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Superstitions in Modern African Musical Arts Performance

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Abstract

Superstitions have played a significant role in shaping the cultural practices and beliefs of African societies for centuries. In the realm of musical arts performance, superstition often intertwines with rituals, spirituality, and local traditions. It influences not only how music is created and performed, but also how it is received, perceived, and understood by the targeted audience. This article thus explores the intersection of musical arts performance and superstition in Africa. It does so by analysing how musicians and communities invoke superstitions in both ritualistic and everyday contexts. Through an examination of some African cultures and their respective musical traditions, I discuss the historical and contemporary relevance of superstition in musical arts performance. Significantly, I analyse the dual impact of superstition on performance – as both a source of inspiration and constraint – alongside the counter-arguments on and around modernity, secularisation, and globalisation in broadly reshaping African musical arts practices.

Keywords: *Superstition, African Music, Performance, Modernity, Secularisation, Globalisation, African Cultures.*

INTRODUCTION

Music has always held a central place in African societies where it has served (and continues to serve) not only as a form of edutainment, but also and more so as a vehicle for religious, political, and social expression. As Mensah Adinkrah notes, 'the music of any society, in its capacity as a communicative and expressive art form, can provide a window into the society, often affirming, reinforcing, and critiquing the prevailing values, beliefs, norms, and aesthetics of the times' (Adinkrah 2008: 1). Embedded within these traditions are superstitions that influence both the performance and perception of music throughout generations. Superstitious beliefs, however, are not only common to African but also other human societies, including the Global North where research has, for example, shown that more than half of US and UK adults are mildly superstitious (see Wiseman 2003; Wiseman and Watt 2004). Whereas the sources of superstitions range from curiosity and fear to anxiety and despair (Blum and Blum 1974; Gilovich 1991; Damisch et al. 2010), the term itself appears not to have an objective usage and has, consequently, invited the use of other equally contested labels, including *folk religion* (Lorie 1992) and *folk observance* (Kaneko 1990). According to Valk (2008: 1), superstition is 'a problematic expression. It derives from religious discourse and can hardly be used to denote a neutral analytical category of folkloristics, because it is loaded with connotations from the past.' Valk is right; yet it is this problematic nature of the term that provokes varying research interests in superstition. As discourse, superstition readily lends itself to the potential for the development of divergent metalanguage within and across cultures.

Often tied to spiritual beliefs, animism, and ancestral worship, superstition is deeply connected to many African musical arts practices. For most musicians, these superstitious beliefs can dictate how they prepare for performances, the types of instruments they use, as

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well as the intended aesthetics of and rituals that accompany their art. This is possible when we consider that 'what musicians say [and do] in the course of composing, listening and performing may be significant and instructive' Agawu (2003a: 6, our emphasis). The relationship between music and superstition in Africa thus varies from region to region, and is shaped by the unique historical, cultural, and religious contexts of each community. However, a common theme throughout the continent is the belief that music holds mystical powers that are capable of communicating with ancestors, invoking spiritual forces, and/or warding off evil. This article thus explores these connections by examining how superstition influences contemporary musical arts performance in Africa, and the place of such influence within the ongoing tension between traditional beliefs and modernity.

In what follows, I present an overview of the extant literature on music performance and superstition in Africa. Relying on relevant examples, the second section delves deeper into the specifics of how superstition manifests in African musical practices by offering a balanced view that includes counter-arguments on and around the impact of modernisation and secularisation. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of key findings and also proposes future frontiers for this research area.

The literature on superstition and/in African music

Musical arts performance in Africa is deeply intertwined with cultural, spiritual, and social traditions. Numerous scholars have explored the role of superstition and belief systems in shaping the performance and practice of music across the continent. This section specifically offers an overview of the state of the art and extant literature, highlighting key themes and, significantly, the gap that our study fills in the discourse. Broadly, superstition is defined as a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic, or a false understanding of causality. According to Damisch et al. (2010), superstition is 'an irrational belief that an object, action, or circumstance that is not logically related to a course of events influences the outcome' (p. 1014). Etymologically, Cameron (2012: 76) contends that superstition was:

> used in classical antiquity, throughout the Christian Middle Ages, and on into modernity. As cultural historians have demonstrated, versions of the idea—if not exactly the name—can be found in many global cultures. Superstition may well have survived as a convenient and adaptable label precisely because it attaches to what many see as the essential question of religion, namely the appropriate relationship between ritual action and belief; yet it is imprecise enough for its limits to be endlessly debated.

The nebulous nature of superstition is why Patrick Mullen argues that 'There is no scholarly reason to label beliefs of some groups as superstition and those of others as religion' (Mullen 2000: 139).

In the African context, more specifically, superstition often overlaps with spiritual and religious beliefs, particularly in societies where animism and ancestor worship are prevalent. For James Frazer, superstition can be seen as a remnant of aboriginal belief systems which persist in contemporary societies as a way of making sense of natural and spiritual phenomena (Frazer 1890). However, other scholars argue that superstition in African societies is more than a relic of the past; it continues to play a functional role in community cohesion and cultural continuity (Mbiti 1969). As African societies modernise and urbanise, however, the role of superstition in musical arts performances has evolved. Some scholars argue that globalisation and secularisation have led to a decline in traditional superstitions, particularly among younger

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generations of musicians. For instance, Chernoff (1979) notes that many contemporary African musicians, particularly those in urban areas, are influenced by Western music styles and technologies, which often leads to a departure from traditional superstitions. However, other scholars contend that superstition continues to play a significant role in African music, even in modern contexts. And so, while the form of superstition may change, the underlying belief in the mystical power of music persists (see Drewal 1992). For example, in Afrobeat(s), a modern music genre that originated in Nigeria, musicians often invoke spiritual or political themes that draw on traditional beliefs, even as they incorporate contemporary musical elements.

This supports the notion that music in African societies is not merely for entertainment; it serves as a vital tool for communication, religious practices, and social events. John Blacking, in his seminal work *How Musical is Man?* (1973), emphasises the social function of music and argues that it is a 'cultural construct' that reflects the values, beliefs, and structures of the society in which it is performed. Similarly, Kofi Agawu (2003b) discusses the performative nature of African music, noting that music often accompanies significant life events such as births, marriages, and funerals, where superstition and spirituality are frequently invoked.

In many African cultures, music is an integral part of religious and spiritual rituals, often believed to have the power to influence supernatural forces. Scholars such as Nketia (1974), Nzewi (1978), and Arom (1991) have explored the role of music in ritual practices and noted that music is often used to communicate with ancestors, ward off evil spirits, or invoke blessings. The belief that music can alter spiritual realities is deeply embedded in African traditions, and this is reflected in the ways that musicians approach their art. For example, in West African societies, drummers are often considered spiritual intermediaries who can summon spirits through their instruments (Charry 2000).

The drums themselves are often imbued with spiritual significance, and rituals are performed before and after playing them to guarantee the musician's protection as well as the community's well-being. Similarly, in the religious practices of Yoruba people within southwest Nigeria, drumming and chanting are essential components of rituals aimed at communicating with the *Orisa* deities in the Yoruba pantheon (Olaniyan 2016). For instance, *gangan* (i.e., talking drums) are used in rituals because *Orisa Ayan* ('the god of drumming') reserves the position of introducing, summoning, appeasing and accompanying one to and from the land of the living.

A local interlocutor named Famule told us that 'Orisa Ayan is thought to reside in wood. For this reason, Orisa Ayan is emblematised by the wood with which the body of the drum (*ilu*) is carved' (personal communication, 2022). This deity is thus eulogised as *Orisa gbe'nu igi fohun* (lit., 'the spirit who speaks out from inside his wooded abode'). The inference here is that the spirit *in* the drum is also the spirit *of* the drum.

All these are possible because 'African music is a spiritual force in terms of its affect and in its ability to produce results by non-physical (meta-physical) means' (Nzewi 2003: 17). While the extant literature reveals substantial research on the role of music in African religious and cultural practices, less attention has been paid to how superstition specifically influences musical arts performance.

Additionally, much of the existing corpus focuses on traditional musical practices, with less emphasis on how superstition interacts with modern forms of African music. The current article addresses these gaps by exploring the continuing relevance of superstition in both traditional and contemporary African music performance.

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Superstition as a driving force in traditional African music performance

In many African societies, superstition is not merely a backdrop to music performance; it actively shapes the way music is performed and understood. Musicians are often seen as conduits between the physical and spiritual worlds, and their performances are imbued with perceived spiritual meanings. In this sense, superstition acts as both an inspiration and a guiding force for musicians. For example, in the Ewe culture of Ghana, drumming is believed to have the power to summon ancestral spirits who can intervene in human affairs. Before a performance, drummers often participate in purification rituals to cleanse themselves and their instruments of any negative spiritual influences (Locke, 1992). This approach underscores the idea that music has the power to bridge the gap between the living and the dead, and that musicians must be spiritually prepared to perform their roles effectively. Similarly, in the Shona culture of Zimbabwe, traditional mbira players believe that their instruments can communicate with ancestral spirits. The mbira is often played during rituals aimed at honouring the ancestors or seeking their guidance. The belief that music can influence the spiritual realm is so ingrained in Shona culture that certain types of music are considered dangerous if played in the wrong context, as they might attract malevolent spirits (Berliner, 1978/1993; Lindroth, 2018).

Whilst some of the practices observed across Africa were believed to be (and remain arguably) superstitious, it could be suggested that in such instances, there is a certain ambiguity as to whether or not they truly were performed for superstitious reasons. Some practices and beliefs, for instance those concerning death, burial, the afterlife, and reincarnation among the Igbo (south-eastern Nigeria) were (and still are) unambiguously superstitious in nature. Of this notion, Ikwuemesi and Onwuegbuna (2018: 186) note that 'Igbo lifecycle is marked and circumscribed by a series of rites beginning from birth and culminating in death. Death brings material life to an end while providing a spin-off to otherworldly existence, including ancestrality.' Regarding music in this superstitious belief, both writers claim that 'Igbo music is valued beyond the sonic material. The compositional materials, the performance practices and the extra-musical properties have a myriad of symbolic and ritual connotations' (p. 191), including its function as 'one of the mechanisms through which reality is ritually renegotiated in the mortuary space (p. 194). The notion that music and the musical arts more broadly have the power to so negotiate and bring about any outcome in the afterlife is not only superstitious, but underscores the 'illusion of control'. An illusion of control is inferred when participants believe or respond as if contingency between their behaviour and the outcome exists (see Alloy et al. 1981; Matute 1994). Regardless of how the illusion of control is measured, all dependent measures reflect a belief that one's actions can influence an outcome that is, in fact, outside the control of those actions.

The factors influencing the use of such illusions have been explored by scholars of different fields and traditions. For example, when anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski visited the Trobriand Islands of New Guinea, he noted that the islanders would, at times, base their behaviour on rational knowledge and practices while at other times rely on magic or superstition (see Malinowski 1954). The islanders, for instance, seldom relied on superstitions and ritual when fishing in a dependably safe setting such as a pond or stream; and they described their successes and failures in terms of skill. However, extensive magical ritual, including chants and work songs, preceded the uncertain and treacherous conditions of deep-sea fishing. Yet, to the extent that the rituals have no verifiable empirical bearing on the success or failure of their adventures, they are logically to be characterised as an exercise under the

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illusion of control. As a counter-argument, however, these superstitious practices persist to date because the absence of evidence is not in and of itself evidence of absence. This logically implicates the constraints of superstition on musical arts performance in Africa.

While superstition can inspire musicians and give their performances greater significance, it can also act as a constraint. In some cultures, musicians must adhere to strict rules regarding when and how certain types of music can be performed. These rules are often dictated by superstitions that warn against performing certain music in the wrong context, as doing so might invite misfortune or anger the spirits. For instance, in some West African cultures, specific rhythms are reserved for religious ceremonies and are considered taboo if played in secular contexts. Musicians who break these taboos risk being ostracised from their communities or even facing spiritual retribution (Charry 2000; Nzewi 2003a). This highlights the dual role of superstition in African music performance: while it provides a sense of meaning and purpose, it also imposes limitations on artistic freedom. To break free of such limitations, modern African musicians embrace cultural globalisation and secularisation. However, that approach has not gone without its own impact, thus prompting the question of adaptation or decline.

Adaptation or the decline of superstition in modern African music?

One counter-argument to the idea that superstition plays a central role in African music performance is the impact of modernisation, secularisation, and globalisation. As African societies become more urbanised and exposed to Western influences, traditional superstitions appear to lose their relevance, particularly among younger generations of musicians. Modern African musicians, particularly those in cosmopolitan cities, are often more influenced by global music trends and technologies than by traditional superstitions. For example, in contemporary genres like Afrobeats, Afropop, amapiano, and dancehall, the focus is often on entertainment and commercial success rather than on spiritual or ritualistic significance. Many younger musicians may not feel the need to adhere to the superstitions of their ancestors because, for some, such practices are outdated or irrelevant to their modern lives. In this sense, superstition may be seen as a relic of the past, with little influence on contemporary music performance. However, this argument overlooks the ways in which traditional beliefs continue to shape modern African music, even if in less overt ways. For instance, many modern African musicians still invoke spiritual, ancestral, and folkloric themes in their lyrics, even as they embrace Western musical styles. Here, the works of musicians such as Angelique Kidjo's *Agolo* (2014) as well as Zlatan Ibile and Asake's *Adura Agba* (2024) are useful examples. To nuance the point, I offer a brief and close reading of a lyrical excerpt of Kidjo's *Agolo* below.

Example 1: excerpts of *Agolo* lyric by Angelique Kidjo

Eman tché foya lénin

Ifé foun gbogbo ayé

Eman tché gbagbé ifé

Ifé foun ilé baba wa

Ifé ayé ilé

Igbahoun foun ayé

Morio orio Ola djou monké n'lo

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In *Agolo*, Kidjo makes use of very few and repetitive verses, which, to the unsuspecting listener and/or culture outsider, offers nothing more than a hook or ostinato passage in musical terms and structure. Yet the actual meaning of the song-text is deeper than what the few words convey in the music. Specifically, the words are derived from a popular Yoruba folklore about a certain beautiful young lady called Olajumoke (herein written as *Ola djou monké*). The fable tells of how she turned down several suitors and marriage proposals until a strange and wealthy man came along. Whereas her parents had their misgivings about this stranger's appearance, family history, and source of wealth, Olajumoke would insist on marrying him. Drama would unfold immediately after the marriage ceremony when she discovers that her 'husband' is a spirit being having only a head (i.e., 'ori' in Yoruba language) with borrowed body parts. As customs demand, the bride's family are to escort the newlyweds to a boundary beyond which only the couple may continue to their new home. Unfortunately, for a very mortified Olajumoke, what lay beyond that boundary is an underworld – home to this ancestral spirit man. Following this dilemma, she cried aloud to her family members: *Morio orio! Ola djou monké n'lo!* (lit., 'Spirit being is taking me away!'). As with many African fables, there is an underpinning moral to this tale – one that emphasises the need to be more discerning in life.

The foregoing arguably suggests that traditional beliefs remain influential, albeit in a transformed or modernised form. In some cases, superstition and spirituality are woven into modern musical practices in subtler ways that reflect a blend of traditional and contemporary values. While secularisation has certainly impacted African music, it would be an oversimplification to claim that superstition is entirely in decline. In fact, many modern African musicians have found ways to incorporate traditional spiritual beliefs into their music, often using these beliefs as a source of creative inspiration. For example, in Afrobeat(s), a genre popularised by the legendary Nigerian Fela Kuti, musicians often invoke traditional spiritual themes and blending them with contemporary socio-economic and political messages: examples include *Ojuelegba* (2015) by Wizkid, *Collateral Damage* (2019) and *Anybody* (2019) by Burna Boy. Kuti himself frequently spoke of his belief in the power of music to effect spiritual and social change, and his performances often featured ritualistic elements drawn from Yoruba religious traditions (Olorunyomi, 2005). Similarly, in genres like highlife and juju music, musicians often make references to traditional beliefs in their lyrics and performances, even as they adopt modern musical instruments and production techniques. Thus, rather than disappearing, superstition has adapted to the modern context, finding new forms of expression within contemporary African music. This blending of the old and the new allows African musicians to maintain a connection with their cultural heritage and identity while also appealing to modern audiences across the globe.

Superstition as a source of community, healing, and identity

Another important aspect of superstition in African music is its role in fostering a sense of community and identity. Music is often used in African societies as a way of bringing people together, whether for religious ceremonies, social celebrations, or political events. In many cases, the superstitions associated with music performance serve to reinforce social bonds and create a shared sense of cultural identity. For example, in many rural African communities, music is closely tied to communal rituals such as initiation ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. These rituals are often steeped in superstitious beliefs about the power of music to influence the spiritual realm, and the music performed at these events serves to reaffirm the community's connection to its ancestors and its traditions (Nketia 1974). By participating in these rituals, both musicians and listeners are reminded of their place within the larger cultural and spiritual

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framework of the community. Even in urban areas, where traditional superstitions may not be as prominent, music can still serve as a powerful tool for expressing cultural identity. For instance, many African musicians who perform in diasporic communities abroad often draw on traditional musical styles and themes to connect with their cultural roots. In this sense, superstition can be seen as a way of preserving and affirming cultural identity, even in the face of modernisation and globalisation.

One of the most significant ways in which superstition manifests in African music performance is through the belief in the power of music to heal and protect. In many African cultures, music is not only a form of entertainment but also a tool for spiritual and physical healing. Traditional healers, known as diviners or shamans in some cultures, often use music as part of their healing practices, invoking the power of music to cleanse individuals of negative spiritual influences or to restore balance to their lives. As previously noted, among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, the mbira is often used in healing ceremonies known as 'Bira' ceremonies, which are aimed at communicating with the ancestors to seek guidance and healing (Berliner 1993). Similarly, in many West African societies, drumming is believed to have the power to protect individuals from evil spirits or to drive away negative energies. These practices are rooted in deeply held superstitions about the spiritual power of music, and they continue to be an important aspect of music performance in many African communities today. However, it is worth noting that these beliefs are not universally accepted, particularly among younger generations who may view them as outdated or incompatible with modern science. Nevertheless, for many people in rural and traditional settings, the belief in the healing power of music remains a fundamental part of their cultural and spiritual lives.

Rationalism and the decline of superstition

While the role of superstition in African music performance is undeniable, it is important to acknowledge the counter-arguments put forth by scholars and critics who view superstition as a hindrance to artistic and social progress. These critics argue that superstitions, by their very nature, are irrational and can limit the creative potential of musicians. They point to the rise of rationalism and scientific thinking as evidence that traditional superstitions are becoming less relevant in modern African societies. For example, some musicians may feel constrained by the need to adhere to traditional superstitions, particularly if these superstitions dictate when and how certain types of music can be performed. In a globalised world where musicians have access to a wide range of musical resources, influences and technologies, the rigid rules imposed by superstition may be perceived as an obstacle to artistic freedom. Moreover, as African societies become more integrated into the global economy, there is a growing emphasis on professionalism and technical proficiency in music performance. This shift towards a more rational, results-oriented approach to music-making may leave little room for the mystical and superstitious elements that have traditionally been part of African music. Our position, however, is that this perspective overlooks the fact that superstition and rationalism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Many African musicians are able to balance their belief in the spiritual power of music with a professional, technically proficient approach to their craft. In fact, for some musicians, superstition may serve as a source of inspiration and creativity, rather than a limitation.

Moreover, critics of superstition in music have raised compelling arguments from varying standpoints questioning whether these age-old beliefs have any place in modern artistic expression. From a scientific perspective, superstition is often critiqued as a cognitive bias that lacks empirical validation (Manneh 2023; Crossman 2024).

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Yet, as we have argued, rituals and superstitions can lead to improved performances, not because they have any intrinsic supernatural power, but because they provide psychological comfort or trigger the placebo effect. Also, critics argue that by adhering to these practices, musicians risk diverting attention from honing their technical skills and creative innovation. As we have noted, superstition thus becomes a reliance on outdated methods that may impede objective assessment and progress in musical artistry. There are also religious criticisms of superstition in music, particularly from groups that advocate for a more orthodox understanding of spiritual practice.

Many conservative religious traditions perceive superstitious practices in music as a distortion of genuine spiritual expression with the key point of contention being that when music is used to invoke supernatural forces (as done in African musical arts), it may lead practitioners away from the tenets of their faith and into the realm of ritualistic excess (Stephens 2018).

This perspective sees superstition as potentially idolatrous, misdirecting worship away from a direct connection with the divine towards a reliance on symbolic actions and rituals that lack a clear theological basis (Risen 2015). This point is important to make especially now that many Christian worship centres are embracing musical idioms of ‘worldly’ genres like Afrobeats in gospel music.

Philosophically, the critique of superstition in music often focuses on the notion that such practices represent a regression to pre-modern modes of thinking where irrationality overshadows reason (Felber and Baker 1931). As noted earlier, the persistence of superstitions in any facet of life may hinder the evolution of a more enlightened and rational society. From this standpoint, the incorporation of superstitious elements into music might be seen as an impediment to intellectual and cultural progress – a relic of a bygone era that modern societies should transcend.

Despite these criticisms, superstition continues to play a vital, adaptive role in African music where it has been and is reinterpreted as a means of preserving cultural heritage. Moreover, the social and psychological functions of superstition cannot be overlooked, as rituals and superstitious practices serve as powerful tools for fostering community cohesion by offering a shared language of symbols and meanings that bind communities together, providing comfort and a sense of continuity amid rapid social and technological changes (Faizal 2018).

Even in urban, modern settings, the invocation of traditional beliefs in music often offers a counterbalance to the isolating effects of modern life by creating spaces where communal identity and belonging are reaffirmed. To reiterate, when viewed through the lens of scientific inquiry, these phenomena demonstrate that the effectiveness of superstitious practices in music might be less about literal supernatural influence and more about the psychological and social impacts they engender.

CONCLUSION

The intersection of music performance and superstition in Africa is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. While modernisation and globalisation have certainly impacted the role of superstition in African music, traditional beliefs about the spiritual power of music continue to play an important role in many communities. Whether through the invocation of ancestral spirits, the use of music in healing rituals, or the reinforcement of cultural identity, superstition remains a significant aspect of African music performance.

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At the same time, it is clear that superstition can also act as a constraint, imposing limits on artistic freedom and creativity. The tension between tradition and modernity is a central theme in contemporary African music; and musicians need to negotiate this tension in their quest to balance their cultural heritage with the demands of a globalised music industry.

In all, while the role of superstition in African music performance is evolving, we maintain that it is far from extinction. Instead, it is adapting to new contexts and finding new forms of expression. As African musicians continue to engage with both traditional beliefs and modern influences, superstition will likely remain a key factor in shaping the future of African music.

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