

Susan Greenwood, *The Anthropology Of Magic*, Oxford/New York, Berg, 2009, pp. 163. ISBN 978-1-84520-671-0 (Paperback). £12.77¹

Susan Greenwood is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the University of Sussex and *The Anthropology Of Magic* (2009) builds on her previous two ethnologies exploring 'magical consciousness', *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld* (2000) and *The Nature Of Magic* (2005). The essence of Greenwood's approach is participant-observation mixing her personal experiences of magical consciousness with academic theories on magic from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, James Frazer, Stanley Tambiah, and others.

In this work, Greenwood sets out to reclaim magical consciousness from its denigrated status as bizarre, irrational and outgrown. In her first book (2000) Greenwood explored both the more formal, hierarchical systems of 'High Magic' (drawing on such practices as astrology, Kabbalah and tarot from Renaissance Hermeticism and the modern occult revival), and the more informal, nature oriented, democratic systems of modern witchcraft or Paganism. Whilst drawing attention to the potential for the abuse of power in the former and so-called 'bitchcraft' in the latter, she argues that magic can be an effective force for personal and social transformation. Whilst clearly distinguishing the two magical traditions Greenwood accepts the academic view that modern Paganism is largely a reconstruction influenced by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. She has a clear preference for Paganism in her own experiential investigation, which unfortunately leaves High Magic and other systems such as Chaos Magic largely unexplored. However, her argument is that magical consciousness is a universal participatory state that has been undermined and undervalued since the scientific revolution. By describing this state as 'participatory' Greenwood seeks to emphasise the experience of inter-relatedness with nature and society, be it material or spiritual that is a core component of magical consciousness. Participation is transformative and results in feelings of personal connectedness, empathy and the dissolution of bodily boundaries. It is characterised by intuitive, altered states of consciousness (ASCs), the language of holism, metaphors of emotion and poetry, an inspired or animistic worldview, and knowledge or wisdom transmitted within myth and story. Magical thinking, says Greenwood, is analogical, abstract and acausal, and therefore can be juxtaposed with the logical, reductive, casual mode of thinking upheld by science and modern Western culture. As such, magical thinking is no less natural or prevalent than logical modes of thought and has much in common with Jung's (1972) concept of synchronicity.

The insider/outsider approach that Greenwood takes can be a controversial one within academia as it risks sacrificing the objectivity of the observer who is traditionally supposed to be detached and impartial. It may even risk degeneration into 'experience for experience's sake' if not undertaken within specific guidelines and for a stated purpose. However, Greenwood cites examples of anthropologists, such as Edith Turner, who have taken this risk and gained original insights as a result. Greenwood handles this dilemma well and clearly distinguishes her personal experiences from her academic commentary. On a personal note the relevance and importance of the first-person element does resonate with the reader. For example, the role of myth is exemplified by Greenwood's description of the Wild Hunt

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challenge in a Norwich wood. During this challenge the forces of elemental nature, as represented by Herne the hunter, are encountered and incorporated into one's own experience during a night walk. This recalls my own experience at university when I used to challenge myself to walk through the woods at night and brave a stone-lined tunnel leading to what was known as 'the amphitheatre'. Student myth associated it with the infamous magician Aleister Crowley. I subsequently discovered that this mysterious place was nothing more magical than a disused fern garden. However, the point is that it was experiences like these that lead to my own interest in magic and spiritual experiences.

There are a few minor criticisms that can be made about Greenwood's conception of magical consciousness. It is not entirely clear how magical consciousness is being defined and characterised. The examples given, whilst clearly describing experiences of interconnectedness with nature, do not differ greatly from other accounts of religious or non-religious experiences involving nature (Hardy, 1979; Dawkins, 2006). There does not seem to be anything that is uniquely magical about these experiences except that they happen within the context of magical beliefs and practices. Therefore, it is not immediately apparent that 'magical consciousness' is a distinct type of ASC. However, Greenwood clearly shows that magic can lead to the same types of experiences that other religious or non-religious traditions do. Neither is it entirely clear how, or if, magical *thinking* differs from magical *consciousness* and whether or not this is a specific, discrete state or an ongoing interaction (akin to Maslow's (1970) peak and plateau experiences respectively). It would also be interesting to know whether magical consciousness can have negative consequences. For example, Janine Chapman's (1993) experience of Golden Dawn magic initially resulted in disintegration of her personality and abandonment of the magical path for a number of years before she was able to pick up the pieces and start over. In her final chapter, Greenwood refers to the concepts of the multi-modal framework of Geoffrey Samuel, 'organic vision' of Henri Bortoft and 'ideation' and 'abduction' of Gregory Bateson, in an attempt to construct a more inclusive model of science. This interesting and important section seems somewhat abstract and would benefit from some specific examples to clarify the implications for science.

Overall, this fascinating and important book attempts to reinstate magical thinking and experience into its natural context in modern Western society. It helps to fill a gap in the academic exploration of spiritual experience in Western magical thought previously only tackled by a few writers such as Ariel Glucklich (1997), Tanya Luhrmann (1989) and Emma Wilby (2005). The conclusion, that magical consciousness is both a natural and universal part of being human, is a challenge and an inspiration for further study.

Reviewed by Michael J. Rush

E-mail: mike@esoteric-experience.org.uk

Website: www.esoteric-experience.org.uk

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