

"Shamanism is the oldest expression of what we now call magic and art."

Susan Greenwood in conversation with Mathilde ter Heijne

Susan Greenwood is an anthropologist and research fellow in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has written several books on anthropology and magic, including *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (2000), *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness* (2005), *The Anthropology of Magic* (2010), and *Developing Magical Consciousness: A Theoretical and Practical Guide for the Expansion of Perception* (2019).

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Mathilde ter Heijne - I am very interested in your ideas about participation as a key to understanding magic and in relation to connectedness. In your book *The Anthropology of Magic* (2009) for example, you speak of something called magical participation. Could you explain what you mean by that?

Susan Greenwood - Magical participation is a way of experiencing the world. Everything comes alive with possibilities, and the everyday boundaries of thought are liberated through imagination. It is a mode of perception, an alternative mode of consciousness with which we can participate in the fullness of life. It works through making associations and connections in the mind that challenge our assumptions; therefore it is the natural preserve of artists, poets, musicians, and other creative expressions. Magical participation is distinctly different to analytical, causal thought, although the two are connected and work best together. Most people can experience both ways of thinking, and we probably shift from one to the other all the time. However, magical participation has been undervalued in rationalizing Western cultures.

Mathilde - You also describe magic as an intuitive process or state of mind- "magical consciousness," I believe. How would you describe this term?

Susan - Magical consciousness is magical participation in action. The manner in which it is felt and understood is different for everyone. It is highly specific to each individual's experience, and depends on how they relate to their culture and the world around them. What we can say, though, is that it always involves feelings, emotions and intuition and it is important in giving meaning to life. Magical consciousness can be viewed on a spectrum: some people have a highly developed sense, such as shamans, or other practitioners of magic, who might train for years to hone their skills, through to the odd flashes of inspiration or daydream that most of us have. Although not confined to the creative arts, magical consciousness might be particularly clearly seen in the work of artists.

Mathilde - I know that you initially studied visual art: What caused you to turn away from art in favor of anthropological research on Goddess religion(s), Paganism and (feminist) Wicca?

Susan - I went to art school after leaving school and completed a foundation year. I wanted to study fine art, but I wasn't ready. I didn't have the life experience to express myself. The art school offered me a place in a special photography course and I spent a year working on photographic projects. These projects stimulated my interest in people-I photographed homeless drug addicts in Piccadilly and in the crypt of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, as well as rich shoppers in Harrods of Knightsbridge, London, and racegoers at the Epsom Derby. The work made me question my society and look for alternatives. Some years later, after I had been working as a professional photographer, I enrolled in an Anthropology and Sociology Degree BA course at Goldsmiths, University of London. It was through studying anthropology, broadly the study of human beings and their varied cultures, that I could explore some of the deeper questions about human experience.

Mathilde - How would you describe your approach as an anthropologist? What made you decide to not only study the different groups from afar, but to learn about their ideas and practices by doing them yourself?

Susan - Dissatisfied with the conventional, and what I saw as the patriarchal Christianity that I had experienced as a child, I wanted to find out more about women's spirituality. I had been exploring magic in a couple of feminist witchcraft covens and wanted to find out more. I combined my interest in magic with my interest in anthropology. When I graduated I had more questions than answers. And so I decided to study magic for a PhD, the result of my doctoral research was my first book *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld* published in 2000. From the start, as I was already a practitioner of magic, I couldn't see why I couldn't include my own experience in my research. The issue in anthropology is one of objectivity, but I figured that if I understood the basics of working magic that could only help me to examine it, I might be able to develop insights not available to those who had not actually experienced it. All of my research has been a blend of analysis and the critical thinking demanded of an academic discipline. My next book, completed in 2005, was *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness*. Here I explored the importance of nature, as environment and culture in British magical practices. Recently, I have taken my deeply subjective exploration of magical consciousness much further in a book, co-authored with American neuroscientist Erik Goodwyn, called *Magical Consciousness: An Anthropological and Neuroscientific Approach*, published in 2015. The aim of this work is to show that magical thinking is fundamental to human thought, but it is also highly specific. This last work uses an exploration of the deep processes of my own magical thinking as an example.

Mathilde - Why do you think feminist spirituality in all its forms has been banished in the 1980 and 1990-ies from leading and widely appreciated feminist art, and has even been written out of the "history" of feminist art?

Susan - I don't think I'm really qualified to fully answer this question. However, I would suggest that art-or what people produce as art, and how "art" is thought about -is a reflection of a given society and its values at a particular point in time. Western cultures are becoming more dominated by materialist concerns, religions are increasingly being used to create conflicts, and spirituality is devalued. The 20th century sociologist Max Weber suggested that rationalization has made the world "disenchanted." There is too much emphasis on material things, and we have become cut off from a magical and spiritual way of living. Some feminists have also taken up an attitude of skepticism and criticism of spirituality as a "soft" or escapist option toward social change. In my own research on feminist witchcraft, I found that there was a division between "spiritual" and "political" feminists: those that sought to use magic to change a patriarchally dominant world, and those who thought you could achieve your aims through politicization. I'm not surprised to see this reflected in ideas about art, too. My own view is that we need both politics and spirituality if we are to change peoples' hearts and minds.

Mathilde - Do you see a fundamental difference between Shamanism, Paganism, Wicca and Voodoo? How would you describe it?

Susan - As I have indicated earlier, one of the main aims in my writing about magical consciousness was to show that the aptitude for thinking magically is a human universal. I have sought to demonstrate in my research that it's a basic component of how we think. This is why I was delighted to work with the neuroscientist Erik Goodwyn on our book on magical consciousness: to bring magic out of the realm of irrationality and value it as a creative and imaginative process of the mind. And so I see magical consciousness as the fundamental process that is shaped by the various cultural frameworks that might be shaped by Shamanism, Paganism, Wicca, Voodoo, and many, many more. For me, magical consciousness explains our underlying propensity to think magically, and this thinking can be expressed in a myriad of different forms.

Mathilde - Do you think the contemporary artist is actually shaman but doesn't know it, and the shaman is a contemporary artist but doesn't understand what that is?

Susan - Shamanism is the oldest expression of what we now call magic and art. Take for example early cave paintings done 20,000 years ago-most famously in Lascaux in the Dordogne, France-images of animals; here we might interpret the art as a shaman communicating with the spirit of the animal, perhaps as a hunting ritual. Our earliest ancestors lived in a magical world. Everything was infused with spirit; the world was alive with spirits. Shamans had a special relationship with the realm of spirits. They were the mediators between the everyday world and the invisible world: between animals and humans, and between the living and the dead. The shaman was the healer, priest, counsellor, artist, and performance actor of that time. If there was a problem in the community-if someone was sick or there were no animals to hunt-it was the shaman who, as a specialist with spirits, would be called to resolve the matter. They might do that through communicating with the spirit of an animal on a cave wall deep within a sacred space. The shaman in these early human communities had a special role to play to help the community. Everyone

shared that worldview. Today we live in a very different world, one that has many varied representations and understandings of a non-material spirit reality. If we look at more contemporary practices of shamanism-such as with North or South American Indians, for example -we can see that they often undergo disciplined and hard training to take on the role of shaman. It is not something lightly undertaken, or even sought out. My feeling is that some contemporary artists might be shamans; perhaps they have undergone some deep and profound initiation process by which they come to understand the need to communicate with the world of spirits. But maybe others are what we might call "shamanistic." They unwittingly effect a shamanistic change, both in themselves and in the viewers of their art. Again, the response to magical consciousness is highly individual and it is difficult to generalize, but I would hazard a guess that most contemporary artists are more shamanistic than shaman.