



Ask Rose Ariadne
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African Witchcraft: The History, the Practices and the Controversies

History

African Witchcraft is a collective term used to describe the spiritual traditions (both past and present) of the various ethnic groups in Africa. From a historical point of view, Egyptian Witchcraft and Arabic Sihr traditionally formed a part of the mix. These two ceremonial forms of Witchcraft are nearly extinct, and have been replaced by the Islamic faith.

The witchcraft practiced in the rest of Africa is shamanistic in nature. Long before the East and the West converged on the continent, the shamanistic practices of Africans were remarkably similar in spite of the ethnic and tribal diversity that prevailed.

This is no longer the case, though. The influences of the Christian and the Islamic religions on African Witchcraft are noticeable. The colonization of Africa by the English, Dutch, French, Portuguese and Germans, brought its own set of cultural influences too. This accounts for the diversity now to be found in the practice of African witchcraft from ethnic grouping to ethnic grouping and from tribe to tribe. This diversification should not be interpreted as dilution or intensification, though. It merely implies that African witchcraft in its purest form has been exchanged for African shamanism of an eclectic form.

The heinous practice of slave trading led to the export of African witchcraft to the Americas, where it now survives under the auspices of religions such as Voudun, Obeah, Santería, Quimbanda and Candomblé.

What is African Witchcraft?

African witchcraft is a nature based religion, where one or more Deities, nature spirits and ancestral spirits are worshipped. The witchdoctor, with his





or her ability to commune with Deity, nature spirits and ancestral spirits, is traditionally held in awe – an awe which is an odd mixture of respect and fear. The reason for this fear is simple. Magic in the African sense may be used for both positive and negative purposes. It can be used to bless and to curse, to cure and cause disease, to bring peace and to initiate battle, to protect and to harm, to create and to destroy.

The witchdoctor can be either male or female. Although there is no gender equality in African culture, no distinction is generally made where spiritual practices are concerned. The witchdoctor is responsible for divination, healing, presiding over rituals, conducting rites of passage, performing sacrifices, finding lost cattle, protecting warriors, casting and removing spells, and narrating the history and myths of old. For harmony between the living and the dead, which is an essential component of leading a trouble-free life, ancestors are shown respect by means of daily offerings, prayers and songs, elaborate rituals and animal sacrifice.

Witchdoctors frequently make use of channeling, throwing bones, dream interpretation and trance. Trance is induced through drumming, dancing and chanting, thus either allowing an ancestral spirit to possess the witchdoctor's body or allowing the witchdoctor to travel to the ancestral realm in search of support or advice. These practices are a common denominator of all shamanistic religions world wide.

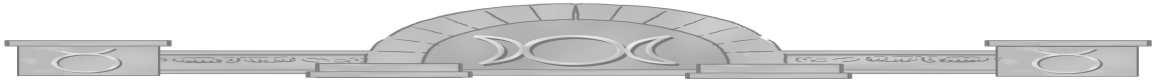
How can African witchcraft be learnt?

In some societies, the title and abilities of witchdoctors may be generational, i.e. uncle to nephew, father to son, mother to daughter, and so forth. This is not always the case though. In many instances young women and men are identified by the witchdoctor/s as being in possession of those special attributes and gifts needed to become apprentices. The tradition is oral and the apprenticeship long, intensive and arduous. Once the training is completed, an initiation ritual takes place. After the initiation, the apprentice is considered a fully fedged witchdoctor.

Some say that parts of the practices can be learnt through reading and study. This is a contentious issue though and perhaps well removed from the reality of African witchcraft. That which is taught to the apprenticed witchdoctor is not recorded anywhere, except in their minds and in their hearts. Hence, the chances are really good that books claiming to offer authentic material may well turn out not to be that authentic after all.

In short, the only way to learn is by being apprenticed to a Witchdoctor. And that is not a simple affair. Only a handful of native Africans crack the nod. For a non-African to be accepted, would be nothing short of a miracle.





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