

An Ethnographic Study on Wicca

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Abstract

This essay will attempt to explore the various concepts and ideas behind the Wiccan religion. Almost entirely stamped out of the popular culture through persecution, and the spread of fear, uncertainty and doubt, in the dominant Christian world, this form of worship is gaining among the many progressive areas of America. The study involves a personal discussion with a twenty-five year old centre manager of a national reproductive health system.

1 Introduction

A close friend of mine, whom I shall call Karen throughout this essay, was often the subject of strange paranormal activity. When she was twenty-one years of age, she had three of her closest relations pass away. In the midst of her college career, this young woman was devastated and thrust into adulthood early. This short anecdote, however, would end here if it were not for the strange course of event to occur on the fortieth day after their deaths.

Karen experienced what might be referred to as a psychic vision (in the context of science: a para-psychological experience.) One night, while sleeping, she awoke to a sound, and a bright pink light floating in mid air. It was warm, as the sunlight hits one, on a fresh spring day; it made her feel intrinsically happy and complete. When she told her mother about the occurrences of the night before, her mother, being a strong believer in paranormal activity, consulted a psychic. The psychic explained that this warm

pink light represented the energy of love that these people had for her. Further, that this event's occurrence concurrent with other separately reported cases, of a time span of 40 days after the death of a loved one if the subject of this paranormal activity was psychically inclined.

This story, and others like it, spurred my investigation of psychic experiences which lead me straight towards the *goddess* based religion of Wicca, or Witchcraft.

2 Myths and Mysticism

To date there have been certain issues surrounding the Wiccan religion. It exists in a backdrop of oppression and misunderstandings. It began with an attempt to understand nature, and ended - for a long time - with the institutionalisation of Christianity. Before going to the details of the Wiccan religion, it's necessary to trace the origins and influences of the dialectical conflict between what is inherently male and female.

2.1 Popular Myths in the Media

The biggest issue surrounding the Wiccan religion is its stigmatism both from within and the popular culture. A decently rated television show *Charmed* and movie "Blair Witch Project" accurately reflect the misconceptions and myths which have propagated themselves throughout popular culture.

Other television shows like *Saturday Night Live* depicted, in their Halloween special, witches as your "standard" broom-toting, haggard, older ladies, dressed in black flowing robes, and pointed hats who were encircling a large cauldron filled with a strange, smoking, bubbling concoction.

The mass media at present day, seems to depict Wicca in a negative light. Surely, if you ask a common man on the street to explain what comes to his mind when the word Witch is uttered, more oft than not, evil will surface. The roots of this negative connotation can be traced back to the Fourth Century when Constantine (Emperor of Rome) instantiated Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.[1, p. 58] Shrines in pagan cultures were looted and sacked; rivers and wells polluted; priests and especially priestesses exposed as heretics and executed.

A recent article in the populist *Philadelphia City Paper* seemed to have done a good job at attempting to dispel some of these myths. The author, Daryl Gale, started by a participant observation of the Fall equinox ritual, reporting all accurately, according to many of my sources. Originally I had

intended to stay clear of the mass media as a source of information. However, my informant, whom I shall refer to as Carol throughout this essay, suggested that I use this article as a nice starting point for my research into the Wiccan religion.

2.2 Monotheistic patriarchal Institution

Under the guise of the Roman Empire, institutionalised Christianity gripped the world with a fist of Iron. The Emperor gave bishops the authority to rule in civil courts, instructing them to uphold all Christian based decrees. Indigenous peoples who stood in the way of the “good news” were declared Devil worshippers and executed.

The stage was set for the new world order where women were oppressed and the balance was shifted from the “chalice to the blade”¹. It was argued by St. Augustine that women had no souls. This view was eventually settled when British bishops (still under heavy influence of their Celtic backgrounds) successfully argued against it. Although it was not written into official church doctrine, this view was held by many local church officials for centuries.

The indigenous religions held women up to a much higher regard than Christianity. They believed that religion was about creation, rather than salvation [1, p. 20 - 23]. As such, they worshipped all that was able to foster the creation of living things: Mother Earth. Women possessed the power of creation: childbirth. Hence, plainly there is no mystery there where the link arose between the two.

There were also other characteristics of women that mirrored earth. Women were on cycles of the moon; now-a-days referred to as the menstruation cycle. Even as the woman was pregnant, the growth of the womb reflected the varying stages of the waxing moon. The institutionalisation of Christianity changed all of these beliefs, thrusting human civilisation into a male-centred world, with its eventual desecration of Earth’s resources.

2.3 Mysticism Revisited

Recently, the nature-centred religions have risen in popularity, due in large part to the feminist movement of the 1970’s. In fact, a large part of prac-

¹Riane Eisler first proposed this notion in 1989. She dichotomised the male and female struggle as the sustainment and enhancement of life (chalice-female) where the main characteristics were nurturing, equality and nature to the power to take away, dominate and destroy (the blade-male).

titioners of Wicca are indeed female. This, however, has not dulled the stigmatism surrounding the subject.

Confirmed by my informant, and some of my sources, there are many more witches than are plainly apparent. Many of them would like to keep this part of their life secret because of the misunderstandings of the populous culture and the resulting harassment. There was an incident of a woman losing her job as a hairstylist because she was wearing a pentagram to work. Another was not allowed to put down “Wicca” as a religion in an admitting form at a hospital: the clerk left the line blank instead.

Very much like a homosexual would keep his sexuality a private part of his life, the Witch must do the same. As Carol recounts:

It’s not something you wear on your sleeve [pause] like, you tell people that you are Wiccan, and they just look at you. Sometimes they smile or chuckle uncomfortably, you know ... But, like, they quickly change the subject ... it’s the difference between tolerance and acceptance ... really

With all of this secrecy involved in the Wiccan religion it’s no wonder that the popular culture does not get more informed of the actual practises, rites, and ideologies of this sub-culture.

3 Wiccan practises

With the information collected from various sources, including from my informant, I have come to the conclusion that *what is, is right* in Wicca. There seems to be a shared *modus operandi* in the Wiccan sub-culture; however, the way that M.O. is expressed is left entirely up to the individual.

While in a way it tends to be very individualistic, it also allows for group participation. However, even within that group, the bond that keeps them together seems endemic. Calling this a religion then would evoke great objections from Emile Durkheim. Since, according to Durkheim, a religion would have to be widespread and a massively shared cultural fact in all of society (I.E.: people would have to gather together in central points of worship,) this would not be counted as a religion in Durkheimian terms. It *is* very much a religion to the practitioners.

3.1 Fundamentals of Wiccan practises

It seems that as individualistic Witchcraft is, there are various practises that make it inherently Wiccan. Although Wicca seems a melange of myths and

legends, I have been able to identify particular characteristics which seem to be shared across my various sources. The details differed but the concepts were similar. These were: the practise of white magick², nature centred religion, the existence of small groups called covens and the circle of protection.

3.1.1 White Hat practises

Wicca is primarily what witches call white magick. Their main rule of conduct is simple: whatever spells you cast, they will be returned to you three-fold. This means that any spell which they cast, be it good or bad, will come around in the future three times as intense as how they cast it.

For this reason, many witches tend to stick to positive spells: spells that are cast that do no harm, but only aid the subject of the spell. My informant noted that even if the subject of the sorcery is someone one dislikes, the witch ought to cast a positive spell. For example, say you go on a date with someone, and you find out that they are very possessive. You just want them out of your life. You would cast a spell that brings to their attention something “good” to get their minds off of you. Maybe, the person gets a promotion which forces them to leave the city, or neighbourhood conversely leaving you alone.

Although this is the main rule of conduct, it is at times broken by those witches who perform black magick. Carol knew no one, personally, who practised black magick; however, there was reference to a popular media witch who wrote several books on black magick, and his travails. Notwithstanding, there is no Devil in the Wiccan religion. The stigmatism of Devil worship arose from the popular Christian Church - in attempts to coerce the pagan population.

3.1.2 Nature-based Rites

The second generalised rule seems to be the celebration of the seasons and nature. Wiccan work with nature and the natural cycles of the Earth. For example, they celebrate the Fall and Spring Equinoxes, and Summer and Winter Solstices. Like monotheism, there is in essence “one” spirit (a better term would be Ether.) From there, one splits off the various parts of that Ether for specific purposes, which is where the various Gods and Goddesses come into play. Much like the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian pantheon, each

²In the Wiccan religion, the letter ‘K’ is appended to demarcate the difference between illusory magic-Houdini style.

of these spirits (portions of energy) are chosen by the individual or group and embodied by a common image.

From the evidence collected, it seems that these spirits (or goddesses) are not actual physical beings (as would be manifested by the Greek God Zeus for example.) The field of energy seems to be a scale of various qualities; the Wiccan invokes a particular form of energy (known as channelling) for the particular purpose. In order to help the Wiccan concentrate on *precisely* what form of energy she would like to invoke, she concentrates on someone (actual or fictional) who embody those qualities.

Carol explained that one is not required to use any particular god or goddess for their rituals. She noted an example using Karen:

say [Karen] had a particular quality which i really loved about her ... say she worked really hard and diligently at work, and I wanted this quality to help me in my work. I would envision [Karen] when I would cast my spells ... so it doesn't have to be a god. But the reason why we use them is so that we can all know what we are talking about. What if i am working with a group who doesn't know [Karen] well, then they won't be able to picture those qualities.

In this way, it is easy to see how the religion can splinter to incorporate a plethora of Celtic, Druidic, Gothic, Roman, Greek gods and goddesses. There is not a necessary belief in the god or goddess itself, rather what that deity represents.³

3.1.3 Concentration Through Groups

The last point of group practise seems to be for major religious rites. The coven is the functional group which consists of 13 members and is headed by a high priestess or priest. The basic *raison d'etre* for covens seems to be the more people, more power. Channelling of energy was a method used by Wiccan to aid in their casting of spells, and other rites. The ability to use more members to channel a particular quality (or kind) of energy, aids in the amount of energy that can be channelled at once.

Although, participation in a coven is not required to practise Wiccan rites, it is oft times done at major ceremonial holidays. Examples of such ceremonial holidays are the Winter and Summer Solstices, and the Wiccan

³Although beyond the scope of this paper, this raises interesting questions on Santeria, the non-Christian adaptations of the Catholic Church's doctrine in Latin America. Where the Saints are worshipped for their qualities (a Saint of Healing for example) rather than God himself.

New Year (Halloween.) Participation in covens is purely out of individual preference. Some, for example, participate in smaller groups or alone.

3.1.4 Circle of Protection

Whether practising alone or in groups the Witches or Priestesses draw a circle around themselves with an artifact of personal significance. Carol used a wooden stick she found once in the forest while in college.

This wooden stick would be nothing extraordinary except that it was embossed with various patterns made by some wood eating insect or animal. Although entirely natural and chaotic, the patterns seem as if they were etched onto the wooden stick in some order. While looking this stick over I could not help but try to make some sense of these random patterns. After some time, I surrendered my search for a regular pattern, concluding that these patterns were indeed just random etchings placed there by nature.

To close this circle around themselves, the witches draw the imaginary circle around them in the air, clockwise. Once the circle is closed, no person may break it by running through it. Carol reports of cases where witches who have broken the circle to meet instant death, while others have been merely burned. Animals, however, seem exempt from this rule; they are a part of nature, so they may flow freely through it without harm.

The purpose of the circle is to protect the witch from unwanted energies as she calls upon nature's energies and selects the one she would like to augment and focus on. Unwelcomed spirits wait on the exterior of the circle to be let in. There may be, however, spirits inside of the circle when it is closed. In order to exorcise these spirits from the circle a particular chant *must* be recited, the "change of the god" prayer. More importantly, one must have faith in the prayer.

Carol recounts a time when she was practising with a coven, and the chant had not been recited. Being inexperienced at the time, she assumed that the priestess would eventually recite it. The priestess lit a charcoal block on fire and started with the rites, without reciting the chant. Moments later, the charcoal block exploded.

After the ceremonies are done, the witches recite a chant to ward off whatever spirits are waiting outside the circle and then reopen the circle in a counter-clockwise fashion.

3.2 Individualistic Perspective

While the fundamentals of Wiccan practises are not limiting, they are the building blocks to the religion. The rest is purely personal preference as to how exactly these rites are to be performed.

3.2.1 Ritualistic Artifacts

There are many artifacts that may be used in rites. Carol prefers to burn sage to cleanse the room where the rites are to be performed. She also prefers to use tea leaves as an instrument to help her focus on the energies. This is, however, very meticulous and exhaustive. So for quick rites she uses Tarot cards.

There are other artifacts that may be used in a rite, among them are: rock salt, Rune Stones (old Celtic or Gothic logograms,) actual Crystal Balls (usually of some form of earth element, which may or may not be transparent.) Carol also has a small set of bells; others may use drums for an increase in the quantity of vibrations in the air.

In sum the artifacts used may vary, but they must represent the four elements of nature: Earth, Air, Fire and Water. There is usually a main candle called the goddess candle. This is the first candle lit. Then the witch lights the rest of the candles from this one. There is then a sage plant for cleansing; this represents the womb (for which I draw the connection to Mother Earth.)

Then there are crystals and stones. Again, like the crystal ball, may be made of various Earth elements. And finally some sort of cauldron: Carol had a small one (that would fit in the palm of the hand) which seemed to have been made of some sort of cast metal.

3.2.2 Proper Ritualistic Use

Carol used to actually read Tarot cards for money at psychic fairs. She grew tired of this because it was not being true to the religion nor herself (spiritually.) She also ceased reading the Tarot to her friends, because it seemed to have begun to create a dependency for many of her friends.

Carol now only practises alone, or with her husband who is also a witch. She states that the rites are very energy draining, and an intensive process. She also states that she does not want to get involved in covens because there seems to be a certain amount of responsibility when practising in groups. The groups sometimes go further than she wishes to go.

After seeing a dead person when Carol was young, she no longer wants to get too deep into the religion, because, although she's capable, she does

not think she would be able to handle the amount of power from regular, intensive practising. Discovery of her limits began when she used a Ouija⁴ board. Carol describes it as “dialling a random number on the phone and starting to talk to them” She explains that it is not necessarily a device of “evil.” However, the spirits on the other end to receive this metaphorical phone call, are the ones “just hanging around not doing anything, who would love to play games with you... they tell you just enough to get you hooked, and then just start playing games with you...it’s really dangerous”

Even not properly chanting a prayer before reopening the circle may cause those idle spirits to remain and make life difficult for the witch. Carol told of a time when the reopening of the circle was not done properly and:

C: when I was done, I just started to leave the room and I could swear that I heard someone behind me stomp their foot. There wasn’t anyone in the house except for me. I started to get freaked out. [pause] I mean the spirit wasn’t harmful, he was just screwing with me.

ER: I bet he was having a ball! [chuckle] I can just imagine that now.

C: well he kept doing it over and over again, when I would turn around to walk.

3.2.3 Personal Identification

Much like many of my sources, Carol was no exception to the self-awareness of her para-psychological abilities. Awareness of strange occurrences (like seeing a dead person) lead her through various self-searching stages. She finally ended the searches when she discovered the Wiccan religion.

Among many of the gods and goddesses worshipped Carol often invokes those of Bridget and Diana. Bridget is the Triple Goddess of the Celtic Irish. She is also known as Brigantia in England, Bride in Scotland, and Brigandy in Celtic France.⁵ She is the goddess of smith-craft, poetry, inspiration, healing and medicine. Instantly, I was amazed by the similarities between Bridget and the Greek and Roman goddesses of inspiration: the Three Muses, to whom the poets like Virgil, and Homer would pray (vicar-

⁴a trade marked name used for a board with the alphabet and other signs on it that is used with a planchette to seek spiritualistic or telepathic messages

⁵She is also the Catholic St. Brigid. This is a stunning example of the incorporation of the pagan gods and goddesses into Catholic Doctrine so as to aid in the conversion of the indigenous peoples.

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iously through poets actually in their poems, or, as in Virgil, in the preface of their works).

The other goddess that Carol relates to is Diana. Diana is Goddess of the wild beasts and glens. She carried a crescent bow symbolising the moon. She is the Mother Goddess of Neo-Pagan Witches, and was a practitioner of white magick. Carol is careful to invoke this goddess because of its awesome and uncontrollable power.

There are other figures evoked like the Virgin Mary, or from the Arthurian legends: Morgana and Maurice. It all comes down to personal preferences, and what spirit the witch can (or would like to) identify with. As stated before, it doesn't necessarily have to be a god or goddess of the ancient religions. However, they usually embody their qualities in a pure form.

4 Conclusion

Wicca as a religion tends to be nature-oriented with a focus on the individual. There is no chain of command, or hierarchical divisions as in the Christian Churches and the group congregations usually do not total to more than thirteen at a time, for rituals.

Being nature oriented, there is this look towards the female as being most in tuned with nature as she mirrors many of natures qualities quite well. It is no wonder, then, that it was quelled during the patriarchal institutionalisation of Christianity, and yet a recent resurgence as women gain equality once again. A link to feminist literature is also no surprise, as nature-centred religions are exposed to worship the female and her power.

There's an openness to the religion based on the fundamental principle of the Golden Rule. There is no control or proselytising as in some other religions. Wicca is more of an attitude of being in tune, and at balance with nature, and the spiritual world. What is, is right. No one tell another what to do, or how to believe. Do whatever you want, but do not hurt others tends to be the standard outlook from the religion.

References

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