

# BRITISH VOODOO

## THE BLACK ART OF ROLLO AHMED

Rollo Ahmed practised black magic, taught Dennis Wheatley yoga, helped Aleister Crowley find a flat and wrote a popular history of occultism. **CHRISTOPHER JOSIFFE** explores the life and times of a forgotten figure from the annals of British magic whose journey from British Guyana to the England of the 1920s encompassed both exoticism and racism.

**M**ention the name of Rollo Ahmed, and – if it sparks any recognition at all – most people will say that they associate him in some way with bestselling novelist Dennis Wheatley (see FT256:38-43). Ahmed and Wheatley were indeed friends for many years. In his autobiography, Wheatley described his friend as “one of the most unusual men I have ever met. Born in Egypt, he had spent the greater part of his adult life in the Caribbean and South America. He had charming manners and laughed a lot. There was little he did not know about Voodoo... whether Ahmed was a follower of the Left Hand Path or not, he was a jolly fellow and I got a lot of useful information from him.”<sup>1</sup>

Wheatley had been introduced to Ahmed by maverick Labour MP and all-round ‘bad egg’ Tom Driberg. Ahmed, a practising occultist, advised Wheatley on specific details of magic for the latter’s first black magic blockbuster, *The Devil Rides Out* (1935). A thinly disguised portrait of Ahmed appears in chapter 14 of Wheatley’s later black magic novel *To the Devil – A Daughter* (1953). The chapter in question is entitled ‘The Black Art’, which happened also to have been the title of Ahmed’s 1936 overview and history of magic. Two investigators, ‘C.B.’ and John Fountain, visit the country house of the novel’s villain, Canon Copely-Syle, and are greeted at the front door by “a manservant of a type that one would hardly have expected to find in an Essex village. He wore a red fez and was robbed in a white burnous. His skin was very dark, but only his thick lips suggested negro blood, and C.B. put

**“HE WORE A RED FEZ AND WAS ROBED IN A WHITE BURNOUS”**

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him down at once as an Egyptian. Crossing his black hands on his chest he made a deep bow, then waited silently until C.B. asked: ‘Is Canon Copely-Syle in?’<sup>2</sup>

But Ahmed and Wheatley’s relationship was not one of English gentleman and colonial manservant.

At one point, Ahmed had been Wheatley’s Yoga teacher, instructing both the writer and his wife. (This was at a time when Yoga was a relatively mysterious and little-understood practice in the UK; it was only in the 1960s and afterwards that it began to attain the popularity it has today.) Wheatley had been impressed by Ahmed’s extensive travels; he had apparently lived in the Amazonian jungle regions of Yucatán, Guyana and Brazil, and had travelled throughout Asia, including a stay in Burma, which was where (he told Wheatley) he had learned Raja Yoga.

Ahmed’s Yoga – or at least the instruction he gave to the Wheatleys – seems to have placed an emphasis on breath control. Dennis Wheatley was keen to acquire knowledge of techniques for the arousal of Kundalini energy, but Ahmed did not feel he was ready for this: “I think that the Kundalini or spinal concentration is just a bit dangerous for you at the present, as you have not yet established the Breathing. I am anxious to give you the best, but feel that we must make haste slowly.”<sup>3</sup> Wheatley had, he believed, been given a practical demonstration of Ahmed’s powers, when, on a freezing cold London night, Ahmed

LEFT: Wheatley’s novel *To the Devil – A Daughter* included a thinly disguised portrait of Rollo Ahmed.

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ABOVE LEFT: A page of a letter from Rollo Ahmed to Dennis Wheatley and his wife, whose Yoga teacher he became. ABOVE RIGHT: Joan and Dennis Wheatley in 1933.

arrived at Wheatley's Queen's Gate house for dinner. He was dressed only in a light cotton suit, wearing no coat, hat or gloves, and had walked four miles from his flat in Clapham. Upon shaking Ahmed's hand, Wheatley found it to be as "warm as toast" – the result, apparently, of Ahmed's ability to generate internal heat via Yoga.

Wheatley had other reasons to be impressed by Ahmed and his occult powers, on another evening, he was entertaining Ahmed together with a member of the Society for Psychical Research, apparently psychically gifted. After Ahmed had departed, the SPR man asked Wheatley whether he had noticed the small black imp leaping about behind Ahmed. A demonic imp subsequently made an appearance in Wheatley's *The Satanist* (1960).

#### THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC...

Such was Wheatley's respect for his friend's knowledge that when his publisher, John Long Ltd., asked him to write a non-fiction book on the history of magic to capitalise on the success of *The Devil Rides Out*, he instead suggested that Ahmed write the book. The result was *The Black Art* (John Long, 1936), an overview of black magic and sorcery with a curious European/Western bias. Curious, because Ahmed, one of few non-white people on the British 1930s occult scene, was not of European descent. Many believed him to be Egyptian, and he was happy to encourage this belief. In fact, Abdul Said Ahmed (his real name) had been born in the colony of British Guyana (now Guyana), around 1898. He apparently told Wheatley that his father had been Egyptian and his mother West Indian.

*The Black Art* featured a generous introduction by Wheatley, who wrote: "I feel that no-one could have been better suited to write upon this mysterious and fascinating subject than Rollo Ahmed – a member of that ancient race which enjoyed by far the

greatest and longest-enduring civilisation of antiquity, the Egyptians. From his father's family he acquired his initial knowledge of the secret art. However, his mother was a native of the West Indies and, while Rollo was still quite young, his parents decided to leave Egypt. For many years he lived with them in those devil-ridden islands and in the little-explored forests of Yucatán, Guiana and Brazil. In these places he acquired first-hand knowledge not only of the primitive magic of the forest Indians, but of Voodoo and Obeah – those sinister cults which are still practised by the majority of the descendants of the slaves brought over from Africa."<sup>4</sup>

Ahmed himself had stated that his exposure to magic and the occult had begun at a very early age. In British Guyana he had encountered indigenous Indians "who practised a form of Ritual Black Magic which may be called tribal magic".<sup>5</sup> He also stated

that he had met Voodoo practitioners amongst the black population.

Despite Wheatley's commendation of Ahmed's knowledge of the subject, the book contains some perplexing errors, such as the statement that the Lancashire Pendle Witches case took place in Scotland.<sup>6</sup> In addition, a modern reader will be struck by *The Black Art*'s antiquated view of indigenous magical practices and early modern European witchcraft as barely-disguised Satanism, and of present-day secret groups of jaded, dissolute sensation-seekers dabbling in black magic. It recalls the writings of one-time priest and full-time eccentric Montague Summers, who genuinely believed that Satan's hand was at work in the various manifestations of paganism, witchcraft, voodoo and the like, across the world.<sup>7</sup>

A 1950s article by Ahmed, 'Black Magic Today', took a similar line.<sup>8</sup> In it, he claimed that English occult societies hold regular Black Masses, "once or twice a year, usually in the deserted ruins of churches or in some cavernous place in a remote position," as well as lesser rituals once a week, usually on Fridays or Saturdays, in a room bedecked in black and red draperies and lit by black candles. At these ceremonies, the participants affirm their renunciation of "all orthodox religions and allegiance to God" and "to uphold the service of evil." Then, they throw back their headdresses and consume "huge quantities of food and drink", sometimes followed by "a weird dance" during which "all clothing is cast aside, and men and women with joined hands prance wildly, with their backs to the altar. In the end the dancers fall exhausted to the ground. After that animals or birds are sacrificed on the altar steps, the members drinking the blood and in some cases even eating the raw flesh of the victim."<sup>9</sup>

Ahmed also makes references to specific cults or sects which, he says, are actually societies that practise Black Magic: "Societies

## LONDON AFTER DARK

Inspector Fabian of the Yard investigates black magic in the capital's immigrant communities during the 1950s

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Interestingly, with regard to the Lancaster Gate temple, ex-Scotland Yard detective Robert Fabian ('Fabian of the Yard') wrote in his 1954 book *London After Dark*:

*There is a house in Lancaster Gate that consists of one-room flatlets. The landlord and his wife occupy the ground floor and basement. Each room has a covered wash-bowl, a rather dispirited bed, a slot-meter gasfire, a rickety table and two wooden chairs.*

*The landlord's wife dabbles in spiritualism, sometimes holds private séances. Her husband is an amateur herbalist. Their flatlets are seldom taken for more than a few days. They are too dingy and untended to be comfortable. Guests come and go.*

*Among them come and go the Satanists. Down in the cellar is a small doorway – probably, at one time, it was a fireplace. It leads through to the house whose walls adjoin it. The front door of this house faces upon an entirely different street. It is privately owned, and, from its cellar, stairs go to an old-fashioned lift-shaft, up which a spiral metal staircase ascends and stops at a sliding door, padded with black felt. Beyond this door is a private Temple of Satanism!*

Was this the same temple as Ahmed's temple of Osiris? Or was 1950s Lancaster Gate a hotbed of occultism? Elsewhere in this black magic chapter of *London After Dark*, Fabian refers to special Satanic gatherings where "men and women will congregate at midnight in secret temples of South Kensington, Paddington and – I believe – Bloomsbury".<sup>1</sup> Lancaster Gate,

Paddington and other areas like these were known at the time for their large houses divided into small flats, as a result being associated with a transient and sometimes immigrant population, with a distinct flavour of London bohemia.

Black migrants to London are explicitly alluded to in Fabian's description of the Satanic temple, invoking the twin fears of black magic and immigration:

*At one end of the long room is an altar, exactly as in a small church – except that the altar candles are black wax, and the crucifix is head downwards. There are no seats. Around the walls are low divans. Alongside each burns a saucer of dried herbs. Symbols of wizardry are daubed on cloths that completely cover the walls.*

*Pentagrams and sigils (supposed to be the magic signs of devils) are on the low ceiling. On the left of this altar, is a black African idol – the ju-ju, obviously, of some heathen fertility rite. It is nearly five feet high, squat, repulsive, and obscenely constructed. It is rubbed to a greasy polish by the ecstatic bare flesh of the worshippers.*

Fabian suggested that people became ensnared in black magic and Satanism as a result of Satanic groups concealing their true nature under the guise of a more innocuous practice, something akin to the 'cannabis as gateway drug' theory. His "Satan-worshippers... get their new victims among likely-looking students at lectures on spiritualism, necromancy, tribal rites"<sup>2</sup> may be compared to Ahmed's statement in *The Black Art*: "There are a few sects to-day practising black magic who more or less openly announce their perverted religious views, but most of these societies exist ostensibly for astrology, mystic development, and so on, while a few of them call themselves private spiritualist groups. In many cases members join in all good faith..."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *London After Dark: An Intimate Record of Night Life in London, and a Selection of Crime Stories from the Casebook of Ex-Superintendent Robert Fabian*, The Naldrett Press, 1964, p75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p74.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p76.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p75.

<sup>5</sup> Rollo Ahmed, *The Black Art*, 1971 edition, p267.

actually practising Black Magic are difficult to track down, because on the surface they are something else... They may be spiritualists with private séances... They may be some weird cult or sect which appears harmless but which has an inner and secret membership which is not."<sup>10</sup>

One such, he writes, is *The Brotherhood of the Golden Hay*, based in Peters Marland, a village on the edge of Exmoor, and headed by two women, the chief one being "of the masculine, lesbian type." Members came down from London and participated in "doubtful ceremonies in an old chapel." Its Priestesses wore "long purple robes with scarlet fillirts [sic] round the head and scarlet girdles." Apparently this remote location had been chosen because it had been the site of an old battlefield. Another group he names is the Sons of Osiris, based at Lancaster Gate [see panel: 'London After Dark']. Its members dress as Egyptian deities; they "ostensibly meet for the purpose of visiting the dead in a trance, but who in reality practise sorcery... mainly concerned with the using of spirits for personal ends, and the casting of spells."

It will be noted that neither of these groups, according to his account, appear

to practise what we would understand as Black Magic. Ahmed does go on to mention "sects of female so-called masons – some of which are harmless and some of which cover evil purposes" and other "mixed so-called masonic societies which practise... marriage with demons and pacts with evil spirits."<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note his seeming opposition to co-masonry (the admittance to the Lodge of men and women), but he gives no further details, other than to say that one of the latter groups was based outside Bourne-mouth. It is highly probable that this refers to the Rosicrucian Fellowship of Crotona, based at Christchurch, some of whose members were co-masons, and some of whom – according to Gerald Gardner – were also members of the fabled New Forest coven, into which he was apparently initiated in the 1930s. How Ahmed knew about this secretive group is an intriguing question in itself.

#### VOODOO HISTORIES

It is odd that Wheatley commends Ahmed to his readers for the latter's first-hand knowledge of Voodoo, Obeah and Indian magical practice, since there is relatively little coverage of these in *The Black Art*,

and what there is takes a superficial and Eurocentric view. Presumably, the publisher was looking for a non-fiction equivalent to *The Devil Rides Out*, something similar to Summers's popular works on witchcraft and black magic. Perhaps a middlebrow 1930s readership was not ready for *Confessions of an Obeah Man*.

A sample of *The Black Art*'s chapter headings will give an indication of the scope of the book: 'Egyptian Rites and Practices', 'Jewish Necromancy and Magic', 'Magic in Greece and Rome', 'The Dark Ages, Mediaeval Sorcery and Black Magic', 'Witchcraft, Vampirism and Werewolves in Europe', 'Black Magic in the British Isles', 'Necromancy and Spiritualism'. While there is one chapter that deals, in part, with African magic, it is titled 'Primitive Races and Black Magic', with a subheading promising a description of the habits and beliefs of savage races in connection with witchcraft.<sup>12</sup>

The chapter is a whistle-stop tour of these "barbarous peoples", including native Alaskans, Burmese, Cambodians, Polynesians and Africans, of which last, Ahmed gives a few instances. One is an African secret society known as the Ngil,

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and threw it on the fire, which then leaped up with vivid green and orange flames... The muttering grew louder and more rapid, and suddenly my father bent his head, dropped the paper bag and began rhythmically to beat the earth with the flat of his palms. The resulting sound was something between a miniature drum-beat, and the thudding of galloping hooves. For some unknown reason this procedure struck terror into my heart... A choking sensation seized my throat..."<sup>24</sup>

The result of this ritual is that Caleb becomes so terrified that he confesses to his father that it was he who stole the eggs! But evidently his father forgives him; later in the novel, after Caleb has relocated to England, he receives a good-luck message from his father: "Enclosed were two thin twigs, crossed, and bound about with white horse's hair, and a mysterious-looking piece of knotted thread. Some of Poupa's magic. I treasured this characteristic little evidence of my father's thought for me, and kept those twigs for many a year."<sup>25</sup>

While there are some episodes in *I Rise*, such as the above, which deal with magic, in general, the novel – dedicated to Paul Robeson – is more concerned with issues of race and racism. Tracing the protagonist's journey from his childhood in Guyana to Liverpool and thence to London, it illustrates the culture shock experienced by a young man moving from a rural to an urban environment, and from the Caribbean to England, coming up against the Mother Country's attendant prejudice and discrimination directed against a member of one of her Colonies.

Arriving in a cold and damp Liverpool in October 1921, Caleb attempts to find a place to stay: "It was one thing to search; quite

another to find. I had not expected equality in England, but neither was I prepared for a colour-bar. As soon as doors opened, and the maids or proprietors saw me standing there, excuses were made. Liverpool was apparently full to overflowing. They were very sorry, there was no room."<sup>26</sup>

He tries several B&Bs or hotels, but each time receives the same message: "Sorry. Full up." Seeing a notice fixed to the door of one such establishment, reading "No Jews. No coloured people," he determines to speak his mind at the next house: "Ah beg your pardon. Perhaps you don't understand. I am British, not a foreigner." Once again, tired and shivering with cold, he is turned away.

Eventually Caleb manages to find a "dreadful room" in a small hotel, whose

manager demands 3½ guineas – for which he gets the use of a gas fire and the dining room.

"What is all this?" Caleb asks. "For streets and streets I cannot get a room at all... and now for a room that is horrible you demand an exorbitant price." He is at pains to show that he is not as unsophisticated and primitive as the English seem to suppose: "I come from a lovely home in British Guiana: I suppose you people think of us as savages, running about in skins brandishing spears, or at least squatting in log cabins, when we are at home." Eventually, he manages to haggle the price down to 35 shillings, for which he may have use of the bath "last thing at night," when the other guests have finished using it.<sup>27</sup>

### LUCKY BEANS AND CROUSERS

It was hard, too, to obtain employment. Having been a gifted dancer in Guyana, Caleb attempts to find work in Liverpool theatres and nightclubs, but is rebuffed. In desperation, he goes to Birkenhead docks looking for casual work unloading cargo vessels. The foreman refuses to take him on, not on the grounds that there is no work, but because "you fellows ought to be sent back where you came from. There's no room for you here."<sup>28</sup> Compelled to leave the hotel when his money runs out, Caleb finds a room with a landlord who lets to theatrical people. He then meets a middle-aged black man, Warren Oldfield, who invites him to a prayer meeting. Oldfield had been a qualified chemist with a successful business in Birmingham, but had been forced to sell up after a false accusation of procuring an abortion. He now sells herbal remedies, and introduces Caleb to this trade. He is able to

"Psychic phenomena . . . where materialisations . . . are sought."

"He (the magician) clothes such forms in the shape he desires."

"Among the majority . . . sorcery and magic are the prerogatives of the witch-doctors, and Secret Societies."

ABOVE: Three illustrations by artist CA Mills from the first edition of Rollo Ahmed's 1936 history of magic and occultism, *The Black Art*.

initiation into which involves "many obscene and disgusting rites, together with excessive gluttony."<sup>13</sup> Another is the Leopard Society of Sierra Leone, whose members dress in leopard skins for their ceremonies, and are thought to be "Ju-Ju" or were-leopards, believed "to roam through the forest in bands, bent on evil and destruction."<sup>14</sup> Another surprising claim is made about the pre-Buddhist Bon practitioners of Tibet, who, Ahmed says, "secretly make living sacrifices, accompanied by horrible blood rituals" and whose symbol is "the swastika with its arms reversed, which indicates its lunar origin"<sup>15</sup> as opposed to the 'good luck' solar swastika. In an early manifestation of 'Nazi occultism' or 'Hitler as black magician' theories, Ahmed goes on to state that: "In this connection it is rather suggestive that the German Nazis presumably unconsciously chose the same reversed aspect of the swastika for their emblem; the sign which represents to most occultists the sinister 'Soma' influence of the moon, and the dark and blood-stained emanations from it."<sup>16</sup> Given that this was written in 1936, when the true horror of the Nazi regime (whether one regards it as having been occult-inspired or not) had not yet become public knowledge, this is prescient of Ahmed.

Writing that "in the past very few of the Negro secret societies were free from the taint of cannibalism"<sup>17</sup> Ahmed also suggests that until recently, human sacrifice as a means of conjuring rain was commonly found "among the natives of the Pacific Islands, and also among those of the West Indies."<sup>18</sup> He claims that travellers have testified to having witnessed such atrocities, although it is unclear whether he is referring to the Pacific or the Caribbean. In a later chapter, on North and South America, he explains that: "two important kinds of black magic are practised in the United States, as well as in the West Indies and Guiana, by the Negro population who were originally imported from Africa. These two branches are Voodooism and

## "THE VICTIMS' FLESH WAS GIVEN TO THE CELEBRANTS TO EAT"

Obeah, and both are carried on today... Voodooism is Devil worship pure and simple. In past days it entailed the sacrifice of a girl-child who was called 'the goat without horns'.<sup>19</sup>

In similarly lurid fashion, Ahmed describes the typical Voodoo ceremony, which, he writes, was "carried out in lonely and desolate places, when the moon was full, the participants joining hands and dancing round the altar. Sometimes these dances were in honour of the moon as representing the 'Old Master' or Devil... As the dances grew wilder, the victims were killed and pieces of the quivering flesh given to each of the celebrants to eat, which spurred them on to even greater delirium. They shouted invocations to the 'Old Master' and the 'Sweet Moon'... Such scenes were usually... accompanied by drunkenness and delirium."<sup>20</sup>

However, Devil-worship is not and was not a feature of Caribbean Voodoo or other African-Diasporic practice, and Ahmed – as a former native of Guyana – would presumably have been aware of this. What, then, do we make of such passages? Was he, perhaps, pandering to popular racist sentiment of the time, and giving

his British readership what they wanted? Or were these his genuine beliefs? Again, in another chapter of the book, Ahmed declares that "Everyone recognises that sorcery and magic are a natural part of the lives of barbarous peoples, but many find it difficult to believe that black magic has any reality in advanced countries."<sup>21</sup> Perhaps such views indicate Ahmed's reinvention of himself as an Egyptian, having repudiated his Caribbean past as a means to gaining acceptance in British society.

### I RISE

A similar scene is described in Ahmed's 1937 novel, *I Rise: The Life Story of a Negro* (John Long, 1937), thought to be at least semi-autobiographical. In the book's foreword, Ahmed writes: "None of the characters is a portrait, but all the most important circumstances are founded upon fact."<sup>22</sup> The relevant passage is one which the protagonist, Caleb Buller, witnesses a Voodoo ceremony in Guyana as a young man. The celebrants, lit by torchlight and the light of the Moon, cry to "Ole Man Moon!" and "Ole Man Debbil!" as the much-feared Obeah-man, old Kola, sacrifices a black goat. Could this have been a ritual that Ahmed had witnessed as a young man in Guyana? Interestingly, the novel also features some less dramatic (and thus more convincingly realistic) examples of African Diasporic magical practice. The protagonist's father consults a deck of playing cards for divination purposes; he also announces his intention "do some magic; an' put a spot ob Voodoo on de one what's stealin' Mummy's eggs."<sup>23</sup> Caleb then describes his father outside their shack, squatting down on the ground, and "engrossed with a tiny fire lit inside a shallow tin" round which "he had made a small circle of bones, and what looked like shiny beans. He was muttering something very rapidly, and every now and then he took a pinch of some powdery substance from a paper bag he was holding

Image removed from this copy due to copyright restrictions (cover of *I Rise: the life story of a Negro* by Rollo Ahmed)

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TOP: Ahmed's semi-autobiographical novel of 1937. ABOVE LEFT: Wheatley's signed copy, with a dedication from Rollo. ABOVE RIGHT: Author portrait from *The Black Art*.

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ABOVE: The colourful Prince Monolulu – born plain Peter McKay – also came to Britain from Guyana and was a legendary fixture at British race meetings for decades.

utilise his showmanship on the market stalls, “growing proficient in the art of entertaining and wheedling my crowd, selling them ‘lucky African beans’...”<sup>29</sup>

This seems to have been a popular source of income for black men at this time. Later, having moved to London, Caleb meets “coloured men who called themselves doctors, who lived in pokey holes in Brixton, Lewisham, Stoke Newington, and the Gray’s Inn Road. They mostly possessed tumbledown cars, and pedalled [sic] patent medicines at various markets, as I had once done.”<sup>30</sup>

The memoirs of another mid-20th century black immigrant to Britain, Ernest Marke’s *In Troubled Waters: Memoirs of my Seventy Years in England*, confirm this. Marke – like Caleb – first tried his hand at show business, and then, when this failed – again, like Caleb – decided to try his hand as a ‘crocuser’. This was the traders’ term for the selling of herbal remedies and other medicines at markets. Marke learned the trade from legendary crocuser ‘Professor’ Edgar B Knight, a self-styled Abyssinian herbalist based in Wombwell, Yorkshire, where he was a much-loved figure. The sartorially elegant Knight dressed either in immaculate Western clothes or in equally expensive African garments. In fact, he had nothing to do with Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia) or any other part of Africa; like Rollo Ahmed, he had

been born in Demerara, Guyana. Renowned for his suave patter and perfect English, Knight was a very successful crocuser; one of his spiels would proceed along the following lines: “This particular herb only grows in my country and this is the first time it is being introduced to the Western world.” In fact, the herbal remedies and other nostrums, whilst genuine, had been obtained from English chemists’ suppliers. Marke explained Knight’s reasoning: “He told me he never would have been half as successful if the public had known that he was from the Western world. Since he was a herbalist, he said, and herbs being nature’s medicine, he had to present himself as a son of nature; for only then would they look up to him and believe in him.

‘And I’ll tell you something else [said Knight]; everyone who takes my medicine will be sure to find some improvement in his health. It matters not if my medicine is good, they’ll find it good because I have impressed them and made them believe.’”<sup>31</sup>

Another crocuser with whom Marke became friends was ‘Black Dougie’. He was from Jamaica but, like Knight, let it be known that he was an African. “He was well educated, a master of words in the English language, and very dark with a pugnacious look.” He also had a perfect set of teeth, which, Marke recalled, he used to great effect when selling a home-made tooth

powder: “In Africa where I come from,” he’d spiel, “we clean our teeth with this very preparation! The root powder in it protects both gums and teeth, with the result that false teeth are absolutely unknown amongst my people. In fact, if I could take my teeth from my mouth and replace them in the presence of my people I would be acclaimed and accepted immediately as the greatest witch-doctor in all Africa!”<sup>32</sup>

Yet another celebrated figure was ‘Dr’ Lascelles, who was genuinely African (from Sierra Leone). Marke describes him as “tall, black as ebony, with a commanding appearance. When Lascelles walked in the streets, everybody looked.” He dressed in “spectacular Eastern costume” and his ‘racket’ was lucky charms; he sold one called ‘Ragal’, which, he told his customers, was an African Goddess of Fortune.<sup>33</sup>

Marke was also friends with the legendary Prince Monolulu, the racetrack king, famous for his flamboyant ‘African’ costume, ebullient personality, and his “touch a Black man for luck” and his “I’ve gotta ‘orse” routine. Monolulu, again, was no African, but had been born – like Ahmed – in Guyana, as plain Peter McKay.

The point I am trying to make is that these black entrepreneurs were not only small businessmen and entrepreneurs; they were also showmen, playing the role of the exotic ‘Other’ to their audiences/customers. And

we may view Rollo Ahmed in a similar light. Presumably he chose to style himself as an Egyptian partly because of the racism of the time, whereby a black man would not have been treated as an intellectual equal. But this Egyptian identity was also presumably a response to the fascination and allure of all things Ancient Egypt in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. The ancient Egypt craze was well established in England. Its initial manifestation was the use of pyramids as a feature of 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture, and then the Victorian vogue for ancient Egyptian architectural forms as seen, for example, in Highgate Cemetery. This Egyptomania had been revived in the 1920s following the 1922 rediscovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb, with the resulting penetration into popular consciousness. With Ancient Egypt seen as a repository for Ancient Wisdom, it was a clever move to present oneself as a member of that mysterious, powerful and wise race, rather than as a mere colonial from the backwater of Guyana.

## IN BOHEMIA

Initially, then, it seems Ahmed made a living in England as a seller of herbs and medicines, like other entrepreneurial black men of the time. Later, however, he branched out into offering services of a magical nature – again, trading partly on his ‘exotic’ appearance and purported Egyptian background. A clue to the circles amongst which Ahmed moved is given in chapter 10 of *I Rise*. Well-spoken and well-educated, he would have had no difficulty in being accepted amongst the left-leaning and progressive section of middle-class white society. The narrator describes a party in Hampstead, attended by “The usual extraordinary collection of people... ‘Arty’ women in beads, casement cloth and sandals, women with cropped hair and male dress suits. All smoking excessively.

## NOTES

- 1 Dennis Wheatley, *The Time Has Come... The Memoirs of Dennis Wheatley*, Vol 3 1919-1977: Drink and ink, 1919-1977, Hutchinson, 1979, p134.
- 2 Dennis Wheatley, *To the Devil a Daughter*, Wordsworth, 2007, p181 (original publication, Hutchinson, 1953).
- 3 Phil Baker, *The Devil is a Gentleman*, Dedalus, 2009, p319.
- 4 Rollo Ahmed, *The Black Art*, John Long, 1936; reprinted 1971, p11-12. All subsequent quotes are taken from the 1971 edition. Many years later, Wheatley produced his own survey of ‘black magic’ in *The Devil and All His Works*,

- Hutchinson & Co., 1971.
- 5 Peter Haining, *The Anatomy of Witchcraft*, Souvenir Press, 1972, p75.
- 6 *The Black Art*, p224.
- 7 Montague Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic*, Rider, 1946.
- 8 Ahmed’s account was intended for publication in a national newspaper, but only saw the light of day thanks to the efforts of editor Peter Haining. It finally appeared in *The Necromancers*, a 1971 collection of historical and contemporary short stories and articles, both factual and fictional, all with black magic or witchcraft themes. Peter Haining, ed., *The Necromancers: The Best of Black Magic and Witchcraft*,

- Coronet, 1971, p.31.
- 9 *The Necromancers*, p31.
- 10 *Ibid*, p31.
- 11 *Ibid*, p32.
- 12 *The Black Art*, p175.
- 13 *Ibid*, p184.
- 14 *Ibid*, p175.
- 15 *Ibid*, p183.
- 16 *Ibid*, p183.
- 17 *Ibid*, p185.
- 18 *Ibid*, p187.
- 19 *Ibid*, p198. The term “goat without horns” is attested in an influential, if notoriously sensationalist and unreliable, 19<sup>th</sup> century work, *Hayti: or the Black Republic* by Spencer St John (1884), who writes of “two sects which follow the Vaudoux-worship – those

who only delight in the flesh and blood of white cocks and spotted white goats at their ceremonies, and those who are not only devoted to these, but on great occasions call for the flesh and blood of the goat without horns”, or of human victims. It is a curious trait of human nature that these cannibals must use a euphemistic term when speaking of their victims, as the Pacific Islanders have the expression of ‘long pig’. *Hayti: or the Black Republic*, Frank Cass, 1971, p192.

20 *The Black Art*, p199.

21 *Ibid*, p267.

22 Rollo Ahmed, *I Rise: The Life Story of a Negro*, John Long, 1937, p9.

- 23 *Ibid*, p72.
- 24 *Ibid*, pp72-73.
- 25 *Ibid*, p267.
- 26 *Ibid*, p247.
- 27 *Ibid*, pp248-249.
- 28 *Ibid*, p258.
- 29 *Ibid*, p296.
- 30 *Ibid*, p317.
- 31 Ernest Marke, *In Troubled Waters: Memoirs of my Seventy Years in England*, Kana Press, 1986, pp101-102; originally published as *Old Man Trouble*, 1975.
- 32 *Ibid*, p104.
- 33 *Ibid*, p105.
- 34 *I Rise*, p327.
- 35 *Ibid*, p328.

ABOVE: Egyptomania arrives in Britain – a display at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924.

Inconspicuous elderly women who were as clever as the others considered themselves to be. Jameson, the poet, whose poems enjoyed a private circulation among that section of the intelligentsia who lap up filth disguised as art.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite Ahmed’s disclaimer in the foreword that “None of the characters is a portrait,” it is hard not to see the “Black haired, black cloaked, excessively bulky” Jameson, “never seen without his famous phallic symbol slung about his neck,” as a Crowley pastiche, or perhaps a composite of Crowley and Robert Graves. Other characters at the party are “May Sing Koo, the Chinese model, who had half London at her feet, and who was the following year destined to fling herself from an upper story of a New York skyscraper,” “Hilary Stringer, who was reported to practise Black Magic with his ladies of the moment,” and “An Egyptian, several stage and screen

artistes, more or less celebrities, and many other people of both sexes and varying nationalities.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the reference to an Egyptian is to Rollo himself. **[E]**

## NEXT MONTH: ROLLO’S RISE AND FALL

With thanks to Phil Baker; Anthony Clayton; Graham King (Museum of Witchcraft, Boscastle) for allowing access to the Doreen Valiente collection; and the staff of the British Library’s Reading Rooms.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



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