SHADES OF MYTH

FOLKLORE IN AMERICAN NEO PAGAN WITCHCRAFT

A Thesis

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Kathleen Rich

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SHADES OF MYTH

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Department of Anthropology
Abstract

of

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by

Kathleen Rich

The American Neopagan Witchcraft community has made deliberate use of folklore to create a community identity and maintain social boundaries. The analysis of selected myths and legends in wide circulation among American Witches allows one to begin to understand how they define themselves and style their religion. Furthermore, Witchcraft folklore has inspired customs and practices that determine how Witches navigate the many layers of their society. Folklore has become the inspiration behind the creation of a Witchcraft community identity as well as a defining factor in how Neopagan Witches characterize themselves.

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Liam D. Murphy, Ph.D.

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Date
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I would especially like to thank my first anthropology professor for introducing me to this incredibly fascinating field. Kristina, you started me on this path and now future generations know who to blame. I would also like to thank my advisor and committee for their direction and efforts in shaping and refining this work. Liam and Terri, you have given me the benefit of your experience and your hard-earned knowledge. Thank you for guiding me every step of the way.

To my friends and family, who have given me their unending support; I love you all and thank you. Finally, to the community on which this study is based, thank you for sharing with me something so personal and precious to you. I hope I have done your stories and your faith justice.
DEDICATION

To all the people who've brought a little magic into my life.

And to every person who has changed the way I think.
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A Note on Orthography

In this thesis, there may appear to be errors in capitalization. Most notably between Witchcraft and witchcraft. The distinction between these is a deliberate effort to differentiate between the religion of Witchcraft and witchcraft as a folklore motif or cultural superstition. Similarly, the same difference applies to Tradition and tradition. Tradition capitalized, is used to refer to a sect or type of Witchcraft that includes specific customs, beliefs, and practices passed down within a culture. One may also see a discrepancy between gods and Gods. Neopagan Witches often refer to their deities as the Gods. In a polytheistic religion this phrase can be a substitution for naming specific deities and in certain contexts is used as a proper noun. For instance, a Wiccan Priest or Priestess considers themselves to be a servant of the Gods. These are important distinctions within the subject community and might cause readers confusion if some easy method of distinction were not adopted.

Wherever possible, I have tried to define terms within the body of the text. Some, however, require elaboration here in order to ensure understanding and provide context. Witchcraft is a religion that is part of the Neopagan movement. It combines elements of occultism, Western esotericism, pre-Christian religion, folklore, anthropology, and shamanistic practices in a spiritual system that has been refined and passed down, through text or in social performance, from one generation to the next. There are several monikers for Witchcraft, the most common two being the Old Religion and the Craft. Some Witches believe the linguistic root meaning of Witch or Wicca is to bend or shape
and thus define themselves as individuals with the power to do so on the spiritual and, in some cases, the physical plane. The practice of Witchcraft is seen by many adherents as a religion, a way of life, and an art form.

A Witch is a person, male or female, who practices the religion of Witchcraft. There are many different sects or types of Witchcraft loosely referred to as Traditions. Traditions are a unique collection of rituals, customs, and practices taught and passed down by teachers and community Elders. Different Traditions may practice similar methods of worship and may even share rituals or ritual structure, but each one has at least one custom or practice that differentiates it from other Traditions. The Witchcraft Community is comprised of adherents to this religion and, sometimes, their families and loved ones.

Two styles of worship largely dominate the community: Eclectic and Traditional. Eclectic Witchcraft is mostly comprised of those branches that do not emphasize the practice of initiation, though some have adopted it. It tends to denote a more flexible style of worship, and it is from those who practice this style of worship that new Traditions most commonly develop. While both Traditional and Eclectic styles respect creativity, innovation, and divine inspiration, the Eclectics tend to adopt a *let's try it and see if it works* approach whereas the Traditional attitude is largely that *we know it works because we have always done it this way.*

When I speak of Witchcraft folklore, I refer to the stories, legends, fables, oral tradition, myths, and folktales that have a deep cultural and spiritual meaning to this
religious community. These stories generate and transmit a shared religious symbolism, morality, and spiritual identity. The folklore presented here has been analyzed as it pertains to the creation and maintenance of community and identity.

Because many Witches have a background in anthropology and participate in the scholarly study of their community and religion, they participate in what is known as insider anthropology (Naryan 1993:671). This term refers to the ethnographic study of one's own social community. The advantage of this approach is that aspects of symbolism, language, cultural norms, and social customs are already familiar to the researcher. The ethnographer can thus more easily navigate the society they are researching because they have lived in it. On the other hand, some of the objectivity traditionally valued by anthropologists might be felt, by some, to be sacrificed. I have had personal connections to the Witchcraft community since childhood. Therefore, much of my own analysis is more akin to an insider perspective than the alternative.
Chapter 1

An Introduction to American Neopagan Witchcraft

A circle is formed around a small altar, a simple wooden garden table decorated with flowers. A woman standing in the East calls out to the powers of Air to protect the ritual space. As she speaks the wind inexplicably picks up, rustling new leaves on the trees. The participants smile knowingly. Fire, Water, and Earth are called, each in their turn. The men and women within the circle clasp hands. With ritual words and voices raised in song they declare the space sacred and welcome their Goddess and God. On their faces are expressions of utter joy [field notes, 2012].

The purpose of this study is to identify the role folklore plays in the creation and maintenance of identity among Neopagan Witches. As a religious community, Witchcraft has developed its own legends, myths, and oral tradition. In identifying and analyzing the function of myths and legends that are continually in circulation one can better comprehend both the religion and its followers. Neopagan Witchcraft is a religion steeped in mythology. One might even go so far as to claim Witchcraft is a religion of folklore. It is the end result of a combination of oral tradition, folk history, occultism, academic studies, and cultural innovation built upon the mythologies of pre-Christian cultures. Neopagan Witches make use of adopted and adapted mythology to inspire the creation of ritual practices and to define themselves. Through the exploration of Witchcraft folklore one can understand how Witches view and interact with the world, as well as how they maintain and create a sense of community. With this goal in mind, I have relied heavily on anthropological theory, with a particular emphasis on a Geertzian approach, to contextualize the legends and myths of contemporary American Witches (Geertz 2001:332-355).
Witchcraft, long with Druidism, Shamanism, Hedonism, Asatru and several others, is part of a family of religions known as the Neopagan Movement. Neopagan religions seek to revive the practices and philosophies of pre-Christian religions (Asatru Alliance 2013; Hexham 2002:81). The term itself is not embraced by all contemporary pagans and has become a point of contention within the movement. However, because Neopaganism is commonly used in academia in reference to pagan revivalist spiritualities it will be used here as well.

The Neopagan Movement evolved out of the same social context that gave birth to the New Age, Satanism, and other occult oriented non-mainstream religions during the 1960s (Berger et al. 2003:3-4,15,21-23; Davy 2007:33; Petersen 2005:424-429). Several studies employing various methods of data collection and analysis have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to define the Neopagan community (Jensen and Thompson 2008:754). Insofar as it is possible to do so with relatively opaque pagan religions, a basic sociological profile has been established. This profile, while not being limited to the Witchcraft community, reflects the generalized socio-cultural makeup of American Neopagan Witches.

According to Voices From the Pagan Census, a survey of 2,089 American Neopagans conducted by West Chester University professor of sociology, Helen Berger, the Neopagan community is comprised mostly of "white middle-class women" though "men participate in significant numbers as well" (Berger et al. 2003:2,25). Large numbers of Neopagans live in urban or suburban regions with a high percentage residing on the West Coast. The majority of Neopagans are college educated and are of Western
European ancestry (Berger 1999:8-9; Berger et al. 2003:29-31; Jensen and Thompson 2008:755). Aiden Kelly, scholar and devotee, estimated around 300,000 active adherents in the Neopagan movement (Lewis 1996:2). Covenant of the Goddess, a Wiccan organization, conducted a poll in 2000 that determined there were 768,400 practicing Neopagans in the United States. In 2001, the American Religious Identification Survey, ARIS, identified 274,000 Wiccan adults and estimated an equal number had refused to disclose their religious orientation, suggesting that the total number of Neopagans was even higher. When the survey was updated in 2008, the number of Neopagans nearly doubled, closely reflecting the earlier results of the Covenant of the Goddess survey (Koshman et al. 2001:12; Robinson 2009). The most commonly cited conservative figure is around 200,000, but publishing and marketing companies have suggested a projected consumer audience of around 10,000,000 (Eck 2013). The Witches Voice, a Neopagan networking site, claims there are around 1,000,000 Neopagans in the United States and 3,000,000 worldwide (Walker and Jung 2002).

The Witchcraft community boasts a diverse number of spiritual traditions including but not limited to Strega, Dianic, Reclaiming, Alexandrian, Gardnerian, Green, Ceremonial, Celtic, Caledonii, Pictish, Seax, Teutonic, Faerie, and Solitary Practice (Landis 2005:131; Moura 2005:149-151; NightMare 2005:212-216; RavenWolf 1997:11-14; Telesco 2005:123,174-175,247-249). Wicca, dubbed by Vivianne Crowley as "the religion of Witchcraft" is arguably the largest branch of Neopagan Witchcraft (1996:1). Some scholars assert that it "has been the dominant influence in the growth of contemporary Paganism" in America (Carpenter 1996:40). It must be noted, though, that
while all Wiccans are Witches, Wicca is not synonymous with all other branches of Neopagan Witchcraft.

Some Witchcraft Traditions have evolved parallel to each other while others are innovations built upon existing branches (Zahr 2005:89-92). It is difficult to chart the progression and development of the numerous kinds of Witchcraft or even account for them all. The diversity is due, in large part, to an ingrained practice of secrecy that was once a social norm among Witches. As the religion has gained greater acceptance by mainstream society, some of the secrecy has been relinquished within the community. Public displays of one's spirituality, which a few decades ago would not have been attempted, are now relatively commonplace (interview, March 7, 2014). Witchcraft symbols have even made their way into popular fashion, most notably the pentagram, ankh, and tree of life.

Technology has aided in the development of a strong community of Witches, offered a greater availability of information, and increased the ease of interaction between members. Neopagan Witchcraft began as a mystery religion, strictly regulated, and secret. Traditionally, information was disseminated through selected books and articles that still represent a region of community knowledge. Personal interaction was once limited to one's region, residence, and environment (interview, March 8, 2014). Physical meeting places were carefully guarded and access to the community reserved for those who displayed consistent interest (Magliocco 2004:63; interview, March 8, 2014). Both the religion and the community have evolved and thrived thanks to shifts in American culture that have allowed secrecy to be, in some areas, an option rather than a
necessity. Now Witches make use of the Internet, community centers, occult shops, public festivals, classes, and any number of other forms of open social interaction to meet and exchange ideas or information.

Many of the social boundaries that were once in effect, when the religion was in its infancy, have been eroded in the face of popular interest. Witchcraft is now no longer a hidden religion. Because of this there has been "a growing similarity in practices, imagery, and language used in rituals and descriptions of mystical experiences" (Berger et al. 2003:4). As the community grows more outwardly open and visible it is safe to assume a certain level of standardization will continue to occur. The secretive nature of mystery religions will, however, prevent complete community homogeneity. In essence, what has developed is a community that is part mystery religion and part alternative spirituality. A community that is at once traditional and innovative, maintaining practices from one generation to the next and yet ever evolving.

The most prevalent divisions within the religion occur between the Traditional and Eclectic styles and between group-oriented worship and solitary practice. A Traditional Witch will often belong to a congregation known as a coven and adhere to a specific pattern of rituals and observances known by and passed down through a Tradition. This Tradition is the collected knowledge of a particular type of Witchcraft and is recorded in what is known as a Book of Shadows. These books are closely guarded and are never supposed to be viewed by an outsider (Cunningham 1999:34). An Eclectic Witch is one who operates outside the regulated practices of a Tradition and may borrow aspects from several paths to create a blend of practices. More often than not,
Eclectic Witches participate in what has come to be known as Solitary Practice, though Eclectic style Traditions have emerged (Telesco 2005:123; interview, March 7, 2014). Solitary Practice is when a Witch chooses to observe his or her religion in solitude. Many Eclectic paths eschew the hierarchy and regulated teachings of the Traditional branches and arguably follow less strict forms of social conduct. Sometimes an Eclectic Witch will have learned his or her spiritual practices through publications, intuition, or spiritual revelation. It is quite possible their only interaction with the Witchcraft community is through the Internet. Other times, an Eclectic Witch will have had a Traditional education but has, for personal reasons, decided the Traditional style no longer satisfies them.

Solitary Practice tends to be highly stylized and informed by popular authors. Numerous books, fondly regarded as Wicca/Witchcraft 101 texts, tend to be the main source of information outside websites for Solitary Practitioners and curious outsiders. Once these resources are exhausted, it is not uncommon for these individuals to develop their own personalized customs and practices. Their sense of community and social interaction, should they choose to partake, often comes from larger community events like festivals, electronic forums, and conventions. Most Witches at some point in their spiritual development have worshiped as a Solitary Practitioner, especially when first discovering and exploring Witchcraft.

A more complex level of social organization is the small group or congregation. These groups may be known as covens or working groups. Covens, traditionally between three and thirteen members, are often more permanent in nature and may continue for
many years though membership may change. Leadership is hierarchical and worship generally follows a structured format. It is common for members of a coven to be bound by ritual and promises made to one another, and form a very close and closed society. Working groups may be less permanent and are less likely to be bound by the same secrecy and oaths. Leadership may be more egalitarian and worship will follow a more Eclectic style, rather than adhering to a specific Tradition (Davy 2007:33).

A still more complex level of social interaction is the large group or organization, such as a Church or Tradition. Small groups often band together for events or causes. Multiple covens may choose to sponsor festivals, classes, public rituals, or other community events regardless of affiliation. Occasionally, as is the case with the Church of All Worlds or Covenant of the Goddess, covens and Solitary Practitioners will network through a single organization (2009; 2009). This enables them to expand their immediate community and resources. It is at this level that Witchcraft begins to function as a community rather than isolated pockets of spiritual practice. Here is where exchanges of ideas occur and where community identity begins to form. According to Davy, this is the point at which we begin to see standardization of practices and "developing religious institutions" (2007:33). It is also where Witches begin to define themselves beyond style or branch of Witchcraft. This is where we begin to see a consistent and shared folklore.

Beyond the large group are the national and international communities. This aspect of Witchcraft culture exists now primarily in the virtual world. It is an entity in and of itself wherein Witches interact with minimal concern for personal safety, national boundaries, and geographical impediments. Blogs, podcasts, networking sites, news
websites, videos, chat rooms, dating sites, and any number of other electronic services allow Witches to connect to each other and share information (interview March 8, 2014). In some ways this is where Witches express themselves most openly and vehemently, where oral tradition takes on a life of its own and where a community folklore is maintained. This is not to say that boundary maintenance is abandoned completely in favor of the free exchange of ideas. A large part of a Witch's identity is derived from their style of worship and affiliation, Traditional or Eclectic, and will always play a role in how community members interact or who they avoid interaction with. The virtual venue encourages community pride and development not only between Witches, but also among the Neopagan movement as a whole. That being said, the Witchcraft community continues to be a religious movement with "minimal state, national, or international organization" (Jensen and Thompson 2008:755). Community identity is certainly present, but community action at an international or national level is not. It remains the prerogative of local communities to enact change within their regions.

While the Witchcraft community shares a common folklore, there is no universally acknowledged religious leadership that can speak for the community as a whole. Nor is there an absolute doctrine. There are shared customs, social forms, morals, ethics, and norms. The community has leading experts, acknowledged authorities, founding members of Traditions, teachers, clergy, and celebrities, but no single individual speaks for all of Witchcraft. As a community, Witches believe in magic and spiritual power. Many individuals learn and hone skills in healing, divination, herb lore, meditation, spell casting, trance, and astral projection, among other metaphysical
abilities. A great deal of emphasis is placed on spiritual growth as well as the development of a personal relationship with the divine (interview, March 8, 2014).

**Methodology**

This study focuses largely on regional facets of American Neopagan Witchcraft. The majority of ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in the Sacramento Valley of California. In the course of my research I encountered several British Traditional Witches, Eclectic Wiccans, Solitary Practitioners, Gardnerians, members of the Fairy Tradition, and several more who declined to identify their affiliation.

My first encounter with a portion of the Sacramento community occurred when I attended an open social event referred to as Pie Night. I went in the company of a personal friend with ties to the Southern California Community. She knew of my research and invited me to come with her while she checked out local options for social interaction. I was upfront about the reasons for my attendance and interest in the community. While some were initially wary of me (and a few still keep their distance), many more were excited by the prospect of my research. I made some contacts through this weekly group and was offered advice and informational interviews. Though warm, their reception of me was still guarded and it was clear that I would have to demonstrate good intentions with open honesty and act at all times in an honorable manner.

Having grown up on the periphery of this community with Witches and Goddess-worshipers for family friends and, in later years, having several personal friends active in covens or groups in various parts of California, I was somewhat versed in the social
niceties of the Witchcraft community. It could be argued that this link to the community would grant me a partial or occasional insider status as family and friends are considered, at times, to be part or extensions of the community. After so many years of research and social interaction, I am indeed treated as a member of an extended family. My perceptions and analysis, I am certain, carry some bias. Thanks to my Neopagan friends, I knew most of the major social faux pas to avoid and was prepared to give people time to know and come to trust me. Furthermore, I was aware that I would have to be exceedingly careful of giving and keeping my word as the reputation I built would be the deciding factor between the community helping or shutting me out. This was especially important because most of the community operates on a promissory basis. One's word is taken very seriously and to demonstrate in any way a casual attitude toward breaking promises would be to lose the trust of the Sacramento community as a whole.

Initially I only attended community events in the company of those friends who are Witches, but as time passed and my list of acquaintances grew I found myself adopted by and accepted into that portion of the community that consists of friends and family on my own merits. In total I attended ten local seasonal public festivals, and was invited to participate in and help organize two open rituals. The rituals were held in a public park and consisted of around twenty Witches, their family, friends, and the hostess' neighbors. Through the people I met at these events I was also invited to attend other forms of social interaction: movie nights, pot lucks, meeting for coffee or lunch, open classes on healing, and conventions. I utilized participant observation, where possible, to see in what ways religion is displayed and belief becomes action. During these events I engaged in
informal conversations and socialized with community members. I asked questions about things I did not understand and they were happy to answer, or if they could not answer were happy to direct me to a resource that might hold the information I was looking for.

Seven formal interviews were initially conducted during the course of my research using a snowball sampling method, but while in many ways enlightening they served more as a method to direct me to further reference material. Most of the interview subjects reflected Berger's statistical community model: white, middle class, college educated, and female (2003:25-31). Though men participated in almost equal numbers at public events, only one of my interview subjects was male. All seven lived within the Central Valley of California. Three came from multi-ethnic backgrounds. Two indicated strong Hispanic influences in their cultural heritage. All but two held professional jobs. One was self-employed; another a house-wife. Four were parents or step-parents. All indicated that they had, at one point, participated in Solitary Practice. Five claimed Traditional training in some form of British Traditional Witchcraft. None were entirely open about their religious orientation in all aspects of their lives. Six indicated that they did not disclose their religious affiliation at their workplace. At every interview, favorite books were brought forth to be shared and authors suggested as established authorities on particular topics. Even in the age of technology there is no escape from a Witch's fondness for books. By the time I had conducted half of the formal interviews, it became clear that I would have to approach my research topic via another route.

It was the virtual community that informed and shaped the greatest part of this work. Participant observation has been vital to an enhanced understanding of the religion
and its followers, but one must keep in mind that the majority of ritual practices and religious observances of mystery religions happen outside the public sphere and are not available for observation. Therefore, it has been the texts and electronic articles published by Witches themselves that has shed light on the main body of community folklore. Podcasts, blogs, music, and texts provided a vast amount of data on the opinions and beliefs of American Witches. These sources also aided in identifying and compiling the major themes in Witchcraft folklore. After identifying particular myths and legends that appeared to be in wide circulation, I then returned to select informants for follow-up interviews to flesh out what I had discovered from the online community and, with their help, was able to place the folklore in a personal rather than abstract context. I discovered how folklore is used in the performance of the Witchcraft religion as well as how these stories play a role in the lives of the people I met, to see points where folklore became religion and religion became action.

Often, Witches are dismissed by the mainstream as crazy or eccentric. Certainly there are those elements within this community, just as in any other. Some Witches even appear to proudly embrace these descriptive terms as badges of non-conformity. However, much of the exoticness of Witchcraft has worn off in the years since the religion became established and wove its way into aspects of popular culture. What I found in the course of this study are individuals who live largely ordinary lives: teachers, nurses, students, wives, mothers, secretaries, husbands, fathers, office managers, customer service representatives, etc. Some are married and raising families. Others are
single. All of these people seek to invite the extraordinary into their lives and make a space for it in their spiritual practices.

While the expression of their faith may seem odd to some, threatening or dangerous to others, I am personally fascinated with and have been deeply moved by the symbolism and emotional expressions of faith I encountered. Mine is not an impartial representation, but then good anthropology does not necessarily demand a clinical approach. I have come to know these people as more than informants, as good friends and in some cases family. I was taken under the wing of community members who helped me see the world through their eyes and express the meaning inherent in their stories. I have been shown the heart of a spirituality, a religious experience in and of itself, and feel it is my duty as an anthropologist to relate as best I can the love Witches have of their religion.

**Chapter Summaries**

Chapter Two discusses the history and relationship between anthropology and the academic study of witchcraft. Introduced are various cultural approaches to, and opinions of, witches and their arts. Also portrayed, is the role academia has played in the development of the Neopagan movement and its member religions. This chapter places Neopagan Witchcraft in its developmental and historical context and lays the argument for the religion's reliance on folklore.

Chapter Three details specific themes in Witchcraft cosmology. It is my intent here to help orient and familiarize the reader to the construction of the spiritual universe
of Witchcraft. In summary, I introduce readers to some small portion of the beings Witches believe share the world with humanity. Also discussed are aspects of the philosophy of the religion that do not easily fit under a particular title or heading, but should not be dismissed or overlooked.

Chapter Four recounts the mythic origins of Neopagan Witchcraft. I discuss the creation of an historical narrative and the ways in which the Witchcraft community engage with mainstream religions. Publications and persons influential to the development of both the Neopagan movement and Witchcraft are reviewed. Here we see how, through the presentation and creation of a far reaching history, the Witchcraft community is able to style itself and claim validity as a religion.

Chapter Five explores the archetype of the witch as a common character in folklore. Offered up are examples of witch stories before and after the Christianization of Europe. The witch's role and purpose is discussed, as well as the evolution of her archetype. The change the witch has undergone from trickster figure, to scapegoat, to social threat, and finally to modern feminist icon is explored. As is the attempt by Neopagan Witches to redefine the role of the witch in popular culture and to redefine the word witch.

Chapter Six details the legend of the Burning Times and the heroic status accorded those who died in the witch hunts. The function of the legend as a means of promoting community cohesion is discussed, as is the related oral tradition of intolerance that functions as a barometer of the community's ambivalence with the mainstream.
These aspects of Witchcraft folklore reflect the community's expectations and fear of persecution from conservative aspects of society.

Chapter Seven discusses the role of ancestor veneration in Neopagan Witchcraft. I discuss the development of spiritual kinship systems which create both divisions and alliances between Witches and Traditions. Ancestor veneration and initiation as methods of social navigation and establishing power relations are discussed. Through becoming part of a spiritual kinship system, individuals gain access to a complex culture and otherwise closed societies.

Chapter Eight details the nature and function of the Gods in Neopagan Witchcraft. Detailed are the interpersonal relationships Neopagan Witches develop with the divine. Also explored is the role played by folklore in the foundation of ritual observances within the religion. The meaning of holidays, the role of deities, and sacred symbolism are all discussed.

Chapter Nine, the conclusion, summarizes the main theme of the thesis. Here I offer my parting thoughts on this work and my analysis of the function of Neopagan Witchcraft folklore. The premise of each chapter is tied together and the context of the research is once more asserted.
Chapter 2

The Anthropology of Witchcraft

The festival could have passed for a local craft fair. Had there not been religious symbols displayed openly at nearly every booth and a public ritual being haphazardly organized at a corner of the fairgrounds, it might have been mistaken for a secular event. Men and women made rounds, families played games, and children ran and danced. Often individuals stopped their window shopping to greet and hug each other [field notes, 2012].

Scholars have long been fascinated with the concept of witchcraft as a cultural superstition. The witch, as a folklore archetype, has been a staple in many cultures and continues to hold a significant place in the imagination of modern societies.

Anthropologists, in particular, have documented cultural and spiritual beliefs concerning the supernatural in numerous parts of the world. It has generally been found that where there is a belief in magic one also finds a belief in witches and witchcraft. The anthropological study of witchcraft, however, is quite different in approach and focus from the study of New Religious Movement, including Neopagan Witchcraft.

Some academics regard witchcraft as an historical anomaly while others view it as a recurring motif that reveals much about a people’s worldview. Anthropologists often regard a community's belief in witchcraft as stemming from a combination of cosmological, environmental, and social factors that culminate in a unique and localized set of cultural narratives: folklore (Guenther 1992:101). However, academics also approach the phenomena as a cross-cultural or universal superstition that manifests in localized ways. Nearly every culture harbors some concept of witchcraft.

Witchcraft is defined by anthropologists as "the use of an innate, spiritual power
to harm others" yet academics have documented instances where this definition fails to encompass a much more complex set of beliefs (Crapo 2003:102). In some societies harmful effects are not assumed to be a precondition of witchcraft. Witchcraft is instead treated as an innate power or skill that alone is neither beneficial nor harmful. The choice in how one uses that power lies with the individual (Gufler 1999:197). Traditionally, witchcraft has been differentiated from other expressions of supernatural power such as sorcery, wizardry, and shamanism. For example, witches and sorcerers may both be seen as potentially threatening individuals but each harnesses their powers through divergent methods (Evans-Pritchard 1976:13-14; Lyons 1998:345). All of this is radically different from how Neopagan Witches see their religion.

The works of many academics help to inform aspects of the Western world’s general perspective on witchcraft, building as they have on superstitions not too far removed from our daily lives, and reminding society of those things we once feared. Witchcraft folklore was not an alien concept in the West. Rather, it was imagined to be a relic, something that belonged to a less civilized past. Anthropologists did not invent it, merely recorded what was there. This folklore, grounded in the authority of scholarship, is one Neopagan Witches contend with and attempt to subvert because it colors the perception of their spirituality.

Many ethnographic studies have been done on witchcraft. Arguably, one of the most seminal was undertaken by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937). What he discovered among the Azande is still pertinent in shaping the way academia treats this particular area of study. For the Azande, witchcraft is inherent to those afflicted and exists physically as
part of the human body. The power or potency is not reliant on ritual, incantation, potions, or brews. "An act of witchcraft is a psychic act" (Evans-Pritchard 1976:1). It is dependent on the desire, will, or emotion of the witch. The Azande believe witchcraft is inherited by "unilinear descent from parent to child" (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 2). The beliefs and attitudes concerning this form of supernatural phenomena are rather apathetic until personal misfortune or death befalls an individual or family triggered by negative emotions: such as hatred, envy, or spite (Evans-Pritchard 1976:4-5,12-14).

Among the Azande and elsewhere it has been found that the belief in witchcraft meets important social functions. In cultures where there is no institutionalized system of law, accusations of witchcraft may provide individuals with a means of enforcing cultural norms and punishing derelict behavior. The belief in witchcraft might also provide a means through which social tensions can be expressed or in some cases magnified (Crapo 2003:70,102-103; Evans-Pritchard 1979:20; Kluckhohn 1944:62-63). Witchcraft might also provide the illusion of control over one’s environment or an explanation of things not understood (Lehmann 2005:252). In many societies, to cure the symptoms and effects of witchcraft is to put an end to social unrest and conflict.

In other contexts witchcraft or the threat thereof can be utilized as an equalizing force in imbalanced power relationships. For the patriarchal Mura, wives use the threat of witchcraft to negotiate access to resources their husbands control (Lyons 1998:344-345,358). Some cultural traditions, like those of the Ihanzu of Tanzania, maintain that witches can be responsible for affecting weather patterns (Sanders 2003:338,347). The Yamba of Cameroon see witchcraft as an active choice that may be used for either good
or ill (Gufler 1999:181,185-190,196).

Clyde Kluckhohn, in his study of the Navajo found witchcraft provided an important ingredient to the maintenance and operation of Navajo society. He identified several themes relating to stories of Native American witchcraft: incest, shape shifting, and misfortune. He postulated that a belief in witchcraft would thrive so long as cultural and social factors were favorable to the continuation of the superstition. That is, society must benefit in some manner from the continued existence and social transmission of witchcraft beliefs. For the individual, turning to the practice of witchcraft denotes a gain in personal power, specifically supernatural and social capital. For the community, witchcraft affords an avenue for the expression of fears and concerns that might otherwise be prohibited. Furthermore, it provides a means by which aggression, anger, and other anti-social tendencies might be acknowledged, expressed, understood, and alleviated (Kluckhohn 1944:39-42,46-50,62-63,67).

In some parts of the world, the continued belief in witches is so profound it has led to particularly violent acts. Individuals, at times entire families, have been killed in the name of fear under the guise of religious purity, community safety, or self-preservation. Among the most famous instances are the Salem witch trials in North America and the witch hunts of Western Europe. More recently, there have been reports of the hunting and execution of witches in Mozambique and Nepal (BBC 2002, 2011; Shrestha 2012).

In contrast, as part of the Neopagan movement, Witchcraft has become a religion embraced by many individuals in the Western world. These works referenced above
represent the conventional academic and aboriginal views of witchcraft. In many societies witchcraft is the only sensible interpretation of unexplained events. Where the extraordinary touches people's lives, witchcraft is assumed to have occurred. What scholars have recorded has, inadvertently, become a general consensus; a negative or fearful view of witchcraft and witches. While academics involved in socio-cultural studies comprehend the difference between the religion of Neopagan Witchcraft and the traditional folklore, the distinction is not always so clear in the minds of the general public. Assumptions about the intentionally harmful character of witchcraft are something Neopagan Witches have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to undermine. Many Witches desire their religion not only to be respected and taken seriously but to be seen as they see it: a beautiful and joyful expression of faith (interview, March 7, 2014; interview, March 8, 2014).

**Academia and the Neopagan Movement**

The Neopagan Movement has always had a close intimate relationship with anthropology. Pioneers such as Edward Burnet Tylor (2001) wrote and published theories on the development of culture and religion that helped to inspire the Neopagan movement. His theory of survivals, cultural holdovers that can illustrate aspects of humanity’s past, has gained its own foothold among Neopagans and has been used to argue for the validity of their religion (Tylor 2001:36). Moreover, Neopagan Witchcraft has drawn heavily on the writings of Mircea Eliade and his myth of "Eternal Return" (Lewis 1996:2-3).
Anthropologists, sociologists, and religious scholars now treat the Neopagan Movement with the same seriousness accorded aboriginal religions (Lewis 1996:2). This transition is due in no small part to the influence of insider anthropology and the efforts of researchers who are themselves devotees of Neopagan religions. A significant number of Neopagans possess some form of college education and a working knowledge of, if not a degree in, anthropology (Berger 1999:8-9; Berger et al. 2003:29-31). Some of these individuals have participated in or been the authors of revealing studies involving their own religions.

According to Eliade, it becomes the goal of the religious seeker to attain or forge a relationship with the divine (1987:63). This can be done in several ways: physically interacting with sacred space, ritual, and even the recreation or reenactment of sacred mysteries (Eliade 1987:63; Lewis 1996:3). Where "the sacred manifests itself in space, the real unveils itself, the world comes into existence" (Eliade 1987:63). For the practitioners of Witchcraft, ritual is performed within a circle that has become a dedicated sacred space. The Solitary Witch or a Coven cleanses and creates a space wherein they can directly interact with the Gods (Crowley 1996:41). Moreover, that sacred space becomes the focal point of magic and creation. It is a point where the spiritual and the physical become one; where prayers are said, songs sung, rituals enacted, spells cast, and words and intent have the power to affect reality. Sacred space becomes a place of communion with the source of creation.

*The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *God of the Witches* (1933), authored by Margaret Murray, have had a significant impact on the development of
Neopagan Witchcraft. In addition, the development of classical archaeology, women’s studies, and folklore studies have made significant contributions without which the mythologies Neopagan religions have been built upon would be absent or incomplete. If we did not have records of the myth cycles, if the folklore of the Greeks, Romans, Celts, Norse, and even Sumerians had never been made available by academics, there would be nothing around which the Neopagan Movement could build. Folklore is the heart of Neopaganism, but it is scholarship that has preserved it and made it available to society. There is a certain cyclical nature to this relationship. With the growing popularity and social acceptability of unconventional religions, new generations of academics take an interest in a spiritual movement their fields played a crucial role in developing. In a way, the study of New Religious Movements has taken anthropology back to its roots.

Recent scholarly works have analyzed the role of magic in Witchcraft (Berger 2005), the role of festivals in community formation (Pike 2001), and the history and development of the Neopagan Movement (Berger et al. 2003; Hutton 1999; Magliocco 2004). Time and effort has been expended attempting to explain why individuals have embraced and participated in the revival of pagan religions. An exceptional number of academic articles have been dedicated to the study of specific aspects of the Neopagan Movement. Because of this, a new type of witchcraft, Witchcraft as a religion, has been added to the annals of academic knowledge.

**Neopagan Witchcraft in a Socio-Religious Context**

Helen Berger asserts that Neopagan Witchcraft "is a marginalized religion, one
that counters the style of worship, practices, and beliefs that are common in mainline churches and synagogues" (2003:32-34,172). However, when one speaks of Witchcraft as a marginalized culture one must do so with the recognition that this is only partially true. A certain discrepancy occurs between the level of individual and community. Witchcraft has been, and continues to be, marginalized as a *religion*. Its followers, however, do not statistically fall into this category in other respects. The white educated middle class are not generally considered a marginalized segment of society. Witches live, work, and are educated within the confines and social norms of mainstream society. Individuals have the choice of openly associating with or keeping their religious affiliation secret. As such, Witchcraft as a religion and a community is arguably marginalized, but one cannot assume the same for the individuals who belong to it (Berger et al. 2003:34).

Witchcraft exists in a state of tension with the mainstream for multiple reasons. There is tension between Witches and conservative religious groups, commonly of Judeo-Christian affiliation (Robinson 2002b, 2003a, 2012a). By design Witchcraft opposes the structure of institutionalized religion, which is viewed by community members as being patriarchal and oppressive (Starhawk 1999:25-37,50,121-122; Stone 1976: 5-6). It can be said this tension is heightened by the fact that the Witchcraft community fears religious persecution. This fear, whether justified or unwarranted, is a very real and driving force within the community and adds to the development of an insider verses outsider mentality (Eilers 2003:13-16; Robinson 2003a; interview, March 8, 2014). Like other Neopagan religions Witchcraft resists the concept of modernity which mainstream
society has largely embraced. Lastly there has been a great amount of influence from counter-culture movements in the development of the Neopagan religions (Berger et al. 2003:12; Clifton 2006:98-100; Magliocco 2004:56).

Regardless of its marginalized status, Witches have been forced to either adopt or combat mainstream society’s ideas and images of their religion. If one takes Niezen’s theory that "cultural identities are stimulated by their denial" and applies this to religious communities, we see that mainstream religion then takes on the role of Niezen’s nation-state (Niezen 2003:6). While mainstream religions such as western Christianity might not deny the existence of new religious movements, they often deny the validity of said belief systems through their doctrine and the calculated utilization of language. By styling these new religious movements as evil, cultish, dangerous or immoral, mainstream religions color the perception of such religions in the public eye. In so doing, these institutions place themselves in a position to create and prescribe a particular identity to a new religious movement and its followers. The knowledge of this imposed identity carries its own power and affects the self-identity of the marginalized community which will then seek to subvert or alter this perceived identity (Nagel 1997:21,28-29,237-245; Niezen 2003:87-89). This has become a main point of contention and interaction between Witchcraft and mainstream religions.

Witchcraft is therefore a constant focus of negotiation, not only intramurally between its varying sects but also in dialectic with the Judeo-Christian religions and popular culture; it is caught up in a continual state of self-definition and reinvention. This is accomplished through a variety of means: language, music, folklore, the creation
of tradition, ritual, academic study, reinterpretation, and community interaction. As Neopagan Witchcraft insinuates itself into the greater religious community, it must engage in a dialogue with the same.

**Folklore and Identity in Neopaganism and Witchcraft**

Not unlike the world’s major mainstream religions, Neopagan Witchcraft has developed a unique mythos unto itself. Yet, the folklore that has developed is flexible enough to be individually tailored to the needs and wishes of each Tradition and Solitary Practitioner (Berger 1999:13; Magliocco 2004:3-5). In other words, one can confidently say that Witchcraft folklore is "a synthesis in time of reproduction and variation" (Sahlins 1985:ix).

The creation of folklore provides a way for Witches to both separate themselves from and engage with mainstream culture, and a means of rediscovering the lost wisdom of the past (Hutton 1999:129-131; Magliocco 2004:4-5,57-58). Even as Witches appropriate the myth cycles of numerous cultures in order to revive ancient traditions it must be kept in mind that "every reproduction of culture is an alteration" (Sahlins 1985:144). The traditions, rituals, and practices of the Neopagan community are inspired by ancient pagan religions but have been altered and in some cases invented. Therefore, folklore becomes a tool through which culture and identity are first created and then transmitted to the next generation (Hobsbawm 1993:1-14). Through the reproduction, reinterpretation, and creation of folklore the Witchcraft community engages in the process of "mytho-practice" (Sahlins 1985:145). Myths drawn from ancient cultures
become fundamental sources of spiritual identity.

The use of folklore in the process of community formation has been a well-documented political tool (Niezen 2003:1-28). Smaller populations can use mythology to create and maintain boundaries as well as cultural identity (Magliocco 2004:58). In their article *The Mindful Body*, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock illustrate how the social and political bodies exert influence over the individual (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:7-8). Each of their spheres of influence - personal, political, and social - effects the way humans comprehend the world around them (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:7-8). Communities exert pressure over their members and create a sense of social identity.

One tool used by social and political bodies alike to create and maintain social identity is folklore.

Folklore making is a well-established means by which humans organize and transmit understanding of themselves, the physical world, and their place in it. Natural phenomenon have been explained away and justified through myth over the course of the human record (Lévi-Strauss 1978:5-17). In many cultures social taboos are explained through myth. Moreover, it has been noted by many folklorists that myth has been a traditional method of passing on an understanding of history and even social relations (Lévi-Strauss 1978:42-43,62).

While critics of Neopagan Witchcraft have dismissed the religion as an unauthentic or sham tradition, it has now been understood as a vehicle through which tradition has been created and reinterpreted (Robinson 2003a, 2005a, 2005b). Witchcraft can be viewed as a folk tradition drawing on both oral and written sources. It is merely
one in a long history of religions that have attempted, purposefully or not, to reinterpret the western spiritual tradition and fit it to a particular socio-cultural context. In fact, Witchcraft can be understood in terms of folk tradition because of its link to the occult subcultures and evolution of folklore studies (Magliocco 2004:24-25).

In some schools of thought folklore was considered a synonym for both magic and witchcraft "in that its presence was considered an indicator of a magical worldview" (Magliocco 2004:56). Neopagan Witches have merely extended this assumption and made it fact. When Neopagan Witchcraft materialized it was "steeped in the academic literature on folklore and anthropology" (Magliocco 2004:56). Witches have capitalized on their religion's relationship with folklore. They have created a spiritual system that not only borrows from existing mythology, but have developed their own folkloric narrative. The Witchcraft community has thus embarked on process of identity creation through the medium of folklore.
Chapter 3

The Supernatural Landscape of Neopagan Witchcraft

She wondered through her garden, weeding as we talked, and kneeling in front of each planter bed. She explained to me how this was her way of reconnecting with the Earth every day. It grounded her and made her feel closer to the Mother Goddess. Every plant had a special meaning and potential religious use. Before we returned to the house she set a bowl of milk in the corner of the garden. When I inquired why, she explained it was for the fairies [field notes, 2011].

In the philosophical sense cosmology is a study of the origins, evolution, and order of the universe. In a religious context this will include the mythic birth of the world and the structure of a supernatural landscape. Most religions convey a worldview that in its most simplistic form consists of, but may not be limited to, the physical realm where humans live and a spiritual world wherein the deities and other supernatural beings reside. In Neopagan Witchcraft this landscape is a synthesis of multiple mythological systems combining to create a unique topography populated by beings that, in this modern age, are widely assumed to be regulated solely to the realm of imagination. Yet for practitioners of pagan faiths, seemingly fantastical creatures are beings of immense power and spiritual significance.

The force behind creation is most often perceived as an animistic and all-encompassing power which gives life or purpose to the Gods who in turn create the universe and define humanity's role therein. In most Witchcraft religions, it is the union of the Goddess of the Earth and the God of the Sun or Sky King which paves the way for life to begin. It is not unheard of, however, for the roles to be reversed and the union to be between the God of the Earth and the Sky Goddess (Comte 1991:33; Conway...
1997:122,123). Whatever the deities or gender thereof, Witchcraft embraces the common pattern of a world-birth myth wherein the divine becomes the spark of life and the Gods parents to all creation. Human beings are thus children of the Gods and owe their continued existence to the presence of these divine forces. Because of this, Witches of all Traditions believe there to be very little distinction between the sacred and profane. The world of the spirit exists both here in the physical and there in the spiritual. The other world can be contacted and crossed into at will through the practice of meditation, ritual, or other methods.

Many Neopagan spiritualities embrace the idea of a spiritual world that intersects, overlaps, and intertwines with the mundane world. The physical world is itself filled with supernatural forces and entities that have active roles in the lives of many Neopagans. Entities of myth and legend can be interacted with for good or ill. Spirits, ghosts, fairies, spirit and guides, nature beings, Elementals, Gods, and Goddesses simply add an extra dimension to the world we all share.

The Tree of Life

The world of the supernatural is referred to by many names, though there are consistently similar descriptions born out of a shared symbolic spiritual imagery (Berger et al. 2003:4). To some it is the Astral world, the Underworld, the Other World, the Unseen World, the Summerland, the Akashic Records, Fairy and many other names (Lynxfire 2005; McCoy 1999:x-xi). Some Witches subscribe to the idea that there are different layers or dimensions to reality. Still others view it as consisting of multiple, but
distinct, worlds connected through a sacred Tree of Life which is the spiritual Axis Mundi of the universe (Eliade 1987:33-35).

Arguably the most common imagery of the supernatural landscape comes from the shamanistic roots of the indigenous cultures of the Americas and Europe: the Axis Mundi. Drawn most noticeably from Northern European myth, the Tree of Life connects all worlds. At its roots is the underworld and its tallest branches connect to the upper-world or the sky realm. The physical world lies somewhere in between (Eliade 1987:33-35). The tree of life is not only symbolic of the universe but also of the Goddess, of nature, of life, and the spiritual ideal of the interconnectedness of all things physical and supernatural.

However the supernatural is perceived to be arranged or organized, an ubiquitous motif is that all humans, magically inclined or not, have the ability to access it. Some Witches utilize the Axis Mundi to travel between the worlds. In a state of trance or meditation they travel along roots and branches. Others imagine themselves passing through doorways in order to reach the spiritual world. To touch these realms is to gain access to wisdom, knowledge, and power. To travel along the Tree of Life is to connect directly to the spiritual and is, for some, a sacred practice that is integral to their religion.

**Good, Evil, and the Absence of a Devil**

No discussion of a religion's cosmology can be fully considered complete without delving into the nature of good and evil within the philosophical framework of that religion. A wide range of philosophers and theologians have tried to address both the
problem of evil, a philosophical conundrum that strives to answer the question of why evil is allowed to thrive if a benevolent God exists, and the concept of evil as a force, an entity, or an action (Calder 2013; Tooley 2012). Theodicy, a term used to "explain a contradiction or conflict associated with the existence of injustice in the world", is a vital element of most spiritual traditions (Kayes 2006:53). Therefore, I would be remiss not to address the topic here as it pertains to Neopagan Witchcraft theology. Most religions stress a particular moral code integrated in a cosmological structure of the universe. Concepts of right and wrong, a spiritual ethic, are often rationalized in relation to the manner of creation and humanity's placement in the natural and social order (Weber 2002). Ethical codes are further enforced through folktales and stories shared within a community.

There are those who equate Witchcraft, along with other Neopagan spiritualities, with Devil worship or Satanism and as such argue that these spiritual practices are inherently evil. Satanism is itself a separate religion that did indeed evolve out of similar socio-cultural movements and occult writings (Petersen 2005:423-447). However, Satan is a construct most Neopagan religions reject, an idea that falls outside of their religious framework. Most Witches answer accusations of Devil worship with the argument that they are not Christian and therefore do not worship Christian deities. But while accurate, this is an overly simplistic statement. By and large, Witches avoid the worship of negative archetypes. This does not mean, however, that the concept of evil is absent from the religion altogether (Berger et al. 2003:3-4,15,21-23; McColman 2003:104-105,150-151).
It may be easiest to comprehend if one understands that the Neopagan Witchcraft cosmological outlook is quasi-monistic rather than dualistic in nature. This does not mean that elements of dualism are not embraced, but philosophically monism is a major underlying theme within the religion. In a dualistic framework good and evil, mind and body, spiritual and physical can exist as independent and opposing forces (Robinson 2011). In a monistic cosmology, a philosophy of \textit{oneness}, such forces are considered part of the spiritual whole (Robinson 2011; Schaffer 2014; Studenberg 2010). The potential for an adversarial relationship between opposing concepts is held in check when one is considered to be part of or to contain the other.

Witchcraft subscribes to morality and ethics. As a community Witches police conduct, separating what is ethical from what is not. Unethical behavior is criticized and denounced (interview, March 8, 2014). Individuals may even be ostracized or face expulsion from the community if the transgressions are serious enough. However, their general denial of the anthropomorphic personification of evil that Satan became during the medieval renaissance is not necessarily a denial that evil exists. Nor are potentially malevolent influences absent from the supernatural landscape. There are spiritual beings believed to cause harm to individuals just as there are those whose purpose it is to help and guide. Witches do not worship Satan, but that does not mean they entirely reject the idea of what he represents (McColman 2003:143; McCoy 1999:8; Panther 2010; interview, March 7, 2014).

Those who subscribe to a Judeo-Christian worldview often view their cosmology in a dualistic light. Witchcraft encompasses elements of dualism, however, the dualistic
theology is not perceived to be between the balance of good and evil. Its approach is an all-encompassing one: monistic. To truly understand Witchcraft one must understand that evil is not generally conceived as a directed or malevolent singular force. There is no Satan or Devil, per se, though they do recognize that others conceptualize evil in such a manner. There are Witches who believe in the existence of dangerous or harmful beings, and there are some who tell personal accounts of having faced frightening creatures (Panther 2010). However, evil is more commonly recognized as existing in the world as intent. Individuals can commit it when they seek to intentionally harm each other. Suffering, pain, danger, and death all exist as part of life, part of nature, and are not necessarily equated with the idea of evil. Because Witchcraft differs from some mainstream religions in that it does not conceptualize evil as a singular entity, evil’s presence within the belief structure is perhaps not as easy to pinpoint as it is within Judeo-Christian theology (McColman 2003:104; interview March 7, 2014).

In Neopagan Witchcraft, the Gods are generally regarded as parents active in the spiritual growth of their children. One grows spiritually from experiencing all life has to offer, both the good and the bad. Natural disasters, for example, are not seen as evidence of divine malice. Personal or global tragedies are not necessarily seen as being caused by a supernatural entity whose mission it is to condemn or tempt souls. Rather, evil exists (if it is admitted to exist at all) in the intent to cause harm; to act from a place of fear, anger, or jealousy. Evil is alive in interactions between human beings that are born of hate, intolerance, and an inability to feel compassion or empathy (interview, March 7, 2014). Most Witches believe that individuals who act from a place of negativity will be
forced to face the consequences of their actions, if not in this life, than in another. This is not necessarily a form of punishment: it is seen as a chance for the soul to learn and grow (Cunningham 1999:70; RavenWolf 1997:258-259).

Arguably the highest moral edict within the Witchcraft community is Karmic Law. It is sometimes considered synonymous with the Rule of Three or the Wiccan Rede and exists almost entirely independent of affiliation or sect. This moral code of conduct is the ethical measuring stick by which actions are evaluated. Basically, one is encouraged to consider the ramifications of and possible harm caused by any action (Fisher 2002:141-143; Rabinovitch and Macdonald 2004:5; Robinso

The Karmic Law is considered part of the universal order and is ingrained in both the spiritual and physical world. It is the weighing of the heart by Maat and the driving force behind the cycle of reincarnation (Comte 1991:128; Cunningham 1999:70). The idea is that whatever energy one puts out into the universe will return magnified to its source. There is no hell, except that which the soul creates for itself (RavenWolf 1997:257). Because of this, a devil is unnecessary in the Witchcraft religion. Good and evil are not forces locked in eternal cosmic combat, but reflected in how individuals behave toward one another here on earth in our daily lives (interview, March 7, 2014).

**Spirit Guides, Guardian Spirits, and Familiars**

Beings exist in the other world, the astral plane or supernatural realm, who can cause harm and must be protected against. Some entities are said to feed off fear or negativity, to drain one's psyche and leave an individual open to disease or illness.
Others are trickster figures who cause a great deal of mischief, but no real physical harm. It is because of these beings that Witches will seek a spirit guide or guardian spirit to protect and help them when they travel into the Other World. However, the influence of the spirit guide is not limited to the astral realm. Most Witches who acknowledge a spirit guardian are in near constant contact with these beings as part of their daily lives (Makransky 2007; McColman 2003:143).

Spirit guides are an exceptionally important aspect of Witchcraft belief. These are benevolent entities who inhabit the spiritual realm and are regarded with a great deal of respect and admiration. They function as guardians and teachers, and for Solitary Practitioners may function similarly to an elder within the Traditional community. The relationship between a Witch and his or her spirit guide is individualistic. The bond that forms is a deep trusting relationship believed to last one or many lifetimes.

For the Witchcraft traditions that take on a more shamanistic bent, the assumption may be that spirit guides come in the form of animals. However, the perception of them is not limited to the pseudo-Native American folklore popular culture might draw from. One often comes into contact with spirit guides through meditation or dreams, but other methods are used by Witches (Makransky 2007). Great store is set on dream interpretation and other spiritual methods of divination. Some Witches claim to have psychic abilities that allow them to communicate with their spirit guides. However contact is achieved, the Witch and their spirit guide will form a method of communication that allows for the spirit guide to offer advice or protection, providing a connection to and source of knowledge from the supernatural world. This aspect of the
religion is as much a practice as it is a abstraction (interview, March 7, 2014).

Similar to the guardian spirit, but the subject of its own folklore, the Witches familiar is a common entity in the older folktales of witches. Most often depicted as a black cat or dog, sometimes they are considered supernatural beings that aid in spells and other magical acts. Some Witches, if they acknowledge the practice at all, will refer to a close pet as their familiar while others insist that their familiar is a spirit being. In either case, the function of a familiar is different from that of a spirit guide or guardian. In essence, they are generally considered companions and helpers. Some speculate that the folklore concerning such figures has its roots in shamanic practices (McColman 2003:74-75; Moon 2011).

**Elementals, Fairies, Ghosts, and Nature Spirits**

There are other entities generally acknowledged by Neopagan Witches to share the world with humans which are integral to the health and maintenance of nature. Some supernatural beings exist almost entirely outside of a religious framework and yet a belief in them is almost synonymous with an acceptance of the supernatural and of magic. There are debates among Neopagans as to the nature of such otherworldly beings, and at times the folklore concerning some of them can appear so entangled one scarcely knows one from another.

All Witchcraft traditions acknowledge the existence of beings known as Elementals. They are the anthropomorphic personifications of natural elements. When one considers that Neopagan Witchcraft is a nature based spirituality it is not hard to
understand why such creatures would be considered objects of veneration and respect. Different types of Witches will interact with, or show reverence to, these beings in distinctive, often ritualized, ways.

Elementals are not gods and are considered far older by some. Others attribute races of supernatural beings to each element. These races are then considered the astral embodiment of said element. Still others claim certain types of faeries fall under the jurisdiction or rule of the Elementals. The most common four invoked are Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. Some Witches leave offerings to the Elementals, others may even keep shrines to them in their homes or yards. Their natures are considered both potentially destructive and life-affirming. Fire both consumes and brings warmth. Water refreshes, but can also drown. Their symbols are almost always utilized in magical acts and are consistently invoked in the creation of ritual space. Indeed they are forces of the natural world, wild, unpredictable, mysterious, and more primal in nature than the Gods, but necessary for life (McCoy 1999:304; Van Cleve 2012).

Fairies and Nature Spirits, sometimes considered one and the same, may be easily though cautiously interacted with. Most Witches desire to commune with nature and some believe they are better able to do so by seeking the favor of these beings. It is believed by some Witches that such beings inhabit trees, forests, stones, mountains, rivers and all manner of natural phenomenon. Those who specialize in healing arts, work with holistic medicine, garden, or work in some fashion with herbs or stones might seek the blessings or aid of Fairies or Nature Spirits. Libations and offerings are sometimes left in places where Witches claim to have interacted with one of these creatures. I have been
told by more than one Witch that they leave offerings to such beings in their gardens in the hope that they will help the plants thrive and protect the land.

Yet, while much of the folklore concerning these two types of supernatural beings overlaps there are some points on which human interaction with one or the other diverges. For instance, there are times and circumstances when a Witch might seek to banish a Faerie or bar it from a particular space, especially if the Faerie is considered a mischievous force. To my knowledge, such an act is never attempted with a Nature Spirit. The latter are considered tied to the physical realm, and the well-being of an ecosystem: such as a pond, a river, or a forest, is sometimes believed to rely on their presence. Fairies tend to be more closely bound to particular folkloric tradition in which procedures for interacting with them are culturally prescribed. Nature Spirits seem to almost transcend cultural or national limitations. Furthermore, Witchcraft folklore acknowledges that Faeries are not always kind and have the ability to cause a great deal of mischief to those who show them disrespect or otherwise attract their attention. Neopagan Witches have adopted many folk traditions for appeasing these creatures, showing respect, or protecting oneself and one's family from their ire. This does not appear to be as much the case with Nature Spirits (McCoy 1999:8-9).

Ghosts are another form of spiritual being Neopagan Witches hold to inhabit the world and interact with humans. Two of the solar holidays in the Witches' calendar mark times in the year when what is known as the Veil Between the Worlds, an unseen boundary between the physical and non-physical, is thin enough for easy communication with the dead (Cunningham 1999:65-68). One of these is famously known as Halloween,
though the belief that the ancestors can interact with and interfere in the lives of humans is not limited to only two days of the year. Still, there is no actual prescribed tenet of faith concerning ghosts. While the majority of Witches may very well believe in their existence and the possibility of real hauntings, the most prevalent religious belief concerning death among Neopagan Witches is that of reincarnation (RavenWolf 1997:257-259).

**The Summerland**

The imagery and ideal of the afterlife are influenced in large part by the myth cycle and pantheon embraced by a given Witch, although the Witchcraft community collectively acknowledges the existence of some form of afterlife and embraces the philosophy of reincarnation (RavenWolf 1997:257-259). Individuals are left to fill in the details in whatever way most comforts them. The Summerland is one of the more common names for the afterlife. Some might equate it with the Land of the Dead or the Underworld though they are also considered to be different stops along the journey to rebirth (interview, March 7, 2014).

Witches believe that after death the soul makes the journey to the Summerland where it can rest and reconnect with loved ones. Here is where the soul can review the records of all its lives (interview, March 7, 2014). Some believe souls descend into the afterlife through the roots of the Tree of Life. Others say it is through a cave that leads into the heart of the earth. Still others imagine a spiritual gateway or the sacred symbol of the cauldron of life and death. However they arrive, the dead are said to return to the
Goddess Mother to await rebirth. Death is part of life and when a Witch's soul returns to its origin point it is accepted "with grace as [the Goddess's] final gift" (Glory and G'Zell 1996:26).

In Neopaganism there are many deities associated with the Underworld, death, and rebirth. More often than not they are tightly bound to a resurrection god or rebirth myth. Osiris, Hades, Hel, Hecate, Ereshkagal; all are considered gate keepers between death and rebirth (Conway 1997:122,147,173,243). These are not considered gentle aspects of the Gods. This is not the domain of the nurturing mother or the protective father. These are deities who are believed to force one to confront his or her fears, who demand one overcome and learn hard lessons. They hold sacred knowledge and wisdom for those brave and strong enough to pass their tests. Such knowledge cannot be given away. If it were it, would hold no meaning. Spiritual or sacred knowledge must be earned, often through suffering. These deities are approached with caution and reverence. They are neither frivolous nor patient, cruel nor kind. They represent the inevitable and inescapable and are known collectively as Dark Gods or Goddesses. They are the manifestation of the final mystery and wait in the darkness human beings instinctively fear. Yet, at the same time, to die is to pass through their keeping and to return to the cosmic womb of the loving Mother. To once more become a child and be nurtured and strengthened until one is born again (Crowley 1996:148-149).
Chapter 4
The Old Religion in a New Age

The drums counted out a beat as participants held ribbons and intricately wove two circles of dancers in and out around the Maypole. As I watched another observer explained that the dance was a traditional custom and symbolized the union of the sacred feminine and masculine. The ribbons created a woven pattern as the dancers were drawn closer and closer to the pole until movement was no longer possible [field notes, 2012].

Many pagan authors, individuals who are regarded as authorities and elders within the community, have referred to Witchcraft as "perhaps the oldest religion extant in the West" (Starhawk 1999:26). Some facets of the Witchcraft community stress that their religion continues in unbroken lineages passed down from teacher to initiate since before the witch trials of Western Europe. Others maintain that Neopagan Witchcraft is a recent development. Most, however, embrace a mixture of both stances and reconcile the dichotomy of being a part of a newly developed ancient religion through the creation of an historic narrative.

Modern Witches have incorporated mythology into their own developing folklore to create a unique community history and origin mythos (McColman 2003:148). This historical narrative can be divided into several parts. First, is the documented history of Neopaganism and Neopagan Witchcraft recorded by academics researching New Religious Movements. The recent history is not under dispute; it is a foundation to which folklore has been added. This folklore consists not only of personal stories, how individuals Witches came to be part of the community – sometimes referred to as a coming home story – but also the development of each Tradition and style of worship.
Reaching beyond this oral tradition is the origin tale of Witchcraft, which is for all intents and purposes, a history inspired by interpretations of the archaeological record and academic publications. This is not to say that the conclusions Witches have drawn fall in line with academic theories, rather that it is a creative application of scholarship. Last is the origin myth, in this case we are utilizing myth in its academic sense denoting a sacred story, which lies at the spiritual heart of this religion. All these aspects combine to make up the history of Witchcraft; the historical narrative of the Old Religion.

The Invention of Historical Narrative

A shared history and explanation of where a community comes from is vital to the cohesion and pride of any society. In such instances where a community’s pedigree is too brief or new, be it religious or secular, individuals will often seek out ways to create or add to their history. Cognitively we can look back to important events in the development of the Neopagan Movement: important publications, the documented formation or disbanding of organizations, the establishment of Traditions, and the deaths or initiations of figureheads. We can research their chronology and see the development in the documents recorded. History is defined by dates and recent memory. However, there are times when history has little to do with facts. The historic narrative is a thing humans create and conveniently edit. The Judeo-Christian religions have holy texts, which many millions of believers consider factual accounts, a recorded history of their people and religion. The bible beautifully illustrates how history and myth begin to blur together to form an origin narrative. Neopagan Witches do not have a bible to draw
from, but they do have an oral history, portions of which have been published, all of which continues to be taught and passed down.

In the course of my research I recall attending a private social event at which I took part in an informal discussion about the history of Witchcraft. When the invitation had been issued it was described to me as a Pagan friendly potluck. After dinner, several of us sat around a table in the hostess' back yard. The conversation had covered several topics in the course of the evening while we watched the children laughing and running wildly. Eventually the discussion turned to community history and I asked the Witches with whom I was sitting about the history of their religion. One asked me if I was familiar with three texts in particular, *The Spiral Dance* (Starhawk 1999), *Triumph of the Moon* (Hutton 1999), and *When God Was a Woman* (Stone 1976). For her, those texts held the major themes of Witchcraft history and, in her view, by reading them I would have all the necessary elements at my fingertips. The man sitting beside her snorted at the mention of Starhawk’s work and a debate began in earnest between the two on the merits of the work and author. The third Witch at the table smiled, turned to me and offered her own interpretation. She told me how excited the community had been when those works had first been published and how deeply disappointed they were when much of the pseudo-scholarship had been debunked. The fantasy and romance of The Old Religion had been appealing to many. We glanced at our companions still engaged in spirited discussions. Clearly for some it still was.

According to Starhawk, Witchcraft began during the decline of the last ice age when small human populations followed migrating herds. Individuals who were believed
to have the ability to influence the hunt or intercede with supernatural forces on behalf of the people became integral to these migrating societies (Starhawk 1999:27). Starhawk's history of Witchcraft appears to be an incomplete mishmash of random theories on the evolution of religion, society, and shamanism thrown together with a liberal interpretation of the archaeological record without actual reference to the context of those theories. However, where she diverges completely from her attempt to cloak her history in the fruits of academia is with her assertion that this is the root of Neopagan Witchcraft. Certainly, it has been hypothesized that all spirituality has a point of origin, a point in time at which its appearance in the human record is recognized as an important evolutionary milestone in the social development of hominids. It is generally accepted that shamanistic or animistic religions are the evolutionary precursors to modern religions (Pals 1996:16).

Some of the oldest known evidence of ritual and symbolic behavior in human beings are burials that date back to the Paleolithic (Narr and Auer 1964:1-2). The evidence of inhumation has led scholars to surmise a burgeoning spiritual system which they coined the *cult of the dead*. Its appearance in the archaeological record denotes a cultural evolution from a purely utilitarian lifestyle (Smirnov 1989:200-202). Mortuary practices were hailed as potential evidence of an early form of religion and a potentially sophisticated understanding of life and death.

To continue with Starhawk's narrative, people gifted with spiritual power passed down their talents to the next generation. One assumes she means this was done orally, though Starhawk is not clear about this. She claims a religious system developed around
these gifted individuals. The men worshiped the God of the Hunt while women worshiped in caves and places associated with the Great Mother Goddess (Starhawk 1999:27). Many people, some of them academics, have used the discovery of archeological artifacts similar to the so-called Venus figurines of the upper-Paleolithic as proof of a widespread goddess worshiping cult (Gimbutas 2001; McCoid and McDermott 1996:319-320; Stone 1976:13). Feminine activists and Neopagan authors latched on to these theories and developed a historical narrative around them.

According to Starhawk, as time passed people moved on to what would become North America while the rest remained in what would later be known as Europe (1999:28). The traditions diverged. Society developed further. Shamans and Priestesses combined their skills and taught each other sacred knowledge. In this way "the first covens were formed" (Starhawk 1999:28). More time passed and civilization evolved. With the advent of agriculture and the domestication of animals, the God of the hunt was transformed into a deity of grain, as was his feminine counterpart. There was trade of goods and ideas. Priestesses learned the power that was inherent in the earth. They learned the magic of energy and stones. The year became marked and divided into the eight Sabbats celebrated by contemporary Pagans. Knowledge of the world, of both science and the mysteries, accumulated. Then the Indo-Europeans came with deities of war and the Goddess worshipers were driven out (Eisler 1987:44; Stone 1976:62-63). They retreated to the hills and the mountains where they became known as the Picts, Pixies, and Fairies (Starhawk 1999:26-29).

Starhawk’s version of the development of Witchcraft is not necessarily
uncommon or even outlandish within Neopaganism, as I witnessed myself, though perhaps it is more detailed than most. At the time she authored her popular work, feminism and the Women's Movement had taken academia by storm. Many theories were advanced about warlike patriarchal cultures overturning peaceful goddess-worshiping matriarchal cultures (Eisler 1987:44; Stone 1976:62-63). In a very real way these theories justified the attitudes and actions of Neopagans when they denounced mainstream religions and turned to a new kind of worship.

Other prominent authors have associated Wicca or Witchcraft with shamanism, claiming a common origin for both religious systems. They tell their readers Shamanism was the first religion or that "shamans were the first humans with [spiritual] knowledge" and that Witchcraft evolved from European shamanism (Cunningham 1999:3). This is a sentiment I have personally heard informally expressed on several occasions. The first time this occurred was while I attended a community social event. One of the women present that night had taken it upon herself to educate we young people on the history of her religion. She told our group of four that Witchcraft had come out of early shamanic traditions. There was no mistaking her pride in this sentiment, nor the fact that she was adamant in the truth of her assertions, though she would never consider herself a Shaman.

Providing a history steeped in myth helps to legitimize Witchcraft as a valid and serious religion rather than, as some view it, a marginalized gathering of crazy or morally dangerous people (Adler 1986:5-6). Having a pedigree that purportedly reaches farther than the mainstream religions supplies a source of authenticity and allows a new religious movement to interact on a more even footing with other religious communities.
Witchcraft has created its own mythic origins, adapted and generated traditions to validate itself and subvert questions of its legitimacy. In aligning itself with an idea of shamanism, the community has attempted to "establish continuity with a suitable historic past" (Hobsbawm 1993:1). Moreover, for Witches this origin mythos provides roots, a sense of belonging, and something to be proud of. Members of any Tradition, no matter how divergent, can point to this shared history, claim it as their own and say we are all part of this, we all share in this. We are witches. We are a community. Neopagan Witches have wrapped both themselves and their spirituality in the mystique of the Old Religion.

Margaret Murray, Gerald Gardner, and the Old Religion

Witchcraft owes a great deal of the creation of its historic narrative to select publications. Perhaps one of the most influential works on the subject is a book written by Egyptologist Margaret Murray titled the *Witch-Cult of Western Europe*. Published in 1921, Murray’s anthropological study supposedly shed light on the existence of a previously overlooked religion that had survived the conversion to Christianity. Murray felt it was "contrary to all experience that a cult should die out and leave no trace immediately on the introduction of a new religion" (Murray 1921:19). To her mind this fertility cult was either responsible for or camouflaged by the thriving European witchcraft folklore. It was Murray’s assertion that in discounting the more fantastical tales of magical acts the spiritual beliefs and practices of the religion could be understood and finally recorded. Supposedly the evidence of the existence of a pre-Christian fertility
cult lay in historical documentation such as trial records, contemporary histories, confessions, and eyewitness reports (Murray 1921:9-12). Murray was hardly the only academic to devote time to the study of Medieval fertility cults and their association with witchcraft belief. Carlo Ginzburg also made a notable addition to this body of knowledge with his work *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (2013). Murray’s methodology and conclusions have since been called into question by the academic community (Simpson 1994:89-96). However, at the time of its publication the work gained wide public acceptance.

The Dianic cult, Murray’s term for her fertility religion, was comprised mostly of women who were led by a priest in the guise of a fertility God. They were said to have worshiped in small localized groups known as covens, which numbered thirteen members. The covens themselves possibly served as a kind of priesthood to a geographical area that might have included multiple villages. Covens met on Esbats and Sabbats; the Esbats being primarily for the practice of magic and the Sabbats for religious ceremony. It was the coven that performed the rites of the Esbats while entire villages may have attended the Sabbat festivals. Murray saw the Dianic cult as being highly organized with established festivals where feasting, dancing, chanting, and paying homage to the God were important ritual aspects. The timing of said festivals suggested to Murray an unbroken spiritual lineage that could be traced back to the development of agriculture. The adherents of this Dianic cult were, in Murray’s mind, the reality behind the medieval mythology of witches and fairies that was abundant in Western Europe (Murray 1921:12-17, 97-168, 190, 194, 238-239).
The witches' God was a dualistic deity, having both human and animal form. He was the central figure of the Witch-Cult. The Goddess, though present, appeared to have had little or no relevance. Neopagan Witchcraft has dramatically altered this pattern, bringing the feminine divine into prominence. While Murray gives a nod to her academic peers on the subject of the cult of the Great-Mother Goddess, one theory of Neolithic religions, it is clear that she viewed the male deity as having greater importance in her Dianic cult (Murray 1921:13). It is to their God that the Witches give thanks for food, harvest, and the fertility of animals and plants. It was also this God who would be sacrificed for the continued fertility of land and populace (Murray 1921:11-12,28-29,60).

As a folklorist, Murray was certainly familiar with the motif of the dying/resurrecting god and to her mind it was this male deity who was incorrectly equated with Satan by the medieval Christian church (Murray 1921:28).

The image Murray paints of the religion of the witches is that of joyful and celebratory worship under siege by a new religion. To her, the witches were persecuted victims of the growing power of the Christian church and perhaps there are some factions of the Neopagan Witchcraft community that have not moved far beyond this perception (interview, March 7, 2014). It was Murray's assertion that historians had too quickly dismissed the fear of witchcraft and witches as mass hysteria (1921:9-12). But she also dismissed the prevalent witch folklore of the region as a smokescreen. She felt that folklore was partially responsible for masking the existence of a religious survival and further equated this to the pre-Christian religions of Britain and mainland Western Europe, something Neopaganism has continued to do. Furthermore, Murray assumed
that the victims of what was essentially the Protestant Reformation were members of the Dianic cult rather than members of rival Christian sects.

Murray’s status as an academic authority led to a wide acceptance of her reinterpretation of history (Simpson 1994:89). The sensationalism served to alter popular culture’s view of the witch trials. Real witches, or rather adherents to pre-Christian paganism, had been hunted by the Christian church. But these witches were not the antiquated embodiment of witchcraft folklore. Folklore and interrogations had merely made unclear the evidence that survivals of pagan culture had been extant up to that point. Murray never intended for her work to hint at the possibility of the witch-cult having survived to the present, as her view was that of an archaeologist having found evidence of a past culture. However, Murray’s books detailing the rituals and practices of her Dianic cult proved to inspire several individuals, including Gerald Gardner (Jencson 1989:2-4; Simpson 1994:89-96).

Gerald Gardner is largely "credited with the invention of modern Neo-Pagan Witchcraft" (Magliocco 2004:48). Gardner himself had been heavily influenced by a personal interest in anthropological writings, exposure to other cultures, and the culture of esotericism and British occultism. He claimed to have encountered a woman he called Old Dorothy. Old Dorothy trained and initiated Gardner into a coven that "practiced an ancient pre-Christian religion" (Magliocco 2004:50). Gardner then published several works which attempted to "contextualize the Witch religions based on survivalist theories" (Magliocco 2004:50). It was Gardner’s assertion that the pre-Christian fertility cult traced back to an ancient culture that later inspired the fairy folklore. His desire was
to record the practices and preserve the knowledge of what he believed to be an endangered religion. In so doing he not only preserved Witchcraft, but also opened the way for it to grow as a religion.

The authenticity of Gardner’s initiatory lineage has been called into question by academics and members of the Neopagan community alike. Critics hold that he invented much of what he claimed to have discovered and recorded. However, given that the publication dates of some Witchcraft literature predate Gardner’s works, the truth may be somewhere in between. That said, Gardner did popularize Witchcraft and Wicca. By the 1950s Gardner had begun his own coven. His students were encouraged to copy his ritual practices and to make their own additions. These students would then pass on Gardner’s Tradition, embellished with their own alterations (Magliocco 2004:51-54). In this way Neopagan Witchcraft began to evolve. The initial structure of the original Gardnerian covens were highly similar in form to Murray’s depictions of the witch-cult. In some circles, it is believed that Gardner was influenced more by Murray’s publications than initiation and instruction by hereditary Witches. This, however, has not lessened the considerable impact he has had on Witchcraft.

**The Old Religion and New Religious Movement**

Initially Gardner’s claims provided a burgeoning religious movement with a sense of legitimacy and history. A revival of pre-Christian pagan spiritual traditions might be met with skepticism by the mainstream, but revealing an existing one that had survived undetected for generations had already been met with approval thanks to the influence of
Murray in mainstream society. Furthermore, it gave what would later become Wicca and other Witchcraft Traditions a sense of mystery, identity, and tradition. There are still those among the Neopagan community who wholeheartedly accept Gardner’s, Murray’s, and Starhawk’s claims (interview, March 7, 2014). They genuinely believe they are adherents to an unbroken spiritual tradition that has survived persecution with secrecy intact. In fact this idea is so ingrained within Witchcraft, even though the reality of it is openly disputed within the community by other Witches, that the religion is still regarded as the Old Religion. Many practitioners openly recognize this reinterpretation of history as a "presentation of symbol and metaphor as history in the attempt to provide greater historical depth for what is essentially myth" (Flaherty 1991:152-153).

While much in dispute, the story of Gardner’s initiation and the works of Margaret Murray mark the beginning of Neopagan Witchcraft as something distinct from western occultism and the New Age. Though it was far from Murray’s aim to provide the inspiration for a new religious movement, that is essentially what occurred. Murray’s research not only provided academic legitimacy but a working manual: a primer for the religion. This, combined with the story of Gardner’s initiation, deepened assumptions about an unbroken historical line extending from a time when the religion supposedly thrived to the present. The mythos of the Old Religion is a method of gaining authenticity in the eyes of the general public. By establishing that the Craft, another term for Witchcraft, is far older than monotheism, the Neopagan religions feel they can put an end to attacks on the validity of their faith (McColman 2003:149-149). The fact that these assertions are now questioned does not lessen the importance they hold in
Witchcraft folklore. It has become part of the oral tradition, textual records and origin mythos. Questioned or not, doubted or not, people still read the books. They still tell the stories. It is part of Witchcraft's history now.

It may seem a conflicting dichotomy to non-community members. How can a religion both predate Judeo-Christianity and be a new religious movement? We have previously established that Witchcraft began in the mid to late 1920s. This is a fact the majority of Neopagan Witches do not dispute. Yet the Craft is still to them the Old Religion and spoken of in the same deferential reverence one might hear the old ways or the old country mentioned by previous generations. To Neopagan Witches, their religious traditions are equally a modern innovation and ancient religious practice. The Old Religion has meaning; it is tradition, a link to ancestral roots, an inheritance from the past, and a mildly cynical bid for authenticity. These can all be true because Witchcraft as a religion is a recent development, but as a spiritual tradition draws upon the mythology and spiritual beliefs of pre-Christian religions (McColman 2003:149). While Neopagans Witches are creating new religious practices and traditions, they also consider themselves to be the spiritual descendants and inheritors of the Old Religion.
Chapter 5

Rewriting the Archetype of the Witch

I sat watching the public circle take shape. Little kids made their way toward the gathering to find out what was going on, their parents following close behind. When the chanting died down a little voice asked in a loud whisper where the pointy hats were. The ritual participants dissolved into laughter [field notes, 2010].

As practitioners of a non-mainstream religious faith, members of the Witchcraft community often feel they and their beliefs are misunderstood or feared. While some of this ennui is a remnant of the religion’s early reception, some is not. As Witchcraft and Wicca become more visible in the media, Witches are forced at times to confront unflattering characterizations of who and what they are. Whether it be a dismissive attitude, an assumption that Neopagan Witches are harmlessly delusional, or a much more adamant and vocal attack on Witchcraft as a religion, they must deal with the socio-religious implications that accompany the term witchcraft.

Neopagan Witches have little in common with their fairytale counterparts, yet they cannot escape being associated with hundreds of years of stories and folktales related to witchcraft. They are linked forever by a word. Those who firmly subscribe to the opinion that witchcraft is evil have launched what may be construed as campaigns of intolerance against spiritual practices they perceive to be immoral. In response to these attacks, Witches have utilized folklore and oral tradition not only as a community rallying point, but as a method of defense. They have accomplished this in two ways: first, by directly attempting to deconstruct the Christian construct of the witch and second, by raising victims of religious persecution to the level of cultural heroes. Witches can thus
utilize their experiences as cautionary tales. In this way, they style the victim and align themselves with the persecuted minority.

By attempting to reinterpret existing witch folklore, Neopagan Witches are able to enter into a dialogue with the mainstream. In so doing, they are able to engage in the creation of a new witch archetype, one with fewer negative connotations than her traditional counterpart, and less harmful to the reputation of their community. Witches, as a community, are highly sensitive to the longstanding stereotypes of witches, real or imagined, and how this flavors the general public’s reaction to their religion. Because much Western witch folklore has been influenced by Christianity, transforming the witch from evil villain to feminist icon allows Neopagan Witches to change mainstream perception of their spirituality. In this way, they also hope to circumvent potential threats to the expression of their religious freedom.

The Witch in Traditional Folklore

The witch is a well-known archetype universally recognized in late modern society. As discussed earlier, the traditional witch of Euro-American folklore is mainly styled as female. She is often described as old, ugly, and dressed in dark colors. Perhaps one of the most notable depictions of the witch as thus is in the first act of Macbeth, in Shakespeare's weird sisters (1997:1045-1047). In folkloric cycles, the witch often possesses a unique or extraordinary item and may have some form of physical deformity or supernatural trait (Ivanits 2006:220). The witch is often portrayed as a foil, or the antagonist, which the hero must confront or outwit in order to attain the desired end.
Unlike modern spins on the archetype, she is rarely depicted as a hero in traditional folklore. Often her behavior or motives appear chaotic, even verging on unfathomable. She stands outside the social stratigraphy and possesses knowledge of the supernatural. This otherworldly knowledge is both what separates her from society and what establishes her as an object of terror. Her role and meaning in earlier forms of Western folklore is multifaceted. She is a wildly complex and fascinating cultural construct.

In some folktales, the behavior of the witch in question may seem to be without motive. This may be emblematic of the witch’s role as scapegoat for otherwise inexplicable misfortune (Evans-Pritchard 1976:18; Ragan 1998:27-28). This aspect of the witch’s role is one that becomes a centralized element to the archetype during and after the Christianization of Europe. It is also one aspect of the witch stereotype Neopagan Witches have found most difficult to shake. Prior to Christianization, which began around the 7th century in the British Isles, the witch might more commonly serve as a trickster or donor figure, a character in folklore that holds a key element or object vital to the completion of the hero's quest (Ivanits 2006:220). This is not to say that she is in any way styled as less dangerous or chaotic, but rather that the assumption of evil intent is muted and the polarizing of witchcraft with Christianity is altogether absent.

In many folktales the witch has something precious in her keeping. This prize may be a magical object or the virginal maiden, something which then becomes an emblem of the hero’s worth and prowess once he obtains it. In the Maid of the North, a story out of the Finnish Kalevala, Louhi is a witch who lives in the northern country with her daughter the Maid. Two heroes Vaina and Ilmarian both wish to marry her and must
each try to win Louhi’s favor. Ilmarian overcomes the trials set before him with the advice of the Maid. Louhi is then forced to give her blessing to the union (Phelps 1981:1-24). In this case the witch character is not a villain. While she tricks, cajoles, and even manipulates for personal gain she makes no attempt to permanently harm the heroes. The trials are in and of themselves dangerous, but not impossible for a true hero to accomplish. Another tale that shares similar elements is Jason and the Golden Fleece, wherein the sorceress-witch Medea makes it possible through her magic and knowledge for the hero to accomplish his great deed. Another figure of classical myth, Odysseus, also crossed paths with a sorceress-witch, Circe. Her island was one of his many stops on his journey home (Powell 2004:484,292).

In the role of trickster the witch may be malevolent, benevolent, or morally ambiguous. In some tales the characters are tricked through their own greed, ignorance, or stupidity. They appear in the general tenor of the narrative to deserve their punishment (Douglas and Keding 2005:90-91). In other instances the witch acts with the deliberate intent to deceive and thus cheats the hero out of his or her happy ending.

Arguably the most well-known and prolific witch character is the Slavic Baba Yaga, sometimes referred to as the witch-mother. She is an entity now adopted by some Neopagan Witches as a Goddess or Crone figure. For some she is the epitome of a Dark Goddess (Boudicca 2011; Lawless 2010). Baba Yaga figures prominently in numerous folktales. She is a complex character whose role often varies, occasionally within the same story. The witch-mother is not always a villain though she often plays the role of antagonist. In many stories she is deliberately sought out by the hero in order to obtain
wisdom or an object with which to complete a quest. Sometimes she appears as an obstacle to the hero’s desired goal and other times she exists in an ambiguous position within the storyline (Haney 2006:313-314; Ivanits 2006:220). Seeking the witch’s aid is always dangerous and the hero is certain to be forever changed by the encounter.

In the story of Maria Morevna, the hero goes to the Baba Yaga in order to save his wife from an evil wizard. In exchange for completing a task Baba Yaga agrees to reward him with a special colt, but if he should fail his life would be forfeit. This is a high price but the hero has the option of not undergoing the trial. The tasks are not easy, but due to his goodness of character the hero succeeds in spite of Baba Yaga’s meddling (Phelps 1981:112-117). In this particular story Baba Yaga is certainly portrayed as dangerous and unpredictable but not necessarily evil. She is what folklorists would classify as a donor (Ivanits 2006:220). Before she will donate the much needed object to our protagonist she first sets the hero impossible tasks no ordinary human could achieve. In overcoming Baba Yaga’s trials the hero displays his heroic status. He proves himself worthy of a gift from the supernatural and deserving of the happy ending.

Even in the Bible witches appear as keepers of mysterious, albeit forbidden, knowledge. When Saul wishes to consult with the spirit of the prophet Samuel, he seeks the aid of the witch of Endor. The medium purportedly summons or raises Samuel’s ghost, disturbing his rest, and Saul is given a dire prediction for his future. In consulting with the dead, and asking for the intervention of the witch, Saul knowingly commits a serious sin (Bar 2011:99; Blumenthal 2013:104).

As an archetype and motif, the witch of traditional folklore appears to embody the
trial or ordeal a hero must undertake and survive in order to return, changed, to the mundane world. She seems to function as a gatekeeper to knowledge or victory. While some folktales portray the witch as a villain, we see from some of these examples that the witch often represents something much more complex. Her appearance within a folktale is often accompanied by motifs pertaining to the supernatural: physical deformities, spectacular objects or animals, or knowledge beyond what others around her possess.

A wealth of witch folklore existed in Europe prior to the witch trials that popularized and solidified the folkloric theme of witch as villain. This is not to say that the witch as traditional folklore figure was only thereafter debased and transformed into a malevolent creature; such was always an aspect of the archetype. However, once infected with religious fervor she was rendered into something much more one-dimensional.

**A Brief History of the Witch Trials**

The historical anomaly that gave rise to the witch trials was not a single event. It was a product of complex social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors that over time culminated in outbursts of social upheaval and violence in multiple places and times. When I speak of the witch trials, I am referencing a series of persecutions that span a large swath of time and numerous regions. It is not my intent to oversimplify something so intricate and multifaceted. However, it is important to understand some part of the history in order to understand and contextualize what Neopagan Witches have made of it.

Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries Europe was sporadically
consumed by war, disease, religious persecution, and fear (Cawthorne 2004:8; Robinson 2011). During this time, and before, the belief in witches was common in folklore and widespread across European cultures. Witchcraft was perceived to be very real and an ever present danger. To the average person, the idea of people flying through the air and dancing naked in the dark was both plausible and rational (Cawthorne 2004:9; Klaits 1985:1; Orion 1995:46; Schoeneman 1992:350).

Initially, the Catholic Church discouraged such superstitious ideas. Religious authorities maintained that there was no such thing as witches, that they could not and did not exist. However, over time this attitude changed dramatically. It became heresy not to believe in witches. As they embraced the folklore, the Church accepted the underlying fears of their followers. In the year 1484 Pope Innocent VIII issued his bull, or proclamation, *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus*, which "officially recognized witchcraft as a problem and a threat" (Schoeneman 1992:352). There were several kinds of witchcraft and many ways in which such supernatural power might manifest. Some types of witchcraft were considered more dangerous than others, such as diabolical witchcraft, wherein the witch was believed to have made a pact with the Devil and participated in the worship of Satan (Nenonen 2012:72).

The witch trials began as a war on heresy, waged by the Catholic Church largely against dissenting minorities. Anyone who questioned the authority of the Church, or in some regions the ruling elite, was branded a heretic. The circumstances under which these accusations and trials took place often entailed great political upheaval and social change. People were frightened and in their fear turned against one another. The trials
and hunts themselves were a calculated reaction to cultural stimuli (Cawthorne 2004:10; Klaits 1985:17, 21; Schoeneman 1992:339). "Every time a major clash between Protestant and Catholic forces (and between rival Protestant forces) occurred, the witch hunts flared up with renewed intensity" (Schoeneman 1992:353). Each conflicting Christian sect believed the others to be spreading dangerous and corrupting dogma. Witches, members of minority sects, were perceived as perverting the word of God. In order to protect the community and their positions of power, religious authorities knew only one way to react: to remove the threat.

What had originally begun as a struggle against heresy grew into a perceived confrontation between the forces of good and evil, a battle between the servants of the devil and the followers of the Church. "To the ancient folk image of the witch as evil sorceress … intellectual and political elites added the witch’s even more threatening reputation as an enemy of God" (Klaits 1985:3). The witch of folklore was thus transformed into "the devil’s servant, a partner in his universal war against all that was good in the world" (Klaits 1985:2). The witch became a foe to be vanquished and wiped from the earth. In short, "The educated European minority created [a] demonic image of the witch when it associated harmful magic with religious dissent or heresy" (Klaits 1985:3).

Once the shift in witchcraft folklore not only took hold, but was also enforced by law and doctrine, things quickly accelerated. Scripture became a justification for the hunting and execution of convicted witches and heretics (Robinson 2003b). Anyone could be accused of witchcraft. Feeble evidence and witness accounts were all that was
required to begin an investigation into a person's guilt. Often times "the appearance or dress of a person was sufficient for an accusation. In other cases the antisocial behavior or negative reputation of a suspect could result in him or her being branded a witch" (Valletta 2000:130). The majority of those accused, tortured, convicted, and executed were women; estimates conclude that "[about] four out of five witch suspects were females," but men also found themselves targets for the fears and suspicions of those around them (Klaits 1985:5).

Accusations were followed by trials to determine a person's guilt. Witness testimonies were allowed, falling under two categories: accusers and informers. Informers were considered the ideal witnesses due to the possibility that accusers might have ulterior motives, yet both were accepted as proof. While it is true that a trial did not always end in conviction, this was no proof of innocence, since it was thought that witches could manipulate the minds of men, including qualified judges who might find the accused not guilty. So, even when acquitted, there was still a suspicion of guilt that would loom over the suspected witch until they were either accused again and convicted or they died (Kramer and Sprenger 1971:194-230). Moreover, some individuals were coerced, through torture, to admit guilt and name others for, "it was perfectly acceptable to use force to save people from heresy. You might burn their body, but you could save their immortal soul" (Cawthorne 2004:37).

One work in particular, the *Malleus Maleficarum* by Kramer and Sprenger (1971), came to be "regarded as the standard handbook on witchcraft and its suppression well into the eighteenth century" (Cawthorne 2004:41). Divided into three parts, it addressed
"the reality and depravity of witches" and condemned disbelief in such evil as "heresy" (Cawthorne 2004:41). Thus, "folklore surrounding black magic [was] codified" to create a common base of information on which the witch-hunters and judges could draw (Cawthorne 2004:41). Fantastical tales were woven within the pages of the *Malleus Maleficarum* "diabolical compacts, sexual relations with devils (*incubi* and *succubi*), transvection (night-riding) and metamorphosis" (Cawthorne 2004:41). Then procedures in interrogation and identification were prescribed.

Religion is often utilized to justify or uphold existing societal values. In this case the status of women is clearly reflected in both the greater numbers of witchcraft accusations leveled against them and in the attitude toward women portrayed in the writings of Kramer and Sprenger (Crapo 2003:255). In the *Malleus Maleficarum* the authors clearly state that women, being weaker in both mind and body as implied in Genesis, submit more easily to the lure of witchcraft and therefore the Devil (Kramer and Sprenger 1971:44-47; Crapo 2003:255). Men were alleged to naturally possess not only a greater intellect but a better understanding of the spiritual matters which had become the providence of the masculine gender and gendered social stratification. This afforded men greater immunity from the evils of witchcraft. Women, having no such natural protection, could be more easily led into acts against the faith. It was in the very nature of women to submit to evil therefore witchcraft was seen as being rooted in the feminine character. Women were as much scapegoats as witchcraft and witches (Kramer and Sprenger 1971:44-47; Thurston 2006:52). The witch could be one’s next-door neighbor, the old woman who lived on the outskirts of town, or even an upstanding member of the
community. In all instances it was believed that the witch was a servant of the devil and had made a pact with him, that she could be identified by certain marks on her body, and that she sought to do harm to the good Christian people around her (Ashton 1896:181).

The witch, alongside other supernatural entities like the vampire or werewolf, was often blamed for events over which ordinary people had no control (Edwards 2002). In a way, her existence reinforced assumptions about the goodness of God and explained the presence of evil in the world. Paradoxically, the witch provided a sense of comfort, a reason why bad things happened to good people. She could be "blamed for nearly every kind of personal calamity" (Klaits 1985:2). The belief in witchcraft became "a convenient way of explaining misfortune. Even more important, it was an explanation that offered the victim an apparent remedy: the witch could be executed" (Klaits 1985:14). There was someone to blame when something went wrong, someone other than God, and that someone could be punished. The witch could be made to answer for the hardships that befell a village, a family, or a single person. Because the witch existed, God was not punishing the innocent and victims could take their anger out on the one they perceived responsible. The witch was more accessible than God, easier to blame than oneself, and a better explanation than just because (Valletta 2000:220; Weber 2002).

While the witch provided people with a scapegoat for misfortune, there were other motives involved in accusing an individual. According to Frederick Valletta three general reasons emerged as motives for accusing someone of witchcraft. The first is, of course, the desire "to remove an evil influence from doing harm to the accuser" (Valletta 2000:128). The other two reasons are as follows: "an expression of religious zeal – a
wish to eradicate the followers of the devil from the land" and "a desire for gain" (Valletta 2000:128). Another possible motivation to accuse an individual would have been likened to that of greed; vendetta, or the desire for revenge against a neighbor or particular family who may have wronged the accuser in the past (Kramer and Sprenger 1971:194-230). Those who accused individuals of Witchcraft and their victims "were rarely strangers. Indeed they were usually known to each other for many years" (Valletta 2000:189).

The Modern Witch

The desire to be free of religious intolerance motivates Neopagan Witches in the repositioning of the witch archetype, an archetype that is still alive in Western culture. She appears in movies, books, children’s stories, and seasonal decor. We can trace our relationship with her back through the settlers who colonized North America and the folklore they brought with them from Europe (Davis 1975:1-3). That is not to say Native Americans did not have their own traditions of witchcraft as evidenced by Kluckhohn’s (1944) research on the Navajo, but arguably the dominant folklore in the United States today descends from Western Europe.

Much of the existing American witch folklore was brought over by settlers from Scotland, England, and Germany. As settlers fanned out across continental North America, the stories that accompanied them were passed on and fused with other traditions. Belief in witches has survived in some areas of the United States well on into the twentieth century. In many cases the folklore did not alter much from what evolved
before the time of the witch trials. Local legends from Virginia and West Virginia
document several specific locations and individuals believed to be associated with
witchcraft. Recorded stories have it that witches could affect livestock, hex or curse
butter, make rifles shoot crooked, and curse individuals or items (Davis 1975:1; Heatwole

Traditions evolved that supposedly protected people from the witches they feared.
Individuals buried what amounted to protection charms or engraved items with symbols
believed to turn away curses (Heatwole 1997:8,10-11,14). In certain regions, people
came to believe witches could be hurt or killed by burning an item that had been hexed.
Fire appears to have been a key element in dispelling witchcraft. It was also thought that
dropping a broom across the doorway of a home would keep a witch from entering. In
parts of the Blue Ridge Mountains, it was believed that shooting the chalked outline of a
witch with a silver bullet would destroy the evil magic and possibly the witch as well

The word witch itself continues to contain many negative connotations in the
present day; to call someone a witch is an insult (Bovenschen 1978:86). In Western
culture, even among those who do not fear or believe in their existence, the witch evokes
images of Shakespearian entities stirring caldrons or flying through the sky on
broomsticks. One imagines a witch and pictures wicked old women dancing in a forest
and casting spells over a bonfire (Adler 1986:5; McColman 2003:26, 28-34; Shakespeare

For individuals who have adopted the title of Witch and call the practice of their
spirituality Witchcraft, this is far from the image they wish to portray to the rest of the
world. As a community, Witches are constantly attempting to negate the inaccuracies
and exaggerations in folklore. When one speaks of the witch, one must keep in mind the
existence of several different entities who share a common name. The first is the
historical witch of folklore. She is the common starting point for the Western cultural
superstition that we, as a society, are familiar with. Second, is the revised icon of the
witch as feminist idol and pop-culture heroine. This repackaging of the archetype
initially had very little to do with religion or spirituality; but this image bridges the gap
between the old witch image and the reality of an existing Witchcraft religion. Last are
those individuals who in the Western world call themselves Witches, and their religion
Witchcraft. They engage with the witch archetype on a regular basis and attempt to
subvert traditional stereotypes.

The Witch as Feminist Icon and Pop-Culture Hero

Several scholars have studied the witch in the context of the feminist movement.
Some have posed the question "is the image of the witch a wish projection resulting from
unrealized female potential? Are witches for feminism what Spartacus, the rebellious
peasants, French revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks are for the socialists?" (Bovenschen
1978:83). Indeed, the feminist spin on old folklore is having such a result. In the witch,
story tellers and activists have found a useful symbol.

The witch came into the feminist movement, and later popular culture, as an icon
of female persecution, but also as a symbol of untapped feminine power (Anderlini-
D’Onofrio 2003:47; Berger and Ezzy 2009:503). Educated women "turned thoughtfully and scientifically to feminist historical archaeology, dug through several layers of history" and found the witch (Bovenschen 1978:84). While the search for the witch icon was perhaps not intentional and the usurpation of folklore simply another evolution in storytelling, the general tenor of feminist scholarship created the means by which this new folklore could emerge. The women’s movement added a new bent on the already politicized nature of the witch mythology. This was a natural progression similar to what has occurred with other motifs. Folklore is fluid and meaning is produced as much by the listener as the teller (Orenstein 2002:3-7). "The word, the image, touched a sensitive nerve, they resonated in a moment of experience far beyond their former historical significance" and the witch became the object of romanticization (Bovenschen 1978:84).

This new representation of the witch icon was far removed from an historically accurate representation. The witch’s power, as a symbol, rested in the romanticization and forbidden nature of a social fantasy. Taken out of context, both historic and folkloric, the witch was given new meaning, personality, and purpose. Women could now "establish their own autonomy by invoking the feminine ‘witch’ myth" and in turn create a new folkloric cycle (Bovenschen 1978:90). The feminist mythology of the witch "mediates between the historical and empirical witch, at the juncture between the femininity syndrome and aggressive self-representation. In popular myth, witches [now] stand side by side with the ancient mother goddess" (Bovenschen 1978:84). She has become a protagonist in the ongoing fight against gender oppression. Once turned into witches by an oppressive misogynistic society, women were now turning witches into women of
substance and power (Bovenschen 1978:85-86).

Feminists and Neopagan Witches alike have engaged in the cultural poetics of folklore and identity creation. The witch was poetically transformed from an eccentric old hag of fairytales or the hyper-sexualized seductress (so threatening to an androcentric religiosity) to an icon of self-determination and vitality. In colonizing the myth, feminists sought to free themselves from its earlier connotations and to lessen the power of the word over women. Furthermore, in adopting the mantle of the witch, the feminist movement has done much the same thing as the Neopagan Witchcraft community. They have aligned themselves with iconic representations of a history they feel reflects their own present circumstances. For the feminist movement, it is the persecution of and gender-oppression against women (Bovenschen 1978:86-87,90-91). For the Witchcraft community, it is the suppression of religious freedom as well as gender-oppression (Starhawk 1999:31-32).

It is important to note here that the feminist image differs from the Neopagan Witch. For some feminists, the witch was and is a rallying symbol for the benefit of political and social change. To a majority within the feminist movement, the witch is not a religious or spiritual figure. She is a romanticized figure out of history whose legacy survives and is reflected in modern women (Bovenschen 1978:87). The process began by feminists concerning the witch archetype has made its way into popular culture. Now movies, books, music, and all manner of social media are littered with strong, positive, characters who, not coincidentally, are witches (Koven 2003:176-177; Smith 1999:138).

Many different subgenres of fiction make use of legends and mythology. In the
1930's through 1960's movies like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Bell, Book and Candle* as well as television shows like *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* explored the familiar theme of women with magical powers (Langly et al. 2013; Saks 2005; Sheldon 2013; Taradash 2000). Witches were styled as good individuals with very human problems who happened to have access to supernatural forces. Following that, several TV shows and movies with supernatural themes aired, some exploring familiar horror or gothic themes. The 1990s appear to have kicked off a Hollywood fad based on a subgenre of science fiction and fantasy: the supernatural drama. This differed from other portrayals of the supernatural due to the removal of elements of the horror genre. These cleaned up and repackaged versions of archetypes have since become mainstream additions to pop-culture. In other words, "the topic of ‘witches’ has become fashionable, has indeed already acquired a fatal glamour" (Bovenschen 1978:83).

Creatures that had once been denounced as monsters have been brought to the forefront as superhuman but flawed heroes. Television shows like *Charmed*, *Harry Potter*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, to name a few, began to portray witches, wizards, and other creatures resigned to the realms of folklore as foot-solders in a war against good and evil (Berger and Ezzy 2009:503). Witches became inducted into the ranks of heroes. J. K. Rowling’s popular *Harry Potter* series of books and movies, created an alternate world of witches and wizards. This immensely popular series helped to popularize the concept of witches as good and sympathetic characters. The popularity of such books brought hero witches into the mainstream. Likewise, the popular television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which aired around the same time as the publication of
the first *Harry Potter* book, cast witches as both good and evil (Gable and Swyden 2006; Reston 2006).

The television show *Charmed* made its debut with a pilot episode titled *Something Wicca This Way Comes* (Burge 2005). The show featured three sisters who discover they are hereditary witches who not only have magical powers, but are destined to protect the innocent. The show makes several references to Wicca. Characters use language specific to Witchcraft spirituality, namely ritual tools, tradition classifications, and Hollywood flavored explanations of Wicca. The popular supernatural drama also played with the new witchcraft icon. The sisters are human, have human problems, love interests, jobs, social anxieties, and family issues. In essence they are sexy, confident, and powerful women who just happen to be witches (Berger and Ezzy 2009:503; Burge 2005; McColman 2003:30-33). This is not to say that the portrayal of witches as evil or darkly otherworldly has been absolutely abandoned. The witch is still a horror genre staple, but what has happened has been an extension of the witch folklore. New venues of storytelling have been opened that allow for reinterpretations of folklore.

**Rewriting Folklore and Redefining the Witch**

The contemporary Neopagan Witch is not the same as the witch of early anthropology, folklore, pop culture or even social movements. Many cannot or will not separate Neopagan Witches from the negative historical stereotypes. As a non-mainstream and non-Judeo-Christian religion there are some who see Witches as participating in devil worship. To call oneself a Witch is to, knowingly or not, take part
in this tradition of redefining and recreating folklore as well as to align oneself with the multiple connotations of the word in Western culture.

The majority of modern Witches are not ignorant of the implications of embracing the witch folklore and invoking the title *Witch*. "The word Witch carries so many negative connotations that many people wonder why we use it at all. Yet to reclaim the word Witch is to reclaim our right, as women, to be powerful; as men, to know the feminine within as divine" (Starhawk 1999:31-32). More than that, there are those who enjoy the "aura of mystery, magic, and spiritual power associated with Witchcraft" (McColman 2003:29). Some people enjoy "being a Witch, even if this means that non-Witches sometimes misunderstand them" (McColman 2003:52).

Much has been made of the word *witch*. Debates go on within the Neopagan community as to whether members should embrace the title or seek to disassociate themselves and the religion from its connotations. Such deliberations have brought about lengthy discussion as to the origins and meanings of the word. These discussions have merit not only linguistically, but also as indicators of how Witches view themselves. Defining who Witches are is a deliberate act by Neopagan Witches to rewrite and recreate the folklore of the witch (Thompson 2003:3, McColman 2003:28-30). In redefining the meaning of witch, Neopagans have consciously engaged in a dialogue not only with each other but also with the rest of society. This is Witchcraft’s response to the intolerance directed toward followers of Neopagan religions.

Neopagan Witches claim to trace the meaning of the word *witch* through Germanic and Old English roots. The legitimacy of these paths down the linguistic
family tree are not of concern to the present work. What is of pressing interest, are the conclusions drawn by Neopagan Witches. According to some, the root of the word Witch is to "bend or shape" (Thompson 2003:6). Let us reflect on what this reveals about the mindset of a community that defines itself in such a way. To bend is a relative term and synonymous with being flexible. This is revealed in sociopolitical context to be in-line with many of the Neopagan movement’s key concerns. Neopagans preach religious and social tolerance or flexibility to the extent that it may well be pinpointed as a community wide moral. Yet it is reference to the act of shaping that is a more interesting element of consideration. This one word, to shape, reveals much about the Neopagan Witchcraft relationship to magic and their approach to spiritual power. To shape is to create, to actively involve oneself in creation. In Witchcraft a Witch is "a [shaper,] a creator who bends the unseen into form, and so becomes one of the Wise, one whose life is infused with magic" (Starhawk 1999:32).

What we see here in these two words is a definition of how Neopagan Witches view themselves in relation to their community, their world, their spirituality and themselves. What we find in this deceptively simple definition is a community enthusiastically involved in the creation and reinvention of itself. This is intensified by the Neopagan perspective on words as having power; not only in the socio-cultural sense but in the spiritual as well. Words can be construed as spiritual actions infused with intent and are believed to have potentially significant effects on the material world. This is similar in spirit to Austin's theory on illocution and speech acts (Austin 1975:5; Yeo 2010:96). The Neopagan movement continues to be a "textual religion," passed on
mostly through the written word (Clifton 2006:3). Words have great importance for this community. Spells, incantations, mantras, and chants are all potential methods by which words can be used to bring about magical or spiritual manifestation. Therefore, the defining or redefining of a word so close to the hearts of many community members cannot be an impersonal or mundane act. Rather, one could argue it is a spiritual one.
Chapter 6

In the Shadow of the Burning Times

During a lull in the conversation I asked the eight others seated at the table if any of them were out of the broom closet (this is how Witches refer to being publically open about their religious affiliation). Of the eight two did not hide the fact that they practiced Witchcraft if directly asked, but did not advertise it. Four were open about their religion in their private lives, but not at work. The remaining two shared their religious affiliation only with other Witches. They did not feel their family and friends outside the Witchcraft community would accept this aspect of their lives [field notes, 2011].

There have been moments in world history, some quite recent, where men and women have died because they were labeled as witches. Whether or not they had any connection to the Witchcraft community, and most of them did not, is almost irrelevant. The legend of the Burning Times is a story of religious intolerance that has taken on symbolic meaning beyond its historical context. It has become part of the oral and folk tradition of the Neopagan movement. While the popularized notion of witches and midwives burned at the stake by Christian aggressors is no longer accepted by professional historians, the legend remains important (Robinson 2002a, 2011). The story has come to have multiple functions. For some it is a heroic tale; for others a cautionary story. It is a rallying cry against religious intolerance and a unifying theme within the Witchcraft community. The narrative of the Burning Times solidifies otherwise fluid and ill-defined community boundaries, while at the same time unifying the community against those who are perceived to attack religious freedoms.

The folklore that comprises the Burning Times legend consists of two distinct parallel threads. The first is the legend itself, consisting of an interpretation of a real
historical event. The veracity of that interpretation and the extent to which historical events are reinvented varies throughout the Neopagan Witchcraft community, but the legend itself is ubiquitous and immediately recognizable. The second aspect of the Burning Times folklore is a modern ever-evolving and expanding oral tradition which consists of anecdotes, personal accounts, and media coverage. This oral tradition is both independent of and irrepressibly connected to the symbolism of the original legend. While this narrative could arguably be treated as the separate folkloric thread, I maintain that it is, in fact, a continuation or modern variant of the Burning Times legend.

**Legend and Heroic Tale**

For many Neopagan Witches the witch hunts are merely an historical event that has little or no relevance for their religion. For others they are an emotionally charged topic. The latter see the Burning Times as part of a silenced history wherein society "literally turned on [their] own wives, mothers, [sisters], and daughters" (McColman 2003:66). In the process of lashing out, that same society forged conceptions of who witches were that have now supposedly been transferred to the contemporary Witchcraft community. As previously discussed, some Witches believe indigenous pagan religions, which they equate with Witchcraft, survived the conversion to Christianity (Starhawk 1999:26-28). The pagans maintained a secretive religion that was pushed farther underground during the Burning Times. Women were revered as healers and individuals of power whose positions were being usurped by the new Christian religion and its priests. The inquisition and witch hunts were therefore a religiously-sanctioned war
against "the women whose power they feared" for their ability to undermine the authority of the Church with the uneducated populace (Murphy 2004). As "high songs and the sacred feasts [were] driven from the shore," those people who clung to the old ways watched as their religion and way of life was systematically dismantled (Powers 2003). In song and verse Neopagans have honored those individuals as martyrs.

The legend of the Burning Times is not solely a reinterpretation of history among Witches. Embedded within it is a thread of resistance, exemplifying the Neopagan attitude toward mainstream religion and veneration of nonconformity. "They would have us change the outward signs of who we are, but with the moon as witness we will never change our hearts" (Powers 2003). Heroically, the witches would not conform to the power of the Christian church and rather than renounce old ways and Gods, "in a refusal of betrayal, women were dying to be free" (Murphy 2004).

Songs, poetry, and even artwork have been inspired by and dedicated to the victims of an arguably one-dimensional idea of the witch hunts. Some individuals still hold that the traditions, beliefs, and teachings of the witches were passed down intact through time (Starhawk 1999:26-28). Gardner himself claimed to be an initiate of one such lineage. These traditions eventually gave rise to modern Witchcraft in its current form. Thus, according to legend, there is an unbroken line from Wicca to pre-Christian witchcraft. This means that according to some, Neopagan Witches are the descendants of those individuals who were accused and executed on charges of witchcraft.

As noted earlier, the legitimacy of Gardner’s claims are generally viewed with a healthy amount of skepticism by certain factions, possibly a majority, of the Neopagan
community and dismissed outright by professional historians. Nevertheless, Gardner published several books and taught an entire generation of Neopagan Witches. Therefore, the mythology that he had a hand in creating and promoting is deeply embedded in the recent history, foundations, and mythos of Witchcraft. So much so that, while the feasibility and legitimacy of the fictitious history is questioned openly, the victims of the witch trials have been adopted by the Neopagan Witches as cultural heroes. For many "To be a Witch is to identify with nine million victims of bigotry and hatred and to take responsibility for shaping a world in which prejudice claims no more victims" (Starhawk 1999:32).

In this way the "victims of the European witch hunts" have been raised to the status and "position of culture-heroes" (Orion 1995:52). Many members of the Neopagan Community feel a certain kinship to them that goes beyond a shared title. Some may wonder what might draw "the sympathies of the self-identified witches so powerfully to the accused witches of older times" (Orion 1995:52). Anthropologist Loretta Orion theorizes that "it is their respect for a source of power – inherent human potential – that the state is hard pressed to regulate or even detect. Attempts to protect pre-modern society from this invisible threat resulted in one of the most shameful episodes of Western history – the witch hunts. Identifying the legendary victims of these persecutions as culture-heroines suggests that the new witches feel themselves similarly empowered and similarly restrained by an encroaching bureaucracy, the “right” society. For that reason they make a promise to one another, and to all rebellious and creative people, with the rallying cry, “Never again the burning times!” [1995:52]

The witch trials and hunts of Western Europe and North America were periods of
social unrest that peeked and ebbed over several centuries. It cannot be emphasized enough that this was a complex set of circumstances that varied over space and time. Each region and outbreak was influenced by a different set of stimuli: religious intolerance, fear, hunger, war, moral panic, politics, economics, and stress. All of these factors (and others specific to each region and time period) combined to create a climate in which societal pressure could only be alleviated by expelling witches from the community (Cawthorne 2004:9-11).

However, regardless of the tenuous relationship between Neopagan Witches and historical victims of the witch trials, the Burning Times have a current meaning to an existing community. Here we are not concerned with the accuracy of an interpretation of history, nor could one give a reliable and comprehensive summary of that time period in a merely a few pages. Generally speaking though, the concept of pagans and native healers being persecuted by the church is an inaccurate depiction. Many trials were conducted by local, secular, courts. Women were accused of witchcraft at a substantially higher rate than men. Some European countries, like Ireland, appear to have been almost immune to the witch panic, while others such England, France, and Germany were not (Robinson 2002a, 2011).

What is important for this analysis is the significance this legend, rather than the historical event, has to Neopagan Witches while also bearing in mind that one is an emotional politicized interpretation of the other. We must seek to understand its meaning and the reasons it has become symbolic. We are concerned with why the Burning Times has consequence, why these stories continue to be told, this history remembered, and the
context in which it is remembered in. Many Witches readily recognize that the history and folklore do not agree. However, the meaning and symbolism endure (Geertz 2001:338-344). Neopagan Witches concede that those who were executed on charges of witchcraft were likely not followers of ancient pagan religions. Yet they are seen as having been branded witches and murdered, many for daring to challenge accepted societal norms.

It is difficult to obtain a finite number of victims who lost their lives during the witch-hunts. Estimates place the figure anywhere between 50,000 to 250,000, but an exact number may never be determined (McColman 2003:66; Robinson 2002a). There are some, like Laura Schmidt, artist and Witch, who believe the exact number holds little or no value. She contends that "It doesn’t matter how many people died, or when they started dying, or what religion they practiced, or what sex they were. [It is] the fact that they DID die – they died simply because of who they were" (Schmidt 2002). Nor can it be ignored that a higher body count provides increased shock value for those who desire to make a socio-political point through folklore. Neopagan Witches typically do not seek to divide death tolls based on region or country. However, the reality is that some European countries participated in witch trials and executions with a greater frequency than others (Robinson 2002a, 2011).

What is certain and important, according to Neopagan Witches, is that during the Burning Times people died because of religious, political, and cultural ideas that together contributed to create a climate in which the witch hunts could thrive. Europeans were overwhelmed by uncertainty in their daily lives; "a collective madness [set] in"
(Cawthorne 2004:10). For the Witchcraft community, the "witch trials remain important now because through them we can hope to understand impulses that are still within us" today (Klaits 1985:7). As such, Neopagan Witches find themselves standing in the shadows of the victims of the Burning Times.

**An Oral Tradition of Intolerance**

There are factions of the Neopagan Witchcraft community who presume that "the threat of another burning times is ever present" (Orion 1995:225). Stories of intolerance and persecution circulate via media and word of mouth on a regular basis. Accounts of parents losing child custody, individuals being fired from their jobs, harassment, eviction, and destruction of places of worship sporadically come to light. Individually these stories are unfortunate, but taken as part of a collective narrative they serve to continue the legacy of the Burning Times legend.

I was privy to several informal conversations wherein Witches brought news of someone they knew who had been discriminated against because of their religion or shared the details of an article that had circulated online. Many Witches I spoke with were adamant about keeping their identities secret and their religious affiliation closely guarded from either extended family or coworkers. They did not want to risk being ostracized or fired for being Witches. Others were unconcerned. This anecdotal folklore appears to circulate with greater intensity when there is a perceived clash between Witchcraft and mainstream religion, particularly conservative Christianity. It is a discourse through which tension and fear are expressed within the Witchcraft community,
whose members are fully aware of how their religion can and might be viewed by mainstream society.

Wiccans, Pagans, and Witches have been regularly dismissed by some as crazy individuals who are simply indulging delusional fantasies. Margot Adler addressed this sentiment in her book, *Drawing Down the Moon*.

"If Neo-Paganism were presented as an intellectual and artistic movement whose adherents have new perceptions of the nature of reality, the place of sexuality, and the meaning of community, academics would flock to study it. Political philosophers would write articles on the Neo-Pagans’ sense of wonder and the minority vision they represent. Literary critics would compare the poetic images in the small magazines published and distributed by the groups with images in the writings of Blake and Whitman. Jungian psychologists would rush to study the Neo-Pagans’ use of ancient archetypes and their love of the classics and ancient lore.

But words like *witch* and *pagan* do not rest easily in the mind or on the tongue. Pop journalists present a Neo-Paganism composed of strange characters and weird rites or describe bored suburbanites dancing naked in a circle in their living rooms. More serious journalists see in it a dangerous trend toward the irrational. Psychologists dismiss it as a haven for neurotics who seek power in magical cults." [1986:5-6]

As Witchcraft became more familiar to the mainstream in the U.S., there was backlash from conservative religious communities. A moral panic ensued in the 1980s when accusations of ritual abuse and sexual deviancy were lodged against childcare providers (deYoung 1997:19). While the *Satanic panic* had virtually nothing to do with the Neopagan community, Witches found their religion being confused with imaginary Satanism (interview, March 7, 2014). It is not unheard of for such charges to be laid against those who stand outside societal norms and many practicing Pagans were afraid of the reactions of mainstream society. Because of this, organizations like the Lady
Liberty League formed to protect the religious freedoms of Wiccans and Pagans (Circle Sanctuary 2013). Also in the 1980s, several court cases questioned the validity of Witchcraft as a religion. Including but not limited to Dettmer v. Landon, People v. Umerska, Roberts v. Ravenwood Church of Wicca, Maberry v. McKune, and United States v. Phillips. While the decisions of these court cases did vary the majority of judgments established or upheld the status of Wicca, and by extension Neopaganism, as a valid religion (Eilers 2003:70-77,84-87).

The fears of the community are not wholly without substance or justification. Like many new religious movements the Neopagan Movement has faced opposition, intolerance and in some instances active suppression. Several high profile figures have spoken out publically against Wicca and Witchcraft, some appearing to deliberately incite new waves of moral panic. Bob Barr cites Wicca and the Military’s support of the religion as a direct cause for "youth violence" and refused to acknowledge it as a valid religion (Robinson 2005a). Other figures have launched what might be considered political attacks on the religion itself, not the least of whom have been George W. Bush and Senator Jesse Helms (Robinson 2005a, 2005b). These aforementioned politicians have maintained that the religious beliefs of American Witches are invalid and should not be protected under the Constitution. They have called for what is the equivalent of the "active suppression of the religious rights of Wiccans" (Robinson 2005a). In light of this open hostility, it is no wonder that Neopagan Witches see a reflection of themselves in the victims of the Burning Times.

One of the best known clashes between Wiccans and conservative Christians
occurred over the Fort Hood Wiccan Coven. This group was formed by military personnel and was the first to be given approval by the United States Military. After a picture of the coven performing a full moon ritual appeared in local papers, "National Christian leaders" objected to "Satanic rituals" being sanctioned by the United States military (Rosin 1999:A1). Fort Hood was inundated with threats of protests and disruption of the group’s rituals. The army was forced to provide extra security for the coven’s protection and to ensure their first amendment rights were not violated. The situation became a topic of debate in Washington where representatives tried to pressure the military to withdraw its sanction. Fort Hood has since become a model for other military covens and the formation of regular open circles (Rosin 1999:A1; Eilers 2003:87).

In Indiana, a Superior Court Chief Judge ordered parents not to teach their child about the Wiccan religion. The divorced couple was barred from exposing their son to any religious beliefs that were non-mainstream. Neither of the parents had any objection to Wicca, in fact both were practitioners, but the Judge would not revoke his order. The parents at the time had no choice but to abide by his ruling until legal recourse could be achieved (Church & State 2005; Pitzl-Waters 2005).

A few years earlier, in North Carolina, a high school teacher was fired from her job because it was discovered she was Wiccan. The eleventh grade "English teacher … had been escorted off campus by school officials and suspended indefinitely after administrators learned of her religious beliefs" (Sager 2000). The moral panic over Witchcraft is so prevalent in some places that a student in Oklahoma, was "accused by
school officials not only of being a witch, but of casting a spell that resulted in a teacher’s illness even though the girl did not adhere to any particular Pagan faith (Hill 2001). The student was "suspended from school for five days … to be followed by 10 days of in-school suspension" (Hill 2001). There is also the case of Crystal Seifferly, another high school student who brought legal action against her school board, demanding that she be allowed to wear a pentacle, a Wiccan symbol, to school (Eilers 2003:24).

A particularly famous case among the Neopagan Community is *Dodge v. Salvation Army*. Jamie Dodge worked for the Salvation Army as a counselor. She was eventually fired because of her non-Christian religious beliefs. The case "came before the United States District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi, southern division" (Eilers 2003:142). Even though the Salvation Army has religious ties and was revealed to be "operating as a religious corporation," Dodge’s job with the organization "was funded by [the] federal, state, and local government" (Eilers 2003:143). The Salvation Army could not legally fire Dodge based on her religious beliefs. The court found in favor of Dodge and the Salvation Army settled rather than pursue the matter further (Boston 2001).

One Pagan woman in Asheville, North Carolina, was not allowed to take her baby home by hospital staff after giving birth. A nurse called child services and reported that the mother was a member "of a baby-sacrificing cult" (Higgins 2005:53). The matter was resolved quickly and she was eventually allowed to take her child home. But that did nothing to prevent the nurse from leaping to the initial conclusion that because the mother was a follower of a Pagan faith she was an immediate physical danger to her child.
While these specific cases may shed much light on those few instances that enter the legal system, for every case brought before a court there are hundreds of individual stories that are not. Many have reported facing prejudice and even violence in their daily lives from which the legal system is ill equipped to shield them. Neopagans have shared stories of harassment, such as being followed or feeling threatened (Amara 2005:57). Others who openly display emblems of their religion have experienced snide remarks and insults (Higgins 2005:52). One Pagan author wrote of her experience with her local Christian community. A particular church in her area had "gone from witnessing to harassing to stalking" in their interactions with her (Amara 2005:57). In this case it was another Christian minister who offered his help in dealing with the harassers (Amara 2005:57).

Anthology contributor Tree Higgins wrote of once being attacked during a camping trip. There was no direct evidence that the men had singled her and her companion out because they were Pagans, though they had been openly identified in the nearby town as Witches. However, she later learned that two men, also Pagans, had been murdered in that same forest three years prior to her experience. She recalled the park ranger, to whom she reported the attack, "[telling her] there [was] nothing he [could] do about it while staring at [her] pentacle" (Higgins 2005:55). As Higgins goes on to reflect upon an ancestor who was burned as a Witch generations ago, and the religious intolerance she has faced in her own life she passes on a message of both sorrow and hope. "We pagans are strong. Our faith was strong enough to survive 2,000 years of
repression and inquisitions. We will endure. We will one day claim our rights. One day we will stand free and proud in all places in the world, both in large cities and small towns, but only if we do not hide in fear" (Higgins 2005:56).

More recently, the Falcon Circle constructed for the worship of followers of nature religions at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado was desecrated (Branum 2010, 2011). In 2011, a temple to Jupiter in the Ukraine was vandalized and the high priest hospitalized after being beaten (The House of Vines 2011). The same year, a stone circle used by Pagan students at Trinity Saint David University in South Wales was destroyed (Pitzl-Waters 2011). In 2013, the home of Kyja Withers, a Wiccan and author of the Rupert’s Tales books for Neopagan children, was repeatedly vandalized (Waxler 2013).

While these events are not necessarily related, each story was widely circulated at the time by the online community as the latest examples of religious persecution. The simple fact of the matter is that what Witches view as attacks on their spirituality still occur, though they are not as numerous as they once were. For every example included here there are dozens of unrecorded personal accounts, each one a cautionary warning to other Witches that intolerance and persecution still happen. This oral tradition functions as a call for solidarity. Individuals in crisis reach out to each other, in person or online, to reaffirm the bonds of community. Moreover, like the legend of the Burning Times, this oral tradition is a cry for the end of religious intolerance and a warning that Witchcraft is not yet free from persecution.
Never Again the Burning Times

A key aspect of the Burning Times legend lies in the friction between competing, dissimilar, or opposing faiths. The continued relevance of this folklore for the Witchcraft community is at the heart of this same issue. The popularity of the legend of the Burning Times and the associated oral tradition tends to flare up whenever tensions are perceived between mainstream religious majorities and Neopaganism. This pattern follows socio-political trends closely with respect to the cultural shift between conservative and liberal politics in the United States. When conservative politics are at the cultural forefront, so is the Burning Times folklore. I noticed also, in the course of my research, that trends in fashion and jewelry followed this same cycle. When social conservatism is at its peak, Witches tend to display the symbols of their faith less frequently. The pentagram is exchanged for other less recognizable symbols such as the Tree of Life. When the stories of religious intolerance begin to circulate many Neopagan Witches begin to blend with the mainstream.

"The controversy over new religions is a complex social issue that has engendered an emotional and sometimes mean-spirited debate" (Lewis and Peterson 2005:5). It is not uncommon for mainstream society to view secretive religious movements with a certain amount of suspicion. The world has witnessed the lives, and sometimes violent, deaths of many cults. As a result the worst is often assumed about followers of new religious movements (Lewis and Petersen 2005:3-5). Neopagans are aware of and sensitive to this mindset. Many individuals within the community are actively fearful of religious persecution. These fears are shared through the continued dissemination of an
oral tradition of intolerance that in spirit and theme that can be traced back to the legend of the Burning Times.

The Witchcraft community confronts fear and moral panic by addressing what they see as the root of misunderstanding. Witchcraft carries with it the stigma of the witch and all that entails to a predominantly Judeo-Christian Western society rich in a folklore that vilifies the witch. In order to change the perception, Neopagan Witches have begun a process of reconstruction through various methods including: redefining language, reinterpreting folklore, and promoting education. Still, there are those who will always associate Witchcraft with evil and this is why the Burning Times will continue to hold symbolic relevance.

Clifford Geertz states that "the thing to ask is what [its] import is" to those for whom it holds meaning and power (Geertz 2001:338). To Neopagan Witches, the Burning Times are an example of religious intolerance and persecution directed largely toward non-conventional approaches to creating a relationship with God. In the words of Starhawk, "Witchcraft is a word that frightens many people and confuses many others" (Starhawk 1999:26). Carl McColman, another Wiccan author, writes that "today’s Witches regard the burning times with the same kind of mythic reverence that Jews feel toward the Exodus from Egypt or that Christians feel toward the death and resurrection of Jesus" and that the "historical event plays a large role in shaping the modern Witch’s identity" (McColman 2003:67). Seen in this light, the Burning Times have become a focal point around which Witches and other Neopagans rally in order to remind themselves and the world of what was and must never be allowed to happen again.
To borrow the words of Joseph Klaits, "plainly, we are not dealing with obsolete issues when we consider such problems as the roots of intolerance, manifestations of prejudice against women and minorities, the use of torture by authoritarian rulers, and attempts by religious or political ideologues to impose their values on society" (Klaits 1985:6). The Burning Times symbolize a struggle that Witches feel they are also entangled in, and as such, a popular saying has emerged within the Pagan Community, "Never Again the Burning Times" (Schmidt 2002). The methods of discrimination and intolerance may have changed, but to Neopagan Witches the principle is the same. Past persecutions, once committed against those who were considered abnormal, have now come to unify a community. "We have trusted no man’s promise. We have kept to just ourselves. We have suffered from the lies and all the books upon your shelves. And our patience and endurance through the burning times and now, have given us the strength to keep our vow" (Pendderwen 2004).
Chapter 7

Ancestor Veneration and Spiritual Kinship in Neopagan Witchcraft

I have read many articles, blogs, and books that reference the familial relationships between coven and community members, but I do not think I understood it as a significant fact until witnessing social interactions between individuals. Some of these people have known each other for years. Though there does not appear to be a sense of universal cohesion within the community (personality conflicts do occur), among certain social groups there is a familiarity and level of comfort that can only be achieved through the development of loving and trusting relationships. Even the people who do not seem to have the same amount of history within the local community appear to visibly relax in the presence of their extended spiritual family. They seek each other out for advice, share significant aspects of their lives, support each other, and rely on and genuinely care for each other [field notes, 2013].

Ancestor worship is a common focus of ethnographic study. Most religions incorporate the concept of an afterlife and seek to answer questions concerning the dead. The religious landscape is riddled with ghosts and spirits, some generalized entities, others kin to the living (Sheils 1975:427-428). While specific modes of reverence vary from culture to culture, ancestor veneration is a documented practice throughout most of the civilizations from which the Neopagan movement draws inspiration. It should not, therefore, be surprising that some Neopagan religions have also adopted similar customs.

Within Neopagan Witchcraft the concept of ancestor veneration, sometimes considered by academics to be present only where a genetic link exists between ancestors and descendants, has been redefined to include a complex system of spiritual kinship that foregrounds emotional over blood bonds (Sheils 1975:428). In British Traditional Witchcraft for example, descent is reckoned in a unilineal fashion, passing through generations of initiates. One’s spiritual lineage may, in some cases, supposedly be traced
directly back to the founder of a specific Tradition and beyond that to the gods themselves. This is, however, difficult to verify as such knowledge is restricted to the initiates of a given Tradition. For example, the Gardnerian Witches I spoke to theoretically all trace their spiritual ancestry to Gerald Gardner. However, as an outsider to that Tradition, my Gardnerian informants neither could nor would identify their specific lineage to me. To hand over such information would be a highly taboo act among the Witchcraft community. Yet, while an outsider would have little or no access to the details of a spiritual lineage, initiated Witches do.

Neopagan Witches embrace fictive brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and so forth, all of whom are known only to other initiates of their shared Tradition. A secret family is formed without the benefit of legal or blood relation. The dead and absent living are honored by the generations who follow by way of their magic and knowledge. For Neopagan Witches, the practice of ancestor veneration has its roots in folklore, but more than this, "it is an essential expression of the inherent rules of behavior of the kinship system" and the community (Tatje and Hsu 1969:154). The propensity of Witches to seek out and create religious roots has already been established. Witches have adopted their own historical ancestors as well as created familial social systems. Ancestor veneration accordingly takes two main forms within the Witchcraft community: divine ancestors and spiritual kin.

Veneration of the dead serves several functions within the community. It provides a method for mystery traditions to engage in boundary maintenance and it gives individuals points of contact with which affinity can be established. Ancestor veneration
helps to create a lineage system through which the initiated gain access to a society that would otherwise be closed to them. This practice also provides both traditional and non-traditional Witches with a sense of identity, heritage, and belonging.

**Ancestor Veneration and Initiation as Boundary Maintenance**

Boundary maintenance within any given group is often twofold, with community focus demarcated along exterior and interior lines (Niezen 2003:6-7). Neopagan Witchcraft is no different in this than other forms of community. Methods used to delineate between Witchcraft and mainstream society have been established in previous chapters, for instance, the use of folklore to unify and fortify the community against outsiders. Yet, within the Witchcraft community, factions navigate an ongoing process of power negotiation. At times these power politics are benign. It is not unheard of, however, for boundary maintenance and social maneuvering to provoke conflict between or within Traditions. These conflicts, sometimes known as "Witch Wars" or "Bitchcraft," can lead to intense schisms that completely fracture Traditions, split families, and put factions of local communities at odds with each other (Fritz 1998).

During my time researching the community, I witnessed several incidents of boundary maintenance, both subtle and overt. The most prevalent concerned the control of access to knowledge. This was exercised mostly by the mystery religion oriented initiatory paths. These Witchcraft Traditions gatekeep information with zealous tenacity. This is, of course, unsurprising since it is in the nature of mystery religions to safeguard sacred knowledge for the *properly* initiated. However, what I did not expect was the way
different Traditions would work together for this same purpose. While attending an open ritual to celebrate Midsummer, I had the chance to inquire of some community elders how they could be certain of an individual's pedigree and spiritual qualifications. I was told that if an individual were to claim to be British Traditional, for example, the local elders would ensure through their own contacts that the Witch in question was properly initiated. First, the elders would talk amongst themselves. If none of the established community members could vouch for the person, other contacts outside the local community would be appealed to for information. I was informed that there had been instances where individuals had claimed a title or rank never earned. While these people were not necessarily confronted or called out, potential students were warned off and the reputation of the person in question suffered within the community. In time, they were quietly excluded from community spheres to which they had no right of access.

Distinctions between differing types of Neopagan Witches are partially illuminated by the practices of ancestor veneration and initiation. As Witches seek to define themselves in relation to one another, they necessarily establish boundaries within their own society and regulate who has access to it. In erecting and maintaining these boundaries individuals and groups exert authority. Within communities "it is by means of geographical and psychological movement that modern power inserts itself into preexisting structures" (Asad 1993:11). By producing identity creation, and identifying who belongs to whom in their spiritual kinship system, certain avenues of social interaction are opened and others closed. Movement within the community is limited and those who can control it can also control access to knowledge.
A Gardnerian Witch, for instance, will have almost free access to other Gardnerian Witches, specifically those belonging to his or her own coven and lineage. His or her initiatory lineage will allow them access to events, private rituals, and spiritual knowledge reserved for members of the Gardnerian Tradition. An Alexandrian Witch, a parallel Tradition of Witchcraft, would not have the same access unless he or she underwent initiation into a Gardnerian coven, a ritualized process by which the initiate is symbolically born into a lineage. When feuds arise between members of the same Tradition, contact may be cut off completely between antagonists. Familial ties, once severed, preclude access to individuals and resources. Conflict between opposing or parallel Traditions may stifle the free flow of community interaction that occurs independently of coven or group activities. The creation of this identity and access to these closed societies, including all their interactions, politics and social negotiations, begins with initiation and ancestry.

Witchcraft is a religion that claims to honor the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The propensity to honor and venerate ancestors is therefore a vital part of this belief system. Without ancestors, previous generations of Witches, Witchcraft as a religion would not exist. While there are those rumored to practice hereditary Witchcraft, which involves skills and practices believed to be passed down through genetic lines, this literal reading of descent is not the norm. Rather, most Witchcraft Traditions accept that descent occurs by way of ritual, education, and emotional bonding. Religious kinship and initiation becomes, for some, a way of establishing religious credentials. Initiation denotes, to those parts of the community that practice or require it, that a Witch has
reached a certain level of skill and discipline and has been introduced to some of the mysteries of their Tradition (interview, March 7, 2014; interview, March 8, 2014).

One of the most noticeable distinctions among Neopagan Witches is between those who are initiated and those who are not. Initiation itself is a ritualized practice that has significant meaning for the Witchcraft community. Each Tradition had its own set of rituals and spiritual symbolism attached to initiation. I have been told that among some Traditional Witchcraft sects a Witch may undergo several initiations, each marking a stage of spiritual development. The first, however, is the initiation that grants access to one's Tradition and connection with the ancestors (interview, March 8, 2014).

As a ceremony, initiation is said to represent change, growth, and learning. As a ritual, it is purported to be emotionally intense, though the exact details are private. For Traditional Witches, and for the rare Eclectic Traditions that have adopted the practice, a first initiation marks the beginning of training in a particular style of worship. It is an experience designed to promote spiritual awakening within the initiate. For many branches of Witchcraft, particularly those that follow a Traditional model, to be initiated is to become a Priest or Priestess. In effect, one is trained as clergy and taught the ways of a mystery religion. Originally, initiation was the prerogative of orthodox forms of Witchcraft, but a controversial custom of self-initiation has been introduced within Solitary Practice. This is due in large part to the demand for spiritual knowledge and in all likelihood continues to be more widespread than established covens can control. Arguments over this custom and the validity thereof are extremely heated and will likely never be resolved (Crowley 1996:90-91; Hatcher 2008; Moonspider 1999; Walker and
Eclectic Witchcraft, largely comprised of non-initiatory paths, is an individualistically driven culture and method of worship, and can promote an egalitarian social structure that departs from the traditional model found in British Traditional covens. While as a community the Neopagan movement touts religious tolerance, it cannot be denied that there is tension between initiated and non-initiated Witches (Hatcher 2008; Shadow 2007). I have personally witnessed a contained level of snobbery and resentment on both sides of the issue. Solitary Practitioners being dismissed as unauthentic Witches and Traditional Witches denounced for gatekeeping. For Traditional Wiccan sects, ancestors bestow authenticity. The way one acquires ancestors is through the process of initiation, though that is not the sole purpose of the ritual itself. The question that arises concerns who can claim to be a Witch or a Wiccan. Who can hold the authentic title of Priest or Priestess? Most importantly, who has the right to question another’s status as a true Witch?

For the Traditional branches of Neopagan Witchcraft, those who are Gnostic and mystery-religion oriented, these questions are easy to answer. Their social system is hierarchical and relatively structured. It is also a simple matter to determine who speaks with the authority of the initiate and who does not. For Traditional Witchcraft, individuality is valued, but takes a backseat to the practices specific to a given Tradition. Individual members of a Witchcraft Tradition or coven are beholden to other members of their spiritual lineage. When alone they may do as they please, but when practicing within a group structure they follow their Tradition with attention to detail. The folklore
and basic beliefs of Witchcraft as a religion are published, but specific rituals and practices unique to each Tradition are passed down from teacher to student following initiation and details of these are restricted to members of the Tradition to which they belong. While elements of spirituality are shared by all Neopagan Witchcraft sects, the Traditional lineages closely guard the details of their rituals, incantations, and membership (interview, March 8, 2014).

A given individual can be initiated in more than one Tradition, potentially making his or her own spiritual kinship system much more complex. The lineages within a particular region often intersect. Traditions may evolve or appear and then seemingly disappear only to reemerge haphazardly over time. A dwindling Tradition may be revived after years of the community showing a disinterest in its practices. This is possible in large part due to the role and actions of Witchcraft elders. Community elders are supposed to act as teachers, initiators, and keepers of history. They are responsible for guarding the knowledge of a Tradition, or in many cases more than one. Elders communicate across these invisible social boundaries and act as gatekeepers within the Traditional structure (interview, March 8, 2014). Fledgling Witches are watched, guided, guarded, and corrected when breaches of propriety occur. For those outside this structure there is no admittance except through initiation. Without the correct pedigree, specific contours of a community may remain elusive or even invisible (Shadow 2007). Conflict appears to arise between initiated and non-initiated Witches when the initiated attempt to gatekeep the non-initiated or question their status.
Initiation not only serves as a form of boundary maintenance between the Traditional and Eclectic communities but also within the Traditional community itself. Initiation can and does serve as a ritualized process through which the separation of Traditions is maintained. Furthermore, even within the same Tradition the process creates a stratified community, separating levels of initiates, who by virtue of advancement have increasing access to the mysteries of their Tradition. An elder within a Tradition is one who has gone through the process of initiation multiple times and has over time, through study, and (presumably) spiritual growth, gained access to a complete Book of Shadows. Because only Elders hold a complete framework of their Tradition, they necessarily form their own cohort within an already secretive and closed society (interview, March 8, 2014).

I have heard hints and whispers that the same set of restrictions meant to keep Traditions separate among newer Witches and initiates are relaxed between Elders. Indeed, I have even witnessed the appearance of a more relaxed intercourse between those identified to me as community Elders than those new to the mystery religion community. If this were not so, their ability to maintain boundaries and gatekeep would be severely curtailed. I have also been told that many Elders have participated in a process known as cross-initiation, meaning they are initiated into more than one Tradition. Cross-initiation allows Elders access to the mysteries of another Tradition and has been used to prevent the Books of Shadows, and thus Traditions, from being lost. This is not to say that there are never disagreements or personality conflicts between
Elders, but most appear to work together as needed in order to protect and isolate their Traditions and kin.

Maintaining boundaries also provides the Traditional community with a means of differentiating and disassociating themselves from those they feel might tarnish the public image of Witchcraft. I have personally witnessed Witches cringe at the thought of the news media getting wind of Witchcraft being associated with amoral or illegal acts (interview, March 8, 2014). Many in the community are aware that Witches and Witchcraft still have sensational qualities easily exploited for entertainment and shock value. Currently popular media has revived the horror genre witch and is marketing witchcraft as dark, exotic, and forbidden in the form of FX Network's American Horror Story: Coven (2014). The ability to claim or deny status appears to work in favor of the entire community when they can say that an unethical individual is not part of their religion or community.

**Elders and Teachers as Spiritual Kin**

Elders hold a special place in Neopagan Witchcraft, ideally acting as teachers and guides for new generations of Witches. Though a vast majority of practices are published through text or online, many details of the Craft are kept private. As noted, Elders are protectors and guardians of their practices and the mysteries of their Traditions. Often they see to the selection and teaching of initiates, though not every Elder will take an active role in the education of fledgling Witches (Telesco 1997).

The bonds between teacher and student form a basis for spiritual kinship. Within
many Traditional paths, teachers may function as initiators, a parental role, and this renders them spiritually responsible for their charges. An entire coven may in some way have responsibility for initiates until they themselves become Elders, but this initial bond with their teacher becomes the primary relationship on which all other relationships between coven members are built. The emotional ties between teacher and student have the potential to be exceptionally strong, though I have been told this does not always prevent a falling out or conflict. The teacher is, ideally, a source of inspiration, support, knowledge, and supposedly represents community values. A training cadre, unique to each Tradition as teachings and practices vary, will identify the basic tenets of knowledge to be taught to initiates and provide a foundation on which the student can develop and incorporate future skills or specialties. The student's actions in the larger community reflect upon the teacher and in return the teacher is expected to transmit proper codes of conduct; in other words, to socialize the student correctly. The teacher is responsible for educating and preparing the student to become a full member of the Witchcraft community (interview, March 7, 2014; interview March 8, 2014).

Teachers and Elders appear to have a great amount of influence over their students. In ideal circumstances it is a loving, respectful, nurturing bond which is only broken or altered when the student has learned all they can from that individual. Students are often expected, at some point in their development, to pass on their knowledge and skills in their own turn. Not all teachers are Elders, for some that is a position never aspired to or achieved. For Neopagan Witches, to be an Elder is to have worked long and hard for spiritual growth. It means having a place of leadership within the community.
and to have worked for and earned the respect of that community (Telesco 1997).

**Divine Ancestry and Community Identity**

Traditional Witchcraft incorporates a complex social system in which initiates are given, through their ancestors, the tools needed for successful navigation within the parts of the community that emphasize the mystery aspects of Witchcraft. It is a system from which the non-initiated are essentially excluded. However, the non-initiated have access to other forms of spiritual kinship in the form of divine ancestry. Just as they share in other aspects of Witchcraft folklore, Witches who follow a non-initiatory path can trace an ancestry through the myths of their religion.

This divine ancestry, wherein any Witch is a child of deity, creates a secondary fictive kinship system that unites the entire Witchcraft community, just as other forms of ancestor veneration divide it. The community thus enters into a near constant process of division and unification and necessitates that community members navigate between the two social forces. The God and Goddess respectively function as surrogate parents to their devotees and on some level this relationship transcends community boundaries and eases egos (interview, March 7, 2014). Divine ancestry is one response to the rupture between initiated and non-initiated over the issue of authenticity. The Gods are seen as a source of both power and spiritual revelation and, as their children, Witches seem to feel they share a loose bond with each other. For the most part, this seems to be a compromise the community can live with so long as *unearned* spiritual credentials are not claimed.
The Gospel of Aradia: The First Witch and Divine Ancestry

Depending on the specific Witchcraft Tradition and the myth cycles from which it draws, Witches can trace their spiritual lineage to any number of specific occult deities or generically back to the Great Goddess as Mother of All. The gods are generally revered, not only as deities, but as forebears of the Old Religion, as mothers, fathers, guardians, and teachers of the Craft and those who practice it. With the aid of the gods, practitioners claim to have developed new rituals, chants, songs, and additions to Witchcraft lore.

One of the most notable examples of divine ancestry within Neopagan Witchcraft is the myth of Aradia, as it was published in *Aradia Gospel of the Witches* by American folklorist Charles Leland (1996). Though drawn specifically from Italian folklore, the translation and publication of the *Gospel of Aradia* or *Gospel of the Witches*, as it is also known, made the story available to a wide swath of the Neopagan community and turned what may have been a minor Italian goddess into the *bringer* of Witchcraft; the first teacher. Charles Leland believed the Gospel, as it is colloquially known, to be a religious text used by extant Witchcraft traditions in northern Italy (Leland 1996:vii-viii). Since its publication, much of its content has been disputed (Grimassi 2000:36). In spite of this, the *Gospel of Aradia* has had a large impact on the Witchcraft community. Variations of this myth have been widely circulated and several Witchcraft Traditions refer to it, at least in part, in their teachings.

According to the Gospel, the Goddess Diana gave birth to a daughter, Aradia. In Leland’s original text, the father is credited as being Diana’s brother Lucifer, an ancient Italian deity of sun and light (Leland 1996:1). The Goddess Diana taught her daughter
the secrets of magic, poisons, and Witchcraft. She then sent Aradia to Earth to free the people, empower the poor, and punish the wicked. Diana told Aradia that she would be the first of the Witches, and that her students would learn the art of magic. Aradia did as her mother instructed and taught her students the knowledge. She then gave them what has come to be known as the Charge of the Goddess, which laid down guidelines for worship (Leland 1996:1-7). The Charge in its current and most popular form has been authored by Doreen Valiente and exists in Witchcraft literature independently of the myth of Aradia (Valiente 2013).

Once Aradia had accomplished her goal and taught the secrets of Witchcraft to her students, Diana recalled her from Earth. Because Diana was pleased with her daughter’s work she gave her the ability to grant certain gifts to those who gained her favor. This Aradia did. Through her, Witches were given the ability to do either good or evil, to conjure, to speak with spirits, to divine, read hands, heal, create beauty, and tame animals (Leland 1996:14-15).

In classical mythology, Diana, also known as Artemis, is a virgin huntress. Daughter of Zeus and Leto, she helped to deliver her twin brother Apollo. She was a warrior goddess who presided over wild places and animals, the hunt, young women, and according to some aided in childbirth. In the Greco-Roman myths Diana/Artemis was celibate. She had no husband or children like her half-sister Athena. She exemplified a powerful and untamed principle of wild femininity. It was said she was worshiped by the Amazons (Comte 1991:30,52-53; Powell 2004:139). This is a dramatically different persona than the one presented in Leland's story of Aradia.
Leland’s original work has notable Christian overtones. Some Traditions actively question the legitimacy of Leland’s work, stating that the folklore he published bears little resemblance to what had been provided to him by his informants (Grimassi 2000:36). In other versions, Diana is the daughter of Hecate and Aradia her granddaughter. This version elaborates a direct lineage between Neopagan Witches and the Goddess of Witchcraft and crossroads, Hecate, who holds a special significance to and is venerated by the community (Powell 2004:218). Further folklore concerning Aradia maintains that she was a real woman who "brought about a revival of the Old Religion" (Grimassi 2000:xvi). In the fourteenth century, a woman named Aradia is said to have lived in Tuscany and taught others about Italian Witchcraft, also called Strega. From her teachings several Traditions have arisen (Grimassi 2000:21). Although this differs greatly from Leland's work, both versions treat Aradia as a messianic figure and originator of Witchcraft.

For those who do not have any other form of spiritual ancestry; the gods provide them with a lineage. Through the story of Aradia, all Witches belong to something greater, something that transcends Tradition, initiation, affiliation, and labels. The myth tells them what they are and what they can do. The act of ancestor veneration helps to promote a sense of common identity and belonging. Ancestors become as much a method of justifying belonging as they do division. In claiming to be a spiritual descendant of Aradia, in claiming kinship to other Witches, one defines oneself as a member of a unified community and aligns oneself with others who share a similar self-identity. One also gains a modicum of religious validation as it is not unheard of for
spiritual teachings to be delivered by deity. It does not seem to matter to Neopagan
Witches that their spiritual kinship systems are fictive. Through spiritual lineage and
kinship a community has the potential to become family and maintain some level of unity
that might otherwise be impossible.
Chapter 8

Witchcraft and Deity

A woman stood within the circle. She had been crowned with a wreath of flowers. To those present, for that space of time, she stood as the personification of the Summer Maiden. She was not a woman playing the role of Summer in a divine play. She was Summer. Just as the man crowned in a wreath of lush foliage was, for them, the Green Man. When she ran and he chased, when he caught her and returned her to the circle, the God of the Witches was returning Summer to the world. Yes it is allegory and symbolism, but for them it is also real [field notes, 2012].

The Western world is familiar with an ideal of God in the omnipotent, omniscient, and patriarchal form. Neopagans, however, have embraced a different spiritual ideology. Their concept of deity diverges from what is now a cultural norm and, in some cases, directly opposes mainstream religious views. Some Neopagan Witchcraft Traditions, in an attempt to rectify the transgressions of a male dominated religiosity, have become Goddess-centric. They have venerated the female divine almost to the exclusion of a masculine deity. Others have embraced a more egalitarian approach, and worship both masculine and feminine facets of the divine.

Witchcraft is a religion that embraces aspects of polytheism, animism, and monism. Most Witchcraft sects blend these epistemologies in a manner that closely mirrors Shamanic systems. Witchcraft professes a theological philosophy promoting the belief in a dualistic form of deity that reflects the natural world: male and female, God and Goddess. Together, God and Goddess form a united whole that transcends gender and creates the basis for all existence. This un-gendered creative force, known sometimes as Manna or Spirit, is the source of spiritual power as well as life (McColman
2003:44-45). While great reverence is shown to Spirit, it is the Goddess and God who, in
the end, truly bind the Witchcraft community together. They are a focal point of worship
and the heart of the religion. In many ways they are considered mother and father
surrogate to their spiritual children (Chai 2010; Ravenwood 2008; interview, March 7,
2014).

For Neopagan Witches, the Gods serve as a source of knowledge, power, magic,
inspiration, and life. They anthropomorphize the solar year, days, months, and other
natural phenomena. The God and Goddess are considered a union of opposites: male and
female, sun and moon, earth and sky, land and sea. Many of the gods are seen to
personify the natural world and through their motions give it continued existence.
Goddess and God respectively reflect the life stages of men and women. For their
followers, they are everywhere. A Witch's relationship to deity transcends connections to
teachers, coven members, elders, and other members of the community and is intensely
emotional. Indeed, it is essentially the first relationship a Witch develops and that which
calls them to their religion (interview, March 8, 2014).

**Animism, Monism and Polytheism**

Typically, Western religions have an exclusionist approach to the nature of deity.
This is not the case with Neopagan Witchcraft. There are elements each of monism,
dualism, polytheism, and animism built into Witchcraft folklore. Witches believe in and
worship many gods. Sometimes the gods are distilled into maternal and paternal
archetypes and worshiped as dual natural forces. The union of the dual, masculine and
feminine, forces is perceived to be the impetus for all life. The gods, while retaining individual personalities, are also sometimes perceived as part of a single creative independent monistic force. There is a saying often repeated by Witches: "all the Gods are one God … and all the Goddesses one Goddess, and there is only one Initiator. And to every man his own truth and the God within" (Bradley 1982:x-xi). This single quote elegantly sums up a general Witchcraft perspective on deity and illustrates how a single religion can embrace what might appear, at first glance, to be divergent or even contradictory stances on theology.

Generally speaking, the primary Gods of Witchcraft are the Great Goddess and Horned God. This is not to say that other gods are not worshiped, but these are the most common and widespread representations of the masculine and feminine divine. There are a myriad of popular deities out of numerous pantheons who are honored as personal patrons, household Gods, and group guardians. Some of their names are familiar: Zeus, Jupiter, Osiris, Isis, Aphrodite, Diana, or Inanna (Conway 1997:119-122, 147, 168, 178, 191-192). Others are more obscure and may not transcend their myth cycle or pantheon of origin to the extent others have achieved. Each God and Goddess has a unique personality and sphere of influence. A Witch might petition Venus or Aphrodite in matters of romance. Anubis or Thor might be sought out for protection (interview, March 7). The Gods are separate beings and yet while separate are also facets of a kind of animistic force, for lack of a better term (McColman 2003:44-45). One might view Neopagan deities as something similar to the ranks of Catholic saints, each more readily approachable than the faceless Manna or Spirit.
The choice of patron deity is a personal one. While groups or covens will have selected Gods their members honor, even if that selection changes with each ritual, most Witches will have additional household or personal deities with whom they feel a special connection or reverence for (interview, March 7 2014). Though some Witches would claim the Gods choose them, their choice in patron deity is a reflection of the needs, desires, interest, and values of the individual. Each Witch forges a connection with gods and goddesses that in some way speaks to or resonates with the individual. When a deity touches the life of a Witch that life is professed to be altered (Eventide 2010; interview, Mach 7, 2014).

A Priest or Priestess of the Old Gods

For some branches of Witchcraft, to be initiated is to take on the mantle of a Priest or Priestess (interview, March 7, 2014). While the Priest is a familiar figure to Western sensibilities, the Priestess is rather more exotic. She is an arguably enchanting figure, almost as archetypal as the Witch, and in many ways shrouded in more mystery in so far as she is assumed to be strictly relegated to the past. For some Neopagan Witchcraft Traditions, the position of Priestess is one that has been revived and made their own. Some have even taken a matriarchal turn in the organization of their spirituality (Ravenwood 2008). Like her Goddess, the Priestess has become a reclaimed and reinvented figure.

Titles such as Priest or Priestess potentially lend their bearer a degree of respectability and authority. Essentially, Witchcraft has created a clergy class within the
ranks of the Traditional and initiatory society. By utilizing these terms, one not only harkens back to the pagan priests of old but, in a small way, legitimizes one's position and partakes in part of the emotional sentiment these titles evoke. There is a fair measure of boundary maintenance among particular Witchcraft sects regarding who should be allowed to use the title and, almost more importantly, who should not. Certainly there have been, and probably continue to be, those who call themselves Priest or Priestess who are not considered, by the greater Witchcraft community, to have earned the privilege. Their usurpation of a title others profess to have worked hard to attain is viewed by some as a sign of disrespect and hubris (Telesco 1997). Yet, there are others who have not undergone initiation and are nevertheless treated as clergy because they have displayed a degree of knowledge and relationship with deity equal to or surpassing the initiated and have therefore earned the community's respect. I have been told by community members on various occasions that a Priest used to only become a Priest through spiritual education at the hands of other clergy. However, others maintain that, while education and training are important, it is the Gods who make a Priest or Priestess (interview, March 7, 2014). For much of the Witchcraft community these titles are not claimed, they are earned through work and dedication to one's religion (Telesco 1997). These debates over validity may appear, on the surface, to be silly or frivolous but they are methods through which the community negotiates power, position, leadership, and authority. Moreover, these titles mean something to Neopagan Witches beyond mere status symbols.

The training of a Priest or Priestess may vary from Tradition to Tradition but it is
not a title received without taking on a certain amount of responsibility. Ideally, in
becoming a Priest or Priestess one dedicates oneself to the Gods and their religion. It
does not require a vow of poverty or silence. One is not required to retire to a life of
solitude. The expectations of the community appear to be virtually the same for clergy
and non-clergy. Individuals are expected to live ethically and to keep their oaths
(interview, March 8, 2014). Being clergy means being a productive member of a
community and using one's skills and talents for a greater good: making the world, in
some small way, a better place (interview, March 7, 2014). The path "to true magical
mastery isn't traversed quickly or without sacrifice ... it certainly has very little to do with
a fancy or powerful sounding title. At its pinnacle, adepthood isn't about impressing
people; it's a way of living and being" (Telesco 1997). Practically, individuals do not
always live up to these standards and there are those who abuse or flaunt authority, but
for the most part the community appears to have methods of self-regulation.

Some covens require their Priests and Priestesses to develop competence in
magical or psychic skills. Others require some form of community service. One
informant told me that his first working group had an active interest in healing. This
circle would open the doors of their meeting place to the general public and offer Reiki
and other forms of energy healing to anyone who sought it. They never charged or
required compensation for their services (interview, March 7, 2014). The particular
emphases of individual covens will ultimately influence the skill set and development of
their members. There are always exceptions to the rule, however. As much as a coven
may influence initiates, the greater role of a Priest or Priestess will be primarily driven by
their relationship and oaths taken to the gods they serve. Each individual is expected to
find their own way of honoring these oaths. The culture of individualism is deeply
ingrained in this aspect of the religion, to the extent that I suspect it would be taboo for
another Witch to interfere unless invited to do so.

For some Witches, honoring their oaths means taking on the same responsibilities
as the clergy of other religions: performing weddings, divorces, or presiding over other
life events. For others it might mean teaching, songwriting, activism, publishing
children's books, art, gardening, or even blogging. It may mean living quietly and
behaving in a manner that exemplifies one's morals, showing through example how to
honor the Gods. However their faith is displayed and oaths honored, what all seem to
agree on is that to be a Priest or Priestess is to become a willing instrument of the divine
(interview, March 8, 2014). In part this mean "The duty of the priestess is to change and
grow and this means she must seek experience" (Crowley 1996:202).

The Goddess and Woman as Divine

Many Members of the Neopagan movement have converted from a mainstream
religion out of purported frustration with an overtly patriarchal system. Because of this,
in Witchcraft a disproportionate emphasis is sometimes placed on the Goddess over and
against her male counterpart. This may be due to the fact that women have historically
participated in Neopagan Witchcraft in greater numbers than men. Furthermore, the
influence of feminism and the women's movement has led some Witches to attempt to
subvert a patriarchal system they reject. By deemphasizing the God, there are those who
feel that they are readdressing gender inequities in mainstream religions and therefore engaging in an attempt to deconstruct the God of Patriarchy through the Pagan Masculine divine. There are Traditions dedicated exclusively to the feminine divine, and to women's mysteries, such as Dianic Wicca. These Traditions often boast an all-female membership and are much more common than their all-male counterparts (Berger et al. 2003:2,25; Coleman 2009:1-15; McColman 2003:90-91; Ravenwood 2008).

The Goddess is one of the elements that makes Witchcraft most visibly different from mainstream religions. Her worshipers regard her as a reclaimed deity taken back from the onslaught of monotheism. "After centuries of banishment, the Goddess has returned" (Farrar and Farrar 1987:1). And her followers, male and female, worship her with pride, joy, and reverence. This point cannot be overstated. Witches love their Goddess. As an icon of female empowerment, She has become the face of her religion. That being said, for the majority of Neopagan Witches, the Goddess stands as an idyllic equal partner to the God who is her Consort. This is the embodiment of "the occult principle of the complete and necessary equality of the male and female creative polarities" (Farrar and Farrar 1987:2).

As the Great Goddess or Great Mother Goddess, the maternal archetype of the religion, She can stand independent of any specific myth cycle (Farrar and Farrar 1987:29-38). As a triple goddess, a deity with three aspects, she embodies the major stages of a woman’s life from youth to old age. In this way she is said to be ever present in the lives of women (Chai 2010). In nearly any incarnation, she appears to be source of female empowerment and gender pride. The Goddess is depicted as unashamedly sexual
and sensual, wild, untamed, wise, and nurturing. In short, Witches imagine her to be all things a woman has the potential to be but rarely is.

In worshiping The Goddess, Witches believe both women and men can become like her and closer to the divine, for she is the sacred feminine within all beings. Through ritual worship women become akin to goddesses on Earth (Farrar and Farrar 1987:8; Valiente 2013). One form this belief takes is a practice called drawing down the moon. In a basic Wiccan ritual, proceedings are led by a Priest and Priestess who will, for the ceremony, embody the God and Goddess. The Priest invokes the Goddess into the Priestess. The Moon is the symbol of the Goddess and therefore the process is called drawing down the moon. When the God is invoked it is known as drawing down the sun. Once the invocation is complete, the Priestess is then considered the embodiment of the Goddess who now stands among her worshipers. At this point the Priestess may sing, chant, trance, or speak. Her words and sometimes actions, or rather the Goddess’ words and actions, are considered divinely inspired. This is one method Witches claim the Goddess communicates with her children and through them (Adler 1986:19-20).

**Earth-Mother and Grain God: The Ecology of Religion**

Witchcraft is a nature-based fertility religion that draws from the myths of societies heavily reliant on agricultural cycles. The fecundity of God and Goddess is a central theme within Witchcraft folklore, for without the Earth Mother's fertility all life ceases. Some Witches believe the Earth is the body of the Goddess. Because they see the union of feminine and masculine energies as being representative of the natural cycles
of the world many Traditions have shaped their practices to mirror this principle. The Goddess as Earth mother "is fertility itself, for mankind and for all creatures and plants. She gives birth to us and them; she nourishes us and them throughout life" (Farrar and Farrar 1987:13). In many ways she and the Horned God are nature incarnate and it is their union that creates the seed and their nurturing that brings the harvest.

Like most religions, Witchcraft influences the political and social views of its adherents. Because many gods are so intimately interconnected with nature, Witchcraft is a religion with an ecological bent. The Earth and the Goddess are generally considered one and the same. On an almost abstract level Witches do not think of one without the other. This is where the animistic and monistic aspects of the religion truly come into play. The gods of nature and Spirit are in everything. They are in the earth, the plants, the soil, and humans. Witches have anthropomorphized nature in their Goddess and this anthropomorphization is in some ways used to garner support for or to justify eco-activism. "I fear the Mother Goddess cries and weeps ... Her heart is broken from our lack of care ... Her once mighty glaciers of ice melt and shatter into the oceans and life, as we know it, is changed forever. We don’t even respect Her enough to see Her cry" (Lady Abigail 2008). Ecology and conservation have become lofty ideals. The marriage of ecology and religion is woven into many classical myths well known in today’s Witchcraft community. In some stories, the Goddess-Queen journeys to the land of the dead. Left behind, the Consort-King and the land suffer. Upon her return, sometimes tragic and sometimes triumphant, the world blossoms again.

One such example reflected in the folklore is the myth of Inanna and Dumuzi.
The Goddess Inanna enters the Underworld and in dying learns the sacred knowledge of death and rebirth. She is permitted to return to the world of the living but another must take her place in the land of the dead. She must choose the sacrifice and price for her freedom. Upon discovering that her husband failed to mourn her, Inanna condemns Dumuzi to the Underworld. His sister, however, takes half his burden upon herself and for half the year dwells there in his stead (Comte 1988:109). When he returns each year the harvest is bountiful. When he leaves Inanna the Earth is dormant. The myth of Inanna is an allegory of agriculture and nature, but Neopagan Witches also view it as a story of initiation.

Similar is the myth of Demeter and Kore/Persephone. After her daughter is stolen by Hades and taken to the Underworld to be his bride Demeter plunges the world into an eternal winter. In order to appease the Goddess, it is decided Kore will spend half the year with her mother and half the year in the Underworld with her husband. When her child is away, the world is cold and dark. Nothing grows. When Kore returns flowers bloom and crops ripen (Comte 1988:69). An alternate version of this myth among Neopagan Witches replaces Hades with Hecate, a revered Goddess of Witchcraft, as Underworld Goddess and Grandmother figure to Kore.

In her book *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Millennium*, Vivianne Crowley (1996) describes some initiations as following Inanna/Kore's descent into the Underworld. The initiate partakes in a form of divine play wherein his or her role is that of Inanna/Persephone. As the maiden or youth, the initiate enters the unknown and faces the Crone or Wise Man, the holder of sacred knowledge. The Lord or Lady of the
Underworld share the mysteries with the initiate who then passes through the gates of rebirth (Crowley 1996:200-201). Like the hero of folklore who faces the witches' challenge and returns home forever changed, the initiate is believed to now have been spiritually awakened, inducted into sacred mysteries, and reborn or transformed.

**The God of the Witches: Deity as Metaphor**

While the God can at times take a backseat to his lady, his presence is considered no less important or powerful in most Witchcraft Traditions, notwithstanding those that are exclusively Goddess-centric. The most common representation of the masculine divine in Neopagan Witchcraft is the Horned God. An amalgam of many pagan deities that share his characteristics such as Pan and Cernunnos, he is considered the masculine epitome of nature and the hunt (Farrar and Farrar 1989:32-33). As the Horned God, Witches see him as the personification of the divine masculine, a wild, powerful, and protective figure. "If man had been created in the Horned God's image, he would be free to be wild without being cruel, angry without being violent, sexual without being coercive, spiritual without being unsexed, and truly able to love ... the God is the image of inner power and of a potency that is more than merely sexual" (Starhawk 1999:121-122). In Neopagan Witchcraft the Horned God is the consort of the Goddess and stands as her equal. But just as she has many forms, so too does he.

As a triple deity and mirror of the Goddess, the Witches' God is a metaphor for the stages of a man's life from youth to old age. His myth is an allegory for the Earth's rotation around the Sun. The Eight sacred solar holidays of the Witches' calendar mark
the life cycle of the God/Sun and coupled with the cycle of the Goddess/Earth, represent the changing of the seasons and complete the agricultural year. At Yule, also known as Winter Solstice, Witches believe the God's soul leaves the Underworld and is reborn. This is the point where the Sun's rays begin to strengthen and the days get longer. Neopagan Witches view the strength of the returning Sun to be a reflection of the God's growing power (Cunningham 1999:65-68).

While the world awakens from its hibernation, the God and Goddess are believed to mature through Imbolc and Ostara/Spring Equinox. By Beltane the God has grown into manhood and becomes the Goddess's lover. I was privileged to attend a public Beltane ritual held at a park near an informant's home. The ritual participants gathered in a large circle in an open field. An altar table had been set up and decorated with flowers, assorted ritual items, and a bowl filled with strawberries.

At the center of the circle stood a Maypole with red and white ribbons streaming from the top of the pole, the colors I was told represented the feminine and masculine divine. The High Priest and High Priestess, the proctors of the ritual, called out an invitation for all present to join them in welcoming summer. They then walked the perimeter of the circle. In his hands he carried incense. She carried a bowl of water and a bushel of greenery to disperse it. Together, through their actions and the materials used, they created a boundary between sacred and profane space while those present called out an incantation. The High Priestess took what I considered to be a great deal of mischievous glee in splashing us as well as the circle's perimeter before they returned to their original places. I was told by the person beside me that the circle we stood inside
had just been purified and had become sacred space. The ritual attendees faced the East and a chosen participant called on the powers of Air to protect the circle. This was repeated with each cardinal direction: South for Fire, West for Water, and North for Earth.

The High Priestess turned to the High Priest and spoke words of invitation and greeting to the God. She placed a floral wreath on the High Priest's head and kissed him. The High Priest mirrored her actions in calling and welcoming the Goddess. With the ritual space set and deity present, we prepared to observe a kind of allegorical play. Another participant was crowned with flowers and announced to be the Maiden Summer. She ran once around the circle before another participant was declared the Green Man, one of the many faces of the God. The other participants called out to him to bring Summer back. He ran after her until they ended at opposite sides of the circle. They called out thinly-veiled sexual taunts and innuendos to each other as the Green Man stalked Summer. After a few verbal sparring matches were thrown back and forth the Green Man caught Summer and led her to the Maypole.

The High Priestess took up the bowl of strawberries and handed it to the individuals representing Summer and the Green Man. She then instructed the dance to begin. The men took up white ribbons and the women red ones. We then danced clumsily, weaving in and out, the ribbons tightening around the pole, eventually drawing our Green Man and Summer into a tight embrace. Each dancer laid a hand on the bound couple and was instructed to direct the energy of the dance into them. They in their turn were to send that energy into the berries they held and into the earth. The High Priestess
took the bowl back from the Green Man and Summer, announced the strawberries blessed and called for them to grant those who ingested them strength, health, and fortune. The Green Man and Summer were cut out of their bindings with much teasing and laughter. The circle was reformed and the High Priest passed the bowl around. Each of us took a strawberry and ate it. The ritual was called to an end and participants and observers picnicked in the park.

I learned later this ritual was inspired by Celtic traditions that recognized two halves of the year, dark and light. As we ate our picnic meal, the meaning behind the ritual symbolism was shared with me. The Witches who designed the ritual told me they envisioned Summer as the personification of the Maiden Goddess as well as the fleeing season. In capturing Summer and returning her to the circle, the Green Man symbolically returns the season to the people. Summer's return heralds the final end of winter. The capture of the Maiden by the Green Man and their symbolic joining through the dancers' ribbons represented the union of male and female, God and Goddess and the renewed fertility of the land.

At the height of the Earth's fertility the Goddess transforms from Maiden to Mother. She conceives and life flourishes. After Midsummer, one of the many fertility festivals, the world begins to prepare for harvest time. The Sun begins to weaken by Lughnasadh, "the first harvest" (Cunningham 1999:67). At Mabon, Autumn Equinox, the God declines and begins his journey to the land of the dead.

At Samhain he is the God of Death and Lord of the Underworld. The Goddess mourns for her consort even as she prepares for his rebirth (Cunningham 1999:65-68).
For Samhain I attended a private ritual, the details of which I was asked not to share. However, what I can say of my experience is that those of us who took part were encouraged to lay to rest the experiences of the previous year. We symbolically let go of that which might impede our spiritual growth. It was meant to be a ritual death of those things in our lives that no longer had a positive influence, a letting go, and cleansing experience so that in the spring new things might take root and begin to grow.

Throughout the cycle of the year Witches ritually rejoice and mourn as the God/Sun and Earth/Goddess return to life and die or fall dormant. I have been told that the harvest festivals are generally times of reflection, whereas the fertility holidays can be times of great joy and exuberance.

Embedded within this folklore is another story - that of the Holly King and Oak King who twice yearly battle for supremacy. At Beltane some Witches believe the Oak King kills the Holly King, symbolic of the Sun's returned strength. Light slays Darkness. The Oak King reins until Samhain when he is overcome by the Holly King. Light gives way to Darkness. At Yule, the Oak King is said to be reborn and as the Sun grows stronger he prepares to battle for kingship once more (Franco 2011). Some Witchcraft Traditions symbolically act out these battles in ritualized pageants or plays as part of their religious observances. Two participants symbolically take on the mantle of the battling kings and partake in a ritualized mock fight, culminating in the victory of the seasonally appropriate king. The victorious king takes the emblem of power/kingship from his slain opponent, often a sword and gains a position at the Goddess' side. Symbolically, the passage of power between dark and light, winter and summer has occurred (interview,
March 8, 2014).

The Influence and Role of Deity in Daily Life

The influence of the God and Goddess in the lives of Witches does not end with ritual or pageantry. A Witch, especially the Priests and Priestesses, feel they are continual servants of their gods every moment (interview, March 8, 2014). This is considered equally true when they are teaching classes, gardening, or doing laundry. As one informant told me, "The Gods influence how I live my life. No, they don't say do x not y nor are the directly involved in the good or bad things that happen" they are simply always present (interview, March 8, 2014).

For Neopagan Witches the cycle of their deities sets the precedent for ritual practices within their religion and influences the practice of magic. While the full moon is reserved for magic, the solar holidays are for worship of the Gods. In this way folklore informs religion. The religion of Witchcraft, its organization, and ritualized expressions of faith are built upon their myths of their God and Goddess, or Gods and Goddesses. Without this folklore the religion itself would be unrecognizable. The Goddess and God are at the heart of Neopagan Witchcraft, the center around which all revolves through ritual, practice, allegory, folklore, and spiritual belief. I would go so far as to contend that they, or their variations, are the religion. The community finds common ground in both their reverence and worship. Just as Witches define themselves as followers of the Old Religion they also define themselves as children of the Gods. Witches draw their identity from their deities not only as a distinct religious community, but as men and
women, and as Witches.
Chapter 9

Conclusion

Two of the women picked up the cauldron they had filled with water for the ritual and upended it over another participant’s head. The presiding priestess laughed so hard she could barely stand. Smiling, the drenched man caught one of the women up in a tight hug, to the amusement of everyone [field notes, 2012].

The myths, legends, and oral tradition presented here are foundational elements of the Neopagan Witchcraft religion. Through these stories, practices, and the act of transmitting them through text or word of mouth, Witches produce and shape community identity. This folklore represents a shared spiritual knowledge to which individuals conform and seek to define themselves through. It is by no means the totality of Witchcraft folklore, but instead represents some of the most prevalent threads. Through stories, myths, legends, allegories, and oral traditions Witches tell themselves, and each other, who they are as people, as men, as women, as believers, as children of the divine, and as individuals of power. They create a new witch archetype and through folklore justify and fuel a styled self-identity. In so doing, the Witchcraft community creates, maintains, and adjusts boundaries both internally and externally. Folklore aids in the establishment of roles within their society, the structuring of their community, and allows the community to both differentiate itself from and engage with the mainstream. In recreating folklore, Neopagan Witches have participated in a collective act of transformation and self-creation. They have created not only an identity for themselves, wrapped in the mystery of myth and legend, but built a community on that identity. In
creating a history, in styling the witch, in seeking to reinterpret folklore, they have engaged in a process of self-definition and identity creation.

So often the job of the anthropologist is perceived to involve documenting and studying that which is exotic or bizarre. On the surface, the study of Neopagan Witchcraft may appear to conform to this pattern. Stereotypes aside, however, the statistical makeup of the community bears little resemblance to the kind of community that popular culture would imagine to be the proper subject of anthropological inquiry. In the course of my research I found that contemporary Witches are men and women in many ways like myself with similar childhood experiences, family structures, education, and religious socialization. This included numerous individuals who were familiar with academic texts pertaining to Neopaganism and Witchcraft, or had a working knowledge of or formal education in anthropology. In short, when I interviewed individual Witches I was interviewing my social peers. This is not altogether surprising considering the role anthropology has had in the development of the religion and the extent academic interest still plays in its growth. However, this knowledge caused particular aspects of my discipline to be placed under the microscope in unique ways. They, the Witches, already spoke my language. My job as ethnographer and researcher was to learn theirs. Their folklore provided me with the tools I needed to learn that language and read their symbolism.

The individuals who shared their experiences and beliefs with me, as well as the authors and artists who are active in the virtual community, are people of faith. People who believe. They are human and not all of them are kind or good. Some, I would
venture to say, are not incredibly well-balanced. However, the people I personally encountered were engaging, sentimental, feeling, intelligent, sincere, and spiritual. Those individuals I have been fortunate enough to meet in the course of this research also appear to share certain personality traits such as a flare for the dramatic, a love of fantasy, an interest in folklore, a mildly twisted and cynical sense of humor, and a creative and curious intellect. All that was required on my part to be accepted by this community was to engage with an attitude of respect, a willingness to set aside natural shyness, and the capacity to not feel ridiculous when dancing around a maypole in a public park.

I found that the symbolic language, the nucleus of the religion, the emotional meaning behind ritual, the impetus and inspiration for spiritual action, and belief is fundamentally expressed through and derived from the legends, stories, and myths Neopagan Witches tell each other and themselves. Without their folklore, Witchcraft would not be a religion or a community. There would be no unity, no pride, no history, nothing to define themselves. Neopagan Witches appear to have taken the Old Gods and the Old Religion into their hearts and made it part of their lives and way of experiencing the world.

Academics point to humanity's past, the archeological and written records, and recognize that once humans of all civilizations understood the world through the matrix of folklore. What is often ignored is that even in the light of scientific and educational advancements humans continue this practice. In many ways, we become the stories we tell and most often tell those stories that reflect what lies within our psyche. Neopagan Witchcraft has merely continued this very human custom. In so doing, Witches have
purposefully defined themselves through religious mythology as a community, a religion, and as Witches.
March 7, 2014

Interview with Thistle and Thorn (British Traditional Wicca/Ceremonial Witchcraft/Eclectic Witchcraft)

**KR:** How do concepts like good and evil factor into your cosmological worldview?

**Thistle:** It doesn't.

**KR:** Are you saying there's no evil?

**Thistle:** I'm not saying that there's no evil; I'm just saying that the concept of evil doesn't really enter into what I deal with on a daily or spiritual basis. I think that evil, or people who do evil, aren't being motivated by some external *evil* force. Is there some kind of external force that's making people do evil things? Oh my god the devil made me do it kind of thing? Or are there just people who do wretched, horrible, things because they're just awful people and we just label them as evil? I don't think there's an opposing force like that, but I do think that there are things, people, entities, and so on that have never been human that are malicious, or what we would consider to be malicious, that operate under their own rules ...

**Thorn:** Evil is a perception thing. You cannot objectively quantify evil. I'm sure that to the mouse the cat seems evil, but to the cat owner the cat seems beneficial because it keeps the place free of rodents. Evil's a perception thing and there are people and entities
that are pursuing their own ends or subsisting on their own terms that are going to appear as *evil* to others who don't have congruous goals.

**Thistle:** Yeah, I think that there are things that don't play by the rules we ascribe to. I might call it evil because it don't understand its rules and can't impose my own rulebook on it.

**Thorn:** In a frame of reference good can't exist without evil, just like light can't exist without darkness.

**KR:** In Neopagan Witchcraft, some of the gods are nature deities. This implies, for lack of a better term, benevolent and possibly destructive characteristics/capabilities?

**Thistle:** Yes. The example that springs to mind is Pele. Eruptions are destructive, but you're creating an island. It's life giving also, that fire. Out of all that fire new things are made. In the destruction there is the possibility of renewal. The same way Native Americans used fire to stimulate new plants to grow. I think the problem comes with humans trying to label these things good or bad.

**Thorn:** In the Old Testament there are plenty of examples of wrath and ferocious, destructive, behavior and that's one of the reasons why I think it's a false premise to say God is good. Any god that was all good wouldn't be good for much. God isn't all good. God is all everything.

**KR:** Can you explain your philosophy about the nature of the Gods?

**Thorn:** There are a lot of different philosophies out there and I don't think they're mutually exclusive. One of the things I think you'll find among a lot of pagans, and in
fact I think you have found this to be the case, is that they're capable of entertaining multiple, not necessarily conflicting, but views from different perspectives.

**Thistle:** [laughing] Seven witches, thirteen different opinions

**Thorn:** So, for me, I look at the gods occasionally as different aspects of the human psyche from a Jungian perspective. Whatever god there is, is merely a reflection of the universe and qualities within me, within us. It all goes into this question of who's created in whose image. Did man create the gods or did the gods create man? Then there's the viewpoint of these gods as being older than time, that they are timeless and they exist as independent entities in the great beyond and they occasionally deign to reach down or project themselves into this dimension and they either work/interact with us for their own amusement or from a sense of obligation to assist us in eventually evolving. I don't think that those views are contradictory. I'm not sure it makes a difference which one of them is the actual truth because when I'm entertaining philosophical issues such as this I find it sometimes better to go with what works as opposed to necessarily what's *true*.

**Thistle:** All of that's a great thought about who created who, what we use verses what we leave, and that sounds lovely until you've met one. I mean, really actually met a God. Because, for instance, we have had interactions with Anubis. Those interactions have been stunningly consistent with other peoples’ interactions when we've met other people who also worship him and we start to talk or you read someone else's account and it mirrors what you've experienced. So is it a thought-form that has the consistency? Have so many people put energy into that thought form that that's how we'll experience it
thousands of years later? For us, we had the experience first and then we went to look into it. So it wasn't as if someone else's experience was informing our own.

**Thorn:** You're going to have people who've had any kind of uncommon experience who will say they absolutely believe. We can say we've interacted with deity on a personal level. That experience has a reality to us in our perception that is unshakable. As far as we are concerned those entities have an independent existence because we have compared the experiences and found it to be the same for many.

**KR:** What do you feel is the role of deity in your lives?

**Thistle:** For me, I would say, they're almost parental figures. For me, because my home life was not pleasant, they have become surrogate parents. I still have agency. I don't go worshiping them the same way my Christian cousins worship their deity. I'm not as much a supplicant as I am an adult child.

**Thorn:** I think she nailed the core of it when she said parental. There is a relationship that embodies love, respect, nurturing, and guidance and it feels very much like a two way relationship in that there are expectations on both sides. We've personally experienced deep feelings of love and devotion toward our deity and we've also experienced comfort and solace when we've needed it. There's also a distinctive sense of personality.

**Thistle:** I would definitely say that. They feel different from each other. You know who's talking to you.

**KR:** Sometimes deity approaches you?

**Thistle:** Oh yes.
KR: What value does secrecy have for the Witchcraft community?

Thorn: Some of it's starting to break down, but the reaction is still to hide when you're different. It used to be about protection. I think, though, that secrecy is becoming less of a strength and more of a weakness. It's hindering us more than it is helping us and I think that some segments of the pagan community are still very bound in tradition and you've got to love the tradition but you've got to recognize the purpose behind the tradition and when the practice no longer serves the purpose then it's time to move forward.

KR: Thorn, you mentioned you worked with a group dedicated to metaphysical healing and energy work. Can you tell me a little about that experience?

Thorn: That's where I learned to meditate, where I began to experience altered states of consciousness, to be able to sense and move spiritual energy, and learned the basics of healing. I worked with that group with for about three years on a weekly basis. Twice a month we would have what they called healing Sunday where they would let people from the public stop in and we would heal them. From there I went to an Eclectic Tradition.

KR: What is the importance of initiation? Why does this practice matter? What purpose does it serve?

Thorn: In Christianity there is a tradition that the pastor is ordained, right?

Thistle: It's kinda like getting an energy attunement. I think one of the functions of initiation is that it divides us from them. Because you have passed through this particular hurdle, you have been accepted by this particular group, and sometimes this is an announcement. That sense of belonging is valuable to the individual. I think that also it's the recognition by those who are in your same community that you have this framework
of knowledge and have for them passed a particular benchmark of ability and understanding.

**Thorn:** I'll agree with that. It's also a rite of passage

**Thistle:** One of the things that I have noticed, is that when you have an initiation you are also brought to the attention of that Tradition's gods.

**KR:** Not all Witches are initiated, right?

**Thistle:** Right. You don't have to be initiated to be a Witch, even though they used to say it takes a Witch to make a Witch.

**KR:** But in American didn't that kinda go out the window when they started publishing how-to manuals?

**Thistle:** Yes and no.

**Thorn:** I don't believe in self-initiation, but I do believe in initiation by the Gods.

**Thistle:** And when you've met with one of those people you know they're legit.

**KR:** Because of this trend though, now there's a wealth of knowledge out there for public consumption and that's created two types of Witchcraft, separated by the practice of initiation?

**Thistle:** Yes. There are people who, within the Traditional community, have a lot to answer for and are deeply in the dog house because they published material that was never meant to be published.

**KR:** So the two facets of the community come into conflict over some issues?

**Thistle:** Yeah, because the non-initiated believe they're just as valid as the initiated but the initiated people don't always think so.
Thorn: The problem with the so-called initiated is that we're not doing the job that we're supposed to. The demand was out there. People wanted to be a part of this, but the existing groups were so cloistered.

Thistle: Insulated and overly selective. They couldn't keep up with the burgeoning wicca (small w) that was happening and so they could have, if they wanted to, help shape what was happening but they didn't.

Thorn: They dropped the ball and then created the problem that they then objected to.

KR: So initiation becomes a form of boundary maintenance?

Thistle: It absolutely is. Now there are Eclectic trends that are becoming Traditions and they're starting to practice initiation.

KR: So you think that in the near future we'll see the births of some recognized new Traditions?

Thistle: Absolutely, it's happening all the time.

KR: What does being a Priest and/or Priestess mean to you?

Thistle: For me it means that I have a responsibility to at least teach who asks. I feel like as a Priestess, it's my job to minister to people who want it and need it with the problems in their lives. When someone comes to you, it means I have to help and I have to do what I can do teach where I can.

Thorn: I think that, when you receive the initiation it's very much akin to the way medical, firefighters, or police officers are sworn in, they take an oath of office that they are going to serve the public good. It doesn't mean that there's a compulsion or that you always have to, but you should be open and try to be available. You're always on call.
**KR:** What is the role of clergy in the Witchcraft community now that there is this population of non-traditional, non-initiated Witches?

**Thorn:** I think the Wiccan community has so restricted the access to knowledge and tradition that they basically close the door in people's faces. Those people have to make do with what they have. The Gods will find you when they want you. It's the role of the clergy, when you become a Priest or Priestess, you're under the obligation of that oath to provide that service and knowledge to those who come after you: to each, to educate, to allow people an avenue to have the experiences they need to grow. If you're not doing that then you are squandering your Priesthood.

**KR:** So you have this situation that's developed where it's the Traditional community verses the non-traditional. Then what's the role of the Traditional community? What purpose does the Traditional community serve?

**Thorn:** From my viewpoint, and some of these I'm making up on the fly because I've never thought about it before, but I can see there being a role for the Traditional community in much the same way as I see a role for the British monarchy. As torchbearers of tradition.

**Thistle:** They keep us from getting blown too far off course. Honestly, I think their relevance is that they're there for those who are interested in the history. I think of them more now as gatekeepers of the history of the mystery religion. Original source material. But if you don't care about that then fly be free.

**KR:** What is the Summerland?
Thorn: It's a construct of the afterlife. You could broadly say it's the Wiccan variation of heaven. It's a plane of existence where people go to rest and recuperate after death. There's a fairly widespread belief that people reincarnate in groups, pairs, and families. And that's what the Summerland is, a place where you go between lifetimes.

Thistle: Some people call it the Akashic records. It's where you go and reflect on the lessons you've learned and figure out what you need to do. It's sort of life a school and resting place and hangout between lives.

March 8, 2014

Interview with CrazyCatPriestess (British Traditional Wicca)

KR: Have you seen the battle of the Oak King and Holly King performed?

CrazyCatPriestess: Not in over a decade. It was a choreographed fight.

KR: Can you tell me about it?

CrazyCatPriestess: OK. The one I can tell you about was at Midsummer. The Oak King (depicted as the Green Man) and Goddess walk arm and arm through the ritual area. They talk about the beauty of the harvest, and all growing things. From the northwest, the Holly King comes into the ritual area with a sword drawn. He challenges the Oak King for the favor of the Goddess, telling all those in attendance that all that lives eventually dies. They are the opposite side of the same coin. Light and Dark/Day and Night/ Life and Death. The Oak King kisses the Goddess, and steps forward. The Goddess hands him a sword and the two gods fight. The Holy King eventually gets the
upper hand and the Oak King yields. The Holly King takes the sword, from the Oak King, and gives it back to the Goddess and takes her hand.

**KR:** What's the role of the gods in your daily life?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** As a Priestess of the Gods, I am a servant to them. Not only when I am in ritual, but every moment. This does not mean that every second of my life is spent in devotional acts. But it does mean that I do my best to mindful of what it means to be a Priest of the Gods. I strive to live as a Proper Person and to be a means for others to find a way to this particular spiritual path. The Gods influence how I live my life. No, they don't say "do x not y" nor are the directly involved in the good or bad things that happen. Though, taking on certain activities (like running a coven) are devotional acts for me. So is gardening.

**KR:** When you say proper person what does that mean?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** A Proper Person is someone who keeps their oaths (which is vitally important to our practices), is self-reliant and therefore capable of taking care of themselves, has no problems with the law of the land (who wants to deal with the issues a criminal would bring to a coven?). These are requirements for the type of person we bring into our religion.

**KR:** How do you feel the presence of the gods in your life? Outside of ritual how do you interact with the gods?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** Wicca is a nature religion, therefore I feel the gods in the changing of the seasons, the growth of the seedlings in my garden, the pull of the Full Moon for my attention. My connection with the gods is deep within the core of my being. I interact
with them in my daily devotions and meditations. Devotions can be as simple as lighting a candle and offering a prayer to something more elaborate with offerings.

**KR:** How has the community's reliance on and demand for secrecy changed over the years?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** It has changed a lot. When I joined the community originally, I had to send a real letter to a PO Box, I received a letter and questionnaire back, and eventually two phone calls, then finally met the people running the coven. With the internet and Facebook, things are faster and a bit more open. Before, only coven leaders spoke to each other, now everyone can talk to everyone. So, if a person wants to be "out" they can be. But it is still necessary to not "out" anyone else. There is still prejudice against those that practice pagan paths and some folks still can be fired, have a rock thrown through their windows, etc. It used to be difficult to find a coven and you had to work at it. Now, there is Witchvox, Facebook groups, yahoo lists, etc.

**KR:** Have you ever faced any personal instances of prejudice?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** Me? I have kept my pagan life away from my work life, so I have not. I did have a relationship change because I told the other person I was pagan.

**KR:** How did it change?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** We were pretty close, went to lunch every week (even just to get coffee), my husband and I went over there for dinner. Now, not so much.

**KR:** Do you think it's easier to be out now as opposed to when you first joined the community? If so why do you think that is, other than the internet?
**CrazyCatPriestess:** There are significantly more people that are out as pagans now than then. I think that is because of the internet and the plethora of books that are in print now. Not that they are all good; but it is much more accessible now. Also with the different kinds of family structure as well as employment options, it is easier.

**KR:** What is initiation and why is it important? What is the difference between initiated and non-initiated Witches?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** Initiation is the rite of passage that brings a person into the family of a coven and a particular Tradition. The postulant (person being initiated) is welcomed into the small family unit of the coven and taught the history and practices of the Tradition that the coven follows. There is much of these practices that are not shared with anyone that has not received a specific initiation. This passing of information is how a Tradition continues to grow and remain "alive." A Tradition is a set of practices and teachings that are unique to a specific group. Other Traditions may share similar practices, but there is enough of a difference between two Traditions to make the distinction. The practices and teachings are handed down teacher to student and remain intact and unchanged at their core. The difference between initiated and non-initiated Witches is that non-initiates do not have access to the Traditional information that is oath bound (bound by an oath taken at initiation). They have a vast assortment of other books that they can learn from, may develop their own skill sets and practices. However, they do not have access to the same information. Therefore, the way in which they worship, do magic, etc. will always be different from a coven of initiated Witches. Initiated Witches have a lineage through their tradition, and for BTW, that establishes a sense of
legitimacy about the person if they have that lineage. We also believe that because the practices of our Tradition have been done the same way by many people for an extended duration of time, that those practices themselves have added power.

**KR:** You majored in anthropology so you're aware of the academic definition of witchcraft as it pertains to native views on the topic. In contrast how would you define your religion?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** It has been a very long time since I have thought of the definition in anthro terms: you are evil. First thing, my religion is not centered around harming anyone, or the act of casting spells/using sorcery to influence people/events at my whim. Second, while the idea of witchcraft from the anthropological standpoint can be found in conjunction with most religions, it IS my religion. My religion is about honoring the Gods of my faith, the Four Elements, Nature, the Balance between Life and Death, Light and Dark. My religion is a set of beliefs and practices that have been taught to me by my teachers, and they by their teachers before them, and so on. It is not an expression of being an outcast from the religion of my tribe/socio group. In fact, the majority of the people that I would consider in my tribe, are of some flavor of pagan faith.

**KR:** What is the role of Elders in the Neopagan Witchcraft community?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** In times past, the Elders were the only ones that communicated between covens and Traditions. Elders of the same Tradition would stay in closer contact generally than Elders across Traditions. But still, Elders discussed things of tradition, potential students, or confirmed that folks that claimed an initiation indeed received a valid initiation. Now, Elders still do the same things, but those of lower degrees might
communicate with other people in different covens and Traditions. It is much simpler now with the Internet. Elders are the keepers of Tradition. An Elder is required for any initiation to be considered valid. There is information that is only passed on to someone once they reach that lofty status.

**KR:** What is the relationship between teachers and students?

**CrazyCatPriestess:** The relationship between student and teacher is a quasi parent-child relationship. The teacher’s role is to guide and protect the student as they make their way into the realm of magic and energy work. Like a child, it is up to the student to learn what the teacher can offer. And part of that learning is what is safe, what is not, what is acceptable, what is not, etc. This might also be viewed as an older sibling to younger sibling, and the same would apply.
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