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Traditional Witchcraft: How Was It Practiced During the Last Millenium?

Traditional Wicca and Traditional Witchcraft are frequently confused with one another. Wicca is a neo-pagan nature based religious movement that came into being during the mid 1900s. Out of this movement, traditions such as Gardnerian, Diannic and Faery evolved.

Traditional Witchcraft, on the other hand, is an ancient practice, which has been around for millennia. Its practices, traditions and knowledge were simply handed down from one generation to the next, mostly within the same family circle. In the context of this article, Traditional Witchcraft is viewed to be the shamanistic Craft as practiced in Western Europe over the last 1,000 years.

Traditional Witchcraft Beliefs

Traditional Witchcraft is a one hundred percent oral tradition. Illiteracy and forced secrecy both contributed to the absence of written records. One has to bear in mind that it was not only during the burning times that witches were persecuted. If material was found containing anything that could allude to the fact that the owner of the material was a witch, it would have meant certain death ... by brutal means. Hence Traditional Witches did not and still do not keep the Wiccan equivalent of a Book of Shadows. In all truth, the concepts of Grimoires and Books of Shadow are late 19th and mid-20th century inventions respectively.

Traditional Witches did not necessarily worship any Deities as a part of their Craft practices. The knee does not bend and the head does not bow, so to speak. The majority of Witches worshipped Nature as an all-powerful force instead. They considered everything, from the energy of the smallest grain of sand through to the energy of the remotest star in the sky, as a part of Nature. Nature in this sense is synonymous with the Universe.





Traditional Witches would generally draw on their own power when performing Magick and call on one or more spirits to lend additional power to their magickal workings. They believed that mortal and spirit worlds are connected and that the spirit world can affect the mortal world. November's Eve (Samhain) was recognized as the only time of the year when the veil between these two worlds was at its thinnest. It is also to the spirit world that the souls of all mortals go after death. There they remain until the time comes for rebirth into the mortal world. Whilst karma forms no part of the Craft, the traditional Witches believe that all souls are reincarnated for a special purpose - one that is revealed as life on earth progresses.

Days of Power

In Traditional Witchcraft, the full moon celebrations were the Sabbats. The days now celebrated by Wiccans as Sabbats, were Festivals. There weren't necessarily eight Festivals celebrated by Witches. Many only celebrated the Equinoxes, the Solstices and Samhain. The Sabbats were considered to be of greater importance than the festivals.

Whilst it is true that celebrating in Nature is a very rewarding and special experience, Traditional Witches rarely had that luxury. Sabbats and Festivals were celebrated inside their homes, behind closed doors and drawn curtains - even in cellars and attics - so as to avoid the scrutiny of inquisitive, malicious neighbors.

Magick

Traditional Witches practiced a simple, yet powerful form of practical folk Magick, drawing heavily on the use of herbs and other materials freely available in Nature. Magick in the Traditional Witchcraft sense was neither black nor white, neither good nor bad and neither left nor right. It would heal and it would cause illness, it would curse and it would bless. Witches had to use their own sense of what is right or wrong in deciding which Magick should be used. There was no 'Law' governing Magick at all, except the universal law that each person is solely responsible for his or her own actions.

The mere fact that witches could choose to cause suffering does not necessarily imply that they did! Witches did strive for balance, harmony and wisdom, so hexes and curses would have been reserved to defend and protect home and hearth, amongst others.

They did not cast circles, call on guardians or invoke goddesses and gods. These are all neo-pagan practices that have been influenced by ritual high Magick.





Attitude to Sex

Witches respected sex as a blessing from nature and used the energy generated by the act to lend power to spells. At the same time, nudity during Festivals and Sabbats were considered taboo as it was seen to be disrespectful towards the Universe / Nature.

Conclusion

There are only a small amount of traditional witches remaining today and, like their ancestors, they keep both themselves and their practices very private. For this very reason, the Traditional Craft is still a mystery to pagan and non-pagan alike.

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