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## Contextualising the Impact of Ancient Greek and Roman Superstition on Public and Private Life

GILL OLUWATOSIN ADEKANNBI<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Consensus on the meaning of superstition remains elusive. Even when dangers allegedly exist, the controversy over the subject has engendered caution against sounding polemical or judgemental by labelling any belief as superstitious. This paper considers undue restraints as insidious and identifies when superstition is inimical to the society. The study indicates various degrees of damage caused by seemingly innocuous traditional/religious beliefs in ancient Greek and Roman climes. Max Weber's social action theory has been adopted as theoretical framework to do a library study of works of Theophrastus, Plutarch, Livy and Petronius. These ancient sources offer the platform for examining superstition as clinging to certain behavioural patterns even when no relationship exists between causes and effects. Attention is paid to how superstition surreptitiously becomes hostile to private and community interests. The paper argues that superstition emerges when customs, routines or habits that lack empirical basis take on harmful legislative powers on people and diminish the quality of their lives. The submission is that admission of past and present errors in perception of esoteric experiences should be unambiguous if the grip of superstition would be eliminated. Viewed as a clog in the wheel of meaningful social development, superstition should be stripped of its overbearing garb of subjective thinking that riddles life with morbid fear and places unfair burden of guilt on the human society.

**Keywords:** Greco-Roman, superstition, traditional religious beliefs, social action theory, fear of the unknown

### Introduction

In Classical antiquity, the Latin word, *superstitio* (superstition), was notably used to connote excesses in the practice of religion as well as similar inordinate traits (Adekannbi, 2001). Generally, from the perspective of educated individuals of the time, such as Theophrastus, Plutarch, Cicero and Petronius, it is portrayed as persistence in holding to practices or beliefs that were viewed as abandoned (Hammond & Scullard, 1973, p. 1023). Such perception, however, is not universal since it has often been challenged by

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some scholars as a prejudiced view (Hammond & Scullard, 1973, p. 1023). The variant position is aptly expressed by the Latin expression, *Quot homines tot sentetiae sunt* (just as there are many men, so there are many opinions). Hence, 'your-religion; my-superstition' thinking pattern tends to make the debate on superstition inconclusive. Notwithstanding the controversy, the theme of subjective irrational abject attitude of mind toward the supernatural, nature or God is undeniable in ancient history (Moellering, 1963). The theme is discussed in this paper as a product of morbid fear or unfounded beliefs, which have dominated the representation of superstition (p. 59). A similar striking aspect of superstition that receives attention is the undue trust in magic or luck or a false conception of causation (Cicero, *De Rerum Natura*, 5, 1196). Classical authors mentioned in this study provide copious examples which display needless or morbid fear of the supernatural, exaggerated notion or a false interpretation of natural events (Moellering, 1963). The examples represent social actions which shape individuals within a context to which they have been given their meaning. The common phrases often used in representations of superstition are related to personal and public afflictions or vexation. (Jahoda, 1969, pp. 2, 3).

In the context of superstition, attention is briefly drawn in this work to disconcerting occurrences that are attributable to private or public lifestyle and attitudes. Relevant examples, generally from Classical resources, are cited to portray the enduring nature of superstitious trends. The concluding part of the paper makes some passing reference to modern African practices which denote the infection of superstition. Beliefs that are otherwise known as common courtesies or social etiquettes (Brasch, 1969, p. 1) are considered in the light of how they become superstitions. It is important to note that this paper takes cognizance of the contemporary thought of how practices that are arguably rooted in superstition are viewed as sources of worries. Hence, the base of social ills and a potent threat to meaningful development is here identified as superstition.

The primary concern of this paper is the ignorance or wrong perception of nature and obsession with fear of the supernatural. The belief that mysterious powers in the universe are accountable for daily human actions (Awolalu, 1979, p.92) is portrayed as going too far to become inimical to private and public interests or societal development. In doing a library study of the works of Theophrastus, Plutarch, Livy and Petronius, Max Weber's social action theory is used. The focus of the theory that runs through this paper is the subjective meaning that humans are accustomed to attach to their actions and interactions within specific social contexts. (Weber, 1964). Superstition is treated in this paper as a social action that is shaped within the context of the meaning individuals have given to it. In this light, instances in the aforementioned works are considered to address how superstition impact private and public life.

### Woes from the Superstitious Greek Leader

The earliest manifestation of undue preoccupation with the influence of the supernatural in human's affairs is found in the oldest of Greek literature, the *Iliad* of Homer (Adekannbi, 2001). The epic poem is dominated by themes of fate and obsession with supernatural phenomenon, which is a good picture of Greeks' proclivity to frequently rely on natural phenomena and the supernatural to account for their actions or inactions. Around 415 BCE, feigning interest in protecting their Sicilian allies, during the second part of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians set sail to Sicily against the city of Syracuse. Despite all logical reasoning pointing to imminent perilous journey, the Athenian general, Alcibiades, spurred the Athenians on and got command of the fleet along with two other generals, Nicias and Lamachus. In Plutarch's version of the story is an instance of when superstition is no respecter of a person or status, a pointer to the fact that superstitious fears should not be viewed as characteristic of uneducated low ranks of the society. The account shows how a superstitious leader can unwittingly undermine public safety.

While everything seemed to be working out for the Athenians on the expedition, Plutarch reports: 'there came an eclipse of the moon by night. This was a great terror. Nicias and all those who were ignorant or superstitious enough to quake at such a sight... Men thought it uncanny, - a sign sent from God in advance of divers great calamities' (Plutarch, *Nicias*, 23, 1). The Greeks possibly could have escaped succumbing to fear of strange occurrences if the people had been well disposed to ancient physicists and astronomers such as Protagoras (460-415 BCE) and Anaxagoras (499-428 BCE). While Anaxagoras was imprisoned, Protagoras was banished because he challenged the traditional belief (Plutarch, *Nicias*, 23, 2- 3). Suggesting Nicias' high propensity toward fear of the unknown, Plutarch further notes that there was no help for the general's superstition because the 'skilled diviner... his former habitual adviser who used to moderate much of his superstition, Stilbides, had died a short time before' (Plutarch, *Nicias*, 23, 5). The superstitious general, 'abandoning all other cares' (Plutarch, *Nicias*, 24, 1), found refuge only in his sacrifices until the enemy came upon them with their infantry. Although Plutarch imputes morbid fear to other soldiers, a more dominant picture is that of a superstitious general that led his army to doom ascribed below:

Their loss and slaughter being very great, their flight by sea cut off, their safety by land so difficult... they did not demand their death, as indeed, their lack of burial seemed smaller than did the leaving behind of the sick and wounded, which they now had in front of



them (Plutarch, *Nicias*, 25, 3).

Despite his popularity among the Athenians, the statesman's leadership record was marred by his failure to retreat out fear of a celestial phenomenon. Being inherently superstitious, he feared supernatural punishment and, in a manner uncharacteristic of a military commander, interpreted the occurrence subjectively as an omen. Hence, 'Nicias was in spite of his popularity blamed by posterity for delaying the retreat... on account of moon eclipse' (Hastings, 1971, p.122). In this instance, superstition is a case of connecting the cause of an incident that is known with that which is unknown and drawing subjective conclusions based on false premises or sheer coincidence. Typical of victims of superstition, this is simply taking an easy way out of a puzzling situation (Heaps, 1972, p.12). The public was made to suffer for the superstition of the general. The Romans' corresponding experience in the discussion that follows further illustrates the place of superstition in a disastrous leadership.

### **The Romans Grappled with Superstition**

Christianity and other unacceptable exotic religions were generally viewed by Roman writers, such as Tacitus and Pliny, as superstitious. The view existed in contrast with the Roman religious practice that was viewed as *pietas* (piety) (Tacitus, *Annals*, 45:44; Sherwin-White, 1966, p. 696). Christians would not go to the Roman shows; refused to take part in state's processions; were absent at public banquets and would shrink in horror from the sacred games. To the Romans, such religion that seemed to enjoy no world in common with the rest of humanity deserved no tag other than superstition (Sherwin-White, p. 696). The Romans designated religious beliefs at variance with the Roman traditions or ancient customs as superstition. This position may imply religious intolerance of suspicious innovative teachings.

Ironically, from a modern perspective, subjective interpretation of human experiences was endemic in the Roman religion. Contemporary definitions of the word and, interestingly, even the perceptions of Roman writers like Cicero and Lucretius, suggest that the ancient Roman society was rife with superstition (Adekannbi, 2001). Preoccupation of the Romans with religion fits a depiction of an extremely superstitious atmosphere. The influence of the Etruscans, who promoted a public life of reading omen and auspices, as if this was a branch of science, heralded the Romans' belief that objects or living beings possessed special spiritual properties (Pollard, 2011, p. 1). The following account of Livy's provides a historical example of the impact of obsession with the supernatural on the public.

The historian records the calamity resulting from a superstitious leadership. While the Carthaginians under the leadership of Hannibal waged

war against the Romans, although the Romans had good chances of victory, superstitious fear hampered them. Livy relates:

On the Roman side, there was far less alacrity, for, besides other things, they were also frightened by some recent portents: a wolf had entered the camp and after rending those whom it met, had itself escaped unharmed; and a swarm of bees had settled in a tree that hung over the consul's tent (Livy, 2. 146).

Could the wolf have strayed into the camp? Did the bees establish their hive in the tree unknown to the soldiers when they did? Superstition is not prone to asking logical questions but to fearfully reading extreme meanings into every occurrence. The tendency associated with superstition is: 'you never know what might happen if you don't,' (Jahoda, 1969, p.145) and this may close all doors to taking reasonable actions. Hence, Scipio would not proceed with his cavalry nor consider any military strategy before averting the supposed evil portended by these 'omens'. Livy further paints a picture of a superstitious milieu by reporting many prodigies in Rome and its environs which, interestingly, are associated with men's thoughts that were inclined toward religion (Livy, 21. 62, 1). Noteworthy are some of the prodigies:

A free-born infant of six months had cried "Triumph!" in the provision market; that in the cattle market an ox had climbed of its own accord, to the third storey of a house and then alarmed by the outcry of the occupants had thrown itself down;... that the temple of Hope, in the provision market, had been struck by lightning; that in Lanuvium, a slain victim had stirred, and a raven had flown down into Juno's temple and alighted on her very couch. (Livy, 21. 62, 2, 3).

The occurrences above may sound trivial or simply intriguing to a modern mind. 'Superstition' should substitute for 'religion' in this context since the futility of preoccupation with seemingly unusual sights was indisputable. Superstition applies when the foregoing marvels and similar sights are habitually viewed neither as accidental occurrences nor as events with any experimental or scientific explanation. Examined closely, while none of the incidents might be so extraordinary, anyone with a superstitious inclination would find the concurrent manifestation of them disturbing. What followed

was no private matter, all the citizens were involved and a lot of cost too, in purifying the city and offering victims to the 'offended gods'. Among other expenses, gold weighing forty pounds was carried to Lanuvium for Juno (Livy, 21. 62, 7). Livy notes that these expiations met the need of the people, at least psychologically: *magna ex parte laevernat religine animos* (went far to alleviate men's anxiety concerning their relations with the gods) (Livy, 21. 62, 11). Nevertheless, the soldiers later admitted that the need for more decisive military strategy was more urgent than making offerings to allay superstitious fear. Blindly turning to religious practices is superstitious, especially when there is lack of insight into the relation between cause and effect. Superstition tends to make it extremely useful, albeit illogical, to cling to a behaviour pattern which has once or many times supposedly resulted in achieving the desired goal (Jahoda, 1969, p.145).

The Historian, in Book 22, further provides records of additional prodigies that worsened the fears of the Romans. Of interest in understanding how tight the grip of superstition could be is the expression: *'augebants metum prodigia ex pluribus simul locis nuntiate* (men's fear were augmented by prodigies reported simultaneously from many places) (Livy, 22. 1, 8). reported, some of the puzzling occurrences included javelins of some soldiers catching fire; a sudden blazing up of 'fire on the shore'; two shields 'sweating blood'; certain 'soldiers being struck by lightning' and a 'sudden brightness of the sky'. It was claimed that the moon fell while it was raining and a hen had changed into a cock and a cock into a hen (Livy, 22. 1, 9-15).

A modern reader of the above passage may generally see a cock and bull story, but it was certainly not so with the Romans. It was viewed differently, not because of the Romans' religiosity, but obviously owing to their anxiety over portents. As soon as the consul reported the events to the Senate, it was another occasion for lavishing State resources; toils of citizens and even freed women on making sacrifices and offering gifts to placate the angry gods. No citizen would grudge what was believed to be serving the interest of the commonwealth (Livy, 22. 1, 16-18).

Yet, despite the religious efforts, it is interesting to note Livy's 'hostile tradition' (Hammond and Scullard 1969, p. 441) that attributes the heroic death of the consul, Flaminius Gaius, to his disregard for the customary and religious ceremonies. First, the narration has it that Flaminius sought neither the counsel of men nor of the gods (Livy, 22. 3, 5). Next, the stumbling of the horse of Flaminius, which led to his being thrown down, was seen as a bad omen that was later made worse by the report that the standard could not be pulled up. Determined to fight against all odds, the consul ignored the 'evil-foreboding' omens and the eventual terrible defeat suffered by the Romans at Trasimene only made the actions of Flaminius detestable to the religious society that believed the 'impiety' had rendered all their former sacrifices invalid (Livy, 22. 3, 11-13). Here, superstition surfaces when the incline was

blaming the general's neglect of omens for the military loss rather than laying the blame on poor strategy.

Besides, if the terrible loss is credited to Flaminius' impiety, it is obvious that whatever dangers the Romans had initially perceived, which should include Flaminius' flaws, were not averted by the sacrifices and prayers to the gods. At any rate, the offerings never prevented Flaminius from taking the wrong steps that wreaked havoc. Flaminius seemed to have realised this but rather late; 'their position, he said, was one from which vows and supplications to the gods could not extricate them, but their own brave exertions' (Livy, 22. 5, 2). If Flaminius' words suggest taking more pragmatic steps instead of profusely investing time, energy and other valuable resources on rituals, then, he should be seen as unwittingly discouraging superstition. Subsequent developments made it appear as if the Romans were ready to take 'more practical' steps. Quintus Fabius Maximus was appointed a dictator and now, rather than heaping vows on the gods and deluging their altars with sacrifices, he first gave attention to 'strengthening the walls and towers of the city.... breaking down the bridges over the rivers' (Livy, 22. 5, 2).

Questions should arise on if making profligate sacrifices on execution of war was the present need. In what may be interpreted as refusing to allow his reasoning to be beclouded by giving attention to 'religious duties', the dictator requested that the Senate consider how many legions should face the Carthaginians (Livy, 22. 11, 1-2). It required only a little more time to know whether 'religious duties' should have priority over considering appropriate military supply or strategy in attacking the formidable Carthaginians. The dictator would not refute the religious sentiment that attributed the failure of Flaminius more to the displeasure of the gods; nevertheless, he was more conscious of the need to be very cautious in facing Hannibal. Hence, he may be adjudged a clever and more skillful general who was less prone to superstition.

At a crucial point of his encounter with Hannibal, Fabius was summoned to Rome to perform certain religious rites. If it is assumed that the state's decision fell in the realm of the Roman religion, it is noteworthy that Fabius, in spite of all the sacrifices that had been made before his setting out, would not entrust his legions to Fortuna (goddess of luck). Rather than expecting success through the making of more sacrifices to the gods, he rationally addressed the urgent need to 'appease' his own men, particularly, the assistant, Mucius. He 'counselled... all but entreated the master of the horse to put more trust in prudence than in fortune, and rather to imitate his strategy than that of Sempronius and Flaminius' (Livy, 22. 18, 8-9; underline, mine). While there is no basis for doubting that Fabius was religious, however, his statement appears to set a boundary between religion and superstition. His words may further be expanded to mean that the defeat at

Trasimene was a case of failure of 'strategy,' or, better still, owing to the personality flaw of the commander. Fabius well knew the threat constituted by the impetuous 'master of the horse' whom he 'entreated' to be cautious. After forewarning the master of the horse to no avail, Fabius left for Rome.

Livy's comment comes in here as a different view of the cause of the Roman tragedy at Transimene. While the general feeling was that the disaster was owing to the anger of the gods, Livy, presenting the matter from Hannibal's perspective, offers a more realistic viewpoint when commenting on Fabius' discretion, saying: *Tandem eum militiae magistrum delegisse Romanos cernentem, qui bellum ratione non fortuna gerei.* (The Romans had finally chosen a military leader who waged war as reason and not as blind chance dictated) (Livy, 22. 18, 2-3; underline, mine). Fabius' rationality in carrying out war can be contrasted with the rashness of Mucius, the master of the horse who came to be in command when Fabius left for Rome. It became apparent to Hannibal that change in leadership would be a great advantage to him. He knew the Roman troops were likely to be bolder than prudent (Livy, 22, 24).

The situation was further aggravated by the plebeians at Rome who, embracing religious sentiments rather than rational thinking, superstitiously felt that even the gods would prefer the zeal of Mucius to the inaction of Fabius. As soon as the plebiscite of the assembly made Mucius an equal of Fabius and gave him command over some legions, the master of the horse finally threw all cautions to the wind. In his characteristic rashness, he fell into the trap of Hannibal, only to be rescued by Fabius. At this point, Mucius was forced to recognise the value of superior reasoning when he told the men who had followed his lead:

Soldiers, I have often heard that the best man is he who can himself advise us what is profitable; the next best he who listens to good advice but that he who can neither counsel well nor obey another has the meanest capacity of all. Since to us the first rank of intelligence and capacity has been denied, let us hold fast to the second or middle state and while we are learning to command, make up our minds to obey a man of wisdom. (Livy, 22, 24)

In this instance, superstition appears as undue interference of religious sentiments in proper reasoning and promptly taking of necessary actions. Expectedly, at this point of Mucius' admittance of his rashness, no

one should be inclined to blame the gods for the misfortune. Claiming ignorance of the personality flaw that brought the avoidable loss only reveals what happens when superstitious individuals consider less of personal responsibility and seek to placate supposedly angry gods. If anyone was to be 'appeased', it was not the gods, but Mucius, the hasty leader. Besides, the calamity possibly could have been forestalled if sound reasoning had prevailed over the plebeians' superstitiously invoking the authority of the gods to appoint an impetuous commander. It could be reasoned that superstitious leaning could be blamed for the delay in giving more consideration to military intelligence than to obsession with religious rites (Moellering, 1963, p. 187).

The foregoing story serves as a basis for concluding that superstition was no respecter of status among the Romans. The narration leaves no room for thinking that superstitious fears would have more hold over the generally uneducated lower ranks of the society than it would on the educated elite. As shown above, members of the educated Roman upper classes, both Senate and military leaders were not immune to the widespread superstitious tendencies. Arguably, since the boundary between fulfilling a religious obligation and being superstitious may be indistinct, distortion of signs or omens could accompany handling of religious duties when the intent is accomplishing selfish interests. This view is premised on the reasoning that there would continue to be men in position of religious authority who profit from employing fear of the unknown (Hasting, 1971, p. 121). However, effort is not made at the moment to explore how religious authorities cast superstitious fears on others to attain selfish ends. It suffices for now to assert that superstition can be a precursor to public catastrophe. The dangerous overbearing effect of superstition is further exemplified by seemingly private actions that are discussed below.

### **More than Idiosyncrasy**

The preceding discussion has dwelt more on when superstition was taken to the public domain. However, superstition caused no less harm in private life in the ancient time. A wide depiction of superstition in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE is the famous portrayal of a 'superstitious man' found in Theophrastus' literary work, *Characters*. Although this is often taken as a parody, Theophrastus can rightly be seen as defining traits that are not beyond human comprehension. The philosopher's parody is a guide to determining varying degrees of superstitious outlooks in individuals. Theophrastus writes:

Superstitiousness, I, need hardly say, would seem to be a sort of cowardice with respect to the divine; and your Superstitious man such as will not sally forth for the day till

he has washed his hands and sprinkled himself at the Nine springs, and put a bit of bay leaf from a temple in his mouth. And cat crosses his path, he will not proceed on his way till someone else is gone by or he (has) cast three stones across the street. Should he espy a snake in his house, if it becomes of the red sort, he will call upon Sabazius. If of the sacred, build a shrine then and there. When he passes off of the smooth stone set up at cross roads, he anoints it with oil from his flask and will not go his ways till he (has) knelt down and worshipped it (Theophrastus, *Characters, Superstitiousness*, 16).

Although with some exaggerations, Theophrastus wrote what his Greek readers could fathom. First, he identifies 'Cowardice with respect to the divine' in a superstitious man. To him, superstition means dreading the supernatural so much that every step taken is plagued by fears of 'bad omens'. The causes of the distress are no more than daily occurrences or common experiences: owls hooting, cats crossing his path. The sight of a snake in the house may seem unusual, but it is neither novel nor unheard of in urban and rural areas. Morbid 'cowardice with respect to divine' engenders melancholic fear so much that the day's business is interrupted by preoccupation with appeasing the gods. A superstitious man may not be a suitable business companion because crucial appointments with others suffer while the man is obsessed with washing his hands, sprinkling himself with water at different springs and engaging in other rituals. Apparently, it amounts to superstitious timidity when an individual, in order to play safe ensures that nothing is lost by allowing his attention to be caught by everything that moves around him (Frazer, 1909, p.2).

Theophrastus further paints a picture of a life filled with afflictions when he says:

If a mouse gnaws a bag of his meal; he will be off to wizard's and ask what he must do... neglects his advice. He is forever purifying his house... should owls hoot... will not continue on his way till he has cried Athena for fend! Set foot on a tomb he will not, nor come high a neither dead body nor a woman in childbed; he must keep himself unpolluted... (Theophrastus, *Characters, Superstitiousness*, 16)

The philosopher introduces themes of triviality and absurdity to superstition. His character is very petty and so ridiculously comical that when a mouse gnaws a hole in his grain bag, he never thinks of a chance occurrence. He

becomes curious and would rather consider performing 'rites of aversion' instead of visiting a cobbler and having the hole patched. It certainly would be the height of prodigy if he had observed what looked like the sack devouring the mouse! Experience of a nightmare is no exception to what strikes the man with terror; neither would he just proceed about the day's business with a quiet mind when he has a dream. The philosopher describes the step he takes when he has a dream: 'he flies to a diviner or a soothsayer or an interpreter of visions, to ask what god or goddess he should appease' (Theophrastus, *Characters, Superstitiousness*, 16). Besides, the sight of a mentally ill or a victim of epilepsy, rather than eliciting sympathy, causes psychological unease, as 'he shudders and spits in his bosom' (Theophrastus, *Characters, Superstitiousness*, 16) to ward off imaginary evil.

Theophrastus' representation of a superstitious man, far from being entertaining produces the effects of annoying or overbearing behaviour that causes harassment for others. Such are the impacts of superstition. The superstitious anxieties may fit the following thought: 'the threat of the hangman's noose [which] may keep some people in line, but ... hardly means that the noose should be dangled in front of their eyes' (Moellering, 1963, p. 64). Granted, some strange occurrences may bring some mental anxiety, however, fears should be managed and not spread to others; judgement should be suspended or kept private when uncertain of the true nature of phenomena. On the contrary, superstition spreads fears and hastily imposes erroneous judgement on others. Hence, the worry over the character's behaviour goes beyond irritability of his actions to include serious concerns over economic loss to family members or relations and others. Besides, the offensive aesthetics from the indiscriminate use of artifacts would also be of concern to the public.

Similar in outlook to Theophrastus' superstitious man is depiction of abnormal fear of death in another caricature man in *Satyricon* of Petronius. The character, Trimalchio voices his superstitious feeling thus:

I was born under crab, so I have many legs to stand on and many possessions by sea and land; for either one or the other suits your crab. And that was why just now I put nothing on top of the crab for fear of weighing down the house of my birth (Petronius, *Satyricon*, 39)

Trimalchio's avoidance of putting something on the crab is not out of consideration for the poor creature. Instead, it is because he associates his wealth with the crab and dreads losing 'the house of his birth'. Further,



supporting a fatalistic view of life inherent in superstition, Trimalchio reportedly has a clock and a uniformed trumpeter in his dining-room constantly reminding 'him how much of his life is lost and gone' (Petronius, *Satyricon*, 26). While the reality of death confronts everyone, it is superstitious to shut out the essence of living by asking to be constantly reminded of death.

In what should be a moment of joy, superstition is close by with its gloom. Since he would otherwise feel insecure, Trimalchio enjoys having a lot of people around him. On one occasion, he excitedly addresses his guest: 'Gentlemen, a slave of mine is celebrating his first shave today... so let us drink deep and keep up dinner till dawn' (Petronius, *Satyricon* 74). The joy is short-lived because, while Trimalchio is yet speaking, a cock crows. To a man who always feasts with the sword of Damocles hanging above his head, this is a prodigy that must be given a prompt attention. Interpreting this as a fire outbreak somewhere, he pours wine under the table and on the lamp, changes the position of his ring and concludes that 'the trumpeter did not give his signal without a reason... someone close by is just going to give up the ghost. Lord, save us' (Petronius, *Satyricon*, 28). Still driven by superstitious fear, he promises to reward anyone who catches the cock that was 'the informer' (Petronius, *Satyricon* 28, footnote). When the cock is caught and brought in, he gives order for it to be killed and cooked in a saucepan, all in an effort to avert misfortune.

Someone may be prone to simply dismiss the next superstitious attitude of Trimalchio as simply being too fastidious about one's health; however, it arguably goes beyond being meticulous about healthcare. Petronius presents the ludicrous scene as occurring when three masseurs drinking Falernian wine before him quarrelled and split some quantity of the wine. At this, Trimalchio says that his health was being drunk (Petronius, *Satyricon* 28). By saying that the young men had 'drunk his health', Trimalchio implies that 'they had drunk each from his glass a health to him (Trimalchio)' (Petronius, *Satyricon*, 28). It is no surprise that accidental splitting of wine is believed to be an act of ruining the health of Trimalchio, after all, he often has misgivings about his well-being.

Theophrastus and Petronius have described individuals who find pleasure and comfort in their activities. Some of their actions may be seen as tolerable as long as they are deemed harmless to others. It may also be reasoned that discouraging or condemning such behaviours would be no less damaging than removing a crutch that provides a support (Heaps, 1972, p. 13). While the characters may provide some comic relief, their traits are hardly socially desirable and are not to be categorised as harmless idiosyncrasies. The characters, having being burdened by superstitious fear of the unknown, transfer the effects of their preoccupation with fear to others unsolicited. This is what Seneca would describe as *error insanus est*. (an

error of insanity) (Seneca, *Epistulae*, 123, 16). While this may sound harsh, Cicero similarly sees superstition as an affliction when he says: *Superstitio fusa per gentis oppressit omnium inbecillitatem occupavit* (superstition which is widespread among the nations, has taken advantage of human weakness to cast its spell over the mind of almost everyman) (Cicero, *Divinatione*, 2, pp. 148-149). In tune with Cicero's view is the view that 'weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance [are] the true source of superstition' (Of Superstition and Enthusiasm, 1995, par. 2).

Today, there are a great many references to psychological research on paranormal experiences like hallucinations. The result of one of them shows more than 70 per cent of a sample of 375 college students at some time had experienced an auditory hallucination of hearing voices while they were not asleep (Hines, 1988, p.61). Such hallucinations may readily be mistaken for ghosts or taken as evidence of the paranormal by those experiencing them. This is especially true since the high frequency of these waking hallucinations is not a well-known finding (Hines, 1988, p. 61). While present research findings may explain away superstitious fears, it sounds rather anachronistic to expect that such psychological researches which were non-existent in the ancient times ought to have served to allay the fear of the unknown among the Greeks and the Romans. Nevertheless, as noted in the preceding paragraph, petty and morbid concern over the supernatural never escaped criticism in the past.

With the discussion above premised on ancient sources, it is not difficult to see the perspective from which attempts have been made to identify some beliefs and practices as superstitions and strip them, as it were, of any garment or immunity that befits culture or even religion. For instance, this is the thrust of an article in *Daily Graphic*, a Ghanaian Newspaper, entitled 'Of Satanic seals ignorance and superstition'. The writer, while discussing the controversial mysterious disappearance of genital organs in some African countries, indignantly says:

The satanic seal that seems to threaten the peace of our society needs to be looked at more closely than is being suggested at the moment. What possible motives will a group of people as wide apart as Accra, Kumasi, Tamale or Takoradi have in common, as to watch a plot so heinous as to awaken whole communities to dangers that have their roots in our ignorance, cultural beliefs and taboos? (Hesse, 1997, p.5).

The article vehemently condemns the disturbance of public peace by what it refers to as: 'superstition, blind belief without proof, spinning stories which

have no foundation', noting that 'these have been the bane of the Ghanaian and other African societies' (Hesse, 1997 p.5). Expressing a strong opinion, the writer argues that 'Superstition and ignorance do not belong in 21st century Ghana' (Hesse, 1997 p.5). The situation is no different in Nigeria where an atmosphere that is engendered by superstition is observable as related below:

The spate of killings for ritual purposes is gradually assuming an alarming rate in Nigeria with little or no effort by concerned government agencies to checkmate the trend. One would have expected such pseudoscience acts to be a thing of the past going by increase in religious activities and in civilization. But murdering people to appease the deities appears to be on the increase. These dastardly acts are carried out in a 21st century, when other countries of the world are experimenting and advancing in technology. It is also shocking to know that some acclaimed high and mighty indulge in ritual killings. For instance, some politicians and government officials have been accused by arrested suspects and herbalists who alleged that they use human beings for rituals in order to sustain their affluence as well as remain in positions of power. Investigations revealed that cases of ritual killings and disappearance of persons are usually high whenever elections are around the corner (Usman, 2017, p.1).

The danger of superstition to the society is apparent in the above quotation. The expression, 'pseudoscience science', should more appropriately be replaced with 'superstition' to expose the true nature of the source of societal woes. Allegedly, 'politicians and government officials' turn to 'herbalists' and 'use human beings for rituals' instead of relying on any record of meritorious service to the public or wooing the electorate with qualities desired in a leader. Disturbance of the public often ensues with 'disappearance of persons' when elections approach. Although the Romans had no record of ritual killing in elections, undoubtedly, as shown in the discussion above, they were known for heaping up sacrifices when military strategies were deficient. Similar to the ancient milieu, superstitious practices in Nigeria are 'entertained by both the educated and the non-educated, by people of all faiths...Modern education in science and logic has not succeeded in eradicating the belief' (Igwe, 2013, p.1). There are more to superstition in mystical subjects that instill fear in people and represent many human experiences as paranormal.

This trend is manifest in nostalgia for ancestral traditions that feature in home videos, movies and shows inundating the ever-growing entertainment industry. The far-reaching effects of this could be the focus of another study.

### Conclusion

Examples in ancient authors have shown that superstition often emanates from religion and cultural mores or traditions. As indicated above, superstition as a form of subjective social action could be insidious. The concept is represented as irrational belief or practice which disguises as mere custom or tradition. Superstitious beliefs, since they are often resistant to every proof that they are unfounded or irrational, could be burdensome and afflicting. The ancient instances examined have illustrated the danger when superstition persists unabated. They show how unfounded fear lurks in people's mind, gains mastery over their lives and inflicts havoc before it is checked. On some people, superstition imposes itself like an unsolicited prescription; sets fear of the unknown before rational thinking and makes them lose control over their lives. While strange phenomena exist, superstition quickly mystifies or exaggerates their nature, creating an atmosphere of apprehension. The conclusion is: superstition becomes a pestilential morbid contagion when, rather than remaining confined to privacy, it gains access to the public and lords it over others and ruins them. Hence, unmasking superstitious beliefs would not only relieve individuals and the society of a huge burden of undue anxiety, it would also be a milestone in societal development.

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