



SUPERSTITION

Minji Karabo

About me: —

1



I am a passionate English Home Language teacher at a prestigious private school in the Gauteng province. I have nine years' teaching experience and love finding ways of making teaching fun, practical and stress-free for teachers, parents and learners.

2

Why these resources?

Teachers and students alike often feel overwhelmed in preparing for the IEB Poetry section, so I aim to make easily accessible, thorough annotations for each of the 19 prescribed poems.

We have also realised at IEB marking that the poetry sections are often the ones students struggle with most, so developing those poetry skills are imperative.



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Thank you for bringing me into your classroom! I hope you find my resources helpful in making teaching poetry easy and stress-free. I have used a myriad of resources as well as my own knowledge to create thorough annotations for you and your students to cover the IEB Poetry Syllabus for 2023–2025.

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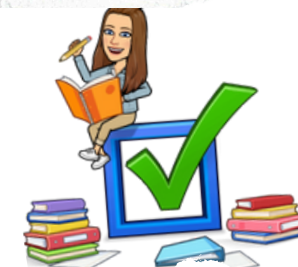
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MINJI KARABO

- Minji Karibo is a Nigerian poet.
- She studied at the University of Ibadan in the 1950s and 1960s.
- Her poetry was published in The Horn, a student magazine.
- Her poem Superstition appeared in the anthology Nigerian Student Verse, edited by Martin Banham.
- After marriage and motherhood, she wrote under the name Minji Ateli.
- In a 1965 letter, she shared that she had paused her writing to focus on family life.

SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW



- Rich Oral Tradition: Rooted in indigenous storytelling, praise poetry (izibongo), and folk narratives.
- Colonial & Apartheid Era:
 - Early poetry influenced by British literary traditions.
 - Protest poetry emerged, addressing oppression, racial injustice, and resistance (e.g. Mongane Wally Serote, Oswald Mtshali).
- Post-Apartheid & Contemporary Poetry:
 - Themes of identity, reconciliation, and social change.
 - Blend of traditional forms, free verse, and performance poetry.
- Key Poets:
 - Mongane Wally Serote – Protest poetry (City Johannesburg).
 - Oswald Mtshali – Township life and struggle (Sounds of a Cowhide Drum).
 - Antjie Krog – Reconciliation, feminism, identity (Country of My Skull).
 - Chris Mann – Spirituality, social issues (Crossing Over).
- Modern Trends: Poetry slams, multilingual works, digital platforms expanding reach.



POPULAR SOUTH AFRICAN SUPERSTITIONS

1. **Don't whistle at night** – It is believed that whistling after dark invites evil spirits or snakes into the home.
2. **Don't sweep the house at night**– Sweeping after sunset may sweep away your blessings, wealth, or good luck.
3. **Dreaming of snakes means someone is jealous of you** – Many believe that such dreams warn of betrayal or hidden envy in your life.
4. **Owls are omens of death or bad luck** – Hearing or seeing an owl near your home may be a sign of misfortune or death.
5. **An itchy palm means money is coming** – If your right palm itches, it's said you're about to receive money.

1. **Stepping over a child stunts their growth** – If someone steps over a child, it may prevent the child from growing tall.
2. **Don't eat from the pot** – Eating straight from the cooking pot is believed to cause marriage difficulties.
3. **Red ants near the door mean visitors are coming** – A sudden swarm of red ants at the entrance could be a sign of unexpected guests.
4. **Dropping a spoon or fork signals visitors** – If a spoon falls, a female visitor may arrive; if a fork falls, a male guest is on their way.
5. **Never put a hat on the bed** – Doing this is thought to bring bad luck or invite negative energy into the home.

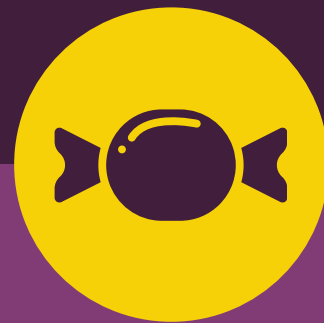


THE BIG QUESTIONS

Which of these superstitions have you heard before?



Do you or anyone you know believe in any of these? Explain.



Choose one superstition. Why do you think it became part of cultural belief?



Do you think superstitions help or hinder people? Why?





THE TITLE

The title *Superstition* is simple yet rich in implication. It immediately sets the tone and thematic focus of the poem, inviting readers to consider the role of **traditional beliefs, fear, and folklore** in shaping human behaviour.

- Literal Meaning
 - The word superstition refers to **irrational beliefs or practices**, often rooted in cultural or religious traditions, that are not based on scientific reasoning but are accepted as truth by communities or individuals.
 - The poem presents a catalogue of such beliefs — from twitching eyelids and owl hoots to spilled drinks and doorways at dusk.
- Symbolic and Thematic Significance
 - The title signals that the poem will explore **cultural knowledge passed through generations**, blending belief, fear, and inherited wisdom.
 - These superstitions are not just odd customs — they are **expressions of how people interpret and manage the unknown**, particularly around **death, luck, ancestry, and the supernatural**.



THE TITLE

- Tone and Attitude Embedded in the Title
 - The matter-of-fact use of the term Superstition suggests a neutral tone, but as the poem progresses, it becomes clear that these beliefs are deeply internalised by the speaker.
 - The repetition of “I know” throughout the poem shows the speaker is not merely listing hearsay — she **believes**, or at least respects, these practices.
- Effect on the Reader
 - The title primes the reader to **question the nature of belief**: What do we accept without proof? Where do our rituals come from? Are superstitions silly, sacred, or both?
 - It also encourages cultural sensitivity, especially for readers unfamiliar with these specific beliefs — many of which are rooted in African traditions.

In short, the title Superstition frames the poem as an intimate exploration of **belief systems that shape identity, behaviour, and cultural heritage**, prompting reflection on the thin line between faith, fear, and tradition.

Lines 1-2: The speaker begins with a strong declarative tone: "I know", which is repeated throughout the poem. This repetition suggests deeply internalised beliefs passed down generationally. The mention of a "grumbling old woman" invokes an archetype often associated with bad omens or witch-like figures in folklore.

Lines 6-9: This blends Christian and traditional African belief systems — sheep are transformed into ghostly figures of the dead. The contrast between "dark graves" and "walk in light" reinforces the idea of the spirit world breaking into the physical world, especially in times when nature feels still and strange.

I know

Symbolism: The "grumbling old woman" symbolises misfortune or a bad omen. She is not just a person — she becomes a living warning, a sign that the day is cursed.

that when a grumbling old woman

Is the first thing I meet in the morning

I must rush back to bed

and cover my head

5

That wandering sheep on a sultry afternoon,

Are really men come from their dark graves

To walk in light

Metaphor: "Wandering sheep... are really men come from their dark graves" is a powerful metaphorical transformation. Animals are interpreted as ghosts — spirits returning from the dead, cloaked in mundane appearances.

in mortal sight

Personification & Imagery:
"to walk in light / in mortal sight" gives these spirits agency and presence. The contrast between "dark graves" and "light" visually emphasises their crossing over from death to the world of the living.

Lines 3-5: This superstition warns that seeing such a person first thing brings misfortune. The act of rushing back to bed and covering the head suggests a desire to hide or protect oneself from impending bad luck, reflecting fear and helplessness.

Lines 3-4: Hyperbole and Imagery: "rush back to bed / and cover my head" exaggerates the speaker's fear, creating a vivid image of someone retreating from an unseen force.

Symbolism: Sheep often symbolise innocence or simplicity, but here they represent the blurred boundary between the natural and supernatural.

Tone in lines 1-5: The tone is semi-serious but filled with cultural tension — there's a blend of humour and fear, as if the speaker knows how irrational it sounds but also believes in its weight.

Lines 10-13: These are classic omens in many cultures. Twitching and the hooting of an owl signal foreboding events.

The internal rhyme (pluck/luck) adds a playful but chilling musicality.

Line 16: The image of witches dancing in banana groves links the natural world to supernatural danger. The setting becomes spiritually charged, turning ordinary nature into a site of mystery and fear.

Figurative Language: Personification / Imagery:
“Witches dance” gives a visual and eerie quality to what is usually a static setting — banana groves are no longer just plants, but sites of mystical activity.

Twitching hands or eyelids and owl hoots are treated as omens. The body and nature are seen as message-bearers — signs of impending misfortune.

That when my left hand or eyelid twitches 10

Or when an owl hoots from a nearby tree

I should need pluck “pluck” and “luck” create a soft rhyme that adds a rhythm and almost playful tone to a serious belief — reflecting how superstition is woven into oral tradition and chant-like memory.

It means bad luck

That drink spilled goes to ancestral spirits

That witches dance in clumps of bananas 15

That crumbs must be left in pots and plates

Lines 14-15: Spilled drink symbolises a libation — a respectful offering to ancestral spirits. What seems like an accident is reinterpreted as a spiritual exchange, showing how daily life and the spirit world are closely linked.

Personification (implied): The owl hooting from the tree may also be interpreted as a spiritual messenger — giving animal behaviour symbolic meaning beyond its biological purpose.

Symbolism: Spilled drink symbolises a libation — an offering to ancestral spirits. In many African traditions, unintentionally spilled liquid is seen not as waste but as a gift to the spiritual realm.

Metaphorical Thinking: The act of spilling becomes a spiritual exchange — what might seem like an accident is reinterpreted through cultural belief.

Symbolism: Banana trees, especially in clusters, symbolise concealed danger or spiritual presence in some African contexts. The ordinary becomes uncanny.

Overall Tone: A Mix of Seriousness and Subtle Irony - While the poem presents the superstitions seriously, the tone can also feel whimsical or ironic, especially in lines like “witches dance in clumps of bananas”. This complexity invites readers to ask: Does the speaker believe all of this, or is she reflecting on what she’s been taught?

Lines 16-18: Leaving crumbs symbolises nourishment for unborn or ancestral spirits, reflecting respect for future life. It shows how hospitality extends beyond the living, highlighting the coexistence of physical and spiritual worlds.

Lines 21-23: Tripping is not seen as a personal fault but blamed on an “evil root”, shifting agency to unseen forces. This reflects a belief that spiritual powers influence fate and that misfortune often has a hidden, malevolent cause.

Personification / Supernatural Attribution: The root is blamed — not the person. This shifts agency from human to object, implying a malevolent intention.

Symbolism / Cultural Belief: The crumbs represent nourishment for spirits — specifically, “babes unborn”. This could symbolise respect for future life, or possibly reincarnation, showing how even leftovers are spiritually significant.

That crumbs must be left in pots and plates
until the morn

Contrast (Implied): There’s a gentle tension between the living and those yet to be, suggesting time and existence extend beyond the physical.

For babes unborn

That it's wrong to stand in the doorways at dusk

For ghosts must pass—they have right of way!**20**

That when a hidden root trips me over

Fault's not in my foot

It's an evil root

Lines 19-20: Doorways symbolise boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds, especially at dusk. Giving ghosts the “right of way” personifies them as social beings, showing respect and fear for the unseen.

Symbolism of Thresholds: Doorways are symbolic boundaries between the physical and spiritual world. Dusk (the time of transition between day and night) heightens this symbolism — a liminal time in a liminal space.

Personification of Ghosts: “Right of way” — a legalistic, human term — is given to ghosts, suggesting they are active agents with moral and social rights.

Metaphor: The “evil root” might also symbolise underlying causes of misfortune or illness, echoing the belief that unseen spiritual forces cause harm.

Lines 24–25: Sleeping with feet toward the door symbolises death, echoing how the deceased are carried out. “Not long be fit” is a euphemism for dying, reinforcing the belief that posture influences fate. The final repetition, “I know it—Yes I know it”, mimics oral tradition and closes the poem with a tone of solemn acceptance, showing that these superstitions are deeply internalised and lived.

Euphemism and Symbolism: “Not long be fit” is a soft way of saying death may be near.

Sleeping with feet toward the door is symbolic of how the dead are laid before being taken out — this belief is found across various cultures.

That when I sleep with feet towards the door,

I'll not long be fit

25

I know it—Yes I know it

Repetition: The repetition here mimics incantation or oral tradition, reinforcing the certainty and emotional conviction behind these beliefs.

Tone Marker: It ends the poem with solemnity and resignation, implying that these beliefs are not simply remembered — they are internalised and lived.

Line 26: A powerful, echoing conclusion that underscores how deeply embedded these beliefs are in the speaker's psyche.

The repetition signals certainty, resignation, and emotional weight, ending the poem on a solemn, almost reverent note.



THE STRUCTURE

Single-Stanza Structure

- The poem is written as one continuous stanza, which reflects the unbroken flow of thought and oral tradition.
- This structure mimics the rhythmic, chant-like nature of storytelling, where one belief follows another without pause.

1

Repetition of “I know”

- The repeated phrase “I know” acts like a chorus or refrain, reinforcing the speaker’s certainty and the weight of these beliefs.
- It also mirrors the style of oral recitation or incantation, giving the poem a ritualistic feel.

2

Uneven Line Lengths

- The variation in line lengths creates a natural, conversational rhythm.
- It reflects how beliefs are passed on informally — not polished, but remembered and shared as they are.

3



THE STRUCTURE

Enjambment (Run-On Lines)

- Many lines flow into the next without punctuation. This enjambment keeps the pace moving and mimics thoughts unfolding in real time.
- It also suggests how one belief leads naturally to another, creating a chain of inherited wisdom.

4

Lack of Rhyme Scheme

- The poem has no fixed rhyme pattern, contributing to its free verse form.
- This mirrors the organic, unpredictable nature of superstition — shaped more by cultural voice than literary rules.

5

Effect of Structure

- The continuous, flowing form and repetition create a tone of intimate conviction.
- The poem's structure supports its theme: that superstition is deeply embedded, constantly present, and passed on through generations, not questioned or dissected.

6

OVERALL INTERPRETATION

Karibo's poem is more than a list of superstitions — it's a cultural map of inherited belief, showing how fear, reverence, tradition, and spiritual understanding are woven into everyday experience. The speaker doesn't question these superstitions — she believes, or at least honours them — reminding readers of how folklore shapes identity, behaviour, and worldview.



SUMMARY OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Line(s)	Device	Effect
1–3	Symbolism / Archetype	The old woman becomes a symbolic warning, not just a character.
4–5	Imagery / Hyperbole	Exaggerates the reaction, reinforcing emotional intensity.
6–9	Metaphor / Symbolism	Sheep become ghosts, showing how natural elements are reinterpreted through belief.
10–13	Omen / Internal Rhyme	Body movements and animal sounds are framed as signs, reinforced by rhythmic rhyme.
14–15	Symbolism / Metaphor	Reframes spilled drink as a sacred offering.

SUMMARY OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Line(s)	Figurative Device	Effect
16	Personification / Symbolism	Banana groves become supernatural spaces.
17–19	Symbolism	Crumbs represent respect for spirits and unborn children.
20–21	Personification / Symbolism	Ghosts are treated as entities with rights.
22–24	Metaphor / Supernatural Attribution	Ordinary mishaps are blamed on spiritual causes.
25–26	Symbolism / Euphemism	Links posture in sleep to death, conveying cultural fear.
27	Repetition / Tone	Emphasises belief, ritual, and certainty.

ORIGINS OF SUPERSTITIONS: WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

Superstitions are traditional beliefs or practices that arise from fear of the unknown, attempts to explain the unexplainable, or efforts to protect oneself from harm or misfortune. Though they vary across cultures, most share common roots in human history, psychology, and environment.

1

Fear and Uncertainty

- Superstitions often develop in response to anxieties about things people can't control — like death, illness, weather, or bad luck.
- When no scientific explanation was available, communities turned to rituals and symbolic behaviour to make sense of their world.

2

Oral Tradition and Folklore

- Before written history, knowledge and beliefs were passed down orally from one generation to the next.
- Superstitions became part of cultural storytelling, often used to teach lessons, moral values, or protective practices.



ORIGINS OF SUPERSTITIONS: WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

3

Religion and Spiritual Belief

- Many superstitions are rooted in spiritual or religious systems, especially those involving ancestral spirits, omens, and the afterlife.
- Actions like spilling a drink or hearing an owl hoot were interpreted as messages from the spirit world.

4

Environment and Local Customs

- The natural environment heavily influenced superstition. For example:
 - In hot, rural areas, banana groves became associated with spirits because they were dense and mysterious.
 - Animals like owls or black cats were seen as omens due to their nocturnal behaviour or unusual appearances.

5

Historical Coincidences

- If a certain event (like a death or accident) happened after someone did something (like breaking a mirror), people started to associate cause and effect, even when unrelated.
- Over time, coincidences became customs, and customs hardened into superstition.

6

Social Control and Morality

- Some superstitions helped enforce behavioural norms, especially in children.
- E.g., “Don’t eat from the pot or you’ll never marry” might have encouraged table manners in a culturally memorable way.



INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT “SUPERSTITION” BY KARIBO

1

The Poem Reflects Oral Tradition

- The repetitive structure (“I know...”) mimics the rhythmic storytelling found in oral cultures, particularly in African traditions. It makes the poem feel like a chant or incantation, enhancing its authenticity and memorability.

2

Cultural Beliefs from Across Africa Are Woven In

- Many of the superstitions referenced — such as owls being omens, banana groves harbouring spirits, and spilled drinks being offerings — are drawn from diverse African cultures, particularly those with strong ancestral and spiritual belief systems.

3

The Structure Mirrors the Nature of Superstition

- The poem is one long stanza, with each line flowing into the next — much like how superstitions are passed on: informally, continuously, and without strict structure.

4

Life, Death, and the Spirit World Intermingle

- The poem blurs the lines between the living and the dead, the physical and the spiritual, suggesting a worldview where both realms coexist in everyday life — a key concept in many African cosmologies.



INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT “SUPERSTITION” BY KARIBO

5

Everyday Actions Take on Symbolic Meaning

- Simple actions (sleeping, spilling, stepping, eating) are given cosmic consequences. This shows how superstition embeds itself in the mundane, turning ordinary life into a ritualistic performance of caution and respect.

7

Educational Use

- Superstition is frequently used in South African classrooms to explore themes of belief, culture, and oral tradition. It's especially effective for introducing learners to poetry rooted in African identity and the blending of the real with the mystical.

6

Tone: A Mix of Seriousness and Subtle Irony

- While the poem presents the superstitions seriously, the tone can also feel whimsical or ironic, especially in lines like “witches dance in clumps of bananas”. This complexity invites readers to ask: Does the speaker believe all of this, or is she reflecting on what she’s been taught?





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Analysis

MESSAGE/ SUBJECT MATTER/ THEME?

Message

- Minji Karibo's Superstition conveys that cultural beliefs, though often seen as irrational, hold deep meaning within communities.
- The poem shows how superstition shapes people's actions, fears, and understanding of the world.
- It also highlights the power of oral tradition and the way knowledge is passed from generation to generation — not always with logic, but with emotional and cultural weight.

Subject Matter

- The poem lists and reflects on various superstitions the speaker has learned or inherited — from omens and ancestral offerings to spiritual warnings in nature.
- These beliefs come from African cultural contexts, and they influence everyday behaviour: how one eats, sleeps, walks, and interprets signs from the world.

MESSAGE/ SUBJECT MATTER/ THEME?

🎯 Themes

- Cultural Belief and Oral Tradition – The repetition of “I know” mimics oral storytelling. The poem preserves traditional knowledge, showing how beliefs are passed down through generations.
- The Supernatural and the Unseen – The poem presents a world where the spiritual realm constantly interacts with the physical one — through animals, ancestors, objects, and natural events.
- Fear and Control – Superstitions provide a sense of explanation and protection in an unpredictable world. They help the speaker interpret misfortune and maintain a sense of control over fate.
- Daily Life and Ritual – The poem reveals how even mundane actions (e.g. spilling a drink, sleeping position) can take on profound symbolic meaning within a cultural framework.
- Inherited Knowledge and Conviction – The firm tone of the speaker — “I know it —Yes I know it” — reflects how deeply embedded and internalised these beliefs are, even if their logic isn't questioned.

WHAT IS THE POET'S PURPOSE?

Minji Karibo's purpose is to capture and preserve cultural beliefs passed through generations, while inviting readers to reflect on how these beliefs shape daily life, identity, and worldview.

🔍 Key Aspects of the Poet's Purpose:

- To Preserve Oral Tradition – By repeating “I know,” Karibo mirrors the rhythms of spoken storytelling, preserving traditional superstitions in poetic form.
- To Explore the Influence of Belief – The poem highlights how superstition can affect how people interpret events, navigate the world, and relate to the unseen.
- To Show Respect for Cultural Wisdom – Rather than mocking these beliefs, the speaker honours them, showing how they are internalised, respected, and emotionally meaningful.
- To Examine the Unseen Forces of Life – Karibo draws attention to the spiritual dimension of existence, portraying a world where the physical and supernatural are interconnected.
- To Reflect on Identity and Inheritance – The poem reveals how identity is shaped not just by reason, but by what is passed down — in stories, warnings, rituals, and instinct.



IMAGERY / SYMBOLISM / FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The poem uses **vivid imagery** to bring cultural beliefs to life — owls hoot, sheep walk like ghosts, and witches dance in banana groves. These images make the spiritual world feel present and real.

Symbolism plays a key role:

- Spilled drink becomes an offering to ancestors.
- Doorways and dusk symbolise boundaries between worlds.
- Roots, crumbs, and sleeping positions carry spiritual meaning.

Figurative language like metaphor and personification helps reinterpret ordinary things as signs or warnings, showing how belief shapes perception.

Overall, these devices deepen the theme that daily life is filled with unseen forces and inherited meaning.

WHAT MOOD / EMOTION IS REFLECTED IN THE POEM?

The mood of the poem is a blend of reverence, unease, and quiet conviction.

- There is a strong sense of respect and seriousness, as the speaker lists each belief without mockery or doubt.
- At times, the mood feels eerie or unsettling, especially in references to spirits, death, and omens — creating an atmosphere of quiet fear or caution.
- The repeated phrase “I know” adds a feeling of certainty and emotional weight, suggesting that these beliefs are deeply internalised and lived.

Overall, the poem reflects a sombre and reflective mood, shaped by the tension between fear of the unknown and inherited wisdom.



WHAT IS THE POET'S TONE OF VOICE/ ATTITUDE TOWARD THE SUBJECT MATTER /

ARE THERE ANY SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN TONE?

T Minji Karibo's tone in Superstition is primarily calm, reflective, and respectful, with underlying notes of seriousness and quiet fear.

Tone of Voice / Attitude Toward the Subject

- The speaker's repeated use of "I know" conveys a tone of certainty and acceptance, not scepticism or doubt.
- There is no mockery or irony — the poet's attitude suggests deep cultural respect for the superstitions being described.
- By presenting them plainly, the tone implies that these beliefs are part of lived reality, not curiosities to be questioned.

Changes in Tone?

- The tone remains mostly consistent throughout: measured, steady, and sincere.
- However, the final repetition ("I know it—Yes I know it") introduces a shift to emotional intensity — suggesting that the speaker is not only reciting but affirming these beliefs with personal conviction and possibly resignation.





THANK YOU!

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L i t e r a t u r e F u n d i

