



Superstitions: An attempt at explaining their roles in the African society

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Abstract

Looking at the concept of superstitions you realise that for lack of a better term, in the African context these are beliefs captured for deterrence and for guidance to the community. These beliefs are not enforced by laws and regulations but they seem to be binding and not embodying them may have dire consequences. The paper gives examples of these age-old wisdom statements and seeks to explain them. The final part is looking at their relevance and applicability in contemporary society with the context of Africa where they are freely shared and exchanged.

Keywords: superstition, oral traditions, African, binding effect.

Introduction

The term superstition is used more often than it is understood. If ten people were asked to explain the meaning of superstition, there is a possibility that you would get as many definitions.

This study arose out of many unquantified and unwritten 'laws' that the author has encountered over life among different peoples of Kenya.

In Kenya like in all other parts of Africa and the world over, there are all sorts of superstitions. Every part of

life in Africa has some superstitions associated with them. These include such areas as birth, eating, sleeping, marriage, work and death.

Despite the coming of different cultures and religious expressions in Africa, there seems to be very little change as far as superstitions' influence on people's lives is concerned. There are a large number of superstitions, folk beliefs and ancient customs which continue to influence our everyday lives, often without us realizing it.

Many superstitions may sound silly, even stupid to us today, but they continue to influence our behavior.

The paper looks at the different endeavors of trying to explain the meaning of superstitions. First several attempts at defining superstition will be explored.

The second part will then move on to explore some examples of common superstitions, where possible giving some kind of explanation to their use.

The final part will look at the role of superstitions in Kenya. Since most of the examples provided are derived from the Akamba community, care will be taken not to assume that the superstitions are representative of all the communities.

Understanding ‘Superstitions’

Superstitions have probably been present among us since time immemorial. Most of the superstitions origins have been lost within the mists of time, but there are some that you can probably guess the reasons for.

Several definitions have been proposed for the concept of superstition; some of these are positive while others are very negative. As a whole, however, whether positive or negative there seems to be an agreement that superstitions exist.

Positive here is taken to mean, that which looks at superstition as having a legitimate position in the lives of the people. On the other hand, negative

definitions look at superstition as irrational, backward and as having no place in the contemporary world.

Some of the positive definitions include the Thesaurus dictionary which defines superstition as ‘an irrational belief that an object, action, or circumstance not logically related to a course of events influences its outcome.’ From this definition, you can therefore say that superstition is the belief that things not directly related to what you are or what you are doing can influence your outcome.

The Medical dictionary sees superstition as, ‘A belief or practice which lacks adequate basis for proof; an embodiment of fear of the unknown, magic, and ignorance.’

The main area of interest in this definition is the ‘embodiment of the fear of the unknown’. This definition therefore sees superstitions as filling in gaps that otherwise would not be explained.

On the side of the negative ways of looking at superstitions, you have the thought that, superstition is a belief, practice, or rite irrationally maintained by ignorance of the laws of nature or by faith in magic or chance. In other words, this view looks at superstitions as barbaric and uninformed beliefs which are retrogressive to the society. This view goes further to say that superstition is a fearful or abject state of mind resulting from such ignorance or irrationality. Others have gone further to

equate superstitions with Idolatry, black magic or ancestor worship. For them, superstition is unfounded belief.

Superstitions are beliefs that are regardless of facts; and it is assumed rather than defined. It is most likely that superstitions could be fate or has certain relationships to magic because it is unseen and is based upon objects and rituals. These ideas are often found in situations involving high risks, chance, and uncertainty.

The Science Teacher's Book defines superstition as;

... Beliefs in ideas or practices based on the supernatural as opposed to laws of science. People look for answers to their questions, reasons that explain why things happen. Those who understand science, apply known scientific concepts to help explain the natural world. Those who believe in the supernatural use superstitions to explain events.

With this kind of definition, there is a clear indication that both religion and superstitions are contrasted with science. Here those who lean on the former are seen as weaker and not able to handle the harder stuff of life.

A closer look at the etymology of superstition would show that, superstition, is thought to be derived from the Latin words "super" (over, beyond) and "sto, stare" (to stand). Therefore, superstition means one who overly stands, or not being progressive.

This comes from the European context where, while all the "new" religious beliefs were being spread from one big city to the other, all the

people who were in the country didn't receive the word, so they kept doing what they had been doing for a long time. Their beliefs were strange when they moved into the urban. They were "superstitious" because they weren't doing what was new. Eventually the English word "superstition" came to imply a religion-like belief that stands outside the bounds of clerical religion.

The general feeling is that superstition is not used positively but is used as a derogatory description of any behavior or situation as presented to the society.

Most Kenyan communities do not see superstitions negatively but as a vital part of the cultural heritage of the given communities.

Most of the people interviewed expressed displeasure at the diminishing usage of these superstitions. This could be explained by the detachment of the home

Examples of Common Superstitions and Their Possible Explanation

Superstitions are some kind of beliefs in the minds of peoples. These beliefs and practices have no rational substances. When it originated? Nobody knows. It originated at different time and different places. Most of the superstitions are about bad luck and death. But there are some beliefs about good luck. Here are some common Superstitions and their possible

explanation.

Sitting on the pounding pestle one will develop a boil on his 'behind'. A possible explanation for this is that since a pounding pestle produces food it would be disrespectful for a person to sit on it at one point and still use it to produce what will be eaten by the people the next moment.

Don't count people or livestock or they will all die. Counting one's possessions or family was seen as a sign of pride on the owner on one hand. It was seen as if the powers of ownership belonged to the individual and not to God. On the other hand, this was seen as displeasing to the spirits who would greatly see to it that the individual lost those members or livestock.

An itchy right palm means that you will receive money. An itchy left palm means you will have to give money. It must have been either a recent superstition or an imported one from other cultures out of Africa, since money was not used in traditional African society. All the same it seems to have caught up pretty quickly to the point that many people hold to this across the cultures.

Itchy foot means you will have a long distance. This is one of those typical superstitions that are not easy to find an explanation. However, as will be seen later, this seems to be one of those spiritual communications of the spirits to the living as ways of warning on what would come to them.

If an owl sings outside your house it means something bad will happen to you. To counteract this bad omen – throw salt into the fire directly! This cuts across all cultures in most African societies; owls are dreaded and seen as bearers of bad omen. It is not clear why but a number of cases were cited where individuals had misfortunes after an owl screeched in their neighborhood.

If a dog starts howling outside your house, something bad is bound to happen to you. It is not clear why this superstition but it is held religiously in some communities.

If you wear red clothes, you are more likely to be struck by lightning. Since superstitions are usually part of the people's cultural heritage, this could have developed out of people's experiences in the society and maybe a number of people were struck by lightning while wearing red. This can however be challenged, if this was the case, the Maasai community would have been extinct by now since a whole majority of them wear red clothing all the time.

If you trip over a stone, someone is gossiping about you. It is not clear the origin or explanation for this superstition however it is still believed.

Never step over somebody - they won't grow. This may have been seen more as a prohibition deterring a person from doing that which was seen as a bad practice.

You don't say 'goodbye' at night –

Otherwise it is assumed the person you tell goodbye might die! This is a way of wishing that people do not...??

A fish should always be eaten from the head toward the tail. This seemed to be common with members of most of the fishing communities. Could this be a case of subduing the ...?

What you do on 1st January, will be repeated the year through. For example, if you cry, you will cry the whole year. Although in traditional African society January 1st was a day like any other, it seems to have caught up very first and the belief although foreign it is now a common belief.

Don't look at yourself on a mirror at night, you will be ugly. With very limited lighting in most traditional African societies, the belief may have arisen out of the fact that a person's appearance in a dimly lit environment would not be a true reflection of the person.

Don't eat while sleeping or else you will be married by an older person. This was meant to discourage a practice that was abhorred in the society through one of the ways in which it was sure would be stuck to.

Don't cut your nails at night. Since the African world is a spiritual world, it was believed that the spirits or bad people with ill motives would come around and use those to bewitch the individual.

Don't eat with your left hand. Eating was taken as a respectful thing to

do and using one's left hand was a sign of disrespect and being unthankful.

Whistling at night and indoors is bad luck. This was possibly meant to discourage 'chaos' at night. Since sounds were part of communication at night, this was meant to clear way for proper communication and not careless signals.

If you choke on saliva you will eat meat. May be a warning of a great day ahead for the individual from the spirits.

Looking at a grown-up person naked will bring blindness. This was a way of ensuring that respect for the elderly was upheld. Since blindness was seen as a difficult way of life and some kind of bad disability, a threat of blindness kept young people especially on the check.

If you bite your tongue, someone is talking about you. A possible warning to the individual to help and explain life.

Slight movement of the eye on the left or the right side, means that one will see blood or water. These instinctive warnings have been proven to work where joyous news or sad news would follow after the persistent reflective movement of the eye.

To eat in the dark is to eat with the devil. This belief discourages eating in the dark, for obvious reasons. This was to discourage people from eating in unlit places since one could easily swallow together with the food objects that were not fit. On the other hand, eating was a communal thing and meant to be eaten

together in a lit place. This discouraged individuals who were individualistic from advancing their individual ways.

To mend a garment which is on one's body brings poverty: it also suggests preparing one's own shroud, which betokens death.

To sweep at night is to chase away blessings. This belief contains some truth, in that one may sweep up and throw away something of value unwittingly. On the other hand, it was a way of guarding against laziness since sweeping was something taken as part of the woman's job and would be taken seriously.

Walking about with only one shoe on causes one's mother's breast to swell. (I suppose this is simply to discourage the stupidity of going about with only one shoe on.)

If a man sees a swarm of ants on the wall it means that unexpected guests will arrive. This is seen as a possible forewarning of the blessings to be brought by the guests.

He who eats a fowl's legs will become a wanderer. This may have been a warning against eating chicken's feet; a respondent said that this could have been for hygienic reasons. Knowing how the traditional chicken would go to all sorts of places looking for food, this sounds reasonable.

At this point I also have to add that, generally, the line between superstitions and taboo is very thin in the understanding of most people.

However, a closer look clearly shows a significant difference. While taboos could be described as the forbidden, unmentionable, unthinkable, banned, prohibited, proscribed, outlawed, and inviolable acts in the society, superstitions, as indicated earlier, are seen as the notions or beliefs which you can almost say that are 'unreasonable' that people have held for a long time.

The Role of Superstitions

Superstitions are part of every cultural heritage, and Africa is no exception. They are found all over the world. They esteemed as part of a cultural heritage. These are the values of the people's heritage that have been passed on from generation to generation, to help in preserving the cultures of the people and maintaining a particular worldview.

Superstitions have their roots in the long forgotten ways of honoring nature and spirits. This in turn stems from the people's religious and spiritual heritage. Superstitions are the way people get communication from nature and spiritual world beyond the physical world in which they live.

Superstitions help a community to explain their universe. These small beliefs that surround the people's life served a major role of not only connecting with their environment but also knowing how to explain it to their descendants.

What is widely accepted is that

superstitions, rituals and omens were all humanity's early attempt to explain Nature and have some control over his destiny. Yet even on taking a look at superstitious behavior logically, many still exist and many highly intelligent people will find themselves instinctively performing a superstitious ritual, even if just the slightest one.

Humanity as a whole will always seek to understand its surroundings and will interpret life by that understanding. Superstition happens to be one of those ways in which this interpretation is done.

Superstitions help preserve the values of the society. Some of the virtues of in most of the communities that would be upheld would include; honesty, chastity, hard work, intelligence, respect, and the like. By some of these beliefs at the back of the individual's mind ensured that they kept to the right social track.

Superstitions are also held as a way of keeping off those practices and acts that were regarded as vices in the society. An individual was repeatedly reminded of the dangers of being involved in behavior that would be seen as unbecoming in the society. Superstitions instilled fears on the individuals and meant that they were more careful before engaging in such practices.

Superstitions as indicated above, not only help to preserve the value of the society, but were ways in which

individuals maintained their identity. Coupled with such other things as totemism, the individual's sense of belonging was upheld by the knowledge of the different superstitions.

Superstitions are also seen as a means through which individuals display respect for their ancestors and for their elders. Superstitions on one hand and to some extent taboos, link individuals to their ancestors and living relatives. Sharing the same beliefs allows people to identify with their clans and/or ethnic groups (Lambek, 1992). By not observing ancestral beliefs, or by observing them only selectively, individuals bring dishonor to their ancestors and can find themselves socially alienated from their community. It is possible to draw inference regarding the social relationships that a person values most highly through superstitious observance. By passing down lineage and societal norms to their children in the form of taboos, elders use their authority to naturalize the existing order (Brown, 1999).

Superstitions are often adhered to out of fear. People believe that violating their superstitions invites misfortune in the form of illness, crop failure, or even death. Most of the respondents gave examples where after ignoring the warning signs though superstitions acts, they ended up with misfortunes including failing in their missions, and even getting misfortunes in their

missions.

The fear sometimes leads one to be over conscious when undertaking some of the activities which may actually lead to the danger that was forewarned actually happening. An act which would be normal for others who may not hold the same superstition may be taken too cautiously by someone else who holds a certain superstition to the point that that person may actually befall a misfortune on the way.

This fear extends to remind individuals that the world does not just run mechanically but there are spiritual powers that are involved in its running and sustenance.

Conclusion

People still tend to believe in common superstitions despite all the technological and scientific advances in today's world. Performing little rituals or honoring good or bad luck omens can give people a sense of control in their lives. In Africa, superstitions have grown amidst all the modern-day activities surrounding us. By the look of things, it seems as if people will not be departing from some of these trivial rules of life in Africa.

Although the terminology and definitions used are derogatory in a way, superstition could be said to be the belief on the values of a people's heritage without using any proof to ascertain them. These continue to influence the lives of people across the

divide and many people's lives would not be what they are if it were not the beliefs of the superstitions.

Many challenges lie on the way in the area of belief of superstitions. The first is the migration into new lands where some of the superstitions are different or even contradictory to individual's own. Within the movements and cultural adjustments, there is also the question of being detached from the individual's original context where the natural features of nature are different those within which the individual is accustomed to, therefore losing the superstitious impressions.

The third challenge lies in the new scientific discoveries which bring new knowledge to the people about some of the mystic features of the superstitions. More and more educated heads of persons are less likely to believe in taboos and superstition. Hence they are more likely to ignore them and hence less likely to be constrained by superstitions in their daily lives. This in turn would mean that they may not pass on these to their descendants.

Since the joy of superstition is when they are held 'by faith' as the truth and not questioned, the challenge then is how to maintain the superstitions at the same time as encourage progress in the society.[]

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