-knowing, how does such space make ‘sense’ in modern societies where ‘knowledge’ marks an important part of subjectivity and form of social currency? As we further suggest in the next section, such magical unknowability does not merely constitute ‘lack’ of knowledge, but a central tenet and affect of human subjectivity which becomes intensified under modern conditions.

Not knowing the world (or one’s self)

About six months into fieldwork in Nicosia, Mr. N and Kyriakides crossed paths in the narrow streets of the old town. ‘When you have the chance come by my shop,’ he said, ‘I remembered something that could be of interest to you.’ The next morning, Kyriakides indeed passed by N’s flower-shop. Perhaps the old man had heard an incident of magic in Cyprus and wanted to pass it on. On previous occasions, he had done this a couple of times, and would end his story by saying ‘some people believe these kinds of things, I don’t.’ On this occasion however, he did not intend on narrating a story he heard or criticise people’s beliefs. ‘I remembered that spell I told you about when we first talked, the one the woman would say when someone came to her to get rid of their fear’ he said. ‘It came to me two days ago, when I was sitting down having coffee.’ He then proceeded to narrate the following verse:

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Σαν τρέχει ο ήλιος | Like the sun flows |
| Σαν τρέχουν τα άστρα | Like the stars flow |
| Σαν τρέχει ο Ιορδάνης ποταμός | Like the river Jordan river flows |
| Έτσι να τρέξει το κακό | Let evil likewise flow |

Τζαι να φύει που πάνω σου.

And leave out of you.

‘But I thought you said you never believed in magic, how come you ended remembering it after all these years?’ I asked. Mr. N face and mouth twisted into an expression denoting aporia. ‘I don’t know,’ he said while shrugging his shoulders, ‘But here it is, I remembered.’ [έτο εθθυμίθικα].

The above incident does well in denoting the capriciousness of human memory, as well as the social dynamics by which binding magic, despite its near-extinction, continues to penetrate the everyday mundane in Cyprus. On another occasion, stopping in a coffee-shop on the way between Nicosia and the Troodos mountains, the owner of the establishment spoke of a Cypriot woman who migrated in London in the 1960s, capable of conducting spells from a distance. He then proceeded to tell me the story he heard from one of his relatives, who in turn had a friend with wards growing on his face and body. When the man with the wards heard one of his own relatives would visit London to see family, he gave him the required fee and a photograph of him to take to the woman. As per the coffee-shop owner telling the story, the wards soon after disappeared from the man’s body.

The story of the magician living in London neatly conveys the one-step removed relationship Cypriots have to binding magic nowadays. The story is told without hesitation and with enthusiasm, but its conclusion generates an awkward pause in the conversation between the storyteller, the ethnographer, and the three other patrons of the shop. If nothing else was said at that point, conversation would probably continue into other topics. I take one last chance to pierce the indirect façade of the story with a more personal question: ‘Do you know the name of the woman?’ – i.e. do you, *yourself*, know or hear anything else about this woman? Once again, a pause, and an answer able of diffusing the direct question: ‘no, but one must be a person of great force to do such things.’

Like Cyprus, the persistence of a magical, Orcadian past manifests in the everyday through various social processes. The 2018 exhibition ‘Of Land and Sea’, which took place in Kirkwall provides one evocative example: A painting by the artist Frances Scott took its inspiration (and its name) from the mythology of the ‘Vore Tullye’ (spring struggle) between the Sea Mither, the bringer of warmth and life, and her enemy Teran, the force of darkness and death. In spring, the struggle between the two would bring violent storms, until such time as Teran was chained beneath the sea - only to escape in autumn, by which time the Sea Mither’s energy would be spent (see Marwick 1975 for a narration of the myth). Scott’s artist’s statement for the piece explains, ‘I am drawn to the ubiquity of the sea in Orkney’s folk history, and the ways in which our ancestors made sense of this entity which can both sustain life, and bring an end to it... I hope to convey a sense of a consciousness - whether malignant or benign - bubbling away beneath the surface of the waters.’

The artist’s approach here is striking in a number of respects: firstly, in its distancing from the world of the past as a world of mysterious forces. The unknown is the domain of the ancestors. Secondly, in its drawing upon the ‘canon’ of folklore as a source for playful reinterpretation (in a different context, see Luhrmann 1989: 331-332 on the playful stance in relation to magic in contemporary Britain). But thirdly, in its final invocation of the idea of the unconscious ‘bubbling away’. Dissolved but not disappeared, the lore retains a presence: our stance towards these forces may have changed, but the potentials to which they refer remain.

Such sense of a knowledge, from which we are *distanced* rather than forgotten through time, emerged again in a different context, during a conversation of Irvine about weather lore. He had been talking to an experienced boatman who referred to the ‘gabs o’ May’ – a spell of cold, stormy weather expected in early May. This was seen as part of a dying vocabulary that

mapped out changing conditions throughout the year (in this case, the dying off was attributed both to scientific progress, and to the in-migration and the resulting loss of language). ‘You see folk come in now, they’ll no ken [know] what I’m saying, it’s dying. You’ll no find much... Some folk, they’d no go out at certain phases of the moon, they’d no go out if they saw a ring around the moon, folk could read the weather, predict things at different time of year. All that’s lost [to the weather forecast and satellite imagery] ... But they 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 our respect too.’ Again, this is knowledge represented as something fundamentally past or passing. From such a stance, it cannot be approached immediately in the present, but only gestured towards. Yet such a gesture renders absence – that is, the temporal occlusion brought about by cultural loss – a powerful presence (Højer 2009; Bubandt 2014).

Magic, misfortune and the modern mundane

As indicated by our conversations and encounters, talking about magic in Cyprus and Orkney is not understood to revolve around forms of knowledge but rather adopts a performative tone, used to convey the first-hand testimony (of another person) of something which is nowadays perceived as alien – not only to the person listening to the story, but also to the one narrating it. Unlike the master-storyteller who is in command of his story, Cypriots and Orcadians are not in control of the stories or memories of magic which they narrate: it is rather the story itself which punctures through social and individual memory to pierce the façade of the mundane. Magic in contemporary Cyprus and Orkney is hence almost always approached via proxy. Storytelling and memory are such social mediums, by which one indirectly approaches magic. Any attempt on the ethnographer’s behalf to probe his

interlocutor *personal* relationship to magic or the coffee shop owner, as Kyriakides did with Mr. N, or Irvine with the boatman, instead results to an overall climate of unease, whereby one distances him or herself from the prospect of magic through his or her incapacity to ‘know’ magic.

In the case of Cyprus, the gradual dissolution of Cypriot magic implies that younger generations of Cypriots have not encountered first-hand any sort of binding rituals. Binding and other magical rituals are instead transmitted through conversations such as the one between Mr. N and Kyriakides, not as a form of cultural knowledge to be reproduced, but rather as a collective memory of a past, rural Cyprus, permeated by magical practices. ‘These are things people used to do in villages,’ a young couple once again told Kyriakides. Both in their mid-thirties, working in office jobs in Nicosia, they seemed to be far removed from the premise of binding and evil, so central to Cypriot society a few mere decades ago. ‘I don’t believe in these things’ the woman says. ‘In a way, I don’t *want* to believe. My grandmother happened to tell me what they used to do in her village back then, and in a way, it scares me that people would think and act in such way. I don’t want to get involved in such things, and I don’t want my children to know about it either.’ There was this one time when everything seemed to be going wrong,’ the man proceeded to say...

...she first broke her arm, then I also got injured seriously playing football. Then some other less important things went wrong – stuff at work and what not. I heard that back in the day people would take a pomegranate and smash it under their house’s threshold for good luck, so I did that. I bought a pomegranate and threw it so hard against the floor I got juice all over my shirt. It feels silly now, the fact we did that back then, but at the time it did make us feel better.

Here, akin to what Cypriot folklorists write of village societies of the early 20th century, envy and evil do not merely represent transient emotional states but rather constitute cosmological contours which anticipate and pre-empt everyday interaction. On another occasion, a woman said to Kyriakides that she would, at times, glance at the evil eye amulet hanging from the rear-view mirror of her car occasionally, and usually whenever ‘bad thoughts’ crossed her mind.

I don’t know when I started doing it, but I do it pretty habitually by now. I don’t know much about how magic worked, but I know that an evil eye amulet is meant to protect you from harm and the envy of others. I don’t think someone is envious of me or out to get me. Sometimes I will just be driving around the city and a bad thought might cross my mind like, I don’t know, someone is going to die or will lose something valuable and I will do this thing, I will just throw a side-glance at the amulet.

In such attempts to replicate, rather than reproduce a magical ritual, the presupposition of ‘automatic efficacy’ (Mauss 1972: 144), otherwise central to magic, is replaced by the intuitive suggestion that something someone is doing ‘works’ (Favret-Saada: 47). The serialised, masterful reproduction of magical ritual, which Mauss (1973) calls a ‘technique’ is replaced by a form of bricolage, whereby one utilises and uses snippets of social memory and storytelling to assemble and conduct individualised versions of magical ritual. Despite Argyrou’s suggestion that the decline of magic in Cyprus is the result of an ‘elitist denunciation of magic... in the name of an imported “modernity”’ (1993: 257), for my interlocutors such forms of magic constitute an epistemological and historical ‘*aporia*’ (Bubandt 2014: 36) which punctuates everyday life.

Akin to Cypriot binding spells and evil eye beliefs, the social position of Orcadian fairy lore and magic inhering in the unseen connected to a cosmological milieu permeated by fear, envy

and a perpetual possibility of death. In Orkney, a particular demonstration of the opaque conditions of everyday life is the problem of the possibility of clear knowledge of what is to come. One well documented manifestation of this in Orkney's magical tradition is the concept of being 'forespoken': the effect of an 'ill tongue' which hubristically invites harm by giving praise. To call a child a 'bonny bairn' or otherwise offer admiration, or simply say they are looking well, was to risk the consequence of a future which runs contrary to the implied clear knowledge of their health and wellbeing (Gregor 1874; Black 1903: 141-143).

A more widely discussed phenomenon touching on the problem of knowledge of the future was precognition (particularly of death), 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', as an informant explained to Irvine. 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. Historically, such understandings have been linked with fairy lore and the landscape, a relationship that is specifically cited in the 1616 trial of Elspeth Reoch for witchcraft, who in her extracted confession described having dealings with fairies from the age of 12 and thereafter making a living from the prophetic power of the Second Sight (see Marwick 1991: 376-377 for a discussion of this case).

That Second Sight is specifically narrated as a gift of the fairies in Robert Kirk's 17th century *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, creates a sense of a corpus of related beliefs; yet the very nature of the fragmentary and distanced engagement with such beliefs in the contemporary setting actively resists such systemisation. The problem of the relationship between Second Sight and the knowability of the world is a longstanding one, shaped by and in term contributing to a national imaginary of Scottish (and in particular Highland and Island) cultural distinctiveness (Richardson 2017). In the late 19th century, the Society for

Psychical Research made enquiries into the phenomenon (Campbell and Hall 1968), and in the 1990s belief in the Second Sight was widely documented across Scotland (Cohn 1999). At the heart of such interest is a sense of the persistence of magical thinking at the periphery as a phenomenon out of time, its existence juxtaposed with an apparently rationalised world where such knowledge is unthinkable.

On one occasion, as Irvine was attempting to return the topic of conversation to Second Sight, the engineer he was talking with visibly grimaced: yes, he had heard talk about it, and he knew people who had stories about it, but he also made it clear you wouldn't hear anything like that from him. Yet the conversation, having turned in that direction, remained on the subject of death. 'You talk about tragedy, but folk are closer to it here', and he went on to list people who he had been to school with, now dead. 'It's just the way it is. There's no making sense of that. I don't believe in anything, you'll get other folk, especially old folk, who do, either way there's no way you ken.'⁵

The circulation and tonality 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. 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. On another occasion a man shared recollection of his grandfather, who was said to have been "troubled" by the second sight. When people came through the door of his house, it was said his grandfather would have visions of their burial and later would sit there "grey in the face" as though he'd seen the walking dead. Such ability, it was explained, was meant to be something that ran through the family, and his grandfather had been a seventh son of a seventh son, which was generally recognised as the pattern of inheritance for abilities of this

type. Characteristically for this kind of conversation, he concluded it with a joke, commenting that you don't get big families like that anymore, so "no wonder it's died out!"

Conclusion: Speaking the ineffable

The manner by which magic manifests in modern Cyprus and Orkney invites us to reconsider certain long-established anthropological assumptions. Ever since Evans-Pritchard's suggestion that witchcraft explains misfortune, and that magic is necessitated to combat such conditions, anthropological understandings have addressed the patterned cyclicity of such course of events. As James Siegel (2006) writes, figuring out and naming the witch, and hence the source of one's misfortune, is a pragmatic act by which, both, magic and the reproduction the social fabric become possible. Siegel shows how the advent of modernity in Java effectuates a breaking-down of magic's bounded character - bounded not only in the sense of taking place in a 'closed' social field, but also bounded in the sense that magic no longer constitutes a cohesive field of knowledge and practice through which such cyclical pattern can be reproduced. The suspension of the act of naming the witch under such conditions implies that connections between magic and misfortune do not fully crystallize but are rather enacted through an existential plateau of ambiguity and doubt, in which the prospect of misfortune cannot be entirely redeemed.

The position of magic in modernity hence invite us to consider magic's spectral and incomplete dimensions. In the case of Cyprus and Orkney, an archaeology of magical memory, storytelling and historical consciousness provide the ferment out which magic 'haunts' (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Argyrou 2017; Newell 2018), rather than enchants, modernity and the mundane. As indicated by the Cypriot cosmological paradigm of 'evil' and the Orcadian notion of Second Sight, understood as an 'outside' (Jensen 2013) expanse which

evades complete articulation, the mundane itself, and the possibility of misfortune which it foresees, becomes the witch. Like the case of the young Cypriot woman who puts faith in her evil-eye stone for some unknown reason, or the Orcadian engineer who associates magic with past ancestors, insofar one dwells in such haunted conditions, one does not require prior know-how of magic in order to engage with it. Rather, even for those who never experienced or practiced magic, such archaeology also constitutes a potential ecology of encounter with dormant layers of magical memory and materiality which become re-activated at the stroke of circumstance.

As philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (2008) writes, a fossil does not necessarily denote a past world, it is also an artefact which begs the question of what lies outside one's existence and timespan. Dormant magical landscapes such as fairy mounds and mundane objects such as evil-eye stones are such magical relics in the case of Cyprus and Orkney. Moreover, in everyday conversations the 'past' itself takes the form of an artefact which emanates puzzlement. Past Orkney and Cyprus, saturated by magic, provide an uncanny version of an otherwise world which remain external and cannot be sublated in teleological trajectories of progress and modernity (Stewart 2017). As our conversations and encounters show, the uncanniness of magic in Cyprus and Orkney does not emerge from a pattern or misfortune or from a supernatural incident which common sense cannot accommodate, but from the manner by which the magical past unexpectedly re-enters human memory and the context of everyday life. The past is infolded within the present in the form of accumulated layers of magical memory which, although one is not necessarily aware of, akin to a relic or fossil, he or she continuously treads, and occasionally stumbles upon.

Nevertheless, in Cyprus and Orkney magic is not spoken as something which belongs in the past, but rather as something which one is incapable of expressing through modern regimes

of knowledge (Irvine and Kyriakides 2018). To speak of magic in personal capacity demands that one situates him or herself within a spectrum of existence which modern epistemology cannot accommodate. Jeanne Favret-Saada uses the term ‘shut within the unspeakable’ (1980: 89) to denote such epistemological position of not being able to verbalise one’s position on magic within modernity. Attempting to speak of magic in Cyprus and Orkney demands the task of approaching and negotiating one’s self within the unspeakable. Akin to what Favret-Saada writes of the ‘annunciator’ (1980: 8) – the person who makes the leap into the irrational and alerts a relative or neighbour that he or she might be under the influence of a witch, hence allowing them to take measure – statements such as ‘these are things people used to do in the past’ or ‘all that [magic] is lost now’ are initially deployed to allow one to start speaking about magic. The capacity to start verbalising and entertaining the possibility of magic is thus predicated on making clear that it is ‘forgotten’ (Papadakis 1993) knowledge that one is ‘ignorant’ (High, Kelly and Mair 2012; Dilley and Kirsch 2015) of.

Deleuze and Guattari (1986) describe such process of attempting to speak the ineffable as ‘stuttering’: as an attempted creative act whereby an existing, dominant semiotic regime is unable of ‘receiving’ or providing one with a pool of signifiers able to represent the ineffable kernel of something which cannot be completely articulated. On the one hand, stuttering, in our conversations about magic, manifests a form of confusion resultant of an attempt to speak of magic and hence probe at the limits of human understanding and perception of the world. On the other hand, the semiotic allowance created from *attempting* to speak of magic provide one the possibility of creative expression. As Julia Kristeva puts it, the power of magical practices comes from ‘a weakening of the value of signs as such and of their specific logic’ (1991: 186). Such ‘loosening’ implies that an attempt to directly speak magic risks the danger of epistemological disorientation, but that it also engenders a space of possibility for articulating that which previously could not be enunciated.

Martin Holbraad in his ethnography of divination in Cuba correctly suggests that a main theoretical problem anthropologists should address is the ‘distance’ which exists between spiritual entities and the human world. Holbraad’s conclusion is that the purpose of divination séances is to elicit human-spirit relations by making spirits ‘traverse the distance from transcendence to immanence’ (2012: 113). Yet, as indicated by the modern standing of magic in Cyprus and Orkney, the possibility of not bridging such distance, and of the magical cosmos remaining undifferentiated, ineffable and unknown, does not exclude the possibility of relating to it. Entertaining the possibility of magic in this case is not the result of a ‘successful’ attempt at expression but, on the contrary, of the pragmatics of an attempt at signification which *cannot* be completed. Take, for example, the statement uttered by the coffee-shop owner: ‘one must have great force to do such things.’ Stuttering here manifests as a subjunctive gesture, through which the man attempts to pierce the unspeakable in order to allude to the existence of a certain force. Nevertheless, even in such subjunctive mode, an attempt at representing magic is destined to fail, since one is not provided with the semiotic potential to signify the magical. What this ‘force’ is, we don’t know, it must remain unnamed, undifferentiated, and contemplative. Or, as Mr N. put it, one can only ‘guess.’

Otherwise said, adopting an epistemological position of not-knowing is the only way pierce through within the unspeakable and to attempt to verbalise it. For philosopher Timothy Morton, it such incomplete understanding humans have of their worlds acts as a transcendental condition of developing new and novel ways of dwelling amid modernity. As he writes, amid modernity, ‘Something is always missing. My self-awareness is a sense of incompleteness’ (2016: 107). Yet, as Morton continues to write, ‘We can speak of ineffable things. When we say we can’t speak the ineffable, there we are, speaking it’ (2016: 112). For Morton, the distributed nature and historical transcendentals of modernity indicate not-knowing as an epistemological stance specific to modernity as-such. Under such conditions,

to not-know does not necessarily imply not being affected since, on the contrary, lack of knowledge in certain circumstances produces an affect of unease in-itself. Indeed, anthropologists largely approach the position of magic in modernity through dissonant processes of doubt (Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2012; Pelkmans 2013; Bubandt 2014). Yet, the ethnographic encounters showcased here situate such uncanny moments beyond emotional states of confusion, and into spaces of self-reflection. In such way, attempting to speak about past forms of magic constituted a meta-pragmatic act according to which one surveys and evaluates his or her relationship with the world and what can be known. Attempting to speak of magic in Cyprus and Orkney is not the opposite of knowledge, but rather is used as an occasion to examine and probe the limits of (non-)knowledge one has about the world.

We hence agree with Sasha Newell when he writes ‘magical thinking is indeed human thinking, but much of it takes place at a level of thought that we sense without actually knowing’ (2018: 8). In addition to such insight, however, our ethnography also indicates magical thinking is the result of a reflexive epistemological position through which people adopt not-knowing as an *intentional* stance of thinking and acting. The unknowability through which people approach magic in Cyprus and Orkney does not rupture and pull modern human subjectivity apart, but rather accentuates not-knowing as an intrinsic trait of human existence. Borrowing from Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, one can say that such stance constitutes a ‘knowing of non-knowing’ (1982: 154): in such way, instances of not-knowing are not necessarily accidental departures from a knowing, rational subject, but rather a conscious mode of thinking, acting, and being in modernity.

Footnotes

1. See Irvine and Kyriakides (2018) for a discussion of the relationship between magic and rationalisation and a consideration of Weberian theories of disenchantment in relation to these fieldsites.
2. The word stems from *goiteuo*, meaning to charm or seduce something or someone. Binding spells called *goeties* were common in the ancient world (Gager 1992).
3. Melting alloys such as solder, lead or tin for purposes of divination is called molybdomancy. In other parts of the Mediterranean olive oil is often used instead (Galt 1982).
4. Rebecca Bryant (2004) relevantly argued that such modern processes of essentialisation undertaken by Cypriots who were striving to attain the modern standing provided by Europe effectuated a nationalist divide between Greek and Turkish Cypriots on the island.
5. Erving Goffman (1953: 316-317), who carried out ethnographic research in Shetland, the island group to the north of Orkney, frames the ‘problem’ of belief in the Second Sight as an intergenerational issue: discomfort among the younger generation on occasions when their apparently rational elders engage in serious conversation about such ‘superstition’. It is interesting to consider that here both the dynamic of awkwardness and the sense of this being a passing belief and something more likely to be heard among the ‘old folk’ persist.

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