

THE RATIONAL STATUS OF MAGICAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES***

A. A. Martins

My discussion of the rationality of magical beliefs and practices has its basis in a theoretical issue that the philosophers of the social sciences have often concerned themselves with. The issue is that of the value-ladenness of the Social Sciences. Is it possible for the social scientist to carry on his inquiries without extra-academic influences such as religion, race, emotion culture and prejudice of one kind or another colouring the conclusions that arise from them? The physical scientist is by and large considered "immune" to this virus of value-ladenness because the objects of his inquiry are impersonal entities such as atoms, gases, etc. He may have a problem with value only to the extent that the immediate problems of his environment act as the catalyst for his research but the results are bound to be cross-culturally valid as in the case of the law of gravity, for instance. For the social scientist, the problem is an acute one and hence some have arrived at the opinion that his conclusion cannot but be value-laden. This is because the social scientist is a social actor and so the beliefs and practices that guide his own social interactions cannot but come to play in his evaluation of other societies. We shall not go far into the intricate arguments in this issue. Suffice it to say that I believe in the value-ladenness of the social scientists' inquiries and conclusions.

The question that arises for me is: Is the social scientist justified in making value judgements especially when it comes to cultural issues? I consider this issue as important because such value judgements affect social relationships, the economic life of peoples, their confidence in themselves, their visions of life and their dignity

*** This paper was presented as one in the series of staff seminars in the Seminary of SS. Peter and Paul Ibadan on 18th March, 1994

42. Cf. Salvation: Its Importance and Acceptance by A. O. Suberu in *Some Doctrine and Practices of Christ Apostolic Church*, Edited by Sam. Babs Mala, (Ibadan: 1980), pp. 7-10
43. Cf. "The Holy Spirit" by J. O. Oyebanji, in *Some Doctrines and Practices of Christ Apostolic Church*, Edited by Sam. Babs Mala, (Ibadan: 1980) pp. 14-17.
44. Cf. The Mission of the Church, by M. A. Adeoye, in *Some Doctrines and Practices of Christ Apostolic Church*, p. 24
45. Matthew A. Ojo "Deeper Life Bible Church of Nigeria", p. 135-156 in *New Dimensions in African Christianity*, ed., by Paul Gifford, Nairobi; Uzima Press, 1992; Ibadan: Sefer, 1993.
46. Ibid. p. 142-148.
47. Ibid. p. 150-152.
48. H. Gasper, J. Muller, F. Valentin (eds.) *Lexikonder Sekten, Sondergrupper Und Weltanschauungen*, Freiburg Basel - Wien: Herder, 1990, Col. 401-404.
49. Cf. Can. 755
50. Joseph Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, (Slough: St. Paul Publications - 1988), p. 137.
51. Cf. Can. 755
52. Cardinal Francis Arinze, Op. Cit., p. 609.
53. This concept is defined in *Directory Concerning Ecumenism*, No. 20.

2. Rev. Dr. B. E. Etafo is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Theology and the Registrar, Seminary of S.S. Peter & Paul, Ibadan, Nigeria.

as human beings made in the image and likeness of God.

It is this in light, that I am attempting in this paper to demonstrate the theoretical issue using belief in and practices of magic as a case study. I have chosen to study magical beliefs and practices because they occupy an important position in the life of peoples in the traditional societies, whether consciously or not. The African society, in particular, is widely regarded as an example of traditional society, in contemporary times and one in which magical beliefs and practices are still very rampant. This does not imply that magical beliefs are absent in other societies. In fact they are identifiable in the set of beliefs held by many people even in Western societies, including even empirical scientists.

As the African continent began to open up to the West through the activities of sailors, missionaries, and colonial administrators, the issue of the beliefs and practices of the peoples began to rear its head. Some of those beliefs and practices were alien to the Western European mind. So the immediate reaction of some of the anthropologists was to dismiss them as irrational practices arising from what Levi Bruhl would call "pre-logical mentality". It then became a pattern to regard beliefs and practices in the traditional societies as the paradigm of the irrational, while those of the Western scientific societies were the paradigm of the eminently rational.

The question of such an evaluation, according to Bryan Wilson "have been raised more pertinently and more challengingly by philosophers"¹. The issue which is one of cross-cultural comparison involves "culture-boundedness of meaning, of... the universality of the criteria of rationality as it has developed in Western society, the comprehensibility of ritual acts, has come into full focus of a many-sided debate between philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists"². I shall focus in particular on the problem of the appropriateness of universalising the criteria of rationality as has been developed in other societies, especially the Western scientific society. With regards to magic, is it justifiable for the social scientist to characterize magic as rational, irrational or non-rational using a set of criteria that are alien to those who practice it? What sort of criteria can we justifiably employ in determining the rational status of magical beliefs and practices?

I WHAT ARE MAGICAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Allen Spitzer in his article simply titled "Magic" describes magical practices as:

the practice of the art of inducing good or evil by means of attempting to exercise control over supernatural powers³.

R. Firth, in his *Human Types* considered magic as a point in a continuous spectrum which includes witchcraft and sorcery. Jarvie and Agassi, in agreement with Firth say that magic is so closely related to witchcraft and sorcery that they all constitute points on the same continuum.

Magic as used here, is not a reference of such phenomena as are often seen on TV. Phenomena such as bringing a bird out of a hat or making scarves "reproduce" one another. Rather it is a phenomenon that is deeprooted, it is metaphysical in itself even though its effects or even the materials that are used in bringing them about may be physical. Magic involves the phenomena referred to as witchcraft and it refers to instances when an effect is brought into being without an empirically identifiable cause. An example would be the "fact" that a person breaks the legs of a wooden effigy that stands for another person and that person, even though is thousands of kilometers away, suffers a broken leg in some inexplicable circumstances. Where the broken leg is attributed to the breaking of the leg of the effigy, it is a magical belief that is being demonstrated. And the act of breaking the effigy's leg is a magical practice that brings about the magical effect of legs being broken as if by remote control. However, the remote control analogy is not even adequate because the effect of the TV's coming on can be identified empirically in the workings of the remote control. Whereas for magic, it is believed that such a causal connection cannot be identified.

In his attempt to explain the origin of magical practices, James Frazer said they arose out of man's desire to cope with the problems that confront him. According to him, there were so many things that the primitive man could neither understand nor control and so the desire arose in him to take control by manipulating the

supernatural forces that he believed to be in control of the universe. In his opinion, magic is only a pristine stage in the march towards science. Evans-Pritchard also corroborated the view that magic is nothing but an expression of the poverty of practical means of controlling the universe. He described magic in his *Theories of Primitive Religion* as:

*... a substitute activity in situations in which practical means to attain an end is lacking ...*⁴

However, in properly identifying the nature of magical beliefs and practices, it is useful to compare it with religion, on one hand and science on the other.

If religion is conceived of as including belief in powers that are superior to man and belief that proper conciliation of these powers can alter or control the course of nature, then magic must be regarded as being opposed to religion at least with regards to the principle that guides its operation. On the one hand, magic is based on the principle that man is capable of controlling the supernatural powers that are believed to be in control of the universe, such that the magician can assert his own will to the extent that it supercedes the will of the supernatural forces. Hence, he can change or modify the order which the supernatural force had put in place. All he need do is go through a specific formula of rites and rituals - which are believed to work in a cause and effect manner - and he will, for instance, be able to induce rain to fall even in the height of the dry season. On the other hand, religion operates on the principle that the superior power exercises absolute control over everything within the natural order. The only way through which the supernatural being can be influenced is through prayer and sacrifices. The attitude of the religious person is based upon the belief that the supernatural is:

*a conscious or personal agent, that his conduct is in some measure uncertain and that he can be prevailed upon to vary it in the desired direction*⁵.

The supernatural is known, by religious people, to have a personal relationship with believers and to do only that which is in

their best interest. When they carry out religious rites and rituals, religious people do not see these as bringing about their desired ends in a cause and effect manner. Rather they are seen as means of propitiating the supernatural so that it can bring about such ends. This is opposed to magic which prides itself with bringing about desired ends by mere performance of rites and rituals.

However, even though magic and religion appear to be in different categories, they are found to be mixed up with each other very often. Hence Evans-Pritchard says:

*several influential writers do not differentiate between magic and religion [and speak of the "magico-Religious"...] others again whilst distinguishing them, give a similar explanation of both*⁶.

Indeed, it is very easy to slip from religious practices into magical ones without realising it. For instance, the act of praying is a religious practice but when a person comes to believe that a certain form of prayers said while in a specified posture and for a specified number of times is that which is efficacious, he or she has slipped from a religious act into a magical one, perhaps unconsciously.

In comparing magic with science, one finds that both have some apparent affinities especially with regards to their principles of operation. In the first place, both of them follow a similar procedure in their enterprises. The scientist and the magician proceed by observation and the classification of observed realities. From such an exercise, the magician is able to identify which rituals and rites lead to which specific effects. In the same way, the scientist formulates theories and establishes models of experimentation by observation and classification of the observed phenomena. In the second place, just as the scientist takes for granted that there is a static, predictable natural order, so does the magician in his operations. As Frazer puts it, magic as well as science take for granted that the course of nature is determined, not by the passions and caprices of a personal being but by the operation of immutable law acting mechanically.⁷ The assumption in both magic and empirical science is that there are certain universal laws that govern the mechanism of the universe and that these laws can be manipulated according to the will and the needs of man. Both

the magician and the scientist also operate on the assumption that there is a necessary connection between cause and effect. Whereas philosophers like David Hume argue that there is no necessary connection between cause and effect, magicians and scientists alike believe that an action A need only be performed to the letter for an effect E to follow.

However, whereas for the magician, a malevolent personal being is capable of interfering with his activity, it is only a fault on the part of the scientist himself or his equipment that can affect his inquiry. This difference represents a major variation in the attitude of mind with which both approach their activities. This means in effect that even though magic and science seem closely affined, there is a fundamental difference that separates them. So magic is not to be identified with either religion or science. It constitutes a distinct category of its own with its own peculiarities even though they touch at some points.

II WHAT IS RATIONALITY ?

A pertinent question that arises at this point is that of: What does it mean to say that a belief or practice is rational? What constitutes the object of rationality? In other words, what sorts of phenomena can be evaluated in terms of rationality? It is necessary to consider this question in order to know whether magical beliefs and practices are subject to evaluation in terms of rationality or not.

The concept of rationality is in itself one that is value-laden and hence my attempt here is to turn the search light on the possible uses of the concept with the aim of thereby isolating the most appropriate use.

There is first of all, the "strong" use of the concept which corresponds to what is called "epistemic rationality". This is the sense in which a belief is said to be rational based on the fact that it is a valid inference drawn from true premises. It is in this sense that we say a particular belief is the rational one to hold. In exemplifying this usage of the concept, Charles Taylor argues that it is only if a belief amounts to theory that we can ascribe rationality to it. According to him, a theory aims at understanding issues from a disengaged perspective i.e. without reference to any

situation in particular. He went further to argue that

*Theoretical understanding is related to rationality since the beginning of our intellectual culture*⁸

i.e. the Western intellectual culture. He contends that both Plato and Aristotle – his starting point for Western intellectual culture – hold that to know is to be able to give an account of something, to be able to articulate it or lay it out in a perspicuous manner. Now, if it is the case that we can articulate something only when we have a rational grasp of it. And if it is the case that the things we can articulate are only those things of which we have theoretical understanding, or that we grasp from a disengaged perspective, it follows that rationality is bound to theoretical understanding. This means in effect that the rational is the theoretical and the theoretical is the rational. Since magical beliefs and of course, practices are almost invariably tied to particular situations, they cannot, by the demand of epistemic notion of rationality, be seen as rational. Hence Taylor says,

*we [i.e. the western society] have this activity of theoretical understanding which seems to have no counterpart among them [i.e. traditional society].*⁹

The weak concept of rationality has it that a belief is rational given the believers' state of life, environment, social structure and universe of discourse in general. Each cultural group is understood as being engaged in its own unique universe of discourse and so there cannot be any "culturally-independent standards of rationality".¹⁰ This means in effect, that a belief can be adjudged rational or otherwise only within its own context i.e. the frame of mind of those who hold it, the importance they attach to it and the goal they wish to attain by holding it etc. This position sounds almost meaningless because its implication is that all beliefs, as long as someone somewhere holds it, is rational. Drawn to this logical conclusion it would seem that the weak concept is so widely applicable that it has no meaning any more. However there is a recognizable limit to its application because if such beliefs are found to contradict a long term goal or the general welfare of the society, they must be declared irrational whatever the context may be.

The question that still remains is: What does it mean to say a belief is rational? In our particular circumstance, in what way shall we consider magical beliefs as rational or otherwise? They can be considered rational if they are found to be logically consistent with other beliefs within the society i.e. if they do not contradict or are not contrary to the other beliefs in the society. So if they fit well into the whole system of beliefs within the society, then they should be considered rational. Secondly, if the beliefs and practices are capable of leading to the end that the believers have in view, then they are rational. It would seem, therefore, that the rationality of magic is an issue that involves logic in terms of their validity and truth. But can we depend solely on logical consistency to determine their rationality? That would be unwise because there are other variables which do not obey the rules of logic. For instance, going beyond the demands of logic, people in traditional societies appeal to other factors such as personal relationships which are more emotive than rational. The logical thing to do when a man falls sick is to apply medications, traditional or otherwise. But in traditional societies, in addition to the medication, the diviner is consulted to find out whether a god or an enemy or a witch is responsible. Of course, such a practice is not irrational. It is informed by the structure of the society and the powers that are recognised within it.

So the next question is: in what way shall we determine the rationality of magic? It has been evaluated in several ways. I now turn my attention to these different considerations.

III MAGICAL PRACTICES: RATIONAL PRACTICES BASED ON IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

Scholars in what has come to be known as the intellectualist tradition consider magic as a specie of science, an earlier stage in the march towards science. Hence, they scorn the mix-up that is often found between magic and religion. In the words of Frazer, the mix-up exists only among the "ignorant and superstitious classes of modern Europe and ...among the lowest savages surviving in the remotest corners of the world."¹¹ It is this attitude towards magic and science that gave rise to the opinion that magical practices are a set of rational practices based on irrational beliefs.

As Stephen Lukes puts their opinion, magical practices are "largely rational in method, purpose and form though unscientific and ...more or less irrational in content."¹² For most scholars of the Intellectualist tradition, magical practices are an example of the prelogical and mystical texture of the so-called primitive mind. Levy-Bruhl went as far to say

*It, [the primitive mind] does not go out of its way... to avoid contradiction... what to our [western, scientific] eyes is impossible or absurd, it often accepts without seeing any difficulty involved.*¹³

Apparently, it is for the above reason that Frazer came to the conclusion that

*magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct, it is a false science as well as an abortive art.*¹⁴

In the same vein, Tylor described magic as a "Farrago of nonsense" because the magician having started well by observation and classification of phenomena goes wrong in "inferring that because things are alike, they have a mystical link between them thus mistaking an ideal connexion for a real one."¹⁵

James Frazer is one of the foremost scholars of the intellectualist tradition. Evans-Pritchard (himself an intellectualist) says "Frazer is...the best known name in anthropology and we owe much to him."¹⁶ He wrote the famous book, *The Golden Bough* which Evans-Pritchard describes as a "work of immense industry and erudition."¹⁷ In that work, Frazer divides magic into two categories: homoeopathic magic, i.e. that in which the magician enacts the situation that he wishes to bring into reality. For example, when a warrior does the victory dance, he believes that he is bringing about the victory that he wishes. It is the same principle that is in use when people in traditional societies do a ritual eating of specified parts of animals or even human beings – that are believed to harbour certain desirable qualities. The rationale behind such practices is the belief that

by eating the flesh of an animal or man (a person) acquires not only the physical but even the moral

and intellectual qualities which were characteristic of the animal or man.¹⁸

For example, according to Frazer, the chiefs of Ashanti army and the Basutos eat the human heart for the sake of acquiring the courageous quality of its owner.

Contagious magic, on the other hand, is that in which the magician uses clippings from a person's body or else anything that has come in contact with the person's body as a means of casting a spell on him or her. *Contagious magic* includes instances when the effigy of a person is ritually stabbed, pierced with pins or simply destroyed. The underlying belief being that such practices will, as a matter of cause and effect, inflict some harm on the person concerned since there has been some contact or some resemblance between him or her and the object employed in casting the spell.

On the account of the intellectualist, magical practices are irrational in content. Even though there is an identifiable scientific rational procedure in arriving at the methods to use in casting spells – observation, classification of experiences and formulation of “theories” – magical practices fail because they are based on beliefs that are irrational. As Frazer explains, *homoeopathic* magic is based on the unproved belief that by imitating an effect, one can produce the effect *de facto*. *Contagious magic* is also based on the assumption that things that have once been in contact can still affect each other even when they have been separated. Such beliefs, in his opinion are unreasonable and so

*a time comes when reasonable men find it hard to understand how anyone in his senses can suppose...*¹⁹

that magical practices can bring about the desired effects. However, he considers magical practices as exemplifying the world-views of those who practice them. Hence, he said

*magic is an integral part of their whole cosmology, that is to say, magic is a part of a theory of the universe according to which given kinds of causes or actions will produce desirable kinds of effect.*²⁰

MAGIC AS NON-RATIONAL PRACTICES

Since field-work was introduced into their method of inquiry, many anthropologists have come to recognise the mistakes of scholars such as Frazer. They have therefore started to interpret beliefs and practices in traditional societies alien to them from new perspectives. One set of interpretation sees most of those practices including magic as being non-rational in character. For a scholar like Dr. Leach, to talk of magic in terms of rationality is nonsensical while Prof. Firth says it is irrelevant. For both of them, who represent the symbolist and functionalist perspectives, magic like some other practices, cannot be properly evaluated on the basis of rationality.

In his book, *Other Cultures*, Beattie argues extensively to the conclusion, in the words of Jarvie and Agassi, that “In non-scientific cultures, most thinking about the world is of a symbolic... character.”²¹

Beattie himself said

...The chief difference between what we call practical common-sense techniques for doing things, (i.e. the scientific) and ritual or 'magico-religious' ways of doing them lies basically in the presence or absence of an institutionalised symbolic element in what is done²² and again “truth is that magic is a symbolic activity not a scientific one...”²³

People in traditional societies as well as those in the Western science-oriented cultures have practical common-sense attitudes to activities such as farming. In both sorts of society, farmers know the best types of soil in which particular kinds of crops will grow, the season in which to plant and the method to use in order to achieve the best results. They have procedures which are learnt from and tested by nothing but experience. However, farmers in traditional societies still employ the services of rain-makers and carry out fertility rites in spite of having done all that should be practically done in order to achieve the desired end. On the symbolists account, they are not being irrational as it would appear to the Western farmer. Rather, both the rain-maker and the farmer who employs him

are stating something: they are asserting symbolically the importance they attach to rain and their earnest desire that it shall fall when it is required.²⁴

John Beattie also contends that rites of magic are mere enactments of the desired state of affairs. When for example, the rain-maker simulates rain by pouring water and cloud by burning herbs to produce smoke, it is not because he believes that the actions will by their very performance produce rain and cloud respectively. Rather, he is only dramatically acting out his wish that rain may fall. Beattie concedes that many people in the traditional societies do not recognise the symbolic function of magic and so they tend to believe that it is potent in bringing about the event symbolised. Nevertheless, magic for him is primarily expressive rather than instrumental. However, that people consider magic as instrumental is understandable considering the magical attitude that people have to words. Words are primarily expressive of thought but it takes an instrumental dimension in the mind of a person who feels guilty if, for instance, some mishap befalls a person to whom he had addressed some words of curse. However, the fact, on the symbolists account is that magical practices are not effective in bringing about a state of affairs rather they only symbolise one's desire. So magic cannot be adjudged rational or irrational since symbols are non-rational signs by their nature.

MAGIC: RATIONAL ONLY IN CONTEXT

This model of evaluation of magical practices is an example of the resurgence of the relativist attitude to explanation. The explanation of the rationality of magic in this manner has been aggressively proposed by many scholars including Prof. Winch. Winch argued that the scientific is not necessarily the paradigm of the rational. It is easily possible to have criteria of rationality that are incommensurate with those employed by Western science but which are nevertheless valid. He was clearly influenced by Wittgenstein's notion of 'language games'. In fact, the main thrust of Winch's argument rests on an interpretation of the notion. Hence, H.O. Mounce said in his work "Understanding a Primitive

Society"²⁵ that Winch interpreted Wittgenstein's *Language games* as referring to independent activities. This implies that the sense of a practice which has a fundamental value in a given society cannot be subjected to doubt just because it does not correspond with another society's intuition. This is the case because such a practice is borne out of a logic that goes beyond being tested by the employment of some criteria of rationality that lies outside of its own boundaries since the society constitutes a 'unique universe of discourse'. Like Wittgenstein, Winch argues that logic is learnt in the process of socialisation. Hence, he says the criteria of logic are not a direct gift

*of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life.*²⁶

This means, in effect, that science and magic do not obey the same rules as far as the rationality of the beliefs that inform them are concerned. They should not be tested for rationality using the same criteria since they are informed by beliefs which arise from different and distinct forms of life. We, therefore, have to look within each form of life in order to determine the appropriate criteria for evaluating both the beliefs and the practices. Winch argues that Zande magic, for example, has its own conception of reality and its own standards of reality. It would, therefore, amount to a distortion for anyone to consider magic as a quasi or pseudo-scientific practice since the practitioners neither share the Western concept of science nor its standards of rationality. On this score, it is unacceptable for scholars like Evans-Pritchard to claim, that the magical view of reality does not correspond with actual reality when what he means, in fact, is that it does not correspond with reality as seen through the eyes of the physical scientist. Such an attitude does not "take seriously enough the idea that the concepts used by primitive peoples can only be interpreted in the context of the way of life of those people."²⁷ This implies in effect that magic is as rational as science in its own context. Neither is rational or irrational on the terms of the other.

IV

The above-mentioned models for evaluating magical beliefs and practices are not of equal value. The first model regards magic as rational only in the procedure it follows in practice but really irrational considering the beliefs that inform them. That sort of evaluation is possible only because it presents magic as a lower form of empirical science. An exercise like that obviously puts magic at a disadvantage considering the widespread influence of the science at the moment. Apart from that, the empirical sciences have a procedure of inquiry that places a high premium on empirical verification. In fact, truth within the circle of the scientists is that which corresponds to empirically verifiable reality. Hence, for the causal connection between a cause and its effect to be accepted, it has to be empirically verified or at least be so verifiable. Magic, on the other hand, does not put much value on empirical verification or verifiability of causal connections. As long as it is known to be the case that whenever a certain action is performed, a certain effect normally follows, it is accepted that such an action is responsible for the effect, especially when it is sufficiently recurrent. For example, if it is observed that when somebody's effigy was stabbed on one occasion, that person simultaneously suffered a stabbing pain and it happens in a few other cases, it is immediately accepted that the stabbing of the effigy is responsible for the pain felt by the "victim". In this case, even though the magician himself knows that there is no physical connection between the knife and the person, he admits that there is a causal connection. That connection is of course, not empirically verifiable. That is to say one cannot physically observe the connection.

This can only mean that the concept of causation is not the same in magic and science and so they belong to two distinct categories. Before rationality can be imputed to one and irrationality to the other, the intellectualist needs to make clear in a precise manner why they should be so evaluated. In other words, before A can be said to be superior to B, one needs to show why A, which is of a different category from B should be considered as such. Apart from their bias in favour of science, scholars such as Frazer and

Evans-Pritchard need to show that 'belief' in magic is less defensible than 'belief' in science.

The second model regards magic as non-rational because its practices are either merely *symbolic* or else have *functional* values only, functional in sustaining the organic body called society. This is unacceptable also because there is no doubt that people expect certain recognisable results from their practices. For instance, if there is a snake-bite, the doctor pronouncing incantations is not just expressing his wish that the victim does not die but he expects the incantations to render the poison impotent. He is not just trying to sustain the society but to save the life of an individual.

The third model i.e. relativist model is quite attractive because it gives each culture its due respect. But it also fails on several accounts. First of all, it does not seem to take into consideration the fact that reality is one and there can be no traditional magical reality different from Western scientific reality. What is real is real, no matter who is perceiving it, and in what context. What Is simply Is, its being does not depend on when or where it is perceived. It does not even depend on whether it is perceived or not. Hence, there must be a true and a false perception whenever there is a disagreement over what is perceived. For instance, God Is and there cannot be a God for Muslims that is different from that of the others. There may be different or even contradictory notions of this God but these do not alter the true nature of God. So reality is one and the relativists are mistaken in creating two forms of reality for the two different peoples. Secondly, the relativist position is inadequate because it does not seem to take cognisance of the fact that if the laws of thought are universal, they cannot but be brought to play in determining the rationality of both magical and scientific beliefs. If there are any practices in either society that breach either the principle of identity, non-contradiction or excluded middle, there is no alternative than to declare them contrary to reason and hence irrational.

V

From the above, my contention is that magical practices are not rooted in irrational beliefs, they are not non-rational (i.e. we should be able to evaluate them in terms of rationality) and we do not

concede rationality to them in a condescending manner - rational only to the peoples who practice it. This means that magical beliefs and practices are rational in their own right. The question that remains to be answered is: If they are rational, on what grounds can we consider them as rational. That is, what sort of criteria should be employed before we can justifiably arrive at the conclusion that magical practices and beliefs, in general and in particular, are rational? My submission is that our criteria should be both context-dependent and cross-culturally applicable ones. This means that we should approach the determination of its rationality using two sorts of criteria. The one should recognise the peculiarities of magical practices while the other should see it as a set of practices carried out by human beings who are as human, rational as any other and so whose procedure of inquiry cannot but be accessible for rationality-test by anyone at all. Steven Lukes in his "Some Problems about Rationality" argues that some criteria are

relevantly applicable to beliefs in any context while others are context-dependent²⁸.

He also contends as I do, that in order to grasp the point and the significance of beliefs and practices such as magic, we must take both the criteria of rationality in general²⁹ and the context-dependent criteria³⁰ into consideration. The criteria of rationality in general are necessary because reality is one for all peoples of all races and sexes. Secondly, all peoples obey the laws of thought. Even though it may not be explicitly stated in some cultures, there is no doubt that everyone recognises the concepts of negation, non-contradiction and identity. This fact is exemplified in the fact that all men communicate. Communication would have been impossible if people did not obey the laws. For instance, there would be no distinction between "P" and "not-P" or between truth and falsity if the laws of non-contradiction and identity were not respected. On this ground we conclude that

If... (any society at all) has a language, it must minimally possess criteria of truth... and logic, which we share with it and which simply are criteria of rationality³¹

However, criteria of rationality which are peculiar to particular societies also need to be applied in considering some beliefs and practices in some societies. Such beliefs and practices are those which do not correspond to a reality which everyone can immediately identify. The fact that not everyone can immediately identify them shows that the values of such beliefs and practices can be appreciated only if seen from the view-point of those who hold them. For instance, when the Nuer, a people in the Sudan, refer to twins as birds, they certainly do not mean that they are children as well as birds at the same time. That would be a negation of the principles of non-contradiction and identity. Since the texture of their minds is the same as those of people everywhere, it follows that we can know that the belief expressed in the proposition "twins are birds" is rational only if we see it in context. In explaining the belief, Evans-Pritchard says

... twin-birth is a special revelation of spirit; and Nuer express this special character of twins in "twins are birds" formula because twins and birds, though for difference (sic) reasons are both associated with spirit³².

Magical beliefs and practices, which is the subject of discussion at present, falls into the same category, that is, the category of beliefs which are not understood by all peoples, especially the Western-scientist, but which are nevertheless rational. They are to be assessed using both the set of criteria that would be applied to any belief or practice anywhere as well as criteria which are developed within the context of those who hold the beliefs.

The issue that then presents itself is how does one use the two sets of criteria in determining the rationality of the beliefs and practices under consideration? Are they to be used simultaneously or one after the other? In order to do justice in the assessment effort, all that one need do is just be rational and at the same time open to receive or at least understand new and unfamiliar ideas. This will necessarily involve the scholar in making more research and straining himself a little more in order to see beyond the categories and models which he or she is familiar with. The researcher would also need to have the capacity to see others

through their own eyes by "standing outside of himself", i.e. shedding his/her own cultural biases, in order to see the "alien" culture as it is and not as he/she perceives it. This approach can be described as: being charitable in the assessment of the beliefs of others. Charity here does not refer to giving out what belongs to one in assisting the other but it refers to being kind, understanding and fair in the assessment of the other. Such an approach is what I consider as being adequate in determining the rationality of magical beliefs and practices.

It should be noticed that I have not concerned myself with the question of how effective magical practices are in attaining their expected ends. That can be subject of another paper. A discussion of its potency would be necessary if the issues were a discussion of how rational magic is. But my concern here has been to try and show the route to follow if one were to do justice in the assessment of the rationality of magical beliefs or practices. I hope I have discharged the burden of this present paper satisfactorily³³.

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29. This is what Benn and Mortimore refer to as "Epistemic Rationality" or "Strong use of the Concept of Rationality" in their book "Rationality and Relativism".
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33. The author acknowledges and is grateful for the invaluable questions and comments of participants at the Seminar in which this paper was first presented. These have helped in clarifying, more thoroughly, some issues that were raised.

Rev. Adewale Alfred Martins is a Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy in the Seminary of SS. Peter and Paul, Ibadan, Nigeria.

WITCHCRAFT, CAUSALITY AND THE AFRICAN WORLD

C. O. Uroh

On the subject of magic and witchcraft in Africa there is a great deal of literature. And yet, one is struck and disappointed by the large amount of ignorance, prejudice and falsification which keeps coming out in modern books, newspapers and conversation on this subject. (Mbiti)¹

INTRODUCTION

The belief in the phenomenon of witchcraft has elicited a lot of controversy among scholars and non-scholars alike. The reason for disputations over the issue is that, like magic, miracle and other paranormal phenomena, the phenomenon of witchcraft is considered to amount to a "transgression of laws of nature"². As the argument goes, events or phenomena sometimes attributed to the activities of witches are at variance with what is generally regarded to be the *natural order of things in the universe*. Witchcraft phenomena therefore, stand nature on its head.

Discussions on the subject have, expectedly, polarised scholars into two opposing camps. On one side are those who hold the view that the belief in witchcraft is a mere fantasy. Their argument include the fact that the phenomenon of witchcraft, in as much as it does not "cohere with a body of known fact, cannot itself be a fact"³. Here, it is taken that for anything to be conceived as *real* it must be "either actual in the sense of conforming with what exist in nature or true in the sense of fitting into a pattern, model or standard" of an already well known system of thought⁴. The belief in the phenomenon of witchcraft is said not to fall within this