

The Book of Shadows (BOS)

Written by Living Green

The Book of Shadows is a collection of spells, rituals and beliefs unique to a tradition, passed from teacher to student. These have frequently become highly codified practices, although Gardnerian author Frederic Lamond has recently suggested that this might not have been the original intention. Here he writes as if quoting Gardner, "The Book of Shadows is not a Bible or Quran. It is a personal cookbook of spells that have worked for the owner. I am giving you mine to copy to get you started: as you gain experience discard those spells that don't work for you and substitute those that you have thought of yourselves."

"Until recently witches were not allowed to write anything down, lest it incriminate them if their house was searched."

Lamond does admit, however, that this attitude is quite contradictory to Gardner's own attempts of attempting to pass off his Book of Shadows as being hundreds of years old, or his insistence to those who knew his BOS had been assembled by himself and high priestess Doreen Valiente.

Today, particularly among Solitaires the BOS has become a personal book of rituals, private thoughts, meditations, spells, and anything else dealing with one's Wiccan experiences. Some compile their information in attractive, bound volumes, but others use spiral notebooks or even computer files. Some people, sites and books give you specific rules for your BOS, but it is a personal reference for you, it is your choice to share your BOS or keep it to yourself. (As long as it doesn't contain any oath bound information, if you are initiated), because Wicca is such a personal religion, a BOS is vitally important. Setting down information allows you to more exactly review it later or compare it to information acquired at a later date. I personally have also found it helpful to write because it may look fine in the book, but re-writing it makes it my words, my spells, I change what is not right for me.

Some authors include exercises in their books asking you to write down certain things in your BOS such as your beliefs on a variety of topics. These are important to consider and eventually write down, but doing them on the spot, require a pressured time and what you are reading at the time may be what you write down. Take time, energy and look up. Research what you don't know, look at the history and do not rely on others to tell you what is correct.

Someone I know says her family has been passing down a Book of Shadows for two-hundred years." I always want to believe but, Wicca is a new tradition, religion, and no one wrote down his or her spells for fear of being persecuted. According to Valiente in *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*, Gardner first came across the term *Book of Shadows* in a magazine in 1949, where the term actually referred to a Sanskrit document regarding divination through the studying of shadows. Gardner seems to have simply taken a liking to the name, even though the two documents have nothing to do with each other. Therefore, in reference to Wicca or witchcraft, Gardner effectively invented the term. Don't get me wrong, I believe in family traditions writings of cures, herbal remedies, and such and I have seen them myself. These are not quite the same. Generally everything they taught to their children was oral, not written. Moreover, books were hideously expensive until the 20th century. I have books that are over a hundred years old and they are in poor condition. There are books in museums over two hundred years old and they have preserved them in climate-controlled conditions. Common Man does not have the opportunity to do so. Historically, ceremonial magicians (who were generally very wealthy) created books known as *grimoires* (grim-WAARS). Some famous ones have been published, such as the *Key of Solomon*. Their nature was somewhat different than a Book of Shadows, however, frequently focusing upon the ability to call and bind spirits and/or strongly rooted in Judeo-Christian religion.

Frederic Lamond, *Fifty Years of Wicca*

Gerald Gardner, *Old Words and the Old Laws*.

Ronald Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*.