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# Magic and Miracles in Ghana: A Critical Examination

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## Abstract

Some people seem to understand magic and miracles to be the same. The understanding of such people can be attributed to the effects that the two phenomena produce. However, magic has also been perceived by some people to be evil whereas its counterpart, miracles are seen as good irrespective of the effects both produce. Whether the two phenomena are the same or different causes much discussion. This is because the understanding of the two phenomena seems to be confused with each other. This paper aims at examining the two phenomena using the descriptive analysis methodology. While references will be made from the western understanding of magic and miracles, the paper will pay particular attention to the Ghanaian understanding of magic and miracles. Secondly, the paper cites and explains when, why and how some societies in the past and the present use magic and miracles. The paper concludes by arguing that magic and miracles are not the same as it has for long been perceived by some Ghanaians. The differences between magic and miracles are dependent on examining the personality of the performer, the source of the power for the execution of any of the two phenomena, the place they are performed, the motive behind their performance and the techniques involved before the desired effects take place in any society including the Ghanaian society.

**Keywords:** magic, miracles.

## 1. Introduction

Magic and miracles are pertinent in the Ghanaian society. Miracles which are perceived to have a Christian orientation mostly take place in churches. But in view of the rapid growth in the number of churches in Ghana<sup>1</sup>, most miraculous activities of some churches are performed publicly to attract members. Magic which is characterized and practiced often in secrecy are sometimes also publicly performed. Its performance can be witnessed during occasions like festival in the Ghanaian context. When some Ghanaians hear the word magic, they most likely picture either a candy that is pulled out of a hat, a box or someone on television making money appear from nowhere. Some entertainers in the Ghanaian culture who perform magic freely admit that they manipulate not the supernatural world, but rather the human perception.

## 2. Clarification of Concepts

The mention of the concepts of magic and miracles invoke varying associations and feelings in diverse people. To some, it is just not worth the trouble to subject the intellect in our age and day to exploring such phenomena because they are just things of the pre-modern (or primitive) world. To people with this kind of disposition towards the subject matter, the concept of magic, especially, was just a means by which pre-modern (or call them pre-scientific) people explained happenings beyond their knowledge. Besides this disposition to the subject matter, there is another disposition which insists that a critical exploration of the issues of magic and miracle is a worthwhile exercise. The foregoing proclivity for magic and miracles breed a diversity which, in the final analysis, is united in the imperative of defining exactly what the concepts to be explored stand for. The question in this regard is: how are the concepts of magic and miracles to be differentiated? The question thus posed seems to envisage a straightforward answer but the complexity involved begins to emerge when one considers the fact that it is impossible to say exactly what happens when a magic is performed (for it would not be magic if it is explicitly open to everyone's understanding) nor is the functioning of miracles readily accessible to the non-miracle performer. This complexity, implicit in the definition and differentiation of the phenomena under consideration, makes it pertinent to proceed by way of descriptive analysis rather than striving to present an exact scientific definition. There is a reason to argue that the foregoing clarifies the cogency of the (descriptive analysis) methodology adopted in dealing with the phenomena under discussion.

To proffer a meaning of the concepts of magic and miracles by means of descriptive analysis, one may ask, how are these phenomena manifested and how are they differentiated? In other words, what are the patterns of their

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<sup>1</sup> Assimeng, M. (1989). *Religion and social change in West Africa: An introduction to the sociology of religion*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press.

occurrences in human societies? To answer this question, let us attempt to clarify the differences as to why some manifestations are described as magical and others as miraculous within and outside the Ghanaian society.

### 3. What is magic?

By looking at the term magic, views from the western and African perspectives would be explored. The term magic has been defined severally by scholars across various disciplines and cultures. The works of James Frazer (1994), Emile Durkheim (1912) and others still reverberate through many scholarly discussions on magic. The use of the term by some anthropologists refers to activities, usually rituals, by which a person can compel the supernatural to behave in certain ways.<sup>1</sup> In his book *Primitive cultures*, Edward Tylor (1871) opined that magic is a logical way of thinking. For Tylor, the problem is that the logic is based on bad premises. This is because in tribal cultures, the magician takes the same approach as a scientist, but the magician makes a mistake because he assumes a causal relationship that does not exist simply because things appear to be similar.<sup>2</sup>

James Frazer (1994) refers to magic as ‘the bastard sister of science’. For him, the term magic is a belief that “the same causes will always produce the same effects, that the performance of the proper ceremony, accompanied by the appropriate spell, will inevitably be attended by the desired result” and this involves no supplication of a higher power.<sup>3</sup> Howard Clark Keen (1986) defines the term magic as a technique, through word or act, by which a desired end is achieved, whether that end lies in the solution to the seeker’s problem or damage to the enemy who has caused the problem.<sup>4</sup>

Within the context of Africa, the meaning of magic is somehow complex. This is due, in part, to the fact that there is no direct equivalent of the word magic in this context.<sup>5</sup> Magic is termed as “Juju”<sup>6</sup> in Africa including the “Akan”<sup>7</sup> group of Ghana. The term can be understood as a medium for the interpretation of different phenomena which have direct resemblance to the western understanding of the concept. Awuah-Nyamekye (2008) writes that ‘magic includes those supernatural devices employed to gain one’s end without the help of spirits or gods’. He adds that magic is something one can conjure up with the help of other devices. According to Awuah-Nyamekye (2008) magic is not to be seen as only good or only bad, it depends on the use to which it is put.<sup>8</sup>

Idowu (1973) understands magic to be an attempt on the part of a man to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his own benefit. For him, magic is “My will be done”.<sup>9</sup> It must be noted that the practice and the use of charms, potent portions, wearing of amulets, voodoo dolls and invocation of non-physical persons or powers by means of incantations have all come to be regarded as the basic manifestation of magic within the African context. Based on this, one may conceive magic within the African context as the influence on events through the use of objects, recitation of words and powers available to human beings to produce an intended desire being either good or bad.

## 4.0 Some Types and Functions of Magic

### 4.1 Types

There are over hundred types, forms and examples of magic in the world. Haviland, Prins, et al (2010) point out in their book *Anthropology: The human challenge* how James Frazer distinguishes between the two fundamental types of magic - the imitative and contagious. For him, the first type “imitative magic” holds that “like produces like”. He explains this type of magic by citing the Myanmar (Burma) in Southern Asia. In this part of the world, he states, that a rejected lover might engage a sorcerer to make an image of his would-be love. If this image were tossed into water, with the accompaniment of certain charms, it was expected that the hapless girl would go mad.

<sup>1</sup> Frankle, R. L. S. & Stein, P. L. (2005). *The anthropology of religion, magic and witchcraft*. Boston [u.a.]: Pearson Allyn and Bacon.

<sup>2</sup> Tylor, E. (1871). *Primitive cultures*. New York: J.P. Putnam’s Sons.

<sup>3</sup> Frazer, J. (1994). *The golden bough: A history of myth and religion*. London: Chancellor Press.

<sup>4</sup> Kee, H. C. (1986). *Medicine, miracle and magic in New Testament times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Okeja, U. B. (2010). *Witchcraft and magic in African context*. Retrieved 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2013, from <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/okejapaper.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> “Juju” is a word of West African origin, derived from the French joujou (toy) that refers to an aura or other magical property, usually having to do with spirits or luck, which is bound to a specific object. Retrieved on 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2013 from <http://www.planetvoodoo.com/history-of-ju-ju.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> The “Akan” inhabit the southern half of Ghana, excluding the south eastern corner. They are composed of the Asante, Fante, Twi groups as the Akwapim, Akim, Akwammu as well as the Denkyira, Wassaw and the Brongs. Retrieved on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 2013, from <http://www.irenekodotei.org/content/history-ghana>.

<sup>8</sup> Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2008). “Magic: Its nature and meaning in traditional Akan society in Ghana”. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 40-1: 25-46.

<sup>9</sup> Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African traditional religion: A definition*. London: SCM Press.

Thus, the girl would suffer a fate similar to that of her image.<sup>1</sup> Other examples of imitative magic are also found in Africa. Rainmakers spit water into the air in order to imitate the falling of rain. Medicine men plaster spots on the body of a person suffering from a rash and then wash away the spots. This imitates the removal of the rash. Some hunters make an effigy of animals which they desire to kill.<sup>2</sup>

In another perspective, Frankle & Stein (2005) argue that homeopathic magic also called imitative magic assumes that there is a causal relationship between things that appear to be similar. The similarity can be physical or behavioral. The most familiar kind of homeopathic magic is 'image magic'. This is the practice of making an image to represent a living person, who can then be killed or injured through doing things to the image, such as sticking pins into the image or burning it. The first may cause pain in the body of the victim that corresponds to the place on the image where the pin was stuck; burning the image might bring about a high fever.<sup>3</sup>

Kottak (1982) seems to share similar views with Frankle & Stein (2005) when he explains imitative magic. He argues that magicians use imitative magic to produce a desired effect by imitating it. He adds that if magicians wish to injure or kill someone, they may imitate that effect on an image of the victim by way of sticking pins in "voodoo dolls".<sup>4</sup> Frazer's second principle of thought is based on contagious magic. The principle holds the idea that things or persons once in contact can influence each other after the contact is broken. For Frazer, the most common example of contagious magic is the permanent relationship between an individual and any part of his or her body, such as hair, fingernails or teeth. In discussing this type of magic he cites the Basutos of Lesotho in Southern Africa, who were careful to conceal their extracted teeth because these might fall into the hands of certain mythical beings who could harm the owners of the teeth by working magic on them.<sup>5</sup>

One cannot leave Mbiti (1989) out of the discussion on magic. His input on magic is based on the categorization he makes. For him, magic is generally categorized under "good" and "evil". Mbiti argues that good magic is that type that is accepted and esteemed by society while evil magic is that magic which involves the belief in and practice of tapping and using this power to do harm to human beings and their property.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.2 Functions

*"If anyone wishes to injure an enemy; for a small fee they (sorcerers) will bring harm on good or bad alike, binding the gods to serve their purposes by spells and curses".<sup>7</sup>*

The functions of magic can be seen in its "instrumental" and "expressive" ways. These functions are obvious in the role it (magic) plays in the life of individuals on the one hand and the entire society on the other hand. Usually, anthropologists identify three main types of instrumental magic: the productive, the protective, and the destructive. Productive magic is

employed to solicit a successful outcome from human labour or nature, such as bountiful hunt or harvest or good weather. Protective magic aims to defend an individual or community from the vagaries of nature and the evil of others. The use of amulets to ward off contagious diseases or the recitation of charms before a journey can be cited as examples of this protective function. Lastly, destructive magic or sorcery is intended to harm others; often it is motivated by envy, and is socially disruptive. Consequently, the use of counter magic against sorcery may relieve some social tension within a community.<sup>8</sup>

In Ghana, the use of protective magic is purported to be of relevance. This is because there is the belief that malevolent spirits manifest in different ways to destroy humankind and their efforts. The manifestation can take the form of the spread of pests and diseases on farm produce and even death. In order for one or the entire society to put up safeguard measures to halt the activities or to protect themselves from these malevolent spirits, protective magic becomes the remedy.<sup>9</sup>

The above view is held by Mbiti (1989). He argues that in the African society, the diviner or medicine-man provides amounts of magical powers to people in the form of charms, amulets, special incantations and the like to protect their homesteads, families, fields, cattle and other properties from the activities of the malevolent

<sup>1</sup>Haviland, W. A., Prins, H. E. L., Walrath, D. & McBride, B. (2010). *Anthropology: The human challenge*. USA: Wadsworth.

<sup>2</sup>Gehman, R. J. (2005). *African traditional religion in biblical perspective*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd.

<sup>3</sup>Frankle, R. L. S. & Stein, P. L. (2005). *The anthropology of religion, magic, and witchcraft*. Boston [u.a.]: Pearson Allyn and Bacon.

<sup>4</sup>Kottak, C. P. (1982). *Cultural anthropology*, (5<sup>th</sup> ed). New York: MacGraw-Hill, Inc.

<sup>5</sup>Haviland, W. A., Prins, H. E. L., Walrath, D. & McBride, B. (2010). *Anthropology: The human challenge*. USA: Wadsworth.

<sup>6</sup>Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy*, (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed.). Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers.

<sup>7</sup>Plato. 4<sup>th</sup> Cent. BCE. (2008). *Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup>Magic. (2013). In *encyclopædia britannica*. Retrieved on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2013, from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/356655/magic/215614/Functions>.

<sup>9</sup>Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2008). 'Magic: Its nature and meaning in traditional Akan society in Ghana'. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 40-1: 25-46.

spirits in the society.<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that Mbiti seems to understand that the works of the malevolent spirits are to harm humankind and their effects and the best of the alternatives for the African to render safeguard measure is to subscribe to the use of protective magic. The expressive functions of magic results from the symbolic and social meanings attached to its practices though its performers may not necessarily be aware of this function. Here, magic's expressive function can provide a sense of group identity through shared rituals that give power or strength to members. Furthermore, it can isolate the magician as a special person within or on the margins of society. Expressively, magic can function as a creative outlet or form of entertainment.<sup>2</sup> In view of the above-mentioned expressive functions of magic, one can argue that magic is inseparable from the total system of thought, belief, and practice in a given society.

Expounding on the functions of magic amongst people and societies, Malinowski (1954 [1925]) describes how magic functions amongst the Trobriand Islanders who live off the

Western Coast of New Guinea.<sup>3</sup> It is to be noted that Malinowski's in-depth study on the Trobriand Islanders was a critic of Emile Durkheim's assertion concerning the fact that primitive societies cannot make a distinction between science, magic and religion.<sup>4</sup>

Malinowski's study on the Trobriand Islands of Melanesia led him to argue that there were no societies without magic, religion, nor some scientific knowledge. For this reason Malinowski refused to believe that preliterate people were 'incurably superstitious'. He observed that in the Trobriand Islands, magical acts comprised three essential elements. Firstly, the spell or actual words used (these were private property, inherited within families). Secondly, a standard sequence of symbolic acts and thirdly, the moral or ritual condition of the performer (frequently involving sexual and dietary taboos).

Magic synchronizes actions for which controls were lacking. For example, the performance of magical rituals during canoe building ensured the mobilization of the necessary labour force. Malinowski found out that the use of magic by the Trobriand Islanders was purposely to manage anxiety generated by uncertainty and to ensure success. Malinowski adds that magical rites were used to ensure safety and good results in open sea fishing, which was full of danger and uncertainty. But no magic was required in lagoon fishing, where the islanders could rely completely upon their own knowledge and skill. His studies of horticulture showed the complicated relationship between magic and science. The Trobriand Islanders cleared plots by practical procedure and skillfully planted crops. However, they fumigated the cleared ground by magical ceremony to prevent blight, pests and insects and to make crops strong.

Malinowski (1954 [1925]) adds that the science of 'primitive societies' consists of a body of traditional knowledge that provides a working understanding of the natural world and that can be put to practical uses. A scientific attitude is also apparent in beliefs in the regularity of nature and in critical reasoning. Malinowski further insisted that magic, religion and science had different roles they play in human affairs. The significance of magical beliefs and practices can be explained by their social and psychological uses.<sup>5</sup>

In explaining some of the functions of magic within the African and Ghanaian context, Awuah-Nyamekye (2008) distinguishes between the functions of 'black' (bad) and 'white' (good) magic amongst the Akan of Ghana. Black magic which he calls 'sorcery' is that type of magic that is used to attack fellow humans, kill, make people sick, destroy property, disrupt marriages, cause barrenness and impotence, and cause havoc in the lives of people amongst the Akan of Ghana in some situations.<sup>6</sup> One can also add that some of the situations in which the Akan of Ghana use black magic is when someone deliberately and continuously have sexual affair with another person's husband or wife, steals from another person's farm produce, intentionally disgraces a person publicly or is jealous about another person's progress in life.<sup>7</sup>

With white magic, it is that type of magic that is used to produce good effect amongst the Akan of Ghana. Normally it is used to heal, to attract love and good luck and to ward off misfortune, to protect people against evil activities, to counteract witchcraft, to treat diseases, to attract more customers to a business and to make people vanish when under sudden attack or involved in motor accidents.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy*, (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed.). Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers.

<sup>2</sup> Expressive functions of magic. Retrieved on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 2013, from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/356655/magic/215614/Functions>.

<sup>3</sup> Malinowski, B. (1954 [1925]). *Magic, science and religion*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.

<sup>4</sup> Durkheim, E. (1912). *The elementary forms of religion*. New York: Free Press.

<sup>5</sup> Malinowski, B. (1954 [1925]). *Magic, science and religion*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.

<sup>6</sup> Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2008). 'Magic: Its nature and meaning in traditional Akan society in Ghana'. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 40-1: 25-46.

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication with Nana Tabir (a traditional priest residing in the Cape Coast castle) in the central region of Ghana.

<sup>8</sup> Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2008). 'Magic: Its nature and meaning in traditional Akan society in Ghana'. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 40-1: 25-46.



Inferring from what Awuah-Nyamekye (2008) posits concerning how magic works to bring about its desired effects, it must not be left out that, the performance of magical rites can either fail or succeed. Secondly, its success or failure has an attribution. Sarpong (2006) explains the source of the attribution for the failure of the desired effect. For Sarpong, when a magical rite fails to produce its effects, the failure is often attributed to the fact that the performer did not follow meticulously the prescription.<sup>1</sup> One would side with Sarpong concerning the argument he makes. This is in view of the fact that magic involves the application of correct techniques and failure to meticulously follow that procedure and prescriptions is tantamount to a fiasco of the magical performance.

Many more are the functions as well as the reasons for the use of magic amongst the Akan of Ghana. For Awuah-Nyamekye, one particular thing that the Akan are noted for in their use of magic is for protection most especially in times of war. The use of magic in this instance is to make the Akan warriors invulnerable and confident of surviving the enemy's attacks (i.e., by their bullets or cutlass).<sup>2</sup>

Mbiti (1989) points out how magic is of relevance to the Africans. He argues that the relevance of magic is evident in how it functions for the individual or the society at large. In view of this, some individuals spend great deal of their wealth and effort to obtain this type of

magical protection and means of prosperity. Mbiti posits that the use of good magic is mostly employed by religious specialists like the diviners, rainmakers and the medicine-men. The specialists use their knowledge and manipulation of this mystical power for the welfare of their community. For example, the treatment of diseases, counteracting misfortunes and warding off or diluting or destroying evil 'power' or witchcraft.<sup>3</sup>

Still on the functions of magic, Mbiti (1991), in his book, *Introduction to African religion*, argues that magic functions as that element that stabilizes relations amongst relatives, neighbours and members of the community. He believes that once people fear that their neighbours or relatives may apply magic and witchcraft against them, they are likely to refrain from certain offences like stealing, rudeness, committing crimes, or deliberately offending their neighbours and relatives.<sup>4</sup>

Bosman (n.d.) writes that amongst the Shona of Zimbabwe, it is believed that magic can be used in its good and bad sense. Shona magicians may use magic to protect or harm people. They can for instance be hired to strike a house with lightning or inflict pain or death on an enemy, cast spells to protect someone who is under attack from a mudzimo, shavi or the magic spells of another person.<sup>5</sup>

From the discussions above, it is crystal clear that magic does not serve evil purposes alone as it has been the popular notion of some people. In fact, its usage can also achieve a good end which is evident in how it functions to maintain, protect society from malevolent forces and enhance productivity in the day to day activities of people.

## 5. Miracles

The term miracle has a range of definitions. Such definitions flow from the views of theologians, philosophers, atheists and others. Some theologians argue that God is the master-brain behind the occurrence of miracles. Some philosophers, for example atheists, debunk the God factor and seem to attribute miracles to coincidence. By definition, St. Thomas Aquinas (1952) defines miracles as those things, which are done by divine power apart from the order generally followed in things. For him miracles must go beyond the order usually observed in nature, though it is not contrary to nature in any absolute sense, since it is in the nature of all created things to be responsive to God's will. He further adds that those events (miracles) are done by God that which nature could never do.<sup>6</sup>

Macquarie (1966) also sees miracles as not normal, but extraordinary features of life. To him God is in the event in some special way, that God is the author of it and intends to achieve some special end by it.<sup>7</sup> The view of Holland (1965) on miracle sways from Aquinas and Macquarie. Miracles for Holland are not as violations of laws of nature, but rather coincidence. For him, miracles are a remarkable and beneficial coincidence that is interpreted in a religious fashion. To further explain his position on miracles, he cites an instance involving a

<sup>1</sup> Sarpong, P. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*, (reprint 2006). Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation.

<sup>2</sup> Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2008). 'Magic: Its nature and meaning in traditional Akan society in Ghana'. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 40-1: 25-46.

<sup>3</sup> Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy*, (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed.). Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Mbiti, J. S. (1991). *Introduction to African religion*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Heinemann Educational Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Bosman, M. (nd). *Shona traditional religion: Philadelphia project*. Retrieved 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2013, from [www.philadelphiaproject.co.za/downloads/religions/shona.pdf](http://www.philadelphiaproject.co.za/downloads/religions/shona.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Aquinas, St. T. (1952). *Compendium of theology*, trans. Cyril Vollert. St. Louis & London: Herder Book Co.

<sup>7</sup> Macquarie, J. (1966). *Principles of Christian theology*. London: SCM Press Ltd.

child whose leg got stuck in a railway line and an approaching train. Holland argues that based on the inability of the driver of the approaching train to stop instantly to salvage the boy whose leg had got stuck in the railway line; the driver unfortunately collapsed behind the steer and coincidentally hit the break lever to put the train into an instant halt. The boy according to Holland escaped death. In view of this, Holland argues that, that scenario was devoid of the intervention of the hand of God but rather a coincidence. Yet, he opines that such a coincidence was a miraculous one.<sup>1</sup>

Miracles are differently understood in the African context. The differences may stem from how it is perceived by the indigenous Africans. With regard to the way indigenous people of Ghana perceive miracles, the following can be considered; healing, deliverance from malevolent spirits, an escape from a fatal accident, passing a difficult interview, successful business life, and success chalked in one's examination and the like.

In Ghana, a miracle is that which happens after a person has followed some prescriptions and practices offered by a pastor. In a person communication, a woman narrates how she had to follow the "akwankyere" (literary meaning directions or prescriptions) prescribed to her by a pastor before she was able to conceive a child in her womb. In her understanding, she calls the outcome "miraculous" because for the past three years, she was unable to bear a child in her marriage. She adds that another way the term miracle is understood is when there is an instant solution to one's predicament in life. An example is when a pastor prays for a person who has been afflicted with blindness and that person's sight is restored immediately.<sup>2</sup>

It must however be made clear that in Ghana and even elsewhere, miracles are not performed by any pastor at all. Rather it takes a pastor who is very powerful. It can be understood from the above that miracles function in the Ghanaian society and probably elsewhere in some societies by taking away discomfort, restoring lost hope, enhancing faith in an ultimate being to mention but a few. Per the definitions and the explorations made in view of having a better understanding of the phenomena miracles, this paper perceives the term miracle as the occurrence of any physical extraordinary event that transgresses the law of nature under the spur of God.

## 6. Some Similarities between Magic and Miracles

The similarities between magic and miracles cannot be over emphasized. This is because both phenomena seem to portray similar characteristics in the effects they produce. Some of the similarities include the following. Magic and miracles serve as means to aid people in their life to accomplish their intended goals. Both magic and miracles relieve people of their emotional, physical, spiritual, psychological, stress and anxiety.

Magic and miracles arise and function in awful moments or situations in the life of individuals and the entire society. Both function to reduce tensions and doubts that arise when outcomes are beyond rational human control. Magic and miracles restore and maintain the equilibrium of society in an anxious state of affairs. The two phenomena exhibit supernatural effect. Magic and miracles performances provide evidence and explanations to the inexplicable situations in life.

Finally magic and miracles involve the use of some techniques and certain unique products for their performance. For example, in the performance of magic, a product like magical powder is used in bringing forth a desired effect. In the case of miracles, some pastors also make use of sacred oils, and "bura munsuo"<sup>3</sup> (literary meaning the water drawn from a well) to bring forth desired effects. In some Neo-Pentecostal churches in Ghana today, some members report of instances where the pastor uses either water or sacred oils to perform miracles. This act is not different from that of the performance of magic. But it must be cautioned that inasmuch as these two phenomena have certain things in common does not imply that they have no differences as it has been the position of some Ghanaians, scholars and practitioners.

## 7. Some Differences between Magic and Miracles

Several scholars have tried to draw distinctions between magic and miracles and have held the view that the two phenomena are not the same. To substantiate their stance, they base their argument on the external characteristics of the two phenomena. But the question is, are these scholars' argument justified when they base their argument only on the external characteristics of the two phenomena? One can argue that by the term distinction, it would be proper if one should explore what goes into the respective techniques and the source of the two phenomena before their effects are manifested.

The following include some of the differences between magic and miracles. Whereas magic is an event is caused by a person's own might to get a desired result (either good or bad) accomplished by using the mind, spells, candles, and other implements, a miracle is not personal base and is devoid of the use of spells, candles,

<sup>1</sup> Holland, R. F. (1965). The Miraculous: In *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2, 43–51.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Abena Serwaa, a church member of the Ebenezer Miracle and Worship Center in Kumasi on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> The term "bura munsuo" in the Ghanaian parlance refers to 'water drawn from a well'. This water is believed to have undergone spiritual purification and sanctification rites and has the power to cause any desired effect on the user.

incantations and the like to bring out a desired effect. The efficacy of magic is short-lived in its effect while that of a miracle are lasting in its effect. Magic involves with manipulating or controlling the mind of the supernatural to get the desired effects but a miracle involves supplication and petitioning the will of the supernatural to cause an effect. While magic is private, involving secrecy and mysterious acts carried out mainly for individual gains<sup>1</sup>, miracle is open and it serves the entire society. Magic is stereotyped as being used to fulfill bad ends while miracle aims in its essence to fulfill good ends. Magic involves a person learning a technique for its performance<sup>2</sup> whereas miracle performance is devoid of apprenticeship and techniques.

Some Ghanaians seem to confuse magic with miracles. The confusion partly emanates from the external superficial effect the two phenomena seem to bring into being. In view of this, they further explain that if the performance of magic can produce an extraordinary effect, bring about healing and deliverance likewise miracle, then arguably the two phenomena are the same. This argument seems to be cogent but does not rob off the differences between magic and miracles.

In drawing the differences between magic and miracles within the Ghanaian context, issues pertaining to the *performer* (the one who executes the act), *source*, *place* and the *techniques* involved are some of the key issues that can be identified. The performer in this essence refers to the one purported to execute the act (magic or miracle). Within the Ghanaian religiosity, magic is however distinguished from miracle based on the person who performs the phenomenon in question. It is believed amongst Ghanaians that magic is performed by a magician or the “traditional priest”<sup>3</sup> whereas miracles are performed by a pastor popularly called “man of God”<sup>4</sup>. Another important issue to consider is the source that activates the phenomena. It is a belief amongst Ghanaians, most especially the Christian folks that magic has its source from Satan whereas miracles from God. On the contrary, the non-Christian folks opine that magic has its source from some unknown spirits. Another way the two phenomena can be differentiated is by considering the place of performance.

Quite a considerable number of Ghanaians understand that magic is either performed in the sacred forest or shrines. However, there are in rare situations and occasions that magic is performed publicly in some Ghanaian traditional societies. For example, during war, festivals and installations of chiefs and the like magic is performed. The performance of miracles is open and takes place mostly in the church and at “crusade grounds”<sup>5</sup>. Magic can also be differentiated from miracles by considering the techniques involved before the desired effect is achieved. Magic involves chanting, recitation of some words, invocation of some spirit beings, throwing of cowries, spilling of magic powder and in some instances the reading of magical books to cause a desired effect. Miracles unlike magic are devoid of such techniques, spilling of magical powder and reading of magical books.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine magic and miracles. It discussed the various definitions of the two phenomena as they are broadly understood and narrowed them down into the Ghanaian context. It was discovered that Magic may be perceived in the Ghanaian context as ‘Juju’ that usually has to do with spirits or luck, which is bound to a specific object manipulated by a person with the aim of using it to harm or protect people in the society. The paper explained the types and functions of magic in some Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian societies.

The concept of miracle, its functions and examples and how it is understood were also discussed within and outside Ghanaian purviews. Some similarities and differences coupled with examples between magic and miracles were also treated in general and finally narrowed down into the Ghanaian context. The paper asserts that despite the similarities that magic and miracles have in common, the two phenomena are not the same. This is because if one should consider only the external superficial effects that they produce, one would be misled into only believing that there are no such differences between them. For this reason, the paper holds the view that the differences between magic and miracles are dependent on examining the personality of the performer, the source of the power for the execution of the two phenomena, the place they are performed, the motives behind the performance and the techniques involved before the desired effects take place in any society including the

<sup>1</sup> Mauss, M. (2002). *A general theory of magic* (R. Brain, Trans.). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Frankle, R. L. S. & Stein, P. L. (2005). *The anthropology of religion, magic, and witchcraft*. Boston [u.a.]: Pearson Allyn and Bacon.

<sup>3</sup> A “traditional priest” is a religious specialist who has extraordinary powers, a direct link with the gods and spirit beings, serves as an intermediary between humans and the spirit beings and presides over ritual ceremonies within a traditional society.

<sup>4</sup> The term “man of God” is a popular Ghanaian parlance that refers to a person (particularly a man) who has been ordained and is believed to possess the power of God/miraculous power.

<sup>5</sup> A “crusade ground” is not a battle ground or a religious campaign against infidels as it has been popularly perceived by some religious faiths. In Ghana, the term means a place where a religious organization has chosen to either preach the word of God, perform miraculous activities or deliverance service for people.



Ghanaian society.

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