ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DIVINATION AND MAGIC





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THE SOPHIA CENTRE 2025

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TOPICS TO BE CONSIDERED

- Methodological Considerations - the relevance of anthropology and ethnography for ancient history, ancient philosophy and classics

- Divination as a Rational Approach to Legal Matters - Evans-Pritchard's ethnographic field and anthropological study of the Azande, Sudan, North Africa: case study of Evans-Pritchards' Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande

- Anthropology and the 'Mentalities' Debate - Magical Thinking, Mystical Mentalities and Magical Consciousness – Susan Greenwood's ethnographical field and anthropological studies of magical practices

What is Witchcraft for African Societies?

- Closer to older European notions of *Malefice* and the evil eye than to a 'Christianised shadow' version of its own image

- European missionaries tried to fit African worldviews encompassing belief in the power of witches into a Christian (or anti-Christian) framework



WITCH-DOCTOR IN HIS WIZARD PANOPLY

In Liberia's forest-choked interior the witch-doctor and medicine-man wield considerable influence among certain tribes. One of their duties consists in administering poison to suspected

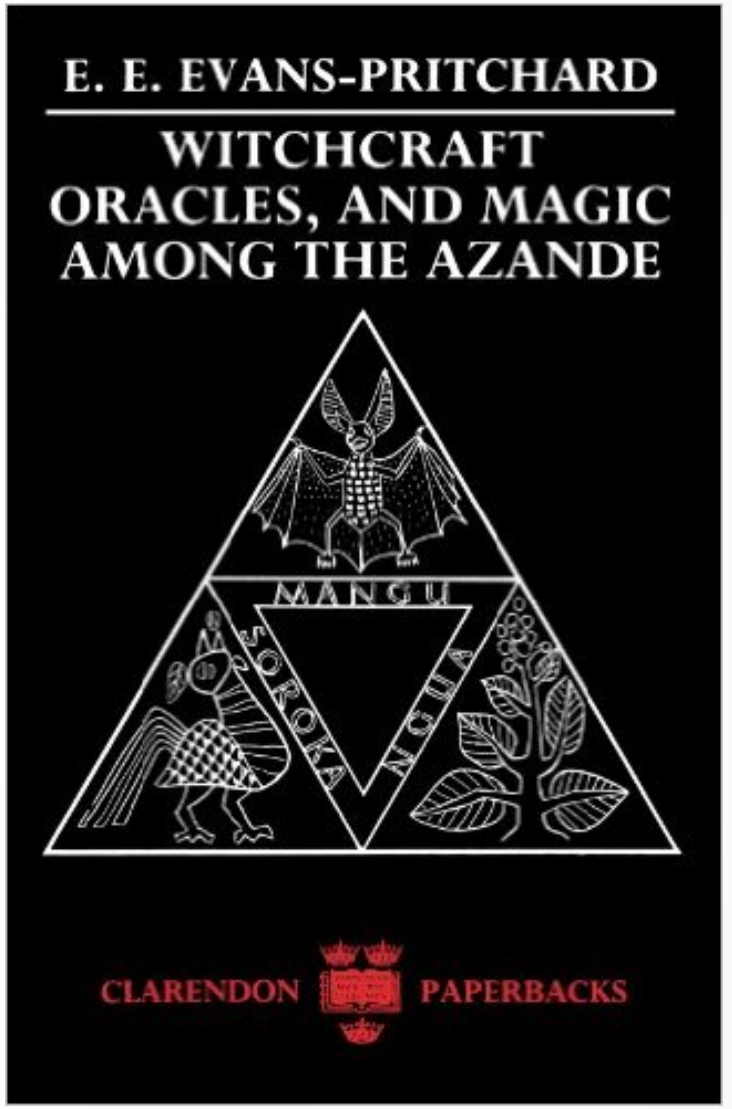
Liberian 'Medicine Man', West Africa, 19th Century
https://wellcomecollection.org/works/bj54tm5y

STUDENT ACTIVITY

- Watch all or part of the BBC Documentary (part of the BBC series *Strange Beliefs*; 52 minutes duration) about Edward Evans-Pritchard and his anthropological and ethnographic fieldwork among the Azande and the Nuer of the Southern Sudan: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q9HyONL_104

Be prepared to give a 5/10 minute presentation discussing the following issues:

- Who was Edward Evans-Pritchard and when did he undertake his anthropological fieldwork among the Azande and Nuer people?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages (or pros and cons) of Evans-Pritchard's methodology and working methods in his fieldwork?
- In what ways were Evans-Pritchard's views and observations affected by his chronological context (i.e. the time in which he was working) and his own background?



Evans-Pritchard among the Azande

- Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973)
- Social anthropologist (Professor of Social anthropology at Oxford: 1946-1970)
- Most of his fieldwork was conducted in colonial Africa, notably among the Nuer and the Azande of southern Sudan (in 1920s and 1930s).
- The Azande (in 1920s and 1930s) numbered about half a million.
- Mainly agriculturists, living in the Southern Sudan and eastern Congo.



Witchcraft and Sorcery



Photo: Evans-Pritchard
https://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/southernsudan/details/1998.341.406.2/index.html

- **Witchcraft:** for the Azande, a psychic power inherited from a parent of the same sex. Witchcraft substance can be detected in the body by autopsy after a person has died. Witchcraft may be used to harm others either consciously or unconsciously by sending out or activating witchcraft substance. The Azande refer to witchcraft as *mangu* and a witch as a *boro (ira) mangu*.

- **Sorcery:** bad or illicit magic involving the conscious use of medicines in order to harm others. Sorcery is a skill that can be learnt, rather than a disposition that is inherited. The Azande terms used to describe sorcery are *gbegbere* (*gbigbita*) *ngua* or *kitikiti ngua*. A sorceror is *ira gbegbere* (*kitikiti) ngua* (Evans-Pritchard (1976; original date of publication: 1937, pp. 227-228).

Witchcraft in Zande Society

'I had no difficulty in discovering what Azande think about witchcraft, nor in observing what they do to combat it. These ideas and actions are on the surface of their life and are accessible to anyone who lives for a few weeks in their homesteads. Every Zande is an authority on witchcraft. There is no need to consult specialists. There is not even need to question Azande about it, for information flows freely from recurrent situations in their social life, and one only has to watch and listen. *Mangu*, witchcraft, was one of the first words I heard in Zandeland, and I heard it uttered day by day throughout the months.'

Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p.1

Oracles and Witchcraft

- When witchcraft is suspected an oracle is consulted to confirm that witchcraft is the cause of the misfortune and to identify the witch or witches (oracles can be consulted about other issues too).
- **The poor man's termite oracle**: two sticks are inserted into a termite mound while the man asks specific questions such as: 'If X is a witch then eat the stick'.
- **The rubbing board oracle**: a specialist slides one piece of wood over another as similar yes/no questions are posed, the friction of the wood giving the answers.
- **The poison oracle (*benge*):** the most prestigious form of oracle which can only be used with the authority of the chief. The poison is administered to chickens as the operator puts questions to the oracle. There is a double check on the procedure. If the question was initially phrased, 'If Y is a witch, then let the fowl die' and the chicken were to die, the same question would be repeated a second time but with the injunction to let the chicken live. If witchcraft is confirmed, the accused is presented with the bird's wing as a sign of his or her guilt.



- The poison oracle, benge, is by far the most important of the Zande oracles. Zande rely completely on its decisions, which have the force of law when obtained on the orders of a prince. A visitor to Zandeland hears as much of the poison oracle as he hears of witchcraft, for whenever a question arises about the facts of a case or about a man's well-being they at once seek to know the opinion of the poison oracle on that matter. In many situations where we seek to base a verdict upon evidence or try to regulate our conduct by weighing of probabilities the Zande consults, without hesitation, the poison oracles and follows its directions with implicit trust. No important venture is undertaken without authorization of the poison oracle. In important collective undertakings, in all crises of life, in all serious legal disputes, in all matters strongly affecting individual welfare, in short, on all occasions regarded by the Azande as dangerous or socially important, the activity is preceded by consultation of the poison oracle (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, pp. 121-122).

Cause and Effect in Witchcraft

A boy knocked his foot against a small stump of wood in the centre of a bush path, a frequent happening in Africa, and suffered pain and inconvenience in consequence. Owing to its position on his toe it was impossible to keep the cut free from dirt and it began to fester. He declared that witchcraft had made him knock his foot against the stump. I always argued with Azande and criticised their statements, and I did so on this occasion. I told the boy that he had knocked his foot against the stump of wood because he had been careless, and that witchcraft had not placed it in his path, for it had grown there naturally. He agreed that witchcraft had nothing to do with the stump of wood being in his path, but added that he had kept his eyes open for stumps, as indeed every Zande does most carefully, and that if he had not been bewitched he would have seen the stump. As a conclusive argument for his view, he remarked that all cuts do not take days to heal but, on the contrary, close quickly, for that is the nature of cuts. Why, then, had his sore festered and remained open if there were no witchcraft behind it? This, as I discovered before long, was to be regarded as the Zande explanation of sickness. (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, pp.19-20).

Cause and Effect

- Evans-Pritchard points out that the Azande are not ignorant of cause and effect. They are simply 'foreshortening the chain of events and in a particular social situation are selecting the cause that is socially relevant and neglecting the rest' (Evans-Pritchard 1937 [1976], p.25).
- If a man is killed by a spear in a skirmish with enemies the physiological cause of death is not socially relevant (as there is nothing that can be done to bring the man back to life). What can be done is to identify the witch who guided that particular spear to that particular man and to punish him or her.
- "Hence if a man is killed by an elephant Azande say that the elephant is the first spear and that witchcraft is the second spear and that together they killed the man" (1937 [1976], p.26).

Cause and Effect (2)

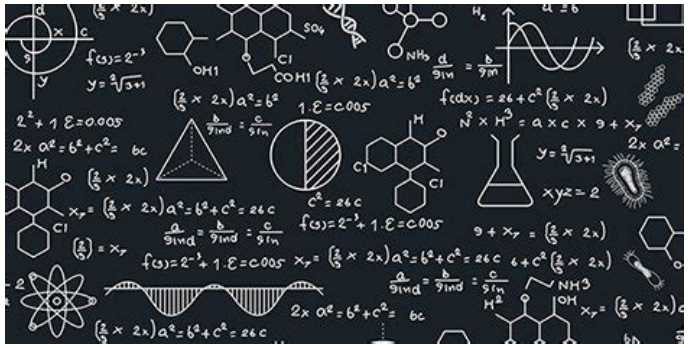
- . Evans-Pritchard: explanations of witchcraft provide the ‘missing link’ in a chain of causation.
- There may be straightforward ‘natural’ explanations for events, but these do not account for the element of synchronicity or chance that lead natural events and people to collide in time and space.
- Azande thought is presented as logical and rational (if mistaken according to Western scientific precepts): for Evans-Pritchard’s time this is quite revolutionary.
- It is not that the Azande have no knowledge of natural causation. Their philosophy fills the gaps in such a theory so that the whole of life and death are imbued with meaning.

Magic, Rationality and Belief

- Evans-Pritchard distinguished between what the Azande 'believe', as in "Azande believe that some people are witches" and what they 'know'—the verb used to describe Azande leechcraft (their medical knowledge of diseases and healing).
- He organised his monograph on Zande witchcraft "around a distinction between ideas that accord with objective reality...and those that do not; the language of knowledge is used to describe the former, the language of belief the latter" (Bryan Good, 1994, p.13).



LE GRAND ARCANE HERMÉTIQUE
suivant Basile Valentin.



Anthropology and the Mentalities Debate

- Evans-Pritchard described **participant observation** (what anthropologists do during their fieldwork) as both entering into and withdrawing from another culture.
- The anthropologist "lives in two different worlds of thought at the same time, in categories and concepts and values which often cannot easily be reconciled" (Evans-Pritchard, 1937 [1976], p.243).
- When asked whether he accepted Azande ideas of witchcraft, he gave the 'yes and no' answer familiar to many field anthropologists:
- "In my own culture, in the climate of thought I was born into and brought up in and have been conditioned by, I rejected, and reject, Zande notions of witchcraft. In their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted them; in a kind of way I believed them...If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts" (Evans-Pritchard, 1937 [1976], p.244).
- The type of society in which one is raised affects one's worldview. Are there fundamentally different ways of thinking in different societies?

The Mentalities Debate

- The French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939): argued that there are two different types of 'mentality', one primitive (prelogical, mystical) and the other modern (rational, logical).
- This was implicitly in conflict with the work of Evans-Pritchard, who, as we have seen, argued that Azande mentality was not without its own rationality
- Lévy-Bruhl continued developing his thought on mystical mentalities for the rest of his life.



Mystical Mentalities…

Explaining Magic

- The anthropologist and shaman Susan Greenwood builds upon the discussion between Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), to formulate a new perspective on the anthropology of magic.
- She proposes magic as ‘a holistic orientation to the world that is essentially relational and expansive’ (Greenwood 2009, p. 17).
- Lévy-Bruhl aims to study human nature by employing a philosophical concept known as ‘participation’, which Greenwood views as a key characteristic of mystical mentality.
- Greenwood proposes a tension for anthropology in relation to other disciplines such as philosophy insofar as anthropology attempts to present as a (social) science, since scientific disciplines orientate to causes and effects, discernable through rationality and observation, rather than to experiences.

Magical Consciousness…

Experiencing magic

- Susan Greenwood describes magical consciousness as ‘a mythopoetic, expanded aspect of awareness that can potentially be experienced by everyone.’ (Greenwood 2009, p. 4)
- A magical experience can be characterised as one in which the usual boundaries of consciousness and sense of self is temporally abandoned
- Greenwood makes a conscious decision in her work that to fully research a magical mode of consciousness requires experiencing it and, therefore, situates herself as an informant in her research (Greenwood 2009, p. 8)
- Magical consciousness for Greenwood creates emotional meaning. It forms emotional, affective relationship; it is an intuitive thinking with the heart in which a deeper spiritual place is accessed, not by the denial of rationality but by its transcendence

Webs of Beliefs…

Practical magic

- Whilst with the Azande, Evans-Pritchard used divination, as a form of magical practice, in his everyday life and found it a satisfactory way to run his affairs (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 43).
- For Evans-Pritchard, in Azande culture, magic(*ngua*), witchcraft (*mangu*) and oracles (*soroka*) are three facets of life that work in relation with each other and are not viewed in isolation (e.g. witchcraft replaces coincidence in connecting events).
- An example of this participatory connection is that of the medicine plants. The witch doctor needs to learn to take the life of the medicinal plant in a certain manner – one which respects the deity and also the local spirits (bringing gifts for them etc.); to prepare them in a certain way, involving particular incantations; and finally to administer them with proper participatory rites.

The Nature of Reality…

‘not only but also’

- The pervasion of magic in everyday life can be seen in attitudes and practices around healing.
- Arguably, a solely biomedical model of healing does not emphasise or consciously involve a spiritual dimension.
- Magical healing, in contrast, assumes the world as pervaded by spirits (human and non-human) and healing as a participatory action to be in relation with them.
- The story of the weeping camel could be seen as an example of how the expression of magical consciousness, conjoined with a participatory act can bring healing. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjlnABSOUwI)
- The nature of reality can be perceived of as not only a scientific, causal process or as a magical, participatory process, but as both – ‘not only but also’ (cf. Greenwood 2009, chapter 9 – knowing as a web, the many interconnected parts in relation; cf. Samuel 1990, chapter 6).

Anthropological Fieldwork - Participant Observation on the Tibetan Plateau (Dawn Collins)

- During my own participant observation of the Leru harvest festival in villages of the Rebgong region, NE Tibetan Plateau, I spent time with one of the Spirit Mediums and villagers.
- I was present with the medium during his preparatory rites and dressing in special robes for possession as Mountain Deity during the festival.
- Arguably, had I not been able to remain open to a Tibetan worldview and interpretation of events, despite my 'other' cultural background, I would not have been invited to participate in such more internal aspects of the festival, but rather remained a non-participant observer, a (ticket-paying) 'tourist'.





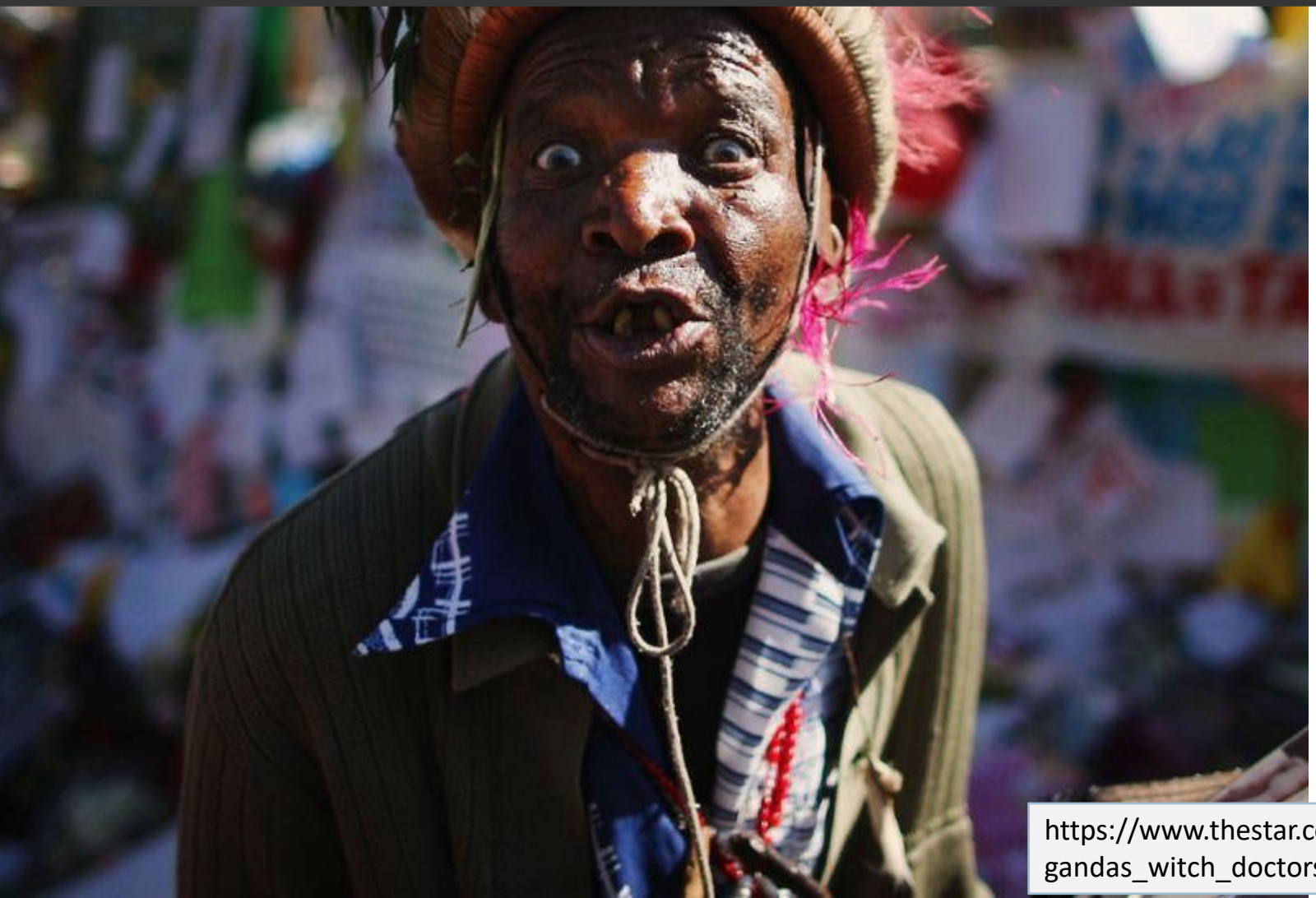


Attitudes to Anthropological Fieldwork

- In the case of Evans-Pritchard he states that he ‘kind of’ believed the Zande worldview whilst amongst the Azande, that acting as though he believed as they did ‘ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts’

- In my own case, I would say that it was a necessary part of my participant observation to be open to Tibetan worldviews and interpretations of events such as possession by a mountain deity in order to participate in rituals in a way that could engender embodied understandings.

Anthropological Methods and Witchcraft in Contemporary African Societies



- Social anthropologists work with traditional witch doctors to combine methods for the treatment of mental health issues – e.g. Canada-Uganda Project 2014

- Other contemporary academic projects exploring witchcraft for African societies include the UCL African Studies Research Centre (ASRC)

https://www.ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies/african-studies-research-centre

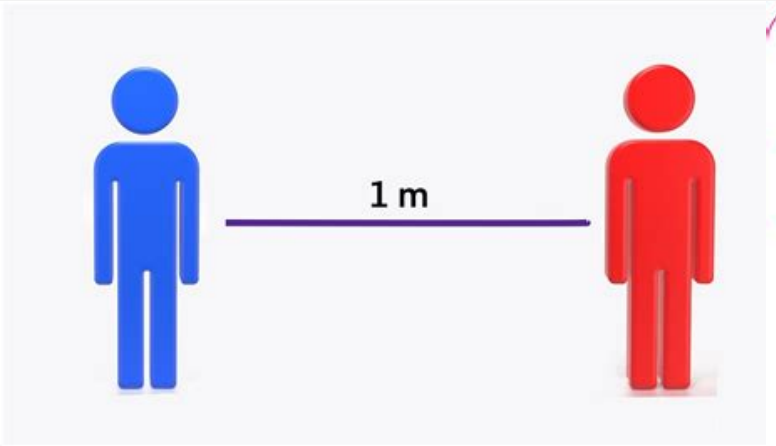
https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2014/04/26/ugandas_witch_doctors_tackle_mental_illness.html

Religion, Belief and Worldviews

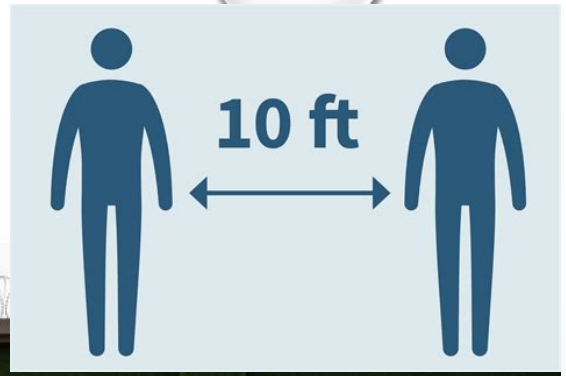
"For fundamentalist Christians, salvation is often seen to follow from belief, and mission work is conceived as an effort to convince the natives to give up their beliefs and take on a set of beliefs that will produce a new life and ultimate salvation. Ironically, quite a-religious scientists and policy makers see a similar benefit from correct belief. Educate the public about the hazards of drug use, our current Enlightenment theory goes... get them to believe in the right thing and the problem will be licked. Educate the patient, medical journals advise clinicians, and solve the problems of noncompliance that plague the treatment of chronic disease...**get people to believe the right thing and our public health problems will be solved. Salvation from drugs and from preventable illness will follow from correct belief.**"

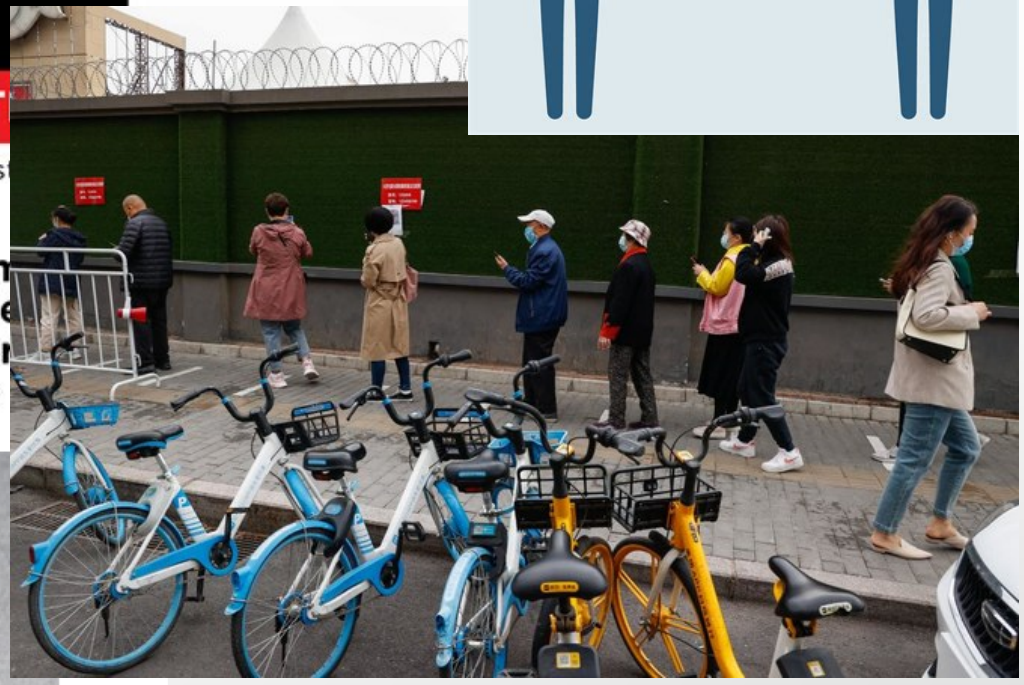
(Good, 1993, p. 7)

We see this type of worldview operating in contemporary societies…





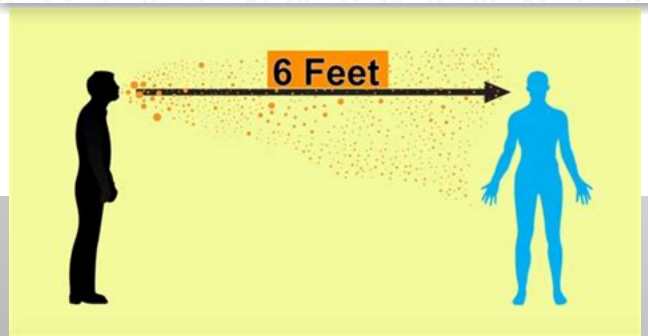












Questions to consider…

- In what ways and to what extent is anthropological research useful for ancient historians, classicists and all those studying divination, ritual, 'magical' and religious practices in antiquity?
- How can anthropological theories and methodological frameworks aid the historian of religions?
- How can we undertake a comparative study of ancient and current magical traditions and divinatory practices, and what contribution does such work make to the academy?

Food for Thought

- Do you agree that belief can emerge from action or do you think analysis is the only valid basis for it? Can it emerge from both?
- Does openness to different possible interpretations of events simultaneously have to entail belief in both/all?
- Is there an objective reality here to believe in or refuse to acknowledge, or is the notion of ‘objective reality’ culturally specific?
- In what ways and to what extent is anthropological research useful for ancient historians, classicists and all those studyingdivination, ritual, 'magical' and religious practices in antiquity?
- How can anthropological theories and methodological frameworks aid the historian of religions?
- How can we undertake comparative study of ancient and modern religious traditions and practices, including the studyof divination, and
- is such comparative work viable and/or desirable?

References and Further Reading

- Addey, Crystal. *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the gods*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014 **available from TSD Library as an e-book**: see especially Chapter 5 on Rationality and Ritual for comparative purposes.
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- Bowie, Fiona, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006 (first edn. 2000): especially Chapter 8: Witchcraft and the Evil Eye.
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