



myths & MYSTERIES

Algerian folklore maintains that if you place the eye of an eagle-owl in the hand of a sleeping woman, when she awakes she will be unable to tell a lie. I am not absolutely sure how gender specific this remedy is and I have a suspicion that if I woke up with the eye of an eagle-owl in my hand, the first thing to come out of my mouth would also be true. The Algerian truth test may well be one of the more absurd beliefs involving owls, but when it comes to owl superstitions, it's hard to find any middle ground in the absurd spectrum.

With their nocturnal habits, silent flight and their large, hypnotic eyes, owls are the perfect candidates for all sorts of weird and wonderful folklore, and owl mythologies are found in most cultures. Some people demonise

these nocturnal predators, whereas others idolise them. There are Icelandic and Native American beliefs that owls offer wisdom and spiritual guidance. In parts of India there is the superstition that the number of hoots an owl emits conveys very different and often very dire messages. Eight hoots foretell impending death, while nine celebrate imminent good fortune. One can only imagine how many frantic conversations this must have started. 'Was that eight or nine hoots, dear...? Dear?'

Loss of life during the night is frequently associated with owls, it seems, and in the Middle East owls are synonymous with infant mortality and cot death. In South Africa too, as in most parts of Africa, the owl is a symbol of misfortune, indicating the

presence of evil and the approaching death of a loved one.

The use of dead owls by traditional healers is also common practice in southern Africa, although, after monitoring skin turnover at the Faraday Street 'muthi' market in Johannesburg, it becomes apparent that the demand for owl parts is relatively small. In some southern African cultures it is believed that powdered owl liver prepared in a broth will cure insomnia, while in other parts of Africa a daily dose of owl eggnog can cure maladies ranging from baldness to drunkenness. The beauty of owl eggnog is that it can even be prescribed for children whose parents are drunkards, just to ensure that they too don't travel that bibulous road.

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In Welsh mythology, the hoot of an owl within the city walls bears witness to an unmarried girl losing her virginity. Hopefully this is not too difficult to distinguish from the hoot of an unmarried boy losing his. The Japanese are a little more specific when it comes to their owl beliefs, revering eagle-owls and demonising Barn Owls. At least this form of mythological discrimination requires some basic ornithological identification.

One of the more beautiful owl mythologies can be found in Aboriginal folklore, where it is believed that the owl, dark and mysterious, is the nocturnal manifestation of the female spirit.

The list of owl-related superstitions is long and it ranges from the bizarre to the, well, really bizarre. The one thing that is clear is that man's relationship with owls has always been an emotive one, and any communion with an owl never fails to elicit a feeling of deep significance.

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