

The Nature and Implications of Magic in African Societies

Maina Ali Danladi

Abstract

This paper set out to discuss the nature, and implication(s) of magic in African societies. Like other mystical forces in the universe, magic is a global phenomenon. The African mythology is populated by powerful and inexplicable forces like evil eye, sorcery, witchcraft, divination, hordes of spirits, magic amongst others that impacts the lives of the people in their communities beyond their understanding. As a result people in these communities often live in fear of the unknown since the impact of magic could be both negative and positive. To compound this fear, the source(s) of power of the practitioners are not known to all as only people with special and gifted knowledge can fathom the nature and operation of these forces. The paper therefore seeks to know the sources of these powers as well as the benefits societies can derive from their operations. The paper relied on existing literature, books, academic journals, and other online sources as its method of data collection. The paper found out that magic can be both good and bad and hence, the conclusion that is reached in this paper is that such magic as are good and beneficial to the should be encouraged and sustained while those that are bad and of no societal benefit should be strongly condemned and rejected.

Key words: Magic, Society, African worldview, Reality.

Introduction

Mystical forces abound around the globe. The use, organization, acknowledgement and application of these forces differ from continent to continent and from regions to regions. This discourse on magic within the context of Africa is inseparably

linked to the African worldview. This world view according to Mbiti is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits and the living dead.¹ Parrinder corroborated Mbiti when he averred that in African worldview, “everything in nature is living, or at least pre-living, and there is no such thing as absolutely dead matter”.² What this translates into is that, the African worldview houses a belief in the existence of a host of spirits existing in the universe and it is drawing from the above that Mbiti argued that “the awareness of the spirit world affects the Africans outlook and experience in life for better and for worse”.³ He further argued that “the belief in the function and dangers of bad magic, sorcery and witchcraft is deeply rooted in African life, and in spite of modern education and religions like Christianity and Islam, it is very difficult to eradicate this belief”.⁴ Okeja corroborated Mbiti when he averred that “the phenomenon of magic has been a recurrent decimal in African consciousness to the point that even the wave of globalization which has made it possible for people within Africa to share in humanity’s demystification of this phenomenon has not been able to calm the tempest of belief in and fear of this phenomenon”.⁵ Speaking further on the manifestation of magic, Okeja averred that:

The manifestation of magic in contemporary Africa is so endemic that one can, without risking ambivalence, say that it is pathological. In schools, market place, church, government and other offices, streams, rivers, homes, forest, the floor of the stock exchange market, newspapers, bridges, government houses, state and federal houses of assembly, senate house, football stadiums and even at the presidency, etc. the feeling,

1 Mbiti, S. John. *African Religions and Philosophy*. (London: Heinemann, 2011), P. 75.

2 Parrinder, Geoffrey *African Traditional Religion*. (London: S.P.C.K., 1996), P. 47.

3 Mbiti, S. John. *Introduction to African Religions*, (2nd ed.) (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers, 1991), P. 81.

4 Mbiti, S. John. *Introduction to African Religions*, P. 165.

5 Okeja, U. “Magic in an African Context” Hendrix, Scot and Shannon, T. J (Ed.) *Magic and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012), P. 102.

report or affirmation of the manifestation of this phenomena is common place.⁶

Deducible from the above is the fact that every strata of the society in Africa, be it the old or young, Christians or Muslims, educated or illiterates, is caught in the web of the fear, practice or the manifestation of magic. In African worldview, the exercise of the powers of these forces although similar in pattern differs from region to region and community to community. However, this paper seeks to account for the nature and implications of magic in African societies. To achieve the above, the paper proceeds from a preliminary discourse on the meaning and nature of magic in African societies to the discourse on the implications of the same. In the final third, the paper proffers recommendations and while bring the discourse to a close.

On the Meaning and Nature of Magic

The concept of magic has been defined variously by various scholars of different persuasions at different times. According Bolaji Idowu, magic is a desire which man seeks to reach the goal of self-efforts and independent achievement devices.⁷ It is a divine power of communication between the environmental forces and man with the man attempting to tap and control the supernatural resources of the environment and universe to satisfy his ego. It is forcing something to happen instead of praying to God for something to happen.⁸ Magic as Okeja captures it is a technique by which the human mind attempts to operate upon its world. As such, it is similar to arts, religion and science but note that the term 'its world' is meant to embrace, not only the physical universe but also all phenomena, objective and subjective, which do not respond to direct control.⁹

6 Okeja, U. "Magic in an African Context" Hendrix, Scot and Shannon, T. J (Ed.) *Magic and the Supernatural*, P. 104.

7 Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion A Definition* (Nigeria: Fountain publications, 1973), P.189.

8 Gehman, Richard J. *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible* (Jos: African Christina Textbooks (ACTS), 2001), P. 43-44.

9 Okeja, U. "Magic in an African Context" Hendrix, Scot and Shannon, T. J (Ed.) *Magic and the Supernatural*, P. 102.

Put differently, it is the ability of individuals to manipulate natural powers for their own ends and those of others. It is believed in the African Religion that these forces are beyond human comprehension, are not natural powers but powers from unseen and unexplained sources. We can therefore say magic is the use of unnatural powers from unexplained sources to manipulate the natural order for the ends of individuals. Magic uses impersonal powers through the use of rituals and ceremonies. It say 'my will be done' and seeks to control and use the power of nature to gain one's wish. Rather than praying to God or god for things to happen, magic seeks to force things to happen. It seeks to control and use mystical powers to gain my own wishes. It refers to "ritual activity intended to produce results without resorting to using recognized etiological process of the physical world. It is a belief and practice according to which men are convinced that they may directly affect natural powers and each other among themselves either for good or evil by their own effort in manipulating the superior powers".¹⁰

The practitioners of magic in African communities ranges from individuals to wisemen and women, diviners, medicine men and women, rain makers amongst others. The above notwithstanding, the following typologies of magic are common in most African communities and this helps in the understanding of the nature of magic in Africa.

i. Homeopathic (Imitative/Sympathetic Magic)

The Torres traits principle which implies that "like beget like" is used to explain the nature of this kind of magic. This is applied in rain-making ritual where the rainmaker spews water into the air to make rain fall by imitation, or clouds of smoke are made through kindling a fire the old fashion way by fiction.¹¹ In this regard, Maxey and Danfulani argued that "sympathetic magic can be used in negative ways, seeking to harm people. A

¹⁰ Maxey, Gary and Umar Danfulani *Juju Vs. Christianity: An African Dilemma*,(Lagos: WATS Publications, 2019), P. 88-89.

¹¹ James Frazer Qtd. in Gehman, Richard J. *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*, P. 46

magician can seize clothing, hair or fingernails from another person and seek to harm them spiritually through those items. Such belief is definitely demonic in nature.¹²

ii. Contagious magic

Contagious magic as Frazer avers, is hinged on the notion that things once joined together remain so and can sympathetically affect one another. In this way harmful charms can be made from shaven hair, nail clippings, clothing, bath water, sleeping mats, money or anything that has been in the possession or contact with intended victim.¹³ In the same vein, Gehman notes that contagious magic means that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance, even after physical contact has been removed".¹⁴ Even a footprint may be used with medicines in order to bring harm to the man who once had contact. It is drawing from the above that some women in Africa have an aversion for giving birth in the hospital because of the fear that the after-birth may be used against them. Consequently, "some hospitals return the after-birth (placenta and umbilical cord) of the baby so that the mother can bury it. Some nurses even make a profitable business by selling the after birth to the mothers. In West Africa servants follow their chiefs around in order to catch their spit in container. The purpose is not to keep the place clean, but to keep the spit away from the black magician. Good magic and bad magic can either be imitative magic or contagious magic as both can be used for good or bad.¹⁵

iii. White Magic and Black Magic

According to Parrinder "good magic ("white magic") and bad magic ("Black magic") are found both among African peoples

12 Danfulani, Umar H.D *Pebbles and Deities: PA Divination among the Ngas, Mupun and Mwaghavul in Nigeria*, (Peter Lang Frank Fort Am Main: European University Studies, 1995). P. 92.

13 Frazer quoted in Maxey, Gary and Umar Danfulani *Juju Vs. Christianity: An African Dilemma*, P. 90.

14 Gehman, Richard J. *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*, P.45.

15 Gehman, Richard J. *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*, P. 45-47.

and Europeans".¹⁶ Good magic is used for protection against evil forces that are found everywhere. The use of charms, amulets, herbs, seeds, powder, skin, feathers, chanting of magical formula, cuts in the body and many other magical practices are used to protect individuals, cattle, houses and possessions from evil powers. They are given by the witchdoctor. It is also used to bring rain by the rainmaker and protect the future by the diviner. In contrast, bad magic is intended to harm people and property. It is practiced at night so people fear it society opposes it.¹⁷ Good magic is accepted and esteemed, used mainly by specialists such as medicine men, diviners and rainmakers. These practitioners use their knowledge or tap into this power for the benefit of their community. Examples of beneficial use of magic power include, the treatment of diseases, counteracting misfortune, neutralizing or destroying evil power or witchcraft.¹⁸ In contradistinction to white or good magic, black or bad magic is harmful. Corroborating the above, Fuller argues that "black magic is used to harm enemies or their property. People who use this against their enemies or hired against other people's enemies are called sorcerers who attack for hate".¹⁹

iv. Personal and Public Magic

Gehman makes a distinction between personal and public magic. Much of magic according to him is used for personal needs and gains. Individuals, he argues, purchase various charms for protection against evil forces. Leather packets containing dried leaves or text of the *Koran* for Muslims may be hung around the neck. On the other hand, he described public as those intended for the entire household or village. Many homes are protected by the use of charms hung over the door

¹⁶ See Gehman, Richard J. *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*, P. 46.

¹⁷ Gehman, Richard J. *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*, P. 45-46.

¹⁸ Bernard GechikoNyabwari "The Impact of Magic and Witchcraft in the Social, Economic, Political and Spiritual Life of African Communities" *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)* Volume 1, Issue 5, May 2014, PP 9-18

¹⁹ Fuller, Lois K. *A Missionary Handbook on African Traditional Religion, 2nd Edition* (Jos: African Christian Textbooks, (ACTS), 2017), P. 74.

way or placed in the roof. Fields are frequently protected from witchcraft by means of charms and magic. Villages in West Africa are often protected by an arch or small door way leading into the village.²⁰

Contributing to the discourse on the prevalence and the nature of magic in Africa, Jomo Kenyatta shows magic to be extremely pervasive among the African people. Using the Agikuyu tribe of Kenya, he argued that it appears that magic is a way of life in this community. Some magic was for defensive purposes, some for enhancing economic activities like hunting, business and agriculture, and others for healing and health; some is used to increase attractiveness and enhance the love life, to acquire influence, and yet others for spiritual cleansing.²¹ Kenyatta lists 11 types of magic that covers nearly all aspects of social and economic life as follows:

1. Charms or protective magic (*githitu*)
2. Hate or despising magic, (*mununga* or *ruruto*)
3. Love magic (*munyenye* or *muriria*)
4. Defensive magic (*kirigiti* or *kihiinga*)
5. Destructive magic or witchcraft (*urogi* = poison)
6. Healing magic (*kihonia*, *githitogiakuhuuhamurimu*)
7. Enticing and attracting magic (*ruthuko*)
8. Silencing and surprising magic (*ngiria*, *itwanda*)
9. Wealth and agricultural magic (*muthaigawautonga*)
10. Purifying magic (*mukuura*, *muhoko*, *ndahikio*)
11. Fertilizing magic (*muthaigawaunoru*).²²

While it is true that there is no monolithic discourse on the type of magic or perhaps, the nature and manner in which magic unveils itself in African societies, it remains to argue that the Agikuyu example mirrors the endemic nature of magic in Africa.

20 Gehman, Richard J. *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*, P. 47-48.

21 Jomo Kenyatta quoted in Bernard GechikoNyabwari "The Impact of Magic and Witchcraft in the Social, Economic, Political and Spiritual Life of African Communities", P. 12.

22 See Bernard GechikoNyabwari "The Impact of Magic and Witchcraft in the Social, Economic, Political and Spiritual Life of African Communities" P. 13.

The Place and Implications of Magic on African Communities

In African Traditional Religion, magic is used for a plethora of purposes. Its common aims are to protect life, to ensure good health, to enhance economic prosperity and guarantee long life. Magic can be used to win over a lover, to produce greater harvest, to cure barren womb and in a multitude of other ways to improve physical and social life.²³ The Mwaghavul, (a Chadic speaking group in Plateau State, Nigeria) for example, describe magic as '*baakka*' (splitting one's head). The potency of *Baakka* resides in certain words or spells, accompanied by certain ritual acts or formula and medicine (*yen*).²⁴ It is composed of things used, the magical materials, things done, the magical rites, and things spoken. *Baakka* is used to assert control over nature, by manipulating super-natural powers that pervade the universe for either good or evil".²⁵ *Baak ka* portrays no evil intentions but depicts the concept of wonder maker- the expression, of "the person who has spited his/her head".

Following from Lois Fuller who stipulated that in magic, people command the powers, magic is for the most part more self-centered. Here, People are guided by the 'my will be done' maxim and the powers are manipulated and it is always supposed to work in the favour of the magician. People often say that God created magic powers for them to use to solve their own problems" like in the case of imitative magic above.²⁶

The implications of the above is that magic and medicine are considered either good or bad depending on how they are used privately by an individual (people tie rings, charms to the body) or communal (tie things to protect houses, villages and chiefs). "Bad medicine and black magic" are used to harm enemies or their property. People use it extensively, either against their own enemies or are hired against other people's enemies. They are called sorcerers in the technical sense.²⁷

23 Maxey, Gary and Umar Danfulani *Juju Vs. Christianity: An African Dilemma*, P.91.

24 Danfulani, Umar H.D *Pebbles and Deities: PA Divination among the Ngas, Mupun and Mwaghavul in Nigeria*, P. 53.

25 Danfulani, Umar H.D. (2011) "Kum: Mwaghavul Traditional Religion" in Akila Lohor *et' al* (Ed.) *Towards a Mwaghavul History: An Exposition*,(Xlibris Corporation.com, USA, 2011), P. 124.

26 Fuller, Lois K. *A Missionary Handbook on African Traditional Religion*, P. 73.

27 Fuller, Lois K. *A Missionary Handbook on African Traditional Religion*, P. 74.

Among the Melanesian in the Tribriand Island people, believed magic to be necessary and important in achieving good growth of crops in the garden. Supernatural forces and agencies act beyond human efforts to bestow benefits and good crop yields as rain and sun are made to appear at the right moments".²⁸ Malinowski's study also shows that "the supernatural powers can also be made to bring bad luck and thwart human efforts in other years. The Tribriand Islanders believe magic as a means of controlling these supernatural forces and those concerned with the dangers and uncertainties in one-sea fishing".²⁹ It is drawing from the above that Mbiti considered magic as been either 'good magic' or evil magic. The use of good magic is accepted and esteemed in society. He further argued that:

It is chiefly the Specialists, particularly the medicine man, diviner, rainmaker who uses their knowledge and manipulation of these mystical powers for the welfare of the community. It is used in the treatment of diseases, in counteracting misfortunes and in warding off or diluting or destroying evil power or witchcraft. The diviner or medicine man provides amounts of mystical power to people in form of charms, amulets, powder, rags, feathers, figures, special incantations or cuttings on the body. He uses to protect homesteads, families, fields, cattle and other property. If you go into African homestead you might see for example, a forked post standing in the middle of the compound, or a piece of pot on the roof of the house, or a few lines of ashes strewn across the gates as you enter the homestead; and if you go to the field you might spot a horn sticking out of the ground; or an old gourd hanging on a tree. If you see babies, they probably will have coils round the neck or waist, their hair might be shaved off except for small

28 Bronislaw Malinowski quoted in Onigu, Otite and William Ogionwo *An Introduction to Sociological Studies*. (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, Ibadan, 2006), P.105.

29 Onigu, Otite and William Ogionwo *An Introduction to Sociological Studies*, P. 105-106.

locks left standing on the other side of bare heads, or the locks might be knotted. These and many hundreds of other articles or visible signs, are pointers to people's belief in the mystical power protective measures, others are intended to bring good health, fortunes or prosperity.³⁰

On the flip side, evil magic involves the belief in and practice of tapping this power to do harm to human beings or their property. It is here that we find sorcery at work, in addition to related practices, which are related to cases of fear, suspicion, jealousies, ignorance or false accusation which go on in African villages.³¹ Corroborating the above, Bernard GechikoNyabwari argued that bad magic involves belief in and or practice of tapping and using this power to harm human beings and their property. In such cases sorcery is at work. Belief here is largely based on fear suspicion, jealousy, ignorance or false accusation. Hair, nails, cloths, or other articles can be used by enemies to produce evil magic. Hair or nails may be burned or otherwise used in a harmful way. When used maliciously, such mystical power is termed black magic, evil magic or sorcery.³²

The implications of the nature and operation of magic in African societies is that magic is not completely evil as have been held in some quotas, rather magic serves a purpose that make for societal and social control. In this regard, magic is used by the individual to protect himself, his family and the society at large. While the operations of magic may vary from society to society in Africa, it must be noted that magic can be employed and deployed for societal good as much as it can also be deployed to cause harm to individuals, families and the society.

30 Mbiti, S. John. *African Religions and Philosophy*, P. 198.

31 Mbiti, S. John. *African Religions and Philosophy*, P. 200.

32 Bernard Gechiko Nyabwari, Bernard Gechiko Nyabwari "The Impact of Magic and Witchcraft in the Social, Economic, Political and Spiritual Life of African Communities" P. 11.

Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, attempts have been made to explicate on the nature and implications of magic in African societies. What is to be noted is that the phenomenon of magic has been recurrent in the consciousness of Africans to the extent that neither globalization nor the presence of Christianity and Islam in Africa been able to calm the fear of as well as the recourse to it. While the practice differs from society to society within Africa, it remains to state here that magic is both benevolent and malevolent and as such it constitutes a double edged sword that can both serve for societal control as much as it can serve for harming individuals, families and the society at large. The implications of the above it that African would recourse to magic in times of crisis with the intent of finding succor and getting out of the crisis situation they may have found themselves.

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