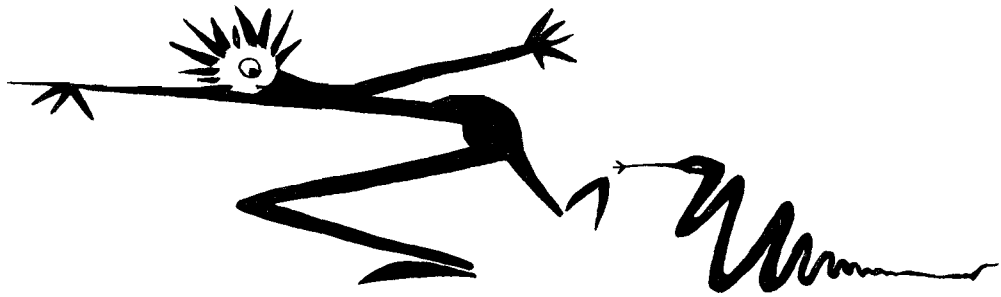


superstitions about snakes



Milking of animals

It is alleged by many people, particularly farmers, that snakes suck milk from the teats of cows and are responsible for the latter running 'dry'. In the first place this is practically impossible physiologically, as a snake's mouth is in no way suitable for the performing of such an act; secondly, it would be impossible for a snake to hold on to a teat without piercing the soft flesh with its sharp, rigidly set teeth and causing injury and consequent immediate reaction by the cow or other animal which a snake might be attempting to milk; thirdly, it can be accepted that the intelligence of a snake is much too low to make such an act in any way credible; fourthly, a snake would find extreme difficulty in keeping any quantity of milk down, as the latter would soon begin to run out owing to distension pressure. In this latter connection, the so-called milk which is often seen to come out of the body of a snake after it has been killed, can be ascribed to the creamy white contents of its own eggs which have been crushed in the process of killing.



Are snakes deliberately aggressive?

Snakes are for the most part shy and elusive creatures and, with few exceptions, will instinctively try to get away as quickly as possible when disturbed. If an attack is made, it is usually only when cornered or otherwise molested, or when its direct line of retreat to a favourite hideout or refuge is obstructed or cut off. It is thus manifest that much of the so-called aggressiveness of snakes is actually a defensive reaction, and is supported by the fact that extremely few snakes are normally encountered even in areas well populated with these reptiles.

Does man possess an instinctive fear of snakes?

In most cases the fear of snakes has been engendered at some time or another by stories that have been heard or by some unpleasant personal experience. It is well known that babies and young children, who have never been told anything about the dangers of snakes, do not as a rule show any instinctive fear of them.

Are all snake poisons alike?

The composition of the poison varies from species to species and even within individuals of the same species the proportions may be different. Snake poison is a mixture of many different components, but broadly speaking there are two main elements, viz. (a) the neurotoxic, which attacks the nerve centres of the victim and is predominant in the elapids (cobras, mambas, etc.); and (b) the haematotoxic, which attacks and breaks down the blood cells and vessels and is predominant in the vipers and adders. (14)

Reference: FitzSimons, F.M. Vivian, *Snakes of Southern Africa*.

Gedruk deur die Nasionale Museum, Bloemfontein.