

## Superstitious Beliefs among African Americans

**Martin O. Edu, PhD, EdD.**

Professor

Department of Mass Communication

Grambling State University

P. O. Box 4292, Grambling, LA 71245

United States of America

### Abstract

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*This study investigated superstitious beliefs among African Americans and the role of the beliefs in their adult lives. This is a qualitative study in which the data were generated through depth interviews conducted on 20 African American adults from different background, and ranging in age from 18 to 80.*

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### Introduction

Superstition has been around for a long time, yet it is described, defined, and understood differently by different people, some of whom take it more seriously than others. Superstitions have been challenged and denigrated by both scholars and religious thinkers, yet they are still around, actively practiced and growing everywhere there are humans. In the United States, there may be as many superstitious beliefs as the pockets of racially and culturally diverse groups of people. It is not confined to one racial or cultural group. For example, President Ronald Reagan freely admitted to his superstitious beliefs but he did it in a manner that allays concern, according to reports (Seaman, 1988). His wife, First Lady Nancy Reagan's reliance on a San Francisco astrologer to determine the timing of her husband's every public move, was not a secret. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of superstitious beliefs in the daily lives of African Americans.

As a racial and cultural group, African Americans are not an exception. Like every other racial group, they hold assumed truths or beliefs, which are of ultimate or long-term importance or value to them, because the beliefs help to form their world view, which in turn, provides them a pattern of thought or a way to view the things and/or events around them. As such, the African American experience and world view are different from any other racial groups in this country. World view, according to Dodd (1995), is not only a belief system about the nature of the universe, but it is a "fundamental set of core assumptions explaining cultural forces such as good and evil, luck, fate, spirits, and one's place in the universe" (p. 106).

Growing up, Jennifer Valentine remembers her father placing money above the front door of every home in which they lived. She said her father encouraged her to do the same, because it brought good luck. The father said the practice came from his grandmother, who also called the small bag of coins placed above the front door "black eyed peas." She believed that it represents good fortune and financial well-being (Valentine, 2014). She further suggests that "supernatural and magical ritual have been a part of the African Diaspora for centuries and many African-rooted traditions and religions carried over into the United States during American slavery" (p. 2).

The author's interest in this study was motivated by years of classroom experiences with college students, the majority of whom were African Americans. For example, one rainy day, an international student came to class with a folded wet umbrella. Before he sat down, he opened it in order for some of the rain water to drain off by the end of the session. As soon as he opened the umbrella, all the African American students spontaneously reacted aloud asking him to close it. All of the international students were surprised by the unexpected reaction, and asked why? The African Americans explained that opening an umbrella indoors was a sign of bad luck.

When the international students heard the explanation, they thought it was a joke but the African American students were not joking. The situation triggered a discussion of superstitious beliefs among the students, which revealed that though every student in the class was familiar with superstitious beliefs, not all of them took them seriously. Some said they regarded the beliefs as ancient practices, which have lost their relevance in this technology-driven age. As the discussion progressed, many more examples of the popular superstitious beliefs were mentioned. From that day, the author began recording some of the beliefs identified by the students in the discussions. Ultimately, he was motivated to explore the topic further.

Hermoso (2014), suggests that a number of superstitious beliefs still exist in various parts of the world. They include “avoiding crossing paths with a black cat, walking under ladders, breaking mirrors, stepping on cracks on the streets, and spilling salt to avoid misfortune and bad luck. Add to these others practiced in Black Africa, where each country can boast of many, including the most notorious known as witchcraft (Igwe, 2014, Oct. 27). Perhaps the most popular today in the Western Hemisphere is the Halloween, which is “regarded as one of the world’s oldest holidays...” (Hermoso, 2014).

Below is a list of the 25 most popular superstitions around the world, which serves as proof that superstitions are not limited to a particular region of the world or cultural group. You may be surprised to find some of them among those listed on page 10 that are popular among African Americans.

1. “Itchy palms” refer to someone who is greedy or has insatiable desire for money.
2. “Four-leaf clover” is regarded as a sign of good luck.
3. “God bless you” is regarded as a gesture of politeness, after some sneezes.
4. “Breaking a mirror” is an indication of seven years of bad luck.
5. “Knock on wood” refers to the idea of acknowledging your good fortunes.
6. “Lucky rabbit’s foot” is regarded as a magnet of fortune for the token wearer.
7. “New broom, new house, bad luck.” Many superstitions are associated with brooms but one is that you cannot sweep dirt out of a new house with a new broom unless you sweep something in first.
8. “Opening an umbrella indoors,” is asking for bad luck to “rain” on you.
9. “When you wish upon a star” means it good luck to make a wish on the first star you see.
10. “Unlucky number 13,” means the number 13 is associated with bad luck.
11. “Photographic soul cage” An enemy who has a photograph of you has power over you.
12. “Fingers crossed for good luck,” a gesture commonly used for good luck.
13. “Soul capturing mirrors,” looking into a mirror steals the soul.
14. “Jinxed birds” means death is on the horizon if wryneck twists its head toward you.
15. “Counting crows” means the number of crows can predict your fortune.
16. “Unlucky smoking triad” means bad luck to light three cigarettes with one match.
17. “Black cats, bad luck” means bad luck if a black cat crosses your path.
18. “Old, new, borrowed, blue” is a belief associated with the number of bridal gifts.
19. “Bird poop equals riches” means count a bird poop on you as good luck.
20. “Ringing of the bells” asks for prayers from the departed souls to drive away evil spirits.
21. “Curse of the Opal stone” means you’re out of luck if the opal is your favorite stone.
22. “Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>” is believed to be cursed
23. “Good luck horse shoe” brings good luck and keeps nightmares away.
24. “Groaning cheese for a newborn” is celebrated to bless the newborn with a long and prosperous life.
25. “Cannibalistic gum chewing in Turkey.” Chewing gum at night in Turkey is believed to rot dead flesh.

(Source: [http:// list25.com/25-strangest-superstitions-ever/2/](http://list25.com/25-strangest-superstitions-ever/2/))

It is important to pause and explore the definition of superstition. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (1982), cited in *Wikipedia* (2009) suggests that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., superstition was understood as meaning an unreasonable or excessive belief in the fear of magic. To European medieval scholars, any beliefs that were either in opposition to or fell outside of Christianity were considered superstitious (Jolly, Rauvere, & Peters, 2001; Tuscan, 1996). The belief of European scholars seems to create the erroneous impression that superstitious beliefs are held or taken seriously only by non-Christians, but Hermoso (2014) points out that Christians also hold the beliefs. He further states, for example, that in recent years, a group known as the Prayer Warriors of the Holy Souls, sponsored by the Catholic Church in 68 countries, “has been actively promoting the proper observance of Halloween.”

Kruk (2001) claims that a growing number of people in industrialized countries (Christians and non-Christians) resort to superstitions, which he describes as “an ignorant and irrational belief in supernatural agency, omens, divination, sorcery, etc.; a deep-rooted but unfounded general belief; a rite or practice proceeding from superstitious belief or fear” (p. 1). If superstition is an ignorant and irrational belief, it is worth noting that Pope Gregory III established November 1 as All Saints Day and October 31 as All Hallow’s Eve in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Liturgically, the Catholic Church has celebrated November 1 as the Vigil of All Saints, and until 1970, as a day of fasting (Hermoso, 2014).

*Webster’s ninth new collegiate dictionary*, (1991) describes superstition as (1 a) “a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, the fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation, (b) an irrational abject attitude of mind toward the supernatural, nature, or God... and (2) a notion maintained despite evidence to the contrary” (p. 1105). For the purpose of this study, superstition is defined as a belief or a practice that does not have any scientific basis or support but is actively recognized and upheld at different levels by different people in different areas of the world. No matter how irrational it may seem, there are those who take their meaning literally and others who don’t.

The dictionary definitions lend themselves to several questions and arguments. For example, Is superstition exclusively tied to magic, or it is practiced by only people who do not go to church, as the Oxford Dictionary seems to suggest? Is the practice really motivated by ignorance, and if so, is it practiced by the ignorant? By the way, who are the people described ignorant when some of the practices are promoted by the Roman Church? These questions are addressed later in the article.

There is no living human who does not have some form of fear of the unknown or trust in chance. Though it is not branded as superstition, the practice of investing in the stock market for the future is an activity motivated by the fear of the unknown, as no one knows the future with all certainty. Employees and numerous investors, trusted in the chance of accumulating their retirement wealth when they invested in the stocks of Enron company. They took a chance that failed to materialize when the company went belly up. The panic, anger, and anguish that followed exemplified the very fear of the unknown that motivated the investment, in the first place.

This goes to show that it is the fear of the unknown that, in some situations, creates an irrational and abject attitude toward the supernatural, nature, or God, known as superstition. It can be argued that the American Dream is a form of superstitious belief. Though the dream is practically unattainable for most people, yet they hold on to it, motivated by the trust in or hope for the chance of being successful in the future, despite the obvious odds in most cases. To trust that an event would occur in the future is to take a chance, which can be described as a superstitious belief. As humans, we take all kinds of chances in life such as playing the lottery or participating in a church or charity raffle, and we use different terminologies to describe them, yet it seems obvious that every such chance taken is motivated by superstition.

Most people, irrespective of the part of the world they live, whether civilized or uncivilized, take the chance to try different things in life either to improve their well being or to protect themselves from the unknown. Their actions are in no way tied to magic or the fear of it. Scholars have challenged these practices by clinging to the lack of scientific evidence but they forget that there are many valid occurrences in this world that cannot be explained scientifically. Some superstitions may be dismissed as baseless or ignorant but believers will be quick to argue that all such beliefs are necessarily baseless. That some of the beliefs and practices have continued to exist in every society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, leads to the assumption that there may not only be some truth to them, but the truths derived from the beliefs may also still be relevant to people’s lives.

Travis (2009) suggests that some superstitions tend to be used for jokes but some affect lives so deeply that they influence the choices that people make in life. Some of the superstitions that people tend to hold on to have roots in their oral tradition and history. Because superstition is viewed differently, the term is sometimes used by the educated to refer irrational folk beliefs. This has led to the use of such pejorative terms as the “old wives tales,” to refer to it (Wikipedia, 2009).

Every cultural group has its set of beliefs and practices that are preserved and passed on from one generation to the next. The beliefs and practices enable the culture to interpret their realities. They also represent a perceptual window through which people see themselves and others. The extent of seriousness attached to the beliefs and practices varies from culture to culture.

Arguments have been advanced to suggest that such beliefs are taken more seriously by the less educated and traditional groups than the educated and more economically privileged groups. If this were true, the affluent and the well-educated in developed countries would not engage as they do in psychic readings, which like superstition, have no scientific basis. Also, the church and its followers will abstain from any such activity.

### **Method**

The data for this study came primarily from one-on-one personal interviews with African Americans of all walks of life and religious orientations. They included college professors, secretaries, housewives, college students, retirees, Christians and atheists. The preference for the in-depth face-to-face interview approach was that it created an environment of trust and eye contact, which helped to make the respondent comfortable (Zhou & Sloan, 2011). The approach also provided a potential for a high response rate. Marshall and Rossman (1989) note that it is much more like conversations than formal and structured interviews, allowing the researcher to explore a topic in a way that uncovers the participant's meaning perspective. Reinard (2007) suggests that the depth interview approach also allows the interviewer to obtain detailed information that reveals the reasons behind what is being said. He added that such interviews do not guide respondents to any particular type of response. The conversational nature of the interviews was friendly and the participants answered questions in a relaxed manner, which was further reinforced by the use of open-ended questions that allowed them to provide a wide range of perspectives.

While there were clear advantages to the use of face-to-face interview approach, the researcher was cognizant of the disadvantages, which include cost, time, and the effect of the interviewer on how the questions are answered. To avoid these disadvantages, the researcher scheduled interviews in advance and provided the participants with information regarding the purpose of the study and why their participation was important. At the start of each interview, the researcher opened with a friendly non-threatening conversation to help relax the participant. In some cases, participants could not tell when the real interview began, which contributed to the success of the exercise.

The participants were all African Americans. They ranged in age from 18 to 80. They were carefully selected to include those who had college education and those who did not, Christians and non-Christians, young and old to ensure a representative sample. The purpose was to generate data that would allow for a comparison of the responses from across the groups in an effort to determine whether superstitious beliefs were more confined to the less educated. A peripheral purpose was to determine the extent to which participants who described themselves as Christians held on to superstitious beliefs.

A total of 20 participants consisting of five college students, four college professors, three secretaries, five housewives, and three retired men were interviewed. Of that number, 10 had college education, six had some college, two completed high school, and the remaining two did not complete high school. Participants were asked the same set of questions, and the interviews were conducted at the same time of the day (in the morning) to ensure a similar frame of mind among them. All the participants were asked the same follow-up questions. About an equal amount of time was spent conducting each interview. By the time the 20<sup>th</sup> participant was interviewed, the responses began to be repetitions of the earlier answers. A decision was made at that point to discontinue the interviews and use the data gathered.

### **Analysis**

A total of 10 questions were asked with follow-up questions based on the responses. All of the responses were read three times to identify some areas of agreement among the respondents. They were then grouped into categories based on their convergence or divergence. Subcategories were created and grouped according to agreement. The categories and subcategories were used as a basis for comparison in terms of the respondents' education, age, occupation, religious leaning, and residential location.

About 90 percent of the interviewees acknowledge the existence of superstitious beliefs among African Americans. Most of them said that the beliefs were passed down from generations of grandparents. Some thought that the beliefs originated from Africa and probably stayed latent until the slaves could speak English. An 80 year-old interviewee said that she found out that some of the beliefs held by African Americans were also common in Black African countries, especially the countries which were involved in slave trade. She added that some of the common superstitions were developed from the sad experiences of the Black race in America.

Education played a role in the extent to which superstitious beliefs were either taken seriously or not. One college professor expressed the view that no matter how well educated a person may be, if that person spent all his or her life in the rural areas and lived among childhood friends, there was a high probability that that individual would take the beliefs more seriously than those who eventually moved from the rural to metropolitan areas or those who grew up in big cities. He added that though such individuals may not demonstrate their beliefs overtly, the beliefs were deeply embedded in them and become more visible in their actions than in their words. He said that one of his well educated friends would tell him in secret that he held strongly to some of the beliefs but would not venture to make it public, because his colleagues who did not share similar beliefs would consider him backward and uncivilized.

The majority of participants (13), four of the five college students, four of the six housewives, the two participants who did not complete high school, one who completed high school and one secretary (65 percent) said that they believed some superstitions, not all. Asked why they believed, most of them said that their parents held strongly to the beliefs based on incidents that occurred in their lives. Because they witnessed the incidents while they lived with their parents, they also believed. One student described a recurring ritual in her home. She said that whenever a member of the family had a headache, their mom would draw the sign of the cross on different parts of the sick member's body. She would then crack an egg into a glass of water. If the egg produced strings, it was a bad omen suggesting that something evil was about to happen. Either the sickness would get worse and possibly lead to death or it would be very severe and protracted before the individual recovered. If the cracked egg failed to produce strings, it was an indication that nothing serious would happen. She said that in many instances, the beliefs had come true, as a result of which most members of her family to believe in the superstition.

This same student said that it was also believed that if a father was a pall bearer of his father's coffin, that young father would lose one of his sons within one year from the date of the death. She said all of her family members had seen it come to pass so many times in other families that they believe it to be true. As a result, no married male member of her family, especially those that have children, would agree to serve as pall bearers.

The secretaries and college professors (five of eight or 62.5%), who described themselves as Christians, dismissed the beliefs as old wise tales handed down by ancestors. They were primarily influenced by their religious upbringing, which condemned superstition as the handwork of the devil. The remaining three said they believed some based on experience, adding that they did not take superstitions seriously except for those that they believed to be true. They expressed the view that such beliefs did not have much room among well educated people, though it was hard to deny their existence among family members.

The following are some of the most commonly named superstitions by respondents as widely held by African Americans. Most of them are also found among the 25 listed on pages four and five as the most popular in the world. The persistence of superstition makes it into a phenomenon whose widespread practice is unlikely to be diminished by education, technological advancement, Christianity, or atheism.

1. It is bad luck to walk under a ladder.
2. It is bad luck to open an umbrella inside the house, especially if you put it over your head.
3. An itchy hand means that money is coming.
4. Step on a crack, break your mother's back.
5. If you blow out all the candles on your birthday cake with your first puff, you will get your wish.
6. If you bite your tongue while eating, it is because you have recently told a lie.
7. Knock three times on wood after mentioning good fortune so evil spirits won't ruin it.
8. Several beliefs about black cats were found. First, the color black is said to be the color of witchcraft. Beal (2010) suggests that for centuries, cats were associated with the dark side of magic and possessed nine lives. (a) Having one cross your path is a sign of evil spirits. (b) It is a good sign for a black cat in front of you runs to your right and bad luck if it runs to the left. (c) If a black cat walks toward you, it brings good fortune, but if it walks away, it takes the good luck with it.
9. Another superstition that seems to be popular is the fear of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. It is said that more than 80 percent of high rise buildings do not have a 13<sup>th</sup> floor. Also, many airports skip the 13<sup>th</sup> gate, and airplanes do not have a 13<sup>th</sup> aisle. Similarly, hospitals and hotels regularly have no room number 13.
10. Break a mirror means seven years of bad luck.

## Conclusion

Their origins of superstition are sketchy but the practices are believed to have ancient roots. That they still persist in the face of the most amazing discoveries, inventions of modern science, and technology suggest that ignorance and fear are believed to play a significant role in propagating superstitions, proponents will point that not all superstition are baseless. That's probably the reason that there is no culture in the world that is totally free from superstitious beliefs. Kruk (2001) suggests that in this day of widespread enlightenment and education, it would not be necessary to debunk beliefs based on magic and superstition, because the acceptance of astrology pervades modern society. Though opinions about superstitions vary, a common characteristic is that the beliefs are widespread, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to label those that take the beliefs seriously as ignorant, considering that some of the best educated in in the church and society practice it in one form or another.

Most of the participants agreed that superstitious beliefs were taken more seriously by the older people in their communities, who tended to be more conservative than the younger and more educated people. The older folks tend to also strongly hold to their traditional beliefs on various issues. The younger generations seems more accepting of new ideas, probably because of their exposure to the world through travel, technology, and education. As such, they do not hold strongly to the beliefs as did their parents and grandparents.

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