

THE CONCEPT OF MAGIC IN THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN WORLD

Dr. James N. Nnoruga
Department of Religion & Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria
jn.nnoruga@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper investigates the concept of magical powers within African societies, focusing on their origins and significance from an African perspective. Many traditional African communities believe that the universe possesses a mystical force that can be manipulated through the ontological or hierarchical structure of existence. These powers, though acknowledged in African cosmology, remain largely mysterious, with only a few individuals understanding how to access or use them. Due to their elusive nature, magical powers are often dismissed as trickery, hypnotism, or psychological phenomena by outsiders. The study examines the increasing use of magical powers in contemporary African societies, especially among the youth of Southeast Nigeria. It employs the theoretical framework of African metaphysics, which views the universe as a dynamic interaction between visible and invisible forces, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of magic within its cultural context. Additionally, the research will utilize social constructivism to explore how modern African societies reinterpret and adapt traditional beliefs about magic to suit contemporary realities. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how mystical powers are evolving in response to modern challenges and influences. It contributes to discussions on African spirituality, the intersection of tradition and modernity, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems. By focusing on the rising popularity of magical practices among young people in the Southeast of Nigeria, this paper offers insights into the social and psychological factors driving this trend and its broader implications for African cultural identity and belief systems in the modern era.

Keywords: Magical Powers, African Cosmology, Mystical Forces, Traditional Beliefs

Introduction

The concept of magic or magical powers in African traditional metaphysical beliefs or spirituality like ancestor worship, divination, and witchcraft, persist or dominate in the lives of the African people in their day-to-day activities. Some weave it out as not being authentic and systematic as science, some still go back to it as a means to solve their traditional and modern problems, while some still turn to magic or magical powers when there is a sense of uncertainty, danger, or unknown circumstantial conditions. In some cases or situations, some scholars view it as an art to amuse the audience or to invoke a sense of wonder among the people, in this case, it is seen as a skill. Generally, the African concept of magic has some mysticism surrounding it just like all other metaphysical beliefs or powers in the African worldview, and in its case magical power commands rather than begs to submit itself to something.

African magic is more of an unknown system (for non-initiate) but a known system (for the initiate) and ability, whereby the Africans in their pristine age try to manipulate or control or command their natural world through some of the forces seen or known in the hierarchical structure of the African gods. Through these forces, they can control or manipulate events, objects, and people, sometimes negatively or positively. This is why in the contemporary African world today, African magic is under pressure and in competition with science and religious practices trying to out the other in solving human problems or being at the center stage. Hence the continuous condemnation by different religious faiths and dismissal by scientists persist but it has survived in its practice and belief in the African world. Being involved or associated with forces of spirit, its efficacy continues to be questioned or debated by religious adherents and scientists who are trying to understand the source of its power or procedural system.

African magic employs the use of other spiritual means to bring about its mission to fulfillment and this is the reason it is always confused with sorcery, divination, witchcraft, and so on. Kanu (2015) reiterated above that witchcraft, sorcery, and magic are related and yet they are individual concepts. Earlier Lois (2001) distinguished magic and religion from the point of view of their operation. For Lois, a common distinction “is that in religion, people pray and submit themselves to the decision of God and the gods. But in magic, people command the powers” (p.83). Quarcoopome (1987) also stated that the main difference between the goals of magic and religion is that while the magic basic aim is to seek the satisfaction of the individual’s wishes or selfish ends, religion is more concerned with the good of the whole community. Though Durkheim (1976) strongly stated earlier that magic is hardly distinguishable from religion, that religion is full of magic, and magic is full of religion, and consequently that it is impossible to separate them and define any of them without the other. The process or means involves seen and unseen things; hence according to David (2007) fundamental to African magical powers is its unseen connections whereby things act on one another at a distance through invisible links. Magic by its system offers no empirical justification of its results because its origin emanates from spiritual forces.

Looking at African metaphysical realities, there are a lot of conflicting realities and opinions concerning the means through which the world order is being manipulated for good or bad purposes through magic, sorcery, witchcraft, and so on. This research among other things aims to resolve some issues and explain the concept of magic, its understanding, and its continuous practice among the African people. The research will also explain why the use of these magical powers by the African youths of this contemporary era for financial purposes, hence the progressive growth and resurfacing of some metaphysical traditional practices among the African people which is being propelled by magical powers found among them.

Tracing the Source of Magic or Magical Powers from the African Worldview

The African concept of magic can be understood better from the African metaphysics, cosmology, and ontological point of view. Magical power or magic is therefore seen as a hidden supernatural power in the universe, human beings ordinarily cannot use it, for the Africans believe that God governs these mysterious powers in the universe, of which magical power is one of them. These unseen powers are hidden yet known to human beings who are trained or chosen by gods to understand or manipulate them. Mbiti (1979) is of the view that access to this mystical power is hierarchical in the sense that God has the most and absolute control over them and that some human beings know how to tap, manipulate, and use some of them. Adibe (2008) described these mystical powers as supernatural, metaphysical, experiences of timeless, spaceless reality that transcends the empirical realities. Many scholars like Mbiti (1982), Kanu (2015), Adibe (2008) Madu (2004), Edeh (1983), Ijomah (2005), and a host of other scholars observed that the African universe is divided into three or two dimensions: the heaven, the earth, and the underworld or the physical and spiritual dimension respectively.

According to Mbaegbu (2012), spiritual beings inhabit the spiritual world; the corporeal beings occupy the visible world and these two worlds shade into each other in the sense that there is no dichotomy between the two worlds though they are essentially different from each other. Daily interactions and communications go on between the two worlds through prayers, divinations, libations, etc. In African ontology, there is in existence, the hierarchy of beings that Africans recognize, man is at the center of these interactions. The Supreme Being called God or the Ultimate Being is at the peak of this existence and is also the creator of the universe. Below the Supreme God are divinities who according to scholars are God’s ambassadors or messengers. Kanu (2015) described them as “the functionaries in the theocratic governance of God” (p.102). After this, we have spirit which consists of non-human spirits and human spirits in the words of Mbaegbu (2012). These spirits in human or non-human form have shadowy bodily forms and they assume different shapes most times such as animals, plants, humans, and so on. But these bodily forms are not permanently attached to them. Then we have human being at the center who manipulates all these to maintain cosmic balance. And finally, we have things or the remainder of biological life comprising animals, plants, and minerals.

According to Quarcoopome (1987) “the supernatural force in magic is associated with Mana, an impersonal power, operating on a principle similar to electricity. With the right technique, one can control it to serve his will” (p.141). Going further in explaining the above, he stated that the divine minister of magic and medicine among the Yoruba people is called *Osanyin*, just like among the Igbo people the divine portfolio of magic and medicine is held by *Agwu* deity. From this tutelary deity or divinity, one can assess the powers of magic. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) noted earlier also that *Agwu* deity can be invoked as a tutelary divinity in connection with good and bad magic. This automatically shows that magic is under the spiritual force or power called *Agwu* deity for the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria. Mbaegbu (2010) states that *Agwu* deity or spirit belongs to the category of beings, of the non-human spirit in the hierarchy of beings. They are created spirits and most people believe that they are frozen forces in things, that is, in animals, plants, and minerals which man can harness to control and manipulate the supernatural resources of the universe for the benefit of man.

According to Ranger (1999), magic practitioners often invoke ancestral spirits to gain access to supernatural powers, seeking their guidance or intervention in magical practices. The Shona people of Zimbabwe believe in the power of their ancestors known as “Vadzimu” for protection, healing, and divination. While Idowu (1962) has the view that many African societies believe in nature spirits or deities associated with elements such as rivers, forests, mountains, and hills. These deities and spirits are seen as powerful and can be appeased or controlled to perform many different kinds of magic. Hence many people in African society worshipped them for their ability to grant magical and supernatural powers. Equally many scholars attributed the source of magical powers to have come from sacred objects, knowledge of plants and herbs, and Divine or Supernatural gifts (Parrinder, 1976). From the above analysis, one can see that the source of magical powers is gained in various ways like spirit, nature, or divine power gifts which must be harnessed or invoked by those who have gifts or revealed by the spirit. For the Africans, the magical power is not ordinary art that can be done or accessed by anyone.

The Conceptual Meaning of Magic and Types of Magical Powers

According to Mbiti (1979) most Africans who grew up in the African traditional society most probably know something about mystical powers, which often is experienced in the form of magic or other mysterious phenomena, that always defy sometimes most scientific explanations. The nature of mystical or magical power can be used by people to do many things like pouring water on a basket and it will not flow out, healing of diseases, changing into animals, sending of curses or harm to people and so on. These manifestations above and more are how magical powers show itself in different ways by their specialist who have mystical powers as an individual gift or by their professions or are inherited from the individual’s family.

Many religious traditions like Buddhist and Christian traditions in one way or another practiced magic in their cultures and it is found in their traditions. In the Christian scripture, there are evidences of magicians performing the art of magic both in the New and Old Testaments. In the Old Testament, it is well known that the Egyptians worshiped many gods and that magic played an important role in the rituals of their high priests. The book of Exodus speaks of magicians practicing what is called secret arts, many chapters in the book of Exodus showed the magicians of King Pharaoh displaying their magical art in response to the marvel displayed by Moses and Aaron in the process of liberation in the life of Israelites. In the New Testament, one sees Simon Magus known as Simon the Magician who was a religious figure whose confrontation with Peter the Apostle is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (8:9-24). All these show that the practice of magical powers has been in most of the cultures and traditions and not only in African society.

Based on the vast known practice or belief of magic or magical powers Frazer (1922) stated or argued that the so-called primitive man evolved a “bastard science” by which objects were supposed to produce effects

resembling themselves, he sees magic as the primordial form of human thought which consisted in making either spatiotemporal connection, for which case it was referred to as sympathetic magic or phenomenal similarity or imitative magic. Offiong (1991) states that magic involves those supernatural devices employed by man, to achieve his end with the help of spirits and gods. This means that magic involves an attempt by man through the aid of gods and spirits to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his personal use or benefit. The above definition or explanation alludes to the fact that the power of magic comes from gods or spirits as already seen before in the write-up.

Generally, magic as an activity or ritual performance is believed to influence the activities of men in the universe, through access to mystical forces beyond the experience of ordinary human beings. From the above explanation, Awolalu (1981) states that:

Magic is a human art which involves the manipulation of certain objects which are believed to have some power to cause a supernatural being to produce or prevent a particular result considered not obtainable by natural means. It is regarded as a means of handling the forces of nature, of bending them to man's will, of safeguarding his welfare and shaping his destiny. He is convinced that there are supernatural resources in the universe for his benefit and that these resources can be obtained by two different means: (a) By appealing to the transcendental Being to satisfy his needs; (b) By devising a means of tapping the elemental forces which are already created in the universe by the Supreme Being, and which can be procured by those who know 'how'. (p. 75).

This is the reason why many scholars believe that magic operates on the principle of command rather than appealing as in the case of religion. For most scholars, magic operates on the principle that supernatural power can be controlled through some mechanical techniques. This is why it is believed that magic is esoteric in the sense that it is limited to those who have the knowledge. Hence, Awolalu states that magic has its motto or approach as my will be done. This means that magic is mechanical and commanding. This does not mean that magic uses coercion on the deity or transcendental being to get what it wants. What magic does according to Awolalu (1981) is to tap the resources which are already provided by the transcendental Beings for the use of man. Magical practices are done by special experts (magicians) and they are found in different communities of African society. Parrinder (1970) explained that:

The magician is a kind of scientist, in that he seeks to discover and use the laws of the universe, not only of intimate nature but also spiritual forces. He believes that there are powers that are hidden secrets that can be tapped, not necessarily that he can force these powers to a different purpose but there are laws which may be set in motion by the knowledge, as an electrician uses the forces of nature to light his house. (p. 157).

Magicians according to Awolalu (1981) use incantations, amulets, spells, enchanted rings, horns, small gourds, padlocks, alligator paper, and many other objects to tap and control the supernatural resources in the universe. This is where magic and religion are closely related or connected because most of the elements used in magic are found also in religious worship and so it is always difficult to say when one passes from one realm to another. But a magical act has almost three elements according to Awolalu, the first is that there are words to be uttered according to a certain formula or order, and any omission or change of the wordings deprives the magic of its power. Secondly, there are sets of actions to be carried out relating to the result which is being intended to be achieved. For instance, if an enemy is intended to be killed from a long distance the magical preparations may include the following actions, the sorcerer in the person of the magician will procure water in a bowl and get a machete or sword to be used but before then he summons the spirit of the enemy by magical means to appear in the water in the bowl. Awolalu (1981) relates that

when the person is stabbed by the sword the enemy whose spirit has been summoned will receive an actual wound wherever he may be.

Thirdly, the condition of the actor also plays an important role in the effectiveness of the magical operations. The magician must refrain from eating certain foods, from causal sexual indulgence, and other contaminating illicit actions. Certainly, if these rules are not rigidly observed, his charms will lose its potency. Sequel to the above three elements, Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) affirmed that magic works through two techniques: homeopathic and contagious means. Homeopathic/imitative magic works on the principle of like produces like, which in another sense means the principle of similarity whereby the effect resembles its cause, while contagious/sympathetic magic is based on the belief that things that have once been in contact with each other continue to act on the other at a distance after the physical contact had been severed. This is better understood that anybody can be harmed through his properties or anything connected or owed by him or her. Though Lois (2001) regarded homeopathic or imitative and contagious as kinds of magic while Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) regarded them as techniques of magic.

The types of magic practiced in contemporary Africa are diverse, reflect the continent's rich cultural heritage and the adaptation of ancient traditions to modern realities. While these practices vary widely in purpose and form, they remain deeply intertwined with African spirituality, identity, and social life. Generally, most scholars believe that in magic we have evil or black and good or white magic which can be regarded as contagious and homeopathic magic (Parrinder, 1976). Mbiti (1979) stated that the use of good magic is accepted and esteemed by society, it is chiefly the specialists like medicine men, diviners, and so on who use their knowledge and manipulation to mystical powers for the welfare of their communities. This good magic is used in the treatment of diseases, in counteracting misfortunes, and in warding off diseases, diluting or destroying evil power. Evil magic or black magic involves the belief in and practice of tapping and using this power to harm human beings or their properties. Here, sorcerers, and evil magicians are at work using magical objects to achieve their ends. According to Adibe (2006) in his explanation of *ajo Ogwu* stated that:

Bad and illicit magic is sorcery. Sorcery is called *ndi dibia ajo Ogwu* (medicine men who prepare dangerous charms and medicine). Their medicines are regarded as offensive and anti-social. They can kill, harm, destroy life or property, distribute unhappiness, and disrupt the well-being of the individual and the society. A person who uses bad magic is a sorcerer (*ajo dibia*). He makes use of hairs, nails, spittle, sweat, urine, wastewater from bathe, sleeping mats, used dresses, chewing-stick and foot-print or any other material that has come in contact with the person he intends to harm. They are very conscious of what they do within the realms of hatred, anger, envy, jealousy, enmity, malice or spite. (pp. 30-31).

In the same vein, Ekwinife (1999) made allusion that bad magic is mainly used by sorcerers who use poison, spell, and other evil means to harm people whom they wish to annihilate or maim. The previous citation by Adibe (2006) shows the contagious way or technique through which bad magic can be transmitted to an individual. Magic can be used or employed in various ways either for good or for bad purposes, as noted earlier magic can be positive or negative, clandestine or public. It has to be known or noted that magical practices according to Offiong (1991)

... involve the ritual manipulation of objects such as charms, amulets, potions, concoctions of various supernaturally endowed objects or materials; the use of word formulas; and reliance upon a wide variety of action, such as dancing, fasting, deep breathing, hypnosis, and other techniques intended to modify

normal physiological and psychological functioning as a means of increasing the operator's magical powers. (pp. 33-34).

Bascom (1991) came up with divinatory magic used to gain insight into the future, understand the will of the gods or ancestors, or uncover hidden truths. It plays a significant role in decision-making processes, whether personal, communal, or political. Common methods of divinatory magic include casting bones, reading animal entrails, or interpreting natural signs. These tools help the diviner magician to communicate with the spiritual realm. Momoh (2015) also alluded to folk magic which encompasses everyday magical practices in the daily lives of the African people. These magical practices are usually informal and are passed down from generation to generation, blended with cultural traditions and superstitions. These items or objects like beads, herbs, and stones, are seen as charms and talismans and are blessed or charged with magical power by the magician.

The above explanations signify that the art of magic involves some ritual processes that are being followed by the magicians and must be duly followed to achieve or obtain magical powers. Rites of magic can be simple or complex ritual acts that include prayers, worship, sacrifices, dancing and so on. As mentioned earlier, ritual objects play very important role in achieving the desired results.

Magical Powers Persist in Day-to-Day Lives of African/Igbo People

Belief in magical power is a strong and widespread phenomenon in Africa despite stiff opposition and downplaying of it from a scientific point of view, western education, and teachings of the Christian religion. For the core African people, the issue is not whether magic exists or not, but the issue is how to combat or neutralize its anti-social activities and take advantage of its positive potential in improving the lives of African people. Observations indicate that magic often does appear to produce the expected results and at other times fails to produce the expected results or effects. That is why Offiong (1991) believes that when magic works it is as a result of coincidence when it is given enough time, the expected or desired event will occur. But this thought on the contrary suggests or shows that African magical powers are not real and have no potential power that can be accessed whenever the appropriate rituals are applied. The continuous magical powers being experienced or performed by some Africans in different fora and events are good testimonies or evidence of tapping from the arts of magic and spiritual powers.

The activities of the so-called Yahoo boys were an eye-opener to many people who see some youths showing off excess money through their lavish lifestyle being displayed in the public forum. It is a known fact that with proper rituals being performed by Yahoo boys with the ritualists, they engaged in deception, killing, and so on with their magicians or bad traditional priests to make a huge amount of money through deception from their clients whom they command to do some activities relating to defrauding innocent people in faraway places. This has influenced many youths to engage in all kinds of ritual acts to be wealthy without any meaningful hand work or being employed by any company or industries. Through this way, the youths of Africa waste their God-giving talents which would have been harnessed or meant to be developed in different sectors of the economy. The yahoo boys are found all over the world but the Africans overtook other parts of the world by adding magical manipulation to their nefarious activities. Sequel to the excess wealth being displayed by the youths of Africa within a short period of their economic activities, if any, it becomes very difficult to curtail the menace of killings, kidnapping for rituals, and kinds of wicked tricks which are used by the yahoo boys. This in effect brought down the morality of the people in the society and the need for honest work or living keeps dwindling. This keeps pushing African continent to be less developed when compared with other continents of the world.

The activities of the bandits or kidnappers found in some parts of the Southeast of Nigeria are pieces of evidence that magical powers, like protection from bullet shots, appearing and disappearance in certain difficult situations, which are being prepared by the bad African traditional priests or magicians for the nefarious activities of bandits or kidnappers, show that magical power persists among the Africans. One

will argue that they are being harmed most times when struck with any dangerous weapon or fired with gunshots, but the fact that they go scot-free or unharmed most times when struck, is an eloquent testimony that some unknown power is connected to it. It has to be noted or recalled that from the above analysis so far, there are rules and regulations which must be kept by the individual making use of the magical power to make the magical powers effective, apart from the other rituals which are being performed diligently by the traditional priests or the magicians. The magical powers help the people using them to change into different kinds of animals or chance of disappearing when the condition is unfavorable for them to escape from the dangerous situation. Here one vividly remembers "*The Bottled Leopard*" written by Ike (1985) which brilliantly tells the story of an embattled school boy (Amobi) who has been chosen by his progenitors to bear the mystical power of his lineage, the power to control a leopard. The boy Amobi was greatly troubled by dreams of a leopard constantly being experienced by him, this shows that his ancestors have been turning or changing into leopards because it is in their lineage. However, Ike (1985) used the story to explore the conflict between two different cultures which resulted from the inability of the Western world to understand and come to terms with indigenous African culture and magical powers bestowed on the African people.

The African magical power is also being employed or used variously during the raining season either to hold the rainfall in the sky or to cause it to fall. There have been arguments and counterarguments on the veracity of the above on whether it is possible to do so. But this is a mystical power that has no procedure or process to be explained as in the case of science. Africans are known to always call the rainmaker in their events during the rainy season to prevent the disruption of events by rainfall. Sometimes even when they are paid, the rain still drizzles or falls torrentially, and most times it does not fall. It is a known fact most times, there would be sunshine (high temperature) where an event is taking place while the surrounding environments or surrounding communities will be experiencing huge rainfall. Most rainmakers always exploit or create this kind of situation to make money because they are paid heavily, especially during the rainy season, they know that they would always be consulted by the people who have one engagement or the other to perform. When they are not consulted, they always join hands together to disrupt any event taking place, that is the reason why two or three rainmakers are consulted to hold or clear the cloudy weather during any important occasions. If one rainmaker is consulted and paid, the other rainmakers, team up to destroy his work. Apart from the use of African magical powers positively, where they are known, some use them for negative purposes to harm other people, threaten the lives of their enemies, and cause unexplained deaths to people, this is the reason most people fear their fellow men and women in the community because they are perceived to be bad in terms of using magical powers which they use to harm people or those they are in conflict within the community.

Findings and Suggestions

Persistence of Traditional Beliefs: Magic remains an integral part of many African societies, especially in the southeast of Nigeria where it is intertwined with traditional belief systems, spirituality, modern religious beliefs, and indigenous practices among the youths. Hence, in many societies magic coexist with other belief systems. From another perspective, magic among the youths of Igbo people, is often perceived as a means of healing, protection, means of affluence, and even social regulation. Many communities believe in the power of magical rituals to protect against evil, attract prosperity, or restore balance. This has led to many youths going into worshipping all kinds of natural elements with human and animal rituals of sacrifice. In contemporary African society as of today, magic is sometimes used to assert power, either politically or socially. Political figures or community leaders believe in the use of magical powers to manipulate the outcomes of elections.

There is a great need to integrate everything about traditional African/Igbo concepts of magic into more research, and to be taught in schools of higher institutions. This will help to discover more about the traditional magic and its procedures and it will promote a balanced understanding of cultural practices. In this way, proper documentation and preservation of knowledge about traditional African/Igbo magical

practices will be sustained. It will also enhance and encourage dialogue between traditional and modern practices. Efforts should be made by governments and Christian bodies to engage in community outreach programs to address the negative consequences and effects of certain magical practices like kidnaping and killings.

Conclusion

Awolalu (1981) is of the view that while one may condemn evil magical powers or disapprove of the existence of African metaphysical magical powers or its preparation because they are anti-social and do not follow any known procedure like the scientific process in most cases, it is recommended and being advocated that the exploring and the use of healthy or good magic to aid modern scientific inventions and improve the standard of living among the African people. For it is not bad idea to employ magical means to cure illness, to escape from imminent danger, to improve life longevity, to discourage evil deeds or improve upon agricultural outputs. Magic power has never been harnessed properly in the African universe because it is not seen as one of the potentials of nature in African society, rather it is being discarded as nothing or a mere superstition. So generally, from the above description and analysis, magic employs the operative factors that are based on the principles of similarity, contiguity, and unusualness unlike religion which addresses itself to God in a spirit of or principle of submission and appeal.

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