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MAGIC: A MISUNDERSTOOD ASPECT OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

by

I. O. OLOYEDE

1.1 Introduction

The statement by E. Bolaji Idowu[1] that "the aid of magic is sought by those who are not sure of their character or those who are positively wicked" conveys to one a number of possible implications concerning the practice and use of magic:

i. Insecurity or its feeling is generated in man by his evil deed.

ii. Magic is adopted by irreligious people or those who are not on good terms with God.

iii. Magic is an act of wickedness and

iv. There is no need for magic if one is upright or kind.

One may not even be convinced that the original statement, in the light of its various implications, will not be inadvertent on the part of the author. This is particularly so when a note is made that the author of the statement is aware of the distinctions in magic when he refers to one type as "black-magic"[2]. Idowu was conscious of the categories of magic when he wrote "magic could be licit or illicit"[3] and that a type of magic could be used for a good end[4]. Idowu teaches that no line of demarcation could be drawn between magic and medicine, that both are connected with a transcendent power and that the basis of medicine, is religion.[5] He further stated indirectly, that Religion is the basis of magic when he indentified a spirit that gave birth to magic as "I called upon the god to cure me more quickly."[6]

These statements of fact coming from the author, added to the clause with which he started his original statement, "In the strict sense"[7] make a reader conclude that the word "magic" in the original statement is not intended to convey "magic" in its true multi-dimensional colour of being similar to medicine; having good usages; and being a product of religion (as revealed by Idowu) rather it is used to convey "bad magic". This conclusion seems to be an over-simplication of the issue, because Idowu did not only confirm his original statement on the same page with the first statement, but also assert his complete rejection of magic in its entirety and without any hesitation. He wrote:

> Thus we have grounds to believe that licit or illicit magic, as practised in Africa is due to weakness in man's concept of God the weakness of man's faith, or impatience on the part of man. . . Religion does not need magic to keep it going.[8]

The quotation is more far-reaching than the original statement and it im-

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plies, in addition to the likely interpretations of the original statement, that magic is unrelated to God and that magicians are impatient.

2.0 Definitions and Clarification:

There is the tendency for a reader to think that Idowu's concept of the word "magic" is not specific or sufficiently clear to us, hence the need for defining our understanding of magic and related issues: prayer, miracle, medicine and religion.

2.1. Religion

Religion could be defined as man's interraction or communication with God or a super-natural Being. Any relationship resulting from man's awareness of, and reaction to a non-human power greater than himself. Religion, at least in African Traditioinal Religion, Christianity and Islam. may be defined as "the means by which God as spirit and man's essential self communicate".[9] Thus religion is any relationship with God which recognises, taps or invokes God's Power and supreme control over all things.

2.2 Prayer

Prayer is an act of seeking favour from God, in a sober and submissive mood.

It is the most outstanding feature of Religion. Prayer, in a strict sense, is calling on God without any material means.

Medicine according to Nkanga "is the art of using available natural resources to prevent, treat or cure diseases. It is by means of herb and drugs".[10] In as much as this definition describes medicine, medicine appears to be wider than the scope of this definition in two aspects: medicine, we are informed, uses supernatural resources and not only natural resources, and medicine treats, in addition to diseases, man's emotional or social problems which have little direct connection with the physique. This explains why a writer[11] refers to *agbodewe* (renewal of old person — a sort of magic which makes old look young) as medicine. This shall be expatiated on later.

Secondly the use of a non-herbal method to cure disease is still medicine. The use of incantation to cure diseases (e.g. headache)[12] and the possibility of a medicine, particularly from priests, having both spiritual and pharmacological value constitute a reality which gives birth to the term "magical medicine". In the word or field[13].

> "Medicine is medicine even when there is a spiritual rather than a material value attached to a remedy. It seems to us that medicine is the art and science of prevention and cure of diseases and non-Physiological problems".

We agree that a part of the Luba (in East Africa) concept of medicine is simi-

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lar to operational medicine in some other parts of Africa, particularly, Nigeria. To the Luba:

> "Medicine can refer to almost any kind of power available to achieve some human purpose. It is the power which is effective in counteracting disharmony"[14].

From the fore-going, it appears that magic, — good magic — is a part of medicine and medicine is connected with the spiritual world which falls within the scope of religion. The theory shall be critically examined and illustrated later, but we may conclude this section by agreeing for the time being with Parinder's definition of "medicine" as:

> a term that covers both natural healing agencies, leaves, roots and the like, and also the invocation of magical or spiritual influences that are thought to be associated with them."[15]

However, there is need to recognise the difference however tiny, between medicine and magic; the former is primarily pharmacological or material or while the latter is non-pharmacological but could be employed along with herb in medicine. In short, medicine is *essentially*, but not invariably, related to pathology.

2.4 Magic

Magic has been defined by *The Dictionary*[16] as "pretended use of supernatural forces", and "art of obtaining mysterious result by tricks". If this definition is correct the two principal statement of Idowu would be very appropriate but we are persuaded, by available facts, to the point that both the definiton and the statements may not be correct. Magic is the "The art of using the available resources of nature to procure non-therapeutic needs";[17] since therapeutic is understood as "art of healing" and we are aware that a sort of magic could be used to heal headache or some other diseases, then this definition will not satisfy our purposes. We, however, agree with Dopamu that magic is:

> the art of influencing course of events by means of supernatural communications and manifestations of power, or by means of occult control of natural and invocation of particular spirit aids.[18]

Magic does not encompass medicine[19] but the opposite is the case. If medicine is used in magic, as suggested by a magic described by Simpson[20], there are two possibilities. The first is that "medicine" may have no pharmacological value, in which case the herb does not ordinarily have any inherent use, therefore it is still part of magic. Secondly, if magic has medicinal value, it is medicine, within which magic is employed. Hence it can be regarded as magical medicine.

There has been a case, witnessed by the present writer of a mixture of magic

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and medicine. When the recommended magical aspect was discarded the medicine achieved the desired goal. This suggests that the magic was an unnecessary addition to the efficacious medicine.

We may end this definition of magic on a note of disagreement with Idowu who suggested that magic is independent of God. We support the claim that the divinities (as agent of God in African Traditional Religion) are brought into control in as much as the primordial names of such divinities are known.[21] Magical Medicine could be used for therapeutic and non-therapeutic needs.

2.5 Miracle:

"A miracle, in the biblical sense, is an event which happens in a manner contrary to regularly observed process of nature."[22] This definition is also similar. to Islamic notion of miracle; the similarity between this and magic is more subjective than objective for magic too causes event to happen in a manner contrary to regularly observed process of nature. They both occasion spell and wonder. This shall be illustrated later in this paper. It should be noted, however, that almost all religions are proud of miracle, thus the Qur'an is the greatest miracle of Islam (from the Muslims' view-point) and the miraculous resurrection of Jesus is the greatest of all miracles according to Christian beliefs.

2.6 Clarification of Idowu's Statements

It may be correct to view magic as an act of impatience on the part of man who considers medicine or prayer too slow for his "urgent" need. Most people believe that medicines are generally slower in effectiveness than magic; this belief in fastness of magic explains the statement that "a medicine works like magic" and to that extent, it is a short cut to a particular goal. Though in a lesser degree, the same could be true of medicine in relation to prayer and moreso when one notes that medicine and magic came into existence as a result of man's urgent need.[23] This does not mean that magic or medicine, like prayer cannot fail. In point of fact they do fail. Idowu's statement, as far as "impatience" is concerned, is to a very large extent correct. It is equally true that while magic persistently remains an aspect of Religion, religion can prosper and exist without magic.

3.0. Magic in a True Perspective:

3.1. Dual nature of magic.

Magic, if properly understood and in the light of the definition earlier on given, could be licit or illicit, positive or negative. And this dual nature does not call for condemnation in as much as the use of curse, even by prophets[24], does not warrant outright condemnation of prayer. What is bad is sorcery, witch-craft or bad magic which are the misuse of supernatural forces. This clarification, we believe is rightly made by Mbiti thus "They (magicians) use their magic power and knowledge for both good and evil purposes, when they use it for good they are medicine-men but for evil they are witches, wizards and sorcerers".[25]

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Good or positive magic include *Owo* (magic that protects one against unseen dangers), *arobi* (magic that removes evil things from one's way), *imole* (magic protecting a house against robbers), *egbe* (magic of flight in times of danger) *okigbe* (magic that makes one immuned to machet cuts) and *areta* (magic that make one immuned to bullets)[26]. It will not be correct to regard *imole, okigbe* or *areta,* for example, as being used only by those who are not sure of their character, particularly when the menace of thieves, robbers, political assassins extends to all corners, all groups, and all places—religious houses inclusive—in Nigeria. This is more so when bullet-proof wears, and parasuites are positively embraced by all.

Magic used for counteracting the effect of sorcery such as *ajegbe* (magic that prevents any poison taken unknowingly to affect one) and *epa* (magic used to destroy sorcery coming into contact with one) are also regarded as positive. Medicine-men healers of sorcery-should be compared to the policemen and psychiatrists. Policemen know criminal techniques and are in fact vulnerable to crime, psychiatrists too sometimes appear psychotic. In the same vein medicine-men know the techniques of sorcery and may be tempted to sorcery. But if the police force could not be cancelled for fear of criminals, psychiatrists not eliminated because of mental disorderliness, therefore medicine-men too are to be tolerated and respected for combating witches, if witches really exist.

The Bible supports combating of sorcery and even encourages the elimination of sorcerers"; You shall not permit a sorcerers to live". (Exodus 22:18) Good magic is to be encouraged so far it is, according to Dopamu, "to procure the total well-being of man and the society.[27] And it is not outrightly bad as pictured by Janzen, in line with Idowu's original statement, when Janzen wrote "Magic is a misuse of forces within the supernatural world, and the misuse is not in God's hands at all."[28]

3.2 Magic and Medicine

From our definition of magic and medicine it is clear that the two are interrelated and almost inseparable. It is also obvious that medicine at times, involves magic in the cure of diseases. According to Mbiti "Magicians belong partly to that category of sorcerers and partly to hte category of medicine men".[29] It is sometimes difficult to separate medicine from magic as sympathetic magic could be seen as medicine.

In order to illustrate this position a medicine for severe headache *tuulu,* may be examined.

Ingredients:

The head of an antelope, the leaves of *irosun* (papilonaceae) *moriwo ope* (the young palm fonds; nine *eeru* (Ethiopian-pepper).

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Prescriptions:

> **Squeeze the leaves** and *eeru* in water. Put the head of antelope on the infusion. Put black soap on a new sponge, go into the bush carrying everything with you. Lean your head against a tree. With the sponge and infusion, wash the treee at the other side, exactly opposite your head. Do this until the infusion is exhausted. Then remove your head".[30]

This represents clear interaction of medicine and magic hence the author aptly calls it "magical medicine" i.e. magic in medicine.

Also in a paper titled "Obsterics and Gynaecology Among the Yoruba" Dopamu[31] prescribes the following, among other magico-medicines, for a gynaecological disease affecting the breast.

> 200 leaves of asunwon... boil them, together with water *over night,* cover the pot with cloth that *belongs to the woman.* In the morning let the woman drink a cup of the infusion. Dig a hole *on the road used frequently* and let the woman wash her breast with the remaining infusion *into the hole" (underlining is ours).*

The words *underlined,* represent magic in the medicine. Therefore one may agree with Dopamu that "Yoruba do not usually have such arbitrary division into magic and medicine"[32], as he identifies seven similarities between magic and medicine.

Poison appears to us, if without any magical act or preparation, as bad medicine and the maker is referred to as "evil Doctor" by Parinder[33]. Magic and medicine, at least originally, are not unrelated to Religion and Prayer.

3.3. Magic, Medicine or Science: A product of knowledge and experience.

We have earlier identified some scholars' definitions of magic as trick, pretext, or deceit. Some sceptics even regard medicine or magic as superstition. To the authors of these opinions magic and even medicine are not real. This position may not be totally true, at least, of Africans. Magic sometimes involves setting in motion of some techniques or theories. Explaining "medicine" a dictionary says "among primitive people it is a spell, charm fetish or magic".[34] This to them, is so, because they were ignorant of the therapeutic or pharmacological content of medicine. An injection was once considered a pure magic by a butcher who was not convinced of any direct relation between 'water' injected into his buttocks and his head-ache.

Magic may involve a relatively exclusive knowledge and manipulation of certain secrets which are generally unknown to the public. This does not rule out the probability of common sense, deceit and conjuring tricks. A purely scientific production, such as television, radio, electrical refrigerator, remains a magic to those who are ignorant of the workings and theories of potential

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energy. An illustration of a common sense, positive use of trick to perform wonder was recently narrated by an elderly person.[25] According to him, a woman who was always impatient, and unprepared to swallow any abuse from her husband, was often beaten by the irrate husband who felt that she was pompous and assuming, by her not allowing any comment or negative criticism of his, to go without her appropriately annoying instant verbal reactions. Her father gave her a 'magical' preparation, to which she was to hold tightly between her teeth whenever the husband was annoyed. This, according to the father would wipe out the 'evil forces' which were after her marriage, which was then on the verge of collapsing. The unsuspecting woman applied the 'magic' and after some time reported wonderous efficacy of the 'magic'; without realising that the so-called magic was only to prevent her from giving a reply to her husband's vituperations, for she cannot hold on to any object, with her teeth and talk simultaneously. The magic was in her silence.

Once a magic is scientifically explained or understood by the audience it ceases to be a magic, or in the religious sense, a miracle. This explains why the raising of a 'dead' woman ceased to be a wonder when the performer, Jesus, said she was not actually dead but asleep (Matthew 9:24). Like Jesus, and the electrical engineer, the father could not be rightly said to be unsure of his character or positively wicked for performing what appears as magic to anyone, who is ignorant of the 'secrets'. A magician, according to Parinder, is a "kind of scientist in that he seeks to discover and use the laws of the universe not only of inanimate nature but also spiritual forces"[36]. If magic is to be condemned, some aspects of medicine and science, could be unduly eliminated in the process.

3.4. Magic and Religion:

We had earlier on noted that it may be wrong to think of magic as unconnected with God or Religion. Idowu[38] opines, in support of this view, when he believes that no discussion on magic could be correctly done except in the light of religion. We are informed[39] that both magic and medicine are dependent on spiritual belief and inevitably connected with the supernatural and divinities or spirits. God is said to be the originator of magic;[40] magic is thus the gift of God to man. That God is connected with magic is Illustrated with the numerous corpuses used in magic, wherein names of God and divinities prominently feature.[41]. Leaves of trees are created by God for healing (Ezekiel 47:12) and to that extent, healing which is sometimes carried out with herb and magic are not completely free from God's hands.

The fact that most magicians and even religious miracle workers, often do not directly mention God, leads some people to conclude that God is not invoked in magic. It took Jesus some explanations to convince the Jews that God, and not Moses, performed the bread miracle which they attributed to the over-whelming power of Moses (John 6:31 ff).

We are informed that among Yoruba and Igbo, it is a divinity, called *Osonyin* and *Agwu* respectively among the two communities, who controls medicine and

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magic; and to that extent, magic and medicine have their root in traditional religion. Furthermore, magic, medicine and religion (Prayer in particular) are occasioned by man's sense of need[42] and man's inability to, on its own, satisfy that need. Eight reasons were identified as linking religion with medicine.[43] It has been observed that the difference between prayer and medicine or magic is that while "thy will be done" — imploring God — applies to the former, the latter has force — "My will be done" as its characteristic. If magic is to be written off because it is a device by man to control super-natural forces, having no patience for prayer; medicine too has to be eliminated, for as correctly said by Field,[44] Awolalu and Dopamu[45] medicine too commands, unlike religion which to some extent implores. This probably is realised by the Aladura group[46] who abstain from drug and medicine. One thus views the relation of magic, medicine and prayer to religion as featuring different techniques of seeking God's aid.

The force in magic should however, not be overstressed to mean that God can be invariably forced by man to do his (Man's) will and that is why magic at times fails. Parinder[47] says "not necessarily that he (magician) can force those powers (of God) but that there are laws which may be set in motion by the knowledge, as an electrician uses the forces of nature to light his house".

It is no secret that certain prayers involve techniques, and they place emphasis on form rather than spirit and content of prayer.[48] Thus medicine, magic and prayer even use the same techniques, force or persuasion" which had hitherto made the mark or distinction between prayer and magic.

It should also be noted that efficacy of medicine or magic is related to Religion, at least in the African context where faith in magic performs rather than magic itself, such as faith in prayer performs wonder and not the prayer itself. This is more so when priests often combine ritual (prayer), magic and medicine.

3.5. Magic and Miracle:

The Bible as well as the Qur'an supports the use of medicine. The Qur'an reports that it (Qur'an) has some healing power[49], while we have earlier mentioned the biblical verse in support of medicine. The Bible[50] and the Qur'an[51] have their spoken or written words used for "magical" purposes. The Qur'an as well as the Bible are replete with verses indicating intervention of divine power in the established course of nature, beyong man's understanding. Such intervention is known as miracle in Christianity and Islam.

Miracle has been a means of confirming authenticity of the miracle-worker and his closeness to God. (John 3:2 and 11:16 and Qur'an 20:70). This is true of the miracles of Moses and Jesus.

Aside the fact that adherents of Christianity and Islam often employ magic in prayer, we have also come across the use of miracle by devils or those who are not within the pleasure of God, though their miracle worked (Rev. 16:14 and 19:20 also Qur'an 20:68ff) just as magic is used by sorcerers. It is thus obvious that miracle — act or event (good) which does not follow the laws of nature — is

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very similar if not identical with magic, but magic unlike miracle is often defamed.

It may not be absolutely correct to say that miracle and magic are differentiate by the fact that God is mentioned in the former and not mentioned or even not intended in the latter. Jesus said: "I have authority to heal", in Mark 2:9ff, when he healed a paralytic. He, in this and some other instances[52] did not say "with the aid of God" but it is implied. In the same vein, in most good African magic, even when God is not explicitly mentioined, he is implied.

Magic particularly good magic, therefore, appears to us as a sort of miracle or wonder; and it is not sorcery (bad magic) as to warrant the condemnatioin of scholars of Religions. If the resurrection of Jesus and the revelation, content immutability of the Qur'an are not only important miracles in Christianity and Islam respectively, but also fundamental to the existence of the two religions, nothing stops magic from being one of the major structures of African Traditional Religion.

4.0. Conclusion

Medicine and Magic are interwoven. Signs of magic are apparent in some medicine, while 'medicines are used in magic, though we have noted that if medicine is employed in magic it is either pure magic or medicine depending on whether the medicine is feigned or actual. The almost inseparable inter-connections and relations among magic, medicine, prayer and religion had been proved. While prayer, in its pure sense, may represent the highest and most acceptably submissive form of seeking aid from God; medicine and magic are also means of seeking the intervention of the supernatural in satisfying the need of man.

Bad magic and curse are negative use of magic and prayer sorcery and witchcraft like poison (in medicine) are bad, but do not conterminate good magic. Good magic, as we have seen, heals and protects. From the fore-going it is obvious that "magic" in the original statement of Idowu is either loosely used or misused in place of sorcery. It is partinent to conclude with two suggestions to the magicians of African Traditional Religions.

(i) Some ingredients for preparing good magic or medicine need to be refined or substituted in order to eliminate dreadful, and at times hazard'ous (to health) ingredients, such as dead person's saliva, human bone and skull. etc.

(ii) Modern techniques, devices and scientific discoveries could perform effectively the duties of some magic which may or may not, at the end be as efficient as modern devices. An example of this is "publicity" and "marketing strategies" as substitutes for *itaja* or *awure* (a magic that attracts customers).

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52. Mark 8:22 ff for example.

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