

WITCHCRAFT...



Origins: Religion ★ Magic

by GINI WELLES

Witchcraft is the degeneration of one of the earliest forms of religious belief and practice. When Man roamed the earth with no apparent form of civilization, he survived in small groups, motivated by desires for food, sex, and self-preservation.

He exercised the sense of psychological unity mainly through dance. Dancing was originally connected with food-gathering, when the dancers mimicked the stalking and slaying of game in hopes that the mime would insure good hunting. Dances were also used to produce fertility, for sexual release, and as a communal exercise.

The ones who called and directed the dances were the earliest priests, who were at the time, old men and women, magicians, or medicine men. People rationalized the need for dance because it reunited the individual with the group. These practices dominated the early religious practices of mankind.

The position of women was all-important. She was the guardian of the home 'round the fire, and the symbol of sexual fecundity. She was the mother 'round the fire, the cauldron which symbolized food and faith. The old matriarchal ideas still persist.

Animal cults formed an important part of the witch background. Early men followed the migrations of reindeer, seal, and buffalo. Men disguised themselves as animals for the purpose of killing them. The relationship between men and animals was more than hunter to prey, however. Man stayed in close proximity with animals, and the animals were often unafraid of men, living and eating in the same area. Women of some primitive tribes still suckle the young of baboons; and pre-Revolutionary Russian aristocrats made peasant women suckle baby wolf-hounds.(1)

It was believed that drinking the blood of animals would bring strength and agility to the drinker. Men took the roles of animals in dancing, becoming the animals themselves, grunting, barking, and crying like animals. Fear of animals, rooted in the belief that some animals possessed evil spirits or powers, contributed to the importance of animal cults.

But the world grew larger, and cultures separated. The attainment of psychic release became more dependent upon organized rites and exercises. If rites were carried out in good faith or performed unconsciously, they were considered religious. They become magical when procured consciously as an individual release. As rites became more organized, religion became increasingly differentiated from magic. Yet the animal symbolism remained, the preoccupation with animals and their processes, the ceremonial regard for animals as sacrificial objects created a psychic field.

As religion developed historically into the long struggle between the group and the individual, the ascetic and the erotic, the dance became almost a dividing line between religion and magic. Dance was associated with fairies, witches, and old fertility rites. It was bitterly attacked by the Catholic Church and the Puritans. Today, dancing is still frowned upon by certain religious groups such as the Baptist, Mormon, and Pilgrim Churches,

who consider dancing a "work of the Devil."

In spite of the historical evolution of conventional Christian thought condemning witches, cults of Satan, and Black Magic, one still has to believe in evil, the Satan-figure, to believe in a countervailing force of benevolence, the God-figure. A form of dualism, that is, that the power of one connotes the power of the other, still exists in conventional Christian thought.

Magic and religion are co-terminous in any society. The early stream of belief is carried on by the Cathari, the Rosicrucians, the Yogis and other societies.

Today, mysticism and magic cults derived from ancient beliefs are apparent in society in the forms of numerology, magnetists, theosophists, clairvoyants, and spiritualists.

Slavic Mythology: Of Genii and Vampire

by FRANCES KUBICA

In Slavic mythology, the soul is a being distinct from the body and is free to leave the body behind and roam about the world during the person's lifetime. The soul usually emerges when the person is sleeping and either dwells in a tree, enters the body of an animal, or assumes the shape of a white bird and flutters around the countryside before returning to the sleeping person. It is not advisable to go to bed thirsty, lest the soul leave the body in search of water, thus weakening the body.

If a person faints the soul wanders uneasily throughout the world until consciousness is restored. Sometimes a man will lie in a death-like state for days while his soul is in paradise. These souls that leave the body are called Zduhacs or genii by the Serbs. Even the souls of animals can be transformed into genii. The genii, regardless of age, sex, or nationality, assemble on mountain tops where they fight each other either singly or in troops. The conquerors bring a rich harvest to their countrymen and success in breeding cattle; but if a man's soul gets killed in battle, the man will never awake. Sudden storms herald the battles among the genii. In general, however, these genii stand in high repute and are regarded as sensible and good beings.

Souls may pass into a living being, called a Mora, which may be a man or a woman whose own soul goes out of its body at night, leaving it as if dead. Sometimes two souls inhabit a body, and one of these leaves it when asleep. A man may be a Mora from birth, in which case his eyebrows are black, bushy, and grow together above his nose. The Mora can assume various shapes, and tries to suffocate men in their sleep. The Mora is either a white shadow, a snake, a white horse, a cat, a piece of straw, or a white mouse, etc. She first sends refreshing sleep to men, then frightens them with nightmares, chokes them, and sucks their blood. She terrorizes children, throws herself upon animals and sucks their blood, and withers trees.

In Russia the Moras, or Kikimoras, play roles comparable to the Roman penates. They are tiny female beings who live behind the oven and frighten sleeping persons by making little whistling noises. They like to spin, hop from place to place, and pester women who rise from the spinning-wheel without making the sign of the cross. They never grow old and are invisible, but their manifestations always foreshadow trouble.

As among many other peoples, the Slavs

believe that certain persons can change into wolves during their lifetime. A man who is born with teeth, or feet foremost, will become a werewolf, or Vukodlak. A man may also be put under a spell and become a werewolf, this happening most frequently as a bride and groom are on their way to be married. The werewolf runs about the village casting forlorn glances in the direction of people, or at other times killing them. He will retain his wolf-like form until the person who has cursed him lifts the spell.

A tradition exists among the Yugo-Slavs which dates from the thirteenth century. It recounts the story of a werewolf who followed the clouds and devoured the sun, causing an eclipse. Bells were rung and drums were beaten in the belief that this would drive the devil away.

The Vukodlak can also transform himself into a hen, a horse, a cow, and other domestic animals. He can suck the milk of cows and causes cattle to die of plague. The Slavs of Istria believe that every family has its own Vukodlak, but each house also has a good genie called the Kresnik, which combats the Vukodlak. Popular tradition often confuses the Vukodlak with the Vampire, and similar stories are told about both.

The Slavs universally believe that the soul can leave the body in the form of a small bird, so when a person dies a window is left open enabling the soul to come and go as it pleases. Sometimes the soul will assume the form of a fly. It will sit on the table and observe the lamentations of the mourners and the funeral preparations. As a bird it flutters around in the courtyard near the home of the deceased.

The soul of the deceased can grow hungry and thirsty, so various kinds of food and drink are placed within the coffin or the grave. Coins are given to the deceased also so that he may buy a place for himself in the realm of the dead. At the banquet given after a burial part of the meal is set aside for the soul which, though invisible, joins in the feast. Water is left for the soul during the first night of the funeral so that the soul might satisfy itself, and in the morning the people inspect the bowl to see if the soul has drunk or not. Sometimes this practice is continued for six weeks. This resembles the practice among the Tingit Indians of the Northwest Coast of North America. They cast tid-bits of food into the fire in order to feed the souls of their relatives in the realm of the dead. In Bulgaria, wine is sprinkled over the head of the grave, while in Russia wheat is strewn over the head of the grave.

A universal belief among the Slavs is that the soul wanders on the earth for forty days after death, and frequents the place where it used to live. It troubles those persons who had been its enemies in life. It is either invisible, or else it appears in the guise of an animal. Bulgarians believe that the soul tries to enter the corpse after forty days, but is frightened by the decaying, disfigured flesh and flies from it to the world beyond the tomb. Russians believe that the soul then flies toward the sun, moon, or stars, or wanders around in the woods, by rivers, or among the clouds.

Souls of the dead often appear at night as jack-o'-lanterns and flicker about churchyards and swamps. Sometimes they lead persons astray and strangle them. For this reason a person must not ridicule souls or whistle at them lest they beat him to death. But if a person is lost and kindly asks the soul the right direction, it will show him the road to follow.

On the whole, souls keep friendly relations with the living, save the souls of those who in their lifetime had been sorcerers, murderers, suicide victims, great sinners, or had been denied a Christian burial. The souls of sorcerers are very reluctant to part with their bodies and cannot leave by the regular door, so oftentimes a board in the roof is removed for them. Their souls assume the shape of unclean animals and enter



Drawing by Liza Meyer

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