

MIX + the cultural impact of superstition

'One For sorrow, two For joy, three For a girl, four For a boy, five For silver, six For gold, seven For a secret never to be told...' recites leading Euro-designer Angelika Seeschaaf.

I first heard this beautiful poem when involved in the Park & Products project for the Serpentine Gallery. It really struck me and I wanted to learn about the meaning behind it. In Germany the magpie is a bad omen, whereas in Britain there is a simple and catchy poem about the bird that might forecast your future and bring you luck...if you believe in it. Why do so many people share this common mindset – a superstition?

Superstition can be defined as a prophecy, where the future can be influenced by behaviour or occurrences – such as the amount of magpies we see. Superstitions are often considered irrational and non-scientific. However, it can also be defined as knowledge of unproven rules. It is a result of false attribution of cause and effect. Folklore beliefs relate to everyday superstitions – eg. about farming, the home or predicting the weather. These beliefs are about communicating experience, but it is hard to say whether they have a basis in fact – eg. 'A single magpie in spring, foul water will bring'.

Even though superstitious beliefs are unproven, they may still change behaviour and by doing so make something that is 'false' or unproven come 'true'. Thus by believing in this special rule of cause and effect the superstition becomes a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.

This is part of the Thomas theorem that was the basis for the sociologist Robert K. Merton's theory of self-fulfilling prophecy. Examples of such prophecies can be found far back in history in ancient India and the Greek oracle. According to Thomas 'People do not react only to the situations they are in, but also, and often primarily, to the way they perceive the situations and the meaning they assign to it. Therefore, their behaviour is determined in part by their perception and the meaning they ascribe to the situations they are in, rather than by the situations themselves'. Once people convince themselves that a situation (a black cat crosses your path) really has a certain meaning (bad luck) regardless of whether it does, they will take actions in consequence. For example, in the case of a black cat crossing our path we might narrow our perception and only see the negative things happening.

To understand the term superstition we can examine the Latin meaning of the word *Superstitio*, which translates to 'standing over' or 'above' and something that is opposed to the common knowledge or belief at a certain time. Throughout history superstition was used to denunciate the prevailing common dogmatic mindsets, such as Christian theology and scientific method.

A real life example of the self-fulfilling prophecy is the 1929 bank crisis. Many people saw banks going bankrupt, and rushed to get their money out of the banks, thereby causing the banks to go bankrupt. This has been prevented so far in the current crisis,

however it can still happen if people lose more confidence in the banking system.

Why is superstition culturally relevant? The shared belief in superstition reflects our ingrained human fears. Superstition is embedded in our culture, consciously or unconsciously. However, it often only reveals itself when you encounter a chance element, such as finding a penny or a four-leaf clover. Are these repeated habits and social acts fragments that have lost their full narrative and roots? From this viewpoint one can argue that a certain set of beliefs or social actions becomes a superstition when it cannot keep pace with social and cultural developments. It's like installing new hardware on your computer. The old programme is deleted but some fragments survive and sometimes activate but without their original programme context.

These fragments may have survived from older knowledge or folkloric rituals that were accepted before but lost their roots. It still is very much ingrained into our everyday culture where it gets passed as narrative from generation to generation. Do you make a wish when you see a falling star or when you blow out all your birthday candles?

However, where these superstitious fragments are stored in our mental hard drive makes them very powerful. It's possible they are stored in the part of the brain where all our primal emotions are stored like fear, joy, disgust, anger etc. We sometimes find this in people who suffer from dementia; they often seem to remember superstitions easily and try to act accordingly.

The four-leaf clover is a rare version of the commonly found three-leaf clover. According to folklore, each leaflet represents something: hope, faith, love and luck. The horseshoe, a manufactured product taken from its original context, is considered a good luck charm in many cultures when it is hung with its two ends upwards. If pointed downwards then bad luck will pour out of it. Today tradition and folkloric rituals are still very widespread. Superstitious beliefs are often more common with certain groups, notably gamblers, athletes and actors. Partially this relates to the amount of risk or performance pressure certain professions have to deal with or of a tremendous dependency on external factors, such as weather, an audience etc.

Superstition is irrational, yet beautiful. It is culturally ingrained, yet hidden beneath the surface. It is prevalent in most western cultures, but often appears at moments of chance. We should treasure our superstitions as fragments of our history and culture and also because they are a vehicle for our wishes – they add an element of chance and poetry to our daily life ●

The cultural impact of superstition written by Angelika Seeschaaf, ceaa design, www.ceaa.co.uk