Power(s) in Folk Religions

1. The heartbeat of our world view is founded on the fact that we are made in God`s image.

    a. Being in the image of Someone, we have a built in desire to link with the One whose image we bear.
    b. As a result of Adam and Eve`s fall and their consequent expulsion from the Garden (Gen. 3:1-24), our direct link was sundered. However, we retained the image of God (Gen. 9:6), and our search for intimate re-connection with the Creator continues, though it is now distorted and is expressed as a deep concern with the powers that govern the world we inhabit (Jacobs, 1979, Conn, 1979; see also Wink, 1992, 3-10).
    c. This concern has resulted in an almost infinite variety of postulated cosmic powers, the total geography of which is composed of a multitude of what may be called *powerscapes.*
    d. We do not have the space or time to develop a full geography of powerscapes, but we may trace the outlines of significant aspects of the terrain for this discussion.

2. The first issue is that of identifying the power(s).

    a. People of every culture postulate a rich variety of power sources which impact their world (Jacobs, 1979; Hiebert, 1982; Burnett, 1990).
    b. Their understanding of these powers forms the religious landscape they inhabit, and their assumptions about these powers gives them the range of answers to the questions of life and faith that they ask.
    c. The types of powers accepted as real by the culture, whether they are ascribed personality or considered impersonal, and their respective names are learned early in life.
    d. They are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, and inform life not just in the religious arena, but in every aspect of daily living.

3. Three classes or types of powers may be considered:

    a. Physical powers: not often the focus of folk religion, though beliefs about them are ideologies that determine religious perspectives (e.g., Carl Sagan's perception seen in the movie "Contact" that these are all that rule the universe might be considered a secular type of folk religion or folk ideology)

    b. Spiritual powers (personal and impersonal)

        i.   Impersonal:

            (1) Relational issues are not as important--but knowledge of how the powers work (folk science) and how they may be harnessed (as we

harness electricity) is (see Hiebert, 1982).

(2) This knowledge may require training (schooling or apprenticeship) and is usually guarded closely. Accessing these powers may be exacting and dangerous (just like electricity), though they do exist in benign forms (e.g., baseball magic described by Gmelch, 1985).

ii. Personal: Spirits, gods, demons, ghosts, etc. When they seen to be are behind events, skills including knowing how to placate, appease, please, or interest them are of significance to the community

(1) The relational grammar seen among people in the daily life of the culture will apply.

(2) The powers will require the appropriate respect, means of initiation, and methods of supplication and petition. The rules for these will be relationally founded and parallel the rules used for normal human relationships (e.g., respect for elders).

(3) The powers will be expected to respond in light of their interpretation of whether the proper communication methods and channels were used and whether their needs are being appropriately met by the supplicant.

c. Human (psychological and social) powers

i. Bridging the gap between physical and spiritual powers are the types of forces generated and driving human beings. We study these in the domain of the "soft" sciences, namely the *social* powers.

ii. These range from the individual to the social levels, including physical drives or motivations we have as human beings (see McClelland's massive *Human Motivation*, 1990) as well as the power social systems (ideologies, bureaucracies, economic systems, etc.) have in determining our existence.

iii. In one sense, these are personal powers in that they do not exist apart from people. In another sense, however, they are impersonal powers because they do not have a separate ontological existence apart from the social structures found in human cultures.

4. Types of impersonal spiritual powers:

a. *Kismet* (Turkish term for fate), karma, fate

b. Mana (discussion from Allan R. Tippett, "The Concept of Mana"; class notes

for *Introduction to Animism*):

i. Defining mana

   (1) Taken from Melanesia, originally defined by R. W. Codrington:

      "It is a power or influence, not physical, and in a way supernatural; but it shows itself in physical force, or in any kind of power or excellence which a man possesses. This mana is not fixed in anything, and can be conveyed in almost anything; but spirits, whether disembodied souls or supernatural beings, have it and can impart it, and it essentially belongs to personal beings to originate it, though it may act through the medium of water, a stone or a bone."

      "A force altogether distinct from physical power, which acts in all kinds of ways for good and evil, and which is of the greatest advantage to possess or control."

   (2) R. R. Marrett (anthropologist) used it in a world-wide framework:

      "cases of magico-religious efficacy where the efficacy has been automatic or derived--i.e., proceeding from the nature of a sacred person or thing, or put into a person or thing by a ghost or spirit."

   (3) Hiebert: an impersonal transempirical force that acts for good and evil. It affects everything that is beyond the ordinary power of humans, and outside the common processes of nature. To be able to possess and control it is a great advantage, but to handle it without proper knowledge and ritual is dangerous.

   (4) Other similar terms from different cultures:

      (a) *Orenda* (Iroquois; "mystic power derived from a chant")
      (b) *Wakan* (Sioux; "power that brings things to pass")
      (c) *Maxpe* (Crow)
      (d) *Manitou* (Algonquin; same as two above)
      (e) *Hasuia* (Madagascar; "efficacy")
      (f) *Baraka* (Morocco; "Holiness"; Swahili, "Holy")
      (g) *Toh* (Indonesia)
      (h) *Magit* (New Britian and Western Solomons; "soul stuff; one's personality or spirit force")

ii. Points to note:

(1)   It is supernatural

(a)Beyond the ordinary power of men
(b)Outside the common processes of nature

(2)   It is impersonal

(a)Resembles a contagion or infection
(b)May have a material object as its vehicle
(c)Belongs to a personal being to activate it
(d)May be accidentally transmitted

(3)   It is a-moral

(a)Good or evil according to the intention of the user
(b)Goor or evil according to the rite used

(4)   It is the product of a ritual act (sacrifice, dance, etc.)

(a)Operated by the correctly approved person
(b)Performed in the correct ceremonial manner
(c)Performed on correct occasion or emergency

(5)   Correctly used it is social

(a)Good

(i)For the prosperity, preservation and growth of the people in peace and war
(ii)For the maintenance of law and order and custom
(iii)For control of weather and harvests

(b)Evil

(i)Against the enemy and the foreigner
(ii)Disciplinary--against the idiosyncratic person among the group

(6)   Used individually it represents a corruption (many forms of black magic)

(7)   It is quantitative

(a)Efficacy may depend on the degree or quantity or strength of the mana produced
(b)Mana used for good and evil compete (good protects against

evil; strongest wins)

c.   Magic:

i.   Defining magic: use of this-worldly, supernatural power to achieve one's desired goals. "A system of conceptual laws of cause and effect, operating regularly through spell and ritual, handed down by tradition, and manipulating the impersonal supernatural power of mana" (Grant, "Folk Religion in Islam," 28)

ii.   Theories of magic (Grant, "Folk Religion in Islam," 22-33)

(1)   E. B. Tylor (*Primitive Culture*): A basic unity with science, in that both assume constant laws of the universe, both employ the association of ideas. However, overall it was a false pseudo-science based on a false philosophical foundation.

(2)   James G. Frazer (*Golden Bough*): Agreed with Tylor that is was a type of pre-science.

(a)Magic is founded on two major premises:

(i)Law of Similarity: like produces like
(ii)Law of Contagion: Once things have been in contact, they act on each other from a distance.

(b)A magical rite acts on its own; it causes an automatic, immediate result (the magician is powerful only because he/she knows the spell, not because he/she has personal power which makes the magic work).

(3)   Bronislaw Malinowski (*Magic, Science, and Religion*): magic is found whenever a people comes to an unbridgable gap and must continue their pursuit. Magic is a means to an end, and belief in magic is simple with a straightforward and definite aim.

(a)There are three typical elements involved:

(i)Phonetic effects (imitation of natural sounds in the spell)
(ii)Use of words to command the desired effect
(iii)References to mythological illusions (namely ancestral and cultural heroes)

(b)Surrounded by strict conditions

(i)Exact remembrance of the spell
(ii)Rite must be performed exactly
(iii)You must always be aware of counter-magic

iii.   Major types of magic (Dupré, *Religion in Primitive Cultures*, 144-47):

(1)   *Substitute magic:* Magical power is released by substituting a part of the one against whom the magic is being worked (hair, nails, footprint, etc.).

(2)   *Contagious magic:* Magical power is released by a contagious object which has been empowered (similar to the spread of disease).

(3)   *Sympathetic magic:* Magical power is released by symbolization of the object against which the magic will be used (e.g., drawings or sculptures of an animal to ensure a successful hunt of that animal).

(4)   *Gnoseological magic:* Magical power is released by having and using appropriate knowledge about sequences, timing, words and accents, etc.

iv.   Categories of magic:

(1)   White magic: used to achieve good goals (bringing rain, victory in battle, success in group ventures)--estimated that 90% of all magic is "white"; can be used privately, but it is not necessary to keep it a secret (socially acceptable)

(2)   Black magic: to harm or destroy someone in the society. Used in secret (an anti-social activity!)

d.   Evil eye: Power in one's eye(s) that harms those being seen. Particulary susceptible are children, brides, pregnant women, and people in ritual states. Some are born with it, and learn to warn others about it. To avoid the effects of the evil eye, compliments may be withheld (to say a child is pretty is to solicit the looks of people who may have the evil eye). Also, food is susceptible, and so may be eaten in private (to avoid the look of others). Handicrafts cannot be perfect so as to attract attention, so a fault is purposfully made. Similar to this are evil mouth, touch, etc.

e.   Omens: objects or events that warn people about the presence of power (or mana) or of the consequences of certain acts; a type of supernatural NORAD.

f.   Taboos: prohibitions based on the belief that certain objects and actions have

power are are therefore potentially dangerous. They may be associated with people, objects, places, calendar events, actions, words, expressions, etc. They may apply to all or be restricted (e.g., to women, to a particular clan). The one universal taboo is incest, though it takes many different defnintions around the world.

g.   Stars (astrology): Astrology is the "science" of deciphering the cosmic influence resulting from the positions and movement of celestial objects. It is built on the assumption that there is a causal relationship between people and those objects

5.   Types of personal spiritual powers:

a.   Gods and goddesses: a belief in powerful spirit beings who were never human (or were once human but have now been transformed) and who control the "forces of nature" as they desire. They may take on very human characteristics (infighting, jealousy, anger, revenge). Beliefs range from overt polytheism to hierarchical polytheism to hierarchical montheism to pure monotheism.

b.   Animated objects: Rocks, rivers, trees, lightening, ocean, volcanos, etc. thought to be alive in some way.

c.   Metamorphosis (or metampschosis): the belief that objects and beings can change their state of being to other objects and beings. *Lycanthropy* is the belief that people can change into animals or plants (werewolves, leopards, snakes, etc.)

d.   Totemism: The idea of an integral link between certain types of people and certain types of animals and/or plants. This may result in the ritual killing and eating of the totem, or in the taboo against any harm to the totem.

e.   Ancestors: the belief that the dead have only passed into a new phase of existence in which they overlook the fortunes of the living and continue in vital relationship with them.

f.   Fetishism: the belief that spirits empower *(kalalose* night gun of the Shona) or possess (*mayembe* horn of Uganda) or may be captured in (e.g., Aladdin's lamp) certain material objects.

g.   Inspiration/prophetism to Possession: the belief that spirits can in some way control or speak through people. The range of control is from inspiring to possessing (taking over control of bodily functions).

h.   Incarnation: the belief that divine beings take on human form (e.g., the

avatars of Vishnu)

i.   Gaia (a literal "Mother Earth"; seen in New Age ecology and wiccan traditions)

6.   *Spheres of influence*: Each power within the cultural world view will have defined lines of authority, responsibility, and accessibility which can be thought of as
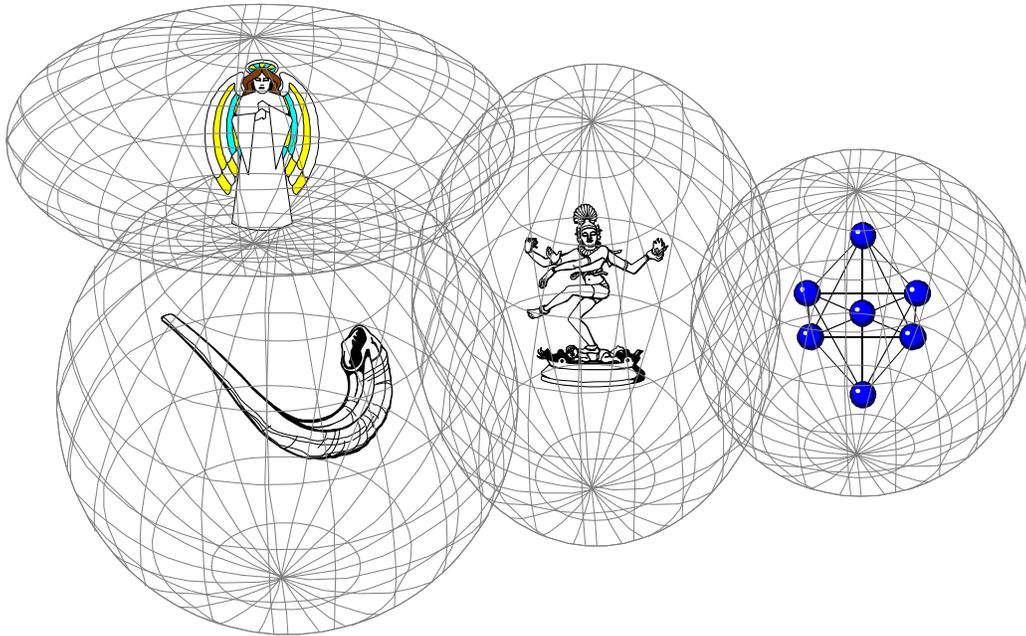
spheres of operation:

a.   The culture may not perceive these powers as always seeing eye to eye; at times they are thought to conflict and at times they are recognized as joining together.

b.   This results in a type of religious equation of power interaction, which is reasonably stable though open to change. It enables a people to know which power to call on for each of the problems or needs in life.

7.   The ascriptions to the powers are not limited to names and spheres of influence.

a.   Corresponding to the vocabulary and sphere of influence will be emotional responses and attachments to each power.

b.   This in turn will define types of cultural scripting embedded in the culture which enables a person to know what power(s) to call and how to call on the power(s) in the varied circumstances and situations of life (Jacobs, 1979).

8.   In animistic world views, these powers are placed on center stage in the daily

events of life.

    a.   Animism is *the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power* (Van Rheenen, 1991, 20; emphasis his).

    b.   Nothing is perceived to take place naturally; everything has a cause framed in spiritual terms.

9.   One analytic model for exploring powers is that of Paul Hiebert ("The Flaw of the Excluded Middle"), which splits the powers into two dimensions:

    a.   The immanent-transcendent dimension:

Transcendent: that which is above or beyond direct sensory experience	
Unseen or not sensed physically (transempirical)	Other worldly: not part of this physical universe as we know it
	This worldly: part of the physical universe and under its laws
Seen or sensed physically (empirical)	(always this worldly because it is perceivable)
Immanent: that which we perceive by immediate experience	

    b.   The personal-impersonal dimension: in explaining how the universe operates, people develop two opposing analogies: personal powers and impersonal powers (see above diagram on personal/impersonal powers). Hiebert refers to these as organic analogies and mechanical analogies.

Organic Analogies	Mechanical Analogies
* like a living creature	* like a machine
* relational	* impersonal
* life processes	* forces that can be controlled and manipulated
* ethical in nature	* amoral in character

Combining these two analytic approaches, Hiebert proposes this grid as a model for understanding magic, animism (or spiritism), religion, and science:

	"Powers" As Personal Beings Based on concepts of living beings relating to other living beings. Stresses life, personality, relationships, functions, health, disease, choice, etc. Relationships are essentially moral in character.	"Powers" As Impersonal Forces Based on concepts of impersonal objects controlled by forces. Stresses impersonal, mechanistic and deterministic nature of events. Forces are essentially amoral in nature.	
UNSEEN OR SUPERNATURAL Beyond immediate sense experience. Above natural explanation. Knowledge of this based on inference or on supernatural experiences.	HIGH RELIGION BASED ON COSMIC BEINGS Cosmic gods Angels Demons Spirits of other worlds	HIGH RELIGION BASED ON COSMIC FORCES Kismet Fate Brahman and karma Impersonal cosmic forces	OTHER WORLDLY Sees entities and events occurring in some other worlds and in other times.
	FOLK OR LOW RELIGION Local gods and goddesses Ancestors and ghosts Spirits Demons and evil spirits Dead saints	MAGIC AND ASTROLOGY Mana Astrological forces Charms, amulets and magical rites Evil eye, evil tongue	THIS WORLDLY Sees entities and events as occurring in this world and universe.
SEEN OR EMPIRICAL Directly observable by the senses. Knowledge based on experimentation and observation.	(FOLK) SOCIAL SCIENCE Interaction of living beings such as humans, possibly animals and plants	(FOLK) PHYSICAL SCIENCE Interaction of natural objects based on natural forces	

c. Analyzing religion, animism, magic, and science in Hiebert`s analytical framework (note that all three levels may focus on organic or mechanical analogies):

Level	Focus	Questions
Religion	Ultimate truth	Ultimate origins and destiny; meaning and purpose in life
"Animism" (magic, spiritism, etc.)	Pragmatic power	Well-being: disease, famine, drought, etc.; Guidance: fear, uncertainty of the future; Success: wealth, power, education, love; Peace: dealing with spirit possession
Science (social and physical)	This worldly empirical control	Taming or harnessing nature by technology: facing a hostile physical environment; Achieving social harmony: social conflict, wars, rivalries, feuds, etc.