

A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Superstitions and Other Powerful Institutions in Iraqi Arabic

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The notion of superstitions, myths and other supernatural powers has been extensively viewed and interpreted in terms of cognitive and socio-cultural deficits. This study is about illusions and beliefs as a socio-cultural phenomenon. It attempts to find out the relationship between superstitions and the surrounding environment. A questionnaire was used to describe the participants' personal background and superstitious beliefs. Data are collected from thirty undergraduate students of Al- Maarif University College, Iraq, (15 males and 15 females) and thirty Academics (15 males and 15 females). The conclusion reveals that the use of superstitions is used by people regardless of their educational, social or religious backgrounds.

Key words: *Superstitions, myths, illusions, socio-cultural factors, psychology, education.*

Introduction

Regardless of the great development in the fields of science and technology, there is still evidence that there are people worldwide who believe that 'knocking on wood' will protect them from bad luck. Superstitions and other magical beliefs are still believed to possess favourable or detrimental consequences on the global norms. One of the goals of this study is to find out why highly educated people, such as academics and students at university levels believe that superstitions and other magical powers have an impact on human lives. Superstitious beliefs entail "beliefs that run counter to rational thought or are inconsistent with known laws of nature", and are the "subset of paranormal beliefs that are pragmatic;

used to bring about good luck or avoid bad luck". They are classified as certain forms of irrational behaviour; its cultural and historical prejudice can be understood by placing

superstitious behaviour in its social context. Certain scholars have investigated some of the factors to avoid any inferred motivation, such as fear, in order to know the inner structure of superstitions. They are viewed as "a set of beliefs or practices as endorsed by their community" and "those topics on which scientists and the general public agree" to distinguish them from the uncertain ones (Vyse, 2014: 23-4). Superstitions are collective specific societal beliefs which are in contradiction and deviant from the factual reality (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; George & Sreedhar, 2006:242).

Superstitions are sets of beliefs that can exist in every society. These kinds of beliefs may be present in societies stretching from the ancient Grecians right up to the Romans, ranging from the various religious believers of Buddhism right up to Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other religions. Furthermore, superstitious beliefs provide a "supporting power for the individual", in addition to assisting people in addressing the challenges in their lives, forming compositions of their normative everyday routine. As a start, they assist in counterbalancing the conflicts and anxieties; however, conversely they act as pacifiers to the psychological conditions of human beings. Hence on these grounds, superstitions are deemed and recognised as ritualistic acts which serve a social meaningful and important part of the norms, and as most likely equally important as in other different societies. The discussions should not be considered as debasing to state that the respective ritualistic acts are likewise things that are accepted and consumed. (Akova, 2011:1).

Superstitions are classified into three main types: religious, cultural, and social. Modern ideology shows that there is an inherent contradiction between religious and traditional concepts in terms of the treatment in traditional medicines and the highly developed and superstitious techniques of using modern medicines. (Dissa et. al: 2017, 72-3). Reliance on superstitions is made for the purpose of obtaining favourable fortune or to repel ill fortune.

Additionally, the degree of reliance on superstitions and being convinced of them is dependent upon the related degree of tension, hazard or vagueness. Dwellers in regions that are susceptible to exposure of a missile assault during the Gulf War were of a majority who held superstitious beliefs, and had a higher inclination to be involved in "thought processes related to magic" as compared to those dwelling in more secure areas (Block & Kramer 2009:162).

A conviction related to religion and the supernatural beliefs possesses significant characteristics, and was normally associated in a positive manner. Extremely devout people, on the other hand, reject supernatural convictions. Devout people who believe in the supernatural are different from the sceptics. The religious people and paranormal believers both are perceptive and highly instinctive, have undergone occult incidents, and possess friends and parents who are more optimistic in outlook pertaining to the paranormal.

However, the devout people possess more extensive conservative and charitable attributes in comparison to supernatural believers (Aarnio, 2007:9).

While Beck and Miller (2001) have realised that there exists a relationship between people who are highly religious and those who believe in magical powers and supernatural phenomena. They have found out that there is a strong relationship between people with a high degree of religious belief, and those with superstitious beliefs in comparison to everyday life experience. (Ibid 73). According to Wang and Yung (2005), the Chinese believe that their children would bring good fate if they are born in the year of the dragon. Accordingly, they mark the very time of birth carefully for their new born babies. Hughes and French (2002) state that certain occurrences like breaking the mirror may cause some health problems, stress or a reduction in performance (Ibid).

According to the Arab culture, newly born children are named after some bad occasions, disasters and famine, as they believe that people will live longer than those who are given beautiful names. Al-Dilaimy and Thabit (2016:376) state that giving a person a name of a particular linguistic action is related closely to social norms, customs, aspirations, apprehensions and important circumstances in the lives of people. They reveal the preference of their givers in terms of their features and beliefs .

Traditionally, superstitions have been conducted on people who have some cognitive disorders or suffer from psychological problems; they do not socially view things correctly and from this perspective, magical thinking and superstitions are limited to individuals who suffer from mental and psychological problems (Plaget, 1929; Lery-Bruhl, 1926; Eckblad & Chapman, 1983 as cited in Risen: 2016,182) .

However, it has been observed that superstitious individuals are not only limited to those who have some mental and psychological problems. There is evidence about people who have remained superstitious throughout their lifetime, despite the fact that they are intelligent and are mentally and emotionally stable adults (ibid, 183).

Review of Literature

Lange and Schippers (2006) address the advantages of superstitious rites in relation to the psychological impact within the sports domain. They examine the conditions that may affect the top sports echelon sports people to embark in certain rites before a game. Coherent with the hypotheses, the outcomes disclosed that the acts of enacting the rites will increase in instances of (a) heightened indefiniteness; and (b) degree of the game significance. Additional analyses disclose that there exist psychological conflicts that carry the impact and significance and the ambiguity towards the adoption of the ritualistic acts. Furthermore,

sports people that are affected by external factors have a greater inclination to enact the ritualistic acts in comparison with sports people who are affected by intrinsic factors. A discussion on the outcomes is carried out in relation with the conflicts that regulate and impact on the practice of ritualistic and superstitious acts by sports people.

Lindeman and Aarnio (2007) argue that the dearth in the clearness of notions has formed a hindrance to the creation of theory and studies on superstitions, things related to magic, and convictions with regard to the supernatural. Their research provides a conceptual framework, and it will distinguish the differences of these concepts in terms of unsubstantiated convictions, and specified as muddled basic knowledge pertaining to happenings and incidents physically, psychologically and biologically. During the assessment of this definition by using the questionnaire items ($N = 239$), the outcomes illustrate that people who harbour superstitions are receptive towards greater transgressions of fundamental metaphysical differentiation, in comparison to the unbelievers. Moreover, the ontological disorientation differentiates the believers from the unbelievers much more than through thinking intuitively, thinking analytically, or through the state of being unstable emotionally. The outcomes substantiate the current thinking on superstitions, convictions related to magic and paranormal convictions, in addition to providing theories on the accustomed daily convictions which are not comprehended in scientific terms and inadequately comprehended.

Akova (2011) assesses the superstitious beliefs and convictions which have retained the contemporary significance and have a place in the lives of people as seen through the perceptions of the believers and non-believers, examining the causes of maintaining their contemporariness, in addition to the domains under observation. The notions on superstitious beliefs, convictions and attitudes, and the parameters that have been addressed in relation to the present relationship between superstitious beliefs and acts, marketing and advertisement initiatives, are to close the loophole in the present discussion. The research does not look at the norms and values of superstitions; however, it focuses on superstitions that are required, and the ways they are assimilated, in addition to their use. The aim is to investigate the perpetuity of superstitions and significance that last throughout the ages. Al-Zubaidi and Al-Rawe (2018: 66-9) have referred to the effect of colour and textual elements in advertisements and their effects on the buyers.

Svedholm and Lindeman (2012) attempt to make inquiries pertaining to what entails the supernatural and superstitious matters related to magic, and supernatural (PSMS) convictions, and the probability of matters that distinguish them from each other. The authors conclude that the notions on the paranormal, superstitions, matters related to magic, and the paranormal signify similar matters; in addition, general specifications related to the areas concerned are not sufficiently correct. Specifying PSMS beliefs can result in erroneous classification as there might arise a confusion in attributes that set them apart in terms of

characteristics with regards to psychological events, physical items, things and beings that are alive; in addition to this the processes aforementioned matters are involved in making a distinction between the PSMS beliefs from alternative conviction and encompassing pertinent convictions.

Khaleeva (2013) argues in her article the kineme SPITTING to discuss the English superstitious discussions. The researcher endeavored to track the particular feature of nonverbal communicative elements, which are related to it via the linguistic cultural abnormalities of English superstitions. Due to this objective, the analysis of the semiotic condition of the English nonverbal sign of the act of 'SPITTING' was carried out via the paradoxical "pragmatic signification versus the symbolic signification". The chosen lexical items offer a chance to ascertain the core meanings, connoted through the *kineme SPITTING* entrenched in the English conversational practices via the cohort "spitting to avert evil" and "spitting for luck", that is taken into consideration in the article.

Factors affecting superstitious beliefs

Gender

The superstitious patterns are taken into consideration to feature independently, however, the interplay between the male or female and in the choices they can make, have been considered. The questions on magic involve intuitive questions which are related to, and are dependent upon personalised proof. They mostly involve interesting emotional connections and intuitiveness which result in paranormal convictions to be deemed as feasible. Superstitious convictions and intuitions are proven as obviously related to the previous researches. It is hypothesised that paranormal ideas and supernatural ideas are linked to intuition and not linked with an analytical frame of mind.

It has been observed that the females usually possess greater supernatural convictions when compared to males. In addition, the initial proof suggests that ladies make a greater selection on instinctive questioning involving intuition and utilise less analytical wondering when compared to men. It is anticipated that there will be gender-based variations in the questioning patterns and impacts on the gender-based distinction in superstitious convictions (Aarnio, 2007:19-20).

Age

It is assumed that the elder generation have higher superstitious beliefs when compared to the younger generation because of the time span they have dealt with during their life-time. The current study has dealt with different generations. The terminology of 'old wives' tales'



alludes to intuitions and the rampantly spread suppositions that the elders have a greater deal of superstitious convictions in comparison to younger people. Certainly, a majority of the cohort respondents involved in a qualitative study “agreed that superstitious beliefs were taken more seriously by the older people in their communities” (Brashier & Multhaup, 2017: ¶ 1).

Education

It is not clear whether superstitious convictions can be reduced by education. The field of education has additionally been identified with superstitious convictions: students of science were frequently discovered to possess less superstitious convictions when compared to students of Arts and the Humanities. The present investigation managed to ascertain how college students and professors vary in their superstitious convictions regardless of whether there are disciplinary contrasts in superstitious convictions, and how long the present training is identified with superstitious convictions (Aarnio, 2007:24-8).

Culture

Countryside dwellers are more superstitious in nature than people in cities and towns. The cultural factor depends on the urban and rural area distinctions. Participants with rural backgrounds have shown greater tendency to use and believe in superstitious sayings and magical thinking. Whereas, those of urban background have shown less tendency to believe in magic and supernatural powers.

Religion

Religion is an uncommon type of the world's mindfulness, brought about by the confidence in the otherworldly powers, which incorporate a lot of good standards and practices, customs, and faction activities, and join individuals in an association (for instance, a congregation or a religious network). Likewise, religion is a man's/woman's perspective (or a specific gathering of people), which depends on the faith in something powerful and unexplainable.

In each religion, there are some principles of practices to be adhered to the disciplines, just as the reason for which people pursue the fundamentals of that religion. Whereas, superstition is a concept that can have an impact on the future and effect it using any otherworldly powers. It contains a supposition, frequently oblivious with the assistance of these powers, and it is conceivable to accomplish a tradeoff, which is satisfactory for mankind. Superstitions more often show themselves in decreased types of a custom at societal stage: associated with utilisation of lucky charms, tattoos, mysterious motions, and so forth. An exceptional spot

possesses various signals and superstitious convictions: certain occasions and models that are credited to prognostic hugeness.

Methods of Analysis

Superstition is used as an analytical point of entrance. The study aims at producing a new insight into how a socio-cultural order and organised differences with reference to socio-cultural criteria, and how these criteria have shaped the very structure of the Iraqi society. The point of departure for the project is in the investigation of the fact that educated and cultivated people still believe in superstitions, and they represent an example of how socio-cultural superstitions are interpreted and dealt with depending on a cultural ideology. The concept of superstitions and other supernatural powers will be mainly studied within the framework of Block and Kramer (2009) where superstitions and associations are mainly based on lucky colours and numbers in making decisions for purchasing goods and performing expectations. Making judgments based on superstitious beliefs affects in one way or another the right decisions to run the economic rationality.

The study has been conducted in an educational institution, namely, Al-Maarif University College, Iraq. The research aims at testing the contrast between academics on one hand, and the undergraduate students on the other; specifically, to assess the effect of superstitious beliefs and their linguistic functions, and to offer proof on the hopes affected by superstitious beliefs and acts, and in enacting the acts that will culminate in the realisation of their aspirations. Thus, 60 superstitious items were chosen, to be the populations for those who use these items regularly.

Participants

This study involves a mixed type of research. A self-administrated questionnaire is used as the instrument to describe the participants' personal background and superstitious beliefs.

The data have been collected from preference of undergraduate students and academics (males and females of Al-Maarif University College, Anbar-Iraq) who come from different social and educational backgrounds from rural and urban areas. Respondents have completed a questionnaire by making one choice of five choices. The time allocated for the questionnaire is unlimited.

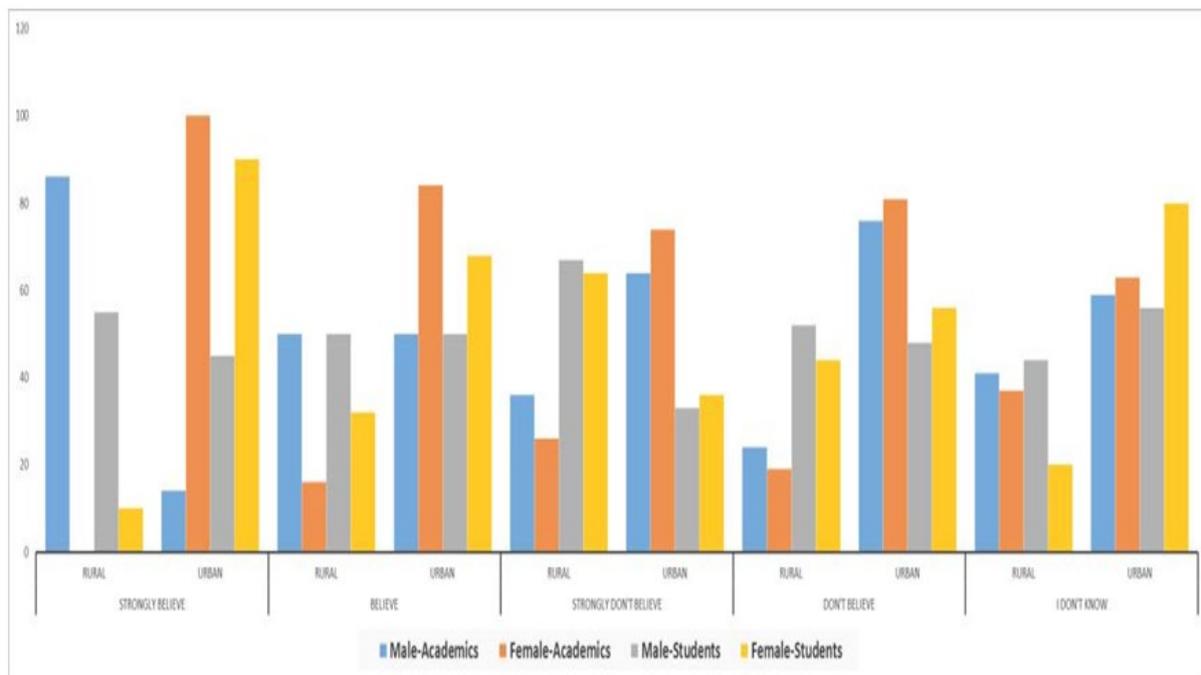
The study explores the reliance on superstitious acts and thinking due to their superstitious beliefs by people and their linguistic implications and uses, that in carrying out these conducts will result in good fate and fortune, or at the minimal prevent ominous occurrence (Block & Kramer, 2009:162).

Discussion

Participants are asked to fill a questionnaire containing 60 items of the most common used superstitious sayings in the Iraqi Culture. The variables range from strongly believe, believe, strongly don't believe, don't believe, I don't know. The participants have shown certain differences, especially in relations to their gender, educational and cultural backgrounds. A number of male academics and students have revealed a less likely tendency to believe in some of the items chosen for the study as some of them are mostly related to the items of feminine issues, unlike the majority of the female academics and students who have revealed a greater tendency to relate some of the items chosen to some religious and scientific backgrounds. The selected educational factor has an 80% influence on the process of believing in superstitious thinking.

The sample of 60 people used in this study shows that gender distinguishes superstitious beliefs, with the majority being dominantly females; this factor of gender differentiation gives an indication that males are less superstitious than females among the educated category of Iraqi society as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The percentages of academic-students, male-female, and urban-rural distinctions, for the sample participants



There is another variable showing that old people are more superstitious than younger ones. Among the sample of the study, it has been noticed that young people are found to have the least belief in superstitions and other superstitious power. Interestingly enough, male and



female academics have shown a higher level of being superstitious than the expected assumption, as this is related to the age differences of the sample chosen for the study.

Conclusion

Females of urban areas have demonstrated less degree of superstitious beliefs in comparison to their counterparts, that is, males in the current research. The males from rural areas have demonstrated a higher level of superstitions following the conventional life styles and traditional methods of their functioning in day-to-day life. Interestingly, the findings have revealed that urban participants have a good level of superstitious belief despite the fact that they are more open to modern life than people of rural areas (George, & Sreedhar, 2006: 24). The empirical part of the current study has shown that even educated smart people are superstitious in varying degrees. It is interesting to note that female academics from urban areas have shown the highest rate of superstitions among the categories treated in the study as shown in Table 1.



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Appendix I: Questionnaire

Gender: _____ Qualification: _____

No.	Items	Strongly Believe	Believe	Strongly Don't Believe	Don't Believe	I don't Know
1	The Evil Eye amulet is used not to be envied.					
2	Hanging the seven-eyed amulet in front of the house is used for blessing.					
3	Opening and closing scissors will bring bad luck.					
4	Khamsa wa Khamysa (pointing your hand in the face of the speakers or wearing an amulet with the shape of a palm) not to be envied by people.					
5	Finding your shoes lying upside down is bad.					
6	Walking under a ladder brings good or bad luck.					
7	Giving perfume as a gift is a sign for separation.					
8	Looking into a broken mirror is a bad omen.					
9	You vow to spread chickpeas and raisin when your problems are over.					
10	When whistling at night, devils will gather around you.					
11	Tossing a pinch of salt over your left shoulder into the face of the devil for blessings.					
12	A newlywed woman is pinching her friends to marry soon.					

13	Seeing an owl is believed to be a bad omen and if it hoots, your misfortune becomes greater					
14	Hearing a crow is a prediction of an upcoming misfortune.					
15	Seeing a black cat: People believe that if a black cat crosses the road is a sign that the devil is watching them					
16	Having shower at sunset: devils are hovering around at this time					
17	The lunar eclipse: doomsday is approaching					
18	Solar Eclipse: if it lasts more than an hour, it is a warning for doomsday.					
19	Itchy palms: If your hand is itching you, don't scratch it! An itch in the right hand means that you will get some money, but if you scratch it, the green bills just disappear.					
20	Birds are fighting in your garden: it is an indication that some guests are coming.					
21	Right foot or left foot: The right foot brings good luck and blessings whereas the left foot brings bad luck to you.					
22	It is a bad luck if you cut your nails at night.					
23	Someone spills water on you brings good luck to you					
24	If you wear the blue colour, no one can envy you. Blue is the colour of earth and sky					
25	The twitching of your right eye means you will receive					

	good news, while your left eye means bad ones.					
266	Throwing your newborn baby's navel (sura) in a school makes it clever.					
27	Sweeping the house at sunset is forbidden as it brings evil.					
28	If you pass the exam wearing certain clothes each time you have an exam, you will wear them again.					
29	Talking about an illness, you will pull your ear and prim your lips so as not to have a similar disease.					
30	Don't let the teapot spout aim at you.					
31	Kissing the eye is a sign for separation.					
32	Don't sing while you are having shower as it is a bad omen.					
33	Two tea spoons in a one cup is a reference to get married again.					
34	Don't eat with your left hand, the devil will eat with you.					
35	If the two pairs of your sandal or shoes are on one another, you will receive visitors or you will be upset.					
36	If an eyelash hair falls on your cheek, we ask you to close your eyes and make a wish.					
37	If a pigeon shits on you, it is an indication of good luck.					
38	Breaking an egg on newly bought items prevents bad luck.					

39	Spilling water after departing people will keep them safe during their journey.					
40	Throwing seven stones after people wishing that they are not coming back.					
41	A Blue bead (khirza) prevents bad luck					
42	You should not wear red clothes in order not to have measles yourself.					
43	Ear-ringing (tinnitus): the right ear is for good luck and the left one is for bad luck.					
44	A pregnant woman with a male fetus would not tell anyone until delivery to avoid abortion.					
45	Giving ugly names to a male newborn child to survive longer.					
46	Wearing an amulet containing a verse of the Holy Quran for blessings.					
47	Never tell the truth about your income not to be envied.					
48	Green foot! For good luck.					
49	When a quarrel occurs in a house, some would say that an Aziza bone (an animal bone) has been thrown at your house.					
50	Burning rue (Harmel) to expel evil spirits.					
51	Do your vows or you will be harmed.					
52	Talking about a disease without referring to it so as not to have the same one.					



53	Putting pictures with living beings in your house is not recommended as angels will not tread in it.					
54	Slaughtering an animal for a newborn baby for blessings.					
55	Distributing a tray of sweets (Zakary tray) as a vow for blessings and hope in becoming pregnant.					
56	When people hear the Tatwa (an ominous bird), they shout at it (a knife and salt)					
57	A pigeon or a crow? For good or bad news respectively.					
58	Knocking at the wood not to be envied.					
59	Don't trim your nails at night, it is an ominous indication.					
60	The cup (dish) has broken, evil has gone.					