

BRUJERÍA (WITCHCRAFT)

From *Chicano Folklore – A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans* by Rafaela G. Castro

Witches and *brujería* (witchcraft) are accepted facts of life in Mexican and Chicano culture. Belief in witches and witchcraft is common in the Southwest, as can be seen by the large number of folk narratives and legends about witches collected in New Mexico and Texas in the last century. This form of occultism is an integral part of the culture of Mexico and the Southwest. The Spanish conquerors and colonists who settled New Mexico in the sixteenth century communicated to the indigenous communities a belief in witchcraft. Beliefs in witchcraft were prevalent in Europe during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, and the missionary friars brought these beliefs to the New World. The Spanish Catholic missionaries worked hard to convert the indigenous populations of New Spain, and any non-Christian belief that was not acceptable to the Spanish friars was often attributed to sin, evil, the devil, or witchcraft. Consequently it was easy to assign unexplainable natural phenomena to the work of witches, and these beliefs have persisted over hundreds of years. Contemporary witches can prepare love potions, lift spells, cure and cause illnesses, and in general cause great harm. They can also take on any form they desire, such as a cat, pig, or owl, and so can make themselves difficult to identify. In folktales from New Mexico, they often appear as balls of fire flying across the sky. *Curanderas* are sometimes mistaken for witches because of their healing power, but they are also often called upon to undo the work of witches.

Many of the folktales, legends, and *cuentos* (stories) collected in New Mexico by Aurelio Espinosa, Juan Bautista Rael, and R. D. Jameson (Robe 1980) are about witches and witchcraft. In the 1930s, writers employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) as part of Roosevelt's New Deal collected many *cuentos* and legends about witches from the people of northern New Mexico, and many beliefs expressed then are still held today. For instance, the way to tell if a person is a witch is to stick two needles in the form of a cross into the sill above a door; if the person in the room is a witch, she won't be able to leave the room. Another belief is that only men named Juan or Juan Bautista or women named Juana have the ability to catch or overpower a witch. Conversely the power of a witch cannot be exerted over a person named Juan or Juana. A witch cannot sense the presence of a Juan, so he may be able to trap her by drawing a circle on the ground and throwing his shirt, turned inside out, into the circle.

Witches often take the form of an owl, in New Mexican Spanish called a *tecolote*, from the Nahuatl word *teolotl*. The hoot of an owl is an evil omen, so one must be careful to stay away from owls. In other parts of the Southwest owls are sometimes known as *lechuzas*. A *lechuzas* is a woman who has sold her soul to the devil and becomes an owl by night. Only a woman can become a *lechuzas*.

A prayer meant to keep witches away was recited at night in a low voice:

*Cuatro esquinas tiene me casa
Cuatro ángeles que la adoran
Lucas, Marcos, Juan y Mateo
Ni brujas ni hechiceras
Ni hombre malhechor
En el nombre del Padre,
Y del Hijo y del Espirtu Santo.
(My house has four corners
Four angels adore it
Luke, Mark, John and Matthew
Neither witches nor charmers
Nor evil-doing man
In the name of the Father,
and of the Son
and of the Holy Ghost.)
(Simmons 1974a, 11)*

Besides being present in folktales and legends, the world of *brujas* seeps into discussions of love and lovers, literature, and other forms of Chicano folklore and culture.

See also Curanderismo; Espinosa, Aurelio Macedonio

References Brown 1978; Delgado 1994; Espinosa 1910; García 1992; Jaramillo 1972; Rael 1957; Robe 1980; Simmons 1974a, 1974b; Ulibarri 1977; Weigle and White 1988