

# SUPERSTITION AND CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: A THEOPHRASTEAN ANALYSIS OF YORÙBÁ TABOOS

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## **Abstract**

Superstition, a pervasive and abiding cultural phenomenon, has long shaped human history. While previous studies on Yorùbá taboos have emphasised their sociological and religious functions, little attention has been given to their psychological dimensions or cross-cultural parallels. This paper addresses that gap by employing social identity theory and a thematic qualitative analysis of C.O. Thorpe's *Àwọn Èèwò Ilẹ̀ Yorùbá* (The Taboos of the Yorùbáland), situating Yorùbá practices alongside Theophrastus' *Superstitious Man* from *Characters*. Ten taboos are selected to examine how taboos reinforce group identity, regulate behaviours, and serve as coping strategies against fear of misfortune, illness, and death. To illustrate this dynamic, the selection criteria emphasised how taboos (1) indicate clear psychological motivations such as fear, avoidance, or control, (2) establish social regulatory functions, and (3) show connection to superstition. Their background, the 'reasons' behind them, and the psychological foundation driving these beliefs are discussed to show how taboos operate beyond mere tradition, influencing behaviours and societal norms. By comparing Yorùbá and Greek traditions, the study extends Yorùbá taboo scholarship beyond ethnography into cultural psychology, revealing universal mechanisms of ritual appeasement and anxiety management. Theophrastus archetype is a timeless framework for interpreting Yorùbá practices, and the mode of

analysis underscores superstition's cross-cultural nature and its enduring psychological power to shape cultural practices. This paper, through a novel psychological analysis of Greek and Yorùbá traditions, demonstrates how superstition and taboos, despite contextual differences, depict the deep-seated patterns of fear management, social regulation, and the quest for control.

**Keywords:** *Superstition, Yorùbá Taboos, Theophrastus, Cultural Psychology, Comparative Analysis*

## Introduction

Superstition has long endured as a resilient and ubiquitous cultural phenomenon, captivating human imagination and influencing societal practices for centuries (Beck & Forstmeier, 2007; Boyko, 2020; Ibodullayeva, 2022). However, existing studies tend to treat Yorùbá taboos primarily as sociological or religious artifacts, emphasising their role in moral reinforcement and social regulation (Akintan & Oyenuga, 2020) or as prohibition sustaining communal values (Adeleye, 2020). Similarly, Greek superstition has often been framed as a philosophical critique of irrationality rather than a psychological mechanism of coping (Frazer, 1909). This divergence leaves a gap: the psychological dimensions of taboo and superstition, and their cross-cultural parallels, remain underdeveloped.

This paper situates Yorùbá taboos within a comparative psychological framework alongside Theophrastus' *Superstitious Man in Characters*. It employs Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership and reinforce identity through practices that distinguish in-groups from out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within this framework, taboos emerge not as ethnographic curiosities but as mechanisms of boundary maintenance, identity performance, and social stratification. Observing taboos becomes a performative act that signals belonging, reinforces cohesion, and differentiates insiders from outsiders. SIT clarifies how cultural identities shape behaviours and beliefs, including superstitions, by showing how individuals adopt group norms and values. Grounding taboos in SIT,

particularly in relation to in-group/out-group dynamics, moves this study beyond description, explaining how taboos function as coping strategies against misfortune, illness, and death while sustaining collective identity.

The analysis demonstrates how Yorùbá taboos, examined alongside Theophrastus' depiction of superstition, identify both universal psychological mechanisms of fear management and culturally specific modes of moral regulation. In doing so, the discussion contributes to the broader discourse on superstition by linking classical philosophy, psychology, and African cultural studies. It highlights superstition's role in shaping human behaviour while acknowledging the distinctive Yorùbá worldview, thereby enriching cross-cultural understanding.

Ten taboos from C.O. Thorpe's *Àwọn Èwò Ilẹ̀ Yorùbá* (The Taboos of Yorùbáland), selected for their psychological relevance (fear, avoidance, control), social regulatory function (Odejebi, 2013), and connection to superstition form the basis of the analysis. These examples exemplify avoidance behaviours, ritual practices, and the desire to conciliate supernatural forces, underlining shared anxieties that transcend geography and time. Although Theophrastus' fictional character is rooted in ancient Greece, it provides a striking archetype for understanding how fear and the quest for control manifest across cultures.

In modern English usage, "superstition" often refers to folkloric belief systems with a dual nature, both a source of social cohesion and individual folly, and has sometimes been used to dismiss traditions associated with the supernatural (Frazer, 1909). Defined as "a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), superstition varies across cultural settings and may relate to cemeteries, animals, ancestors, weather, gambling, sports, occupations, death, luck, spirits, and many aspects of human behaviour (Jahoda, 1969). Myths often provide moral bases for fears about socially alien people or conditions. As Jahoda notes, "in situations of acute danger or

distress, usually involving excessive uncertainty, superstition is likely to come to the fore...giving the person at least the feeling of having some control” (1969, p.146).

Scholars have historically debated the meaning and function of superstition across contexts, either as a moral failing or a functional cognitive trait. Bowden (2008) and Moellering (1963) highlight how Greek thinkers such as Theophrastus and Plutarch treated *deisidaimonia* (fear or awe of spirits/deities), the word rendered superstition, as excessive religiosity, critiquing its irrationality while acknowledging its social presence. However, from modern psychological perspectives, Skinner’s (1948) experiments with pigeons and Risen’s (2016) psychological studies show how superstition emerges from behavioural conditioning and intuitive biases, suggesting cognitive roots beyond culture. Vyse (2019) further argues that superstition persists because it provides psychological comfort and a sense of agency in uncertain situations. Ibodullayeva (2022) contributes a cross-cultural dimension, describing superstitious beliefs as culturally transmitted habits that adapt linguistically and socially to remain relevant across generations, effectively acting as a "bridge" between an individual's psychological needs and their specific cultural heritage.

From a Yorùbá perspective, however, scholars typically frame taboos not as superstition but as moral and cosmological laws. Fadipe (1970) underscores that taboos are embedded in indigenous epistemology, serving functions of moral regulation and cosmological order beyond fear alone. Idowu (1962) similarly highlights how religious beliefs permeate every aspect of life, presenting taboos as instruments of divine regulation. Adeoye (1987) emphasises their role in sustaining communal discipline and cultural identity, while Daramola and Jeje (1976) describe *èèwò* as prohibitions rooted in moral codes designed to maintain harmony between humans and the spiritual world. Odejobi (2013) demonstrates that taboos operate as mechanisms of social control, reinforcing values and preventing harmful behaviours, and Akintan and Oyenuga (2020) add that they function as moral reinforcement

in the face of modern erosion of values. Simply put, Yorùbá scholars argue taboos are functional instruments of cultural sustainability and moral guidance.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal a tension: Yorùbá scholars describe taboos as culturally coherent systems of meaning, while comparative psychology interprets them as superstition because they embody universal mechanisms of fear management, ritualised avoidance, and identity construction. This dual framing allows taboos to be understood both as indigenous moral laws and as examples of the broader psychological processes through which superstition shapes cultural practices across societies. While scholars often separate them for academic clarity, in daily life, taboos and superstitions may be seen as frequently overlapping to form a single, cohesive system of belief.

Before exploring the link between superstition and taboo, this discussion provides a background on modern perspectives of superstition, beginning with classical Greek foundations

### ***Deisidaimonia* in Ancient Greek Society**

The Greek term *deisidaimonia* is often translated as "superstition" but this translation could be viewed as both inadequate and misleading (Moellering, 1963). *Deisidaimonia* is a compound word derived from "δέιδω" (fear) and "δαίμων" (demon). While "δέιδω" can suggest reverence rather than craven dread, "δαίμων" generally refers to superior beings, including gods. Thus, *deisidaimonia* often implies "fear or reverence of the gods."

In Homeric texts, the fear of the gods, for example, Zeus, is associated with reverence and respect rather than dread. In *The Odyssey*, Eumaeus, the loyal swineherd, offers hospitality to Odysseus not out of pity but because he reveres Zeus, the god of guests. He remarks, "I fear Zeus, god of guests, and feel pity for you" (Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 14, line 389), illustrating that the fear of gods such as Zeus is rooted more in reverence and respect than in mere dread. Similarly, Hesiod's *Works and Days* portrays *deisidaimonia* as an integral part of daily life by providing detailed

rules for religious conduct. For example, he suggests this when he says, "appease the immortals with libations when you go to bed and when the holy light returns that they may have a kindly heart and spirit toward you" (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 338–340).

However, reverence could turn into an obsessive preoccupation with not offending the gods, linking every event to divine favor or displeasure. Hence, over time, the term's meaning evolved. Aristotle used the term *deisidaimonia* to describe the manipulative behaviour of a tyrant who adopts a facade of religious piety to gain the trust and control of his subjects (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1313a), indicating the term's shift toward negative connotations. Despite its negative connotations, *deisidaimonia* could also be viewed positively. Xenophon praised King Agesilaus of Sparta for his *deisidaimonia*, commending his deep reverence for the gods and piety (Xenophon, *Agesilaus*, 11.8). This positive usage indicates that true reverence and religious devotion were still highly respected qualities. There appears to be a dichotomy between reverence and fear, underscoring the complex relationship between superstition and piety in ancient Greek society. Before Theophrastus, a prominent Greek philosopher and successor to Aristotle, *deisidaimonia* was largely understood in a positive light as reverence for the gods (Bowden, 2003). However, Theophrastus's characterisation in *Characters*, XVI marked a significant shift. His portrayal of *deisidaimonia* depicts the behaviour as an irrational and excessive fear of the gods, introducing a more negative connotation to the term. This represents the intellectuals' aversion to superstition during his time, highlighting the serious and self-righteous nature of superstitious behaviour that could influence public actions.

Theophrastus's disdain for superstition and its effects points to a broader cultural shift towards rationalism and skepticism among Greek intellectuals. His work offers a glimpse into how superstition was perceived and criticised in classical Greek society, illustrating the complex evolution of the concept of *deisidaimonia*. Plato, for example, is disturbed that every nook and cranny in the state would be crammed with the artifacts, with which people appear to

commemorate their ‘follies’ (Plato, *Laws*, 909e ff). Clearly, classical sources on superstition characterise it as the unwarranted attribution of events to unknown forces and the reliance on illogical reasoning. They often critique superstition as an irrational belief system that assigns significance to coincidences or supernatural influences without empirical evidence. These perspectives argue that superstition stems from a misunderstanding of causality, leading individuals to perceive patterns and connections where none exist.

The duality of reverence and fear in *deisidaimonia* underlines the complex relationship between superstition and piety in ancient Greek society. While Theophrastus’ critique marked a cultural shift toward rationalism and skepticism, the concept also signals how communities negotiate identity through shared beliefs and ritualised avoidance. This insight is crucial for understanding Yorùbá taboos, which similarly operate at the intersection of reverence, fear, and social regulation. Fadipe (1970) and Odejobi (2013) note, Yorùbá taboos are not merely prohibitions born of dread but are embedded in indigenous epistemology, serving to reinforce moral codes, cosmological order, and communal identity.

Viewed through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), both Greek *deisidaimonia* and Yorùbá taboos show how group membership shapes belief systems and behaviours. Individuals internalise norms that regulate conduct, whether through fear of divine displeasure in Greece or through culturally sanctioned prohibitions in Yorùbáland. The comparative framework reveals that what Greek intellectuals labelled “superstition” and what Yorùbá tradition defines as “taboo” both operate as mechanisms of identity construction, anxiety management, and social cohesion.

Therefore, within this connection, Yorùbá taboos are examined in a broader cross-cultural psychology of superstition while retaining their indigenous meanings. Although their rationality continues to be questioned in scholarly debates—and they may appear as fear-based reactions—the analysis underlines their twofold role: universal strategies for coping with uncertainty and culturally specific expressions of moral and cosmological order.

This understanding represents taboos, not merely as prohibitions, but as cultural mechanisms that negotiate vulnerability, sustain identity, and entrench communal values in everyday practice.

### **Revisiting Theophrastus' Superstitious Man**

To understand how superstition functions as both a psychological mechanism and a cultural regulator, it is useful to revisit Theophrastus' famous sketch of the Superstitious Man in *Characters*. Below is the excerpt:

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 if a cat crosses his path, he will not proceed on his way till someone else be gone by or he [has] cast three stones across the street. Should he espy a snake in his house, if it be one 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*: XVI.)

Interpretable, Theophrastus paints a vivid picture of a life plagued by constant fear, haunted by omens and unexplained phenomena (Bowden, 2008). An ostensibly simple sight, such as an owl flying past, fills the man with dread, as he instinctively interprets it as a harbinger of misfortune. His existence is governed by perpetual ritualism, engaging in elaborate ceremonies; meticulously washing his hands in sacred fountains, sprinkling himself with holy water, and carrying a laurel leaf in his mouth, believing these practices shield him from harm lurking everywhere (Ogden, 2010). Superstitious avoidance dominates his behaviour: he steadfastly avoids stepping on tombs, going near corpses, or visiting women in confinement, fearing these encounters may bring pollution or misfortune into his life (Bowden, 2008).

The Superstitious Man is portrayed as living under the weight of omens, since he believes no event is due to chance (Vyse, 2014; Halliday, 1930). A trivial event, such as a weasel crossing his path, halts him in his tracks, frequently interrupting the day's business. The actions are not just personal eccentricities, others must accept responsibility for them when he refuses to proceed until someone else takes the lead or counters the perceived bad omen by hurling three stones across the way (Halliday, 1930). Although seemingly devout, his obsession with unseen forces observably steers him from harmless rituals to excessive scrupulosity and bizarre, even repulsive, rites (Halliday, 1930). Significantly, he could be seen as engaging in religious activities, yet he is portrayed as not recognising when sacrifice is unnecessary or when pragmatic alternatives should be considered for handling situations. Setting no boundaries between genuine religious duty and irrational compulsion, the Superstitious Man is set as rather prioritising ritual over reason.

Theophrastus' depiction is both witty and incisive (Halliday, 1930; Ogden, 2010), capturing the absurdity and irrationality that define the man's character. Rather than glamorising religious behaviour, the description underlines the abnormality of superstition itself. The Superstitious Man is distressed, gripped by relentless anxiety over ominous signs and terrifying portents, his life is consumed by fear. He is obsessed with defilement—an ever-present paranoia that compels him to endlessly multiply, often absurdly, the means of purification. Rather than equating superstition with hypocrisy, Theophrastus highlights its association with folly (Halliday, 1930; Millett, 2007). Moreover, this relentless fixation on omens and purification may hinder his ability to engage in everyday social interactions, as his beliefs interfere with routine activities and require others to accommodate or counteract his anxieties. Rather than fostering connection, these practices often isolate him, and make his world feel increasingly restrictive.

It is important to note that Theophrastus' Superstitious Man can be understood as a reflection of broader Greek religious

psychology carried to the extreme. Ancient Greek culture was saturated with ritual, omens, and purification practices, which were deeply embedded in everyday life. Reverence for the gods structured conduct, while fear of divine displeasure shaped social norms. Practices such as consulting oracles, interpreting signs, and performing purification rites were widespread and culturally sanctioned (Bowden, 2003).

What Theophrastus does is exaggerate these tendencies. He takes ordinary piety and pushes it into obsessive compulsion, turning cultural norms into caricature. In this sense, the Superstitious Man is not simply eccentric; he embodies the anxieties and ritualistic impulses or disposition already present in Greek religious psychology, but carried to a higher level. That exaggeration makes the satire intelligible to his audience, who recognised familiar practices distorted into idiocy. Satire only works when it targets recognisable everyday habits. Hence, while his work is an embellishment of real Greek religious practices, it serves as a valuable perspective to understanding Greek cultural psychology, showing how fear and ritual can be institutionalised into everyday behaviour.

From a modern psychological standpoint, conditions such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are characterised by distractibility, difficulty sustaining attention, and repetitive behaviours used as coping mechanisms (Victor et al., 2018). While certain features of the Superstitious Man—such as compulsive rituals and repetitive avoidance—may appear to resonate with these descriptions, ADHD is a contemporary clinical construct and should not be retroactively applied to ancient literary figures. However, Theophrastus' portrayal is more appropriately understood within its cultural context as reflecting anxiety-driven behaviour, obsessive ritualism, and fear responses shaped by Greek religious psychology. His constant apprehension, ritual purification, and avoidance of perceived omens demonstrate how fear of uncontrollable forces could become the guiding principle of conduct. Greek philosophers critiqued this as distortion of piety (*deisidaimonia*), contrasting it

with proper reverence (*eusebeia*) (Bowden, 2008). Theophrastus' sketch could be viewed as presenting how beliefs and practices associated with superstition overwhelm rational judgment, producing a cycle of anxiety and ritual that isolates the individual and burdens social interaction. By embodying Vyse's (2019) four dimensions of superstition—fear of the unknown, excessive ritualism, avoidance, and belief in omens—the character reflects the integral psychological foundations of ancient Greek cultural life.

These same foundations resonate with Yorùbá taboos, which transform fear and reverence into communal prohibitions and ritual practices. Theophrastus' Superstitious Man and Yorùbá taboos when placed within the framework of Cultural Psychology, provides a good basis for examining how diverse societies ritualise fear and uncertainty into patterned practices that sustain collective identity. Theophrastus' caricature, though satirical, shows how Greek religiosity could slide into excessive scrupulosity, transforming ordinary signs into omens that demanded ritual responses. Interestingly, Yorùbá taboos, by contrast, are framed by scholars as moral and cosmological laws, divinely sanctioned to regulate behaviour and preserve harmony between humans, ancestors, and the spiritual world (Idowu, 1962; Daramola & Jeje, 1976; Adeoye, 1987; Akintan & Oyenuga, 2020). Despite these differences in framing—satire versus moral seriousness—the paper interrogates the channelling of fear and reverence into ritualised avoidance and symbolic interpretation in both contexts. Utilising Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the study delves into how group membership shapes belief and conduct, transforming anxiety into practices that reinforce communal cohesion.

### **Taboos and the Yorùbá Belief System**

The prevalent religious ethos governing human affairs is vividly captured in accounts of traditional societies. The following description indicates the worldview that underpins Yorùbá belief system:

In all things they are religious...As far as they are concerned, the *full responsibility* of all the affairs belong to the Deity...Before a child is born, the Oracle gives direction about it at every stage of life-puberty, betrothal, marriage, taking up a career, building a house going on a journey and, in fact, the thousand and one thing which make up human existence here on earth – man is in the hands of the Deity whose dictate is law, and who is waiting on the other side of this life to render him as he deserves. (Idowu, 1962, p. 5) italics ours.

Scholars of Yorùbá religion have long emphasised the inescapable role of the divine in everyday life. Idowu (1962) observes that “in *all things* they are religious... man is in the hands of the Deity whose dictate is law” (p. 5, italics ours ). This perspective indicates how religious beliefs permeated every aspect of traditional Yorùbá society, shaping decisions from birth to death. It also provides a meeting point with Classical societies, where divine powers similarly influenced human conduct. Similar to the Greeks and Romans, the Yorùbá community is characterised by beliefs in mystical forces expressed through myths, taboos, and oracular pronouncements. The systems are not only deeply religious, the divine is not distant, but intricately woven into the natural world. Within this framework, natural phenomena are often interpreted symbolically, interweaving essential properties with coincidental traits. Interestingly, while reliance on divine guidance can encourage piety, it may sometimes raise the issue of blurred threshold between human autonomy and providence. This indistinctness may be compounded by “the lack of any technique for discriminating between essential and nonessential qualities of things... the inability to deduce general principles from specific experiences” (1970, p. 293).

However, the foregoing description may not simply be construed as evidence of cognitive limitation. Rather, it may be read as an alternative epistemology in which experiential knowledge, oral tradition, and spiritual authority are privileged over abstract rationalism. In other words, what may appear as superstition from a

Western analytic lens can, within Yorùbá thought, may be understood as a culturally coherent system of meaning that regulates behaviour, sustains communal identity, and mediates the relationship between humans and the divine. Yorùbá taboos therefore, against this backdrop, exemplify a distinct mode of reasoning—one that integrates morality, cosmology, and social regulation into a unified worldview (Akintan & Oyenuga, 2020). Before analysing specific taboos in the Theophrastean context, it is pertinent to further examine the Yorùbá concept of taboo within the framework of Yorùbá epistemology.

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English defines “taboo” (or “tabu”) as “something regarded by religion or custom as forbidden, not to be touched or spoken of” (Hornby, Cowie, & Gimson, 1994, p. 876). Beyond these general definitions, Yorùbá scholars have provided culturally grounded explanations. Daramola and Jeje (1976) describe *èèwò* as prohibitions rooted in religious and moral codes, designed to regulate behaviour and maintain harmony between humans and the spiritual world. Adeoye (1987) emphasises its role in sustaining communal discipline and cultural identity, while Raji (1992) highlights its cosmological dimension, linking taboos to ancestral authority and divine sanction.

Considered together, these perspectives show that Yorùbá taboos are not merely prohibitions but part of an alternative epistemology—an indigenous system of knowledge that integrates morality, cosmology, and social regulation. While Western definitions may frame taboos as restrictions or cognitive limitations, Yorùbá scholarship demonstrates that they function as instruments of moral instruction and cultural continuity, reinforcing identity and guiding everyday conduct. In closely knit communities such as the Yorùbás, awe inspired by many unexplainable occurrences has contributed to the use of taboos as a means to preserve unity, uphold values, and prevent dangers. Interestingly, “every aspect of Yorùbá social life is tabooed. For example, death, diseases, sex, excretion, bodily functions, food, imprisonment, etc., are tabooed. Behaviours

regarded as harmful are forbidden based on the people's beliefs" (Oyetade, 1994, p.92). This practice also establishes behavioural codes for both individuals and the community as a whole. Taboos are therefore seen as things that must be avoided or prohibited actions that all members of the community must feel compelled to observe for personal happiness and peaceful coexistence (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979, p. 211). Simply put, taboos play a significant role in shaping people's behaviour and social interactions. They establish rules and restrictions that guide individuals and communities, dictating what is considered acceptable or unacceptable while influencing daily actions, traditions, and moral beliefs. It should be noted, however, that *èèwò* varies among Yorùbá divinity worshipers, leading to the saying, "one man's meat is another man's poison." For instance, while a devotee of Ògún is free to drink palm wine and may even celebrate the god's festival with it, a worshipper of Òrìsà-nlá considers even tasting the drink taboo. Many taboos bind entire communities, regardless of individual cults or religious beliefs. The expressions "*A kúṣe*" (it is not done), "*èèwò ni*" (it is taboo), and "*a kò gbòdò*" (we must not) leave no room for choice, wielding potent authority over every member of the community. In a culture where elders issue instructions with finality, violations of taboos are often feared, and questioning their rationale is generally avoided. Though taboos may not always align with formal state laws, they function as unwritten rules that regulate behaviour and carry the same weight as legal statutes. Violating them can lead to consequences ranging from social ostracisation to supernatural repercussions.

Taboos serve as moral laws guiding both children and adults. Through the effective use of taboos, close surveillance of children is deemed unnecessary. Elderly members of the community, particularly women who often supervise children's activities, carry the traditional responsibility of passing down these taboos. Instructions are delivered constantly and are typically brief. They are unprinted laws etched into the hearts of children, reinforced by elders who declare authoritatively, "*Èèwò ni!*" (*It is a taboo!*). While

the reasons behind them are often left to a child's imagination, children may politely inquire further during their parents' leisure time (Thorpe, 1967, p. xiii).

Scholarly efforts are frequently directed toward articulating a rational foundation for these taboos. Rather than dismissing them as potentially deleterious perspectives of traditional societies or mere superstition. The taboos are often interpreted as integral to the preservation of cultural heritage or as manifestations of collective belief in supernatural forces that regulate human existence (Oyetade, 1994, p. 99). They may further be interpreted as precautionary measures designed to avert adverse outcomes, thereby reflecting a distinctive cultural orientation. This is particularly evident in the Yorùbá context, where certain religious practices and beliefs were initially devised to address specific exigencies or situational crises. Over time, practices that emerged from such pragmatic responses were subsequently recognised as beneficial and, in turn, assimilated into the broader religious framework. This pattern has been characterised as a pragmatic orientation to religion, wherein provisional solutions gradually crystallise into enduring traditions, as it is illustrated below:

Some of our elders, in their honesty, will not hesitate to say that some of the *trappings of the religion of the Yorùbá were first 'invented' to serve certain emergencies* but since they were found useful and good for religion, prudence has decreed that they should be allowed to stay on and there they are today (Idowu, 1962, p. 66, italics mine).

However, while this evolutionary trajectory illustrates how rituals and beliefs initially formulated as pragmatic responses to specific exigencies can become deeply implanted within the cultural and religious fabric, it also raises questions about the potential origin of superstitious practices. Certain practices, sustained without critical interrogation of their origins or purposes, may endure well beyond the contexts that once conferred their relevance. Fadipe (1970) may be understood as capturing this propensity as a failure to distinguish

core qualities from incidental ones and to derive general principles from particular experiences. (p. 293). This may be taken as a critique that highlights how taboos, when detached from their original rationale, may themselves exemplify distortion or exaggeration, particularly when prohibitions are extended beyond their initial scope.

Again, it bears repeating that later scholars caution against interpreting this solely as cognitive limitation (Adeoye, 1987; Daramola & Jeje, 1976; Raji, 1992). They emphasise instead that taboos function as moral and cosmological instruments, structuring social life and reinforcing communal identity. Nevertheless, Fadipe's (1970) observation can be read as suggesting that reliance on anecdotal evidence and personal experience, rather than systematic reasoning, contributes to the survival of practices that may no longer serve their original pragmatic or moral purpose. This tension parallels Theophrastus' caricature of the Superstitious Man, where excessive religiosity distorts proper reverence (*eusebeia*) into ritual obsession. Both Greek and Yorùbá traditions illustrate how communities embed fear, reverence, and divine authority into cultural psychology, though through distinct interpretive frameworks. This is illustrated by the taboos that are discussed below.

### **Yorùbá Taboos and Psychological Drive**

To illustrate the foregoing dynamic, ten selected taboos from Thorpe's *ÀwọnÈèwọ̀ Ilẹ̀ Yorùbá* (Taboos of Yorùbáland), translated from Yorùbá into English, are presented. Their background—including the 'reasons' behind them, the psychological foundations driving these beliefs, and their connection to superstition, is examined, with attention given to how they reinforce group identity and regulate behaviour.

- **Needle taboo: When purchasing a needle, the buyer must avoid calling it by its common name (*abéřé*) and instead use the euphemism *okinni*** (Thorpe, 1967, p. 3). Beyond associative reasoning, this practice reflects the social identity function of

taboo: linguistic avoidance signals membership in the community that recognises the euphemism, distinguishing insiders from outsiders. Superstition here is not merely irrational fear but a mechanism of boundary-maintenance, where shared language practices reinforce collective identity (cf. Tajfel, 1974). This practice exemplifies the psychology of superstition, in which meaning is assigned to events through possible past encounters or stories, while coincidences or repetitions are interpreted as signs, omens, or divine messages—even in the absence of any causal link (Vyse, 2014). The Superstitious Man would carry bay leaves or cast stone, engaging in ritualised avoidance of ordinary objects.

- *Pregnancy & photography*: **A pregnant woman must not take a picture of herself, as it is believed this could lead to her death** (Thorpe, 1967, p. 5). While the explanation foregrounds psychological vulnerability, the taboo also functions socially: it illustrates communal concern for maternal health and enforces collective vigilance. By prohibiting self-representation, the community symbolically asserts control over the liminal state of pregnancy, reinforcing solidarity through shared anxiety. Superstition here becomes a cultural script that channels fear into protective regulation (Brygger Venø et al., 2022). This is reminiscent of the Superstitious Man's avoidance of omens (for example, owl or weasel) that symbolise danger.
- *Coconut water*: **Drinking coconut water is forbidden, as it is believed to cause forgetfulness** (Thorpe, 1967, p. 27). The mystique surrounding coconut water exemplifies how unfamiliar phenomena invite caution. Socially, the taboo also interpretably marks cultural boundaries: abstention from coconut water signals conformity to group norms, while violation risks exclusion. Superstition thus operates as a disciplinary tool, inserting fear of cognitive decline into everyday dietary practice, and reinforcing identity through collective adherence (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). The

Superstitious Man would similarly assign mystical danger to ordinary substances.

- ***Mental illness and marketplace:*** A person who has just begun manifesting symptoms of mental illness or lunacy must not be allowed to appear in the marketplace in that state, as it is believed that such exposure may render the illness incurable (Thorpe, 1967, p. 39). Relatives make every effort to secure a private cure, particularly in the early stages, since public awareness of the illness is thought to make the condition irreversible. This belief may be understood as reflecting more than superstition: it may illustrate how communal identity is protected by regulating visibility in public spaces. The marketplace, as a central social arena, symbolises collective order, and the taboo functions to preserve group cohesion by shielding the community from perceived disorder. In this way, stigma operates as a mechanism of social control, aligning with findings that cultural interpretations of mental illness intertwine with supernatural explanations and shape treatment-seeking behaviour (Adekannbi et al., 2018). The taboo thus reinforces boundaries between the “healthy” collective and the “deviant” individual, a dynamic consistent with social identity theory, where exclusionary practices protect group norms. Superstition here becomes a cultural strategy for maintaining social stability, though it simultaneously perpetuates stigma (Rüsch et al., 2005). The Superstitious Man would similarly avoid corpses or confinement to preserve purity.
- ***Bride stumbling:*** A bride must not stumble on her way to her groom’s house, as stumbling is considered an omen of encountering obstacles in marriage (Thorpe, 1967, p. 113). While this reflects magical thinking and confirmation bias (Risen, 2016; Shermer, 2011), its social function is equally significant. The taboo demonstrates the transition into marital identity, etching communal expectations into the bride’s conduct. By interpreting a stumble as a portent of marital struggle, the

community reinforces vigilance around ritual performance, ensuring conformity to collective ideals of marriage. This belief can also create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948), shaping how couples interpret normal challenges. Within social identity theory, the taboo underscores how group norms are projected onto individual behaviour, with superstition serving as a symbolic mechanism for regulating identity at a critical life stage.

- *Children and hen's eggs: Children must not look at the eggs of a hen during incubation, or they will go blind* (Thorpe, 1967, p. 19). Beyond its psychological basis in operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953), the taboo functions as a regulatory tool for socialising children. By instilling fear, it discourages disruptive behaviour that could harm the community's food supply. Children's curiosity (Piaget, 1952) is redirected through fear-based prohibitions, inculcating obedience into early social identity formation. The taboo thus exemplifies how superstition operates as a pedagogical device: it conditions children to respect communal resources and aligns their behaviour with group norms. In this way, superstition is made to function as a culturally entrenched strategy for underpinning collective values through childhood socialisation (Bandura, 1977).
- *Rooster with curved tail: A rooster with a curved tail must not bring dirty objects into the house* (Thorpe, 1967, pp. 23–24). The taboo reflects the Yorùbá worldview that associates unusual animal traits with mystery and potential misfortune. While this aligns with superstitious conditioning (Skinner, 1948), its social function is equally observable. The prohibition infers communal anxieties about disorder, linking physical anomaly with spiritual danger. By enforcing cleanliness and order, the taboo reinforces collective identity around purity and domestic harmony. This makes superstition function as a cultural strategy for managing uncertainty and sustaining group cohesion (Okebukola, 1986; Omobola, 2013).

- *Rooster crowing at evening*: **A rooster must not crow in the evening** (Thorpe, 1967, p. 31). The association of an evening crow with impending misfortune exemplifies behavioural reinforcement (Ojebiyi, 2023). Yet the ritual response—elderly men killing and consuming the rooster—reveals deeper social dynamics. The act consolidates patriarchal authority, situating men as custodians of ritual power (Adebayo, 2021). Within social identity theory, this taboo strengthens hierarchical roles and gendered responsibilities, promoting communal order through ritualised superstition. The attribution of misfortune to the rooster externalises threat, while the ritual response reaffirms collective resilience (Kanu, Omojola, & Bazza, 2020; Ogundiran, 2024). The taboo provides a ritual mechanism for dealing with uncertainty since it is believed that if the rooster is killed, a potential misfortune is neutralised. The taboo echoes ritual appeasement—Superstitious Man builds shrines or sacrifices to avert danger.
- *Shattered mirror/photograph*: **A glazed photograph or mirror must not fall and shatter** (Thorpe, 1967, p. 42). While practical reasoning suggests weak hooks or ropes, the taboo interprets breakage as a portent of death. This belief exemplifies operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953) and cognitive superstition (Vyse, 2014). However, socially, it may represent the fragility of kinship bonds: the mirror or photograph symbolises family identity, and its shattering is read as a rupture in communal continuity. Although the cognitive theory of superstition suggests that such incident may be coincidental (Vyse, 2014), the taboo might be viewed as serving the cultural purpose of supporting vigilance and respect for household symbols, (Adeleye, 2020).
- *Butterfly entering house*: **A butterfly entering a residence signifies an impending visitor** (Thorpe, 1967, p. 80). Associative learning (Pavlov, 1927) explains the link between butterflies indoors and unexpected guests: the unusual sight of a butterfly indoors may have coincided with past experiences of unexpected

guests. However, the taboo also functions as a cultural reading for hospitality. By interpreting the butterfly as a sign, the community exhibits openness to social interaction and strengthens norms of welcoming. Within social identity theory, superstition here sustains collective values of sociability and reciprocity, bringing natural phenomena into the regulation of communal identity (Vyse, 2014; Omobola, 2013). The Superstitious Man would also interpret everyday signs (weasel crossing) as meaningful portents.

The taboos discussed above are deeply rooted in cultural tradition and can also be understood through the lens of Social Identity Theory. They illustrate how group norms and shared beliefs—including superstitions—not only guide behaviour but also reinforce a collective sense of security, identity, and belonging, shaping perceptions of risk and emotional resilience within the community.

### **Theophrastus’ Superstitious Man and Yorùbá Taboos: The Meeting Point**

The basis for associating Yorùbá taboos with superstition in this paper lies in the psychological and cultural functions of the taboos rather than in a normative dismissal of tradition. As Jahoda observes, superstition emerges “in situations of acute danger or distress...giving the person at least the feeling of having some control” (1969, p.146). Theophrastus’ Superstitious Man exemplifies this through excessive ritualism and avoidance behaviours, transforming ordinary signs into omens that demand ritual responses (Bowden, 2008; Ogden, 2010). While in a different epistemological context, Yorùbá taboos operate in a comparable manner: prohibitions such as forbidding a rooster’s evening crow or preventing children from viewing incubating eggs link everyday occurrences to misfortune, thereby ritualising fear into patterned conduct (Thorpe, 1967; Oyetade, 1994).

These practices embody cognitive mechanisms of magical thinking and associative reasoning (Risen, 2016; Vyse, 2019), while Social Identity Theory clarifies how they reinforce group belonging

and communal cohesion (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In both Theophrastus' account and Yorùbá practice, ritualised behaviours emerge as cultural strategies for managing uncertainty and sustaining identity. The superstitious individual's elaborate rituals—washing at sacred springs, casting stones after a cat crosses his path—reflect cognitive biases that transform random events into structured acts of control. Yorùbá taboos function similarly, but within a communal epistemology that embeds fear into culturally sanctioned prohibitions, channeling uncertainty into predictable patterns of behaviour that sustain cohesion and moral order (Idowu, 1962; Fadipe, 1970; Akintan & Oyenuga, 2020). Therefore, it can be theorised that Theophrastus' Superstitious Man offers a lens through which to view Yorùbá taboos as instruments that transform anxiety into structured ritual and symbolism.

Placed side by side, the Yorùbá man governed by taboos and Theophrastus' Superstitious Man converge on several analytical points:

- *Fear as Cultural Capital*: Fear of misfortune is not merely personal but socially productive. In both contexts, fear is ritualised into practices that sustain group identity—whether through Greek omens or Yorùbá prohibitions.
- *Ritual as Anxiety Management*: Ritualistic behaviour provides psychological comfort by transforming uncertainty into controllable acts. SIT posits these rituals are not just eccentricities but performative signals of belonging, reinforcing in-group norms.
- *Meaning-Making through Association*: Ordinary events (a bride's stumble, a weasel crossing) are interpreted as signs of fate. This reflects a universal cognitive tendency to impose causality, but culturally framed as moral or cosmological instruction.
- *Community as Enforcer*: Both figures are rooted in collective systems. The Greek intellectual milieu critiques superstition as folly, while Yorùbá elders enforce taboos as binding moral law.

In each case, the community legitimises and perpetuates the practices, ensuring their continuity.

## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that Yorùbá taboos, when examined alongside Theophrastus' Superstitious Man, reveal a shared psychological architecture of superstition. Both traditions show how fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability are ritualised into patterned behaviours that sustain collective identity. From perspectives of cultural psychology and Social Identity Theory, taboos emerge as mechanisms of boundary maintenance, anxiety regulation, and social cohesion. Theophrastus' caricature illustrates how cognitive biases—such as magical thinking and associative reasoning—transform commonplace events into omens, compelling ritual responses. Yorùbá taboos operate similarly, but within a communal epistemology that integrates morality, cosmology, and social regulation. In both cases, ritualised avoidance and symbolic interpretation provide individuals with a sense of agency, while simultaneously reinforcing group norms and cultural identity.

This comparative analysis advances Yorùbá taboo scholarship beyond ethnographic description by locating these practices within a universal psychological framework. Taboos can thus be viewed as cultural technologies of fear management and identity construction, illustrating how what may be understood as superstition, functions as a cross-cultural strategy for negotiating uncertainty, channeling fear into ritualised behaviour, and sustaining communal cohesion.

By foregrounding the psychological dimensions of taboo, this study highlights how Theophrastus' Superstitious Man may shape understanding of cultural practices across time and geography. Yorùbá taboos, therefore, are not isolated cultural curiosities but concrete examples of the enduring processes through which human societies ritualise vulnerability, transform anxiety into patterned conduct, and reinforce collective identity.

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