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**TIBULLUS' POEMS AND ISSUES ON
YORUBA BELIEFS**

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ABSTRACT

The human society has a history of exposure to strange or incomprehensible experiences. Different explanations and interpretations have been employed in coming to terms with puzzling occurrences for ages, and here is a consideration of superstition, the subjective pattern that often guides or accounts for human perceptions and behaviours, either as individuals or as a group, which may be overt and obvious to others or inward. Superstition in this context is treated as a belief that is held on to, even when an empirical basis is lacking.

The paper employs the work of the Roman poet, Tibullus and some Yoruba beliefs to examine behaviours to which human beings attach a specific meaning or set of meanings that are challenged from time to time by reasoning considered more enlightened. In addition to underlining the personal subjective meanings of Roman and Yoruba beliefs, the paper partly depicts how social and religious structures influence self-goals, and problem-solving activities, calling on man to bear some responsibility for his action or inaction.

Introduction

The predisposition to shift responsibility for human action or inaction to supernatural agents characterises the poems of Tibullus (a Latin elegiac poet, born in an equestrian family).

This view of his work can be traced to the ancient attitude of the Romans that ascribed prodigies in form of omens and auguries of every description as the means by which the gods furnished warnings against imminent dangers or expressed their wraths. Indicating the extent of dependency, the religious features were just like road maps to the people who would not hesitate to account for every blessing or misfortune on the basis of strange incidents or wonderful appearances. This notion, similarly, finds expression in the traditional Yoruba belief system or epistemology, where there are spiritual explanations for virtually every occurrence, even when these may conflict with empirical evidence. The tendency to readily ascribe the term 'mystery' to puzzling situations or fear-portending experiences has often been termed as superstition. This paper considers some of the beliefs that may engender the practices in Books I-III of Tibullus' poems and some Yoruba beliefs.

Belief in the Spirit and Ancestors

Tibullus' poems epitomise the Roman religion. While they effectively convey the writer's fondness for rural life, they equally provide a glimpse of a superstitious life. First, in Book I, the poet draws attention to the gods the people associated with the crossings of the paths that separated one estate from another, which were also worshipped in private houses – Lares. Lares, as deities of farmland, are referred to as the 'protectors of a prosperous estate and now of a poor one', suggesting that the deity was seen as responsible for both good and bad harvest¹. Tibullus further shows the extent of reliance of the rural people on the Lares for their bountiful harvest that they would naturally desire:

You my Lares, you also
take your dues; in these
days a slaughtered heifer
purified unnumbered
bullocks. Now a lamb is
the small victim for my
tiny plot. A lamb shall
fall indeed for you, and
round it the youth of the
country shall shout
hooray! Give good
harvest and give good
wine!²

Interestingly, both bumper and lean harvests are here readily attributed to the Lares and neither to any failure in the way the farmer cultivates the ground, nor, to some natural occurrences. Farmers were well known with the practice of venerating isolated tree stumps since they saw everywhere, spirits, who when not opposing, were seen as assisting them and therefore in need of appeasement or thanksgiving. In this belief atmosphere where farmers disposed to holding the Lares responsible for whatever outputs they had, the superstitious tendency to attribute to the spirits crop failure resulting from using poor farming methods is not hard to imagine. Although Lares were originally associated with farmlands, it is noteworthy that their influence extended to include guardianship of crossways, roads and wayfarers. So potent was their control that they were embraced as state guardians.

Romans' belief in the guardianship of the Lares who were conceived as the spirit or ghost of the dead, can find a parallel

in the Yoruba belief system. The West African tribe hold in common with other Africans the belief in conscious existence of the deceased ancestors. To them, even when the thought appears contradictory, the dead are not dead after all, or they are the 'living-dead'.³ The belief system also dwells on partial reincarnation as well as continuity of life in heaven or 'the great beyond'. In other words death is simply viewed as a passage to another life or 'transition'. The Yoruba concept of an ancestor means more than one's progenitor or forefather. Ancestors in the belief system include all the departed spirits of ancestors to whom the living could turn for help. These, especially, would be only those who led a good life and left behind worthy children. The degree of respect given an ancestor, generally, is subject to the extent of his prominence and praiseworthiness when alive. Usually, male progenitors are esteemed as more important in the community of ancestors so that a man's father at his death functions as the man's link with the spirit world with which contacts are made by prayers and offerings.

There was a custom of digging graves inside the house, and in particular rooms, supposedly to maintain close contact with the ancestors via the pouring of libations, breaking of kola-nuts and praying on the grave of the deceased, which otherwise would not be convenient when they are buried in the common cemeteries. With the belief in the persistence of the human personality beyond the present life, the Yoruba from time to time provide food for the departed spirits, thinking that the more offerings they make the more they improve the state of their ancestors and the favour they enjoy from them. The living believe that neither can witches and sorcerers harm nor can bad medicine have any effect on them unless their

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ancestors are in a slumber or are indifferent to their welfare. Although the ancestors are viewed as superhuman or as beings in the spirit realm who could see everything at anytime, when in a serious strait, the living appeal to the departed father to be vigilant and come to their rescue, saying, *Bàbá mi má sùn l'òrun* (my father do not be asleep in heaven).

Similarly, when a woman experiences a protracted labour, a family will consult the oracle to find out the cause, and if the anger of the ancestors is said to be the reason for the extra labour pains of their daughter, offerings with things such as kola-nuts, gin, a goat and, possibly, a very expensive cloth of the woman in labour would be made. This belief could be another root of superstitious practices. It is not strange to hear about people pleading poverty for failing in their responsibility to provide for the type of education they desire for their children while they go to any length in sourcing for money to sponsor extravagant and ostentatious burial ceremonies. People sometimes enjoy the illusion of their children benefiting from quality free education while they indulge in the custom of wasteful living with the hope of finding the favour with the dead. This attitude, which is also viewed as an act of goodness to the dead is rooted in culture.

However, (ignoring the fear of sounding judgmental) some families evidently wallow in abject poverty despite their persistently supplicating the ancestors. Sometimes this may result from failure to live within their means, inadequate efforts or ineffective exertion in handling life's challenges. The belief suggests that loved ones become cruel, unfeeling, and perhaps unreasonable toward their survivors as soon as they supposedly join the spirit world. The ancestors seem oblivious of the suffering of the living and unconcerned about whether those

they leave behind incur debts to perform rituals in order to be at peace with them or placate the spirit world. There have been cases of expensive burial ceremonies held supposedly to 'turn the back' of ancestors who died many decades ago. While this may be seen as a choice based on cultural values, squandering scarce resources to entertain men who are no more than merry-makers as an expression of love or loyalty to the dead when the survivors are hardly capable of any descent living, may rightly be seen as an undue preoccupation with the spirit realm.

While the case of protracted labour in pregnancy may no longer be a strange medical problem, belief in ancestors may mystify it. When a woman experiences difficulty in childbirth, with a superstitious incline, the subjective reasoning that this is an expression of the anger of an ancestor quickly comes up. The superstitious tendency readily leads to wrongly attributing the plight to an 'incensed dead loved one' when apparently the available medical care is inadequate or has not been reasonably utilised. There is no gainsaying the fact that lives are lost to such superstitious disposition.

Divination, Incantation and Magical Power

Another prominent feature of the Roman religion which also receives Tibullus' attention is divination. In the same manner as the Greeks, the Romans were fond of seeing omens in dreams and various natural phenomena that included strange occurrences in the course of sacrifices, as well as in the performances of birds. These aspects of the Roman religion were designated to the god, Apollo and his priests. Tibullus, in Book II, describes the influence of this integral part of the people's life thus:

You see the distant events
to come; the augur in
your service knows well
what fate the prescient
bird song tells. You
govern the fall of lots,
and the seer's sense of the
future when the god
marks the slippery
entrails with his signs.⁴

Dreams, according to Tibullus, were similarly sources of worry of the night. Seen as omens, these again and again prompted men to turn to the altars and bestow the gods with sacrifices. Whether or not the people consider any warning supposedly received from superhuman sources as genuine, the fear is real, causing a panic-stricken mind originating from a bad dream to make the petition: 'I pray to Luccina to make my fears groundless and to will it that I shall have been causelessly terrified having deserved no such thing.'⁵ At other times, chanting of spells may be the action that would be taken to ward off any possible evil.⁶

It bears repeating that superstitious tendency played an important role in the Romans' private life. A trip could be cancelled or delayed owing to this incline, and misfortune could be deemed the outcome of ignoring supposed warnings of phenomena. Tibullus next illustrates this:

Thrice she drew lots to
see what they would tell;
thrice said the acolyte that
all was well... I cheered
her but when all was set

to part, wildly sought
reasons delay my start;
made birds or ominous
words pretext to stay, or
claimed I could not leave
on Saturn's day. I set off,
but how often did I see in
each false step presage of
misery. Venture no
partings Cupid has not
blessed, you will live to
know you've flouted his
behest.⁷

With experiences such as the one in the quotation above, the Romans would hardly embark on any serious enterprise without first ascertaining that there was a 'favourable' omen. The practice was more than a private habit though; it applied with equal force in public affairs where Sibylline books, the official document for divination were regularly consulted.

In a similar vein, the traditional Yoruba believe that the supernatural beings control virtually all human affairs. This may imply that the beings are expected to take full responsibility for whatever happens. Here lies an explanation for why divination is a prominent facet of the people's belief. Divination is defined as 'seeking to discover the unknown and the future by manipulating some supernatural means and seeking guidance from supernatural sources.'⁸ Concerning the etymology of *Ifa* divination, some writers say that the word *Ifa* comes from the root 'fa', which means 'to scrape' or in idiomatic sense, 'to embrace', 'to contain.'⁹ Indeed, the

'embrace' of the supernatural world really matters in the traditional belief system.

Hence, divination to the Yoruba begins early in the life of a child; the oracle is consulted to know what the future holds. As he makes progress in life, *Babaláwo* (the priest specially trained in the mysteries of interpreting divine messages), must always be at his disposal since he is believed to know better; when he should get married, who to marry and perhaps, where to marry. The priest is also to be consulted to inquire the career to pursue, when and where a house is to be built. When journeys are to be made, divination is a 'road map.'¹⁰

Coming to terms with powers that influence the world seems a wise course of action, hence, the need for divination to know the plans of the forces, how to forestall evils, or propitiate the gods. The boundary between religion and superstition admittedly may be obscure. However, while controversy tends to arise over simply labelling divination as superstition, the rationality of an individual persisting in its practice when evidently other relevant factors or practical efforts are neglected, will continue to raise questions that the word superstition just fittingly provides an answer for. Evidently, it has taken more than divination to realise that sudden death or frequent illness among children which is attributed to witches in the past could have been caused by sickle-cell anemia and other similar diseases. A negative effect of undue reliance on divination is depicted as follows:

With so much reliance on
divination, the traditional
Yoruba would rather
believe the herbalist who
tells him that he is being

destroyed by witches than
trust the professor of
medicine who says that
he is a sickler and no
more.¹¹

With a lot of trust in divination to interpret virtually every life situation, one can only expect a priest who lacks the true knowledge of the matter to prescribe a sacrifice that would be offered in vain. His case is no better than that of a medical doctor who prescribes a drug without proper diagnosis. This kind of leaning toward divination tends to produce a society that flourishes with charlatans who take advantage of the immense entanglement of superstition among those who exhibit undue preoccupation with the supernatural. Even when divination passes for an aspect of a religion, wrong expectation from its practice fits a definition of superstition.

Other superstitious instances related in Tibullus' poems stemmed from primordial habits that with passage of time became the instinctive behaviours of the people. These age-old acts include spitting to ward off evils that might result from another man's misfortune. For example there is mention of youths and boys jostling round and each spitting in his breasts for protection and to forestall an infection.¹²

Tibullus also mentions the use of magic even in a love affair, where personal choice should ordinarily be respected:

I learnt this through
witch's magic arts. I have
seen her drawing stars
down from the sky and
turning rapid streams by

sorcery; she splits the soil, and from beneath their stones draws ghosts...She knows Medea's every poisonous herb... She wrote a spell, that you might steal his wit. Chant it three times and after each time spit. Then he won't credit anything that's said not his own eyes that see us both in bed.¹³

By Tibullus' time, magic was a well-known phenomenon and further references to this are in expressions like: 'has some old woman put a spell on you ...or charmed you with brew?', 'this downfall was laid by spell or herbs.'¹⁴ Use of incantations is cited by the poet as another magical art.¹⁵ Such use of magic could well be accommodated by a system that is too preoccupied with the supernatural world

Spoken words are affected as well in the Roman's thought of the spirit realm. The people believed that words uttered could influence the treatment that would be received from the gods or the spirits. Tibullus cites an instance of this: 'we must speak words of good omen; Natalis is coming to the altar: All present ... be careful what you say.' Natalis was known as the 'Guardian spirit' particularly worshipped on the birthday. Apart from being careful as to what is said on this day when Natalis supposedly visits, it is equally a day to 'burn the due incense' and 'the perfumes from' the rich Arab land.¹⁶ Sanctity

given to this day is reminiscent of Hesiod's scrupulous observation of days. Again, while this may be seen as part of a religious rite, it could extend to another human sphere—superstition, where human failure is merely ascribed to a wrong choice of words.

The Yoruba's belief in the supersensible world powers that cause and control the phenomena of nature and the possibility of establishing contact with these mysterious powers were not just dismissible notions in the traditional society. Use of incantations, amulets, spells, enchanted rings, horns, small gourds, padlocks, alligator pepper and many other objects is often employed by practitioners of magic to trap and control supernatural resources in the universe. This has a sociological background:

certain belief underlies the use and practice of *ofò* [incantation]. first is the belief in sympathies, for Yoruba ontology accepts a belief in an impersonal dynamic vital force which is immanent in varying degrees in all things, animate and inanimate, and inhuman or supra-human beings¹⁷

Incantations involve chanting or uttering of words that are considered magically potent. Such words are sometimes accompanied with objects that have medicinal powers, such as a ring (*òrùka*) amulet (*Ifìmpá*), girdle (*ìgbàdí*) small gourd (*àdó*) apron (*bànté*) and needle (*abéré*). Incantations have reportedly been used along with these objects to escape death, to disappear when danger is imminent, to escape a fatal accident, to attack an enemy or wild animal and to stupefy

thieves. There is also *egbé*, a charm that supposedly takes a person physically from one location to the other in order to forestall dangerous encounters. *Kánàkò*, a charm considered to be a necessary possession for travellers was reportedly used to shorten distance in the traditional society when people were accustomed to trekking long distances and modern means of transportation were unavailable. A job seeker could also employ incantations. Some herbal preparations to be accompanied with these incantations are made for him. Along with the herbal preparation, the individual utters the following words with the hope of getting a job:

<i>È bú mi wásé</i>	Help look for a job,
<i>È fòrò mi ló</i>	Tell my problem to the other
<i>È feti keti</i>	Whisper to every ear
<i>È fòrò mi lo</i>	And proclaim my need;
<i>Bí alántakùn ilé bú tàwú</i>	When the home-spider makes his web
<i>Á fì logi ilé...</i>	He reports to the wood in house... ¹⁸

To the traditional Yoruba, this, however does not rule out the need for making personal efforts as illustrated by the Yoruba expressions such as the following: *kíkó ni mímò*, *bi owe ijápá* (acquiring knowledge requires skills, so goes the tortoise proverb). While this is not the norm among the Yoruba, a superstitious job seeker could rely on herbal preparations together with the incantations to get a job ahead of other applicants without any consideration for a better *curriculum vitae* or a superior performance in job tests. When there is more reliance on using incantations than on acquiring

the skills needed to secure a job, one may expect a situation where a medical doctor in reality is a mortician; after all, the incantation does not bestow the knowledge that was never acquired. It could then be seen as superstitious to prepare for a job interview with herbal preparation and incantation instead of fortifying oneself with the required knowledge.

As a result of belief in magical powers, there are instances of Yoruba individuals who rather than thinking of acquiring the needed practical skills, are fond of resorting to the use of all kinds of charms that include copper rings (*Orùka bàbá*) amulets (*Ífùnpá*), herbal preparations sewn up in a leather girdle/ belt (*ońdè*). Sometimes, a small gourd with some shining liquid that drips from it on the ground may be hung on the doorpost. Babies also wear coils round their necks and waists. These and similar magical practices are meant to be protective measures, to bring good health and prosperity. They may also be employed to make other people live in fear. Farmers, allegedly, have also taken to magic to improve their agricultural products.

Awolalu advocates exploring the use of healthy magic to aid modern scientific inventions while evil magic should be condemned.¹⁹ However, rather than depending on magical preparations to improve their farm products, farmers in rural areas are now eager to receive fertilizers from the government, perhaps in their recognition of the superiority of Western agricultural technology. What has been achieved with incantation and magic so far among the Yoruba would make speaking of 'the Yoruba as possessing scientific knowledge' to amount to unduly overstretching the meaning of the word science.²⁰

Further, there is clearly no contribution to development in the superstitious trend of magical practices that is manifest in the controversial disappearance of genital organs that has been associated with the release of new currency notes in Nigeria. Individuals, who depend on magic and not hard work to get rich quickly, reportedly have mysteriously robbed others of their male genitals. Such stories of mysterious disappearance of genitals and different forms of ritual killings have not only disturbed the peace of the public but continue to generate a lot of controversy. The mere thought of engaging in the practices could only spring from a mind with beliefs that engender superstition. The pervasive belief in juju and charms, divination, private revelation, fortune-telling fostered by charlatans who lay claim to divine or magical powers to cure even AIDS, make people rich or live longer, still flourish with the influence of the belief in magical powers.²¹ (<http://www.cskop.org/sb/2001-09/nigeria.html>10/10/2004).

Conclusion

Superstition appeared either as a wrong perception of natural phenomena or the supernatural in the Roman society. A reason for ardent attack on it in the past (which was common among the educated elite) is obvious in the work of Lucretius (ca. 94 BC) *De Rerum Natura*, where the full force of the Greek philosophical tradition is used to advocate that man should set bounds to desire and fear in order to attain the greatest good in life²². Superstition existed as ignorance of the philosophical and scientific truths about the natural laws. The view was held that, rather than turning to a philosopher or a sage, when confused as to why things were the way they were or when uncertain as to what to do in a perplexing situation, the

superstitious tendency was to hastily head for a theological solution.

The beliefs discussed in this paper as superstitious, or better still, as the background to superstitious practices are sometimes viewed as veritable religious means of achieving an orderly society and inculcating manners in the past. This applies to the Yoruba belief system, and with the Romans, even when beliefs became doubtful, at least, political expediency would make the leading men cling loyally to them. Interestingly, though, the seemingly enlightened modern societies lean toward no regard for some of the virtues supposedly engendered by such 'superstitions'. For instance, the traditional values highly cherished in the past among the Yoruba, such as, maintaining virginity before marriage, keeping an oath even in the court of law out of fear of the thunderbolt believed to be the judgment weapon of Sango, the god of thunder, are now disappearing fast. The concept of *alájobí* (having ancestors in common) reportedly promoted unity among the people, since the ancestors to them were very much alive and capable of bringing about justice. A hunter or any cult man would not covet the wife of another member of his guild because of the fraternal tie and fear of the gods. It has been argued that the traditional Yoruba society generally used these beliefs, however questionable they may appear, as the means to an end and not an end in itself. Added to this is the point that the society was at a developmental stage as shown by the Yoruba saying, *bíríbirí l' ayé ñyi* (the world keeps changing).

By considering themes in the poems of Tibullus and some Yoruba beliefs, this paper has demonstrated, as well as illustrated, the subjective pattern of reasoning found in both the

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Roman and the Yoruba belief system. The parallels are seen in the attributing of either success or failure to the supernatural beings; 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. Such beliefs have also been portrayed as controversial and questionable when providing the basis or excuse for action or inaction. While the beliefs may still be privately cherished, they are far from being popular in a secular world. For instance, no one, interviewing a candidate for a job would sympathise with him if he attributes his failure at the interview to attacks from the witches. This is a picture of when, rather than being generally inclined to accept personal responsibility for the effects of actions or inaction, an individual is readily disposed to shift accountability to superhuman forces, a tendency attributable to personal subjective proclivity as well as the propensity to always seek knowledge of the cause of occurrences from the spirit realm and hold the unseen power responsible for misfortunes that are either apparently of human making or resulting from poor handling of situations.

Notes and References

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² *ibid* I.i.19

³ Mbiti J.S. *African Religion and Philosophy*, 1971: 83

⁴ Tibullus, *op. cit.* II. v. 11-14

⁵ Tibullus, *op. cit.* III. Iv. 12-14

⁶ Tibullus, *op. cit.* I.v. 12, 13

⁷ Tibullus, *op. cit.* I. iii.11-20

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- ⁸ Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* London : Longman, 1979: 120
- ⁹ Abimbola, *Ifa, An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus*. London: Oxford University Press, 1976:4
- ¹⁰ cf. Awolalu op. cit.
- ¹¹ Olukunle, *Witchcraft: A Study in Yoruba Belief and Metaphysics*. Ph.D Thesis: Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1980:123
- ¹² Tibullus, op. cit. 1. ii 97-98
- ¹³ Tibullus, op. cit 1. ii. 44-58
- ¹⁴ Tibullus, op. cit. 1. viii. 17-18; 21
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Tibullus, op. cit. II. II.1-4
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- ¹⁸ cf. Awolalu, op. cit.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*
- ²⁰ Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press
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- ²¹ <http://www.eskop.org/sb/2001-09/nigeria.html> 10/10/2004
- ²² Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V, 1196