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.

**"He wore a red fez and was robed in a white burnous"**

Mention 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 FT256:84-83). 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.”

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 major occult novel *The Devil Rides Out* (1933). A thinly disguised portrait of Ahmed appears in chapter 14 of Wheatley’s later black magic novel *By the Devil – A Daughter* (1953). This 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.R. and John Fincham, visit the country house of the novel’s villain, Canon Cepedy-Fyfe, and are greeted at the front door by “a manervent of a type that one would hardly have expected to find in an Essex village. He wore a red fez and was robed in a white burnous. His skin was very dark, but only his thick lips suggested negro blood, and C.B. put 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 Cepedy-Fyfe in?”

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 Yucatan, Gojona and Brazil, and had travelled throughout Asia, including a stay in Burma, which was where he had met Wheatley and had learned Raja Yoga.

Ahmed’s Yoga – or at least the instruction he gave to the Wheatsleys – 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.” Wheatley had, he believed, been given a practical demonstration of Ahmed’s powers, when, on a freezing cold London night, Ahmed

**LEFT:** Wheatley is novel *By the Devil – A Daughter* included a thinly disguised portrait of Rollo Ahmed.
arrived at Wheatley's Queen's Gate house for dinner. He was dressed only in a light cotton suit, wearing no coat, but no gloves, and had walked four miles from his flat in Clapham. Upon shaking Wheatley's hand, Wheatley found it to be as "warm as toast" - the result, apparently, of Wheatley's ability to generate internal heat via Yoga.

Wheatley had other reasons to be impressed by Ahmad and his occult powers; on another evening, he was entertaining Ahmad together with a member of the Society for Psychological Research, apparently psychically gifted. After Ahmad had departed, the SPI man asked Wheatley whether he had noticed the small black imp leaping about behind Ahmad. A demonic imp subsequently made an appearance in Wheatley's The Satanists (1906).

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 Rider Out, he instead suggested that Wheatley write the book. The result was The Black Art (John Long, 1936), an overview of black magic and sorcery with a cursed European/Western bias. Curiously, because Ahmad, one of few non-white people on the British 1930s occult scene, was of East European descent. Many believed him to be Egyptian, and he was happy to encourage this belief. In fact, Abdul Said Ahmad (his real name) had been born in the colony of British Guiana (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 Ahmad - a member of that ancient race which enjoyed by the greatest and longest-enduring civilization 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 desolate islands and in the little-explored fores of Yucatan, Guinea and Brazil. In those 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." 8

Ahmed himself had stated that his exposure to magic and the occult had begun at a very early age. British Guiana he had encountered indigenous Indians "who practised a form of Esuhi Black Magic which may be called tribal magic." 9 He also stated that he had met Voodoo practitioners amongst the black population.

Interestingly, with regard to the Lancastrian State temple, "the Society's typical coven of the 19th century. It was a house in Lancashire that consists of eleven secret rituals. The London and this was the area around the ground of the Gnomon". Each of these rituals has a concept about beauty, almost a religious aesthetic, and two women are present. The invalid's aide-de-camp is in shock. Sometimes these women are private sources, but they are also an ancient heretic. Their bodies are taken for more than from the society and for one, they have a strange, even terrifying, ability to take away comfort. Curious and gone. Among them come and go the Satanic presence. Deep in the cellar is a small cubby - pocket, or the hiding of a pedophile. It leads through to the数千 whose minds are calmed. The Pagan Door of the Satanic is an ancient vestige. It is protected and owned by one of the society's godlike beings. The Pagan Door, as the name suggests, is an ancient piece of Satanic symbol, marking that it's a focus of black magic and witchcraft.

"few of the doors that it is often exactly as a small cubby - except that the other one's doors are made of easily burned doors. There are no holes but the doors are made of wood. Alongside each branch is a secret of death. Synods of every kind are addressed on oaths that completely cover the walls."

VODDHA"...or "Ladies"...jpg inserted into the image of the page from the manuscript. The image is not a direct copy of the text. It is a visual representation of the text content.
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*Percol pleasantness...*. Lower musical...'...'; "We (the implicit) relate each form in the shape he sells..."


initiation into which involves "many obscene and disguising tricks, together with excessive gluttony." 18 Another is the Leopard Society of Sierra Leone, whose members dress in leopard skins for their ceremonies, and are believed to be "Ja’Ju or Ja-Ju, believed "to roam throughout the forest in bands, bent on evil and destruction." 18

Another surprising claim is made about the pre-Buddhist Bon practitioners of Tibet, who, Ahmed says, "seem to have magical powers, accompanied by horrible blood rituals" and whose symbol is "the serpents with its own head reversed, which indicates its inner power" 18 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 most occultists the eastern 'solar' influence of the moon, and the dark and blood-stained emanations from it. 18 Given that this was written in 1932, when the true nature 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 few very few of the Negro secret societies were free from the taint of cannibalism." 18 Ahmed also suggests that until recently, the sacrifice of a girl-child was "the only goat without horns."

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 cauldron. Sometimes these dances were in honor of the moon as representing the Old Master or Devil. As the dances grew wider, the victims were killed and pieces of the quivering flesh given to each of the celebrants to eat, which spared them to even greater dilutions. They should invoke the Old Master and the white men, cry to Old Man Moon and "Ole Man Moi" as the much-feared Obabwa-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 (but more convincingly realistic) examples of African Diaspora magical practices. The protagonist's father consults a "deck of playing cards for divination purposes; he also announces his intention "to some magic pot" to get a spot of Voodoo on one what's small". Mary's hereditary gift, "Ahmad then describes his father outside their shack, squating down on the ground, and "engrossed with a tiny fire in inside a shallow well" which he had made a small circle of bones, and what looked like shining 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 and threw it on the fire, which then leaped up with vivid green and orange flames. The murrering 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 resultant sound was something between a miniature drum-beat, and the thundering of galloping horses. For some unknown reason this procedure struck terror into my heart. A choking sensation seized my throat..." 18 The result of this ritual is that Ahmad becomes so terrified that he confesses to his father that he was the boy who stole the eggs! But evidently his father forgave him; later in the novel, when Caleb has relocated to England, he receives a good-bye message from his father: "Enclosed were two thin twigs, crossed, and bound about with white hemp's hair, and a mysterious looking piece of knotted thread. Some of People's magic. I treasured this characteristic little evidence of my father's thought for me, and kept those twigs for many a year." 18

While there are some episodes in I Rise, such as the above, which deals 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 then 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 prejudices and discrimination directed against a member of one of her Colonies.

In a cold and damp Liverpool in October 1931, Caleb attempts to find a place to stay. "It was one thing to want to start a new life, 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 proprietresses saw me standing there, excuses were made. Liverpool was apparently full to overflowing. They were very sorry, there was no room." 18 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 managed to speak his mind at the next house: "Ah beg your pardon. Perhaps you don't understand. I am British, not foreigner." 18 Once again, tired and shivering with cold, he intervened away. Eventually Caleb manages to get a "dearful 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 unphilanthropic 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, at least squatting in log cabins, when we are at home." Eventually, he manages to haggle the price down to 3½ shillings, for which he may have use of the bath "last thing at night," when the other guests have turned in for the night. 18

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." 18 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 the West Indies, but had been forced to sell up after a false accusation of procuring an abortion. He now sells black remedies, and introduces Caleb to this trade. He is able to

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will in his showmanship on the market stalls, “growing proficient in the art of entertaining and wheedling our crowd, selling them ‘likely African beans’.”

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 poky holes in Berwick, Lewisham, Stoke Newington, and the Gray’s Inn Road. They mostly possessed tumble-down cars, and peddled [sic] patent medicines at various markets, as I had once done.”

The memoir of another mid-20th century black immigrant to Britain, Ernest Mark’s “In Troubled Waters: Memoirs of my Seventeen Years in England” confirm this. Mark, like Caleb — first tried his hand at show business, and then, when this failed — again, like Caleb — decided to try his hand as a “cressiser.” This was the trader’s term for the selling of herbal remedies and other medicines at markets. Mark learned the trade from legendary businessman ‘Professor’ Edgar B Knight, a self-styled African herbalist based in Wombwell, Yorkshire, where he was a much loved figure. The sartorially elegant Knight dressed either in immediate 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 Rollie Ahmed, he had been born in Demerara, Guyana. Renowned for his trade patter and perfect English, Knight was a very successful cressiser; one of his spells 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. Mark explained Knight’s reasoning. ‘He told me he never would have been half as successful in the public had known that he was from the Western world. Since he was a herbalist, he said, and herbs being native medicine, he had to present himself as a son of nature; for only then would they look him up and believe in him.’

And still he sells 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.”

Anathor cressiser with whom Mark became friends was ‘Black Douglas’. He was from Jamaica, like Knight, let it be known that he was an African. “He was well educated, a mannered words in the English language, and very dandies with a predilection for clothes.” Or did he have a perfect set of teeth, which, Marke recolled, he used to great effect when selling home-made tooth powder: “In Africa where I come from, ‘he spelt, ‘we clean our teeth with this very preparation! The root powder in it promises 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 at once accepted and accepted immediately as the greatest witch doctor in all Africa.”

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

Mark was also friends with the legendary Prince Monolulu, the racko县长, famous for his flamboyant ‘African’ costumes, Elliott’s personal assistant, and his “touch a Black man for luck” and his “I’ve got you” 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 audience/customer.

we may view Rollie Ahmed in a similar light. Presumably he chose to style himself as an Egyptian purely because of the tactics of the time, whereby a black man would not have been treated as an intellectual equal. But this Egyptian identity was also necessarily a response to the fascination and allure of all things Ancient Egyptian in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. The ancient Egypt craze was well established in England. Its initial manifestation was the use of pyramids as a feature of 19th 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 closer aces to present oneself as a member of that mysterious, powerful and creative race, rather than as a mere colonist from the backwater of Greece.

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, reading partly on his ‘occasional appearance and purported Egyptian background. A clue to the circles amongst which Ahmed moved is given in chapter 11 of J.R. Rees’ 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 small audience of poets,cleansers and whores, women with hair and dress suits. All smoking excessively.

ABOVE: Egyptomania in Britain — a chalice at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924.

Inconspicuous elderly women were as black as the others considered themselves to be. Jameson, the poet, whose poems enjoyed a private circulation among the section of the intelligentsia who put up with the dish that had fallen from the sky, and who had half London at her feet, and who was the following year destined to ring herself from upper story of New York skyscrapers. Hilary Stringer, who was reported to reproduce Black Magic with his Index of the moment,” and “As an Egyptian, several stage and screen

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NOTES

2. The Black Ark, p.22.
4. If you’re going to advertise a product, you need to advertise it with a splat.
7. The Black Ark, p.27.
8. The Black Ark, p.28.
12. The Black Ark, p.32.
14. The Black Ark, p.34.
15. The Black Ark, p.35.
16. The Black Ark, p.36.
23. The Black Ark, p.43.
24. The Black Ark, p.44.
25. The Black Ark, p.45.
27. The Black Ark, p.47.
29. The Black Ark, p.49.
30. The Black Ark, p.50.
32. The Black Ark, p.52.
33. The Black Ark, p.53.
34. The Black Ark, p.54.
35. The Black Ark, p.55.