CHAPTER II
Superstition: Its Definition

The definition of the word 'superstition' is not an easy task. What constitutes superstition is still being debated among psychologists and sociologists. The word 'superstition' may not be a very useful scientific term. One man's superstition may be another man's religion or moral conviction. "It is hard to mark out the boundaries of superstition. A Frenchman travelling in Italy finds almost everything superstitious, and is hardly wrong. The Archbishop of Canterbury claims that the Archbishop of Paris is superstitious; the Presbyterians levy the same reproach against his Grace of Canterbury, and are, in their turn, called superstitious by the Quakers who are the most superstitious of men in the eyes of other Christians". ¹

Many words in everyday use are deceptive. On hearing them, we have the confident feeling that we understand them clearly, but if we were suddenly challenged to define them, we would discover that our certainty was a convenient illusion.

It is very difficult to expect a precise definition of this term at the outset. However, a satisfactory working definition is necessary for scientific research.

"Man has learned very slowly to understand the world about him. For many thousands of years strange or mysterious events or circumstances troubled or frightened him. He believed they were caused by good or evil forces, which could be controlled if he had the power to do so. These beliefs, now no longer held, are called superstitions. The word means that which stands above or survives. Bertha Morris Parker defines superstition by quoting the secrets of the snake-charmer. "The scientist's decision to find out whether it is the music of the snake-charmer which makes the snakes behave as they do, has brought to light the idea that the music does not charm the cobra but his thumping on the floor or tappings on the sides of the containers is the sole cause in bringing the snakes out of their resting places. "The idea that music charms turns out, then to have no foundation. It is an unfounded belief."\(^3\)

The Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the term superstition as follows: "Superstition is thus an unreasonable

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3. Ibid., p.3.
belief in the supernatural; belief in magic, witchcraft, etc., belief that objects, words, gestures, etc., affect people's lives - a particular example of such belief".¹ Thus it is any belief or attitude that is inconsistent with the known laws of science. It is something which springs from ignorance. It is a non-rational belief. Oxford Illustrated Dictionary defines it as "Irrational fear of unknown or mysterious, credulity regarding the supernatural; habit or belief based on such tendencies; irrational religious systems, false or pagon religion".² The Dictionary of Sociology defines superstition as, "A religious belief or practice surviving from out of the past and lacking an adequate basis in either the prevailing religious system or the existing body of scientific knowledge; a religious survival".³

Like many words having a derogatory sense, superstition is often loosely and vaguely used. To identify it with false belief or practice would be quite misleading. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines it in the following words: "We may now perhaps attempt to define superstition as the acceptance of beliefs or


practices groundless in themselves and inconsistent with the degree of enlightenment reached by the community to which one belongs". 1

Dr. Willard E. Edward defines superstition as "Any belief or attitude that is inconsistent with the known laws of science. It is non-rational belief in, or fear of, the supernatural. It seems to be the weed of brain, and once started, it often grows profusely. Superstition springs from ignorance, and is especially a belief in charms, omens, and the supernatural". 2

The word superstition is derived from the Latin words 'super'; above, and 'stare'; to stand. In ancient times those who survived in battle were called 'superstites', because they have outlived their fellows. Our modern superstitions fall into this class for they so often represent apparently bizarre modes of thought that have survived the ages which created them, to linger on in our midst like ghosts from unknown planet. It was in this sense our ancestors used the term superstition when they condemned the religious dogmas of their opponents". 3 The Romans regarded pagan beliefs as superstitions, while to


the Protestant Reformers most of the beliefs of the Roman Catholics were mere papish superstitions; and the modern humanists are often ready to brand all religious beliefs as superstitions.

Lundeen and Caldwell give a more definite and acceptable explanation to the term. "What we call 'superstitious beliefs' are those which (a) have been demonstrated to be at variance with the objective facts, (b) are likely to be shared among many members of a society, and (c) frequently involve a disposition to ascribe phenomena that admit of a natural explanation to such occult or supernatural causes as 'fate', 'luck' and the devil".¹ According to Maller and Lundeen, "A superstitious belief is one that ascribes causal relationships to phenomena and objects which bear no such relationship".² The definition given by The New Schaff Herzog, Encyclopaedia comes closer to the present purpose of the investigator. "Subjectively it is a mental attitude. The essence of superstition is therefore in part the misplacing of the source of causation. Psychologically superstition is


often the result of the inability or unwillingness to carry on sustained thinking involving a consequent readiness to accept as correct certain conclusions which have been handed down, without being tested as to their cogency". 1

Any belief having the following characteristics is considered as a superstitious belief for the specific purpose of the investigation. Instead of using the phrase 'superstitious belief' it is better to use the phrase 'superstitiousness of a belief'. Superstitiousness of a belief is a question of degree. Any type of belief including the most absurd belief and the science-supported belief can be put somewhere in the most superstitious-least superstitious continuum. A belief which is most acceptable in the light of present-day scientific knowledge can be considered as the least superstitious belief. But in future, in the light of new discoveries, this belief may move towards the other end of the continuum. Placing a particular belief in the continuum is a time related process. A particular belief moves more and more towards the right end of the continuum when the following conditions are satisfied.

1. The relationship posited by the belief is more logical and functional.

2. The relationship suggested can lead to prediction which has more than chance probability of occurrence.

3. The relationship believed in can be linked to a systematic body of knowledge.

4. The relationship suggested does not bring in supernatural agencies or causation.

5. Suspending belief in the relationship does not create any uneasiness, anxiety or fear.

6. The relationship is amenable to modification in the light of new experiences or evidences.

7. The relationship does not have universal or absolute validity.¹

The above definition of superstition which is relied upon for the present investigation could meaningfully bring within its focus, the related concepts given in the earlier pages. The degree of superstitiousness whether it is a belief in palmistry or divination or ghosts or amulets, can be evaluated against the seven criteria given above.

Major Varieties of Superstitious Beliefs

The problem of predicting the future recurrence of events has exercised the imagination of both the primitives and the modern scientist. Prediction of events gives man a sense of mastery over the world. Primitive methods of prediction could range all the way from astrology to

necromancy. Modern methods of prediction has slowly evolved out of the earlier primitive methods.

The primitive minds could not distinguish between the wish and reality, and the belief in ghosts and spirits was universal among the primitives in all cultures. Unwillingness to accept the finality of death coupled with hallucinatory experiences might have strengthened the belief in spirits and ghosts. Moreover the primitive mind could not distinguish between animate and inanimate things, and ascribing magical powers to different articles and things was the usual practice. Superstitious practices can be classified under five major heads: (1) Those concerned with the prediction of future events, (2) Belief in spirits and their working, (3) Attributing magical powers to inanimate things, (4) Magic, (5) Myths and fables.

**Prediction of future**

(a) Astrology

It is a big money maker, for those professional engaged in the business. Men observe the changes and the courses of sun, moon, stars, and planets. Their positions are believed to influence human life. Babylonians gave the planets the names of gods or goddesses. A person born under
the planet Mars would have a violent disposition like that of Mars, the god of war. Astrology became a very complex form of superstition. But the careful study of the heavens which it fostered led to the true science of astronomy. Even though astrology is not assigned the status of science, the belief that planetary movements do affect the bio-chemical function in man may have an element of truth in it. But it has to be put to rigorous scientific test before acceptance.

Astrology is the art or science which claims to forecast events on earth by observation of the fixed stars and the sun, moon and planets. It originated in Mesopotamia, perhaps in the 3rd millennium B.C., but attained its full development only much later, within the orbit of Greek civilization of the Hellenistic period. It spread from there to India in the 6th century B.C. and reached China not long after.

(b) Palmistry

It is the very ancient practice of reading character and personal futures from the lines, size and shape of the hand. It is a combination of astrology and hand-reading.


It is a pseudo-science, and along with others, it has lost favour with scientific minded people. But palm readers still flourish in the Orient, and there are many believers in the Western World. The arguments for it are often clever, but there is no scientific proof for the elaborate claims of palmistry. But extensive researches by Wolfe do indicate that the characteristics of the palm could indicate one's health and similar conditions.

(c) Numerology

It is another superstitious system which tries to foretell the future or the unknown. An occultism has been built around numbers, such as those denoting birth-dates, or the sum of the letters in one's name. Other beliefs merely give undue significance to certain numbers. For instance, Romans considered odd numbers 'lucky' and even numbers 'unlucky'.

(d) Augur

It was the name given to each of a group of Romans who made prophecies about the future. There were only three

augurs at first. The number grew to 16 by the time of Caesar. An augur was always of noble rank and wore a white tosabe, a Roman garment with wide purple border. Nothing important could be done without asking the advice of the augurs. The augurs not only foretold the future but explained the will of the gods to the people.

(e) Divination

It is the practice of foretelling events by means of signs or omens. Superstitious people have believed in divination from earliest times. It is believed by many that natural occurrences such as sudden storm or a falling star, have a hidden meaning. A flock of flying birds might mean that a fleet of ships was sailing to meet an enemy. The sight of a hawk later could mean that a victory had been won, or a crow could indicate defeat. Many systems of artificial divination developed out of these beliefs. In Greek mythology, men appealed directly to oracles for advice, and were answered by the inspired words of Gods. Drawing lots grew up as a form of divination. When a man wanted a question answered, he drew lots, and thought the answer was directed by gods.

Divination is the process of obtaining knowledge of secret or future things from contact with super human or divine sources. Divination is practised in all grades of culture, the information received being commonly held to come directly or indirectly from superior, non-human sources.¹

The Spirit World

(a) Ghost

It is believed by some people to be the unhappy and often harmful spirit of a dead person. Once, many superstitious people believed in ghosts. As more persons became educated, the belief in ghosts declined. However, belief in ghosts still persists in different parts of the world.² There are also many different ideas about the powers of a ghost. Some people insist that a ghost can be heard but never seen. Others believe that ghosts are visible to some people and can be recognised because they never cast shadows or leave footprints, and can walk through closed doors and solid walls. Believers in ghosts think that some evil causes ghosts on

earth. They say that the ghosts exist to right a wrong or revenge a crime. The ghosts are supposed to work at night only when light is poor. Ghosts play a part in many primitive religions. They have always been a favourite subject of writers and story tellers.

(b) Voodoo

It is the name given to the religious beliefs and the practice of magic of certain African-Negro tribes. The word is a west-African word which means god or spirit. The belief and practices of Voodoo have spread to many sections of the West Indies, and to a few parts of the U.S. Voodooism usually has a powerful influence on those who practise it. According to Voodooism, the spirits of the dead live in a world of ghosts, but can visit the world of the living to bless or curse people. If a man makes a wax image that represents his enemy and sticks pin on to it or melts it down, he is then practising Voodooism to injure his enemy.1

Voodoo is the name of the religion practised in poverty-stricken areas of Haiti. Central to Voodoo is the worship of loa, chiefly divine beings of the African pantheon and also ancestors who have been deified.2

1. Ibid., 'Voodoo', Vol.18, p.365.
According to superstition, it is a ghost that comes from the grave at night to suck the blood of living persons, especially young persons.¹ It is supposed to take the blood from the neck while the victim is sleeping. The person is said to waste away and die, and then become a vampire himself. Wizards, witches, suicides, and those cursed by the church or their parents were believed to become vampire at death. The vampire is said to renew its life from the blood of the living.

Vampire is a term originally applied to blood sucking ghosts, later transferred to blood-eating bats inhabiting South America and north to Southern Mexico. In its original meaning Vampire is supposed to be the soul of a dead man which quits the dead body at night to suck the blood of living persons.²

(d) Witchcraft

It is the practice of evil acts by witches, or people supposed to have evil powers.³ From earliest times people in

all parts of the world have believed in witches. The power of a witch was believed to have given, or sold by devils. Most people no longer believe in witchcraft. But some primitive persons still cling to their belief in evil, mysterious powers. Such people believe that accidents may be caused by an individual who has these mystic powers. They also believe that a man who practises witchcraft calls upon spirits or demons to rise up and hurt his enemies. This belief in evil spirits, or demons is called demonology.

(e) Exorcism

It is a form of magic. Exorcists believe that they have the power to cast out evil spirits.¹ They perform certain ceremonies and say 'magic' words in order to make the devil and other spirits obey their commands.

Exorcism is an adjuration addressed to evil spirits to free them to abandon an object, place or a person which they have more or less in their power. In a more technical sense, exorcism is a ceremony used by the church to expel demons from persons who have come under their power.²

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Attributing magical powers to inanimate objects

(1) Fetish

It is an object which is supposed to have magical powers. Many people carry a rabbit’s foot, a medal, or a lucky penny or coin, which they think might bring them good luck. The word fetish comes from the Portuguese language and was first applied to objects of worship, such as stones, or images of clay. Fetish worship is the lowest form of religious worship. Primitive people believed that fetishes could make their wishes come true. It is in reality, a kind of animism, or belief that lifeless things possess a spirit. Many Negroes of Africa, Indians of the South West, United States, Eskimos and even many educated, modern persons are fetishists.

Fetishism is a term denoting two quite different phenomena: (1) the use of the magic charms by peoples in West Africa and the Congo region; (2) a form of a sexual deviance involving erotic attachment to inanimate objects or an ordinarily sexual part of the human body, such as foot.


(2) Amulet

It is a charm which is supposed to have magic powers. It is usually worn around the neck to protect the wearer from harm. It may be a metal or some ornament. Sometimes it is a bag or package that contains some supposed powerful object. Many people still wear them.¹

Amulet is an object, whether natural or made by man, believed to be endowed with special powers of protection or of bringing up good fortune. In the latter capacity an amulet may also be called a talisman or in modern usage a charm or mascot.²

(3) Birth-Stone

It is a gem which is a symbol of the month of a person's birth.³ Many ancient people believed that a birth-stone brought good luck to the wearer and also influenced his personality. The modern beliefs about birth-stones are thought to have originated in Poland in the 1700's. These beliefs spread to other European countries and to the U.S. Many people still choose their birth-stones to be set in rings, and other jewellery.

Magic

Magic is the practice of trying to control events by supernatural means, or of appearing to do so by the use of trickery.¹ It includes the mystic learning and practices, which are used to support the magicians claim of supernatural powers. In simple culture, magic is often closely related to religion. Many primitive peoples think magic brings man closer to the powers above him. For them, it protects against evil and prevents disease, solves the problems of life, and lifts the dark curtain of the future. Magic links itself with the mysteries of human life in this world and the next. In the happenings of nature it sees a prediction of the future events. It sees spirit force moving the sun, moon, and stars, and causing wind, rain and lightning. Magic links itself with the ancient belief in the survival of ancestral ghosts. It creates an unseen world peopled with spirit that controls human fate. It surrounds life with constant duties and dangers. The task of the magician in a primitive society is to ward off the forces of nature. Science and magic are similar in that they both deal with cause and effect. But science rejects the supernatural. Magic depends on it. There are rites for the punishment of enemies, for hunting, for making war, and for the common

affairs of life. Primitive people believe that enemy can spoil crops and cause sickness and death if he uses the proper ceremonies. This belief in black magic is rooted in the human race, and survives in many parts of the world today.

**Myths and Legends**

As a part of its belief system every society has its myths and legends. All sorts of stories of past and current events, of heroes, and of institutions enter into our systems of belief. "Social myth may be defined as an imaginary interpretation of past, present or future events". ¹ Such myths are not created out of nothing but have a basis in some crises. The crises may have to do with economic needs, with warfare, success or failure in life, with birth, with puberty, with marriage and divorce, with death and future life. Myths sometimes arise as a wish-fulfilling device in some difficult situation and serve to stabilize us in the presence of distress. Yet the bulk of them are deeply imbedded in our culture and are passed on from one generation to another.

Legends, in contrast are stories, which have some factual basis, but which in the telling or retelling lose much of their objective accuracy and accumulate all sorts of imaginary

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and fictional details. The emergence and spread of a humour is a good illustration of a rudimentary form of legend which may become accepted by a neighbourhood or community.

Together, myths and legends make up a body of folklore of immense importance. They are highly significant components of our total belief systems and give us a basis for the continuity of social life and culture. Without them the past and present, as well as the future would seem chaotic. Myths and legends make what we call social, cultural reality or what is currently called 'belief system'. Myths are not fairy stories told to children to amuse them.

Myths have been defined by Bronislaw Malinowski as follows: "Myths as it exist today in a savage community, (that is, in its living primitive form) is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primitive time and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. The myth is to the savage, what, to a fully believing Christian, is the Biblical story of Creation, of the Fall of man and the Redemption by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. As our sacred story lives in our ritual, in our morality, as it governs our faith and controls our conduct, even so does his myths for the savage".1

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"Studied alive, myth is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject-matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral craving, social submission, assertions, even practical requirements. Myths fulfil in primitive culture an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies beliefs; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilisation; it is not an idle talk, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic character of primitive faith and moral wisdom".¹

¹ Ibid.