

The Application of Psychoanalytic Principles to the Study of »Magic«

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ABSTRACT

In this paper Freud's work on animism and magic is elaborated. Those two subjects are presented mainly in his work »Totem and Taboo« (1913). The true motives, which lead primitive man to practice magic are, according to Freud, human wishes and his immense belief in their power. Importance attached to wishes and to the will has been extended from them to all those psychical acts, which are subjected to will. A general overvaluation has thus come about of all mental processes. Things become less important than ideas of things. Relations, which hold between the ideas of things, are equally hold between the things. The principle of governing magic or the technique of animistic way of thinking is one of the 'omnipotence of thoughts'. The overvaluation of psychic acts could be brought into relation with narcissism and megalomania, a belief in the thaumaturgic force of words and a technique for dealing with the external world – 'magic' – which appears to be a logical application of these grandiose premises. Recent psychoanalytic authors dealing with the problem of magic emphasize that magic survived culturally to the present days and even in adults who are otherwise intellectually and scientifically 'modern'. Their explanations for that derive from Ferenczi's and especially Róheim's work that pointed out that magic facilitates adaptive and realistically effective endeavors. Balter pointed out that magic employs ego functioning, and conversely ego functioning includes magic.

Key words: magic, belief, omnipotence of thoughts, narcissism, ego functioning

Introduction

Magic depends on belief and not on empirical fact. It has been based on »a will to believe« associated with an inhibition of reality testing. The earliest stud-

ies on magic have been derived from two valuable works »The Golden Bough« of Sir James Frazer¹ and »A General Theory of Magic« of Marcel Mauss². Both authors

had been addressed this phenomenon more from anthropological point of view than from psychological one. A lot has been discussed on relation of magic to religion on one side, and of magic to science and technology on the other.

But we will try to explain how psychoanalysis has approached the phenomenon of magic. It had been first discussed by Freud, most extensively in his work »Totem and Taboo«³. In that work he noticed its close relation to animism and the *omnipotence of thoughts*.

»Animism is, in its narrower sense, the doctrine of souls, and, in its wider sense, the doctrine of spiritual beings in general. The term *animatism* has been also used to denote the theory of the living character of what appear to us to be inanimate objects, and the term *animalism* and *manism* occur as well in this connection«³ E. B. Tylor⁴ explained, according to Freud³, present meaning of the term *animism*. Freud³ carried on with his explanation of animism and said »What led to the introduction of these terms was a realization of the highly remarkable view of nature and the universe, adopted by the primitive races of whom we have knowledge whether in past history or at the present time. They people the world with innumerable spiritual beings both benevolent and malignant; and these spirits and demons they regard as the causes of natural phenomena and they believe that not only animals and plants but all the inanimate objects in the world are animated by them«.

Animism is a system of thought that does not merely give an explanation of a particular phenomenon. It is the first theory of the universe. But in the course of time there are three such systems of thought, three pictures of universe: animistic (or mythological), religious and scientific. It could be told that the first human Weltanschauung is a psychological theory³. To discuss how much it still per-

sists at present time in the form of superstitions or in some believes is out of scope of this paper.

Discussion

The psychoanalytic approach to the animism, however, has come from another side. In the formation of the basic doctrine of animism some observed or experienced facts such as dreams, death, mirror images, shadows, may have played their parts. But it is hard to believe that the men' creation of this first animistic system of the universe had come from their pure speculative curiosity. The practical need for controlling the world around them has got involved in it. »So we are not surprised to learn that, hand in hand with the animistic system, there went a body of instructions upon how to obtain mastery over men, beasts and things – or rather, over their spirits. These instructions go by the names of *sorcery* and *magic*«³. Freud regarded them as its technique.

Sorcery is essentially the art of influencing spirits by treating them in the same way as one would treat men in alike circumstances: appeasing them, making amend to them, propitiating them, intimidating them, robbing them of their power, subduing them to one's will – by the same methods that have proved effective with living men³.

Magic is on the other hand, as Freud stated, something fundamentally different: it disregards spirits and makes use of special procedures and not of everyday psychological methods. It seems that magic is earlier and more important branch of animistic technique. Magical methods can, among others, be used in dealing with spirits, and magic can be applied as well in cases where the process of spiritualizing Nature has not been carried out yet.

Magic has to serve the most various purposes – it must subject natural phe-

nomena to the will of man, it must protect the individual from his enemies and from dangers and it must give him power to injure his enemies. From the vast number of magical acts having a similar basis some examples, which have been practiced among primitive peoples, and which referred to rituals for producing rain and fertility can be sorted out. They have been quoted by Freud³. »Rain is produced magically by imitating it or the clouds and storms which give rise to it, by 'playing at rain'. In the same way, the fertility of the earth is magically promoted by a dramatic representation of human intercourse. Thus, »in some parts of Java, at the season when the bloom will soon be on rice, the husbandman and his wife visit their fields by night and there engage in sexual intercourse« to encourage the fertility of the rice by their example*. There is a dread, however, that prohibited, incestuous sexual relations may cause a failure of the crops and make the earth sterile«. Certain negative observances, that is, magical precautions, Freud³ included in this group. »while a Gilyak hunter is pursuing game in the forest, his children at home are forbidden to make drawings on wood or on sand; for they fear that if the children did so, the paths in the forest would become as perplexed as the lines in the drawings, so that the hunter might lose his way and never return**«. As in many other instances of the working of magic the element of distance is disregarded; in other words telepathy is taken for granted. What is to be regarded as the operative factor in all given examples is the similarity between the act performed and result expected. Frazer describes this sort of magic as *imitative* or *homoeopathic*. »If I wish it to rain, I have only to do something that looks like rain or is reminiscent of rain.«³

In the other group of magical acts similarity plays no part. What is believed to be their effective principle is spatial connection, contiguity, or at least imagined contiguity – the recollection of it, so they may be grouped under the name of 'contagious' magic. For example »...an enemy can be injured by possession of some of his hair, or nails or other waste products or even a piece of his clothing, and treats them in some hostile way. It is then exactly as though one had got possession of the man himself and he himself experiences whatever it is that has been done to the objects that originated from him.«³ Further example shows how much importance primitive man has given to the person name. If one knows the name of a man or spirit one has obtained a certain amount of power over the owner of the name. Because of that the remarkable precautions and restrictions existed in the use of names. The motives for cannibalism among some primitive groups have a similar origin. By incorporating parts of person's body through the act of eating, one at the same time acquires the qualities possessed by that person. This leads in certain circumstances to precautions and restrictions with regard to diet. A woman who has a baby will avoid eating the flesh of certain animals for fear that any undesirable qualities they may have might be passed over to the child that is nourished by her. From these and many similar examples we can conclude something what is common to all of them. Since similarity and contiguity are the two essential principles of processes of association, it seems that the true explanation of all the folly of magical observances is domination of the association of ideas. Freud³ had thought that the criticism of such conclusion is justified. The associa-

* Frazer, 1911, quoting Batchelor, 1901

** Frazer, 1911, quoting Labbé, 1903

tive theory of magic merely explains the paths along which magic proceeds. The true motive, which leads men to practice magic, is human wishes. »All we need to suppose is that primitive man had immense belief in the power of his wishes. The basic reason why what he sets about by magical means comes to pass is, simply that he wills it.«³ Children are in a similar psychical situation but their motor abilities are still undeveloped. This is the reason why they at the very beginning satisfy their wishes in a hallucinatory manner. The wishes of an adult primitive man are accompanied by motor impulses with which he can alter »the whole face of the earth« in order to satisfy them. This motor impulse is at first engaged to give representation of the satisfying situation by means of something what Freud³ had thought could have been named *motor hallucinations*. »This kind of representation of a satisfied wish is quite comparable to children's play, which succeeds their earlier purely sensory technique of satisfaction.«³ As time goes on, the psychological accent shifts from the motives for the magical act on the measures by which it is carried out – that is, on the act itself. In this way it seems as though it is the magical act itself, which, because of similarity with the desired result, determines the occurrence of that result itself. At the stage of animistic thinking there is no opportunity to explore the truth of actual state of affairs. »The fact that it has been possible to construct a system of contagious magic on association of contiguity shows that the importance attached to wishes and to the will has been extended from them on to all those psychical acts which are subject to the will. A general overvaluation has thus come about of all mental processes – an attitude toward the world, that is, which, in view of our knowledge of the relation between reality and thought, cannot fail to strike us as an overvaluation of

the latter. Things become less important than ideas of things: whatever is done to the latter will inevitably also occur to the former. Relations which hold between the ideas of things are assumed to hold equally between the things themselves.«³ A distance (in time and space) is of no importance in thinking and »so, too, the world of magic have telepathic disregard for distance and treats past situations as though they were present. In the animistic epoch the reflection of the internal world is bound to blot out the other picture of the world – the one that we seem to perceive.«³ The principle of governing magic or the technique of animistic way of thinking is one of the *omnipotence of thoughts*.

According to Freud³ »Primitive men and neurotics attach a high valuation – in our eyes an over – valuation – to psychical acts. This attitude may plausibly be brought into relation with narcissism and regarded as an essential component of it.« In his work »On Narcissism: An Introduction« Freud⁵ summarized his findings about narcissism and narcissistic phenomena. He had concluded that there has been an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects, but which fundamentally persists and is related to the object – cathexes »much as the body of ameba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out«. He assumes the existence of an antithesis between ego – libido and object – libido. The more one is employed, the more the other becomes depleted. Freud showed that manifestation of sexual instincts can be observed from the very beginning of life, but they are not directed towards any external object yet. The separate instinctual components of sexuality work independently one of the other to get pleasure and find satisfaction in the subject's own body. This stage is known as autoerotic and is followed by one in which an object is chosen. However, Freud had found nec-

essary to divide the first autoerotic stage into two. At this intermediate stage sexual instincts which have been isolated have already come together into a single whole and have also found an object which is not an external one but it is the subject's own ego. This new stage has been called *narcissism*. »The subject behaves as though he were in love with himself; his egoistic instincts and his libidinal wishes are not yet separable...«³ The animistic phase would correspond to narcissism both chronologically and in its content.

Freud's original libido theory was built on his psychoanalytic practice but it had received further support in observations of children's and primitive peoples' mental life. In reference to them Freud⁵ said. »In the latter [primitive peoples] we find characteristics which, if they occurred singly, might be put down to megalomania: an over – estimation of the power of their wishes and mental acts, the *omnipotence of thought*, a belief in the thaumaturgic force of words, and a technique for dealing with the external world – *magic* – which appears to be a logical application of these grandiose premises. In the children today, whose development is much more obscure to us, we expected to find an exactly analogous attitude towards the external world«. It could be said, according to Freud's drive concept of narcissism, that in primitive men the process of thinking is still sexualized to a great extent. »This is the origin of their belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, their unshakable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world and their inaccessibility to the experience, so easily obtainable, which could teach them man's true position in the universe.«³ Primitive men knew how the world looks like just on the basis of his own presumptions. Animism came to primitive man in a natural way and as a matter of course. He transposed the structural conditions of his own

mind into the external world. Through animism, mental life itself is projected into external, even unanimated world. »Spirits and demons are only projections of man's own emotional impulses. He turns his emotional cathexes into persons, he peoples the world with them and meets his internal mental processes again outside himself – in the same way as the intelligent paranoic, Schreber, found reflection of the attachments and detachments of his libido in the vicissitudes of his confabulated *rays of God*.«³ The tendency to project mental processes into the outside will be intensified when projection promises to bring with it a mental relief. Such relief could be expected where an emotional conflict has arisen. Typical of such emotional conflicts is the conflict between the two members of a pair of opposites as in the case of ambivalent attitude. In such a case the creation of projection seems particularly likely. The assumption that the evil spirits appeared first in the history of man is bounded to the phenomena of projection.

Like animism magic is, according to Freud³, fundamentally psychological phenomenon. »However, magic is not a perceptual or conceptual distortion entailing, say, projection. In agreement with Mauss, Freud saw magic as entailing agency and efficacy. Magic expresses the intention, the aim to change or control objects in the external world, but according to the projective constructs of animism.«⁶ The primitive men tried to obtain mastery over men, animals, and things or over their spirits. That mastery was *magic* and »it was conceptualized animistically – that is, along the mental lines rather than objective, empirical ones.«⁶ Through magic men look for control over things in the external world by controlling ideas about those things. Very similar conclusion came from Frazer¹ »Men mistook the order or their ideas for the order of nature, and hence imagined that

the control, which they have, or seem to have, over their thoughts, permitted them to exercise a corresponding, control over things.« But Freud went further than Frazer in his conclusions. »He showed not only that the logic of magical practices reflects the logical relations of the corresponding ideas, but that those logical relations are identical to the laws of thinking he found in dreams and neurotic symptoms and inferred to characterize unconscious mental life in general (the primary process).«⁶ Freud said »The technique of animism, magic, reveals in the clearest and most unmistakable way an intention to impose the laws governing mental life upon real things« and again that thereby »replace the laws of nature by psychological ones«. »But the psychological laws, the mental structural conditions involved, are primitive and infantile. They speak about the dominance of pleasure principle.«⁶ The motives, which lead men to practice magic, are human wishes. Freud³ further assumed that magic is more fundamental and older than doctrine of spirits, which forms a kernel of animism. According to Freud³ »Whereas magic is still reserves omnipotence solely for thoughts, animism hands some of it over to spirits and so prepare the way for the construction of religion«. General overvaluation of all mental processes which Freud termed *omnipotence of thoughts*, as we mentioned above, is in relation with narcissism. Thus, for Freud, »magic, – »a technique for dealing with the external world« – is a principal explanatory concept. Its governing principle is the omnipotence of thoughts and is rooted in primary narcissism. Magic indicates the existence and persistence of a developmentally and culturally primitive mode of thinking, characterized as animistic, that conceives the external world as having

properties corresponding to the contents and forms of infantile mental life.«⁶ The first picture which primitive man formed of the world – animistic – was the psychological one. »It needed no scientific basis as yet, since science only begins after it has been realized that the world is unknown and that means must therefore be sought for getting to know.« Scientific approach overcomes other approaches of men's view of the universe and could be compared with the stage of individual libidinal development at which an individual has reached maturity, has renounced the pleasure principle, adjusted himself to reality and turned to external world for the object of his desires. At the animistic stage men ascribe omnipotence to themselves. The scientific view of the universe no longer gave much room for human omnipotence. Men unwillingly have acknowledged their smallness and submitted resignedly to many necessities of nature. However, some of the primitive belief in omnipotence is still surviving. The human being remains to some extent narcissistic even after he has found external objects for his libido.

But there are some difficulties with concept of narcissism from the beginning. Freud himself was dissatisfied with his original formulation what may be seen from his letter to Abraham⁷. »We do not know just why Freud was dissatisfied, but most current theoreticians feel that our present difficulties are due mainly to the fact that this concept has not been explicitly redefined in terms of Freud's later structural psychology.«⁸ Surprisingly metapsychology of such an important concept has not been adequately described. The reason for this may lay in the fact that »Freud's original theoretical conception of narcissism as the libidinal investment of the ego*** was essentially econo-

*** Freud used terms ego and self interchangeably

mic one and prove to be so nonspecific that the term came to be applied to many different psychic phenomena.«⁹

Ferenczi¹⁰ took up some Freud's¹¹ examples of a situation in which the pleasure principle reigns supreme and the reality of the external world is excluded, was »a bird's egg with its food supply enclosed in its shell«. He expended on Freud statement that the prototype of pleasure principle was in this self – contained existence where no stimuli from the outside can impinge, and asserted that it is in fact the period of the life in the womb which, as a stage of human development, totally represents Freud's example. It is this stage, which truly defines omnipotence. It is not the state of having all of one's needs met, but a state in which one does not even need to need. It is the state of total self-sufficiency. Glatzer and Evans¹² formulated further Ferenczi's view: »The clear implication of this first stage this period of unconditional omnipotence...is that growing up is a painful quite apart from the nature of the environment. The unconscious fiction of the frustrating 'outside' is ineluctable and universal. It is the inevitable consequence of being born«. Ferenczi traced out various steps in the development of the ego that lead from animism and magic to an appreciation of objective reality. He showed that this development requires a progressive abandonment of the narcissistic, megalomaniac omnipotence of thoughts characteristic of very early childhood.

»Freud's and Ferenczi's explanatory concept of the illusion of magical omnipotence as an aspect of very early and intense mental infantilism, characterized by narcissism, goes some way to explain the close association of magic with primitive states of mind (pathological and normal), primitive cultures, and even some anachronistic forms of behavior in adults and *advanced* cultures«. ⁶

Stolorow¹³ stated »Since the advent of the structural theory, a trend in modern psychoanalytic ego psychology has been to move away from preoccupation with purely economic explanations, and to move towards functional explanations«. With the expansion of ego psychological concepts mental activity has been less explained primarily in terms of a hypothetical flow of instinctual energies (a highly abstract level of theorizing) and more in terms of its multiple functions which a given activity serves in the interplay of id, ego and superego forces within the personality (theorizing much closer to actual clinical observations). Stolorow offered a functional definition of narcissism. »Mental activity is narcissistic to degree that its function is to maintain the structural cohesiveness, temporal stability and positive affective coloring of the self-representation.«¹³ Ego psychological view of magic would not give any particular libidinal or aggressive modality a privileged position in its operation.«⁶

Conclusion

»Freud's discussion of magic may be transposed into structural terms. Magic is an archaic mode of ego functioning oriented toward modification and control of external world on the basis of archaic mental processes (ideational and narcissistic). But psychoanalytic elucidation of magic goes further. Magic employs ego functioning, and conversely ego functioning includes magic«. ⁶

Géza Róheim¹⁴ from anthropological and psychoanalytical point of view thought that »magic in its first or original form is the basic element in thought, initial phase of any activity«. As ego development goes on the early magical aspect has not disappeared. Magic remains inherit in pragmatic ego derivatives, but more inhibited, sublimated, realistic, moral and practical. Thus there is no dis-

inction between magic and very early mental processes, which are regulated by the pleasure principle and concerned with the external reality. Balter⁶ asked a question why has magic survived culturally to the present days and even in some adult individuals who are otherwise intellectually and scientifically 'modern', in spite of its empirical unreliability? He further commented, »In fact the omnipotence of thought may easily be brought into relation with, and become part of, pragmatic and intellectually competent activities«. Róheim showed that magic facilitates adaptive and realistically effective endeavors by providing the experience of confidence at what Freud had

hinted on in his comment about primitive men's unshakable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world and their inaccessibility to the experiences. »The assured and certain feeling of optimism produced by magic thus actually helps practical, knowledgeable people overcome the external obstacles and internal inhibitions that impede their realistic endeavors« said Balter⁶.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Ministry of Science and Technology of the Republic of Croatia grant to V.R. (0108308).

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PRIMJENA PSIHOANALITIČKIH PRINCIPA U ISTRAŽIVANJU MAGIJE

SAŽETAK

U ovom članku razrađuje se Freudovo shvaćanje animizma i magije. Njih je Freud uglavnom predstavio u svom djelu »Totem i tabu« (1913). Prema Freudu ljudske želje i snažno vjerovanje u njihovu snagu glavni su motivi koji potiču primitivnog čovjeka na izvođenje magije. Važnost koju pridaje željama i volji proširuje se na sva psihička djela podređena volji. Nastaje opće precjenjivanje mentalnih procesa. Manje su važne stvari nego ideje o stvarima. Odnosi koji postoje između ideja o stvarima jednako se pripisuju odnosima među stvarima. Magiju ili tehniku animističkog načina mišljenja vodi princip »omnipotencije misli«. Precjenjivanje psihičkog može se povezati s narcizmom i megalomanijom, vjerovanje u taumaturgičnu snagu riječi i bavljenja vanjskim svijetom – magija – izgleda kao logična primjena tih grandioznih pretpostavki. Noviji psihoanalitički autori ističu kulturalno preživljavanje magije čak i u odraslih koji su inače »modernih« intelektualnih i znanstvenih shvaćanja. Njihovo objašnjenje za tu pojavu oslanja se na radove Ferenczija i osobito Róheima koji je ukazao na to da magija olakšava adaptaciju i realistička djelotvorna nastojanja. Balter je istakao da magija koristi funkcioniranje ega i suprotno tome funkcioniranje ega uključuje magiju.