



REPRINT

## Viscerality, faith, and skepticism

Another theory of magic

Michael TAUSSIG, *Columbia University*

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“Underlying all our mystic states are corporeal techniques, biological methods of entering into communication with God.”

– Marcel Mauss, “Les techniques du corps,” 1960

“The sorcerer generally learns his time-honored profession in good faith, and retains his belief in it more or less from first to last; at once dupe and cheat, he combines the energy of a believer with the cunning of a hypocrite.”

– Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive culture*, 1871

Habituated as we are these post-9/11 days to the dramaturgy of Homeland Security—who can still remember the color-coded warnings of terror whenever the president’s ratings were falling or the advice to place plastic sheeting on the windows?—there is one act of theater that still seems fresh and daring: the revealing glimpse of stately being provided by U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft when he ordered Justice have her fulsome breast covered by suitable drapes. It was as if he had taken to heart what, according to students’ notes, the learned anthropologist Marcel Mauss had said in Paris sometime in the 1920s, that “underlying all our mystic states are corporeal techniques, biological methods of entering into

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communication with God” (Mauss 1979). Later on with untold millions watching the 2004 Super Bowl on television, the singer Janet Jackson had a wardrobe malfunction in which her dress slipped to reveal for an instant the breast that the attorney general had had to cover up. Laws were instantly drafted against indecency in the media. A year later the noted evangelist Pat Robertson told viewers on his television show that the United States should kill Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, described in the *New York Times* as “a leftist whose country has the largest oil reserves outside of the Middle East.” Claiming that “this is even more threatening to hemispheric stability than the flash of a breast on television during a ballgame,” the Reverend Jesse Jackson called for the Federal Communications Commission to investigate, just as it did when Janet Jackson’s breast was exposed (Goodstein and Forero 2005, A10).

Mauss hardly needed to add that clothing—that second skin—goes hand in hand with “corporeal techniques” for reaching the holy. One has only to think of the passions aroused by the veil in Islam, nuns’ and priests’ habits in Christianity, the scarlet robes of cardinals, the pope’s miter, the orange robes and haircuts of Buddhist monks, and the layers of black and white cloth, white string, and large black hats of Jewish men’s orthodoxy, let alone the postures and body movements for praying, to get the point, strange as it may seem. Even nudism is a kind of religion. It is strange, is it not, that something so intensely spirited and spiritual as communicating with God should be so tied to the flesh and, at the very same time, be so tied to covering it, uncovering it, and even mutilating it?

Intense it certainly is. Those of us fortunate enough to live in the United States have become acutely aware these days of such “corporeal techniques” that in media form allow the populace to enter into communication with God, techniques so downright earthy and body-saturated that they leave the Christian and Muslim penitents lashing themselves to bloody frenzy far behind, no less than the nuns of early modern Europe glorying in their infected wounds. In Flemish painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it is common to see Christ the Crucified with a neatly made, vagina-shaped, incision on his right chest, level with the nipple. In one painting I know of, the wound emits golden rays of fine droplets that take up a good third of the painting. Leo Steinberg has dedicated much of his formidable scholarship to the ubiquity in Renaissance painting, north and south of the Alps, of what looks like a large, sometimes very large, erection on Christ’s part while on the cross (Steinberg 1996). What is just as noteworthy is the cover-up. For not only is Christ naked except for an awkwardly bulging sheet, but centuries have passed without mentioning this unmentionable, as likewise with the equally large number of paintings of the Virgin adoring the baby Christ’s dick. If it wasn’t for the fact that people choose, perhaps unconsciously, not to see this, one can only imagine what a busy time people like the attorney general could be having in the War against This Terror.

But fortunately for us those barbarous displays of spiritual devotion devoted to covering and uncovering the body are long past. Today in the West, church and temple have long been sanitized, and the evidence lies safely ensconced in the no-less-sanitary and no-less-hallowed rooms of art museums. Instead, religion has found other and better “corporeal techniques for entering into communication with God,” absolutely life-and-death issues including fanatical opposition to



abortion, gay marriage, embryonic stem-cell research, euthanasia, condoms, and the sale of “morning-after” pill. (But not Viagra.) That this opposition wins national elections and hence shapes the fate of the world is now painfully obvious, and thus these corporeal techniques merit closer examination.

In the sorts of societies traditionally studied by anthropologists, in which religion was in the hands of so-called shamans, witch-doctors, and sorcerers, such corporeal techniques can be viewed as forms of conjuring based on sleight of hand, which is what assures them their ability to enter into communication with God. This is conjuring, but with a twist. And what is this twist? It is quite marvelous and amounts to *the skilled revelation of skilled concealment*—witness Janet Jackson’s briefest of brief revelations and the attorney general’s cover-up. Witness the crucified Christ’s erection that nobody sees. What we have here is an art form dedicated to cheating, or should I say contrived misperception, a corporeal technique that not only evokes something sacred but that involves deceiving oneself as well. Religion is certainly strange. In the mid-nineteenth century in Oxford, England, the celebrated founder of anthropology, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, put it like this:

The sorcerer generally learns his time-honored profession in good faith, and retains his belief in it more or less from first to last; at once dupe and cheat, he combines the energy of a believer with the cunning of a hypocrite. (Tylor 1871)

By “sorcerer,” Tylor was not necessarily thinking of attorneys general, but it is established in the ethnographic record that law in so-called primitive societies is very much a matter of sorcery, if by that term we include, as is generally the case, medicine and religion. What is more, Tylor puts his finger on something timeless here, fascinating and timeless, which is that faith seems to require that one be taken in by what one professes while at the same time suspecting it is a lot of hooey.

At once dupe and cheat, Tylor said—truly an amazing state of affairs, mixing recognition with denial, blindness with insight. Here faith seems to not only happily coexist with skepticism but *demand*s it, hence the interminable, mysterious, and complex movement back and forth between revelation and concealment. Could it follow, therefore, that magic is efficacious not despite the trick but on account of its exposure? Let me flesh this out, beginning with what for me stands as the primal scene of conjuring on the part of the sorcerer.

### Uttermost parts and humbugger

In his wonderfully evocative and informative autobiography, Lucas Bridges, son of a missionary turned sheep farmer, tells us how he grew up playing with Indian children around 1900 on Isla Grande, one of many islands, peninsulas, and waterways that make up Tierra del Fuego. He learnt at least one of the native languages, and by the time he was an adult he was tempted to learn the ways of the sorcerer, ways which were, in essence, very puzzling because the fear of magic coexisted with disbelief in the magicians. Note that magic, in the form of killing by means of sorcery, was common. The first among the Ona Indian superstitions, according to Bridges, was “fear of magic and of the power of magicians, even on the part of those

who, professing that art, must have known that they themselves were humbugs. They had great fear of the power of others” (Bridges 1951: 406). He went to say that “some of these humbugs were excellent actors,” and it will be useful for us to follow him in his description of what he calls “acting” and observe the focus, if not obsession, with the “object,” an object withdrawn from the interstices of the living, human, body.

Standing or kneeling beside the patient, gazing intently at the spot where the pain was situated, the doctor would allow a look of horror to come over his face. Evidently he could see something invisible to the rest of us. . . . With his hands he would try to gather the malign presence into one part of the patient’s body—generally the chest—where he would then apply his mouth and suck violently. Sometimes this struggle went on for an hour, to be repeated later. At other times the *joon* would draw away from his patient with the pretense of holding something in his mouth with his hands. Then always facing away from the encampment, he would take his hands from his mouth gripping them tightly together, and, with a guttural shout difficult to describe and impossible to spell, fling this invisible object to the ground and stamp fiercely upon it. Occasionally a little mud, some flint or even a tiny, very young mouse might be produced as the cause of the patient’s indisposition. (Bridges 1951: 262)<sup>1</sup>

As an aside let us take note of the eyes of the great medicine man, Houshken, perforce an expert in physiognomy. He was over six feet tall and his eyes were exceedingly dark, almost blue black. “I had never seen eyes of such color,” muses Bridges, and he wondered whether Houshken was nearsighted. Far from it. For not only was the man a mighty hunter, but it was said that he could look through mountains. These are also the sort of eyes that can look through the human body, as was brought out when Bridges allowed another famous medicine man, Tininisk (who twenty years later became one of Father Martin Gusinde’s most important informants), to induct him into the ways of the medicine man. Half-reclining naked on guanaco skins by the fire sheltered by a windbreak, Bridges’s chest was gone over by the medicine man’s hands and mouth as intently, said Bridges, as any doctor with a stethoscope, “moving in the prescribed manner from place to place, pausing to listen here and there.” Then come those eyes again, those eyes that can see through mountains, the mountain of the body. “He also gazed intently at my body, as though he saw through it like an X-ray manipulator” (Bridges 1951: 406).

Having eyes like these eyes is helpful for seeing through the world, but perhaps the implication this carries is misleading. For penetrating as these eye are, it could be the nature of the material looked through that is special. For it seems that solids, like the body, are, under certain conditions at least, unstable and transparent.

The medicine man and his helper stripped naked. The medicine man’s wife, one of the rare women healers, took off her outer garment, and the three of them huddled and produced something Bridges thought was of the lightest gray down, shaped like a puppy and about four inches long with pointed ears. It had the

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1. Note that Bridges spoke the Ona (Selk’nam is the native term) language, and when he describes speech as guttural he is not necessarily mistaken. *Joon* is the word for shaman or native doctor.

semblance of life, perhaps due to the handlers' breathing and the trembling of their hands. There was a peculiar scent as the "puppy" was placed by the three pairs of hands to his chest, where, without any sudden movement, it disappeared. Three times this was repeated, and then after a solemn pause Tininisk asked whether Bridges felt anything moving in his heart or if he could see something strange in his mind, like in a dream?

But Bridges felt nothing, and eventually decided to abandon what he had found to be a fascinating course of studies because for one thing, he would have to frequently lie, "at which I was not very clever," and for another, it would separate him from his Ona friends. "They feared the sorcerers; I did not wish them to fear me, too" (Bridges 1951: 264).<sup>2</sup> Yet, although his desire to learn magic waned, it never completely left him.

Some twenty years later Father Martin Gusinde was informed by the Indians that the "puppy" was made of the white feathers of newborn birds and a shaman's entire body, other than the skin, was made of this stuff. It was this substance that gave the shaman his special powers—his penetrating sight, his ability to divine, to reach out and kill, and sing as well (Gusinde 1982: 18).

When he later met up with the famous Houshken, about whom he had heard so much, Bridges told him he had heard of his great powers and would like to see some of his magic. The moon was full that night. Reflected on the snow on the ground, it cast the scene like daylight. Returning from the river, Houshken began to chant, put his hands to his mouth, and withdrew a strip of guanaco hide three times the thickness of a shoelace and about eighteen inches long. His hands shook and gradually drew apart, the strip stretching to about four feet. His companion took one end and the four feet extended to eight, then suddenly disappeared back into Houshken's hands to become smaller and smaller such that when his hands were almost together he clapped them to his mouth, uttered a prolonged shriek, and then held out his hands, completely empty.

Even an ostrich, comments Bridges, could not have swallowed those eight feet of hide without a visible gulp. But where else could it have gone but back into the man's body? He had no sleeves. He stood butt naked in the snow with his robe on the ground. What's more, there were between twenty and thirty men present, but only a third of them were Houshken's people and the rest were far from being friendly. "Had they detected some simple trick," writes Bridges, "the great medicine man would have lost his influence; they would no longer have believed in any of his magic" (Bridges 1951: 285).

Houshken put on his robe and seemed to go into a trance as he stepped toward Bridges, let his robe fall to the ground, put his hands to his mouth again, withdrew them, and when they were less than two feet from Bridges's face slowly drew them apart to reveal a small, almost opaque, object, about an inch in diameter, tapering

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2. And note the story in Gusinde's more than one thousand pages of ethnography on the Selk'nam (based on fieldwork undertaken over four trips between 1918 and 1924) of how in 1919 a group of medicine men had been offered presents by Bridges's brother, Guillermo, if they could kill one of his dogs with magic. The medicine men refused, as they believed their magic to be of no use against white men or their dogs (Gusinde 1982: 698-99).

into his hands. It could have been semitransparent elastic or dough but whatever it was, it seemed to be alive, revolving at great speed.

The moon was bright enough to read by as he drew his hands apart, and Bridges realized suddenly the object was no longer there. “It did not break or burst like a bubble; it simply disappeared.” There was a gasp from the onlookers. Houshken turned his hands over for inspection. They were clean and dry. Bridges looked down at the ground. Stoic as he was, Houshken could not resist a chuckle, for there was nothing to be seen. “Don’t let it trouble you. I shall call it back to myself again.”

By way of ethnographic explanation, Bridges tells us that this curious object was believed to be “an incredibly malignant spirit belonging to, or possibly part of, the *joon* (medicine man) from whom it emanated.” It could take a physical form. Or it could be invisible. It had the power to introduce insects, tiny mice, mud, sharp flints, or even a jellyfish or a baby octopus into the body of one’s enemy. “I have seen a strong man shudder involuntarily at the thought of this horror and its evil potentialities” (Bridges 1951: 286). “It was a curious fact,” he adds, that “although every magician must have known himself to be a fraud and a trickster, he always believed in and greatly feared the supernatural abilities of other medicine-men” (Bridges 1951: 286).

### Viscerality and *The gay science*

At this juncture I want to draw your attention to several things about the sleight of hand involved here in the manipulation of the human body. First, there is the use of the body as a receptacle, a “holy temple,” whose boundary has to be traversed. This is the basic, the essential, staging for the perpetual play of moving inside and outside, implanting and extracting . . . whether it be the shaman’s body, the patient’s body, the enemy’s body, or the body of a novice shaman during training.

Then there is the exceedingly curious object that is said to be a spirit belonging to the body of the medicine man; it appears to be alive yet is an object all the same; it marks the exit from and reentry into the body; it has a remarkably indeterminate quality—note the weird elasticity of the guanaco strip and the semitransparent dough or elastic revolving at high speed—all acting like extensions of the human body and thus capable of connecting with and entering into other bodies, human and nonhuman.

There exists a Central European version of this weird doughlike spinning thing and it is called Odradek, the hero of a one-and-a-half page story, “The cares of a family man” (Kafka 1983). The author, Franz Kafka, tells us that the origin of the name Odradek is perplexing, and from his account it is impossible to know whether Odradek is a person, an animal, or an object. Odradek seems like a person in some ways, can speak and respond to questions, for instance, and can move fairly nimbly, like an animal. Yet it is nothing but an old star-shaped cotton reel with bits of different colored thread and a couple of little sticks poking out either end. It lurks on thresholds and cul-de-sacs, on the stairs and in the hallway. When it laughs it is like the rustling of dead leaves. We are unsure as to whether he can die.

Kafka himself did not employ sleight of hand. His writing was sufficient. Odradek was an extension of Kafka, his body no less than his mind, similar to the



“puppy” of white feathers of newborn birds emerging from Tininisk to enter the body of his patients or victims. Kafka’s stories are not stories at all. They rely on gesture, the bodily equivalent of words, words that suddenly shoot out of syntax and take on a life of their own, like the Selk’nam revolving dough emergent from the shaman’s mouth. Kafka never felt at home in his body. He was bound to empathy and metamorphosis. Remember the man who became a bug? And the facial tic that tics away on its own?

In Kafka’s account, Odradek is both exotic and familiar, fantastic and ordinary. Perhaps this is the same for the “puppy” among the Selk’nam described by Lucas Bridges and by Father Gusinde. Such creatures are more than creaturely; they are sudden appearances and equally mysterious disappearances; they are movement, most notably bodily movement, meaning not only the place of the body in space, nor simply rapid extension of limbs in what is almost a form of dance, but also movements of egress and ingress, of insides into outsides and vice versa combined with a movement of sheer becoming in which being and nonbeing are transformed into the beingness of transforming forms.

Such creatures refer us to the metamorphosing capacity of curious unnamable animated objects able to become more clearly recognizable but out-of-place things such as baby octopi or mud or a flint in the body of the enemy rendered sick and dying, a capacity on the part of these creatures not only for change but also for an implosive viscosity that would seem to hurl us beyond the world of the symbol and that penny-in-the-slot resolution called meaning.

Above all at this point, I want to draw attention to the spectacular display of magical feats and tricks and to wonder about their relationship to the utterly serious business of killing and healing people. This combination of trickery, spectacle, and death must fill us with some confusion, even anxiety, about the notion of the trick and its relation to both theater and science, let alone to truth and fraud. We therefore need to dwell upon this corrosive power creeping along the otherwise imperceptible fault lines in the sturdy structure of language and thought, splicing games and deceit to matters of life and death, theater to reality, this world to the spirit world, and trickery to the illusion of a world without trickery—the most problematic trick of all. Here one can sympathize with Friedrich Nietzsche where he writes that “all of life is based on semblance, art, deception, points of view and the necessity of perspectives and error,” no less than with the attempt by Horkheimer and Adorno to position not Eve and the tree of knowledge of good and evil but shamanism and its magic as the true fall from grace onto the first faltering steps of Enlightenment and what has come to be called science, imitating nature so as to control nature, including human nature, transforming the trick into techniques of domination over nature and people (Nietzsche 1968: 23; Horkheimer and Adorno 1969: 3-43).

Faced with this world based on semblance, art, and deception, Nietzsche advises us not to labor under the illusion of eliminating trickery on the assumption that there is some other world out there beyond and bereft of trickery. The trick will always win, especially when exposed. What we should do instead is practice our own form of *shamanism*, if that’s the word, and come up with a set of tricks, simulations, and deceptions in a continuous movement of counterfeint and feint strangely contiguous with yet set against those weighing on us. It is something like

this *nervous system*, I believe, that Nietzsche had in mind with his *Gay science*, a “mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art” built around the idea, if I may put it this way, that exposure of the trick is no less necessary to the magic of magic than is its concealment (Nietzsche 1974: 37).<sup>3</sup>

**“To describe any considerable number of tricks carried out by the shamans, both Chuckchee and Eskimo, would require too much space”**

When Catherine the Great opened up the wastes of Siberia to European explorers in the eighteenth century they were first not called *shamans* but *jugglers*—jugglers as in *conjurers*. The name *shaman* came later, being the name used by one of the indigenous cultures, that of the Tungus, for one of several classes of their healers. From its inception, the naming and presentation of the figure of the shaman by anthropologists was profoundly linked to trickery by means of startling revelations about ventriloquism, imitations of animal spirit voices, curtained chambers, mysterious disappearances and reappearances, semisecret trapdoors, knife tricks, and so forth, including—if *trick* is the word here, and why not?—sex changes by men and women.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, so-called shamans came to be thought of by anthropologists and by laymen as existing everywhere throughout the world and throughout history as a universal type of magical and religious being, and the trickery tended to be downplayed as the mystical took center stage. The term itself had become early on diffused throughout Western languages, thanks to the ethnography of Siberia begun in the late nineteenth century, the phenomenon thus joining an illustrious company of colonially derived native terms enriching European languages such as *totemism*, *taboo*, *mana*, and even *cannibalism*, words at once familiar yet mysterious as if freighted by their indigenous meanings and contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Hearken to the wonderful tricks presented by Waldemar Bogoras for the Chukchi shaman he met in Siberia, Bogoras’s 1904 monograph being one of the high points in the birth of shamanism as a Western object of study (Bogoras 1969: 433-67). Bogoras was fascinated, for instance, by the shamans’ skill in ventriloquy creating soundscapes so complex and multiply layered that it seemed like you had become immersed in a spirit world. Bogoras took pains to capture the trick of

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3. See also Michael Taussig, “Why the Nervous System?” (1992).

4. On the importance of the eighteenth-century explorations in Siberia for the dissemination of the very notion of shamanism, see Flaherty (1992). These terms are splendid examples of hybrids emitting much cultural and historical mischief. “Totemism,” for example, was brought to European attention by a whisky-peddling fur trader on the late eighteenth-century North American frontier and then professionalized by certified anthropologists in the twentieth century as a worldwide institution by which clans were thought to identify with a particular plant or animal species or other natural phenomenon such as lightning. Later it was easy for Claude Lévi-Strauss to disassemble it for his purposes of demonstrating his thesis that culture is like a language. But the story does not end there, as this essay demonstrates.

voice throwing onto a wax cylinder, phonographic record, and was surprised that he could do so, delighted by his own trickery. The shaman sat over there, throwing his voice, but the voice emerged right here, out of the phonogram! I heard the same thing a century later, two years ago in the oral examination of a doctoral student who had gotten hold of a copy. This was one of those especially fine tricks from everyone's point of view. To the white man it conflated two magics, that of the mimetically capacious shaman with that of the modern mimetic machine. To the native it must have been satisfying to have another happy client.

Another form of trick performed by a shaman was wringing her hands to make a large pebble reproduce a continuous row of small pebbles on top of her drum. Bogoras tried to trick her into revealing her trick, but he was unable to. This is an important moment in the Western investigation of shamanism and we should not let it pass unnoticed no matter how much our attention is focused on the shaman's tricks. It is a touching moment when the anthropologist tries to outsmart the shaman, something you don't generally come across as recommended in standard texts on field methods such as *Notes and queries*. We shall observe it in detail later with E. E. Evans-Pritchard in Africa in the early 1930s.

Another of this shaman's tricks was to rip open the abdomen of her son to find and remove the cause of illness. "It certainly looked as if the flesh was really cut open," said Bogoras. On both sides, from under the fingers flowed little streams of blood, trickling to the ground. "The boy lay motionless; but once or twice moaned feebly, and complained that the knife had touched his entrails." The shaman placed her mouth to the incision and spoke into it. After some moments she lifted her head, and the boy's body was quite sound. Other shamans made much of stabbing themselves with knives. Tricks are everywhere. As Bogoras concludes, "To describe any considerable number of tricks carried out by the shamans, both Chuckchee and Eskimo, would require too much space" (Bogoras 1969: 447). Yet can we resist mentioning a couple more? Upune, for instance, "pretended to draw a cord through her body, passing it from one spot to another. Then suddenly she drew it out, and immediately afterward pretended to cut it in two and with it the bodies of several of her children, who sat in front of her. These and other tricks resemble to a surprising degree the feats of jugglers all over the world. Before each performance, Upune would even open her hands, in the graceful manner of a professor of magic, to show us she had nothing in them." The greatest trick was not that of being able to descend and walk in the underground but to change one's sex, thanks to help from the spirits, a change that could well eventuate, at least in the case of a man, in his taking male lovers or becoming married to a man. Such "soft men," as they were called, were feared for their magic more than unchanged men or women (Bogoras 1969: 447).

### A can of worms

Every year from 1975 to 1997 I would visit the Putumayo region of Colombia's southwest, a strikingly beautiful landscape of cloud forested steeply sloped ravines saturated in sorcery. I lived with my shaman friend, Santiago Mutumbajoy, a well-known indigenous healer using hallucinogens and music, and at one point, before

the guerrilla war became really serious, we were thinking of setting up a dual practice. I would do the Western medicine, he would do the rest. He would laugh a lot and loved jokes, usually in the form of gossip or stories about people and the strange situations in which they found themselves. There was one joke he loved in particular. It summed up centuries of colonial history and the ways by which history played a trick on itself: Europe's conquest of the New World imputed magical powers to the savage such that modern-day colonists of the region, poor whites and blacks, and lately well-to-do urbanites, would seek out forest Indians for their alleged shamanic powers. Santiago Mutumbajoy found this uproariously funny, a trick to beat all tricks, as if keeping in reserve the other sort of magic, the "true" magic we might say, that came from centuries if not millennia of Indian history and culture. But of course was it possible in practice to separate these two sorts of magics?

But the joke was on me in other ways as well. Like when I asked him how he became a shaman. When he was young and recently married, he replied, his wife was constantly ill. He and she consulted shaman after shaman at great expense with no relief until, one day, they heard that a white doctor was being sent by the government to the nearby town to treat Indians. They dressed in their finery, including swathes of necklaces of tiny colored glass beads, and walked to town. "Make way for the Indians! Make way for the Indians!" people said. On the balcony of a two-story house was the doctor. To her consternation he made his wife take off her shirt and began to palpate her chest, drumming one finger on top of another, laid flat, such that hollow booms followed muffled ones. He said she was anemic and gave her parasite medicine. A small boy they met going home explained there was more than one type of anemia.

When she defecated a day or so later she expelled a lot of worms. "Look here!" she exclaimed. Santiago Mutumbajoy went over and looked. A great rage seized him. All those shamans had been fakes. And at that moment he decided to become a shaman.

### **"A peculiar state of mind . . . it would be wonderful if a man could talk with animals and fishes"**

"It is perfectly well-known by all concerned," wrote the eminent anthropologist Franz Boas toward the end of his career, that "a great part of the shamanistic procedure is based on fraud; still it is believed in by the shaman as well as by his patients and their friends. Exposures do not weaken the belief in the 'true' power of shamanism. Owing to this peculiar state of mind, the shaman himself is doubtful in regard to his powers and is always ready to bolster them up by fraud" (Boas 1966: 121).

At the risk of being odiously pedantic, allow me to try to catch this slippery fish of Kwakiutl shamanism by itemizing its contradictory components as they come across here in Boas's rendering. I am aware that all I demonstrate is that the more you try to pin this down, the more it wriggles, and this is, I guess, my labored point, to watch the figure of logic emerge as a vengeful force of pins and points bent on restraint.



1. All concerned know that a great part of shamanistic procedure is a fraud.
2. Yet shaman, patient, and friends all believe in shamanism.
3. Moreover, exposure of shamanism's fraudulence does not weaken belief in it.
4. But contrary to points 2 and 3, the presence of fraud does make the shaman doubt his or her worth.
5. Point 4 has the effect that the shaman resorts to (further) fraud.
6. Now start with point 1 again.

A student of Franz Boas, Irving Goldman, emphasizes that “the Kwakiutl shaman relies heavily on elaborate tricks in his public demonstrations. He devises hidden trapdoors and partitions, and uses strings to cleverly manipulate artificial figures. He is in appearance the modern magician” (Goldman 1975: 102).

Well, not quite. After all, magicians who screw up are not usually killed. After all, it's only a trick. But hearken to Stanley Walens. “Anthropologists have often wondered,” he says, “why it is that the natives do not complain that the shamans are performing tricks and not real cures. They have found it difficult to explain the seeming paradox that while Kwakiutl shamans are admired for their abilities at legerdemain, if a shaman bungles one of these tricks, he is immediately killed” (Walens 1981: 24-25).

At this point, let us pause and cast an eye over the strategies one might pursue to understand fraud as somehow not fraudulent at all but something true and even efficacious, what I keep referring to as the *trick as technique*. One could find relief in Boas's statement that not all but only a (great) part of the shamanistic procedure is based on fraud and hope that the lesser part may turn out to be the more important. One could interrogate the meaning of *belief* as in “still it is *believed* in by the shaman as well as by his patients,” thus forcing the issue about the difference between belief as in a personal psychological state, versus belief as in “tradition” as some sort of cultural “script” (the British “intellectualist” approach to magic versus the French à la Emile Durkheim and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl), and so forth. One would also want to ask questions such as to what extent is belief ever an unflawed, confident, and consistent thing anyway? How much does one have to “believe” for shamanism to work? And so on (a well-worn path, actually).

Or one could play the E. B. Tylor maneuver taken up, as we shall see later, by Evans-Pritchard, that because procedures for verification or falsification of the efficacy of magical healing are either not available, not practiced, or by definition inapplicable, *there is always a way of explaining failure away* (e.g., malevolence or ritual error on the part of the healer, a stronger sorcerer or spirit at work in the background). This argument is usually packaged with another: that this infamously “closed system,” about which so much has been written as regards Africa, is in some yet to be plausibly connected way associated with the yet to be explained belief that *although any particular shaman may be fraudulent, shamanism is nevertheless valid* (believed in, plausible, worth a shot?). It takes more than a few bad apples . . .

Or one could substitute *simulation* or *mimesis* for *fraud*. This has remarkable fallout poetically as much as philosophically and is uncannily resonant with the ethnographic record itself—as we shall later see. With this, perhaps, our fish would

stop wiggling and start to swim, a manner of “resolving” contradiction I find preferable to that of pins and points.

Boas’s intimate knowledge concerning this “peculiar state of mind” came from his forty-year relationship with his Kwakiutl informant George Hunt and the ten thousand pages of material they published, plus several thousand more existing in manuscript form. Franz Boas’s texts on Kwakiutl society have been described by Stanley Walens as “one of the monuments of American cultural anthropology” (Walens 1981: 7). Walens also points out that the “degree to which the excellence of Boas’ work is the result of the meticulousness and diligence of both men [Hunt as well as Boas] has never been amply discussed” (Walens 1981: 9). Irving Goldman describes these texts as “probably the greatest single ethnographic treasure [in existence]” (Goldman 1975: vii).

Hunt and Boas’s conversations concerning Hunt’s shamanic experiences began in 1897 and reached a peak almost thirty years later in the 1925 *autobiographical* text of Hunt’s that was published in both Kwakiutl and in English in 1930 as “I desired to learn the ways of the shaman” (Hunt 1930: 1-41). This text was miraculously delivered from obscurity two decades later by Claude Lévi-Strauss in a famous essay entitled “The sorcerer and his magic,” which was an attempt to provide what must seem now more of an *expression* of faith, as in structuralism, than an *explanation* of faith, as in magic, the point being that Hunt, known at the beginning of the 1930 essay as Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World, becomes by his own admission a famous shaman not so much despite but because of his profoundly skeptical attitude (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 161-80).

In fact, over the twenty-nine years from 1897 to 1925, Hunt *had given Boas no less than four accounts of his experience in becoming a shaman*, and it was for Boas remarkable how the last account—the one that became published as “I desired to learn the ways of the shaman”—eliminated what Boas called all the supernatural elements in the earlier versions, in which Hunt vividly described his mysterious fainting fits as a child; finding himself naked in the graveyard at night; the visits by powerful spirits such as the killer whale named Tilting-in-Mid-Ocean who told him how to cure the chief’s sick boy the following day; how the down indicative of disease just appeared of its own accord in his mouth as he was sucking out the disease; how killer whales accompanied his canoe; how he ate of the corpse of the shaman Life-Maker, and so forth. Most of the time, it seems, in the early versions, he was falling unconscious, passing out into these other realms, while in the last version, that of 1925, Hunt takes the position, as Boas puts it, that “his only object was to discover the frauds perpetrated by Shamans” (Boas 1966: 121). Small wonder then that confronted with contradictions such as these, and resolute to the facts at hand, Boas—unlike the fledgling field of British social anthropology, in the pioneering hands of Bronislaw Malinowski with his functionalist formula relating part to whole—never came up with a general theory or panoramic picture of Kwakiutl society.

At one point Boas commonsensically noted that the skepticism displayed by Kwakiutl people toward magic should be seen as a political defense because Indians did not want to come across to whites as irrational and so would fake a critical attitude toward shamanism. (How things have changed now that “shamanism” has

become a darling of the white man!) Hence at one stroke we could dismiss questions concerning the place of skepticism in faith and simply view such perplexity as mere artifact of another sort of fraud—or is it mimesis?—namely, that of Indian self-representation to whites at that time and place. But then of course another hypothesis intrudes, that if fraud is an essential part of (Kwakiutl) shamanism, or at least of its “greater part,” as Boas elsewhere states with much vigor, and if skepticism exists alongside such fraud, then it probably wouldn’t require much effort, if any at all, to “adopt” (as Boas puts it) a skeptical attitude toward shamanism when talking to whites, and this would hold true for two connected reasons. The first is that skepticism is part of the greater part and that the Indian is merely being honest and is in fact giving “the native’s point of view” in admitting to the fraud, and the second is that insofar as one is being fraudulent vis-à-vis the white interlocutor, presumably one has had much practice with fraud and skepticism in discussing shamanism with fellow Indians anyway.

And what are we to make of the fact that Hunt’s scathingly skeptical 1925 autobiographical account of shamanism comes not at the beginning but after forty years of friendship with Boas and that it is the earlier, not the last, versions that are mystical and not skeptical? Does not this timing tend to contradict Boas’s attempt to interpret the veracity of his Indian informant when he states that as a general rule the Indian is likely to stress skepticism with whites in order to appear rational? Wouldn’t the later version be more likely to be more honest and less concerned with creating a good—that is, rational—impression? What was there to hide about the culture after forty years?<sup>5</sup>

In any event, the colonial relationship through which such sensitive and imaginative activity as shamanism is to be conveyed inevitably becomes no less part of our object of study than the activity itself. To get to the truth about shamanism, we start to realize, means getting to the truth of an intercultural relationship objectified by means of autoethnographic intercultural texts such as the fourth version over three decades of “I Wished to Discover the Ways of the Shaman.”<sup>6</sup>

But this is most definitely not to say that the pervasive influence of colonialism accounts for skepticism with regards to the autoethnography of magic. On the contrary. The magic at stake here first and foremost concerns the way in which the colonial presence provides yet another figure to be caught in the legerdemain of revelation and concealment.

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5. This is hardly the place to make an extended analysis, but it needs to be observed that Hunt’s mode of ethnography contains enormous problems for the interpretation of Kwakiutl culture precisely because the character of the relationship between Hunt and Boas is not opened to analysis. Why did Hunt write? How did he see his task? What instructions did Boas give him? What did Hunt think he was doing telling a white man about the secrets of shamanism? How could Boas publish a text under his name that was one hundred percent written by Hunt? Only when we get a better understanding of their relationship will we be able to understand the subtleties of the culture being investigated.

6. I acquired this terminology of intercultural autoethnography from Mary Louise Pratt.

Perhaps an outline of Hunt's meteoric shamanic career, as he presents it in his final, 1925, text, will assist us here, although the comforting sense of a career does scant justice to the zigzagging through contradiction that is entailed. First let us dwell on the fact that from the first line of his account, he presents himself as *the arch-doubter, yet wants to learn* the ways of the shamans.

The tension here seems so carefully highlighted that it would surely be reasonable to venture the hypothesis that learning shamanism means sinking ever deeper into ambivalence—an interesting dilemma, perhaps, even a mystical exercise?—doubting it while believing it, doubting practitioners but not the practice, such that continuous oscillation without any resolution is what this learning process is all about.

"I desired to learn about the shaman," he starts off, "whether it is true or whether it is made up and whether they pretend to be shamans." His doubting is all the more striking given that the two shamans with whom he is involved were also, as he states, his "intimate friends."

His first step is to be the target of a shaman's vomited quartz crystal during a public healing ceremony. He himself, we might say, becomes a display object, a ritual within a ritual, a trick not unlike the trick with the concealed down in the mouth that he later learns for healing. Next he appears as a powerful shaman in the dream of a sick boy, the son of a chief, whose dream acts as a detailed script full of technique for the subsequently effective cure he practices on the young dreamer, and with this his fame is ensured, his name is changed, and a succession of shamanic competitions ensue as he travels the land in search of truth and technique in which he exposes other shamans as fakes or at the least puts the healing efficacy of their techniques in grave doubt, such that they are convinced that he possesses a *secret* more powerful than their own.

At this point it should be noted that there is a curious substitution of *secret* for *sacred*. Irving Goldman tells us, for instance, that in many places "the Hunt manuscript is more precise [than Boas's edited and published version] in rendering Kwakiutl meanings. For example, Boas characteristically converts Hunt's 'secret' to 'sacred'" (Goldman 1975: 86-87). The implications of this seem devastating. We are immediately alerted to a sort of game, even a conjuring game, in which the sense of something as secret has to be maintained at a pretty high level in the community of believers, but the secret itself must remain secret. What is important is the demand here for the continuous evocation of revelation and concealment.

From the outset Hunt not only privately doubts shamanism but goes out of his way to publicize the fact. It seems culturally important to do this, making it clear that he is "the principal one" who does "not believe in all the ways of the shamans, for I had said so aloud to them" (Hunt 1930: 5).

Yet far from his being the "principal one," he lets you know that one of the first persons he meets after the quartz has been shot into him asks, "Have you not felt the quartz crystals of the liars, the shamans, the one that they referred to that was thrown into your stomach? . . . You will never feel it, for these are just great lies what the shamans say" (Hunt 1930: 5). And the head chief, Causing-to-be-Well, the next person with whom he speaks, similarly disabuses him: "They are just lies what the shamans say."



Just about everyone, so it seems, revels in declaring shamans to be fakes and rarely lets an opportunity slip to insist on this elemental fact. What's more, each time Hunt, known here as Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World, serves as a target of opportunity for the *revelation of this fakery*, his *desire to learn the ways of the shamans redoubles*. One really has to admire his enthusiasm—no less than that which the accomplished shamans bring to bear to the task of revealing their secrets.

Take the case of the famous Koskimo shaman Aixagidalagilis, he who so proudly sang his sacred song,

Nobody can see through the magic power  
Nobody can see through my magic power.

But when Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World (i.e., George Hunt) cured the patient whom Aixagidalagilis was unable to cure, and did this through his *pretense* of trembling and through his *pretense* of sucking out the bloody worm of disease (I am merely emphasizing here what he says in his text), then Aixagidalagilis implores Hunt to reveal his secret:

I pray you to have mercy and tell me what stuck on the palm of your hand last night. Was it the true sickness or was it only made up? (Hunt 1930: 31)

This from the man who used to sing, “Nobody can see through my magic power.”

“Your saying to me is not quite good,” responds Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World, “for you said ‘Is it the true sickness, or is it only made up?’”

Note that this is the very same Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World who has just finished singing his sacred song on completing his successful cure in front of the assembled throng, humiliating Aixagidalagilis:

He tried to prevent me from succeeding, the one who does not succeed.  
Ah, I shall not try to fail to have no sacred secrets. (Hunt 1930: 30)

Having been bettered, an amazing thing occurs. Aixagidalagilis pours out his secrets: “Let me tell you the way of my head ring of red cedar bark,” he says.

Truly, it is made up what is thought by all the men it is done this way. Go on! Feel the thin sharp-pointed nail at the back of the head of this my cedarbark ring, for I tell a lie when I say that the alleged sickness which I pretend to suck out from the sick person. . . . All these fools believe it is truly biting the palm of my hand.” (Hunt 1930: 31-32)

Once they lose out in competition, established shamans beseech Hunt for the secret of his technique. In doing so, however, they seem even more concerned with telling him theirs. In fact their predisposition to confess their secrets is breathtaking. The secret teaching of shamanism has thus built into it this emphatic and deliberate tirade of revelation!<sup>7</sup>

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7. I am tempted by this to overturn the distinction essential to Michel Foucault's discussion of transgression and confession—where he contrasts the transmission of bodily knowledge through a premodern master-apprentice system he calls *ars erotica*, versus *confession* which he sees as part of modern Western sexuality, confession here amounting to the secret that has to be spoken in order to remain secret! It is the latter, the

Thus the ways by which the deception was achieved is divulged in passionate and loving detail. And what a world is revealed! Nothing seems to have been without pretense, other, of course, than this exposure itself (and the doubleheaded serpent with the head of a human in its middle, about which more below). “It would be wonderful,” Aixagidalagilis says at one point, “if a man could talk with animals and fishes. And so the shamans are liars who say they catch the soul of the sick person, for I know we all own a soul” (Hunt 1930: 32).

It is his daughter, Inviter-Woman, who then recounts what happened to this cynical manipulator that is her shaman-father—of the great unholiness that befell herself and him when, on account of his shame, they fled the haunts of men and in their wandering came across a creature lying crossways on a rock, which they recognized as the double-headed serpent, with a head at each end and a large human head in the middle. Seeing this they died, to be brought back to life by a man who told them he would have brought them good fortune, but because she was menstruating they would have trouble until they died.<sup>8</sup> And from then on they were driven out of their minds. She was laughing as she told this, and then she would cry, pulling out her hair, and her father, the great pretender, died crazed within three winters. And the moral? “Now this is the end of talk about Aixagidalagilis who was believed by all the tribes to be really a great shaman who had gone through (all the secrets). Then I found out that he was just a great liar about everything that he did in his shamanism” (Hunt 1930: 35).

Thus, we might say, shamans might be liars, but menstruation and doubleheaded serpents are not without a decidedly nasty potential. And surely this is one of those tales that not only belies the satisfaction of a moral or any other system but delights in exploiting the idea of one? This we might with truth call a “nervous system,” in which shamanism thrives on a corrosive skepticism and in which skepticism and belief actively cannibalize one another so that continuous injections of recruits, such as Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World, who are full of questioning are required. They are required, so it would seem, to test and therewith brace the mix by serving not as raw material of doubt positioned to terminate as believers, nor yet as cynical manipulators, but as exposers—vehicles for confession for the next revelation of the secret.

*Technique* is thus revealed as *trick* and it behooves us to inquire further into this momentous distinction—recalling how fundamental a role the passage from trick to technique is in Horkheimer and Adorno’s beguiling argument regarding the role of mimesis in the shamanism that in their opinion stands, so to speak, as doorway to Enlightenment and modern technology. Here I am indebted to Stanley Walen’s

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so-called “modern” mode, which fits perfectly with the Kwakiutl shamanism! See Foucault’s introduction in *The History of Sexuality* (1980).

8. In his first major monograph Boas described this double-headed serpent, the Sisiul, as perhaps the most important of the fabulous monsters whose help was obtained by the ancestors and had therefore become the crest of a clan. To eat, touch, or see it was to have one’s joints dislocated, to have one’s head turned backward, and to meet with eventual death. But to those persons who had supernatural help, it may instead bring power (Boas 1895: 371-72).

reading of shamanic tricks as technique in the Boas-Hunt texts because of his pointing out the awesome magic of mimesis in which the practitioner sets up a performance, which, through its perfection, spirits will copy. This follows from the fact that the Kwakiutl believe their world is mimetically doubled in several ways, that “animals and spirits lead lives exactly equivalent to those of humans. They live in winter villages, perform dances, wear masks, marry, pray, and perform all other acts that humans perform.” When the shaman sucks disease from the human body, the spirits are there, sucking too. In this way magic involves what Walens calls “the magnification and intensification of a human action to a greater level of power” (Walens 1981: 24). Hence he can claim that there is no real paradox involved in shamanism, because the tricks turn out to be models or scenes for the spirits to follow, and it is the spirits who ultimately supply the cure.

The apparent paradox is a result of the way Enlightenment disenchants the world such that for most of us spirits are to be explained rather than providing the explanation. It is devastating, I think, to read Walens when he tells us that the shaman is at all times dependent on the spirits and that “Kwakiutl pay no attention to the thoughts of the shaman while he is performing the act because the spirits effect the cure using the shaman as their instrument and the shaman’s thoughts are irrelevant to the efficacy of his cure” (Walens 1981: 25).<sup>9</sup>

In the Hunt text we read of a shaman talking to his rattle and getting it to swallow the disease of a sick man. Then he says to the spectators: “Did you see my rattle as it bit the palm of my hand after it had swallowed the great sickness?” Then he tells the song leaders to sing after him the words of his sacred song.

Do those supernatural ones really see it?  
Those supernatural ones see it plainly, those supernatural ones  
No one can imitate our great friends the supernatural ones  
Wae. (Hunt 1930: 27-28)

Nevertheless, a fundamental objection raises itself here: how does this explanation invoking spirits help us understand the continuous anxiety about pretense and the continuous excavation of fraud through revelation of the secret? In other words, given the creation of these marvelous simulacrum that instigate action on the part of the spirits, why is there continuous concealment and revelation, this other play of viscosity, faith, and skepticism, this play-within-the-play?

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9. Claude Lévi-Strauss makes the mistake of omitting this native understanding from both of his famous essays on magic, “The Effectiveness of Symbols,” concerned with Cuna shamanism in the San Blas Archipelago off Panama, and “A sorcerer and his magic” most of which works through George Hunt’s 1925 account of his shamanic experiences that I discuss in this essay. In the Cuna case, Lévi-Strauss assumes that the sick person understands the curing song sung in a specialized shamanic language—a dubious proposition because the ethnography indicates that ordinary Cuna do not understand such language and because the song is intended not for the patient but for the spirits, providing, through words, the same sort of simulacrum Walens describes for the performances practiced by the Kwakiutl shamans. It is curious how this error is made in both of Lévi-Strauss’s essays and through which he is able thereby to supplant the mimetic (a form of bodily knowing through empathy) with the semiotic (a form of intellectual knowing).

I doubt there is a satisfactory answer to this. Yet there is a clue where Walens points out that the “critical part of the cure is the fluidity, skill, and physical perfection with which the shaman performs his tricks, for it is the motions of the tricks (reinforced by their exact duplication by the spirits) that effect the cure” (Walens 1981: 25).

“Motions of the tricks.” Walens calls it fluidity. I call it sheer becoming in which being and nonbeing are transformed into the beingness of transforming forms. In other words, “fluidity” to me suggests mimesis as a sort of streaming metamorphicity rather than replication as with a photograph. In the language set forth by *The golden bough*, this is magic of *contagion* and not of *likeness*, what Roman Jakobson, the famous linguist, inspired by the terms set forth in *The golden bough*, later called *metonymy*, meaning a sense of physical connection, versus *metaphor*, meaning likeness. Yet neither of these terms do justice to the fluidity that Walens refers to as “the critical part of the cure” because they are both too static and draw attention away from the sheer becoming and instead direct it towards the end result.

What is required of us, I suggest, is that we adopt a particular view of what it is to reciprocate. We have to wrench ourselves away from the idea of reciprocation as a contract between humans and spirits responsible for effecting the cure. Instead it is the fluidity of the mimesis that is at stake and not some form of instrumentally conceived mutual aid. By this I mean that the performer is neither asking for a gift nor entering into a contract with the spirits so much as *gearing into their world* through the perfection of his performance of *beingness*. In later life, Nietzsche saw this as essential to the Dionysian state, in trance or ecstasy, with music and dance, the Dionysian character becomes totally plastic and protean in a rush of becoming other. This is not so much becoming any specific other so much as becoming becoming itself.

Perhaps we could say, therefore, that the crucial thing is the repetition of concealment and revelation, for which moving in and out of the human body is the quintessential staging. “The characteristics of the physical movement made by the ritualist are of the greatest importance,” says Walens, “for the particular qualities of the movement he makes during the performance of the ritual will be repeated exactly in form, but with greatly increased power by the spirits” (Walens 1981: 25).

An immensely suggestive feature is left hanging here, along with perfection and skill. “As long as the shaman performs his actions fluidly,” insists Walens, “the spirits are conjoined by cosmic forces to use their power to cure” (Walens 1981: 24). And whatever fluidity is, it is not *bungling*. “The shaman who bungles his tricks,” Walens goes on to say, “forces the spirits to perform actions that are as disjointed, undirected, and destructive as his.” Not only does this bungling not result in a cure, but far worse, it actually kills people by unleashing what Walens refers to as “uncontrollable chaotic power on the world.” For this reason, the bungler must be immediately killed before he or she can do greater damage. To say the least, this puts Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World’s desire to learn the ways of the shaman in admirable perspective. If what Walens states is true, then it would seem almost suicidal to be a shaman.

I am reminded of Boas describing the reaction of members of the seal society when they notice a mistake in the dancing or singing of the performer in the Winter Ceremonial; they jump from their seats and bite and scratch the person who



made the mistake, who then pretends to faint, meaning that the spirit has taken the performer away. Members of the seal society sit on the platform of the house or stand during the dances to be certain of discovering mistakes. It is said that in former times, if the cannibal dancer fell while dancing, he was killed by the other cannibal dancers, often at the insistence of the dancer's father (Walens 1981: 25; Boas 1895: 433-34).

Whatever we might mean here by sacredness, it surely has a great deal to do with the flow in technique in Kwakiutl shamanism, a shamanism that bears heavily on the facility with which soul can be dislocated from the body, implicating not one but several bodies and energies flowing into and out of one another across borders accessed by dream, surrealism, and animal visitations. Take the toad or the wolves come down the beach vomiting foam over the human body while the others lie dying on account of the holocaust brought by white society in the form of smallpox, reducing the Kwakiutl population by an unbelievable 80 to 90 percent from 1862 to 1929. (The precontact population has been estimated as between 15,000 to 20,000 persons [Masco 1995: 55-56].)

As I understand it, the flow is in the song, the body of the song, which takes speech to another plane of being's being. Flow is what is going on between animals and humans—as from the very beginning of Kwakiutl time when the original ancestors took off their animal masks and skins to present their human selves. The flow is also from the clothes, presumably of the white people, the flow of the pox. “After we had stepped from our canoe,” recounts Fool, describing how he became a shaman, “we found much clothing and flour. We took them and ten days later became sick with the great smallpox. We lay in bed in our tent. I was laying among them. Now I saw that all our bodies swelled and were dark red. Our skins burst open and I did not know that they were all dead and I was laying among them. Then I thought I also was dead.” Wolves came down to the beach, whining and howling, licking his body, he recounted, vomiting foam, which they put into his body. They tried hard, he explains, to put foam all over his body, continuously licking him and turning him all over. When it was all licked off, they vomited over him again, licking off the scabs of smallpox in the process.

All manner of incredible things happen here, beginning with the devastating smallpox left by the white man. Then there is the fact that the wolf speaks as a human and it is the same wolf who said his name was Harpooner-Body that Fool had saved out at sea on a rock earlier choking to death on a bone. The wolf not only vomits foam over the dying Fool but nuzzles his nose into his sternum as if trying hard to enter into him too. Perhaps Fool is making all this up, equivalent to the legerdemain for which shamanism is famous. But then this weaving in and out of other realities, akin to weaving in and out of other bodies, is what living in that Kwakiutl world is all about. “He sat down seaward from me and nudged me with his nose that I should lie down on my back, and he vomited and pushed his nose against the lower end of my sternum. He vomited the magic power into me . . . Now I was a shaman” (Boas 1930: 41ff).

Above all, however, what I find outstanding is a certain quality of flow-within-flow provided by materials such as vomit and foam, how they are made to cover the human body while with equal assiduity they are then removed through licking.

This amounts to the same action as concealing and revealing, reinforced by the fact that it is clothes, outer coverings, that are left on the beach that attract the Indians, and that the smallpox has one its leading manifestations, the pustules and redness of the swollen skin, blowing out as an envelope from the frame of the body. What is more it is the wolf's insides—its tongue—licking up the exteriorized material from its deeper insides—its own foam-vomit—that clinches this engagement of insides with outsides, endlessly repeated at the point of immense death there on the smallpox scene of the beach. “Now I saw I was lying among my dead past nephews” (Hunt 1930: 41).

“We might say,” says Walens, “that the Kwakiutl play games as much with the spirits as with their human opponents” (Walens 1981: 26). In this regard it is illuminating to read the vicissitudes of Boas's translation of the Kwakiutl name of the stupendously important Winter Ceremonial, when the spirits emerge in their fullness from November well into the following year and take over the life of the villages. This is when humans impersonate the spirits. They enact the myths pertaining to the origins of human acquisition of supernatural powers from some fifty-three human-animal doubles such as Wolf, Killer Whale, Eagle, Thunderbird, and Man Eater (“Cannibal Dancer”).<sup>10</sup>

The name of the Winter Ceremonial, *tsetseqa*, is curious. Boas says it means “fraudulent” or “to cheat,” as well as being synonymous with *to be good-minded* and *happy*. “For instance, when a person wants to find out whether a shaman has real power or whether his power is based on pretense, he uses the same term meaning ‘pretended, fraudulent, made-up’ shaman. Even in the most serious presentations of the ceremonial, it is clearly and definitely stated that it is planned as a fraud” (Hunt 1930: 172). In *The mouth of heaven*, Irving Goldman tries to mitigate this curiousness by arguing that Boas's translation is crude. It should, claims Goldman, using Boas's posthumous grammar, mean imitated (Goldman 1975: 102).

Here, I think, fortuitous as it may be, we have located the core of the riddle, especially when one notes that Boas had, according to Goldman, “in an earlier stab at translation” suggested that the stem of the word for the winter ceremonial, *tseka*, meant *secrets*.

There is a certain anxiety, even pain and craziness, here, as Goldman heatedly insists that to imitate is not necessarily to secularize. Who ever said it was? What's the problem? All these words start to swim in multiple and multiply conflicting configurations of overlapping associations and streams of reversible meanings:

fraud  
simulation  
exalted  
imitation  
secret  
happiness  
sacred

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10. Goldman (1975) gives a figure of fifty-three from Boas's report of 1895, and sixty-three from Curtis (1915).



From here on, the ground becomes steep and slippery and perhaps only fools dare go further, as the impenetrable mysteries of representation and reality, within Western philosophy alone, not to mention Kwakiutl, emerge full force.

Yet if there is a moral, it might be this: that the real novice-shaman in “I Wished to Discover the Ways of the Shaman” was Franz Boas and, beyond him, by implication, the science of man he came to spearhead and the momentous historical moment of modernity that spawned this science. This, of course, very much implicates us too and yet gives us the choice provided by this insight. For the point of the text as I read it (and as is amply confirmed by Boas’s later commentary) is not that Boas as a neutral observer and recording angel somehow lucked out and found the one unique Enlightenment individual ready to challenge hocus-pocus and give the inside story to our man from New York, nor even that there seems to be a ready supply of such skeptics, but that the text in itself, an artifact of the fledgling science of anthropology, especially one given over to giving the natives’ point of view, is an utterly perfect instance of the confession of the secret, the very acme of the skilled revelation of skilled concealment—in this case using a scholarly inflected academic anthropological text—another form of “winter ceremonial,” another form of rite, as the vehicle for carrying this out.

In other words, this text is not so much about shamanism as it is shamanic in its conformity to the cannibalistic logic of having to have ever-fresh recruits for ceaseless confession, such that in its very skepticism lies its profound magic, making it difficult to accept Lévi-Strauss’s conclusion that at the end *Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World* seems to have lost sight of his fallacious technique and, by implication, has crossed the threshold from skepticism to faith, from science to magic. For Lévi-Strauss’s mistake lies in not having taken with enough seriousness the necessity for skepticism in magic as relayed through rituals of exposure and unmasking and, second, in not having seen the text “I desired to learn the ways of the shaman” as in itself just this very ritual transposed into textual form and readied as science by the anthropologist. Leaving this text as Kwakiutl speak in the mode of Boas or recruiting it as does Lévi-Strauss for the purpose of validating structuralism, misses the point but also the invitation that such ritual offers—that it lives as magic and makes claims even on us non-Indians in its request for a reciprocal response composed in equal measure of confessional responsibility and judicious and intricately moving medleys of skepticism and faith, continuously deferred through the opening and closing of the secret.

For we have our tricks to develop too, “the trick of the floating quartz crystal,” we might call this, involving a heightened sensitivity to fluidity, mass, and movement no less than to ecstatic moments of appearance and disappearance of objects inside and between bodies as when the liberated quartz crystal vomited out by the shaman *Making-Alive* enters the body of our friend here, *Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World*. “Now this one will be a great shaman,” said he” (Hunt 1930: 4). This suggests a certain fluidity of performance with human identities, if not with the logic of becoming itself, the song leaders beating fast time as Fool looks upward, watching the quartz float around in the cedar beams, while *Making-Alive* staggers like a drunk around the fire in the middle of the house in front of a great mass of onlookers.

Might we not say that the reality of shamanism hangs on the reality of this fragmentation of flickering light in tumbling stone, passing between intestines through streams of vomit, lost for the moment in a graceful float up there in the cedar rafters?

There are many issues here, but keep your eye on the quartz crystal floating free. For who knows how short or long a time it stays up in the air heavy with the tension of bodily interconnection? The quartz is a trick and the trick is a figure and the figure of the trick is one of continuous movement and metamorphosis in, through, and between bodies, carrying power one jump ahead of its interpretation. The language of true or false seems not just peculiarly inept here but deliberately so.

At one point, struggling to understand the place of theater and spirit impersonation in the Winter Ceremonial, Irving Goldman seems to be stating that mimetic simulation is a way of keeping hidden things hidden while at the same time revealing them, of keeping secret things secret while displaying them. "The ceremonies deal with the secret matters that are always hidden and can be experienced, therefore, only in a simulated form" (Goldman 1975: 102).

I can think of no better way of expressing my thesis regarding the skilled revelation of skilled concealment.

## Dancing the question

*Indeed, skepticism is included in the pattern of belief in witchdoctors. Faith and skepticism are alike traditional.* (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 193)

Witchcraft was ubiquitous in Zande life when Evans-Pritchard, fondly remembered in anthropological circles as EP, carried out fieldwork in the watersheds of the Nile and Congo rivers in the early 1930s, and it was witchcraft, oracles, and magic that were the focus of interest of his first publication about these people in a book that through the sheer brilliance of its writing and intellect came to define the field of study of magic, and much else besides. Yet at the outset, it should be emphasized how curiously unclear this transparently transparent book actually is when any particular point is examined, how certainties dissolve into ever more mystifying contradictions magically dispelled, momentarily, as it were, by the author's self-assured explanations of the multifarious aspects of magical phenomena. I take this to be striking confirmation of how magic begs for and at the same time resists explanation most when appearing to be explained and that therefore in its unmasking, magic is in fact made even more opaque, a point given a special twist here through the technique, or is it a trick? of (what Clifford Geertz has called) EP's "transparencies" (Geertz 1983: 62-80).

Now, witch-doctors are those persons, generally male, whose task it is to divine the presence and identity of a witch in this witch-infested Zande land and heal the sicknesses arising therefrom. They belong to corporations with group secrets. Initiation into the group is long and arduous. These secrets are the knowledge of medicines together with what EP calls their "tricks of the trade," principal of which is the actual extraction by hand or mouth of objects such as bits of charcoal, splinters, black beetles, or worms from the body of the victim of witchcraft. There are

plenty of other tricks too, such as vomiting blood, extracting worms from one's own person, resting heavy weights on one's chest, and shooting black beetles and bits of charcoal from one's leg into the body of somebody else, even over large distances. But no trick is as secretly guarded, in EP's narrative, as that of extracting the witchcraft object from the body of the sick. Whether we are to call these tricks or techniques, I for the moment leave for you to decide. (That is pretty much an EP sort of sentence, in both senses of the word.)

The doctors would not divulge their secrets to EP. He in turn decided that entering into the corporation himself would be counterproductive and so instead paid for his Zande servant, Kamanga, to undergo initiation in order to "to learn all about the techniques of witchdoctors." Kamanga, we are told, was a gullible man with profound faith in witch-doctors.<sup>11</sup>

EP was able to learn even more by using the secrets elicited by Kamanga to play on rivalries between doctors. But he felt sure that certain things, notably the extraction of witchcraft objects, would not be told to Kamanga because he had been "straightforward," as he says, in telling the doctors that he expected Kamanga to pass on all he had learned. "In the long run, however," EP adds, striking a militant note, "an ethnographer is bound to triumph. Armed with preliminary knowledge nothing can prevent him from driving a deeper and deeper wedge if he is interested and persistent" (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 152).

We seem a long way from Nietzsche's gay science, in which "We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn. . . . What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance" (Nietzsche 1974: 38). But like most of us, EP just has to get to the bottom with his wedge driving deeper and deeper—his aim is to expose the exposure of the witchcraft object extracted through the surface, the fold, the skin, as if penetrated by surgical incision.

What's more, his obsessive search for truth seems to share a good deal with the doctors whose secrets he is intent on uncovering. Like them he uses artifice and like them he extracts worms, or their equivalent: "It would," he declares, "have been possible by using *every artifice* to have eventually *wormed out* all their secrets, but this would have meant bringing undue pressure on people to divulge what they wished to hide" (emphasis added, Evans-Pritchard 1937: 151). And while the anthropologist digs deep, be it noted, the witch-doctor brings the secret to the surface, counterposed movements destined to meet in the pages of the monograph, a triumphant conjunction of movements through which the anthropologist is drawn into a ritual scheme, neither of his own choosing nor understanding—that in telling the witch-doctors his servant is to reveal to him the secrets they tell to him, he is thereby fulfilling to the letter the need for unmasking that the secrets of their magic actually demand. In other words, there is this oblique ritual of exposure of the secret within the witch-doctors' ritual, which the presence of the anthropologist has here drawn from its otherwise obscure existence.

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11. In this regard Evans-Pritchard was unlike Frank Hamilton Cushing, who through bluff and trickery forced himself into the priesthood of the Bow Lodge of the Zuni. See Cushing (1979).

Such rituals of exposure seemed common enough. Young nobles loved to expose witch-doctors by tricking them—an activity EP refers to as “testing” and as “playing a joke.” He tells us how a commoner friend of his, Mbira, once placed a knife in a covered pot and asked doctors to divine what lay within. The three doctors danced in the fierce sun the better part of the day, trying unsuccessfully to ascertain the contents, and, grabbing the opportunity, one sought out Mbira in his hut and pleaded he be secretly told the answer and thus avoid humiliation. Mbira refused, calling him a knave (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 186). Only a people imbued with a measure of skepticism could indulge in such activities, EP points out (neglecting to wonder at the witch-doctors’ motivation in agreeing to participate in such tests), and yet Mbira believed firmly in every kind of magic, was himself a magician of standing, and consulted witch-doctors when he had a problem. But I want to go further and ask why a sincere or even just your middling sort of skeptic would want to indulge in such sport given such skepticism? And the answer, I submit, has a good deal to do with the need for rites of exposure built into rites of magic in order to strengthen magic itself.

There is in EP’s book a dramatic moment of great poignancy concerning rites of exposure, and as an aside, I would like to note how wonderfully postmodern this 1930s straight-from-the-hip text is, how it has sneaked into the canon for other than what it is, you might say, with its anecdotal form of analysis; its studious, almost manic aversion to theory in place of storytelling; its constant swerving away from what is supposed to be the point; and, above all, the way its contradictions not merely pass for a seamless argument regarding the explanation of witchcraft, for instance, but are indispensable to it. The “closed system” of witchcraft consisting of a web of mutually reinforcing propositions impervious to contradiction, made famous by this book, is exemplified by the book itself. The book is the best example of the witchcraft it purports to explain.

Far be it for me to expose such exposure. Instead I want to recall that memorable day EP out-tricked the trickster when his servant, Kamanga, under the tutelage of his instructor, Bogwozu, was about to wipe the body of a sick man (another servant of EP’s) with the poultice of grass prepared by Bogwozu. This, we are told, is standard medical practice. It is wiped over the abdomen of the patient with the aim of extracting an object of witchcraft, which, if extracted, is shown to the patient, who is then likely to recover. But it was this technique that, to EP’s chagrin, the witch-doctors stubbornly refused to impart to Kamanga because “they were naturally anxious that” EP “should not know their trade secret (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 230). It was a complicated state of affairs, made even more so by the fact that Kamanga himself stubbornly held to the belief that there was no trickery involved in this technique. Now I want you to concentrate on the complexity of this situation in its various shadings of gullibility and trickery, faith and skepticism.

*First, the anthropologist tricks the witch-doctor:*

When the teacher handed over the poultice to his pupil I took it from him to pass it to Kamanga, but in doing so I felt for the object which it contained and removed it between my finger and thumb while pretending to make a casual examination of the kind of stuff the poultice consisted of and commenting on the material.

It was a disagreeable surprise for Kamanga when, after massaging his patient's abdomen through the poultice, in the usual manner of witch-doctors, and after then removing the poultice, he could not find any object of witchcraft in it. (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 231)

Then, the exposure:

I considered the time had now come to stop proceedings and I asked Kamanga and his teacher to come to my hut a few yards away, where I told them that I had removed the charcoal from the poultice, and asked Bogwozu to explain how it had got there. For a few minutes he pretended incredulity and asked to see the object, since he said that such a thing was impossible, but he was clever enough to see that further pretence would be useless, and, as we were in private, he made no further difficulty about admitting the imposture. (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 231)

We can read this as yet another crass instance of colonial power flexing Enlightenment muscle against primitive magic, staging its own rites of scientific method right there in the heartland of magic. We could also read this a quite different way, that the anthropologist was doing little more than the culturally appropriate thing. For just as Mbira took delight in ridiculing witch-doctors as described above, so the anthropologist was following a well-worn path, although there are no instances described of Zande's being as sneaky or as daring as EP in actually removing the key to the trick midway through the healing of a sick person. After all, it is one thing to test a doctor's powers. It is another thing to trick him and, who knows? thereby contribute to the death of the sick person.

In any case, the point to consider here is whether the anthropologist was himself part of a larger and more complex staging in which exposure of tricks is the name of the game and that what we are witness to via the text is an imaginative, albeit unintended and serendipitous, rendition of the skilled revelation of the skilled concealment necessary to the mix of faith and skepticism necessary to magic.

Finally, we have to consider the effect that the teacher's confession and the revelation of trickery had on the young pupil: It seems like unmasking actually adds to, rather than eliminates, the *mysterium tremendum* of magic's magic.

The effects of these disclosures on Kamanga was devastating. When he had recovered from his astonishment he was in serious doubt whether he ought to continue his initiation. He could not at first believe his eyes and ears, but in a day or two he had completely recovered his poise and *developed a marked degree of self-assurance which if I am not mistaken he had not shown before this incident.* (emphasis added, Evans-Pritchard 1974: 231)

We see this paradoxical impact of unmasking again when the anthropologist, constantly on the lookout for "tricks," fails to see that he is instead party to the skilled revelation of skilled concealment. For example, Kisanga, "a man of unusual brilliance," told EP how a witch-doctor begins his treatment:

When a man becomes sick they send for a witch-doctor. Before the witchdoctor comes to the sick man he scrapes down an animal's bone and hammers it till it is quite small and then drops it into the medicines

in his horn. He later arrives at the homestead of the sick man and takes a mouthful of water and swills his mouth round with it and opens his mouth so that people can look into it. He also spreads out his hands to them so that everyone can see them, and speaks thus to them: "Observe me well, I am not a cheat, since I have no desire to take anything from any one fraudulently" (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 191-92).

"Some training in trickery is essential," writes the anthropologist in that confidence-restoring tone that talking about other people's trickery seems to always instill.

In the first place, the Zande has a broad streak of skepticism towards his leeches who have therefore to be careful that their sleight-of-hand is not observed. . . . If the treatment is carried out in a certain manner, as when the *bingba* grass is used as a poultice, he will be frankly suspicious. But if the witch-doctor sits down on a stool and calls upon a third person to cut *kpooyo* bast and make a poultice of it, rinses his mouth with water, and holds his hands for inspection, suspicions will be allayed.<sup>12</sup>

It is hard not to feel these ostentatiously demonstrative acts of denial are saying the very opposite and that everyone knows (and probably enjoys) that. It is also hard to believe that the anthropologist is alone in detecting skilled concealment of trickery as when he writes, "If you accompany a witch-doctor on one of his visits you will be convinced, if not of the validity of his cures, at least of his skill. As far as you can observe, everything which he does appears to be aboveboard, and you will notice nothing which might help you to detect fraud" (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 232-33).

EP is so busy looking for concealed trickery he doesn't realize that he might be a privileged witness of its skilled revelation and that the secret of the secret is that there is none or, rather, that the secret is a public secret, something generally known but that cannot generally be articulated. This is not a question of seeing more or seeing less or seeing behind the skin of appearance. Instead it turns on seeing how one is seeing. Whatever magic is, it must also involve this turn within the known unknown and on what this turn turns on, namely, a new attitude to skin. As Nietzsche would have it, the biggest secret of all is that there is no "underneath" or "behind." God is dead and metaphysics is magic.

## Deferral, performed

The way I read him there are by EP's reckoning two ways by which faith manages to live with and overcome skepticism concerning witch-doctors. One is what was noted by E. B. Tylor by way of *probabilities* wherein one says that even though most doctors are fake, there are some who are not, and it is often the case, says EP, that a Zande never knows whether any particular doctor is a cheat or not and hence faith

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12. Here, the word leech is an archaic English term for a folk healer. Like other terms used by Evans-Pritchard, such as *ensorcell* and *knave*, this term creates its own mystique combined with an implicit notion that African medicine occupies a stage on an evolutionary line of development that British society superseded. This is unfortunate and probably far from the author's intention.



in any particular practitioner is tempered by skepticism. There is, in other words, a rock-steady ideal of the truly endowed witch-doctor who can divine and cure the evil effects of witches, and now and again the ideal appears actualized. Let it be noted that the probability of the ideal being actualized increases the farther you go from home; the magic of the other is more truly magical, and faith lies in distance and hence difference.

The second way by which faith coexists with and even triumphs over skepticism lies in the use of *substances*, of which there are two: herbal medicines; and the human body, as with the body of the witch, inheritor of witchcraft substance, *mangu*, and as with the witch-doctor's medicine-laden body in motion, dancing the questions.<sup>13</sup> If the first mode, that of probabilities, rests on the logic of the general and the particular, the ideal and the actual; the second rests on the heterogeneity of matter as force.

It is *deferment* that these two apparently dissimilar explanations for the coexistence of faith with skepticism have in common, a continuous and relentless deferral—a positing and flow of intellection that stands in marked contrast to the driving of the wedge, the wedge itself being driven by the quest for the catharsis of the triumphant revelation of the secret. The explanation through probabilities refers us back to where we started in the middle of the problem of magic's truth, which is a truth continuously questioning its own veracity of being. Circular reasoning and doublings back are the movements of intellection here, not the wedge. Deferral also lies here in the power of the "stranger effect," meaning that truth lies in a never-attainable beyond and that cheating is merely the continuous and expected prelude to the mere possibility of authenticity, for behind this cheat stands the shadow of the real in all its perfection, but even this real is strange and never homely or destined for homeliness for all of that. Authenticity is that beyond that is permanently beyond the horizon of being.

As for medicines, in many ways the bedrock of the entire system of witch-doctoring, subject of careful instruction over years of training and of much secrecy as well, deferral could not be more obvious on account of the massive, world-consuming tautology on which the medicines rest; namely, that not only do they serve as the basis for faith in witch-doctoring, as EP's text tirelessly informs us, but the medicines are themselves the quintessence of magical power, and so we end up with no end in sight but that of tracing an endless circle in which magic explains magic. It

13. I have not here analyzed the deceit wherein the witch doctor is supposed to cut a deal with the witch who caused the disease so that both will share in the fee for curing (see Evans-Pritchard 1974: 191–93). Here the skepticism in the magical powers of the witch doctor is balanced by faith in those of the witch to cause and withdraw misfortune by mystical means and that these means reside in *mangu* substance inherited at birth in the body of the witch. The question begged by this account is, Why would there be a need for the elaborate performance of the witch doctor? Why can't the doctor act more like a lawyer or peacemaker? Why the art? In the healing practiced by the people indigenous to the New World (if I may be so bold as to generalize), the answer lies readily at hand: the art is essential as the mode of establishing a mimetic model with the spirits. I know too little about Africa to comment, but I suspect the New World notion is applicable there, too, raising a totally different approach to the one of rationality and philosophy of science that has dogged British commentary on magic.

is medicine that ensures magical power, as in accuracy of divination. “Thus my old friend Ongosi used to tell me,” the anthropologist informs us, that “most of what the witch-doctors told their audiences was just *bera*, just ‘supposition’: they think out what is the most likely cause of any trouble, and put it forward, in the guise of an inspired oracle, as a likely guess, but it is not *sangba ngua*, the words of medicine, i.e., it is not derived from the medicines they have eaten (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 184).”

To become a witch-doctor, one must learn the medicines and partake in the communal meal of these medicines with other doctors as well as be taken to their legendary source, a stream in the watershed of the Nile and Congo rivers, where, in caves, some of the more powerful plants are to be found. There are many magical things about medicine, beginning with the fact that medicine connects the interior of one’s body with other bodies and with substances exterior to one’s body. Indeed it is with medicine that the very force of being—as opposed to meaning—is best established, medicines being the fluid flow by which the exterior penetrates the interior to fundamentally empower the soul of the doctor-in-training.

The novice must hold his face in the steam of the cooking pot but with his eyes open so that the medicines will eventually allow him to see witches and witchcraft. The medicines are served in a highly ritualistic way, with the server offering the spoonful of medicine from the cooking pot to the mouth of one man, only to quickly remove it as he goes to swallow it by offering it to another. Incisions are made on the chest, above the shoulder blades, and on the wrists and face, and medicine is rubbed in (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 210-211). The medicines are spoken to as they are being cooked and as they are being rubbed into the novice’s body. As soon as a novice has eaten medicine, he begins to dance.

Medicine must be paid for, that is, it must be reciprocated by another gift otherwise the medicine may not work, and payment must be made in sight of the medicine. “Purchase is part of the ritual conditioning of the magic which gives it potency,” we are told, and this seems to imply some humanlike mentation and capacity for retribution on the part of the medicine itself, as much as of a dissatisfied vendor. EP tells us of a witch-doctor placing money—an Egyptian piaster—of his own on the ground when treating a patient, explaining “that it would be a bad thing if the medicine did not observe a fee, for it might lose its potency” (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 209). At one point, EP refers to this exchange as a gift.

If angered, a witch-doctor can use magic to remove the magic of the medicine he has “sold” to a novice by taking a forest creeper and attaching it to the top of a flexible stick stuck in the ground to form a sort of bowstring, to which he brings a few drops of the magic of thunder such that the medicine will roar and break the creeper, the top half flying on high, the lower staying in the earth. As the top half flies, so the medicine flies out of the novice (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 213-14). This is one of the very few instances where magic depends on metaphor—as opposed to substances in contact with one another. By far the bulk of the instances supplied in this long text referring to witch-doctors are visceral and concern flows of physical force and interruptions to such flows in chains of metamorphic connectedness.

In any event, it certainly seems like that what we have here are powerful instances of magic explaining magic in a circular, albeit staggered, manner, and that this is the movement of deferral par excellence in which the very idea of a secret

behind a façade to be unearthed by the zealous ethnographer driving his wedge is extraordinarily naïve.

Nowhere does the existence of deferral intrinsic to the mix required of faith and skepticism find more dramatic expression than in the witch-doctors' séance of divination. "A witch-doctor does not only divine with his lips, but with his whole body. He dances the questions which are put to him," states the anthropologist in what must be the most exquisite description of dance in anthropological writing, comparable to that of Maya Deren (1983; Evans-Pritchard 1974: 154-82).

He dances the questions. His body moves back and forth in the semicircle bounded by the witch-doctors' upturned horns filled with medicines. He kicks up his leg if annoyed by the slackness of the chorus of young boys and may shoot black beetles into them. The spectators throw their questions concerning the witchcraft bothering them. Back and forth, question and answer, another circle is being traced as the doctor leaps and swirls through the heat of the day for hours on end as the answer is ever more refined through clever elimination of alternatives and leaps of intuition. Gongs and drums resound. Back and forth go the questions and the answers as the public secrets of envy and resentment are aired in this flurry and fury of intellect and bodies in motion.

The dancing is ecstatic and violent. The dancer slashes his body, and blood flows. Saliva froths around the lips. The medicines in the body are activated by the dance, just as the medicines in their turn activate dancing. When a question is put to a particular doctor, he responds by going up to the drummers to give a solo performance, and when he can dance no more, as if intoxicated, he shakes his hand bells to tell the drummers to cease and, his body doubled over, looks into the medicines obtained in his upturned horns on the ground and he voices his oracular reply. He dances the question, and the dancing is spectacular. "The dance of the Zande witch-doctors," writes the anthropologist, "is one of the few performances I have witnessed in Africa which really comes up to the standards of sensational journalism. It is weird and intoxicating" (Evans-Pritchard 1974: 162). Here trickery is deferred, transmuted into theater where theater meets the magic—the weirdness and intoxication—of a ritual. The various dichotomies of trick and technique, intellect and intuition, secrecy and public secrecy, are deferred by a series of other types of knowledge given in a body dancing the question under an open sky. This is neither a question of replacing mind by body nor of sense by the senses but of giving to the skilled revelation of skilled concealment a density and fluidity almost sufficient to dispel the craving for certainty that secrecy inspires. It is this revelation of the already known, the public secret, that the witch-doctor dances in his dance of faith and skepticism.

### Turning tricks

All along I have been asking myself, What, then, is a trick? I keep thinking of the way a trick is a subterfuge but also something that highlights nature's mysteries as well as those inherent to social institutions and personal relationships. I think of the tricks performed by an acrobat or by a diver performing twists and somersaults or a cardsharp pulling aces. All these tricks require inordinate skill, inordinate

technique, inordinate empathy with reality. Wouldn't this make the trick equivalent to technology, that inner knowing, the art and magic, which has to be added to technology so it fully functions? By the same token, is magic cheating on technique, or is it instead the supreme level of technique, so rarified, so skilled, that it passes from mere technique to something we might dignify as magical or sacred—as with a musician, a brain surgeon, or a short-order cook?

Like a gambler or a shaman, the practitioners of such skills take on the laws—the natural laws—of chance and scorning distance they use mimesis to merge with the object imitated. This is a sexual act as that devout gambler, Walter Benjamin, noted in describing gambling as an erotic passion whose thrill lay in cheating on fate (Benjamin 2002). This brings us back to the beginning, to those “corporeal techniques” that Marcel Mauss said underlie all our mystic states for entering into communication with God. As I have tried to show, such techniques of the body notably employ sleight of hand involving revelation and concealment, that is to say, skilled revelation of skilled concealment. Whether God really listens is another matter, but between the bosom of Justice and that of Janet Jackson, we can surely plot the curve of our epoch and its hopes.

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Michael TAUSSIG is the Class of 1933 Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. His books include *The devil and commodity fetishism in South America* (University of North Carolina Press, 1980), *Shamanism, colonialism, and the wild man* (University of Chicago Press, 1987) and, most recently, *The corn wolf* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).