What I do as a sorcerer

Notes for a seminar at The Site, 22.2.2018, with Chris Oakley.

Trance, ritual, spell. To what end?

I am a sorcerer in the chaos magic tradition. In a space where I was talking to other pagans and occultists this would be enough information for people to be able to locate much of my working model, although possibly not much of my day to day practice. It is a statement the function of which is equivalent, perhaps, to saying ‘I am an existential psychoanalyst’. This notion - of function - is what I want to try and take as a connecting thread in my comments. In particular the chaos magical tradition grounds much of their work on using the function of belief. The core idea here is that belief is a tool. But a tool for what?

First of all, some rules of thumb that underpin this talk of ‘belief’

(a) Belief is (primarily) an affective state, distinct from judgement.
(b) Trance is the function of production of belief. (Transference as a form of trance).
(c) ‘Knowledge’ (JTB or otherwise) is materialised, that is, made concrete and actual, only on the ground of Belief. (The condition of reality of knowledge is belief.)

With this very rough framework in the background, what is it that a sorcerer does? The answer is, speaking generally, that the sorcerer does whatever is in their power and simultaneously takes responsibility for their capacities, which effectively means that they explore, deploy and increase their capacities when needed. Much of the time this looks from the outside like a form of self-development, and indeed it may be limited to this, but if the sorcerer continues in their practice the ‘self’ becomes something that proliferates.
Still, what is it that the sorcerer actually does? There are perhaps three elements of activity that can be identified - trance, ritual and spell. We embrace and use trance - both deep trance and light ‘habituating’ trance; we enact and produce ritual, both highly complex symbolic theatrical ritual and empty-handed or near-empty-handed bodily acts; and we cast spells by embodying intentions into objects and actions. Above all, we practice. By this I mean something quite simple - sorcery is not something that can be done without practice. The sorcerer cannot know anything without enactment, even if the enactment is as simple as the muttering of a spell from a book, because the primary medium of sorcery is the body.

Sorcery is, above all, a practice and, moreover, a practice that needs no theory because the practice is the ‘theoretical’ work itself. The practice comes first. If ‘theory’ means something like contemplation, if it means something like ‘a way of seeing’ then there is nothing to see without first doing. Sorcery is thus highly experimental and exploratory, and someone interested in knowing what sorcery is can only fully encounter sorcery by becoming sorcerous, even if only a little.

In practice many of the techniques of the sorcerer may be quite familiar. Meditation and breathing techniques are almost ubiquitous and for many are some of the most basic everyday practices. Making objects and artworks - crafting - is again extremely common. Other widespread practices are theatrical activities (ritual); storytelling, poetry and music; training and knowledge sharing through workshops, lectures and seminars; the study of self-declared magical and sorcerous traditions and texts as well as the study of other disciplines when material of interest is found; the production and use of psychoactive substances (‘potions and sacraments’ and ‘entheogens’); an engagement with sexuality, death, bones and blood and the formation of communities, both formal and informal.
Sorcery makes use of anything it can find in the culture in which it operates to construct its practices and so, at its heart, reveals itself to be a human practice.

Whilst being a human practice, however, sorcery is above all directed towards developing an engagement with the non-human. Sorcerers do heal and curse but above all they aim to connect and above all to connect with that which is not human - animal, plant, planet, star and cosmos; angel, demon, fairy or goddess. It is for this reason, this imperative to connect with that which is not human, that we find sorcerers occupying a liminal, marginal position in human communities, in borderlands between this world and that world. The core function of the sorcerer is to build or create connections with that which is not human in such a way that a dialogue of some kind becomes possible, perhaps just between the sorcerer and the other but potentially (and in some places in practice) between the human community and non human communities.

All this, of course, is to spread a wide net, one which many sorcerers will quite reasonably declare doesn't capture quite what it is they do. Maybe it's easier to describe a little of what I do?

I meditate regularly, usually every day. I keep a diary that records much of my sorcerous work. I burn incense, light candles, draw sigils on objects and in the air, chant, whisper, mutter and mark spells. I go into the woods at the time of the pagan festivals, create circles where I make altars and light fires and sit or dance, sometimes robed, sometimes naked, sometimes in silence and sober, sometimes ecstatic and intoxicated, sometimes alone and sometimes with others. I make potions, grow plants, tend woodlands and allotments and organise communities. I make pacts and bargains, ask for boons and offer devotions. To use terms more familiar to chaos magicians, I evoke, invoke, divine, enchant and illuminate,
to various degrees at various times. Most of all I work to organise connections and much of the time those connections then guide and open new spaces of exploration as new connections weave themselves into already existing ones - and in forming connections comes joy, so long as I take responsibility for the connections. This ‘taking of responsibility’ is crucial to the sorcerer. Making connections involves breaking connections as much as instituting them, it involves a responsiveness that must be developed in selecting those connections which aid and those which harm, and this cannot be restricted solely to that thing called the ‘self’ but needs to extend to that realm of the non human, not least because for the sorcerer responsibility involves acknowledging our role as a human assemblage within a universe of other assemblages.

To do this, to build connections, we sorcerers build beliefs, which we embody through practices of our body, often involving trance states or the re-machining of habitual assemblages of light trance in which the human perpetually lives most of its life. We build and institute states of believing which may be temporary or permanent but which we take responsibility for by reflection over time. Exactly what beliefs we build, however, depends on our intentions.

This interest in the technologies of belief, in experimenting with the production of beliefs, is resonant with a wider problem diagnosed by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *What is philosophy?*. There they say the following:

“...it is possible that the problem now concerns the one who believes in the world, and not even in the existence of the world but in its possibilities of movements and intensities, so as once again to give birth to new modes of existence, closer to animals and rocks. It may be that believing in this world, in this life, becomes our
most difficult task, or the task of a mode of existence still to be discovered on our plane of immanence today. (WIP 74)

In many ways the fascination of the sorcerer with belief, now, in our world or in our multitude of worlds, arises from this problematic. The skill of the sorcerer rests on their capacity to believe without believing, to engage with the necessity of belief, its reality, intensity and productivity, without being drowned in its depths. Trance, as the function of the production of belief, thus rests at the core of what we sorcerers do and the capacity to deploy trance, in its full range of intensity, is perhaps what we attempt to develop above all else.

If it seems a little slippery, if I haven’t satisfied your curiosity as to what a sorcerer does, then this may be for reasons familiar to psychoanalysts. In his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* Freud points out to his audience the difference between training in physiology or psychiatry and that in psychoanalysis. He first refers to the use of words and the way those who dismiss the possibility of the talking cure refer to ‘mere talking’ being involved in the psychoanalytic treatment. He then remarks, as if to clarify that there is no such thing as ‘mere talking’, that

“words were originally magic and to this day have retained much of their ancient magical power. By words one person can make another blissfully happy or drive him to despair, by words the teacher conveys his knowledge to his pupils, by words the orator carries his audience with him and determines their judgements and decisions. Words provoke affects and are in general the means of mutual influence among men” (PFL 41).

After rejecting the dismissal of psychoanalysis as ‘mere talking’ by appealing to the ‘magical’ power of words he goes on to make the point that, despite this, despite the *public* nature of the words that are apparently crucial to the talking cure, it is still not possible to *observe* a psychoanalytic session. The session itself, the actual practice of psychoanalysis, requires
privacy. Specifically he claims that “the talk of which psychoanalytic treatment consists brooks no listener; it cannot be demonstrated” and he goes on to explain that “the information required by analysis will be given by [the patient] only on condition of his having a special emotional attachment to the doctor; [the patient] would become silent as soon as he observed a single witness to whom he felt indifferent”. Just to emphasise the problem he goes on to make it clear that “in the strictest sense of the word, it is only by hearsay that you will get to know psychoanalysis”. (PFL 42). I would suggest that, for similar reasons, it will only be by hearsay that you will get to know sorcery.

**Experience/behaviour in Laing**

Freud is of course not the only person to have ever referred, seemingly without irony, to ‘magical power’ within a rational discourse of understanding, where this magical power refers to something like an irrational element in our experience and behaviour. We find the same reference in Laing, in his book *The politics of experience*, when he talks about the role of creation.

“If there are no meanings, no values, no source of sustenance or help, then man, as creator, must invent, conjure up new meanings and values, sustenance and succour out of nothing. He is a magician.” (PE 37).

Shortly after this passage Laing goes on to say the following.

“Words in a poem, sounds in movement, rhythm in space, attempt to recapture personal meanings in personal time and space from out of the sights and sounds of a depersonalised, dehumanised world. They are bridgeheads into alien territory. They are acts of insurrection.” (ibid)

Laing himself goes on to say, in a very Sartrean vein, that the source of this creation is “from the Silence at the centre of each of us”(ibid) and there is a way of understanding sorcery that
would happily align itself with the Sartrean existentialist emphasis on the power of the
imagination and nihilation supposedly located within the human. The difficulty with such an
understanding, however, is that its' valiant efforts to defend a human specificity and value in
the face of natural scientific reductionism ends up rending the human from the world. If, as I
have suggested, the function of the sorcerer is to build or create connections with that which
is non human then working within a theoretical paradigm grounded precisely in separating
and promoting the human as distinct from the non human is problematic.

Laing, for example, suggests that different psychoanalytic theories can be understood as
placing different emphases on the twin elements of experience and behaviour. In particular
Laing wants to emphasise a ‘doubling up’ of the relations of experience and behaviour in his
social phenomenology, which is focused on what he calls ‘inter-experience’, that is,

“It is concerned with your behaviour and my behaviour as I experience it, and your
behaviour and my behaviour as you experience it.” (PE 17).

He suggests, with regard this inter-experience, that the “idiom of games theory” has an
advantage as “it relates persons together” and that “the failure to see the behaviour of one
person in relation to the behaviour of the other has led to much confusion” (PE 43).

As a sorcerer, particularly as a sorcerer from the chaos magic tradition, I find myself in great
sympathy with this notion of the game but I’m left wondering why it seems so artificially
restricted to human persons? The most direct response, perhaps, is that there is a
widespread restriction of the concept of experience to the human, a restriction that seems
highly problematic. What the ‘game theory idiom’ allows, however, is for experience to be
placed back within a complex and extended field of interactions, one that is productive of
experiences but which itself is pre-subjective. To limit this extended field of interactions
merely to the human seems arbitrary, inconsistent and unproductive. For the sorcerer the
field of interactions, that space in which connections are built, broken and reconfigured, precedes any experience of subjectivity. In particular this field of interactions is populated predominantly by non human assemblages, by non human persons and non human interactions. Yet the more obvious reason as to why the field of interaction of the game is restricted to humans in Laing is that he was interested in humans. His passionate writings reveal a continuous cry against the pain humans cause each other and his work loses nothing for its focus on the human, apart from when he begins to offer accounts of the world, of being, of the ‘way things are’.

The body, trance and transference.

If it is with regard this field of interactions of the inter-experience that the ‘idiom of game theory’ gains its advantage, it is with regard this field of interactions that the difference between sorcery and psychoanalysis is most explicit. For the sorcerer the body is their primary tool of art. It is through the body, through changes in the body-chemistry, the body-structure, the body-behaviour and the body-organisation that the sorcerer attempts to attune themselves to the connections they work with. It is through the body that we listen and with the body that we talk and it is perhaps for this reason that the body itself is the closest thing to what, in psychoanalysis, is called the ‘unconscious’. Yet the body of the sorcerer is a nexus of connections, not merely a physical organism. These connections occur with or without the sorcerer and are encountered in the habits and ‘light trances’ of the body, the way it settles into a rhythm, or finds itself unsettled into arrhythmias.

An example of the sorcery of the body might be seen in William Burroughs concept of the ‘do easy’. Burroughs strongly identified with chaos magic towards the end of his life, joining one
of the few organised groups of chaos magicians, the ‘Illuminates of Thatateros’. Burroughs
defines doing easy in the following way:

“DE is a way of doing. It is a way of doing everything you do. DE simply means doing
whatever you do in the easiest most relaxed way you can manage which is also the
quickest and most efficient way…” (Burroughs, Doing Easy)

This practice appears like a form of body mindfulness in that the subject begins to focus not
on their experience or even, strictly speaking, on what we might be called behaviour but
instead on the connections and flows of the body within a wider field of interactions,
interactions with objects, things, people, ideas and other bodies. Interestingly the practice of
doing easy also has the capacity to offer curious insights into those little mental loops and
intrusive thoughts that can slide under our awareness until they produce something
unwanted in our experience. As one practices do easy there are whole series of failures of
the body, moments when the fingers slip, or the legs trip. At those moments something or
someone that is disruptive to us is usually in our minds but not yet on our mind. In this way
the body acts as a kind of ‘tell’, offering us a royal road to the field of interactions within
which we are continually being produced, a field that - like the psychoanalytic unconscious -
can never be fully brought into the light but the effects of which are crucial to the production
of consciousness.

The other effect of something like do easy is of course to produce what I have been calling
‘light trance’. If heavy trance is close to the production of an altered state of consciousness,
then light trance is the production of a habitual state of the body. The body settles into these
light trance states to such an extent that it might even be thought to be the basic state of the
body, to be entranced. Transference, the production of that ‘special emotional attachment’
that Freud spoke of, operates not simply - I would suggest - through the symbolic or affective
relation to the master, the one who knows, the one who cares or can cure but also through
the settling of the body into particular habitual light trance states formed by the analytic encounter.

To return to the brief rules of thumb I outlined at the start of this paper, I might suggest that the structure of the analytic encounter in terms of the way the bodies are organised produces an affective state of light trance, which is expressed in the particular mode of the ‘special emotional attachment’ of transference (trance as the function of production of belief). It is this that then enables the analysand to ‘come to know’. Analogously the sorcerer engages in constructing assemblages of bodies, organising and re-organising bodies with a view to experimenting with the form of light trance that the body will inevitably settle into or which will result from a particular way of unsettling the body through heavy trance. These experiments of the sorcerer, however, are not solely focused on cure or care, but depend only on the particular intentions of the particular sorcerer at a particular time. At the same time the practice of sorcery produces a continual engagement with the need to take responsibility for the intentions of the sorcerer, through the processes of making explicit and reflection, and in taking such responsibility the sorcerer encounters the potentials of their power, or if you prefer, the limits of their freedom. To that extent sorcery is simply a functional practice of body-organisation, developing and deploying techniques of attempted agency within a pragmatics of freedom.

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