

# Witchcraft and Magic

J U L I A N N A Y A U

Witchcraft and magic are collectives of practices such as rituals and spells, which are employed to cause or influence a desired outcome. Witchcraft is not always separable from religious rituals and is often heavily based on religious concepts. Forces such as spirits, gods, and demons are commonly attributed to acts of witchcraft, although modern-day practitioners of witchcraft prefer using terms such as *energy*, *will*, and *desire*. Witchcraft has been subject to disbelief because of the fallibility of evidence in support of its claimed effects. Critics find certain explanations of witchcraft more credible than others; the psychological and sociological effects of witchcraft are the only two factors that both believers and nonbelievers agree upon. The belief and practice of witchcraft have affected history in numerous parts of the world, and it is still being practiced in various forms around the globe.

Witchcraft is a part of virtually all human cultures, existing either within or alongside the culture's native religion. Although the exact practices differ among cultures and traditions, they all share similar structures. Acts of witchcraft can be categorized as either ritual or folk magic. Folk magic includes image magic, amulet/charm magic, healing magic, and ancestral veneration. Ritual magic, or ceremonial magic, is more formal and often involves one or more forms of folk magic. Folk-magic practices can sometimes take the

form of rituals or ceremonies if one form is the dominant focus of the ritual.

Image magic is based on the belief that an image is linked to what it represents and that anything done to the image will result in a similar effect upon the original. Unmarked stuffed dolls in the shape of a human, known as poppets or voodoo dolls, are most commonly used in image magic. The doll is considered to represent a certain person and can be used to bring benefit or harm to that person. Recognized practices include wrapping or binding the doll with cloth or rope in hopes that the person will be physically, mentally, or otherwise restrained from being able to do harm. Marks can be made upon the doll, indicating injuries or illnesses to be cured or created.

Amulets and charms are objects kept near a person or place to attract the desired or repel the unwanted. Their power is believed to be mainly symbolic, either through drawing on the influence of what they represent or reminding the owner of their power. The composition and shape of the item are often specific to the tradition. Familiar amulets in North American society include clovers, rabbit feet, horseshoes, and various religious symbols.

Healing magic is used either as a replacement for or a supplement to oral or topical medicines when an illness has a strong psychological or spiritual cause. Similar to faith

healing, it is meant to work without directly affecting the biological or chemical attributes of the subject. The systems of healing magic are based on concepts such as energy flow and spiritual unrest. Magical or religious rituals are often employed for exorcism, psychological therapy, or spiritual cleansing.

Ancestral veneration involves praying to the spirits of deceased family members and, in its magical form, asking for their assistance in completing a deed or in divination. Divination is the prediction of unknown and/or future events with the aid of tools such as tarot cards or casting sticks, and it is commonly employed by practitioners of witchcraft.

Sacrifices in magical rituals have been documented in several cultures throughout history. Other offerings such as food and valuables are also commonly found in magical rituals, especially when asking for the aid of spirits or gods. Sacrifices and offerings have been used to encourage spiritual favor. The use of offerings in rituals has continued to this day, although the practice of sacrifice has diminished considerably.

Witchcraft has often been dismissed as groundless because the link between the alleged influence on a problem and the desired effect cannot be proven to exist by current scientific methods or standards. Because witchcraft recognizes that multiple causes can affect a given outcome, practitioners often refute claims that witchcraft has no effect by stating that other factors may have prevented the desired outcome. These other factors include a range of scientific and superstitious causes. As the superstitious causes are highly fallible, they are often dismissed as unsound, resulting in the dismissal of witchcraft as a groundless enterprise.

Practitioners recognize the psychological and sociological impacts of witchcraft, but they deny any claims that these are the only effects of their practice. Critics, by contrast, will attribute *only* psychological and sociological im-

pacts to witchcraft because they are the only effects that can be tested in controllable environments. But even in such environments, not enough factors are controllable to produce evidence with absolute certainty.

European societies in the Middle Ages were highly superstitious and merged the new Christian theology of that era with pre-Christian practices. People believed in phenomena such as poltergeists, spirits, and the Devil. Such superstitions were the backbone of the witchcraft practiced and understood by European societies in that period. The majority of Europeans believed in the power and existence of witchcraft, and historians have noted that this belief was enough to render witchcraft effective psychosomatically. Others attribute the effects of seventeenth-century witchcraft to hysteria, in both the medical and colloquial sense.

The most common practices of witchcraft in this period included amulet and image magic. The most powerful witches were considered to have been those who entered into a pact with the Devil and agreed to work for him in exchange for magical powers. All witchcraft was considered immoral, and those who were suspected of practicing witchcraft were persecuted. If someone was accused of witchcraft with supporting testimony, death was almost certain, for most attempts at proving innocence were futile, often interpreted as a lie to protect the witch. As a result of the persecutions, any actual practitioners either altered their rituals in order to go unobserved or took their practices underground to avoid suspicion.

Contemporary historians are often critical of Middle Age European testimonies about witchcraft because of the methods used during the witch persecution trials. It was common practice to extract confessions through various forms of torture, including the removal of fingernails, the insertion of needles, and other forms of forced mutilation. Historians have noted that under such circumstances, few would have withheld the confession the court

desired. Others were deprived of sleep and/or food, which inevitably led to delusions and weakened physical and psychological resistance. Although these methods are currently viewed by most as inhumane and unscientific, they were common and widely acceptable practices at the time. Today, the term *witch trial* is often used as a colloquial reference to trials that use methods of torture and psychological manipulation in order to extract the desired information or confession.

When Europeans first encountered witchcraft outside of Europe, the practice was assumed to be a savage custom of unenlightened persons. Although European witches were persecuted, non-European witches were treated differently: efforts were made to dissuade them from their practices and convert them to Christianity. Like their European counterparts, the majority of these practitioners either altered their practices or infused the new knowledge with their existing practices. Because of the adaptability of the practitioners, the majority of magical practices have survived to this day.

Currently, witchcraft is one of the central aspects of the neopagan religion Wicca. Whereas the majority of modern practitioners in Europeanized countries are Wiccan, some choose to identify themselves only as witches or magicians. Methods of witchcraft and magic vary and still feature both ritual and folk magic. As explained by Wiccan practitioners, all acts of magic include the basic requirements of will,

need, desire, and energy. Many will insist that the lack of any of these aspects will weaken the power of the act. Most consider disbelief a lack of will because the practitioner does not will the desired results to occur. Critics say that the desire for magic to be real will often cause the practitioner to ensure the occurrence of the expected outcome through nonmagical methods. Some practitioners agree but add that this is actually part of the act of magic—or the entire act itself.

Practitioners of witchcraft and magic are still persecuted, even though the majority of them maintain that they do not believe in the Devil and work only for positive change. This persecution varies in degree of physical and psychological violence. Even in the late 1990s, there were cases in which schools in North America prohibited students from wearing symbols connected to witchcraft. Practitioners of witchcraft in other cultures are still being dissuaded from their practices by nonbelievers.

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