Magic, Miracle, and Marvels in Anthropology

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ABSTRACT *As ethnographic reports variously relating to magic, witchcraft, sorcery, and shamanism have expanded in recent years, so too has our thinking about them. However, deep epistemological, ontological, and methodological issues remain that cut to the heart of anthropology (Kapferer 2003a: 1–2). This paper discusses the concepts of magic and miracle, with a focus on how they have been and are being researched and taught. It argues that events of extraordinary wonder claimed to be the result of supernatural force might better be conceived under a broad category of 'marvels.' It also suggests that social scientists should investigate ultra-natural marvels with respect for unique social and psychological realities without abandoning questions and concerns about generalization and empirical validity.*

KEYWORDS *Religion, ethnography, methods, epistemology*

What's the difference between magic and miracles? I had not given much thought to this contrast until a curious student asked me the question. I was prepared to give pat definitions of magic, but what was a miracle? Was there anything in my ethnographic experience that related the two?

Defining Magic and Miracles

In working with the Amish, I had just assumed that miracles were supernatural wonders stemming from God and Jesus. I understood that 'charming' in their folk medicine involved magical technique, but didn't their curing also involve something miraculous? Similarly, when informants in the American South told me more recently that they had seen ghosts, would anthropological wisdom suggest that magic or miracle was involved? Or, when informants and relatives from Lesotho talked about witchcraft and other mysterious things, was there also conceptual space for the miraculous?

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When I examined the older ethnographic literature, I found that anthropologists had reported on situations that seemed miraculous, but they did so without paying much attention to what most interested me, their distinguishing characteristics. Even in the more recent phenomenological approaches, it seemed that marvels had been overwhelmed by discourse directed to theories about magic and witchcraft. This paper is therefore an attempt to answer my student's question by: (a) discussing the relationship between magic, miracles, and marvels, (b) reviewing relevant literature, and (c) considering epistemological and ontological issues from a framework that owes much to Pascal Boyer (1994; 2001), while, I hope, still being sensitive to the claim that some issues are fundamentally undecidable.

Introductory textbooks offer a good place to start the discussion, if only for what they reveal about the restricted sense of magic that has pervaded teaching. Consider four examples:

(1) Conrad Kottak (2004) defines magic in his glossary as the 'use of supernatural techniques to accomplish specific aims.'
(2) For Keesing and Strathern (1998:305) 'magic ... represents human attempts to manipulate chains of cause and effect between events that to us are unrelated, in ways that to us are irrational...'
(3) According to Schutz and Lavenda (2001:169), magic refers to 'a set of beliefs and practices designed to control the visible or invisible world for specific purposes.'
(4) For Haviland (2003:671), the classical anthropological notion of magic is the 'belief that supernatural powers can be compelled to act in certain ways for good or evil purposes by recourse to certain specified formulas.'

Is this all that magic is? What Mary Douglas (1985 [1966]:59) described some time ago as the Anglo-American 'debt' to Frazer, an 'isolating and hardening of the idea of magic as the efficacious symbol,' is obviously still in service here. Even now, a paraphrase of Frazer's sympathetic magic is often the only definition of magic given in introductory treatments (see, for example, Peoples & Bailey 2003:276–280), with such other phenomena featured in the folklore of magic as physical transformation, spiritual enchantment, and occult communication being ignored. Indeed, one wonders why magic is so much a part of textbooks at all, given that, as David Graeber (2001:241) has pointed out, the concept has offered so little inspiration to ethnography that it has been largely replaced with 'rubrics like witchcraft and sorcery, shamanism, curing, cosmology, and so on, each of which implies different questions and different problematics.' And the work engaging these 'other problematics' – such as that which has embraced sorcery, shamanism and other occult practices

and beliefs as real (Turner 1996; Stoller & Oakes 1989; Lett 1991; Young & Goulet 1994), or interpreted them as valid forms of expression concerning morality, modernity, knowledge, and power (Jackson 1989; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Kapferer 1997, 2003b; Moore & Sanders 2001) – have also not yet much influenced the textbooks.

What is most to the point here, though, is that not all of the definitions are completely clear as to the role of agency in the Frazerian magical process. While I think one can fairly assume that they all at least imply that human beings are the manipulators behind magical acts, the definitions of Kottak and Schutz and Lavenda could be applied to any causal agent, including spirit beings or God. This distinction is important because Frazer himself did not see the concept of magic as exclusively referring to human activity. In fact, he argued explicitly that for primitive man gods 'are often merely invisible magicians who behind the veil of nature work the same sort of charms and incantations which the human magician works in a visible and bodily form among his fellows' (Frazer 1935:375).

In his classic text *Primitive Religion*, Paul Radin (1957:59–60) presents some additional perspectives on magic and animism that reveal more about how previous generations of anthropologists helped maintain a gap between magic and miracle. First, Radin agreed with Frazer that magic is a primordial attempt to control or gain access to desirable objects and that the human proclivity to act in terms of an all-pervasive sense of magic declines with civilization. However, what made magic possible and, at one point in social evolution at least, necessary, was that humans began to inhabit a mysterious world of language and abstract thought. Hence, we sought to connect symbolically with the object of our intentions – to be one with it in an animistic fashion: 'it is the fundamental concern of every magical act and rite to establish a relation of such a kind to the object that it can literally be at one with the ego' (Radin 1957:60). This overcoming of boundaries to connect with the objects of nature was the main focus of religious attention before the development of monotheism. 'Thus,' says Radin, echoing the Gospel of John, 'in the beginning there was magic and magic was with God and God was magic' (1957:60). Since magicians make unmediated connections to the mystical relationships in the world, their actions are profoundly different from those who pray or use other forms of ritual to beseech God. For Radin and for Frazer, then, miracles must be on a different plain from magic because they are thought to be the manifestations of a transcendent God, not the manipulations of those who connect to a spiritual realm immanent in nature. As Frazer wrote, 'a miracle

to him [primitive man] is merely an unusually striking manifestation of a common power' (Frazer 1935:377).

In their more recent study of sacred pilgrimage, Victor and Edith Turner also found it necessary to distinguish between miracles and magic. While they reported that they had often seen something that looked like contagious magic – Christians seeking close physical contact with the sacred objects of a pilgrimage site in order to receive grace – they thought there was more to this than magic. This pilgrimage contact was different because 'it is mediated through a carefully learned theology of incarnation which recognizes that selected components of the material order were sanctified through the bodily sacrifice of Jesus' (Turner & Turner 1978:71). In other words, Turner and Turner reinforce through their ethnographic observations Frazer's judgment: although the pilgrimage process can operate on the same logical terms as magic, there is an overarching theology that interprets the resulting supernatural power as the ultimate product of the transcendent God.

As with Frazer and Radin, Raymond Firth considered there to be a significant difference between magic and miracle that had to do with the posited source of supernatural power. However, he approached both from an openly materialist perspective. In fact, Firth has been one of the few anthropologists to critique miracles and their relationship to belief in God in a textbook, giving considerable attention to them in his *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation*. Here he defined a miracle as 'an unexpected performance resulting from supernatural power, exercised by direct divine agency or through the agency of a divinely inspired person, such as a saint' (Firth 1996:206). For Firth, however, the promulgation of belief in miracle events stands in paradoxical contrast to the more productive achievements of religious institutions in such endeavors as music, art, and architecture. In his (undocumented) opinion, most anthropologists would agree with him that miracle claims are not to be taken literally but are best seen as 'propaganda devices, reinforcing the pretensions of a religion to credibility' (Firth 1996:206). Still, despite this forthright skepticism, Firth's definition of miracle is in good accord with formal usage.

The OED defines a miracle as 'a marvellous event not ascribable to human power or the operation of any natural force and therefore attributed to supernatural, esp. divine, agency; *esp.* an act (e.g. of healing) demonstrating control over nature and serving as evidence that the agent is either divine or divinely favoured.' However, current usage also suggests some lingering influence of the word's derivation from the Latin *miraculum*, an 'object of wonder.' In fact, the etymology suggests, the sense of divine involvement in the pro-

duction of a wonder is not indicated by the descriptive words given in the New Testament Greek – words sometimes translated as miracle in English literally suggest sign (*sēmeion*, σημεἱον), wonder (*teras*, τέρας), or mighty work (*dynamis*, δύναμις). The sense that miracles must imply the action of almighty God does not seem to have developed until at least the fourth century.

Today, of course, the reality of miracles is fundamental to such institutions as the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, as Turner and Turner (1978:205–6) have noted, the Church considers itself a 'living body' historically connected to the generative miracles and revelations of the biblical era. As such, it remains both 'electrically charged' with the potential for miracles and responsible for guarding against inauthentic claims. Once authenticated, however, miracles are considered facts, not just beliefs. Their reality is established from material evidence or corroborated testimony that suggest some normal operation of nature was suspended in fulfillment of God's higher purpose. While miracles transcend nature, they do so in a way more unpredictable than the supernatural aspects of regularly recurring rituals, sometimes by way of intermediaries such as angels, saints, or sacred relics. As works of God, they are to be distinguished from demonic acts or 'prodigies' of supernatural power ('Miracle' 1913). In all these things, except for the reference to saints and relics, Protestant views are in substantial agreement (Purtill 1997:72).

While opinion polls conducted in the United States between 1994 and 2003 indicate that some 79 to 84 percent of adults believe in miracles (Shermer 2000:21; Taylor 2003), what North Americans mean by miracles must be considered. A 1996 survey of Ontarians, for example, found that their miracles amounted to such things as finding the right mate, receiving a much needed but unasked for gift, avoiding a fatal car crash, and witnessing a critically ill relative recover after life-support was removed (Shermer 2000:26). Popular culture as presented in television programs, movies, and books also indicates that the characterization of unusual life events as miracles is widespread. One example from recent television is the popular PaxTV network series *It's a Miracle*, where one hears all manner of happenstances described as miracles. A jacket cover from one of the program's spin-off books advertises 'divine intervention … miraculous rescues … inspiring reunions … heartwarming animal stories … and remarkable medical recoveries' (Thomas 2003). Similarly, on the long-running *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, reverential tones of awe and words of praise to God are used to describe the 'miracles' that have been brought about by new technologies and medical advances in vision enhancement, prosthetics, and speech pathology (*Oprah Winfrey Show*, July 23, 2003.) In

North American folk thought, then, a miracle may be defined as any uncommon event brought about by some divine agency for the benefit of an individual or group. However, despite high rates of belief in God, the typical folk view of miracle has been secularized to such an extent that an emphasis on 'supernatural' transformation may be entirely absent.[1]

The distinctions Judeo-Christian scholars make between nature/supernature raise other issues about cultural specificity. As a miracle is assumed to be a rare case of a personalistic God-agent temporarily overturning the ordinary conditions of existence, it would seem that any other supernatural manifestation would have to be deemed an inferior prodigy, magic, or witchcraft. However, this is not so if 'other divinities' are allowed to enter into the conceptual space of the miracle. This is a move that David Hume (2000:92) made in his famous discussion of miracles when he reported on a case from antiquity in which a blind man and a lame man were said to have been cured by contagious contact with emperor Vespasian, in response to a vision of the God Serapis. And, there is some room for disagreement even among those who believe in the literal reality of biblical miracles. For example, when Aquinas spoke of miracles as caused by 'divine agency' (Levine 2002) and C.S. Lewis (1947:10) defined a miracle as 'an interference with Nature by supernatural power,' they opened conceptual space for different characterizations of that agency and power. More recently, the Christian philosopher David Johnson (1999) has expanded that space by arguing that it is not necessary to include reference to God in defining a miracle. Instead, he identifies miracles with paranormal phenomena in general (1999:73).

The definitions of Lewis and Johnson are in keeping with the sense of *miraculum* described in the OED. In my opinion, the Latin concept has more cross-cultural utility than does the term miracle in that it encompasses divine interventions, supernatural wonders, and other paranormal phenomena without the implied hierarchy of monotheism or traditional anthropology. However, because the term 'miraculum' is rather too arcane to be useful, I suggest the term 'marvel' as an alternative. Indeed, in addition to meaning something extraordinary, in obsolete usage marvel was synonymous with miraculum. Thus, we may say that a marvel is as an event of extraordinary wonder, thought to have physical consequences, claimed to be the result of ultra-natural force. A miracle would then be a special type of marvel that yields positive results, traditionally ascribed to the power of the divine.

A likely point of contention concerns the cross-cultural validity of using terms like supernatural or paranormal in the definition of a marvel. While

some anthropologists consider the term 'supernatural' fundamental to comparative analysis, others find it ethnocentric (Lohmann 2003b). And a prominent sociologist of the paranormal has argued that it 'becomes an intellectual issue only in a society where the scientific method is *hegemonic*' (Goode 2000:22, italics in the original). However, it seems to me that claims of such wide divisions are debatable. For one thing, it is debatable if a materialist orientation to causality is really hegemonic in any society – as opposed to being hegemonic in more narrowly authorized institutional practice (Humphrey 1996:4; Jindra 2003). Further, in non-Western contexts, contrasts between normal and ultra-normal are also readily found. For example, cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer has observed that the Fang 'find stories of flying organs and mysterious witchcraft killings fascinating as well as terrifying, precisely because they violate their expectations of biological and physical phenomena' (Boyer 1994:21; also quoted in Humphrey 1996:56). I have also found such distinctions among the Sotho. To take but one instructive case, a recent issue of a popular Sotho-language weekly featured a front-page article titled 'Woman Gives Birth to Eggs' (2003). On the 31st July, the story relates, an astonishing wonder (*khoba*) and marvel (*mohlolo*) occurred when a 24-year-old woman gave birth to two eggs, of the appearance of chicken eggs. This story shows clearly that the Sotho make a distinction between at least three types of phenomena: witchcraft/sorcery, a very astonishing wonder (*khoba*), and a wonder (*mohlolo*): It also indicates that there is much skepticism.

These examples reinforce what philosopher Michael Levine has noted with reference to the ancient world, 'what is required for a notion of the miraculous is … a strong sense of what constitutes the normal, natural course of events' (Levine 2002:10). However, such a distinction between usual and unusual does not commit us to the view that everything that is ultra-natural is necessarily a marvel. Indeed, some spiritual manifestations may not be marvels either from folk or analytic points of view. Aragon (2003:134–5) gives an example from Central Sulawesi in which it is said that rats that eat up the harvest are manifestations of the ancestors. As she notes, this is not so much a supernatural marvel as an added layer of imagery told about an empirical reality. Similarly, many anthropologists have been occupied of late demonstrating how such systems of meaning about the ultra-natural are not essentially 'other' but may reflect, critique, and constitute empirically evident social realities (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Moore & Sanders 2001; Kapferer 2003b). In any case, conceptualizing miracles and the more wondrous aspects of magic and witchcraft in the same domain helps avoid too simplistic a contrast be-

tween 'Western' and 'closed' systems of thought that had been suggested in some of the older debates about rationality (Wilson 1970).

Studying Marvels

In support of the argument that the concept of marvels I have put forth above is ethnographically useful and interesting, I will describe several cases in which observations about them have been made from different points of view, but with little comparative link. While one of the best general surveys of Christian marvels is Joe Nickell's (1993) account of weeping icons, healing pictures, Marian apparitions, stigmata, and so on, his debunking approach is practically unheard of among anthropologists. More typical is the relativist perspective that Geertz (1968:25–35) takes in describing the marvelous powers attributed to famous saintly figures by his informants in Morocco and Indonesia. Although some might label his approach phenomenological, I would not do so because more recent approaches given this label often find Geertz too much a functionalist and social constructivist. In turn, social constructivism and the more recent phenomenology need to be differentiated from 'reflexive-seeking' and 'naturalistic-cognitivism.' Reflexive seekers most forthrightly describe personal marvel experiences and use them to question their own premises. Naturalistic-cognitivists and social constructivists are not so much interested in understanding marvel experiences in-and-of-themselves but for what they reveal about mind or society. Phenomenologists and reflexive seekers share the goal of coming to an empathetic understanding of marvel experiences. Despite their differences, all these views raise some rather interesting philosophical issues about causality, relativism, and ontological possibilities that I will try to address below.

One of the most reflexive and *reflective* of the recent accounts of the extraordinary is an ethnographic account of an apparent rising of the dead (Grindal 1983). This is especially interesting in connection with miracles because it touches directly on issues of validity and testimony discussed by Hume. In 'Of Miracles,' Hume (2000[1748]:87) wrote: 'When any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle.' However, as Bruce Grindal's account makes clear, in light of a dramatic personal experience of the wondrous, making such a cold calculation is not always so simple.

Grindal's marvel occurred on the 23rd October, 1967, in the town of Tuma, Ghana, while he was attending a funeral ritual for a man who was prominent locally as a drummer. 'Near midnight came a moment totally unnatural to my previous experience,' Grindal reported, 'I "witnessed" the raising of the dead' (Grindal 1983:60). This was apparently evoked by the actions of the Sisala praise singers (*goka*) who were dancing in the house, near where the corpse sat propped up against a wall. As they sang, they moved forward and back from the corpse, beating a steady rhythm of iron hoes as they did so. With the movements, the rhythmic beats, and the song, Grindal began to see the *goka* and the corpse as linked, as if tied together. He then saw the corpse jolt, and flashes of light emerge from it and from the bodies of the praise singers. 'The corpse, shaken by spasms, then rose to its feet, spinning and dancing in a frenzy.' Finally, 'a most wonderful thing happened. The talking drums on the roof of the dead man's house began to glow with a light so strong that it drew the dancers to the roof-top. The corpse picked up the drum-sticks and began to play' (Grindal 1983:68).

Grindal's interpretation of this astounding experience involves a complex mixture of psychology, mysticism, and sociology. From the scientific vein, he characterizes his marvel as an altered state of consciousness, a 'synesthetic integration' of the senses (p. 75). He also describes in intimate detail the personal circumstances of the previous few days that could have evoked such a state. These included experiences of intense heat, uncomfortable change in personal routine, the putrid smell of death, ubiquitous stinging insects, severe sleep deprivation, hunger, physical fatigue, stress from lengthy funeral proceedings, and fear from being physically threatened with an axe. Yet, he describes what he saw as more than just a temporary mental aberration. With allusions to mysticism, he says, 'the experience was real and was seen as such by those who sat to my right in the divination place, as well as by the *goka* who conjured the miraculous transformation' (1983:71). Further, there were other contexts to consider. At the sociological level, Grindal discovered that his personal testimony fit together with other Sisala narratives of extraordinary death. In the days following the funeral, he heard several tales of this genre – of men whose corpses had been briefly re-animated like that of the drummer and of a corpse that had resisted burial by stretching its legs out over the grave pit. Indeed, it was said that if a 'man has strong *daluri* or "medicines," the spirit of the daluri can make the corpse hear and can cause the corpse to move' (Grindal 1983:71). Clearly, these are no ordinary events (the story of the corpse that resisted burial was told about an event from 30 years beforehand), and their power was heightened in the re-telling.

Katherine Ewing (1994) provides another good example of a reflexive-seeker perspective from a different ethnographic setting. While doing fieldwork in Pakistan on Sufism, she had an unsettling dream that seemed to verify Sufi beliefs about the extraordinary. On the very same night that a Sufi saint had told her that he would come to her in a dream, he seemingly did so. This shook her assumptions about reality as she continued to do her fieldwork, and she flirted with shifting ground away from anthropological inquiry toward the inquiry of a seeker after spiritual truth.

In contrast to such questioning, a social constructivism that tends toward relativism is much more common. I say 'tends toward relativism' because in this approach no claim is made that an account of a marvel might somehow be beyond nature; it is primarily taken to be a socially significant event. While this has the appearance of relativism because it also does not directly call into question the marvel, it also does not take the marvel as 'really real' either. Consequently, what is most important to the seeker, the reality of marvels, may be virtually ignored. In fact, one of the most important contributions of the reflexive seekers is to point out the 'pseudo' quality of the more typical analyst's relativism. Only if marvels are not really real, is there need for the additional complexities of social analysis (Lett 1991).

Such a contrast in perspectives is nicely illustrated in Spencer's (1997) analysis of 'Fatima and the Enchanted Toffees.' Here Spencer describes the case of a sixteen-year-old Sri Lankan girl called Fatima who, according to her own description and that of some of the Buddhist and Sufi specialists she consulted, was possessed by demons. As Fatima told it, the demons entered her body after she ate enchanted toffees proffered to her indirectly by a frustrated young suitor. A demonic presence then became evident some days afterwards when she started to have fits of possession. During these times, she writhed, twisted, and spoke aggressively. In addition to possessing her, the spirits were said to have made cups and plates fly through the air and smash to the ground; there was also a spontaneous appearance of blood on Fatima's cheeks and on surfaces near her. However, from his dispassionate description, it is clear that Spencer is not really interested in exploring the physical reality of these apparent 'poltergeists.' Instead, his paper is about other things of anthropological concern – about concepts of the person and the stability of selves, about Sinhala and Freudian projections of desire, about the control of female sexuality, and about Fatima's possession and treatment as 'a means of redefining her own identity as Sinhala Buddhist rather than Muslim' (Spencer 1997:701).

For the social analyst, the empirical reality of marvel testimony is secondary

to the teasing out of connections between occult belief and the social problems and concerns of the times. If some people in the streets of Port Harcourt say they saw a vulture turn into a man or if a few Pentacostalist women in Lagos confess that they are agents of Satan whose vaginas have magically destroyed the financial wealth of men (Bastian 2001:73, 83), what is really going on is an embellished articulation of unjust differences in wealth and power in the physical world. Indeed, despite the unfashionable quality of such references, the vast majority of recent anthropological work on malevolent marvels treats them in much the fashion of Durkheim – as social facts to be explained by social facts – and (in the fashion of empiricism) as dependent variables – with the apparently increasing rates of witchcraft accusations the consequence of such independent variables as social insecurity, relative impoverishment, gender discrimination, and transnational forces, to mention a few explanations given in recent African work (Moore & Sanders 2001; Kohnert 2003). While this work has been criticized precisely because it has these positivist implications (Kapferer 2003a:18–20), a different concern here is with the logical inconsistency of making implicit evaluation behind a mask of relativism. Such analysis is relativist in name, but analytically other in practice.

If Firth's perspective on the anthropological opinion of miracles were accurate, there would be little need to belabor this point. Yet, it seems even if they are as skeptical as Firth believed, anthropologists are reluctant to label socially patterned imagination false in the way that he did. For example, consider a report of the testimony of three South African women who separately claimed to a large church gathering that they: (a) had married a zombie (b) had imprisoned elderly relatives alive beneath the sea; or (c) had 5,000 demons under each knee. For the ethnographer, these confessions were 'not necessarily false' because they seemed to be psychologically enabling actions that helped the women overcome the trauma of their lives (Badsteubner 2003:21). While a functionalist explanation like this is plausible enough, is there therefore no need for distinction here between empirical reality and imagination? Graeber (2001:243) notes that his Malagasy informants did not hesitate to call a liar a man who claimed to have killed someone with lightning. Would not Firth's anthropologist also see these testimonies as false, propagandistic, social constructions whose articulation before the crowd put naïve women at future risk so as to bring in large crowds, thereby functioning as advertising for a fledgling church whose male leader stood most to benefit? Holding in check one's skepticism in the process of interacting with others during fieldwork is one thing, but refusing to admit a difference between social-psychological reality and material reality is another.

The ever-present possibility of ordinary alternatives is what Hume's dismissal of miracle testimony was all about. And however viable his case for the dismissal of miracles on logical grounds may be, the philosopher makes a number of other observations that are directly relevant to any ethnographic account of them. (See Earman 2000 and Fogelin 2003 for the continuing debate on Hume's logic.) Extrapolating from these observations, it can be suggested that ethnographers always need to wonder about: (1) possible deception and the distorting affects of the will to believe; (2) why one should accept testimony of violation of well-known physical processes when no causal explanation is offered; (3) how rumors of the uncanny will spread rapidly in groups because such news is so out-of-the-ordinary, and (4) whether or not there are conflicting accounts available. The significance of these and other related concerns about distortion potentials in human perception and communication have been well documented and elaborated upon by recent critics of credulity (Gilovitch 1991; Shermer 2000) as well as by some classic ethnography of shamanic deception (Boas 1930). Yet, as Ewing (1994:571) and Shweder (1991:49) have wondered, is not a refusal to take the beliefs of others seriously, a kind of hegemony or arrogance?

In response, one can point to evidence that anthropologists have in fact tended to downplay indigenous skepticism (Graeber 2001:243). As Goody (1996) has argued – and as recent accounts of marvels confirm (Boyer 2001:76; Mitchell 1997:87–88; Spencer 1997:705–706) – doubt is an intrinsic feature of religious experience. 'Questioning is in fact built into the human situation in which language using animals create representations of entities to help deal with their intellectual, social, and psychological needs' (Goody 1996:679). Even in classic accounts like that of Evans-Pritchard on the Azande, doubt is acknowledged only to be dismissed as unimportant (Graeber 2001:243). This lack of interest can be of considerable consequence in that it promotes too uniform a view of others and obscures analysis of strategic manipulation by skeptics. For example, David Lan's (1985) well-known work on the positive role of spirit mediums in Zimbabwe's war against minority rule has been criticized for assuming that guerilla leaders were mere followers of tradition. Others have suggested greater complexity by pointing out that guerillas used coercive force to get rural villagers to comply with their strategies and may have consciously manipulated the belief in spirit mediums for their own benefit (Kriger 1991). As Graeber (2001) argues, similar combinations of compulsion, doubt, and conviction are often involved in people's general relationship to power. This is so clearly a universal issue that apologetic claims from Western scholars

that they will not consider other people's marvels in terms of all relevant and available evidence about nature, history, society, and belief seem themselves peculiarly engaged in a quite restrictive form of tolerance, a tolerance for the marvelous but not the mundane.

One problem with open skepticism is, of course, that it may be taken as a sign of disrespect. Many religious settings may not be available if we express any disbelief. Open expression of doubt may simply prompt informants to refuse to talk. 'If you just listen nicely and believe what I tell you, not asking questions of doubt, I will tell you about these things [witchcraft]', a Zulu informant once told Berglund (1976:269). This is clearly a problem not to be denied. But a requirement for methodological relativism should not be confused with a reasoned consideration of alternative possibilities in ethnological discourse.

In their studies of sorcery and witchcraft, Kapferer (2003b) and his colleagues attempt a phenomenological way that they suggest is beyond such questions without being mystical. While not accepting that marvels are 'really real,' they also argue that the division between rational/irrational, supernatural/natural is an outmoded product of a hegemonic metropolitan discourse. Most at issue here is the claim that to examine information comparatively in terms of evidence about empirical reality is to accept uncritically master narratives of rationality and unilinear progress. (See also Moore & Sanders 2001:12, 13 on this point.) If I understand Kapferer correctly, no attempt to explain marvels using Western forms of reason will fully get at the complexity and multiplicity of the experiences they represent. Instead, witchcraft and sorcery are best seen as occupying their own space (seemingly a hyperspace) outside of set frameworks of social or psychological analysis. In this view, it is wrong to think of a marvel as a dependent variable because it is not just an effect; it is constitutive of experience and therefore creates its own effects.

However, there are still unavoidable problems here. Should one neglect altogether questions about such an 'empirical' and 'rationalist' link as that between distorted perception and tendencies toward scapegoating in times of social crisis? Why else but because they were treated as scapegoats have hundreds of women and elderly people been killed as witches in South Africa in recent years? One might also consider that because anthropology is not just information but practice, it too must modify itself over time. Because of their focus on the particular, many of the recent ethnographers of marvels show no interest in the universal processes that may under gird what they have observed. Yet, these processes will form a crucial dimension even of

hyperspace if they actually delimit what it is conceivable for variable gods, spirits, demons, witches, and sorcerers to do (and not do).

The naturalist-cognitive perspective attempts to do precisely this, to delimit what is a possible ultra-natural concept. Against those who argue that 'positivism' is unable to make sense of the 'world constitutive force' of particular marvels (Brendbekken 2003:50), experimental approaches from cognitive psychology and evolutionary anthropology do suggest that there is a predictability to the ultra-natural that is an understandable feature of human inference systems. Following Boyer (1994, 2001), who has done much to explicate the evidence, it can be shown that marvels have a restricted set of ontological features as well as congruence with default templates of expectations. For example, if spirits manifest themselves, they will operate as agents that meet our expectations of what minds and persons are like. If a person turns into a baboon, it will not be a complete baboon, but a baboon with a person's thoughts and intentions. If diviners from Sudan say that the burnt twigs of an ebony tree can reveal the testimony that the spirit of that tree 'heard,' they will carry with them the default assumption that the tree's hearing will be like that which is typical for people. Spiritual expectations will always be based on people's implicit assumptions about what it means to exist in the physical world. If a tree can 'overhear,' the overheard testimony will be from near the tree's physical location, not from across the ocean; and the twigs will reveal conversations relevant to us, not conversations that trees hold amongst themselves about being trees (Boyer 2001:68). Similarly, if a Dominican peasant talks about *misterios* (mysteries) *espiritus* (spirits), *angeles* (angels), *vientos* (winds), and *sanes* (spirit beings) (Brendbekken 2003:35), it is predictable that these phenomena will have intentions and goals; be concerned and engaged with what happens to living human beings; and, when extraordinary nonmaterial powers are expressed, people will be concerned with their effects, not bothering themselves too much to unravel the details of how such things could possibly occur (Boyer 2001:200).

Physicists, chemists, and biologists are particularly good at providing detailed answers concerning material mechanisms, but there is little equivalent inquiry concerning the mechanism of marvels. People who describe marvels are rarely interested in questioning the magical process whereby the immaterial is transformed into the material, particularly at the point where the ultranational interfaces with the material. A Judeo-Christian miracle, in which God can say, 'Let there be light,' and light just happens, does not evoke much questioning about how exactly spoken words turn into light because it is based

on the taken-for-granted assumption that *our* thoughts mysteriously allow us to do things too. We do not need to question how it happens; when we want to move our arm, for most of us, it just moves. Similarly, when gods think or act, their intentions can just be realized. 'Marvelous' claims may continue to be successfully promulgated because they fit in with such extrapolations from human intentionality and inference about what it is for us to exist in the world.

While such naturalism may sound too purely Western to some, as a compromise position and as a methodological strategy, I have advocated elsewhere that it is useful to regard ethnographic description as pertaining to several different but overlapping domains of truth (Shanafelt 2002). Experiences may be real, functionally important, and true at distinct levels of psychosocial analysis. 'Truth' at the levels of psychological state, speech act, or social practice may have criteria of evaluation that are distinct from any 'etic' truth that must be based on consideration of the total preponderance of all available evidence. In seeking the relevant evidence, we should also not disdain older literature simply because it is old. The folk literature of magic and marvels, for example – especially the literature that shows the marvelous to be eminently promotable entertainment (Boyer 2001:20; Schechter 2001:6), has yet to be fully explored.

In folkloristics it is old-hat to point out that marvels have themes that transcend cultural particularity. Review again some of the phenomena that I have mentioned previously or that are described in the recent literature on magic and sorcery. Besides sounding like headlines from the most sensational of tabloids or themes from gory B-grade horror films, they are also quite easy to find in Stith Thompson's (1955–58) classic index of folk literature – (1) woman lays egg is motif T565; (2) the living corpse is E422; (3) magical transformation of man to animal is in the D100–D199 range, with D152.3, man transforms to vulture, included; (4) resuscitation by magician is E121.7; (5) witch in animal form [G211] flies with magic aids [D1531.5]; (6) remarkable sex organs [F547] cause loss of fortune for breaking a taboo [C930]; (7) vampires [E251], etcetera. As Boyer (2001:90) argues, it is a mistake to assume essential differences between folkloric representations and so-called sacred ones because these are domains in which 'concepts often migrate from one to the other.'

Approaching Marvels in the State of Georgia

From my present social setting in Savannah, Georgia, I have relatively easy access to accounts of poltergeists, Marian visions (Davis & Boles 2003), ghosts of the Civil War dead (Debolt 1984), and phantom lights (Prizer n.d.). In this

last section, I would like to review some of the marvels around me. In doing so, I will reinforce some of the points I have made above, but will also emphasize a few new things. These additional points are that there are material consequences of marvels that can be objectively measured; that skepticism and faith are not simply bipolar oppositions but exist in a dialectical relationship; that social constructs are nevertheless real mental constructs that may have ethical consequences that cannot be ignored; and that the writing of ethnographic experience is not the only fair way to study marvels.

Marvel Economics

When Savannah gained notoriety in 2002 for being named 'America's Most Haunted City' by the American Institute of Parapsychology, the opportunities for promotion were obvious. In 1991, the Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce reported that none of the city's 18 tour companies conducted 'ghost tours.' By 2003, however, 27 of 53 tour companies conducted them (Murdock 2003). (For a virtual sample, one may visit http://www.theghostsofsavannah.com.) In the wake of this acclaim, at least one bed and breakfast was able to find couples willing to pay $450 for dinner, a walking tour, and an overnight stay (Murdock 2003). This move towards commercialization of ghostlore is not locally specific, but seems to represent a trend that involves many historic cities in North America and Europe (Seeman 2002).

Savannah resident Al Cobb is one promoter of marvels who apparently does so out of firm conviction that something wondrous happened at his family home in 1998–99. While he does profit by selling books about his experiences (his self-published *Danny's Bed* [Cobb 1999] sells for $14.95), to me he appears no mere profiteer but to genuinely believe that things paranormal happened in his house. Cobb says that his house was occupied by a poltergeist that the family came to think of as a little boy from the 1890s named Danny. He believes Danny was metaphysically attached to an old bed purchased for one of his fourteen-year-old twin sons. Now, not even considering Cobb's book sales and his ultimate motivation, we are able to calculate some of the local market value of his ghost story by tracing its relationship to this bed. In October 1998, Mr. Cobb bought the bed for $125.00. A few weeks later he resold it for only $66.00. Initially this seems to suggest ghosts are bad for business. However, the price drop occurred before Cobb's ghost story became more widely known. After an account of it appeared in the *Savannah Morning News* (Fishman 1998), the bed's auction value skyrocketed to five hundred dollars. A few weeks later it was sold again for $550.00 (Cobb 1999:38).

Cobb's story and the related example of burgeoning ghost-tour businesses exemplify the more general trend of the commodification of folk tradition. Fascinating tales of hauntings that were once spread with dramatic flourish on porches and in parlors are now experienced through tourism or in book, TV, movie, or video format. What Hume referred to as the 'love of wonder' has a profit margin that is as highly valued by small-scale entrepreneurs as it is by media moguls who turn out endless variations of marvel themes for public consumption. (And the profitability of wonder is not just confined to spiritualism or the entertainment industry. Purported apparitions of the Virgin Mary in rural Georgia in the 1990s netted a supporting organization 3 to 4 million dollars in donations as well as enough money to buy the apparition site [Davis & Boles 2003:379]). Carl Jung recognized some years ago that 'our age wishes to have actual experiences in psychic life' (quoted in Humphreys 1996:160). The difference today is that we have many more ways to hope and pay for them.

Marvel Faith

Cobb's explanation of his marvels involves a combination of everyday assumptions and concepts about personhood and the Christian soul with more uncommon assumptions and jargon from spiritualism and occult science. He refers to different planes and dimensions of existence entered through portals, to energy fields, to telepathy, to spirit balls, to channeling, and so forth. Such elaboration suggests not only a rich cultural tradition, but also a need for justification, as ideological conceptions develop complexity in response to strain and challenge (Geertz 1973:218). Certainly, none of the spiritualist elaborations work as explanations of supernatural mechanism. They are more like the layer of complexity added to Sulawesi observations of rampaging rats from the ancestors. Similarly, in the public performances that are ghost tours, I have heard guides in New Orleans, Savannah, Orlando, and London make use of scientific-sounding descriptions (such as 'the ghost was only partially visible because it still occupies the dimensions of the building of the time') that authorize their accounts without really explaining. Given what I have referred to above as the institutional hegemony of science, this is perfectly understandable. But, even in the realm of the paranormal believer, the very need for scientific legitimation suggests a dialectical relationship with doubt.

Below, the mission statement of the 'Georgia Haunt Hunt Team' (GHHT) provides a further example:

> The goal of the GHHT is to obtain evidence supporting our theories on ghosts. For this purpose we use Electromagnetic Field Detectors (EMF meters), thermal scanners,

> infrared detectors, voice-activated tape recorders, compasses, many types of cameras, many types of film and good old-fashioned common sense. We do not condone the use of *ouija* boards, the invoking of spirits, or the conducting of seances. We are a serious, scientifically-oriented, research organization. (http://www.geocities. com/Athens/Aegean/8697/pgmission.html)

The assumptions here are clear: ultra-natural phenomena can be studied because they leave material traces on machines, and there are wrong ways to go about it. Yet, these measures claim only things that lack solidity and remain mysterious to ordinary human perception: electricity, magnetism, heat, sound, light, all things, like moving your arm, that are experienced by just seeming to happen to us. And ghost activists want not only to focus exclusive attention on confirmatory evidence that *ghosts* are real, they must even affirm their reality as *people*: 'We are real investigators and real people, not a big store or corporation trying to make a profit from you,' reports another group (http://www.ghosthunterstore.com).

Ghost hunting and other marvel-seeking certainly have psychological and sociological benefits that have been well covered in the standard accounts of religion. However, one should hardly forget that the truth-claims of seekers can have consequences beyond harmless mental fascinations. I am not content to let go unchallenged the claims of people who think there are vampires and then act in the world as if they are vampires, especially if this leads to cases like that of the Kentucky teenagers who sacrificed animals, drank each other's blood, murdered two parents in Florida, then headed to New Orleans in an apparent attempt to meet Anne Rice, author of *Interview with a Vampire* (www.cnn.com/US/9802/27/vampire.slayings; Zagnar 1996).

Marvel Making

Two Georgia ethnographers have recently published work describing rural Conyers, where, from 1991 to 1993, an apparition of the Virgin Mary was said to appear monthly to a woman named Nancy Fowler (later, from 1994 to 1998, the appearances were yearly events that attracted thousands of people). This work shows clearly how shared expectations and discourse can turn ordinary events into marvels. The ethnographers, Davis and Boles (2003), describe how crowds of seekers created meaning out of their shared experience of being together with the common goal of witnessing the sacred on temporarily hallowed ground. This was a process that involved a combination of emotional enthusiasm, significant physical activity (a trek to a holy well, visits to stations of the cross), negotiated typifications, and shared validation

of signs (most notably reports of an ethereal smell of roses, a pulsating crucifix, and the exchange of overexposed photographs socially interpreted as 'doors to heaven'). While the occasional individual expressed skepticism, this was a message not widely shared. Rather, the crowd disparaged skepticism itself, especially that implied by the Church's refusal to validate their claims.

After listening politely to the anticommunist and antiabortion messages that were reported from the seer, people seemed more interested in direct signs. For example, after one service, many people pointed 'their cameras skyward above the farmhouse, hoping to capture the moment' [when the Virgin Mary ascended back to heaven]. There were also 'flurries of picture taking during the service, accompanied by waves of "oohs" and "ahhs" when the sun came from behind the clouds' (Davis & Boles 2003:380–381). Nothing seems more striking as evidence of a profound longing for wonder, and of the power of groups to make wondrous phenomena that would be taken for granted individually, than a large crowd of enthusiasts constructing miracles out of overexposed film and the sun going behind a cloud. Whether it presses the limits of human experience as some anthropologists might have it, or swings wide the doors of false consciousness as might others, the Conyers case in either case exemplifies Lohmann's (2003a:178) point that imaginations have their own reality as empirical products of the cogitating brain.

And, outside the brain, technology functions to certify and make tangible the fleeting and essentially contestable nature of marvels and their memories. (See also Wojcik [1996].)

Marvel Variables

By desiring miracles so much – and by interacting through frames of reference indexically connected to previous Marian phenomena – the crowds at Conyers were able to interpret the sun going behind a cloud as a small marvel. Through shared expectations and desires, the crowd constituted an especially meaningful experience from a mundane event, thereby creating its own effects. While this 'social reality of psychologically real imaginings' may be difficult to interpret from the point of view of a dualistic philosophy, methodologically, there is no necessary difficulty in treating belief as a dependent variable for certain circumstances and independent for others. Certainly, Catholic identity may be treated as an independent variable related to the likelihood of an individual experience of the dependent variable, 'something sacred about Mary' in Conyers. Whether or not an individual saw the sun going behind a cloud at a particular moment in Conyers and interpreted

it as a miraculous sign could in turn be seen as an independent variable, causally related to something else. And, referring again to the vampire case mentioned above, is it acceptable to *not* investigate causal variables for manifestly dangerously real fictions?

Surely, while belief both constitutes and is constituted by experience, it is the differing patterns of experience that shape these beliefs. There are always variables that can be explored in depth by ethnographers, but only if they are not shy of entertaining ideas about cause and effect. Whatever their shortcomings, questionnaires, for example, can suggest interesting causal relationships that are not evident from informal discussion.[2] Of course, this may sound like a fall back to the old materialist-idealist divide, but much recent work in the ethnography of marvels suggests that the field is not as far beyond that division as many might imagine.

Conclusion

In both magic and miracle, there is an overpowering of the ordinary course of nature by non-material, spiritual means. In this paper I have suggested that the label 'marvel' be set aside to specify any event or effect of extraordinary wonder, thought to be tangibly real, that is claimed to be the result of ultranatural force. This term has the advantage of being less tied to monotheistic premises than is miracle, and it should be useful in conceptualizing a wide variety of specific cases that have found no place in traditional conceptions of magic. To answer my student's question, then, I would say that magic is a type of manipulation of ultra-natural forces to bring about desired results, some of which may be marvels. A miracle, on the other hand, is a marvel brought about by no manipulative process, as if by pure intention. In monotheism, it is traditionally said to be the product of a divine intention that is spontaneously realized.

The brief look at marvels I gave here from a naturalist perspective suggest that the mechanisms by which they operate always involve such a mysterious act of interface between a special non-natural force and ordinary matter that leads to some material transformation. While this mysterious process is an aspect of the terrain of all narratives of the wondrous, the miraculous transformation, what I would call the 'poof factor,' is what is generally most vaguely depicted. Our willingness to pass over this 'poof' to consider the results may simply be an example of an overriding focus and obsession with the products of our own concerns. Yet, its neglect is part of what makes marvels interesting from the point of view of comparative social science.

While some anthropologists are interested in what ultra-natural phenomena reveal about the mind, many others focus on how claims of wondrous magic and witchcraft provide a window on the social concerns and issues of our times. Some marvel beliefs may even, as Kapferer (2003a:24) suggests, press 'the limits of human experience and beyond.' What I hope I have shown here is that there is something to be gained from stirring up magic, miracle, and marvel more formally into the same conceptual brew. As should be clear, my reading of the evidence suggests more methodological materialism is needed, not less. However that may be, continued dialogue on the subject of marvels and how to describe them may help anthropology as a discipline arrive at a greater appreciation of its own epistemological requirements.

Notes

1. I would like to comment on two things here. First, it seems that for contemporary Mexicans a miracle (*milagro*) has similar associations. For evidence, consider the *retablo* tradition. *Retablos* are folk paintings made for the express purpose of thanking a Catholic saint, or, sometimes, a folk intercessor such as Jesús Malverde (patron-saint of smugglers), for a particular *milagro*. Thematic analysis (Durand & Massey 1995) shows that contemporary *retablos* depict such stressful events as hospital recovery, escape from criminals, survival of automobile accidents, crossing the border safely into the United States, overcoming legal problems, and returning to one's home safely as consequences of supernatural intervention. Second, the term 'supernatural,' with its built-in dualism, seems less problematic when used in reference to Christian belief than when used as a general term in anthropology. However, Lohmann (2003a:175) has suggested a valuable 'etic' definition of term as 'a ubiquitous mental model that depicts one or more sentient, volitional agencies that are independent of a biological substrate and understood to be the ultimate cause of elements of physical reality.' Still, given the political implications of binary oppositions, it may be even better to use a substitute term (Sered [2003:218] uses 'ultra-natural,' and this term has interesting possibilities.)
2. The author found this to be the case after conducting a survey of 200 Georgia Southern University students about 'Out-of-the-Ordinary Phenomena.' Responses pertaining to five items that related to marvels were highly correlated, and there were interesting differences in opinion associated with religious background, gender, and ethnicity. (Results are available from the author upon request.)

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