

SUPERSTITIONS AND LEGENDS ABOUT THE DOMESTIC CAT

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Superstition has been associated with the domestic cat from the time of its appearance in Egypt during the Fifth Dynasty, about 3600 B.C., when a "small and unknown feline" replaced the lions who guarded the entrances to the temple.¹ In a very short time the cat rose to a position of eminence. It was worshipped by the Egyptians as the Goddess of Love and Fashion.² Numerous statues of Egyptian gods and goddesses were made with feline features — the most notable of which was the Goddess Pasht. A temple was dedicated to her and to cats in the ancient city of Beni-Hasan in the year 1500 B.C.³ The word "pussy" is commonly thought to be derived from her name since she was the Egyptian moon goddess who guarded the cat during its nightly sojourns.⁴



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After it declined in prestige in Egypt, the cat became the victim of superstition and legend throughout the known world. Through the centuries, the cat has been thought to be a witch in disguise; when the belief in witchcraft was at its height, the body of a cat became the abode of demons and of the devil. As a consequence, cats were burned and boiled alive, and suffered other hideous tortures. They have become the subject of gruesome stories, some of which are too hideous to be included here.

Witches confessed that they had taken the shape of cats, and cats were brought to trial the same as people. It was believed, both in Japan and Europe, that at the age of twenty years the cat turned into a witch, and that at the age of one hundred years the witch turned back into a cat. If a cat jumped over a corpse, the English believed that the soul of the deceased would enter the cat's body; the Chinese believed the cat would cause a person to come to life in this manner. The mighty Empress Wu would not allow cats in her palace because a court lady whom she had ordered put to death threatened to come back and haunt her. Monsignor Leon Maurin, once Archbishop at Port Luis in Mauritius, wrote, "The Devil himself frequently wore the robe of a black cat." The Arabs believed that a demon took the form of a cat to haunt a house, and that the last born of two twins had the power to change himself into a cat. A Frenchman believed that he could acquire the ability to transform himself into a cat and gain the gift of clairvoyance by making a girdle from the skin of a cat.⁵ King Howel Dda passed a Welsh law to the effect that cats must have perfect tails or they "might join the spooks of the night and go howling at the new moon."⁶

American Negro superstitions about the cat were connected with African voodoo worship. They believed that there were three hairs of the devil in the end of a cat's tail; these caused the cat to go prowling.⁷ According to another source, the Southern Negro believed that

cats were powerful "hoodoo", caused bad luck, misery, disease, and death.⁸ He thought that he would get rheumatism if he kicked a cat; that the devil would get him if he killed a cat, and that the cat would haunt him if he took one of its nine lives.

In the United States, during Hallowe'en, the cat was supposed to become a screaming demon after dark.⁹ It suddenly came upon a person from out of nowhere. It could see in the dark, gave off sparks, was protected by magic, had nine lives, entered haunted houses, and stared people in the eye. The Celts believed that the souls of the departed returned on Hallowe'en to warm themselves by the fireplace, while witches rode throughout the countryside, some on brooms, and others on tabby cats which had been turned into black horses.

Beliefs in the cat's color as a sign of good or bad luck varied greatly, and there were many of them. It was generally believed everywhere that black cats brought about bad luck, while white cats indicated good luck.¹⁰ There were exceptions; for instance, in New England and Eastern Kansas it was a sign of good luck to be followed by a black cat. In the British Isles, a black cat entering a house or crossing one's path was a sign of good luck. In certain English seaports, sailors' wives kept black cats to protect their husbands at sea. In England, it was said that a black cat would draw lovers to a girl. This belief was expressed in the following rhyme:

Whenever the cat o' the house is black
The lassies o' lover will have no lack.¹¹

A white cat in Maine brought poverty to its owners, and caused sickness and trouble when it entered a house in Scotland. Tricolored cats brought good luck in Canada, Washington, and Eastern Kansas. Japanese sailors believed that tortoise-shell cats had the power to bring good luck, prevent shipwreck, and keep away evil spirits. A "smutty-nosed" cat in New England was a sign of good luck.

The cat of superstition predicted weather, and the weather was invariably bad. From East to West, the cat has been closely associated with the art of rain-making. Considering that cats do not like water, this is a very odd superstition, but it is nevertheless widespread. In Indonesia they believed rain could be produced by bathing a male and a female cat together, or by carrying a cat three times around a dry field.¹² Rain would be produced by bathing a cat in an earthenware pot until the cat nearly drowned, or by throwing a cat into the midst of women wading and splashing in a river, or by carrying cats in a procession and then throwing them into a pool. In the British Isles, if a cat put its paws behind its ears while it was washing itself, it was a sign of rain.¹³ In Newfoundland, drowning a cat in salt water made it rain. Rain was predicted in the United States by a cat washing its face before breakfast or in the parlor. When a cat scratched a fence it foretold rain, and it pointed its tail in the direction from which the wind would blow on the following day.¹⁴

There were countless other superstitions involving situations for which cats were considered responsible. In Alabama, the first person in a group at whom a cat looked would be the first to get married. If a cat sneezed on the day before her wedding, the English bride would have good luck.¹⁵ In England, they thought that if a person

swallowed a cat hair it would turn into a kitten. Transylvanian farmers believed that fertility could be induced in newlyweds if a cat was rocked in a cradle in their presence. In Japan a cat was able to conceive by itself if a bamboo brush was rubbed across its back. The Chinese did not include the cat in their ancient calendar because they believed that the cat sinned by eating the rat.¹⁶

Legends about the cat are not as numerous as are superstitions; however, there is a striking similarity in the legends about its origin. Noah is given credit for creating the cat in several countries, while the lion and the monkey are closely related to the creation of the cat in other regions. Three interesting versions are those told in Egypt, China, and France.

The Egyptian story is that among the animals taken aboard the ark was a pair of mice. They multiplied so rapidly that life became unbearable for the other occupants. In order to rid the ark of so many mice, Noah passed his hand three times over the head of the lioness. The lioness sneezed, and out came the first cat.

A Chinese legend is that when Noah took the animals aboard the Ark they immediately found corners in which to hide and rest. On the second day, the monkey came out of his resting place and persuaded the lioness to make love. The result of the unusual mating was the birth of the cat.¹⁷

When the Earth was being created, the French say that the sun and moon tried to out-do each other in creating animals. The sun created the lion which pleased the other gods, but this made the moon jealous. The Moon created the cat and made the other gods laugh. The Moon was furious, so in order to revenge himself, he created hatred between the monkey and the cat, and between the cat and the mouse.

Noah was given credit for cutting off the tail of the Manx cat by the people on the Isle of Man in another legend. When Noah led the animals into the ark, he noticed that the Manx cat was missing. When it started to rain, Noah decided that he could wait no longer for the cat and proceeded to close the door of the ark. Just as he slammed the door, the cat squeezed through, but not fast enough to save his tail, which was cut off by the heavy door.¹⁸

Another Egyptian legend relates how Cambysis, King of Persia, defeated the Egyptians. At that time the cat was still believed to be sacred, and the penalty for killing a cat was long imprisonment or death. Each soldier at the head of Cambysis' army carried a cat. When the Egyptians saw the cats, they threw down their arms and refused to fight, for they were afraid that they might accidentally kill a cat and be subjected to punishment.¹⁹

Still another Egyptian story about the Prophet Mohammed and Muezza, his pet cat, is still believed by his followers. While Mohammed sat and meditated, Muezza slept peacefully upon the sleeve of his robe, which was draped over the arm of his chair. When it became time to attend devotions, rather than awaken his pet, he cut off his sleeve. The followers of Mohammed honored this act by founding and maintaining a hospital for sick and aged cats in Damascus.

In Professor de Groot's Religious System of China, which deals with sorcery, there is a legend about the cat-specter. It was believed that the wealth of a murdered person was automatically transferred to the owner of the house in which the cat-specter was kept. In the year 598 A.D., the Emperor ordered his brother-in-law, Tuh-Huto, and his wife, to commit suicide, because he believed that they had used a cat-specter to make the Empress ill. A female slave testified during the trial that Tuh-Hoto's mother had ordered the cat-specter to murder the Empress. The order was rescinded at the request of the Empress, but Tuh-Hoto's position and wealth were taken from him, and his wife was committed to a Buddhist nunnery. In the same year, the Emperor ordered all families keeping cat-specters to be exiled.

In the year 1875, a man from Toulon, France, told Berenger-Peraud that one of his friends had a wizard cat.²⁰ The cat joined the family in discussions and gave advice to the man's wife. The cat himself decided whether he would have meat or fish for supper. The man and his wife believed that the cat could transform himself into a human. At the cat's request, it was given a Christian burial when it died.

A remarkable legend was related by General Sir Thomas Gordon in **A Varied Life**. For twenty-five years the native guard at the Government House near Poona, India, had repeated an addition to the standing order, this was to the effect that any cat coming out of the house after dark was to be regarded as His Excellency, the Governor, and the guard was to present arms. The reason for this unusual order was the belief that the spirit of Sir Robert Grant, Governor of Bombay, who had died there in 1938, had entered the body of a cat. On the evening of the day of the Governor's death, a sentry had seen a cat leave the house. The cat proceeded to walk up and down a particular path in the same manner as had been the habit of the former Governor. This event was reported by the sentry to a priest. As they were unable to tell which one of the household cats had done this, they decided to salute all of the cats, and this decision was accepted by the natives and the government officials.

The "Mimi-bukuro" relates a legend of a talking cat.²¹ In the year 1795 the abbot of a monastery was patiently trying to catch some doves. The doves were frightened away by a cat which exclaimed, "What a pity!" Realizing that the cat could talk, the abbot seized it and demanded that it explain why it could talk. The cat replied that cats were not the only animals that could talk. It explained that all animals over ten years of age were able to talk, and that a cat which was a cross between a cat and a fox could speak at an even earlier age. The abbot was satisfied with the answer and let the cat go. After making three bows, the cat disappeared.

A Japanese legend which originated during the Kenyei Era (1624-1644), told the story of a benevolent cat.²² A silk merchant whose only son had died took an abandoned baby boy to raise as his own son. Shortly thereafter, the merchant was killed by an intruder. When the boy became fifteen years of age, the foster mother took the boy and an old family cat to Tokyo, in hope of finding work. She became ill

and their situation became desperate. One night the cat came home, carrying a piece of gold in its mouth, and continued to do so each night thereafter. The proprietor of a nearby pawn shop caught the cat stealing from his store. He killed the cat and threw its body into a stream. When the boy heard what had happened he was filled with sorrow. Wishing to give the cat a proper burial, he went to the pawnbroker and asked for the cat's body. When the man saw the boy, he noticed a striking resemblance between the boy and his dead wife. Upon questioning the boy about his parentage, he discovered that the boy was his own son, whom he had abandoned. The pawnbroker took the boy and his foster mother into his home and cared for them. Later, the boy found and killed the murderer of his foster father. He attributed his good fortune to the old cat, and in its memory he built a bridge over the stream into which the cat had been thrown. The bridge may still be seen in Tokyo, and is called the "Monster Cat Bridge."

Only a few of the legends concerning cats are given in this paper. For some mysterious reason, the cat has been the source of superstition for centuries, and stories still continue to be told about an animal which, through no fault of its own, arouses dark thoughts in the minds of cruel and ignorant persons.

Footnotes

- 1 Tyoh Cattery, "Things You Might Not Know About Cats," *The American Cat Fanciers Association Bulletin*, September-October, 1962, p. 4.
- 2 Harry Gilroy, "Cats From Egypt to Here," *New York Times Magazine*, March 23, 1962 p. 20.
- 3 Kit Wilson and Addison Webb, *Cats* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1952) p. 8.
- 4 "Cat," *The Source Book*, II (1930), 519.
- 5 Carl Van Vechten, *The Tiger in the House* (3rd ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1936), p. 101.
- 6 Jean C. Conger, "The Exodus of Cats," *Cats Magazine*, ed. Jean Laux, XIX, No. 3 (1962), 7.
- 7 Vechten, p. 119.
- 8 Maria Leach (ed.), *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, I (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1949), 197.
- 9 Wilfrid S. Brown, *Cats* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1950), (pages unnumbered).
- 10 Mary M. Sims, "The White Cat Out West," *Cats Magazine*, ed. Jean Laux, XIX, No. 8 (1962), 9.
- 11 Vechten, p. 117.
- 12 James George Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, ed. Theodor H. Gastor (New York: Criterion Books Inc., 1959), p. 45.
- 13 "Superstition," *Chambers' Encyclopaedia*, XIII (1950), 295.
- 14 Vechten, p. 113.
- 15 Leach, I, 295.
- 16 Conger, *Cats Magazine*, XIX, No. 3, 7.
- 17 Vechten, p. 85.
- 18 Blanche Cowley Young, *How the Manx Cat Lost Its Tail and Other Folk Stories* (New York: David McKay Company, 1959), pp. 29-35.
- 19 Wilson, p. 25.
- 20 Vechten, p. 97.
- 21 Vechten, p. 96.
- 22 Vincent Starrett, "Gossip About Cats," *Asia*, (August, 1941), p. 415.