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A Portrayal of the Supernatural Fixation in the *Iliad* and *Works and Days* with Allusion to an African Belief System

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Introduction

The Ancient Greeks with the influence of their philosophical tradition departed from a mythological approach to explaining the world, and gradually replaced this with an approach that laid more emphasis on reason and evidence. Beginning with concern with explanation for the whole cosmos, the Presocratic philosophers, despite their diverse theories, strove to identify a verifiable underlying principle of the universe. Even when they never achieved a consensus, they succeeded in laying foundation for the quest to discover underlying principles.

This new outlook of the ancient Greeks ignited a strong desire to investigate the key place of reason and human sensory faculties. The pursuit then took the turn of seeking to understand ways by which knowledge could be acquired and what indeed constituted knowledge. Hence, the birth of the Greek philosophy: 'the love of wisdom'.

With Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle taking the lead in the field of Metaphysics, Epistemology and Ethics, the perception of the world by the Greeks began to reflect more of the role of the human being rather than a resort to supernatural explanation for virtually all man's experiences and the material world.

However, Homer's *Iliad* and *Hesiod's Works and Days* invoke a different image of the socio-religious landscape of the early Greek society. Of particular interest is the obsession with fear of the supernatural, which is frequently rendered as superstition in this article. While the *Iliad* is occupied with Heroic deeds, *Works and Days* is full of the activities of the peasantry. Yet, both works have the common theme of cosmic myths and anxiety over the intervention of the gods in human affairs, a constant feature of the early Greek society. An attempt is made to provide a concise explanation for this prevailing ambiance

by making some allusion to the traditional Yoruba epistemology later in the article.

A Perception of the Early Greek Society in the *Iliad*

One of the earliest manifestations of man's fixation over the authority of the supernatural in human's affairs is found in what is believed to be the oldest of the Greeks' literature, the *Iliad* of Homer. Apart from frequent mention of other features of the Greek religion such as omens and sacrifices, the epic poem is dominated by the theme of fate, a clear portrayal of the obsession of the Bronze Age, when every phenomenon or idea conceived by the Greeks was perceived as the gods speaking to them in low voices. So much was the people's interest in the gods that the Greeks could talk about the immortals going to sleep (Homer, *Iliad*: 2. 1). While the historical basis for the *Iliad* will continue to generate debate among ancient scholars, the scepticism of the 5th century would not prevent the Greeks from generally seeing the world of the Homeric epic as the foundation of the Greek world and a source for the Greek history.

In the world of Homer, any courage displayed by man was viewed as the gods' urging him on, and when he weakened out of fear, the gods must be in opposition to him. The obsession in *Iliad* stems from the attitude of man or his mentality; it appears sometimes as if his destiny is dependent on his actions and decision, but most times, he is helpless, having little or no control at all over his life course. Homer presents man as ever conscious of the vindictiveness of the gods which manifests when humans fail to offer the right sacrifice or when any aspect of the worship of the gods suffers neglect. The word superstition in this context then describes when people are less inclined to see their failure as

resulting from inadequacy or inability to understand and control either natural phenomena or their own emotions, as it could be seen in the case of Achilles.

The opening words of *Iliad* introduces the Greeks' concept of man as mere tools in the hands of the gods: 'anger be now your song, immortal one Achilles, doomed and ruinous, that caused the Achaeans loss and crowded brave souls into the undergloom, leaving so many dead men carrion for dogs and birds; *and the will of Zeus was done* (Homer, *Iliad*: 1. 1-6. Italic is mine). Even when 'Achilles' anger' is associated with the doom of the Achaeans, 'the will of Zeus' is used to account for what might be termed lack of restraint over the hero's emotion when the need for this was far greater than conquering a mighty walled city in the ancient world.

Clearly, the 'will of Zeus' is the overriding force permeating Homer's work. For example, Book 22 contains an account that presents man, although capable of rational thinking and admired for his power or prowess, as being in the tight grip of the immortals, particularly, Zeus:

But when, for the fourth time they reached the spring The Father poised his golden scales. He placed two shapes of death, death prone and cold Upon them, one of Achilles, one of the horseman, Hector, and held the midpoint, pulling upward down sank Hector's fatal day, the Pan went down toward undergloom, and Phoibos Apollo left him. (Homer, *Iliad*: 22. 248-254)

The common superstitious trait in *Iliad* is seen in the characters' constant fatalistic reference either to their own end or to others' destiny. Obsession with death is not strange in a world where the gods are portrayed as seeing nothing wrong in acquainting, even their favourites, with their future misfortunes and making them live with the thought of the irreversible lot in life.

An instance of this is in Book 1, where Thetis, Achilles' mother tells her son: 'alas my child, why did I rear you, doomed the day I bore you? Ah, could you only be serene upon this beachhead through the siege, your life runs out so soon. Oh early death! Oh broken heart! No destiny so cruel! And I bore you to this evil!' (Homer, *Iliad*: 1. 496-498).

Interestingly, man in the world of the Homeric epic does not passively live with the knowledge of ill fate. As soon as it is revealed to him, either through his own inquiry or purposefully by the gods, he becomes haunted by fear. Although he musters up all courage, man is perceived as struggling in vain against the irrevocable wills of the superhuman forces that do all to ensure the schemes and designs of the immortals come to past. Hera, using Achilles' horse as her mouthpiece, makes a pronouncement that may illustrate the misery of a mortal constantly living with the thought of disaster: 'yes, we shall save you, this time too, Achilles in your strength! Yet, the day of your destruction comes, and it is nearer. We are not the cause, but rather a great god is, and mighty Fate' (Homer, *Iliad*: 19. 483-486). The great Achilles soon sees death all around him and inescapable despite his illustrious background, bemoaning his lot, he only hopes for the day of his misfortune:

I am, and how well made? My father is a noble, a goddess bore me, for me as well, in all the power of fate. A morning or evening or high noon when someone takes my life away in war, a spear-cast, or an arrow from a bowstring' (Homer, *Iliad*: 21. 122-128).

The above examples are only representative of the notion of superstition in the *Iliad*, and with many other related instances in the book, the conclusion that a superstitious view of life

dominates is not farfetched. Debates will continue on whether or not a man's fate or destiny is controlled by his actions or by the supernatural forces. Or better still, the issue of who ultimately should bear the responsibility for human actions or inactions remains arguable. While the example of Achilles above portrays man as culpable, it also shows man struggling to no avail to wrest himself from the overwhelmingly tight grip of the divine ones. Although this concept of life is rooted in religion, it tends to set limit for human self-assertion. It is obvious then in the book that the extent to which human's will is expressed is often subject to his belief in the shackles of destiny; the thought of the tenaciously binding laws with which he apparently grapples from birth to death. This often diminishes his determination to succeed and, perhaps, make him an object of pity as it is seen with Achilles.

It is noteworthy, though, that a casual reading of *Iliad* may reveal that the will of Zeus, mentioned at the outset of this article, could be nothing other than the meaningless death of Heroes and desolation of many homes. This is a paradox; attributing of carnage merely to "the will of the gods" when this is generally devoid of human responsibility could pass for a subjective naive reasoning of superstition. When Homer attributes to the gods all the actions that are shameful and blameworthy among men, one may raise the question of where the will of man really lies or if he has any at all.

The claim, however, is potent, that man is crediting the gods with his own image, endowing them with features and attributes that he deems appropriate or best serves his purpose. Even when there may be some reservations for this position, the leaning of holding the supernatural being ultimately accountable for human errors and misfortune is clearly permissible in the *Iliad*.

Hence, the conclusion that man's worship of the gods and imploring them for help or protection is not necessarily grounded on love for the immortals but on morbid fear may follow.

Hesiod and the Greek World of Fear

Hesiod, one of the earliest Greek epic poets often compared and contrasted with Homer, giving a picture of peasant life that dates back to the archaic period provides another glimpse of superstition in the early Greek society. He writes about some religious scruples governing different facets of human life in *Works and Days*. In the work that could be viewed as a major source for the social condition in the emerging *poleis*, elements of superstition are obvious in the advice he gives on different facets of human activity: moral, agriculture, sea-faring and social conducts.

Apparently, the notion of constant dreadful fear of the gods and the unknown runs through his work and indeed constitutes the background to the prevalent taboos of the time that the poet gives a legalistic force. Hesiod, evidently out of apprehension about the invisible realm, tends to rule out the possibility of accidental occurrence. He notes, 'if a man chances on victims burning in sacrifice, let him not mock the unknown and thus anger some god' (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 755). This suggests the thinking that a god is out there to promptly pick offense at any unwitting action. The worry of the time manifestly includes fear of the dead, therefore, the warning: 'it is not good for boys twelve days or twelve years old to sit on that which is motionless, for such an act unmans even a man in his prime' (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 750).

'That which is motionless' could be understood as a reference to tombs, or the condition of the dead. The significance of the

number, twelve is not certain. However, the reason why boys, and not girls, can be harmed by sitting on the tomb could be deduced. It is rooted in the belief that the dead in the underworld possess powers that are hostile to life and fertility, and it is the man (or boy) carrying the seed of life that is more easily subject to the harmful influences. (Athanasakis, 1993:107). Another action that supposedly can 'unman' a man is expressed in the taboo: 'a man should not sleek his body with a woman's bath water, for in time this is cruelly punished' (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 753). A possible reason for using any water having such contact with a woman's body is given thus: 'it is widespread belief among primitive people that contact with the 'weaker sex' weakens men. This is the idea that lies behind taboos that forbid men to eat even with their wives' (Athanasakis, 1993: 107).

An area where one may see superstition as very rife in Hesiod's days is in the observation of days. Hesiod's work is one of the Classical sources that abound in evidence of the ancient Greeks' considering some days holy or auspicious and other days unholy or inauspicious. With this background, it is not difficult to imagine both private and public important function being cancelled abruptly at the sight of sign that appeared to make it inauspicious. While one may be quick to see this as an aspect of religion, the attention that is now given to Hesiod's scheme of days that are good or bad for certain events or activities might give nothing but a picture of the superstitious inclines of the ancient time.

The poet does not see all days as suitable 'for overseeing work and giving men their rations'; 'the thirtieth day' is rather deemed best since that would be most appropriate to Zeus who according to him, determines the days when certain activities should be carried out (Hesiod,

Works and Days: 765). 'The first', 'the fourth,' 'the seventh' days are labelled as 'most sacred'. Men are equally expected to be conscious of 'the eight and the ninth' days for these 'outstanding days are meant for them to engage in work' (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 770-773). While Hesiod recommends 'the eleventh and twelfth' days for 'shearing sheep and reaping a fine harvest's', preference is given to 'the twelfth' day when 'spiders hover in the air and spin their yarn at this day's fullness' (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 775-778). Further encouraging elaborate slavish observation of days, Hesiod cautions:

Do not start sowing on the thirteenth of Days waxing of month; this day is best for nurturing plants. The sixth day of mid month does not favour plants but it is good for the birth of boys; it does not favour either the birth or the marriage of girls (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 780-784).

The poet would also account for 'the birth of boys who are sharp tongued and who lie and coax and are fond of secret whispers'. These, he simply concludes, are the children born on 'sixth day of the month's first part'. (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 785-789). Observation of days is likewise crucial in getting married. Although 'the fourth of the month' is considered ideal, yet, the man must go about things with care. Implying that flight of a bird should have a bearing on his decision, the man is advised to 'first watch for the bird signs best for the venture (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 800/1). And while the empirical basis for reaching the conclusion is evidently lacking. Hesiod goes on to assert the "science" of his world, saying:

The ninth of midmonth is better toward evening, and the least harm for men is found in the first ninth; this is a good day for men and women both to plant offspring and to be born themselves. Yes this day is never all bad (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 811-814).

Seemingly with all sense of good judgment, he recommends twenty-seventh day, claiming that it is the best day that only few men know and call by 'its true name' (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 814,818). Although without any verifiable basis, Hesiod appears to have observed days so much that he asserts:

Few men know that after the twentieth of the month. The fourth is the best at dawn and not as good toward evening. The people of this earth profit greatly from these days. The other days are meaningless, untouched by future. Men have days they favour, but few really know. (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 820-825)

Hesiod concludes on a strong note, expecting no one who wanted to succeed in his time to disregard his recommendations as mere products of conjectures: 'happy and blessed is the man who knows all this and does his work without offending the immortals, ever watching birds of omen, ever shunning transgression' (Hesiod, *Works and Days*: 825-828).

Prescriptions made here sound more imposing than mere religious options available to the people of the time; indeed, they convey the sense of rules that govern daily actions or decision-making in a society that was apt to see the gods' or unseen forces' routine interference in practically all human dealings. A brief examination of Hesiod's *Work and Days* furnishes some evidence of superstition stemming from the ancient fears and taboos; the subjective trend that persisted into the Classical period.

An African Interpretation of the Greek Concept of the Supernatural

This socio-religious air of the Greek society is explainable with a look at the belief system of the Yoruba who are mostly found in the western part of Nigeria. Concerning the people's

perception of human experiences that really applies to the early Greek society, it is important to readily recognise that 'there is an intertwining web of their science and religion, so much so that one cannot be separated from the other' (Jegede, 2010: 2). Hence, the Yoruba cosmos is a matter of a dynamic interplay of the physical and spiritual forces. This, viewed as scientific, hardly leaves any room for the notion of superstition. The background makes the concept of superstition completely alien to the traditional Yoruba society as it was to the Greeks'. *Alagba* Adebayo Faleti, a well-known authority in the Yoruba culture, came up with the word *abamoda* (proposition), in the interview he granted on the Yoruba's view of the word superstition (Adekannbi, 2007: 2). In his opinion, an individual may contend with a traditional belief or suggest something different, tending to spurn the possibility of a dire consequence. However, he argued that this was not the trend in the traditional Yoruba society where the saying, *ma-se e, aye ni n gbe, to-ba-se e -n -ko, n be lajule orun* (a person who desists from violating a taboo will continue to live on earth, but anyone who dares the consequences of violating a taboo will die) was no empty threat. Hence, there was neither the thought of irrationality in the view of a taboo, nor was there a notion of any abnormality or excessiveness in the fear of the supernatural.

Besides, challenging a taboo or a traditional religious belief could be a mere proposition, and perhaps in this context, doing so in the Yoruba society may rather be seen as "superstitious", the foolhardy act which the traditional Yoruba believe would not go unpunished by the gods. The generally strong belief as well as the attachment to taboos and others religious tenets were supposedly products of the real life experiences of the people, when calamitous consequences

result from ignoring warnings on portents. Further, preoccupation with these beliefs and the practices associated with them were never seen as irrational, but rather as the degree of devotion that may be expressions of earnest request or borne out of appreciation. High Chief S.K Olajide, a Lecturer at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, observed during another interview that the traditional Yoruba, governed by the principle of a reciprocal relationship, well knew what their gods wanted; the more an individual generously gave to them, the more he could hope to gain from the supernatural sources. Additionally, he concluded that there was nothing abnormal about obeying whatever instruction a worshiper believed came from his deity.

Rather than tending toward reductionism, the Yoruba approach is holistic in the interpretation of the human society. This stance never allows for playing down the relevance of the metaphysical world in understanding the physical world. If anything goes wrong in the latter, the former is always seen as having a role to play. The use of superstition in examining the Yoruba belief system could then be seen as part of the controversy over the use of the word, which is joined on the premise that, what is viewed as a religion in a context may be labelled as superstition in another.

The Yoruba epistemology, briefly touched here, provides some insight into the Greeks' perception of their world. Both Homer and Hesiod in their works considered above present the constant influence of the gods in every affair of man. It is logical then to conclude that the Greeks, just like the Yoruba, generally would not separate their physical world from the spiritual one. This is the picture portrayed in *Iliad* and *Works and Days*. Whatever a man does often

finds explanation in the support from the gods or lack of it; from the activity of the Hero fighting in wars to that of a peasant tilling the ground. An offer to the gods is expected to have a mutual benefit to the gods and the provider of the sacrifice.

Conclusion

However relative it may be though, more often than not, the term superstition in Classical and modern contexts has been used to depict traits such as 'excessive fear of the gods, unreasonable religious beliefs' (Charlton and Short, 1879:1809). Vis-a-vis some worrisome societal ills and vices, particularly socio-religious ones, these behaviours are seen as products of unsound mind, or better still, fertile sources of faulty reasoning. It is termed 'baffled amazement', linked with 'beliefs, habits...which we regard as not being founded on reasonable conceptions of the world and or human life' (Hastings, 1971: 120). This implies that it is superstitious to have the disposition, or tendency of ascribing phenomena that have some options of explanation, usually according to the natural laws, to occult or supernatural causes. Worthy of note in association with this incline is the morbid or abject attitude springing from the mind that is paralysed by illusory fear of the unknown.

The term "superstition" may sound harsh and judgmental, yet, it remains that, while education or enlightenment may shape view of the supernatural world, there continues to be so much influence of the spirit realm that individuals' as well as groups' values constantly reflect an awful mix of hope and fears. Hence, while Homer's *Iliad* may simply be dismissed as an account of myths, and Hesiod's *Works and Days* may look like an exercise in absurdity, yet the works exemplify an ancient concept that still finds

parallels in parts of Africa where 'believing in the dead ancestors, evil spirits or witches as influencing daily activities and relying on divination, magic and the use of incantation in solving problems' (Adekannbi, 2009: 109) persist with vigour. Now, the trend increases often under the guises of supposed religions of light and make people cower like characters of the Homeric epic and students who absorb instructions from Hesiod.

The belief that supernatural beings act to influence and intervene in human affairs benevolently or malevolently is widespread. While researches in Africa continue to support identifying positive aspects of the culture that engenders development, they should also highlight cultural elements that work against growth. Researches should investigate allegations of absurd claims and conceptions, as well as irrational beliefs in African thoughts and culture that permeate family life, farming, trading, politics, and are now very rife in film industry.

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