Sociological description of inclination to superstitions (emphasizing on Cognition Sociology)

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Abstract: One of the sociologists' interests is superstitions, reasons and its prevalence in the society. This article tries to have a glance on psychological, historical, religious and philosophical viewpoints in analyzing superstitions and also analyzes it from sociological viewpoints and represents the reasons of inclination to superstitions from Cognition Sociological viewpoint, particularly. The methodology is documentary and literary; the researcher tries to describe superstitions through analyzing theories of scholars. Prevalence of superstitions in African mythology as a result of traditional, non-scientific system from viewpoint of Horton (Jahouda, 1992, pp. 185-186); the role of little literacy in worker class from viewpoint of Hugart (same source, p. 241); the relationship between occupation, income and people thoughts from viewpoint of Sugarmann (Alaviyoun, 1994; pp. 76-77) and finally, the spirit of inclination to destiny and superstations in farmers class from viewpoint of Ragers (Rafiee, 2003; p.35) are among theories which have been analyzed in this article.

Introduction

Superstitions are defined as wrong beliefs which are not in conformity with intellect, logic, science and reality. Inclination to Superstition is following wrong beliefs which are not in conformity with culture and science of the society which the superstitious person belongs to it. (Molavi Ganjeh, 2003, p.1)

Other theorists present different theoretical definitions which are common in terms such as ignorance, being illogical and being imaginative of superstitious affairs. It can not be assumed any experimental and scientific foundations for such beliefs; therefore, in general we can define superstitions as below:

"a series of beliefs and behaviors which, most of them have been formed because of ignorance of people of casual links of phenomena and are not in conformity with scientific and intellectual standards".

Superstitions could be analyzed through 5 viewpoints: Historical, sociological, psychological, divine and cognition-philosophical.

In general, historical viewpoint gets through historical origin, prevalence of superstitions in different nations, historical ups and downs and similarities of symbols between different cultures and compare them with each other. Philosophical-cognition viewpoint emphasizes on nature of superstitious beliefs and their relationship with cognition right and wrong. Psychological viewpoint gets through reasons of superstitions growth in the society, but contributes proportion between mental structure and superstitions as well as discussing about effects and results of superstitious beliefs in domain of human mentality. In divine viewpoint, it is discussed regarding harmful effects and results of these wrong beliefs in domain of religious thoughts and also the ways of confronting with superstitions. In sociological viewpoint, the social reasons of formation superstitious beliefs and their consequences and also the function of superstitious ceremonies and acts are discussed.

Psychological description of superstitions

This viewpoint has two main characteristics: it is human-center and also pathologic. It means that: in psychological analysis of superstitions, the emphasis is on the person. From this viewpoint, superstitions are personal phenomena which are result of mental struggle of the person for solving external conflicts. Psychology studies superstitions from the mental pathology viewpoint. As if, superstitions are result of an abnormal and ill mind (social researching group of determining assembly of System policies, 2008, pp.143). In this case, superstitions are responses of the person toward his/her needs and inner interactions.

Freud and Yung viewpoint

According to Freud psychiatric school, the human mind is responsible for understanding, analyzing and reasons of superstitions. Moreover, superstitions are reactions to mental harshnesses and impatience and also difficulties and obstacles. Freud through his psychiatric method attributes superstitions to "unconscious level" of mind. He believes that there are threatening elements in the mind and unconscious level which are attributed to the external world through projection mechanism.

In contrary of Freud, Yung was the first psychiatric who found that religious even myth thoughts and beliefs are symbols of deep insights and thoughts. He believed that superstitions are basic characteristics of human spirit. According to his beliefs, it should not be distinguished between right and wrong beliefs. Yung was interested into function of superstitions in life and mind of human (same source; pp. 144-145).

Freud and Yung were in common in analyzing superstitions as the follows:

1. Both of them believed that superstitious beliefs and ceremonies have deep roots in processes of human unconscious mind.

2. Both of them said that not only superstations are not limited to past times or illiterate people, but also are inseparable parts of all human's mind.

3. Both of them emphasized on the role of emotions in superstitions. (same source; p. 145).

Historical analysis of superstitions

Among all of the phenomena, the most important and most complicated phenomena for the early man were death, illness and eclipse. So, we can see the most superstitions are about these phenomena. The early man tried to recognize and understand these phenomena. He asked some questions about them. He was so curious. Gradually, Responses to these questions made some beliefs for him/her. It is worth of mentioning that these reactions were not resulted to right beliefs, necessarily; rather lack of knowledge and also inability to understanding the world was led to wrong beliefs. The second reaction toward natural happenings was psychological. Confronting with big and inaccessible phenomena, weakness and inability in controlling them resulted in fear and perplexity in him/her. He/she knew that he/she is able neither to predict nor to prevent them. Even, he/she cannot resist against them. When he/she finds himself/herself weak and lonely against these phenomena, inevitably, he/she tries to find some ways for first decreasing dangers and affecting them and second calmness and relaxation. Through superstitious actions, he/she resurrects lost relaxation, at least. If beliefs of primary cultures led to description and understanding the world, actions and ceremonies could be associated with reactions toward the phenomena. Through inventing superstitious ceremonies, man tries to decrease the evil effects and attract the goodness. In this way, ceremonies such as black magic have two bases: repelling evil and attracting goodness (same source, pp. 144-145).

Philosophical-cognition description of superstitions: cognition variables of superstitious thinking

Inability in understanding the world and controlling conditions are two basic philosophical variables in superstitious thinking. When man is unable in controlling his life and happenings through knowledge, he seeks help from superstitions. If man feels weakness toward external conditions, he is inclined to superstitions; if he is unable to understand the conditions and happenings, the probability of superstitious thinking will be increased. If we combine two variables of understanding and ability of controlling world, we have four social worlds:

First world: understandable and controllable

It is least probable a person, who understands the around world and predicts the happenings, feels that he is able to control and affects the condition to be inclined to superstitions. We can see that, superstitions are least prevalent among people in first world. (same source, p.45)。

Second world: understandable but uncontrollable

A person who can understand the world, analyze the associations of happenings and get true information about his world but he finds himself weak in confronting problems and bad happenings, is inclined toward superstitions such as black magic and superstitious actions.

Feeling severe disability, despair, fear and anxiety are among characteristics of second world. People of second world are pushed toward superstitious actions and make a hero oriented society. Hero orienting is an ill-defined phenomenon which is resulted from disability feeling of ordinary people toward solving conflicts and problems. Hero oriented spirit in society shows that problems and difficulties are not solvable with existing competence and potentialities in the society and it is necessary to wait for a hero or superman to remove difficulties and solving problems with his high power. (same source, p.49)

Third world: controllable but not understandable

People of third world are not able to recognize their world because of thinking poverty, but they believe that this world is controllable and manageable. People in this world know they are able to confront with bad conditions. Ignorance is necessary for superstitions. So, lack of realistic understanding of nature and associations between phenomena (ignorance) push people toward superstitious thinking (same source. p.52).

Fourth world: non-understandable and uncontrollable

There is most inclination toward superstitions in this world because of ignorance of social realities, natural associations, ruling laws of the world and also disability and weakness feeling toward happenings. Lack of scientific and rational understanding of the phenomena induces fear and anxiety in man. On the other side, weakness feeling toward what is going on provides background for hopelessness and despair.

In fact, superstitions would be prevalent in a society because of low understanding the phenomena and ruling principals on personal and social lives and also unsolvable problems. Fourth world is formed from understanding and effecting competences and provides the best background for penetrating superstitions in thoughts and actions (same source, p.59).

Divine Description of superstitions

Some scholars believe that either religion or sciences are appeared from black magic and superstitious, simultaneously (Jahouda, 1992, p.244).

In fact, black magic and superstitions are against religion and sciences. It means that superstitions are deviation from religion and sciences. 'Bad thinking leads to black magic and sciences are nieces of black magic.' John Stewart Mill Said. (rouholamini, 1993, pp.1-2).

The theorists of evolution faculty such as Tyler and Freezer believe that religion is originated from sorcery. According to Freezer, sorcery existed before religion and is origin of religious beliefs. He noted that the behavior of people and their belief to Metaphysics powers originates from sorcery and leads to nobility of soul; religion is resulted from defeating sorcery and making pure the beliefs (same source, p.204).

It is obvious that the prevailed religion usually repels defeated religion and recognizes it as old, superstitious and combined with magic (Nikpanah, 1998, p.1).

On the other side, custodians of superstitions combine superstitious actions with some prayers. In general, superstitious beliefs enter into religions and societies in two ways: 1) superstitious beliefs and actions are deformed in older societies and cultures. 2) As histories of religious societies shows superstitions penetrate into religious thoughts, actions and habits of people of theses societies from other nations and cultures gradually. The frauds match superstitions with new society, attribute them to Saints and show superstitions as religious ceremonies. (Fazayi, 1987, p.3).

Sociological description of Superstitions

A sociologist defines superstition without previous bias or positive/negative biases and accepts it as a social reality.

1. Two different viewpoints of sociologists to superstitions

A) Some of sociologists and anthropologists believe that culture is a complex of beliefs, ceremonies, values, norms, behaviors, arts, tools, constructions and technology. Superstitions and wrong beliefs are parts of the culture of each society which are labeled on the beliefs and values of other people. Therefore, there are not superstitions and wrong beliefs in the world. These are complexes of beliefs,

values and norms of a society, a culture, a nation or a group. We call them superstitions because they are not in conformity with our values, norms and beliefs. The sociologists who believe in this way are belonged to understanding….., They seek reasons, motivations, intentions and will of social phenomena. They believe that any mental symbols, values and beliefs are meaningful and have definite targets. It is not possible to understand them without recognizing the motivations of people. These scholars believe that social researchers must be free of values; they believe that there are no right and wrong beliefs or wrong superstitious beliefs; these are beliefs and values of a society which may not be in conformity with our values and beliefs (Secretariat of assembly of General Culture of Lorestan Province, 1996).

B) These scholars believe that there are wrong and irrational values, beliefs and ceremonies in heart of right and rational values and ceremonies. They think that sociologists must recognize this complex and present solutions for removing irrational values, beliefs, ceremonies and actions. They seek for causes, incline to law and nature to some extent and seek for causes in analysis the culture of the society. For example Pareto divides human behaviors into rational and irrational ones. He believes that irrational behaviors of human are wrong justifications and reasons which justify wrong behaviors of human. August Conte believes that human's mind has three evolutional levels. In first level or sensation level, man attributes symbols to creatures and powers which are comparable with human beings. In second level, mind of human pays attention to abstract existences. In third level he observes only symbols and refuses from discovering causes of phenomena. In first and second levels, man does not think intellectually. Therefore, superstitions are parts of his/her life. In fact, accordance to August Conte, superstition is one of levels of mind growth. Societies in level of thought are less mature than intellectual societies. In other words, more mature societies have more intellectual actions and superstitious behaviors are belonged to immature societies (same source, p.9).

2. Theory of social learning

One of the reasons of prevalence of superstitious behaviors between people is nature of human learning. Accordance to social learning theory the mutual relationship between person and environmental factors describes human learning. It means that personal variables such as inferences, thoughts and imagines affect on environmental factors. Environmental factors affect on imagines and thoughts of people as well. Therefore, person forms the environment and it affects the person. (Secretariat of assembly of General Culture of Lorestan Province, 1996. p.1)

Accordance to social learning theory, society and ruling culture are reasons for superstitious behaviors and thoughts which affect generations through influencing people. Therefore some of the cultural faults and social interactions as superstitious environmental variables make superstitious thoughts in the person. Later, person affects on the other people as the factor of spreading superstitions in the environment. The followers of this theory believe that observation of other's behaviors particularly through Medias and environment make the behavior of person which are resonated though resonators such as decreasing conflicts, gaining financial rewards, getting admiration of others or getting self-esteem (Ispa,2003, p.7).

Vyse believes that: "children learn superstitions through observing the behaviors of parents and other adults and imitating them. So, if parents and adults knock on wood, walk under ladder or carry luck amulet with themselves, children will imitate them". (Vyse, 1997).

3. Theory of social conformity

This theory tries to describe the inclination toward superstitious beliefs. Conformity is defined as a change in the behavior and beliefs of the person in consequence of real or imaginative force on side of a person or a group of people (Oronson, 1991,. p.21). There are some factors such as unanimity of the majority, character of the person, the members of the group, security feeling, reward/punishment, which decrease or increase conformity. This theory suggests that superstitions are consequences of forces from groups or society particularly reference group and important people. In result, people are obliged to change their behaviors and beliefs and conform themselves with the society. According this theory, prevalence of superstitions in a society is a kind of social conformity which people will be accepted in the society through it (Khasheii, Reza, 2001. p.7).

4. Sociology of cognition and social origin of thought

Accepting superstitions as a kind of thought, we can see that superstitious actions and behaviors have roots in thought. In consequence, we can utilize cognition sociology as sociological theories regarding effective factors on thought.

Cognition sociology analyzes the relationship between thought and social background of thought. In fact "this section of sociology analyzes the relationship between thought and society as well as social and existential conditions of cognition". (Kuser, 1998, p.563).
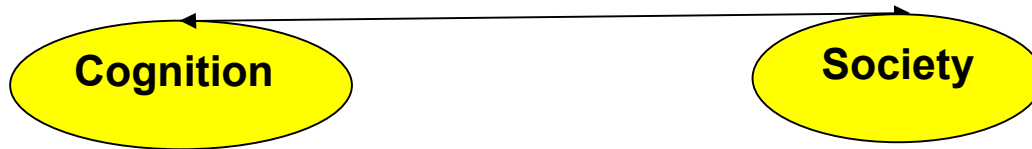
This scheme shows a complex and their mutual relationship. This relationship can be simple and weak or casual and determined. The arrow is bilateral. It means that the function can be from one side to the other side and vice versa dependence to the conditions; also it can have functions on both sides simultaneously. Such cognition sociology emphasizes on existential (social) conditions of cognition; therefore, it links all of thinking productions such as ideologies, religions, philosophies and sciences to their social-historical frames which form and deliver them (Glover et al. 2004, pp.12-13).

For example, accusing women to sorcery was a way for making scapegoat in social riots. It seems that, people of England in 16th and 17th centuries had weak beliefs to sorcery in comparison with other European societies. Why? Accordance to Anderson and Gordon, "English women enjoyed independence which was unique in the world at that time". They were rich, they were literate to some extent, and if they intended to marry with a richer man, they were observed with hesitation more than before. In result, less English women in comparison with other European women were made as scapegoats and few of them were accused to sorcery. There were few sorcery trials and execution sentences in England. We can see that the penalties were mild and there were many opportunities for exoneration. In contrary, we can see that in Scotland, suffering and prosecution of magician women were prevalent because of low rank of women accordance to the Church and also society. Therefore, cognition sociology tries to link between thought patterns and social situations (Glover et al, 2004, pp.27-28).

At the following, you can see some sociologist theories regarding thought and its social origin (in general) and the relationship between superstitions and their social origin (in particular):

Robin Horton:

Robin Horton suggested some similarities and coherences between traditional-mythological thought of African people and Western scientific thought. In agreement with his predecessors, Horton presents there is no formed system in contrary with traditional beliefs complex in traditional societies. However, in the developed scientific societies, people have access

to many kinds of thought inferences. Since, the system of beliefs in traditional cultures is so strict, people in these societies are not able to leave such a strict system and they can not deviate from it. One of the characteristics of the traditional thought is that people can not tolerate lack of information in contrary with a scientist who is always ready to set aside inefficient theory (although he/she can not replace it with another). In traditional societies, the concept of chance/accident has not grown up: people in these societies try to find a definite reason for each happening. For example, if a rotten branch of a tree falls on head of a man and kills him, it is necessary to present a clear reason for his death; for example it is probable that this man has had a quarrel with his half-brother on inheritance and a magician helped the half-brother to kill the man by falling a rotten branch on his head; it is probable that the killed man has not divided the inheritance honestly and his ancestors made the rotten branch fall on his head…. (Jahoda, 1992, pp.185-186).

Hugart, Sogarmann and Ragers are among sociologists who analyzed superstitions with viewpoint of Cognition Sociology. Hugart in his book "the benefits of Literacy" analyzed prevalence of superstitions in workers class and concluded that workers believe superstitions more than other social classes because of little literacy (Jahouda, 1992, p.241). Sugarmann believes that the differences in nature of occupations cause differences in attitudes and viewpoints. Since, simple workers have little control on the future, they can not improve their situations, so they believe destiny, routine actions and instantaneous enjoys. (Alavioun, 1994, pp.76-77). Rager suggests that farmers believe that destiny is the absolute power in their happiness or adversity; they think it is difficult to fight with nature for improving life level. Therefore, if they are successful in their lives, they will attribute it to metaphysic powers. They think they have not strong enough to fight with destiny; they prefer to give up, be patient and flee from it. He concludes that belief in destiny is one of factors which prevents changing and accepting re-building. (Rafiee, 2003, p.35).

Conclusion

This article looks at superstitions from 5 viewpoints: historical, sociological, psychological, divine and cognition-philosophical.

From psychological viewpoint, superstition is a personal phenomenon which is result of mental struggle of a person to solve external conflicts. It is also result of an abnormal mentality and ill mind. (Social Researching Group of Assembly of Determining Policies of System, 2008, vol.23).

In historical viewpoint, the responses of the early man to questions about the universe, provides some beliefs for him/her, gradually. Confronting with large and inaccessible phenomena and also his/her weakness and disability in controlling those phenomena, leads to fear and perplexity in him/her. At least, he/she regains calmness and relaxation through creating superstitious actions (Social Researching Group of Assembly of Determining Policies of System, 2008, vol.23).

In philosophical viewpoint, there are two important philosophical variables in belief to superstitions: lack of understanding the world and inability of controlling the conditions. People seek help from black magic when they are not able to control the conditions of life, scientifically. However weak the man may be toward external conditions, he will incline to superstitions more; when man is not able to understand and control the happenings, believing to superstitions are highly probable.

In divine viewpoint, superstitions are the deviations from religion and sciences. The theorists of evolution faculty such as Tyler and Freezer believe that religion is originated from sorcery. According to Freezer sorcery existed before religion and is origin of religious beliefs. He noted that the behavior of people and their belief to Metaphysics powers originate from sorcery and leads to nobility of soul; then religion are resulted from defeating sorcery and making pure the beliefs (same source. p.204).

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Social conformity theory suggests that superstitions are consequences of forces which are made by groups or society on the person (particularly reference group and important people). In result, people are obliged to change their behaviors and beliefs and conform themselves with the society. According this theory, prevalence of superstitions in a society is a kind of social conformity which people will be accepted in the society through it (Khasheii, Reza, 2001. p.7).

On the other side, cognition psychology suggests that superstitions have social origin. In fact "this section of sociology analyzes the relationship between thought and society as well as social and existential conditions of cognition". (Kuser, 1998, p.563).

Accordance to Robin Horton traditional-mythological thought of African people is reason of superstitions prevalence in Africa. In traditional societies there is not another formed system against traditional beliefs complex. However, in the developed scientific societies, people have access to many kinds of thought inferences.

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12/25/2016