

PROPHETISM, CHARISM AND AGWU: STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN DISCRIMINATORY BELIEF AND REALITY

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Abstract

Charismatic gifts, though tautological, is a catch word amongst Christian denominations, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Claim of charisms is an assurance of a team of followers and adherents. The more one is able to hypnotize the people into believing that he has charisms, the more famous he becomes and the greater respect he commands. He immediately begins to answer 'Man of God'. Fortune telling confused as prophesying is the most popular amongst these uninformed. Uttering of unintelligible sounds, frenzy shaking and rolling or dancing in spirit are common signs that one is possessed by the spirit of prophecy amongst Christians of today. This paper questions the authenticity of the Christian prophetic gift claims against the backdrop of African (Igbo of Nigerian) traditional possession by the Agwu spirit. One gets increasingly concerned with the truth value of the claims that Christian prophetic spirit is good while African Agwu spirit is evil since most signs seen amongst Christian prophets and prophetesses are not really different from the ones seen in the life of those possessed by Agwu in African Traditional Religion understanding. If this is the case, why must the later be repudiated by the former and why must Christians regard them as unbelievers and in need of conversion? Could it not be that the native Africans are coerced into accepting the belief of the Westerner as authentic to the unfortunate neglect of the even superior African belief and experience? This and other similar issues form the status quaestionis of this paper.

Key Words: Prophetism, *Agwu*, Africans, Christians, Spirit, Discrimination

Introduction

The prophets, both the major and minor rank second in the classification of the books of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, prophetism is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Eph 4,11; 1Cor 12,28; Rom 12,6; Acts 21,9). In the contemporary times, a claim of prophetic power gives one an edge over his peers and colleagues. For the average African, there is a reason for every experience in his/her life. Only a prophet or one charismatically gifted can solve the mystery behind any experience. Prophetism is therefore a common parlance in speech and life. It is, yet, the most misconstrued and misinterpreted word in religious phenomena. In a bid to satisfy the inculpable craze for miracles on the part of the poor masses who believe God is the solution to all their problems as taught, many including the uninformed take on the aura of prophetism as

of course one of the easiest ways to amass wealth. The malady is not just a limitation of the uninformed. It extends even to priests who now fool people into believing that they have special powers. Gullibly enough but inculpably, people innocently follow them since priests ought to be knowledgeable and truthful (Hos 4,6). It is like our people are today left at crossroads. The more Africans get deeper into westernized Christianity, the more they lose touch with reality. We are colluded into seeing God as responsible for everything. Hardly, do we see ourselves as architects of our success or failure. Most live a visionless life. They live without plans. They believe God is there and will always solve their problem. Meritocracy based on rewarding the deserving, as long as their abilities and talents are put to good use to benefit the larger society and contribute to the good and prosperity of others (Ornstein, 2007) is sacrificed on the altar of fanatic and confused belief. A young African girl hardly discerns a man for marriage without a recourse to these prophets to ascertain God's mind. One business mishap or near success syndrome consults them for solutions even though he might have been careless over time. Wars in families are traceable to messages from these prophets. The researcher believes that the issue of prophetism as a religious experience is no longer something that must be left in a closed box. It calls for a serious study and attention as many more are becoming victims and our people are losing their focus. It is based on this that a study is made to see the difference between what the Africans call possession by "Agwu" spirit and possession by spirit of prophecy. If there are points of rapport, why must African *Agwu* be tagged evil, and spirit of prophecy be tagged good? It is all about possession by unseen forces. Since the forces are invisible, who can really say what spirit possessed what? It is the belief of the researcher that since the manifestations and signs of possession are basically the same, and their functions are optimally related, classification of *Agwu* possession as evil is only a discriminatory note. The truth of the matter is that what the Old and New Testaments call spirit of prophecy is what Africans call *Agwu*. They are the same in essence and substance. The difference is only nominalistic owing to geographical location. Condemning one for the other is opposing God who has so benevolently blessed every nation with her own natural endowments and gifts to tackle some of her supernatural problems. Great problems of confusion would be solved the moment Africans realize the factuality and portents in her natural and traditional beliefs. What African Christians do today is least described as transposition of their traditional belief into Christianity. If this is so, it is better to study our natural religion with a view to improving on what we already have for a better understanding and love of the Most High God who endowed all with knowledge of Him naturally (Wis 13,1-11).

Prophetism

This is the act of playing the prophet. Etymologically, it is a combination of two Greek words: pro and fhmi, meaning "before, in front of" and "to say something orally or in writing" respectively. The noun profthj means "one who speaks before others". Simply put, it means the art of speaking on behalf of another. In the Greek Bible (LXX) profthj always translates the Hebrew ayb.n'. Mckenzie (1995) observes the uncertainty on the meaning of the etymology. Some scholars see it as connected with Akkadian root meaning "to call", "speak aloud" and so interpret it as speaker. Others trace it to Arabic root which means "to bubble" relating it to the frenetic character of prophetic utterance. Huffmon (1992) expands the meaning to include those who play priestly roles as was found in Egypt, technical advisers as seen in Western Asia and those who speak directly under orders from a deity. Reese (1980) understands the term to apply

to those who interpreted dreams, visions, and enigmatic utterances of oracles. It includes one who speaks nothing of his own, but simply repeats what has been given to him in revelation. There is a varied and wide range of definitions. This entry limits its purview to prophecy understood as inspired speech at the initiative of a divine power, speech which is clear in itself and commonly directed to a third party. Even though people generally take prophecy today as dating strictly to the biblical times, it is the submission of this paper that the world of the Ancient Near East and of course Africa have prophetic experiences before, and during the biblical times. In the contemporary era, no matter how far she is misunderstood, prophecy remains a common experience among the great people of Africa owing to their very profound inclination to and belief in the unseen forces.

Prophecy in Ancient Near East and Pre-Biblical Times

Boadt (1984) defends the belief that consideration of prophecies as unique to Israel prevailed only when the bible was the only source of knowledge of the ancient world. Archaeological findings have revealed interesting information about prophecy in the ancient world. Lindblom (1973) warns that we have no sufficient foundation for assuming there were no prophets before the days of Samuel and Saul. Jab (1988) documents that men who practiced divination were found everywhere in the ancient East (cf. Num 22,5f; Dan 2,2;) and thus were judged fit to receive communications from superior beings. They were consulted by people occasionally before embarking on major undertakings. It devolved upon the prophets of Israel to perform similar functions (1Kings 22,1-29). Various texts and roles in Ancient Near East involving predictions, eschatology or apocalyptic, social or religious criticism, and commissioned messages from deities could be classed as prophetic depending on one's understanding of the term.

In Syria-Palestine, evidence of prophetic texts abound. The Ebla texts dating to the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C. and Emar's Meskene dating to about 1300 B.C all in North Syria evidence prophetic works as early as the period in question. Meskene indicate an office with Akkadian designations *anabbi'atu* and *Muñabbi'atu* associated with the goddess Išhara. The editor translates the term as prophetesses (Arnaud 1986). Selms (1971) believes that among Ugaritic texts there are announcements of future blessings and technical divination that could be referred to as prophetic. In Phoenicia references to prophets of Baal and Asherah abound. The OT has references to them and even used the same Hebrew term *ayb.n'* in referring to them. They had similar ecstatic behavior as the Israelite prophets. Huffmon (1992) documents that it was one time argued that biblical prophecy derived from Canaanite (Phoenician) prophecy. The plaster inscription from about 700 B.C found at Tell Deir 'Alla of Ammon in 1967 refers to Balaam, son of Beor, a visionary of the gods. This is re-inforced by Num 24,4-5 in which Balaam, son of Beor, hears the worlds of God and sees a vision of the Almighty. In Anatolia texts dating back to 14th C.B.C of King Mursilis II and even of his uncle, Kantuzilis, show inventories of means of divine communication (cf. ISam 28,6). In these, there are references to inspired speakers. The Mesopotamian region including Uruk (Southern Babylonia) and Mari (Middle Euphrates) and Assyria show evidences of prophetic texts of both titled and untitled prophets. Grayson (1975) published some of these texts in his "(Akkadian) Prophecies" (cf. also Hunger and Kaufman 1975). In Africa, Egypt, the case is not different. Ipu-wer contains admonitions and criticisms against sociopolitical order just as we have in most prophecies of the OT. The prophecy of

Neferti foretells a future deliverance for a country in a time of trouble very similar to the OT predictions and messages of hope.

One can therefore maintain safely and without fear of contradiction that the phenomenon of prophecy predates the biblical times. Indeed what we regard as prophecy in the biblical understanding is not strictly different from extra-biblical and pre-biblical beliefs and understanding.

Prophecy in Biblical Times

This paper studies the phenomenon from three moments: the pre-exilic, post-exilic and New Testament times. In biblical tradition, prophecy is expressed with other words like Seer (1Sam 9,9); man of God and visionary. In biblical tradition, divine inspiration is believed to be what makes a person become a prophet. It is the same inspiration that cause him speak out and make others listen to him as a legitimate spokesperson for the divine. Earlier, the conception is that “the spirit of the Lord” speaks through the person (cf. 1Sam 10,10; 1Kgs 22,24). Later, the terminology preferentially holds that “the word of the Lord came to” the person (cf. Jer 1,2,4; Ezek 1,3). Most early prophets spoke to individuals like kings or officials. Later ones addressed larger groups, the whole nation or the entire city. It depends on who the prophet consider the appropriate recipient of the utterance. Generally, the idea in the bible is that the prophet is the one who can speak in the name of God. In the narrative books, the first four books of the Torah do not really give any figure of prophetic character. Anachronistically, Abraham is addressed as a prophet but he does not function as other prophets do. He never addresses people in God’s name. In Exod 7,1 Aaron acted as a prophet in relation to Moses but he never says “thus says the Lord”. Miriam though is called prophetess but she is more like a cultic one (Exod 15,20; Num 12,1-15). In Num 11,26-30 we read about competitions among those who claim exclusive right to prophetic activity. Num 12,6 mentions the possibility of a prophet in Israel whose vision of and insight into the divine would be less than Moses. Deuteronomy identifies Moses as a great prophet sent from God, the model of one who is to come (Deut 18,15-19; 34,10). In Moses’ address within the narrative, there is a presupposition of the existence of prophets as an institution. It stipulates ground for believing or disbelieving a prophet, namely: if the prophet leads the people away from God (Deut 13,1-6) and if what the prophet says does not come true (Deut 18,20-22). One can therefore say that prophetism in the Pentateuch is by retrojection. In the second section of the *TaNaK*, prophets are divided into former and latter prophets. The former prophets include all the book of the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua through Kings). Latter prophets include the major prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah) and the twelve (12) minor prophets.

In the OT, prophetism has one common denominator. All the prophets understand themselves to have been called by God. Often they present their messages in such a poetic, cryptic and crabbed style. At times the messages are tied to a particular circumstance that it sounds meaningless to a contemporary reader. Other times, the messages are as lively as they are haunting. They are characterized by their introductory formula: “thus says the Lord”. It is noteworthy to state that similar formula characterize emissaries from monarchs in the Ancient Near East. Among other themes, God, Israel, relationship between God and Israel, the future are the central ones covered by the pre-exilic prophets.

We can therefore safely conclude with Schmitt (1992) that prophecy, a probable loanword in Israel was not a phenomenon unrelated to ideas and practices outside Israel. Israelite prophecy can rather be understood as a concept and an activity that Israel shared with other cultures and peoples among whom the Israelites lived and experienced God.

Postexilic Prophecy

Many traditions and institutions in Israel suffered a setback with the fifty (50) years of Babylonian exile. The impact is felt more in the social and political areas but not without any effect on the character of prophecy. The postexilic prophets have obvious shift from the message of doom by the pre-exilics to message of hope. The exile already vindicated the pre-exilic prophets who predicted doom because of the Israelites' infidelity. The post-exilic prophecy a better future based on the fact that God has now exacted the punishment which earlier prophets had correctly maintained that he would insist on. Post-exilic prophets would therefore be said to have consistency with the pre-exilics. But the belief that God's judgment had now been fully exacted and so had come to an end did gradually change the prophetic message into something substantially different from what it had been before. Deuteron-Isaiah gives the impression that with the exile, Israel has paid in full for her misdeeds and so owes God nothing anymore (Isa 40,2). In post-exilic prophecy therefore, it is no longer a prediction of doom due to sin but a message of comfort and consolation for Israel, and of judgment only on her enemies. Their message is characterized by teaching to induce a change of heart; cultic practices (Amos 4,4-5; Jer 7,1-4; Hag 1,4; Zech 4,8-10; Mal 1,6-10); oracles about foreign nations; and eschatology (Barton 1992).

In the postexilic times, prophecy seem to align closer to cultic practices. This is clear from the increasing concerns on the reestablishment of Temple worship among the exile returnees. This is seen more in Haggai and Zechariah and even Ezek. 40-48 as against the less cultic Amos and Isaiah. Hanson (1975) sees postexilic prophecy from two dimensions: a drift towards institutionalization of prophecy as temple officials with the task of producing liturgical texts and giving exhortations to keep the Torah and be regular in worship with promises that God would bless the community around the temple. Secondly, he sees a minority tradition which kept alive authentic prophecy whose task is to protest against the complacent and static institutions of Second Temple Judaism.

In all, it must be noted that there is one driving force in both pre-exilic and postexilic prophecy, namely, the claim that the prophet is under the influence of the spirit of God. Ezekiel speaks of the spirit of God transporting him from place to place and Trito-Isaiah claims the spirit of God inspired him (Isa 61,1). Haggai and Zechariah always make reference to the spirit of God (Hag 1,14; 2,5; Zech 4,6; 7,12). Joel 2,28-29 explicitly refers to the gift of prophecy as resulting from the outpouring of God's spirit and that time is coming when it will be extended to all mankind.

Prophecy in the New Dispensation

The New Testament and early Christian books are replete with evidences of prophecies and its effects. It is understood as the phenomenon in early Christianity of inspired speech in the name of God, the risen Jesus or the spirit. According to Boring (1992) it is a term used to represent claims to communicate messages from the gods, with other designations such as 'seer',

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‘mantis’ and ‘sibyl’. He adapted the 1973 Seminar on Early Christian Prophecy of the Society of biblical literature to say that: “The early Christian prophet was an immediately-inspired spokes person for God, the risen Jesus, or the Spirit who received intelligible oracles that he or she felt impelled to deliver to the Christian community or, representing the community, to the general public” (p. 496). What is important here is that the prophet is a mouthpiece. The inspiration from an extra-terrestrial forces does not negate the employment of his natural endowments and senses in his execution of his task. Thus, messages from prophets is not totally devoid of human limitations and imperfections. The researchers notes with interest the common denominator between the pre-scriptural, Old testament and New Testament prophetism. It is noteworthy, that the common characteristic of every prophet and indeed prophetic message is that the messenger is only a carrier of the message and the deliverer. What he gives is not his own. He is only a mouthpiece of the divine. A spirit is the author of the message. He only uses a human agent, prophet to deliver its messages. This is very true for prophecies in the pre-biblical times. The Old Testament is not different either. In the New dispensation, it becomes more pronounced.

In the Hellenistic world, prophecy is located within the broad spectrum of devices by which information from the world of the gods was transmitted. From the time of Plato, distinction was made between *artificiosa divination* and *naturalis divination*. The former is reading the mind of the gods through artificial means like the flight of birds while the latter refers to communication of messages from gods by inspired speech received in trance, ecstasy, or vision (Aune, 1983).

In the Jewish world, rabbinism believes that prophecy ceased in the time of Ezra. It is the belief that it can only come up again in during the eschatological times. The Protestant Canon enforced this belief and teaches that there was four hundred (400) years of silence from Malachy till the time of John the Baptist. There is a massive evidence for 1st-century Jewish prophecy, however, from Jewish sources themselves. This is clear from the writings of Philo; Rabbis; Josephus and the Qumran documents.

John the Baptist is the first prophet notable in the New Testament. He is in every way a contemporary and comparable to Jesus. New Testament writers sought to portray him as subordinate to Jesus and so described him as a forerunner in the sense of Elijah (Matt 17,9-13). Luke peculiarly sandwiched him into the Prophets of Old Testament extraction (Luke 3,10-14). Still it is clear that John was fully conscious of his vocation as originating in God. He preached repentance on the basis of eschatological judgment in the near future (Matt 3,7-12; Luke 3,7-9). Thus he is regarded as more than a prophet. He is seen to be a forerunner who serves as the immediate herald of the final act of God’s saving history (Matt 11,9; Luke 7,26).

All the four gospels posit Jesus as a prophet. At baptism he received the prophetic mission corresponding to a prophet’s call (Matt 3,13-17). In Jewish context, the Spirit that descended on him is the spirit that makes one a prophet. His authority is not that of a scribe or rabbi but the immediate authority of the inspired prophet (Matt 7,29).

Literature of the early Christianity including letters of St. Paul; the Q source; the synoptic materials; Johannine tradition; Apocalypse; Didache; Ignatius; Odes of Solomon and Hermas all speak of prophetic activities in the early Christian times. At this time, they were seen as church figures and continuing voice of Jesus. They were believed to be possessed by the spirit of Jesus. Redmond (1967) writes that hierarchy works to safeguard and preserve the faith and to discern the prophetic spirit without extinguishing the spirit.

The foregoing discussions on prophetic actions from pre-biblical times to the New Testament times have one thing common with all the periods. Each believes that a prophet is a mouthpiece of a divine or spirit being. The prophet is always at the service of this being who in turn inspires or possesses the prophet leading to ecstasy, trances and prophetic utterances (McCarthy 1967).

***Agwu* and its agents**

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council teach that the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men (Nostra Aetate 1965). Further the same Vatican II holds that the Holy Spirit was at work in the world before Christ was glorified (Ad Gentes Divinitus 1965). If this is correct, then it is not wrong to assert that the Holy Spirit is at work in all individuals and in all religions. The Holy Spirit could be found in all religions through the seeds of the Word of Christ, yet immature, as found in human initiatives in religions and human efforts to attain truth, goodness and God Himself. What the Christian religion call Holy Spirit, African Traditional Religion calls *Agwu*. In the words of Adibe (2009), “The Igbo traditional theologians in their effort to position the Holy Spirit at work in Igbo professionals could not find any better name but *Agwu* for this mysterious divine element working in their religion and society” (p. 257). Umeh (1999) agrees with this view when he describes the *Agwu* as the Igbo Holy Spirit because of the kind of work it does for the diviners and herbalists. It gives the native doctor divine revelation of knowledge of herbs and the administration for the benefit of humanity. It makes him potent. For the Igbo man, *Agwu* is the manifestation of the power of the gods. The native doctor or African traditional prophet cannot operate unless under the influence of *Agwu* Spirit. His power and ability is proportional to the potency of the *Agwu* which is itself measurable by the proximity and adherence of the native doctor to *Agwu*. The closer the native doctor gets to the *Agwu*, the more potent he is. The possession by *Agwu* is a call for service for priestly duty and other human tasks. *Agwu* is not necessarily evil. Just as one can offend the Christian Holy Spirit by the type of life he lives, so *Agwu* could be offended especially through acts of resistance and disobedience.

Western/Biblical Prophetism and African Traditional *Agwu*

McCarthy (1967) documents essential factors in the prophetic role, namely: the Prophet is delegated to speak for God (Isa 6,8-9; Jer 1,9); the vocation is compelling even though the prophet be reluctant or untalented (Amos 3,7-8; Jer 1,7-9); God communicates his word to the Prophet (Isa 6,9; Ezek 2,8-3.3); the communication involves auditions and visions. It must be noted that all these characteristics noted above are also common with prophets in the pre-biblical times. The researcher is proud to say it loud and clear that African Traditional Religious setting has prominent men and women who exhibit similar characteristics. Such people are known to be possessed by *agwu*. They ought to be servants or agents of deities. Western culture with her domineering and ‘better than thou’ influence has in her colonial missionizing most mistakenly deconstructed and named such people agents of the evil one needing deliverance and exorcism. One wonders the parameter used in classifying the African *agwu* as evil and the Western spirit as good. This paper is of the conviction that *agwu* spirit is not necessarily evil. It is God’s own way

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of ministering to His African children just as He ministers to the westerners in their own way through their prophets. The nomenclature against African experience is not of reality but of misconception and discrimination. Wis 13,1-11 and Rom 1,18-24 hold that God speaks to every culture in diverse ways. Adibe (2009) agrees that “Agwu that provided skills in Igbo religion is found in believing in God through a righteous encounter with Jesus ... The traditional perception of *Agwu* is the Christian perception of the Holy Spirit” (p. 275). This implies that *Agwu* is not necessarily evil. It is a good spirit. All one needs to do is not to decamp from his Christian belief in order to perform his duties as directed by *Agwu*. He only needs to get deeper into God and still use the God-given spiritual gifts through *Agwu* to help others. As a matter of fact, people obsessed by *Agwu* spirit are true visionaries, healers, and exorcists. All these were in existence in African culture before the advent of Christianity. Some missionaries misconceived these wonderful and uniquely exceptional greatness of African mysticism and termed all evil. Most latter African Christians including some pastors get cued away by this very myopic and utter misunderstanding of the real. They encourage the destruction of the shrines dedicated to these *Agwu* and coarsen the Africans into believing that these are all evil possessions. They even organize prayers of deliverances for these spiritually gifted men and women. Evidences show that after the frenzy manifestations termed anointing, the same men and women end up as prayer warriors, visionaries and ministers in the same prayer centers. They are convinced to believe with the prayer monger that the power of Jesus set them free from evil and has now empowered them with gifts of the Holy Spirit to start working for him. This is not completely true. What has really happened is that the same natural and spiritual endowment remains in the person but now he has changed camp to side the pastors in his church as an instrument for use. What he/she does in his/her new church is exactly what she used to do traditionally. The difference is only in location and not in the subject or gift. Just as an African colonized by the Westerner is no less an African, so *Agwu* possessed traditionally turned ‘Christian’ is not by that fact stripped of his/her powers. If he can use it in Christian church, he can as well continue using it on his own without any attachment to totems or idols. *Agwu* is only an African/Igbo name given to explain mysteries in supernatural entities. It is something to be grateful to God about. It must not be repudiated as evil. It only calls for refinement just as Christianity got refined with time and growth.

Conclusion

Prophetic experiences predate the biblical times. Documentaries are replete with men and women charismatically gifted in different cultures even before the bible times. They were supposed to be visionaries, healers, priests and diviners. People listened to them. They were at the service of the people as mediators between them and the supernatural. In the biblical times, for both the Old and New Testaments, the experiences are simply similar. Distinguishing characteristics are only very subtle. Compared with the people possessed by *Agwu* in the African Traditional Religion, one awes at noticeable and obvious similarities. It is the same frenzy manifestation when under the influence of the spirit. The mediatorial roles are very conspicuous to be denied. Both are diviners, visionaries and mouth pieces of the unseen as they all give messages from the unseen concerning the physical. It is therefore our unalloyed conclusion that misunderstanding and repudiation of the African Traditional *Agwu* is simply discriminatory and sequent to superiority mentality of the Western mind against the African. Just as God spoke to

the Ancient Near Eastern and Western peoples through their prophets so He speaks to Africans through the agents of *Agwu*.

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