



The use of spells and prophetism as Religious Realities: The case of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Both spells and prophetism are known as agelong religious realities. This study underscored how these two distinct religious phenomena are co-opted and used, one serving as a cloak for the other by operatives to achieve their ends. Employing a qualitative interdisciplinary approach anchored in critical phenomenological study, this work showed the intertwined use of spells and prophetism, especially as witnessed predominantly within Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian milieus today. Analysing the current dispensation of prophecies, which are mainly foretelling, in the forms of predictions, forecasting, conjecturing, etc., this study observed that, besides other forms of mystical and ritualistic performances, several practitioners use spells cloaked as prophecies to control happenings. In essence, several of the doom prophecies of death, accidents, catastrophes and other forms of calamities are orchestrated by the use of other media of engagements cloaked in the name of prophecy. These so-called prophecies admittedly make such practitioners rise to fame, gain economic favors and other benefits. This study further discussed the operational modes and the danger of using the media of spells cloaked as prophecies to harm individuals and societies in the name of prophecy. It showed how to curb such occurrences in the national fabric through education to avert the exploitative manoeuvring of such operations. There is a need to be aware of such cloaked spells labelled as prophecies, charlatans and charlatanic performances to curtail the situation. Although not undermining the religious liberty of anyone, this study opined that attention should be given to the training of religious leaders by the government, as done in other jurisdictions, to control the situation.

Keywords: Spells, Prophetism, Prophecy, Cloaked, Religious Realities, Interdisciplinary Study.

INTRODUCTION

Christianity, through apologetics, has defended its purity and sanctity in religion and spirituality through the centuries. Nonetheless, it is not devoid of charlatans and charlatanic practices, falsehoods and all manner of practices that are obnoxious to its true character and identity. To this, prophetism has suffered a backlash in both its operations and delivery due to how some people mimic it as a cloak to achieve their ends. In recent times, there has been an upsurge of prophetism in Ghana and Africa in general. Whilst there is no gainsay to the veracity of prophecy as a gift (1 Cor. 12 and 14), a part of the fivefold ministry (Eph. 4:11), an agelong

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practice and in both Old and New Testaments, the falsity in the operations of prophetism in both the biblical text and recent times cannot be denied. Whilst some claim to be prophets and prophesy, their operations rather portray the use of other means in the name of prophecy.

It is observed that several of the doom prophecies of death, accidents, catastrophes and all manner of calamities, especially use other media of engagements cloaked in the name of prophecy. A more recent national happening of a so-called fulfilled prophecy in Ghana that gained headlines was the tragic helicopter crash that took the lives of eight Ghanaians, including two ministers of state. In the year 2025 alone, but not too different from previous years and in these times, the number of prophecies which had the character of a damning effect and doom is innumerable. These prophecies create fear and panic at both the individual and national levels. The operatives use these prophecies to control societies and people to their gain and favour. These prophecies of calamities and catastrophes usually forecast accidents, gory incidents and death, etc., by mainly foretelling in the form of predictions, forecasting and conjecturing, sometimes happening accurately. However, what needs to be asked is whether these predictions are true prophecies or a result of other manipulative operations disguised as prophecies.

It will be observed that several of these so-called prophecies come from obscure men and women who claim to be of God, who suddenly rise to fame in the name of their predictive doom sayings and their fulfilments. It appears these 'men and women of God' use these prophetic engagements as operative manoeuvres to gain attention and become relevant to society as they suddenly shoot up to fame and gain some favours, including economic benefits from victims, congregants and society in general. This study looked at these operations from the perspective that underscores how spells, besides other practices which are not necessarily prophetic, are used to create and engineer such upbeats to fame by the practitioners. The study, therefore, looked at the use of prophetism with the religious manipulative operations of spells to spin on faith as a means to cause such predictive prophecies and their fulfilments. Jesus's thought on the rise of many false prophets in the end-times (Matt. 24:24), coupled with other scriptural evidence, compared with the rise of many 'prophets' and 'anointed men' who flood the airwaves with such doom sayings, is a cause for alarm.

This study, therefore, discussed spells and prophetism as religious realities and disclosed how spells are disguised and schemed as prophecies. These orchestrations benefit the practitioners. Through these manipulative means, they rise to fame, gain power, authority and economic benefits.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative interdisciplinary approach. This is anchored in critical phenomenological ethnography by researching the intertwined phenomena of spells and prophetism predominantly within Ghana's African Independent Churches, Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, Charismatic and neo-Charismatic Christian milieu. This methodology respects insider meaning by observation while critically analysing social contexts. This involves phenomenological descriptions, by employing *epoché* (bracketing) to suspend outsider judgments and focus on describing the essence and intentionality of the experiences.¹ It also includes ethnographic immersion by using participant observation. The researcher observed how such prophets operate in a generic sense.²

DISCUSSION

There is no gainsaying syncretic practices, from pre-colonial indigenous worldviews and early 20th-century African Independent Churches to modern neo-Pentecostalism.³ In this study, spells and prophetism are reviewed to appreciate their interconnectedness and how spells are disguised and projected as prophecies. There are power dynamics that often stigmatize spells as primitive while legitimizing prophecy as modern. These are competing responses to historical and socio-economic pressures. This gives a sense of transactional

¹ James L Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

² Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

³ Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

dimensions within a competitive spiritual marketplace, where efficacy is often linked to economic exchange and client satisfaction.⁴ This further indicates the existence of material and discourse analysis showing the “technology” of faith and the rhetoric in sermons, advertising the prophet(s) and how spiritual power is mediated and marketed.⁵ Spells and prophetism are discussed as follows.

Spells

The concept of spell from religious and anthropological perspectives is a complex phenomenon. It varies significantly across religious and cultural contexts, thereby creating a difficulty in ascertaining its definition from a unitary standpoint. Scholarly definitions, therefore, usually avoid simplistic and/or sensationalist approaches and language in their attempts to define it. They generally focus on functions, mechanisms and worldviews when it comes to defining spell. One definition, focusing on instrumental function, sees spells as a formulaic and instrumental ritual practice whereby one accomplishes a specific and concrete goal through compelling supernatural forces or manipulating the fundamental structures of realities through precise words, actions and objects to achieve an end. According to Malinowski, who particularly studied the Trobriand Islanders, where magic provided a sense of control in unpredictable endeavours, spells are the operational aspects of magic that involve the words uttered, the gestures performed, and the materials manipulated. This emphasizes that spells are techniques meant to accomplish specific results, such as healing, harming, protecting or compelling, etc.⁶ In Ghana, some operational terminologies for spells (common forms) are commonly known as “for girls,” *gbɔtemi* (in Ewe), *bedianko* (in Twi), which are manipulative charms that seek to lure, especially girls, for sexual exploits of a man or boy and vice versa. This definition underscores that spells are not merely requests or prayers which are supplicative but are operational techniques which have the power to manipulate realities by formulaic pronouncements, enchantments and/or incantations. The power, therefore, is believed to reside in the correct or accurate performance of the ritual itself. This definition draws on the functionalist approach common in anthropology, which examines magic as a practical technology for dealing with uncertainty, need and anxiety.

From the ancient Mediterranean religious worldview, particularly in the context of Greco-Roman and Near Eastern religious perspectives, a spell, *epoide* and *carmen* in Greek and Latin respectively, usually involved written or spoken words of power (*voces magicae*), the invocation of divine or demonic forces and symbolic actions designed to bring about a change in the natural or human world in accordance with the will of the operator. This highlights the blend of invocation and command that characterize much ancient magic, which existed alongside and was often intertwined with official temple religion. In this way, a spell is seen as a ritualized request or command, typically addressed to supernatural beings such as gods, demons, ancestral spirits, the dead, etc. Its efficacy is thought to depend on the correct observance of the ritual, the use of the proper and often secret names and words and the inherent power of the materials used. This perspective is central to the study of ancient magic, a category that was often defined polemically by ancient elites against foreign or non-sanctioned practices. Scholars like Fritz Graf and Hans Dieter Betz, through the analysis of papyri and curse tablets, *defixiones*, have shown how spells functioned within the broader religious ecosystem of the ancient world.⁷

From an anthropological perspective, there is a contradistinctive definition of spell to religion and magic, although now often problematised. Accordingly, a spell can be defined as a coercive or mechanical ritual technique, distinct from supplicative prayer. It operates based on a perceived law of sympathy or contagion within the universe, rather than appealing to the will of a conscious deity. This definition stems from the work of early anthropologists like James Frazer, who differentiated magic as a pseudo-science

⁴ Karen Lauterbach, *Christianity, Wealth, and Spiritual Power in Ghana* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). 8-12, 103-130. This work examines the economic and authoritative exchanges in spiritual services.

⁵ Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity, New Edition: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: Hurst & Co, 2004). 94-120. This analyzes material culture and discourse of charismatic prophetism.

⁶ Bronisław Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. (Routledge, 1922).

⁷ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz, 2nd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Philip Franklin, *Numen* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

claiming to command nature from religion, a propitiation of higher powers. While his evolutionary model, magic → religion → science, is largely rejected today, the descriptive dichotomy between coercive and supplicative ritual strategies remains a useful, if blurry, analytical tool. In this, magical acts are premised on the belief that one can manipulate the natural and supernatural world through spells.⁸ They are believed to have instinctive or automatic effects, provided they are performed correctly. This contrasts with religion in terms of prayer, where supplication to a deity is central. A spell is, therefore, thought of as an automatic formulaic performance bound to happen consequent to correct ritualized articulations.

A more contemporary scholarly view, synthesizing these elements mentioned above, sees a spell as a performative and declarative speech act, embedded in a ritual context that is believed to effect change through the agency of culturally postulated superhuman forces or inherent power of the performance itself. Its efficacy is traditionally understood to be dependent on precise recitations and executions. A modern, synthetic definition which uses concepts from linguistic philosophy sees spells as performative speech acts and emphasizes the cultural specificity of the source of the power. According to J. L. Austin, the concept of a spell is “performative utterances,” words that do something rather than just describe something.⁹ It reflects the more nuanced understanding of contemporary scholars like Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, who analysed the “persuasive analogy” and poetic structure of magical language itself as a source of its perceived power. Here, spell is the core ritual unit of magic, a procedure that is held to be effective through the power of its own performance.¹⁰ Therefore, it is a technique grounded in a particular worldview that accepts the efficacy of words and symbolic actions to alter reality. The magical quality of a spell lies in the directness of the intended effect, bypassing what is considered ordinarily as causal pathways.

In several African religious contexts, the Western term spell is often an imperfect translation for complex practices rooted in a holistic worldview. However, there are key definitions of indigenous concepts which reflect the cosmological practice of spells. Through the lens of *Nommo* (the Power of the Word), within various African cosmologies, particularly from a Bantu philosophical standpoint, a spell is a practical application of *Nommo*, the generative and creative power of the spoken word, to consciously direct life force, *ashe*, *nyama* and *ntu* towards a specific material or spiritual outcome. Here, spell is not a coercion of nature but an alignment with it through ritually potent speech. Spell, therefore, is seen as an act of creation and direction, not coercion, although others see it as a coercive force. The word itself is an active force that shapes reality. It is believed that the spoken word has an endowed power of actualization. The performer or magician knows the words that are effective in each case for an effect. Magic through the state of spell is the practical derivative and application of *Nommo* for a definite purpose and result. Whatever the performer seeks to occur, he/she knows what incantations or formulaic pronouncements can bring about the desired effect. This concept is central to the work of Placide Tempels, a European missionary whose work was foundational for African philosophers.¹¹ This was profoundly expanded by Abbé Alexis Kagame in his work on Bantu-Rwandan philosophy. The term *Nommo* was popularized in the English-speaking world by Mbongeni Senghor and others. The idea that speech acts are generative is a pan-African epistemological theme. This concept of spell through *Nommo* espouses the view that words have desired effects and therefore are operational in effect.¹²

In another view, spell is seen in the light of “Forces” and “Vitalism.” Therefore, from African Vitalism, a spell is a ritual technique designed to manipulate the network of vital forces that constitute the universe. It involves a knowledgeable person known as *Nganga* or *Babalawo*, what we call in Ghana, *Wotse* in Dangme, *Okomfo* in Twi, etc., using words, herbs and objects to attract, channel, or repel these forces to restore balance, protect, heal, or, in negative cases, disrupt and harm. This view, advanced by Tempels and refined by others, sees the spell as operating within a known cosmological system of interacting energies. It is believed that the African universe is a world of forces within a hierarchy of interactions whereby the witch

⁸ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study In Magic and Religion* (Penguin Books, 1996).

⁹ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

¹⁰ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, “The Magical Power of Words,” *Man, New Series* 3, no. 2 (2017): 175–208.

¹¹ Placide Tempels, A Rubbens, and Colin King, *Bantu Philosophy* (Présence africaine Paris, 1959).

¹² Alexis Kagame, *La Philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de l'Être* (Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, 1956).

doctor is precisely the professional who knows the nature and direction of these forces and who uses this knowledge in a performative way to achieve results. Spells, being pronounced words of incantations, are recipes for combining forces to achieve a desired result. While criticized for its generalizations, it opened the door for African scholars to systematize indigenous thoughts. Scholars like Segun Gbadegesin and Marimba Ani have discussed the concept of life force, for example, *ase*, *nyama*, as a fundamental metaphysical principle that ritual practices, including spells, engage with to achieve ends which ordinarily could not be done.¹³

From the perspective of Mediated “Technology,” which is the Ubuntu perspective, a spell is a form of spiritual technology that mediates between human needs and the ancestral world. Its efficacy is contingent not just on correct performance but on the moral standing, *iwa*, of the practitioner and their community. For instance, a spell for healing is a request channelled through ancestors to access universal healing forces. This makes it a communal rather than an individualistic act. This definition of spell emphasizes the relational (Ubuntu) and ethical context, which is often the line between accepted ritual practice and anti-social witchcraft. It is believed that the distinction between medicine and witchcraft is not in the substance used, but in the purpose, the social status of the user and the moral context. A healing spell can be described as a sanctioned use of knowledge to restore community harmony. This ethical and communal framework of the spell is critical to understanding African spirituality. Scholars like Musa W. Dube, Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and Jacob Olupona have extensively written on the social embeddedness of African Traditional Religions.¹⁴ The distinction between good and evil use of power is a recurring theme in the work of John S. Mbiti, who, though sometimes critiqued for his generalizations, provided an early systematic theology from an African perspective.¹⁵

In another way, from a Literary-Scholarly View, a spell can also be defined as a signifying and poetic act. Here, it is a highly coded, poetic and performative speech act that employs metaphor, analogy, rhythm and invocation to create a bridge between the visible and invisible worlds. Its power lies in its ability to signify, that is, to point to a reality and make it manifest through the artistry of language and the authority of tradition. This view focuses on the linguistic and artistic sophistication of incantations and enchantments, seeing them as a core part of African literary heritage. Highly formulated incantations, *ofò* in Igbo, *ipede* in Yoruba, are not mere utterances. They are poetic compositions which have spiritual underpinnings. They work through a logic of signification and symbolic analogy, which invokes the authority of the ancestors and the forces of nature to bring about a desired change. The analysis of spells as literary and poetic forms is a growing field started in the works of Wande Abimbola and Isidore Okpewho. These scholars documented and analysed the structure, metaphor and power of incantations, showing their deep artistic and philosophical value. Nonetheless, these poetic formats do not in any way deny their spiritual connotations.¹⁶

While the core concepts of religious and theological studies are enduring, scholarly discourses evolve with new perspectives, methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches with a focus on decolonization and lived religion. There are current trends in the academic study of spells and ritual practices which make spells more acceptable and used in spheres where ordinarily, they are not found. Now, from a Material and Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) perspective, spells are considered as ritualized, formulaic sequences of actions and utterances. Their efficacy is understood by practitioners through cognitive frameworks of intuitive causality. Their power is generated through the precise, repetitive performance that engages the human mind’s predictive coding systems, creating a sense of efficacy and real-world impact. This is how some assume the realms of Christian prophecy and prophetic practices as prophets. This contemporary approach uses insights from cognitive science to explain why certain ritual actions feel intuitively effective across cultures, without necessarily validating their metaphysical claims. The magical ritual of a spell

¹³ Segun Gbadegesin, “African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities,” 1991; Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*, (No Title) (Africa World Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. (Chalice Press, 2000).

¹⁵ John S Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990).

¹⁶ Wande Abimbola, *Ìjápá Tìròkòtìrò Èniyàn: Ifá Divination Poetry* (NOK Publishers, 1975). Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*, vol. 710 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

operates based on intuitive principles. A spell is not just spoken but is often embedded in a material practice that engages these intuitions directly, making the intended outcome feel not just possible but probable to the practitioner. Jesper Sørensen, ect., have empirically studied how ritualized behaviours, including spells, reduce anxiety and create a sense of control. This work moved beyond Frazer's old principles of sympathy and contagion to explain why these principles are intuitively convincing to the human mind.¹⁷

From a decolonial and post-colonial perspective, a spell is a form of subaltern knowledge practice, often mislabelled and marginalized by colonial and Western academic categories like magic or superstition. It is seen as a purposeful, often sophisticated, technology of interacting with the more-than-human world (including ancestors, spirits and forces) that is central to the lifeworld and existence of communities. This definition seeks to reclaim the term and practice from its pejorative Western connotations. This makes spell more acceptable and appreciated. This perspective critiques the historical use of the term spell as a tool of colonial othering and seeks to understand these practices on their own terms. Decolonial scholarship in religious studies and anthropology has been profoundly engaged and influential. Amy Whitehead, in her work on contemporary paganism and materiality and Angela Zito advocate for methodologies that centre emic (insider) perspectives and challenge the hegemony of Western categories. It is believed that what was dismissed as spells and witchcraft by colonial authorities and missionaries should be re-read as archives of indigenous epistemic resistance and sophisticated ecological knowledge systems. In this way, a spell is seen as a tool for negotiating power, health and justice within a society's own cosmological framework. To a large extent, those who practice it today delineate spells from what can be termed as evil. However, because it can have negative results, its evil sources and intentions cannot be denied.¹⁸

Furthermore, from the perspective of lived religion and embodiment, a spell is observed as a performative act of "doing religion" that employs somatic, verbal and material elements to directly address a pressing human need of healing, protection, justice and love, which form the positive use of spells. Its authority is derived not from institutional sanction but from its perceived practical results. It is deeply embedded in the embodied habits and everyday experiences of its practitioners. This thought shifts attention from abstract belief to lived practice, viewing spells as pragmatic, embodied solutions to real-world problems, from illness to social conflict. The "lived religion" framework concept of spells was pioneered by Robert Orsi and Meredith McGuire. It is now a dominant paradigm in sociology and religious studies.¹⁹ Current scholars such as Kathryn Lofton analyse how everyday practices create meaning. This perspective is evident in recent work on global Pentecostal practices, where prayers and rituals for healing and success blur the line between supplication and spell-like command. This explains that spells are today considered prophetic utterances and declarations. In the framework of lived religion, the binary between religion and magic collapses.²⁰ It is obvious that the spell for healing is a form of religious bricolage where a practitioner actively employs available resources, such as prayers, herbs, Bible verses, rituals and so-called prophetic utterances, to achieve a tangible, desired outcome in the world. This is religion in its most applied and pragmatic form.

In current studies from the viewpoint of environmental humanities and new animism, a spell is a communicative and reciprocal act within an animate, inspirited world. It is a means of engaging with the agency of plants, stones, places and atmospheric forces, often through poetic and sonic invocation, such as chants and rhythms, to request, persuade, or align with these non-human powers to effect change in realities. This very current approach views spells not as commanding an inert nature but as negotiating with a participatory and conscious cosmos. These animist rituals involve spells that are of fewer commands but more calls, invitations or negotiations with the surrounding lifeworld. The power of the spell comes from its ability to ritualise and ritually compose the human within a larger community of beings, activating their

¹⁷ Jesper Sørensen, *The Cognitive Science of Religion: A Methodological Introduction to Key Empirical Studies*, Bloomsbury Academic (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

¹⁸ Amy Whitehead and Sarah Harvey, *Senses of Religion: Sensing Religion in Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2023); Angela Zito, "Religion and Media," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁹ Robert Orsi and Meredith McGuire, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* (Pennsylvania : : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

²⁰ Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

potential in a shared project. This ecological and new animist view is influenced by the work of Eduardo Kohn and others. Scholars like Graham Harvey extensively show how magical practices involve a relational epistemology with the natural world.²¹

Considering these operations of spells from the current dispensation of prophetic utterances, one would observe a clear similarity of spiritual incantations and formulaic pronouncements cloaked in the purview of prophecy. Reality is controlled by formulated and/or formulaic messages that predict and orchestrate a futuristic happening that, when not interfered with, occurs as predicted. This happens from sources or forces which are not necessarily God or sometimes, not even from any deity, but by the occasioned power of words which have inherent energy as an active force.

Prophetism

Prophetism is a phenomenon that extends beyond a single individual as a prophet. It encompasses the social, religious and political movement or pattern of activities characterized by claims of divine communication. These are often aimed at social critique, reform and ethical exhortation grounded in an experience of divine summons in the form of forthtelling and/or foretelling. From a theological perspective, particularly within the Abrahamic traditions, prophetism is the institution of giftedness and movement by which divine will, judgment and promise are communicated to a people through chosen human intermediaries known as prophets or prophetesses. This definition emphasizes the prophet's role as a messenger, *nabi*, within a specific theological framework of covenant between God and a people. This classic theological understanding is deeply informed by the work of Old Testament scholars like Abraham Joshua Heschel and Walter Brueggemann. Their works remain foundational for defining the prophetic task in biblical theology. Unlike today's prophetic ministrations emphasizing foretelling, they believe that the prophet in ancient Israel was not principally a foreteller but a forth-teller. He or she, as a spokesperson for Yahweh, addressed the concrete social, political and religious circumstances of the nation from the perspective of the covenant laws.²²

From a religious-sociological purview, the prophet is a social critic and innovator. Here, prophetism is a recurrent pattern in religious history where an individual, claiming unauthorized or charismatic authority derived from a direct personal revelation or experience of the sacred, arises to criticize the prevailing religious and social structures and to proclaim a new or revitalized vision of truth, justice and communal order. This definition, influenced by Max Weber, focuses on the role of the prophet as a disruptive force against established (priestly) authority and a catalyst for change.²³

An anthropological definition sees the prophet as a master of the alternative. This views prophetism as a cultural mechanism for managing change and crisis. The prophet is a specialist who claims access to an alternative source of knowledge, which is divine will. They diagnose the causes of ongoing misfortunes like drought, war, disease, etc., and prescribe a new course of action. They imagine a radically different future for the community, often through potent symbolic language and actions. In the view of Clifford Geertz, the prophet offers a symbolic reconstruction of happenings. The prophet gives a new 'cultural map' which "reinterprets the past, makes sense of a chaotic present and outlines a path to a restored future. This is often achieved through oracles, visions and symbolic acts that disrupt ordinary perception and create new possibilities for thought and action."²⁴

In process theology, prophetism is seen as the mode of divine activity whereby God brings persons and communities toward greater good through the presentation of novel possibilities receptive by a prophet. This definition sees God not as a coercive ruler but as a persuasive divine being, with the prophet as a partner in creativity. Here, prophetic awareness includes receiving the divine vision and mission for the world or nation and recognizing the divine urgency for its realization. The prophet is seen as not merely an announcer

²¹ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (California: University of California Press, 2013); Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (Columbia University Press, 2020).

²² Abraham Joshua. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001); Walter. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th Anniversary Ed (Fortress Press, 2018).

²³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (California: University of California press, 1978).

²⁴ Geertz Clifford, "The Interpretation of Cultures" (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

of doom but someone who bears new possibilities, serving as an instrument of divine persuasion that seeks to transform and reform the world or nation from what it is into what it can be. This view sees the prophet as a meaning-maker who provides explanations and solutions during times of upheaval. This process theology perspective is articulated by its founder, Alfred North Whitehead and developed by theologians like John B. Cobb Jr. and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki.²⁵

Prophetism as liberative praxis, from a liberation theology viewpoint, is a spirit-driven commitment to a preferential option for the poor and oppressed. This manifests as a radical critique of ideological and structural ‘sin’ of capitalism, racism, colonialism. It involves active participation in struggles for emancipation. It is less about predicting the future but “making” a future of justice by aligning with God’s liberating activity in history. This perspective defines the prophetic primarily by its stance against oppression and its solidarity with the marginalized. This view sees true prophetism as speaking God’s word from the standpoint of the oppressed. It is a means of denouncing dehumanizing present and announcing God’s intention to create a new social order characterized by justice and fellowship.²⁶ Here, prophetism is inherently a practice of solidarity and liberation from oppressive structures.

From esoteric knowledge (gnostic and mystical) traditions, prophetism is the attainment of a heightened spiritual or intellectual state that allows for the perception of metaphysical realities and the hidden meanings of sacred texts. The prophet (*nabi*, *al-‘arif*) is less a social reformer and more a revealer of divine mysteries and the inner truths of cosmology and the soul. This definition prioritizes hidden knowledge (gnosis) over public social critique.²⁷

In the African, and for that matter, the Ghanaian context, prophetism is a complex phenomenon that blends indigenous worldviews with external religious influences, particularly Christianity and Islam. It is rarely just about foretelling the future; it is fundamentally concerned with healing, power and restoring balance in the world. From a diagnostic and restorative power perspective, African prophetism is a charismatic movement wherein individuals, claiming direct authorization from the Supreme God, ancestors, or the Holy Spirit, arise to diagnose the spiritual root causes of communal crises of illness, drought, conflict, and prescribe rituals, prayers and moral reforms to restore holistic well-being. This view positions the prophet as a spiritual expert, a diviner-therapist, who identifies malfunctions in the relationship between the community and the divine.²⁸ It is a spirit-inspired movement of resistance and cultural affirmation. It condemns all forms of “pharaonic” oppression, colonialism, neo-colonialism, corruption and witchcraft. It announces God’s intention for full life. It often involves the indigenization of worship and the reclamation of African cultural symbols within a Christian or Islamic framework. Accordingly, true African prophetism is the speaking of God’s word from the experience of the wounded community. It denounces the ‘spirit of death’ in all its forms, be it political, economic and spiritual and announces God’s power to liberate and make whole.²⁹ An anthropological-theological perspective sees prophetism as a dynamic synthesis of the traditional religious function of the seer/diviner and the biblical model of the prophet. It represents a continuity of the African worldview that expects divine communication for practical problem-solving, while innovating through the incorporation of new spiritual sources like the Holy Spirit and a focus on mass movement formation. Here, prophetic churches in Africa do not represent a complete break with the past indigenous worship but a translation of the old into the new. The prophets take over the social functions of the traditional diviner’s role of healing, divining and protecting them from evil. However, these are done under the banner of Christ and the Holy Spirit, thus creating a uniquely African expression of Christianity.³⁰

²⁵ North Alfred. Whitehead, “Process and Reality,” 1929; Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (A&C Black, 1994).

²⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics* (Orbis Books, 2023); James H Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation. 40th Anniversary Edition* (Orbis Books, 2010).

²⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

²⁸ Maria Frahm-Arp, “Prophetic Pentecostalism in South Africa: A Study of the Pentecostal Prophetic Phenomenon.” (Brill, 2021).

²⁹ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009).

³⁰ Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*, vol. 27 (Brill, 2004).

In a current definition, prophetism is seen as a digitally mediated religious practice where authority is constructed and performed through online platforms. The contemporary prophets leverage social media, live streams and apps to broadcast revelations. They build global followings and create economies of spiritual goods like prophetic words, anointed items, etc. Their influence is measured by engagement metrics of likes, shares and subscribers, which makes digital literacy and brand management central to modern prophetic ministry. The 21st-century prophet is much more of an influencer who gains authority not from institutional ordination but from algorithmic visibility. This comes about through the ability to generate shareable content that engages and resonates with the anxieties and aspirations of a digital congregation.³¹ These provide specific case studies of how prophets build authority and community online. In a more significant way, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, societal and political upheavals, prophetism is seen as a religious response to existential and systemic crisis whereby prophets provide explanatory frameworks for collective trauma in framing a pandemic as divine judgment or a spiritual battle and offer hope through predictions of divine intervention. This function positions prophetism as a meaning-making institution that provides certainty and a sense of urgency in a world perceived as chaotic and out of control.

Again, prophetism is today seen as a networked charisma current. Here, scholarship uses network theory to define prophetism as the ability to act as a central node in a vast network of human and non-human agencies in terms of followers, spirits, algorithms, capital, etc. The prophets' power lies in their perceived capacity to connect these entities and channel flows of spiritual power, information and resources. Their authority is distributed and reinforced by the network itself, rather than being solely located in the individual. The networked approach draws on the "ontological turn" in anthropology, science and technology studies. Scholars like Bruno Latour have influenced how religious networks are analysed.³² Marisol de la Cadena's work on indigenous cosmopolitics also informs this perspective. Currently, there is also prophetism in the "attention economy."³³ In the context of media studies, modern prophetism is a strategy for capturing and monetizing attention in a saturated information landscape. The prophetic utterance, especially a dramatic prediction or a word of knowledge, functions as a high-value commodity that cuts through the noise of everyday life, commanding attention and consequently, financial support from an audience seeking personalized divine access. The concept of the "attention economy", coined by economist Herbert A. Simon, is now widely used in media studies.³⁴ Applying it to religion is a new frontier. Scholars like Kathryn Lofton often explore these dynamics of the intersection of religious studies, culture and capitalism.³⁵

Implications

The above provides significant information on spells and prophetism. However, the issues that remain to be addressed are the interactions of spells with prophetism and how spells are concealed and framed as prophecies. Spells are often framed as prophecy for power, favours and fame. This practice involves a religious figure, a prophet, seer, or pastor, publicly proclaiming a divine revelation (as a prophecy but a concealed spell) that predicts a catastrophe (illness, bankruptcy, accident, death, misfortune, etc.) upon individuals (mostly popular figures) or the community. The resolution or avoidance of the predicted catastrophe is then made contingent upon obeying, appeasing, or financially supporting the prophet and/or ministry. This discussion is necessary as several doom prophecies are just controlled spells cloaked as prophecies to win, especially economic favours. Also, the practitioners, the so-called prophets and prophetesses, use these operations as conduits to rise to fame.

³¹ Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2013); Adam Possamai, *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Mediatization*. (Routledge, 2023); Frahm-Arp, *Prophetic Pentecostalism in South Africa: A Study of the Pentecostal Prophetic Phenomenon*.

³² Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory, Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³³ Marisol De La Cadena, "Uncommoning Nature: Stories from the Anthro-Not-Seen," *Anthropos and the Material* 2019 (2019): 35–58.

³⁴ Herbert A Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," *International Library of Critical Writings in Economics* 70 (1996): 187–202.

³⁵ Lofton, *Consuming Religion*.

Operational Mechanism

The strategic convergence of spell and prophecy is a powerful mechanism for building religious authority, extracting resources and gaining fame. This practice involves disguising a coercive ritual act of spell, as divine revelation and act(s), cloaked as prophecy to manipulate followers, other individuals and nation(s). The mechanism of transitioning from and cloaking coercive spells to divine prophecies often works in the following engaged process:

1. **Ritualized coercive spell(s) to create harm and catastrophe:** This is done in private, a formulaic performance or ritualized coercive message(s) to cause a future occurrence, especially catastrophes. This is done either by consulting gods or human incantations to manipulate natural happenings. Some of the prophets purely use threats to create fear and panic, traumatic situations that, when announced as prophecy, would compel the victims to accept it as real; hence, the possibility of occurrence centred on the principle of beliefs becoming realities.
2. **The “Revelation”:** Instead of stating that he/she has performed a private ritual which is a classic spell, the religious leader, a prophet, publicly announces that he/she has received a divine prophecy, a predictive future event. This prophecy typically predicts a negative outcome, such as illness, bankruptcy, accident and/or demonic attack, that would befall an individual(s) (mostly popular figure(s), organization(s), or the congregation(s)). To rise to national or global fame and win big economic favours, the individuals and/or groups mentioned are mostly of national or global character.
3. **The Spiritual Bypass:** This move is crucial. By framing the prediction of a spell as a “prophecy,” the leader attributes its source to God, not to their own will, whims and caprices or any ritualized or formulaic secret performance. Their language depicts that even if they are not trusted, the nation and people should consider the message(s). They make it sound as if what matters is the message but not the messenger. They say this with much compelling force to appear selfless and make their messages so convincing, creating a sense of urgency and emergency around the “prophecy”, which mostly comes with timelines. This act bypasses the negative cultural stigma of witchcraft, casting a spell and cloaks the threat in divine legitimacy and supremacy. They show that the religious leader is not an aggressor but a mere messenger whose message must be obeyed regardless of who he/she is. This stage further has the intent of creating a strong belief in the “prophecy” by the victim(s) or the hearing community. This heightens the energy level of the spell to work since psychologically, such messages have nocebo effects. They know that breaking the belief breaks the spell’s power over the mind, and therefore, would not happen as coerced and directed. Hence, creating sensation(s) with various means for the community, especially for the victim(s) to believe,
4. **The Creation of Demand:** The prophecy of doom, through a spell, creates immense fear, anxiety, panic and uncertainty among the followers, the victim and/or the nation. This manufactured crisis through spell and “prophesied,” generates a desperate demand for a solution. The would-happen-event is so postulated and pontificated in a way that it heightens the demand for solution(s). With the spate of available social media and other means of communication, this demand immediately becomes a national crisis and need. Sometimes, the prophet has conduits to transmit the “prophecy” quickly and fast to reach its intended victims on a national or global scale.
5. **The Sale of the Solution:** The prophet, claiming to be God’s sole authorized intermediary, then reveals that he/she has the solution to avoid or avert the outcome of the said prophecy. Either he/she is to be consulted in private or may announce what the victim(s) should do to overcome whatever catastrophe is to befall them. The solution is almost always a specific action that benefits the prophet, and the prophet is solely the one who has the solution. The benefits may include: i) financial favours as a required “sacrificial seed offering” or donation of a specific amount, often large sum of money to the prophet’s ministry to “break the curse”; ii) material favour of purchasing the prophet’s “anointed” objects like oil, water, handkerchiefs, for protection and aversion of the said catastrophe; iii) social fame of unquestioning loyalty, public praise and the promotion of the prophet’s fame as a

condition for receiving grace and prayer. When they get to a high level of acceptance and recognition by the public or nation(s) and the favours continue to flow, they often cease to give such predictions.

6. **The Outcome and Attribution:** If the followers, the national or global figure, complies and the outcome of the spell cloaked as prophecy does not occur, the prophet is credited with having accurately heard from God and effectively interceded. His spiritual authority and fame grow. If it occurs, it is blamed on the victims' "lack of faith" or "incomplete obedience," further reinforcing the need for total submission to the prophet. If the afflicted does not comply and the prediction eventually happens, the prophet's fame and authority grow to highlight an occurrence that could have been averted but for disbelief and disobedience to the voice of God on the part of the victim(s).

In essence, the prophecy orchestrated by a spell functions identically to a threat of casting a spell, but the prophet would use the theological language of divine revelation to make the threat palatable and unassailable. Therefore, the mechanism of spells concealed as prophecy works mostly as itemized above. This practice involves a religious figure, a prophet, seer, or pastor, publicly proclaiming a divine revelation, "a prophecy," that predicts a catastrophic infliction (illness, bankruptcy, death, accident, misfortune) upon individuals or the community. The solution or avoidance of this predicted catastrophe is then made contingent upon obeying, appeasing, or financially supporting the prophet.

The concealing of spells as prophecy and the *modus operandi* as outlined above can be viewed as:

1. **Commodification of Spiritual Authority:** This is the strategic performance of divine access, where a prophecy of future harm is used to create a religious market of fear and panic. The leader commodifies their claimed spiritual authority by selling immunity, bought through donations and obedience, from the very doom by spells created by the so-called prophets and prophesied. Their fame becomes a product of their perceived efficacy in manipulating these cosmic economies.³⁶ This analysis is central to the work of sociologists studying the "religious economy" in, especially, modern Charismatic and Pentecostal movements.
2. **The act of "Reverse Engineering" of Spiritual Power:** This is a form of ritualized social control that "reverse engineers" the mechanics of a spell. A traditional spell involves a secret ritual to cause harm. However, in the case of concealing them as prophecy, the harm is orchestrated secretly and announced publicly as a prophecy. The ritual to avert it is the public act of payment or submission. The power is not hidden but spectacularized and the community itself becomes the witness and enforcer of the compliance mechanism. The concept of "reverse engineering" spiritual power comes from the field of the anthropology of religion and the study of rituals. Scholars like David Chidester, in his work *Religion: Material Dynamics*, analyses how religious power is performed and materialized.³⁷ The public spectacle of prophecy aligns with what Birgit Meyer, in her work, *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision and Christianity in Ghana*, described as the "aesthetics of persuasion" in religious contexts, where visual and public performance is key to establishing authority. This "reverse engineering" of spiritual power works just as reversing a technological product to see the parts put together to create the whole. In terms of reverse engineering spells and inflictions, especially when the prophet deems it fit, he/she reverses the ritualized future happening by incantations to avert it.³⁸
3. **Synthesis of "Divine" and "Mystical" Causality:** This tactic synthesizes two distinct religious frameworks: the divine, prophecy as a message from a deity and the mystical, which is a spell as an automatic operation of ritual force. The prophet claims the divine authority to reveal a future event but implies a mystical, almost mechanical, certainty to its occurrence unless a specific ritual action, for example, payment, is performed. This hybrid model allows the leader to command the

³⁶ Frahm-Arp, *Prophetic Pentecostalism in South Africa*, 2021; Ebenezer Obadare, *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria* (Nigeria: Zed Books, 2018).

³⁷ David Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics* (California: Univ of California Press, 2018).

³⁸ Birgit Meyer, "Sensational Movies: Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana" (California: University of California Press, 2015).

fear associated with witchcraft while enjoying the legitimacy of a prophet. The blending of prophetic and mystical frameworks is a hallmark of several African-Instituted Churches, the global New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. Scholars like Daniele Hervieu-Léger in her work on religious memory and Susan Kwilecki in studies of modern prophecy have explored how these syncretic models operate.³⁹

4. **The infliction of the spell:** This comes as a form of spiritual terrorism and coercive control. This practice can be defined as the strategic use of divinely sanctioned threats to induce fear and compliance within a religious community. By framing predicted inflictions from spells as inevitable divine will, the prophet creates a system of coercive control where obedience is purchased through money and loyalty, and dissent is equated with sin, inviting catastrophe. This approach highlights the abusive and manipulative nature of the ploy, treating it as a form of psychological violence. Here, the prophecy of harm functions as a mechanism of social control. It is a form of spiritual terrorism whereby the fear of divine retribution, channelled through the prophet's words, is used to ensure conformity, extract resources and silence criticism within the religious marketplace. The term "spiritual terrorism" is used by scholars studying abusive religious leadership. It captures the mechanism of using ultimate fears to control behaviour. This analysis is seen in the work of Steven T. Newmaster in his studies of authoritarian churches and in the field of pastoral theology concerned with clergy abuse.⁴⁰
5. **There is also the issue of analysing spells cloaked in the garment of prophecy through the lens of what is referred to as the "Economy of Fear":** From a sociological perspective, this is a performance within a religious economy where fear is the primary currency. The prophet commodifies fear by selling immunity from an orchestrated spell. Followers purchase protection and aversions through donations and acquisition of anointed goods, which are framed not as payments to the prophet but as spiritual transactions with God, mediated by the prophet. The prophet's fame is a product of their perceived efficacy in navigating this economy. The concept of "religious economy" is famously associated with sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. Applying this to modern prophetic movements, particularly in Africa, is a focus of scholars like Afe Adogame and David Maxwell.⁴¹ Maria Frahm-Arp, in her study, provided a specific, current analysis of how these economies of fear operate within highly popular neo-Pentecostal and neo-Charismatic movements. This framework views religious practice through a market lens, where prophets offer a desired service (protection) for a cost.⁴²
6. **Manipulation of Existential Fear:** Another way of analysing these experiences is through understanding the manipulation of existential anxiety. This practice preys on a universal human desire to avoid suffering and make sense of randomness. The prophet offers a terrifying but ultimately manageable explanation for potential future pain, which comes as a divine warning. This reduces existential anxiety by replacing chaos with a predictable, though fearful, cosmic narrative. This provides a clear, actionable path to safety by obeying the prophet. The prophets' authority is bolstered by positioning themselves as the essential guide through a dangerous spiritual world. Although the prophecies of orchestrated spells offer a theodicy of preparedness and give a reason for future sufferings before they happen, the individuals suffer an illusory sense of control over the uncontrollable. Obviously, the prophet, through this means, gains fame by being the author of this narrative and the guarantor of the solution. This approach draws from

³⁹ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, *Nova Religio*, vol. 8 (Polity Press, 2000); Susan. Kwilecki, *Becoming a Prophet: A Study of Modern American Prophecy*. (University Press of America, 1999).

⁴⁰ Steven T. Newmaster, "Understanding Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Dealing with an Unhealthy Church Experience," 2020.

⁴¹ Afe. Adogame, "Prophets, Papists and Pentecostal Visionaries in the African Religious Economy." In *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. J. Spickard, S. Landres, and M. McGuire (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 134–47; David Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism and the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement*, vol. 14 (Oxford, 2006).

⁴² Frahm-Arp, *Prophetic Pentecostalism in South Africa*, 2021.

psychological anthropology and the sociology of religion in Peter L. Berger's *The Sacred Canopy*, which was written about religion's role in shielding humans from existential terror, a theory that remains influential.⁴³ Contemporary analyses of how modern prophets manipulate these anxieties can be found in the work of Katy Greenland, who showed how religious leaders use specific linguistic strategies to maintain control over members. It shows how a specific kind of rhetoric is used to pathologize dissent and critical thought, framing them as demonic influence.⁴⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

The way forward is to curb these practices through educating the populace. This paper provides a significant understanding of the operations of the recently heightened works of the syncretic prophetism of mystical practices of spells cloaked as prophecies. A major way of handling such calamitous spells cloaked as prophecies is to defy their orders. Their high operational modes become effective and efficient when they are believed, cowed and surrendered to them. However, one should be spiritually grounded to avert these overtures and overcome them. The aim of these doom sayings through the means of spells couched as prophecies is to gain economic favours and for the operatives to rise to fame. When one observes carefully, these so-called prophets who give these kinds of doom sayings in the form of prophecies are often young and new individuals rising in the industry. Usually, when they gain fame as national and/or international prophets, they cease to give or virtually reduce such prophecies to the barest minimum, whilst other young ones take over from them. The government should find a way to overcome these happenings. For instance, in Rwanda, one cannot just rise to become or call himself/herself a pastor or a prophet until he/she has had some level of theological training. It is mandatory for pastors in leadership to hold some diploma or a degree in Religious Studies, Theology or a relevant certificate from a recognized institution. The enforcement of this requirement has led to the closure of several churches in Rwanda sanitizing the system. The Ghanaian system should equally be sanitized to avert these doom prophecies. This call is not oblivious to the religious liberty of practitioners, but to curb a rising trend that has become a threat to the survival of societies and individuals.

CONCLUSION

In this study, it is observed that several of the doom prophecies are orchestrated to control the people, be it individuals, congregations and/or nations. This is done through the cloaking of mystically orchestrated spells as prophecies that often mention the future doom of individual(s), usually popular people, congregants, etc. The difficulty with these operations is the challenge of having the ability to decipher what comes from God and what comes from charlatanic sources. The use of social media and other traditional media sources to create fear and panic mongering through these said prophecies and proffering solutions has become rampant in Ghana and a bane in socio-cultural and religious life.

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⁴³ Peter L Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Anchor Books, 1967).

⁴⁴ Katy Greenland, "We See the Devil in Your Eyes: Rhetoric of Control in Religious a Group.," *Culture and Religion* 20, no. 4 (2019): 425–43.

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