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MYTHS AND REALITIES: HOW DIFFERENT FORMS OF SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS CREATE GOOD AND BAD LUCK FOR PEOPLE IN PAKISTAN THROUGH AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LENS

Umar Daraz¹, Ibrahim¹, Aziz Ul Hakim¹, Zakir Hussain², Wasif Khan^{1,*}

¹Department of Sociology, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

²Department of Social Work, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

The present research explores various forms of superstitious beliefs that are commonly practiced, despite being inconsistent with rational thought and known laws of nature. These beliefs are often followed by individuals in their daily routines, in the hope of attracting good luck and avoiding bad luck. The study was conducted in the Lal Qala District of Dir Lower, Malakand Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Data was collected from 23 participants using purposive sampling, through in-depth interviews and participant observation. A qualitative approach was employed, and primary information was supplemented with empirical data to analyze the different forms of superstitious beliefs and their underlying themes. Thematic analysis revealed that various superstitious beliefs, such as stepping below a ladder, encountering cat with black color passing one's path, considering specific dates like the 13th of March as unlucky, and beliefs related to weddings and colors, are widely practiced to either attract or avoid future occurrences of good or bad luck. However, it is suggested that eliminating these superstitious beliefs from society can be achieved through proper religious training, the spread of education, the dissemination of positive and scientific knowledge, and the constructive role of media.

Keywords: Superstitious beliefs; Forms; Walking under a ladder; Black cat; Color; Wedding; Hygiene.

* Email: khansoc900@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Superstitions are irrational and unsupported beliefs that lack scientific and logical evidence. However, superstitious beliefs have a historical presence in the sub-continent, where Muslims and Hindus coexisted and shared their ideas and views (Kalandarovna, 2023). While these beliefs and practices are accepted in Hinduism, Islam strictly opposes such groundless and unreal beliefs (Khan et al., 2024). Lack of education, religious knowledge, and misconceptions contribute to the prevalence of superstitions (Djohar, 2023). Superstitions arise from the belief that certain actions or behaviors can influence future outcomes, despite the absence of a causal relationship (Poon et al., 2023). Many superstitions originate from notions of good luck and bad luck, which in themselves can be considered superstitions (Hardwick, 2023). Although Indian society is progressing, there are still individuals who hold strong faith in local superstitions (Bhaskaran et al., 2023). Many of these beliefs lack logical reasoning and have become detached from their original scientific basis over time (Khartade et al., 2023; Thomas, 2023).

In India, superstitions often revolve around signs and omens, such as the appearance of animals and birds. For example, encountering an elephant before a journey is considered lucky because it represents Lord Ganesha, the god of good luck and obstacle removal (Bhaskaran et al., 2023; Hasan & Baloch, 2023). Other auspicious signs include the cawing of a black crow indicating the arrival of guests, or the presence of a peacock symbolizing luck, although hearing its shrill sound is considered bad. Sparrows building nests in

new houses are believed to bring good fortune (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2023). Some superstitions, like the belief that killing a cat requires offering one in gold to a priest, were created to protect cats that serve the purpose of rat control (Khan et al., 2024; Miard et al., 2017). Indian culture is also influenced by superstitious beliefs in daily life activities. For instance, astrological charts are consulted to determine auspicious times for important tasks like leaving home after a wedding or embarking on a journey (Vekemans, 2023). Indians associate good luck with seeing cereals, paddy, cotton, hay, or a newlywed before starting a journey. Additionally, certain days are considered inauspicious for activities like shaving on Mondays or washing hair on Thursdays (An et al., 2019).

Superstitions are not limited to India; they also manifest in other cultures, such as the Chinese and Japanese, where numbers hold particular significance. For example, the number four is considered highly unlucky in Japanese culture due to its similarity to the word for death in Chinese Mandarin. Hospitals often omit the "fourth" floor, and individuals may avoid traveling on the fourth day of the month (Takahashi & Nakazawa, 2023). Superstitions related to numbers can even have health implications. A study found that the stress associated with the fourth day of the month led to a 13% increase in chronic heart-related deaths among American Chinese and Japanese individuals (Huang et al., 2023). Additionally, the "year of the fire horse," which occurs every 60 years, is considered unlucky in Sino-Japanese culture. In 1966, a significant drop in female birth rates, increased induced abortions, and higher newborn child mortality rates for girls were attributed to this superstition (Josephson, 2019). Considering the presence of superstitious beliefs in Pakistan, specifically in Malakand Division, this study aims to explore how various forms of superstitions shape perceptions of good and bad luck among the people of Lal Qala District Dir Lower, Malakand Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

The Argument

Superstitious beliefs have been ingrained in human society for centuries, stemming from our fear of the unknown and our desire to control or predict our future. The origins of many superstitions remain unknown, lost in the depths of time. However, some superstitions do have practical bases, such as avoiding putting hats on beds to prevent the spread of head lice, or not walking under ladders to avoid potential falling objects (Farooq & Kayani, 2012; Tahir et al., 2018). In the Pakhtun society, women often visit shrines for various reasons, including seeking good luck, desiring a male child, arranging marriages, or securing employment for their husbands (Kayani et al., 2017). The Pakhtun society continues to uphold superstitions, such as avoiding walking under ladders, avoiding cracks in pavements, spilling salt, or breaking mirrors, all of which are considered "bad omens" (Hasan & Baloch, 2023). Many superstitions from the past still hold influence in Pakhtun society today, including the belief that a black cat crossing your path, washing, or wearing clothes in the evening, putting on clothing inside out or backward, or encountering a crow flying across your path brings bad luck (Sehar et al., 2023).

Superstitious beliefs are deeply rooted in the human psyche, irrespective of educational level or ethnicity, and they have social and psychological impacts. For instance, Anwar et al. (2012) discovered that people living in houses with the number 13 believed it brought them bad luck. As a result, fewer people tend to travel on Friday the 13th, with nervous motorists staying at home on this date (Zahid et al., 2023). Interestingly, Sehar et al. (2023) found that hospital admissions for traffic-related accidents rose by around 52% on Friday the 13th, but not significantly for other types of accidents.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to investigate how different forms of superstitious beliefs producing good and bad luck for the people of concerned community. In addition to that people of the local area attached various superstitious to their social life, therefore, the study seeks to explore those superstitious which are attached to the people socio-economic life in Pakhtun society.

METHODOLOGY

An anthropological study was conducted in the Lal Qala District of Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, to extensively describe the prevalent superstitions and mysterious beliefs among the local population. The study employed a comprehensive case study approach, utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observation as data collection methods in relations with phenomenological approach (Daraz et al., 2023). The researcher purposively selected 23 respondents based on saturation point theory, including both males and females, who actively practiced and followed these superstitious beliefs (Saunders et al., 2018). The researchers spent two and a half months in the village, immersing themselves in the local community to gather data on the various forms and levels of belief related to good and bad luck. The data was analyzed, using thematic analysis approach to elaborate it in more comprehensive and sophisticated manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISSCUSIONS

Beware the Ides of March, Keep One's Fingers Crosses

"Beware the Ides of March" is a quote from William Shakespeare's historical play, Julius Caesar, referring to the day Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC. It alludes to the warning given by a soothsayer to Julius Caesar, advising him to be cautious on the 15th of March. Unfortunately, Caesar ignored the advice and met his demise on that very day (Hardy-Butler, 2020). In relation to this, one respondent shared their perspective:

"I have noticed a pattern of bad luck occurring in the month of March for me and my family. To avoid misfortune, we have developed a practice of refraining from engaging in our family rituals and ceremonies during that month."

Respondents have indicated that, according to the ancient Roman calendar, the ides fall on the 15th day of March, May, July, and October, and on the 13th day of other months, making them significant periods associated with misfortune and ceremonial activities. Additionally, the phrase "keep one's fingers crossed" is used to express the hope for good luck or success, literally symbolizing the act of hooking one finger over another (Valussi, 2020). Many respondents strongly explain that this expression, dating back to the early 20th century, may stem from the superstition that making the sign of the cross can ward off bad luck. In a similar vein, a woman expresses her belief:

"By crossing two fingers, specifically the middle and pointing fingers, as a sign of hope or desire for a particular outcome, and by making the sign of the Christian faith with our fingers, we believe that evil spirits will be prevented from undermining our chances of experiencing good fortune."

These examples highlight the connections between historical events, cultural beliefs, and superstitious practices, providing insights into how people perceive and navigate the concepts of luck and misfortune.

Repeated Actions, Walking Under a Ladder and Spilling Salt

The respondents have clearly expressed various superstitious beliefs related to attracting good luck and avoiding bad luck. These beliefs include engaging in repeated actions, avoiding walking under ladders, and the act of spilling salt. An elderly man from Lal Qala shared his opinion:

"Practices that are believed to bring bad luck, especially when repeated three times, are considered particularly unlucky. One specific practice often associated with misfortune is the act of lighting three cigarettes with a single match. This superstition is said to have originated among soldiers during wartime. They believed that the prolonged glow from a match used to light three cigarettes would give the enemy enough time to take careful aim at them, potentially resulting in their death."

Furthermore, superstitious women believe that walking under a ladder brings bad luck. This belief seems to stem from the ladder forming a triangle with the wall and the ground, symbolizing the Holy Trinity.

Violating this sacred symbol by entering the space under the ladder is believed to align one with the devil and invite God's wrath (Vyse, 2022).

Respondents also attribute the belief that walking under a ladder is unlucky to historical practices of hangmen using ladders to execute people. It was believed that walking under a ladder would draw the hangman's attention or attract the notice of death.

In addition, the village leader holds the view that when salt is spilled, it is necessary to take a pinch of the spilled salt and throw it over the left shoulder. This belief is rooted in the historical value of salt as a purifying substance capable of warding off evil. By performing this action, it is believed that one can drive away lurking evil spirits that may cause harm and misfortune (Fliginskikh & Semenova, 2022).

These examples of superstitious beliefs reflect the perspectives shared by the respondents. They provide insights into the cultural and historical underpinnings of these beliefs, highlighting the connections between repeated actions, symbolism, and the avoidance of misfortune.

Clothes, Bell, Birds and Color Related Superstitious Beliefs

The residents held various superstitious beliefs related to clothes, bells, birds, and colors to avoid bad luck. One respondent expressed the following viewpoint:

"Taking off your clothing on the rough side bring misfortune until when it is arranged in proper order"

Furthermore, major participants argue that bells ring has the power to remove bad spirits because of its relations with marriage day, New Year celebrations and funeral festivals. Furthermore, an elderly woman from Lal Qala shared her opinion:

"When a crow fly in your way bring bad luck, and such misfortune can be eradicated with help of pronouncing alphabet as soon as possible. Additionally, birds with blue color is a symbol of safe and sound return of sailors to home".

According to Dario (2023), when a bird enter into house and flies out again through window is a symbol of death happening in the home. Moreover, different colors are associated with various superstitions regarding good and bad luck. An elderly villager explains:

"We avoid wearing red during an electrical storm as it is believed to attract lightning. Green was once associated with witches, and actors believe that wearing green will bring bad weather or natural disasters. Yellow is believed to be the color of cowardice, and black is associated with death and funerals."

These examples highlight the superstitious beliefs held by the residents, revealing the ways in which clothes, bells, birds, and colors are believed to influence one's fortune. These beliefs, although rooted in folklore and cultural traditions, continue to shape the behaviors and choices of individuals in their daily lives.

Black Cat, Breaking Mirror, Death

Anthropological analysis, based on most respondents, reveals various beliefs associated with black cats, breaking mirrors, and death. According to these beliefs, if a black cat crosses your path, it is believed to bring bad luck. However, another version suggests that if a black cat walks towards you, it brings good luck, whereas if it walks away, it takes the good luck with it. Bainbridge and Stark (1980) explain that in England, black cats are considered to bring good fortune. Noteworthy beliefs include the notion that if you can pluck a single white hair from an otherwise all-black cat without being scratched, you possess a powerful talisman of good luck.

"Breaking a mirror is commonly believed to bring seven years of bad luck, as expressed by the Chairman of the local government".

The reflection in a mirror is thought to represent one's soul or spiritual state. However, another respondent suggests a way to avoid this misfortune. They propose taking the broken mirror pieces outside and burying them in the moonlight. They also explain the belief in seven years of bad luck, suggesting that in the past, mirrors were so expensive that breaking one would result in serving seven years as an indentured servant to its owner, as few could afford to replace it. Before the invention of mirrors, people would gaze at their reflections in pools, ponds, and lakes. Distortions in the reflection were seen as signs of impending disaster, as noted by Robinson (2023). Furthermore, superstitious beliefs are associated with death circumstances. For instance, a dead man with open eyes, which is considered for awaiting the arrival of more souls from their family, according to one woman from the village. Traditions such as preparing a last meal for the departed spirit and lighting a candle to guide their way are commonly observed. When a person dies at home, it is customary to open all the windows to facilitate the easy departure of the soul, and mirrors are covered to prevent the deceased from being startled by their own reflection, as mentioned by Frazer (1910).

These superstitious beliefs related to black cats, breaking mirrors, and death offer intriguing insights into the cultural perceptions and practices surrounding luck and the afterlife. They demonstrate the interplay between folklore, symbolism, and the human desire to make sense of the mysterious aspects of life.

Hygiene, Jewelry, Miscellaneous and Umbrellas

Superstitions related to hygiene and sweeping are believed to have an impact on luck, either avoiding good luck or bringing bad luck. A village resident named Mir strongly argues that:

"Sweeping at night diminishes one's blessings, and sweeping dirt out of the door carries away good luck with it. Additionally, bathing at night is considered equivalent to losing a cup of blood".

Jewelry is also associated with superstitious beliefs. One respondent mentioned that:

"Allowing someone else to wear your wedding band is believed to invite infidelity into the marriage. Buying opals for oneself is seen as unlucky unless they happen to be one's birthstone. Certain specific gems, such as the Hope Diamond, are believed to carry curses".

Entering a room or building on the right foot, using the same door to enter and exit a building, and getting into and out of bed on the same side are superstitions commonly mentioned by participants. It is believed that covering one's mouth when sneezing is important, as the soul is said to momentarily leave the body during that action.

Furthermore, giving a wallet without money is believed to signify future financial emptiness. Hardwick (2023) explains additional superstitions, such as, when umbrella is placed on bed is considered to invite misfortune. Moreover, a respondent clarifies that:

"If one drops an umbrella, it is advised not to pick it up personally. It is considered that when an umbrella is fallen from a women and when she took it back from the ground is associated with never marry again in life. Furthermore, black umbrella is considered unlucky during journey in sea ship".

These superstitions related to hygiene, jewelry, miscellaneous practices, and umbrellas provide fascinating insights into the cultural beliefs and practices that influence people's behaviors and perceptions of luck and misfortune. While they may appear irrational to some, they reflect the rich tapestry of folklore and traditions that continue to shape various societies.

Wedding and Wishing

The anthropological discussion clearly describes how weddings are believed to bring both good luck and bad luck to the groom and bride. A newlywed bride explains that:

"Is bring misfortune when a bride wear her marriage clothes on the other day of marriage leads to its cancellation".

It was believed that when a person wear marriage band before the rituals is believed to bring doom to the marriage (Foster & Kokko, 2009). Furthermore, Santisteban and Galay (2023) mention that wearing the color green on the wedding day is considered unlucky, and it is believed that all pins from the bride's dress and veil should be removed to avert bad luck.

Moreover, one respondent explains that:

"Finding a spider in the wedding dress is considered good luck, while having a coin in the bride's left shoe before leaving the house is believed to bring prosperity to the marriage. It is considered unlucky to pass an open grave, cross running water, or encounter a blind or cross-eyed person".

Kaxarova and Aripova (2023) reveal that it is important for both the bride and groom to step into the church with their right foot. The groom is advised to give alms to a poor person on the way to the church, while the bride should give alms on the way from the church. Furthermore, some respondents mention that it is unlucky to enter a place with the left foot, and even more unlucky to trip when entering. Making wishes upon seeing the first star in the evening is believed to make them come true, and blowing out all the candles on a birthday cake in one breath is said to make the wish come true. Falling stars are also regarded as favorite objects for making wishes.

These examples of wedding-related superstitions provide insight into the beliefs and customs associated with marriage. While they may seem peculiar to some, they reflect the rich traditions and folklore that have been passed down through generations, shaping the cultural practices surrounding weddings.

Thirteen being Unlucky, knocking on Wood / Touching Wood and Itching Palm

The qualitative discussion further reveals the widespread fear and superstition surrounding the number thirteen (13). This fear is so prevalent that it has its own term, triskaidekaphobia (Kalandarovna, 2023). The headmaster of the primary school argues that:

"The belief in the unluckiness of thirteen is deeply ingrained not only in the village but also in many other societies. It is so strong that major hotels and high-rises often either construct only twelve floors or skip labeling the 13th floor entirely. People tend to avoid staying on the 13th floor or in room 13, and some even stay home from work due to the fear of something bad happening".

However, Hassler and Pohle (2022) note that not all ancient cultures view the number thirteen as unlucky, as Chinese and Egyptians consider it lucky. The anthropological discussion further elaborates on other forms of superstitious beliefs. For example, the tradition of knocking on wood three times after mentioning good fortune is prevalent. In the American version, it is called knocking on wood, while the British version involves merely touching wood. This tradition can be traced back to ancient pagan beliefs that spirits resided in trees, particularly oaks. By knocking on or touching wood, one would pay a small tribute to the spirits, acknowledging their presence and seeking their protection against ill-fortune (Espinal, 2020).

Moreover, participants in the study express beliefs regarding itching palms. According to these beliefs, if your left palm itches, it signifies that you will soon receive money, while if your right palm itches, it indicates that you will lose or have to pay money. An old woman explains that:

"If your left palm itches, you should scratch it on wood to ensure receiving money, whereas if your right palm itches, you should refrain from scratching it at all, as doing so may lead to monetary loss".

These superstitious beliefs surrounding the number thirteen, knocking on wood, and itching palms shed light on the cultural practices and beliefs that shape people's behaviors and perceptions of luck. While some may view these beliefs as irrational, they highlight the intricate web of folklore and traditions that continue to influence societies across different cultures.

Holding your Breath when Passing a Cemetery, Blessing someone who Sneezed

Embark on a journey into the realm of fascinating superstitions that have captivated human imagination for ages. Let us explore an anthropological discussion that unravels the belief surrounding the act of passing a cemetery. It is said that one must hold their breath during this encounter, for fear of inhaling the souls of the recently departed. According to a village resident, failing to do so could awaken the spirits with each breath or incite jealousy among them, as the living continue to breathe while the spirits cannot. Some even believe it is a way to safeguard against inhaling malevolent entities (Cryer, 2016).

Delve deeper into the intricate connection between breath and the soul. Throughout history, the belief persisted that when a person sneezed, their soul momentarily took flight, leaving their body vulnerable to the intrusion of evil spirits. This explains the practice of offering blessings to those who sneeze, as it is believed to protect them. By extending these blessings, one seeks to ensure the sneezer's continued good health and ward off any potential harm (Cooper, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Superstitions have deeply entrenched themselves in our society over time, permeating various aspects of life such as social, cultural, economic, religious, educational and even sports. Within Pakhtun society, a wide array of superstitious beliefs surrounding good and bad luck prevails. These beliefs encompass practices like walking under a ladder, encountering birds, crossing paths with a black cat, using umbrellas, engaging in wedding customs, observing hygiene rituals and more. However, these beliefs often generate social, economic and psychological impacts that can pose a threat to the religious fabric of society. The general population in the region wholeheartedly embraces these superstitious beliefs, seeking to avoid misfortune and attract good luck. The challenge arises when these very superstitions hinder societal progress or adversely affect the well-being of individuals. Essentially, these beliefs and practices are based on illogical assumptions derived from isolated incidents, perpetuated by the gullible. They have been passed down through generations, shaping our culture and finding their roots in the customs, traditions and collective wisdom of our ancestors. Their purpose is to ward off potential dangers or dissuade individuals from specific actions. For thousands of years, humans have sought to comprehend and explain the mysteries, anomalies and unusual events they encountered, often attributing them to the work of spirits. Superstitions emerged as a means of protecting oneself against the unknown.

In order to remove the superstitions from its root, religious knowledge and education must be spread in the local community. Scientific and rational knowledge through education and mass media must be spread among the people to eradicate the curse of superstitions from the research community in District Dir lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan.

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