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“Luck as Contemporary Folkloric Magic: A Multidisciplinary Approach.”

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will examine the feasibility of a study of luck as contemporary folkloric magic. First, I will establish the concepts used in defining magic in academia, with a wider look at theories on rituals and folklore in religious studies in order to acknowledge peripheral concepts. Second, I will assess the available literature pertaining directly with the conceptualization of luck in philosophy, psychology, religious studies, ritual studies and folklore. In doing so, I hope to evaluate the necessity and place of a study of luck as magic within religious studies. In my concluding remarks, I will propose a methodology to pursue an actual study of luck using the elements discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Luck, Magic, Multidisciplinary, Folklore, Literature Review, Ritual.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary Western world, one often hears the expression “Good luck!” Many expressions (“knock on wood”), actions (crossing one’s fingers), and items (four-leaf clovers) are associated with this concept of luck. But what is luck? Luck, as I will demonstrate, can be considered as a metaphysical force analogous to magic, one that is traditionally regarded as part of a non-religious system of belief, which nonetheless contains religious-like elements and that can be (but is not necessarily) superposed upon a religious one when included within a category of belief such as superstition.

Of course, a conceptualization of luck as magic does not encompass the entirety of the concept, but interacts with a facet which lies on the periphery of everyday considerations. As John Cohen notes, “the idea of luck is ubiquitous but by no means simple, in the sense that it means precisely the same to everyone, everywhere. Expressions for ‘luck’ in different languages introduce nuances that are difficult, if not impossible, to capture in any particular tongue. And even those who speak the same language do not necessarily use the word for ‘luck’ in the same sense.”² Usually, in the contemporary West, the terms luck and chance are conflated, where using one term implies the other and vice versa. Chance, in contrast with luck, contains no

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² John Cohen, *Chance, Skill and Luck: The Psychology of Guessing and Gambling* (London: Pelican, 1960): 114.

metaphysical ramification in its definition, and pertains solely to probability; One who has chance (French *chanceu.se*), who is lucky, does not necessarily have luck. Expressions such as "take a chance," meaning "give it a shot," or simply "try," imply a probability of success rather than one's usage of a metaphysical element. Those phrases have different implications than expressions such as "good luck," meaning "I give you / I hope that you will have luck," which themselves introduce luck as a concept alien to probability. This usage of the term luck suggests that specific actions were undertaken to give luck to someone, or that luck passively interacts with specific objects or situations. In its passive sense, i.e. having good or bad luck (French *chance* and *malchance*, respectively) independently of one's action, that is without any ritualization consciously associated with one's action in a specific context, luck means chance. Thus, the linguistic usage of both luck and chance demonstrate two possible modes of thought: metaphysical and probability. Here, the question becomes: how does one define and account for luck when considering it as a belief?

Now, investigating contemporary folklore presents unique methodological challenges, some of which will be dealt with here. The belief system surrounding luck, as it is for some folkloric traditions, is never put in writing aside in practice of belief: one may write a novel in which "luck" is mentioned or practiced, or one may express their belief in an item such as a four-leaf clover, without any afterthoughts on the matter. This effectively puts the term and practice of luck in writing, but does little more than give an example of the belief (and, consequently, insight into the belief structure). Studying this concept, then, requires some amount of conceptualization.

Examining the feasibility of a study of luck as contemporary folkloric magic, I will first establish the concepts used in defining magic in academia, with a wider look at theories on

rituals and folklore in religious studies in order to acknowledge peripheral concepts. Second, I will assess the available literature pertaining directly with the conceptualization of luck in philosophy, psychology, religious studies, ritual studies and folklore. In doing so, I hope to evaluate the necessity and place of a study of luck as magic within religious studies. In my concluding remarks, I will propose a methodology to pursue an actual study of luck using the elements discussed in this paper.

MAGIC, RITUAL AND FOLKLORE: A WORKING TAXONOMY

In order to evaluate the necessity and place of a study of luck as magic within religious studies, one needs to assess the literature available in the academic study of religion. Prior to determining the validity of such a study, some concepts used above in my working theory need clarification for the reader to grasp the conceptualization of luck *qua* magic.

MAGIC AND RITUAL

Magic has been practiced in every period and culture of human history, in some to a greater extent. Scholars of religion typically conceive of it in terms of religious practices as a causal system based on persuasion and ritualization, and divided in categories of acts and intents. Historically, the concept of magic spawns from the ancient Greek *magoi*, a word referencing "practitioners of private cults,"³ specifically ancient Persian Zoroastrian priests. In the sense of the practice of Others, this conceptualization has been reused throughout the centuries and was later Christianized by writers such as Augustine of Hippo, who lists both magical arts and divination (in the form of haruspices and augurs) as "superstition" in *On Christian Doctrine*.⁴

³ Jan N. Bremmer, "The Birth of the Term 'Magic,'" in *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, edited by Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra (Leuven: Peeters Publishing, 2002): 2.

⁴ See Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library). See especially Book II, Chapter 20.30.

This Christianized conceptualization of magic informed early academic writings on magic; As Ahmet Ünal explains,

J. Grimm wrote in 1875: "miracles are divine, magic is infernal", and Simar formulated in 1894: "Soothsayers like magicians want to break their way forcibly into the sanctuary of divine omniscience and omnipotence, they stretch their impure hands once again toward the tree of knowledge in order to assume a likeness to God"... magic was categorized in early studies as valueless in comparison to [the Judeo-Christian] religions.⁵

Eventually, the academic study of magic transcended its Christian confines, leading to texts such as Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg's *Defining Magic: A Reader*,⁶ Stanley J. Tambiah's *Form and meaning of magical acts: A point of view*,⁷ and Daniel Miller's *Another Look at the Magical Ritual for a Suspected Adulteress in Numbers 5:11–31*.⁸ Granting that these texts, and many others in the study of magic, focus on cultures of the ancient Near East, they nonetheless express theoretical approaches to the study of magic as a larger field.

Outside of its Christian understanding, magic takes the form, to use Tambiah's conceptualization, of a conventional persuasive system predicated on cause and effect. A conventional persuasive system "consists in persuasively transferring the properties of the desired... relation to the [object] which is in an undesirable condition, or in attempting to convert a potential not-yet-achieved state into an actualized one."⁹ In turn, the cause and effect relationship of the system is based on categories of acts and intents; specific acts with specific intents have different effects from one another. Joris Frans Borghouts, in *Witchcraft, Magic, and*

⁵ Ahmet Ünal, "The Role of Magic in the Ancient Anatolian Religions According to the Cuneiform Texts from Boğazköy-Ḫattuša," in *Essays on Anatolian Studies in the Second Millennium B. C.*, edited by H. I. H. Prince Takahito Mikasa (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1988), 56.

⁶ See Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg, *Defining Magic : A Reader*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2013.

⁷ See Stanley J. Tambiah, "Form and meaning of magical acts: A point of view," *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 3 (2017): 451-73.

⁸ See Daniel Miller, "Another Look at the Magical Ritual for a Suspected Adulteress in Numbers 5:11–31." *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 5, no. 1 (2010): 1-16.

⁹ Tambiah, 461. He contrasts this system of knowledge assessment with scientific predictive, which "serves as a model in science generating hypotheses and comparisons which are then subject to verification inductively." (Ibid.)

Divination in Ancient Egypt,¹⁰ demonstrate the three non-exclusive and intersectional types of magical acts: magic by speech (incantation),¹¹ magic by rite (ritual),¹² and magic by inherent property (items).¹³ In her detailed account of Hittite magic, Gabriella Frantz-Szabó suggests that there were only two modes of magical intent in Hittite culture, either "white" (apotropaic) and "black" (harmful).¹⁴ While this was surely the case, it is difficult to introduce love or sexual spells, such as the Mesopotamian ŠÀ.ZI.GA ritual,¹⁵ within either category. In other words, intent is the purpose of the magical ritual, the objective of its expected effect.

Furthermore, the operational ritual logic—a terminology coined by Miller, used to describe the ways in which magic operates—of luck has similarities with the mechanical elements of magic.¹⁶ Magic is often understood in part as cosmic sympathy, the idea that "anything that happens in any part of the universe can affect something else in the universe, no matter how distant or unrelated it may seem."¹⁷ A specific action, consciously undertaken, is efficacious only because of its ritualization; It is true for both magic and luck that without the proper cultural references and the proper ritualization, the desired effect will not come to fruition. Undertaking a specific action causes a specific effect, determined by the intent of the action (or agent) and by the ritualization of the act itself.

¹⁰ Joris Frans Borghouts, "Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Ancient Egypt," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East 3*, ed. Jack M. Sasson et al. (New York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995), 1775-1785.

¹¹ For more on incantations, see Daniel Miller, "Incantations in Ancient West Semitic Corpora and the Hebrew Bible: Continuity and Discontinuity." See esp. chap. 1, part 16 "A new classification system for incantations."

¹² For example, the Mesopotamian ŠÀ.ZI.GA ritual. See Walter Farber, "Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East 3*, ed. Jack M. Sasson et al. (New York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995), 1895-909.

¹³ For example, the Ketef Hinnom amuletic scrolls. See Gabriel Barkay et al., "The Challenges of Ketef Hinnom," *Near Eastern Archeology* 66, no. 4 (2003): 162-71. A more comprehensive discussion of the interplay of magic by speech and magic by rite in conducting magic by inherent property goes beyond the scope of the current paper.

¹⁴ See Gabriella Frantz-Szabó, "Hittite Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East 3*, edited by Jack M. Sasson et al. (New York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan, 1995), 2007-19.

¹⁵ See Farber.

¹⁶ See Miller, "Another Look at the Magical Ritual for a Suspected Adulteress in Numbers 5:11-31," 5.

¹⁷ Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi, Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds, A Collection of Ancient Texts* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 5.

Given that the term "ritual" is tremendously vague, and that theories on rituals tackle both its sacred and mundane modes, sometimes without proper distinction, scholars in ritual studies prefer to use the term "ritualization" when discussing the time, space, elements, and expected effects of a specific ritual. As Catherine Bell states,

Most attempts to define ritual proceed by formulating the universal qualities of an autonomous phenomenon. They maintain, however provisionally, that there is something we can generally call ritual and whenever or wherever it occurs it has certain distinctive features. Such definitions inevitably come to function as a set of criteria for judging whether some specific activities can be deemed ritual. As a result, these definitions of ritual are not complete when they set up a single universal construct; additional categories are needed to account for all the data that do not fit neatly into the domain of the original term.¹⁸

Scholars of ritual, such as Catherine Bell and Ronald Grimes,¹⁹ have been instrumental in developing theories in ritual studies.²⁰ Ronald Grimes, often co-identified as the parent of ritual studies with Catherine Bell, wrote abundantly on methods and application of ritual studies.²¹ Academics from a variety of scholarly disciplines have written on ritual, and people such as Claude Levi Strauss (anthropology),²² Émile Durkheim (sociology),²³ Victor Turner²⁴ and Gavin

¹⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 69.

¹⁹ See Ronald L. Grimes, *Ritual, Media, and Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Ronald L. Grimes, *Rite Out of Place: Ritual, Media, and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Ronald L. Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1990).

²⁰ See Catherine Bell, ed., *Teaching Ritual*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Catherine Bell and Reza Aslan, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²¹ See Ronald L. Grimes, *Research in Ritual Studies: A Programmatic Essay and Bibliography* (Chicago: American Theological Library Association, 1985). See also Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), and Ronald L. Grimes *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982).

²² See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

²³ See Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

²⁴ See Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

Brown (performance study),²⁵ and Ceri Houlbrook (folklore)²⁶ have brought insightful additions to the conversation on ritual, each with their specific focus, although few authors actually discuss luck rituals, focusing rather on larger problems such as framework (Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner),²⁷ play theory (Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart),²⁸ efficacy (Johannes Quack and William S. Sax),²⁹ interrituality (Anne-Christine Hornborg),³⁰ and embodiment (Damon Lycourinos).³¹

Luck and its ritualization are composed of the same three main categorizations as magical practices: uttering "Good luck" is an incantation, crossing one's fingers is a ritual, and four-leaf clovers are magical items. Luck also has the two dichotomic modes of intent laid out by Frantz-Szabó; good luck is apotropaic and bad luck is harmful. Luck rituals may also have intent other than protective or destructive, as magic rituals do. Moreover, luck is ritualized in different ways depending on its setting, intent, and relation to other rituals (whether pertaining to luck or not).

In this way, then, luck contains a metaphysical element similar to magic when not considered in terms of probability: in proceeding with certain ritualisations, one affects a specific situation in a perceivably logical way by means of an operational ritual logic, and through a force akin to cosmic sympathy.

²⁵ See Gavin Brown, "Theorizing Ritual as Performance: Explorations of Ritual Indeterminacy," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 3-18.

²⁶ See Ceri Houlbrook, *The Magic of Coin-Trees from Religion to Recreation: The Roots of a Ritual* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

²⁷ See Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, "Re-Mapping Bateson's Frame," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 26, no. 2 (2012): 7-20.

²⁸ See Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart, "Comment: At Play in the Fields of Framing. Or, Why Framing? From Play to Work in Ritual Process," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 26, no. 2 (2012): 79-80.

²⁹ See Johannes Quack and William S. Sax, "Introduction: The Efficacy of Rituals," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 5-12.

³⁰ See Anne-Christine Hornborg, "Interrituality as a Means to Perform the Art of Building New Rituals," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 31, no. 2 (2017): 17-27.

³¹ See Damon Lycourinos, "Sexuality, Magic(k) and the Ritual Body: A Phenomenology of Embodiment and Participation in a Modern Magical Ritual," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 31, no. 2 (2017): 61-77.

FOLKLORE

While ultimately without precise definition, folklore is, in Martha Sims and Martine Stephens's words,

Informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures, and our traditions that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors, and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people.³²

In other words, folklore is not taught as part of a formalized curriculum, and consists of knowledge and concepts that are not regularized by an authority. Luck *qua* magic is unofficial knowledge that is informally learned as it is not academically imparted, nor is its meaning pedagogically formalized. While luck is articulated through words and is interactive in its communication, as its linguistic functions confirm, it is also expressed through other means. For example, the representation of luck as a four-leaf clover, the custom of identifying black cats with luck (either good or bad, depending on cultures), or the behaviour or knocking on wood in order not to attract bad luck are all creative expressions of luck transmitted through performance and communication. Thus, it can be said that luck is a form of folkloric belief.

Given its linguistic usage, ritualization, operational ritual logic, and folkloric-resemblant structure, luck—in its Western iteration and aside from its definition as probability or chance—is a form of contemporary folkloric magic.

In schools of religious studies, neither magic, ritual nor folklore are given proper focus. Instead, those multidisciplinary subjects are repelled to the periphery of academic studies: Magic is usually mentioned in studies of ancient Near-Eastern religions and in psychology, ritual studies are conducted in sociology, psychology, anthropology and religion departments, while

³² Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens, *Living Folklore : An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*, 2nd ed. (Logan: Utah State Univ Press, 2011), 8.

folklore is studied in language and literature departments in addition to religion and anthropology. This bounds theories of luck to those academic disciplines, while still ultimately letting it be free-formed by multidisciplinary approaches.

THEORIES OF LUCK

Luck has been the focus of some studies, mostly in philosophy and psychology. Unsurprisingly, it has mostly been considered in meanings of probability, with a few exceptions. In religious study, luck has been investigated both in terms of probability and as a religious phenomenon, while in ritual study and folklore the concept of luck is practically non-existent in the academic literature.

PHILOSOPHY

In Duncan Pritchard and Matthew Smith's words, "Of those that do attempt to offer a useful account of the notion of luck, one of the most standard approaches has been to define this concept in terms of the notion of an accident."³³ As they show, philosophers repeatedly install luck as conceptualized from chance, accident, odds, plausibility, probability, fortune, and overall lack of control over a situation, without considering its metaphysical facet. In this sense, philosophers define luck as either situation or agent dependent, where its functionality is, respectively, subject-relative or subject-involving. Joe Milburn, in *Subject-Involving Luck*, wrote that a subject-relative account of luck "[fills] in the right-hand side of the following biconditional: an event e is lucky for a subject S if and only if _____,"³⁴ while a subject-involving account "[fills] in the right-hand side of this biconditional: it is a matter of luck that S ϕ s iff _____."³⁵

³³ Duncan Pritchard and Matthew Smith, "The Psychology and Philosophy of Luck," *New Ideas in Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2004): 1-28.

³⁴ Joe Milburn, "Subject-Involving Luck," *Metaphilosophy* 45, no. 4-5 (2014): 578.

³⁵ Ibid. " ϕ " refers to a generic act, and "iff" means "if and only if."

Thomas Nagel, in *Moral Questions*, establishes luck in the following way: "Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgement, it can be called moral luck,"³⁶ while Mylan Engel's article *Is epistemic luck compatible with knowledge?* describes luck as "situations where a person has a true belief which is in some sense fortuitous or coincidental."³⁷ In most philosophical inquiries, the concept of luck falls within discussions of morality or epistemology, respectively answering the following questions: Should one's action be judged as moral or immoral if they are the result of luck (*qua* chance)?³⁸ Does one really acquire or have knowledge if this knowledge is contingent on accidental or coincidental elements?³⁹ Other influential philosophers also wrote about (or alluded to) their perspective on luck: for David Hume morality transcended luck,⁴⁰ Immanuel Kant proposed that "morality is immune from luck,"⁴¹ and René Descartes "mere happiness... is contentment of mind that is acquired through luck and fortune."⁴²

Interestingly, it is without considering luck as a metaphysical element that philosophers allude to it. In *The Machinations of Luck*, Nicholas Rescher exemplifies the three "doctrinal positions that deny the existence of luck" (*qua* chance): mechanistic determinism, metaphysical determinism and theological predestinationism. Respectively, those positions implies that "the

³⁶ Thomas Nagel, "Moral luck," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 25

³⁷ Mylan Engel, "Is epistemic luck compatible with knowledge?" in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30 (1992): 59.

³⁸ "For example, if we find out that a woman who has just stepped on your toes was simply pushed, then our temptation to blame her is likely to evaporate." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Moral Luck," last modified April 19, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-luck/>.

³⁹ "for example, an optimist's belief that it will not rain may luckily turn out to be correct, despite forecasts for heavy rain all day." Mylan Engel, "Epistemic Luck," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁴⁰ See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Hume on Free Will," last modified May 27, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-freewill/#LuckAndMorSys>.

⁴¹ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Moral Luck," last modified April 19, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-luck/>.

⁴² See *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "René Descartes: Ethics."

world is one vast machine of sorts, all of whose operations are unavailingly predetermined by nature's inexorable laws,"⁴³ that "the world's eventuations are one and all predetermined for the very interest of time by principles of lawful order that necessitates all of its occurrences,"⁴⁴ and that "the world's treaty [is] the temporal unfolding of a vast and all-determinative program through which God sets into action an all-determinative plan."⁴⁵ Indeed, these positions exclude luck *qua* chance from their machinations, but what of the cases in which one believes (consciously or not) in luck as an efficacious force which can be controlled while simultaneously endorsing one of those worldviews? Is luck *qua* magic really inconceivable in those settings? Considering luck as one of the mechanics of a mechanistic world or as one of the principles of a metaphysical world ultimately permits a recognition of luck *qua* magic without disrupting those perspectives.

PSYCHOLOGY

Studies of luck in psychology range from attribution theory, in theorizing luck as chance, to gambling psychology, in which luck is conceptualized both in terms of chance and of an unknown force. While few scholars of psychology go as far as to say that luck is magic (or magic-like), some actually introduced such a theory, considering what scholars of magic call the operational ritual logic of luck rituals. In their article, *The Psychology and Philosophy of Luck*, Pritchard and Smith notice the same amalgamation of meanings found in psychological investigations as in the philosophical conceptualization of luck, with some additions, although they themselves are quick to dismiss the idea of luck as magic.

⁴³ Nicholas Rescher, "The Machinations of Luck," in *The Philosophy of Luck*, ed. Duncan Pritchard (Wiley-Blackwell: Malden, MA, 2015), 174.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Fritz Heider's theory of attribution comes close to recognizing the metaphysical element of luck, but falls short: "when the success is attributed to luck... two things are implied: First, that environmental conditions, rather than the person, are primarily responsible for the outcome, and second, that these environmental conditions are the product of chance."⁴⁶ Using Heider's terms, one could say that the effects of luck *qua* magic are the products of personal attributions in manipulating environmental conditions. Without plainly presenting luck as magic, Gideon Keren and Willem Albert Wagenaar, in their study of blackjack and gambling, found that "there was consensus among those interviewed that luck was a concept that refers to a person, whilst chance refers to an event or outcome—some people may be luckier than others, whereas chance is the same for everyone."⁴⁷ This implies, maybe unintentionally, that luck can be considered as a substance, that one may have (or even obtain, and thus lose) more luck than another. Similarly, David M. Hayano "found that poker players perceived luck to be some kind of 'agent' that explained why cards would fall in detectable patterns. Players believed they could control their luck by employing a variety of strategies such as talking to the cards, moving seats or playing at a different table."⁴⁸ One may observe the implications of different acts, utterances, and rites for the believer (and practitioner of) luck as described by Hayano—although the agents here do not identify the perceived effectiveness of those rituals as efficacious by operational logic, or at least not in those terms. Analogously, Peter R. Darke and Jonathan L. Freedman mention that some

⁴⁶ Heider, Fritz, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, (New York: Wiley, 1958), 91.

⁴⁷ Pritchard and Smith. See Gideon Keren and Willem Albert Wagenaar, "On the psychology of playing blackjack: Normative and descriptive considerations with implications for decision theory," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 114 (1985):133-158.

⁴⁸ Pritchard and Smith. See David M. Hayano, "Strategies for the management of luck and action in an urban Poker Parlour," *Urban Life* 6 (1978): 475-488.

people hold beliefs about luck, in its metaphysical sense, as a "somewhat stable force that tends to influence events in their own favour."⁴⁹

Surprisingly, and maybe somewhat bluntly for a scholar of psychology, James M. Henslin categorized gambling rituals to control luck as magical, given that "driver-player do believe in and practice magic"⁵⁰ in their use of luck. In this way, luck is an "inexplicable and hidden skill"⁵¹ that seems to require "some degree of skill which enables the agents to manipulate outcomes, particularly (or perhaps only) where there is some significant degree of chance in play," the result of which is nonetheless not restricted solely by chance or skill.⁵²

The interesting point brought by studies of luck in psychology is the fact that "luck was not clearly identified by subjects as being either external or internal and that luck was not clearly identified by subjects as being uncontrollable." This implies, in addition to the observations above, that luck was identified as being controllable by some people. When cast in terms of controllability, the metaphysical aspect of luck becomes either fate (uncontrollable luck) or magic (controllable luck).

RELIGION

Studies about luck in religious studies are divided into two camps: those who adopt the philosophical approach of luck *qua* chance, and those who consider luck in terms of implicit religion, that is "anything present in [peoples] lives that was comparable to religion, in any of its various dimensions and manifestations,"⁵³ which is unspoken and has a character of its own.

⁴⁹ Peter R. Darke and Jonathan L. Freedman, "The belief in good luck scale," *Journal of Research in Personality* 31 (1997): 486

⁵⁰ Henslin, James M. "Craps and Magic." *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 3 (1967): 318.

⁵¹ Pritchard and Smith.

⁵² Pritchard and Smith.

⁵³ Edward Bailey, "Implicit Religion," *Religion* 40, no. 4 (2010): 271.

Inspired by the philosophical debates on luck, Guy Axtell's *The New Problem of Religious Luck* addresses the core elements of the mainstream discussion of luck in religion and philosophy. While still considering luck *qua* probability, he explains that the "efficacy of factors of nature and nurture [are] explainable teleologically in terms of divine will, ultimate plan, and gifts to the faithful,"⁵⁴ and that luck is asymmetrically attributed to the development of religiosity and of religious movements, as well as to agents of religion. Religious luck deals with problems of chance and probability in theological discourses, without so much considering it as a religious element in and of itself, although Axtell does mention something in regards to considering luck as non-religious from a religious person's perspective. In various ways, he defines some of his categorizations of luck as interacting with religious exclusivism, which shines light on the major problem of considering luck as magic. Magic, as defined above, is historically a religious concept, while luck is not. Interpreting luck as magic could be considered the equivalent of implying that luck stands, in relation to religion, where magic stood (and still stands) in some cultures: as thoroughly defined by its religious circumstances. In such a case, there would have to be a larger belief structure which would include luck as an external force, and in which other metaphysical elements are found.⁵⁵ Other scholars of religion and theology adopt the same approach as Axtell in defining luck, such as Jordan Wessling,⁵⁶ although few actually discuss this problem.

On the other side of the debate, data seem to show that there is a significant belief in the efficacy of luck *qua* magic. Leslie Francis, Mandy Robbins and Emyr Williams conducted a

⁵⁴ Guy Axtell, "The New Problem of Religious Luck," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy and Psychology of Luck*, eds. Ian M. Church and Robert J. Hartman (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019): 436.

⁵⁵ A study of the interaction of luck and fate (as well as other elements of interrelated implicit religions), in unexamined popular beliefs, in comparison to magic and religion might address this problem. Unfortunately, such a discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵⁶ See Jordan Wessling, "Theology and Luck," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy and Psychology of Luck*, 451-63, eds. Ian M. Church and Robert J. Hartman (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019).

study on the implicit religion of teenage girls in Wales, finding that between 94% and 95% of them crossed their fingers for luck or to protect themselves from harm.⁵⁷ "In order to protect themselves from bad luck many [Welsh Anglican] churchgoers have thrown spilt salt over their left shoulder (73%). In order to promote good luck many churchgoers have crossed their fingers (80%) or touched wood (79%)."⁵⁸ Furthermore, "14% [of those who attended church weekly in 1991 Britain] believed that good luck charms sometimes do bring good luck."⁵⁹ Francis, Robbins and Williams's study demonstrates the existence of implicit religion, although not recognized as such by the practitioners, in the Western world.

Edward Bailey, in his 2010 article *Implicit Religion*, defines his title-concept as "[Involving] no assumption about the number of commitments that may be found. The unifying thread is the fact of being committed"⁶⁰ to the belief in itself. Additionally, an implicit religion is integrated in agents' lives, with "intensive concerns [and] extensive effects."⁶¹ In this way, luck *qua* magic is identified as an implicit religion: belief in luck engages no commitment, both in terms of quantity or quality of belief, and is thoroughly incorporated in everyday conscious and subconscious actions and beliefs, as shown by Francis, Robbins and Williams. Other religious phenomena, such as unchurched spirituality and some new religious movements, are included in this concept.⁶² Discussing luck as an implicit religion, rather than as magic, does incorporate an

⁵⁷ Leslie Francis, Mandy Robbins, and Emyr Williams, "Believing and Implicit Religion Beyond the Churches: Religion, Superstition, Luck and Fear among 13-15 Year-Old Girls in Wales," *Implicit Religion* 9, no. 1 (2006): 82. See also *Id.*, 85.

⁵⁸ *Id.*, 77.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* See also Robin Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶⁰ Edward Bailey, "Implicit Religion," *Religion* 40, no. 4 (2010): 272.

⁶¹ *Id.*, 273. For more on implicit religion, see Peter Clarke, *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2011). See esp. chap. 8, "Religious Change: New Religions and New Spiritualities, Esotericism and Implicit Religion."

⁶² As another note to determine an implicit religion from a "regular" religion, one may look at institutionalization and its nuances. Unfortunately, this goes beyond the scope of the current paper.

acknowledgement of the metaphysical facet of luck but does not properly assess the ritualization and operational ritual logic of luck.

FOLKLORE AND RITUAL STUDIES

The usage of luck in a folkloric framework necessarily brings a discussion of superstition. Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Proud, in the *Dictionary of English Folklore*, stipulate that "[modern superstitions] aim to 'accentuate the positive/eliminate the negative': do this for good luck, avoid that to prevent bad luck. Luck can be influenced, but not completely controlled."⁶³ Superstitions include ritual actions and prohibitions, such as "wild flowers or open umbrellas (outdoor items) should not be indoors"⁶⁴ and the belief that "certain things, words, or actions have powerfully negative effects, and must be avoided or counteracted,"⁶⁵ amongst other beliefs. Discussing luck in light of superstitious belief does insert it as an implicit religion, and does take into account ritualization and operational ritual logic. As Simpson and Proud note, "it is clear that the hold of superstition on people's minds has weakened over the centuries, and that it is increasingly consigned to trivial areas of everyday life." This claim reinforces the idea of luck as an implicit religion.

In academic works on folklore, luck is usually cast in terms of belief. In *Risk and Ritual: An Interpretation of Fishermen's Folklore in a New England Community*, John J. Poggie and Carl Gersuny explain that turning one's hatch cover upside down would bring bad luck to the fishermen and that knocking on wood would bring them good luck.⁶⁶ While that knowledge of an action's implications, of a ritualization and consequent operational ritual logic, seems restricted

⁶³ Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Proud, *Dictionary of English Folklore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), s.v. "superstitions."

⁶⁴ Id.

⁶⁵ Id.

⁶⁶ See John J. Poggie and Carl Gersuny, "Risk and Ritual: An Interpretation of Fishermen's Folklore in a New England Community," *The Journal of American Folklore* 85, no. 335 (1972): 66-72.

to fishermen (outsiders would not know not to turn a hatch cover upside down), its ritualization—or lack thereof—entails a belief in luck and in the efficacy of specific actions to control it. In another part of the world, Jürgen Wasim Frembgen discerned that “between Iran and Rajasthan, there is the widespread folk belief that, if a bat lives somewhere in the house or sits on the roof, this would mean bad luck for the owner. . . . This is reflected in southwest Asia by the common belief that it would carry bad luck to kill a bat.”⁶⁷ Here, again, luck is illustrated as a belief, and that specific ritual actions (or in this case, prohibitions) are based on this belief. In the *Dictionary of English Folklore*, it is noted that,

Whether good or bad, ‘luck’ is an idea basic to folk belief, ancient, and widespread. . . . Unlike mere chance or accident, it is thought to work through regular cause-and-effect. . . . Yet, unlike fate, luck can change; sometimes it ‘turns’ spontaneously, sometimes it can be manipulated (you can attract good luck by carrying a mascot, cancel an unlucky action by turning round three times, etc.). Unlike providence and judgements, it has no connection with benevolence, wisdom, or justice, no purposeful plan; there is no meaning behind it.⁶⁸

I would disagree with the final remark (“there is no meaning behind it”) simply based on the specificity of ritualization depending on circumstances; Whether meaning lies behind luck or is ascribed to luck is another matter altogether. These observations demonstrate the parallel link of luck with magic by demonstrating luck as a belief situated within a larger belief structure, which can be called an implicit religion, while also associating luck rituals with their appropriate ritualization in light of their operational ritual logic.

In ritual studies, luck is rarely assessed properly. In early anthropological works on rituals, scholars mention luck as magic, without defining either concept aside from the practice in question, while later anthropological works refer to luck in terms of ritual. In 1941, George C.

⁶⁷ Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, "Embodying Evil and Bad Luck: Stray Notes on the Folklore of Bats in Southwest Asia," *Asian Folklore Studies* 65, no. 2 (2006): 245-6.

⁶⁸ Simpson and Proud, s.v. “luck.”

Homans wrote that "the primitives feel a sentiment which we call anxiety and they perform magical rites which they say will insure good luck."⁶⁹ In 2012, 70 years later, Inge Daniels talked about luck more refinedly, in terms of "a powerful spiritual entity (or energy) that connects people, spirits, objects, and places in producing and sustaining an all-encompassing relational ontology."⁷⁰ For their part, Cristine H. Legare and André L. Souza explained luck akinly to magic, saying that "Simpatias are ritualistic remedial procedures, and are not confined to any particular Brazilian religious group, although some of them do include religious information. They are used to solve a variety of everyday problems (e.g., sinusitis, asthma, depression, anxiety, lack of luck, and infidelity)."⁷¹ In the psychological approach to ritual studies, luck is defined simultaneously in probability and metaphysically: Dennis W. Rook notes that "many individuals invest in lucky numbers (lotteries, racetrack betting), favor good luck garments (lucky sports clothes, the "power suit"), and invoke luck-encouraging procedures (craps-table incantations). Such arbitrary beliefs are often enacted in ritual performances."⁷²

These assertions harmoniously correspond to an approach of luck *qua* magic, probably due to the multidisciplinary nature of the academic field in which those studies were undertaken. As observed, theories of luck found in multidisciplinary fields such as folklore and ritual studies are inclusive of the meaning and definitions of luck found in other academic areas while still bringing insightful nuances to the debate.

⁶⁹ George C. Homans, "Anxiety and Ritual: The Theories of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown," *American Anthropologist, New Series* 43, no. 2 (1941): 164.

⁷⁰ Inge Daniels, "Beneficial bonds: luck and the lived experience of relatedness in contemporary Japan," *Social Analysis* 56, no. 1 (2012): 148.

⁷¹ Cristine H. Legare and André L. Souza, "Evaluating ritual efficacy: Evidence from the supernatural," *Cognition* 124, no. 1 (2012): 3.

⁷² Dennis W. Rook, "The Ritual Dimension of Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research* 12, no. 3 (1985): 255.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Going back to the original definition of luck *qua* magic above, and reworking it with terms found in the current academic discussion, one could say that luck—aside from its definition as chance or probability—is part of (or simply *is*) an implicit religion when considered as a belief, and has similar ritualization and operational ritual logic as magic. Logically, one may affirm that luck is a contemporary form of magic.⁷³

From the lack of acknowledgement of luck as a religious entity proper to itself to its assessment as a metaphysical force analogous to magic, theories of luck either consider luck in terms of probability or as a superstition. Philosophers conceive of luck solely in terms of probability, while scholars of psychology and of religion use it in either or both of its definitions, i.e., chance and belief. Multidisciplinary approaches, such as folklore or ritual studies, mainly consider luck as an unexamined belief.

Thus, an actual study of contemporary luck—of its ritualization and operational ritual logic, and of the perceived effectiveness of those acts—may bring insight into the nature of implicit religions, and also enlighten peripheral discussions on superstition and rituals. In order to collect data, one could conduct a series of stratified-random⁷⁴ or, preferably, of systematic-random⁷⁵ semi-structured interviews⁷⁶. Focusing on qualitative aspects (what actions do you do to attract good luck or to protect from bad luck?), while still integrating quantitative elements

⁷³ I must acknowledge that this text does not include content from Steven D. Hales *The Myth of Luck: Philosophy, Fate, and Fortune*. His book would have been a wonderful addition for contextualizing luck within academic culture; unfortunately, his book is unavailable online, and due to the current health crisis I could not gain access to this material.

⁷⁴ Group A (and B, C, D, etc.) is divided in X number of subgroups, and responses are observed from a given amount of people, randomly selected, in each subgroup.

⁷⁵ All members of a given population are put in a given order, and every Xth person is selected for response (X being a number randomly selected).

⁷⁶ Semi-structured interviews are completed using a set of pre-decided questions, and leaves some room to discuss peripheral topics within the interview.

(how many of those do you consider effective or do you practice?), one could build a decent database for analysis of the contemporary belief in luck. As part of such an analysis, one could then discuss the prevalent forms of luck beliefs and rituals, as well as their expected effects. Finally, one could include an analysis of operational ritual logic with examples from those dominant representations and uses of luck in contemporary common belief. A multidisciplinary study of luck as contemporary folkloric magic would be feasible. I believe such a study is necessary in order to better assess the impact of implicit religions on belief formation and worldviews.

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