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ARTICLE COMMENTARY

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More than folk technology: instrumentality and opacity in magical ritual

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Abstract

This commentary responds to Hong's folk-technology account of magical ritual. It accepts that magical practices often involve instrumental reasoning, testing, and specialist correction, but argues that instrumentality does not exhaust magical ritual. Such practices are also stabilized by socially dense configurations of authority, restriction, normativity, and partial opacity. A multidimensional account is therefore needed in which instrumental efficacy, social embedding, and opacity coexist rather than replace one another.

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Hong's article offers a powerful corrective to accounts that define magical ritual by the absence of causal reasoning. Many magical practices are indeed goal-directed, causally theorized, and open to testing, tinkering, and specialist correction. In this respect, Hong is right to challenge overly rigid contrasts between ritual and instrumental action. My concern is not to restore such a dichotomy. It is rather that Hong's corrective risks overcorrecting. From the fact that magical practices often have an instrumental layer, it does not follow that they are exhausted by that layer, or that they are cognitively and socially continuous with ordinary technologies.

This matters because Hong's claim is stronger than the modest thesis that magical rituals often involve instrumental reasoning. He argues that magic is "cognitively represented in the same way as ordinary technical actions," that magical rituals are "subject to the same cognitive and social dynamics as other complex technologies," and that "whether following a recipe, debugging code, or casting a spell," the actor operates within a logic of instrumental causality. The conclusion is that magic is "not qualitatively different from other mundane, goal-oriented techniques" (Hong, 2026). My objection is directed at these stronger claims. Hong's evidence supports instrumentality, but not exhaustiveness.

As I understand it, Hong's central argument has three steps. First, many traditional societies do not draw a sharp emic distinction between natural and supernatural causation. Second, practitioners often treat magical procedures as goal-directed, explainable, improvable, and testable. Third, magical rituals are therefore better understood as folk technologies than as rituals marked by so-called "irresolvable" causal opacity (Jagiello et al., 2022). The first two claims are persuasive. The conclusion, however, does not fully follow. The absence of an emic natural/supernatural distinction does not mean that there are no relevant cognitive, social, or functional distinctions for analysts to make. Nor does the presence of instrumental reasoning show that the practice is exhausted by its instrumental core.

This matters especially for Hong's treatment of opacity. Hong is right that "irresolvable causal opacity" may be a poor phenomenological description of how participants understand their own practices. If a local worldview treats ancestral agency, spirit causation, or cosmic balance as part

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of the natural order, participants need not experience magical procedures as violations of nature or causally irresolvable. As Durkheim already noted, "in order to say that certain things are supernatural, it is necessary to have the sentiment that a *natural order of things* exist … Now as long as this was lacking or insufficiently established, the most marvelous events contained nothing which did not appear perfectly conceivable … they never saw in them glimpses of a mysterious world into which the reason cannot penetrate" (Durkheim, 1964, pp. 26–27).

This, however, does not fully settle the analytic issue. If resolvability is indexed entirely to local causal ontology, then indeed almost any practice can count as resolvable, provided it can be fitted into a locally accepted explanatory scheme. In that case, Hong has not so much shown that magical ritual is ordinary technology as shown that different standards of explanation are being invoked.

The question, then, is not simply whether practitioners can offer some locally intelligible explanation of what they are doing. Hong is right that many societies do not draw a sharp emic boundary between natural and supernatural causation, and that magical practices are often treated as ordinary ways of intervening in the world. But this concerns explicit cultural taxonomy. It does not by itself show that the same attentional patterns, learning strategies, error diagnostics, social expectations, or normative constraints are involved in magical ritual and mundane technical action. Emic indistinction does not entail cognitive equivalence.

This is especially important because Hong's conclusion is a claim about cognition, not just about folk classification. The absence of an explicit natural/supernatural distinction does not establish that magical practices are cognitively represented "in the same way" as ordinary technical actions. A society need not explicitly classify some actions as "supernatural" for those actions to recruit distinctive patterns of attention, trust, authority, secrecy, norm enforcement, and failure interpretation.

Hong acknowledges that agents, forces, or events may violate intuitive ontological expectations, but emphasizes that such violations need not generate an explicit cultural category of the supernatural. That is true, but it narrows the issue too quickly to conscious classification. The question is not only how practitioners classify these practices, but how they are learned, authorized, evaluated, and socially sustained. Counterintuitive agents or ritualized procedures may be incorporated into an everyday causal ontology without thereby becoming analytically equivalent to ordinary techniques (Boyer, 1998). The same point applies to evidence of testing, tinkering, and debugging. Such evidence is important, and it does show that magical rituals often have instrumental dimensions. But it does not show that the cognition involved is exhausted by instrumentality.

The relevant unit of analysis is therefore not always the isolated procedure by which an actor, under a given emic description, attempts to bring about an outcome. For anthropology, it is often the wider practice-configuration: the materials used, the persons authorized to use them, the places and times in which the action may occur, the restrictions governing access, the standards by which failure is diagnosed, and the social consequences of participation or refusal. Importantly, acknowledging this does not require a strict categorical distinction between magic and technology. Ordinary technologies too can become partially embedded in authority, restriction, secrecy, and norm-governed access, and many of them are. The point is rather graded and organizational. Some practices are more densely structured by restricted expertise, normative correctness, ritualized attention, partial causal opacity, and socially consequential participation than others. Magical rituals often occupy this region of space. Hong is therefore right to resist a rigid ritual/technology dichotomy, but the opposite move – treating instrumentality as the defining core of magical ritual – risks underdescribing the phenomenon.

Also, from a cultural-evolutionary perspective, the recurrence and stabilization of a magical practice may depend on its embedding within a wider social ecology (van Mazijk, 2026). This embedding is not merely external to the practice if it shapes its transmission, conditions of success, and standards of legitimacy. A purely emic-instrumental description therefore remains incomplete. Consider, for example, priestly or oracular practices in ancient city-state contexts. Their persistence cannot be understood only by asking whether participants believed that a given procedure

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produced a specific result. Such practices also organized authority, public decision-making, and coordination beyond kin. These dimensions are not merely downstream consequences of instrumental belief; they are part of the social ecology in which the practice becomes intelligible, socially consequential, and reproducible. From this perspective, magical ritual may be partially instrumentally organized at the level of local action while remaining partially opaque at the level of the wider practice-system.

This is why Hong's claim that the social function of magical ritual is "downstream of, and sustained by" shared conviction in instrumental efficacy seems too one-directional (Hong, 2026). Sometimes this is right. But often elements mutually sustain one another. A ritual may be believed effective partly because it is ancient, costly, secret, specialist-controlled, publicly endorsed, or embedded in institutions of legitimate authority. The social dimension is not merely added after the instrumental belief is in place; it can help produce the conditions under which the practice comes to be experienced as instrumentally credible.

Hong's folk-technology model is therefore a valuable corrective, but it is best understood as identifying one important dimension of magical ritual rather than its essence. Magical rituals are often instrumentally reasoned about, tested, and adapted. Yet they are also embedded in socially dense configurations of authority, restriction, and normativity. Hong convincingly challenges an overly rigid ritual/technology dichotomy. But the alternative to such a dichotomy is not simply to reclassify magical ritual as folk technology; it is to develop a multidimensional account in which instrumentality, social embedding, and opacity can coexist.

Disclosure statement

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