WITCHES, WICCA, AND REVITALIZATION: RECONSIDERATIONS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF MODERN AMERICAN WITCHES</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF REFERENCES</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

This paper considers the anthropological conception of "witch," presents an ethnographic description of some modern witches practicing their religion in the American Midwest, and considers this witchcraft or Wicca, as we shall come to call it, in light of the cultural revitalization movement model well known in anthropology. Using ethnographic material on modern American witches, the paper analyzes the limitations of the revitalization movement model's usefulness in understanding group oriented movements. The paper challenges the model's construction of leadership patterns, and offers suggestions for revisions which may render more visible movements with organizational patterns not described by its original formulations.

Each of these tasks stands to make a contribution to anthropology. A consideration of the anthropological conception of "witch," for example, will offer new conceptual clarity for a term which has been presented as something of a cultural universal, despite its origins in a specific Western tradition. In addition, we shall see a great disparity between the most popular anthropological definition of this term, one imputing psychic malevolence to the witch, and the
philosophies and practices of American women and men who identify themselves as witches. The significance of this endeavor lies not only in the conceptual sensitivity it offers anthropologists exploring witchcraft, but also in the practical ramifications it may have for a group frequently and negatively misrepresented by anthropology.

The ethnographic description presented here offers the discipline data which should enrich our understanding of modern witches. Heretofore, researchers in the social sciences have provided only sparse data on contemporary witches, and those which have been generated are problematic. Again, in addition to increasing the anthropological data base, this ethnography can be regarded as having importance for witches themselves; not infrequently do the lives of witches and anthropology's definitions of witchcraft come face to face in the public's reception of those who call themselves "witch," and the encounter, unfortunately, is often unnecessarily painful.

We can further understand Wicca as a movement within the framework of Wallace's (1956) cultural revitalization movement model. Adherents of the Wiccan religion exhibit the discomfort and discontent with their culture's "system," and a vision for reformulating it, characteristic of cultural revitalization movements. The revitalization model has most frequently been used to analyze small scale, millenarian, or Messianic movements. Wicca is none of these; nonetheless, the model seems useful in understanding the spirit, vision, and general nature of this religious movement.

Reciprocally, understanding Wicca as a revitalization movement allows us to expose certain limitations of the classic model. In
particular, the prophet-disciples-followers hierarchy usually considered to characterize revitalization movements does not describe the organizational structure of the Wiccan movement. I propose that the model be expanded to include group-oriented movements as well as leader-oriented ones. I speculate that such an expansion will allow us to more clearly perceive social movements otherwise mischaracterized or rendered invisible by the classic definition. I specifically suggest that woman-oriented revitalization movements may be neglected by adherence to the classic model.

A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Wicca, the religion of modern American witches, first came to my awareness through feminist women during the two years (1986-88) preceding the period during which I conducted my fieldwork. My initial reactions to American feminists practicing witchcraft were mixed but strongly visceral: as a feminist activist and scholar, I wondered how politically intelligent women could involve themselves with what I initially regarded as hocus-pocus; I questioned the role of Wicca as one more derivative of the classic "opiate of the masses;" and I speculated that Wicca allowed women to direct their energies away from practical, "real world" concerns through a belief that lighting candles and chanting to the goddess could bring them the social and political reform or revolution they sought.
On the other hand, as an anthropologist at least peripherally aware of the malevolent magic reported of "witches" in many cultures, and as a middle-class white American of Protestant upbringing, I experienced a good deal of anxiety contemplating the possibility that Wicca was more than hocus-pocus. It was my feeling that if Wiccan witches were effectively working "good magic," not much could stand in the way of their working "black magic." In short, my reactions ranged from disbelief, to skepticism, to fear.

Still, it remained that several well-educated, articulate, and politically active women of my acquaintance revealed to me their involvement with witchcraft, as well as the seriousness of their dedication to it. During the two-year period before beginning my fieldwork, I became more sensitive to the presence of "witches" and the trappings of witchcraft in the social settings in which I participated. During this period, I also encountered a few popular texts about witchcraft, Wicca, goddess worship, and "women's spirituality."

The casual conversations in which I participated and the superficial reading I accomplished during this period did little to reduce my skepticism and anxiety about witches among us, though they presented me with views which intrigued me. They also introduced me to Wiccan ideology. Wiccan ideology, as it was presented to me at the time, stood in bold contradiction to common understandings of the nature, scope, and direction of witchcraft. I remained skeptical, speculating that a doctrine of "an ye harm none, do what ye will," constituted the public face of a dark, manipulative spiritual practice. Nonetheless, I also began to wonder if the ideology presented to me --
one of non-malevolent goddess worship -- might actually be part of a broader system that included both beneficent and malevolent practices. If this were the case, there was at least more to witchcraft that its common etic definitions had suggested.

During the period in which I first encountered Wicca, I lived near a semi-rural town known for its politically liberal population. I was aware of the presence of a woman there who called herself a witch, and who seasonally conducted ritual celebrations of the principle holidays of witchcraft on her property. Announcements of these celebrations she posted at prominent locations around town, and included on them her address, her phone number, and instructions of preparation to celebrants. I attended none of these gatherings before my fieldwork, although I would have occasion to participate in one during my study. Before the inception of this project, I tacitly speculated that this witch and her group of associates were somewhat unique, and that their area of residence had something to do with their existence; because it was a rural area, it reflected to a degree the context of traditional pagan lifestyles ("pagan," after all, is generally etymologically synonymous with "peasant"); furthermore, the temperament of the village, I thought, was one which might allow an alternative religion to flourish without interference, and, therefore, it had.

I left the area and moved to a metropolitan area within a few hours' driving distance to pursue graduate study. I began to consider Wicca a potentially manageable area of thesis research. To my surprise, a few initial inquiries among feminist acquaintances brought me indications that the witchcraft activity in the district to which I
had moved was considerable. Given the presence of witches in the local metropolitan community, as well as my confidence that I could do work in my former area of residence, I decided to begin research on Wicca.

I can identify several motivations for my interest in this project. At a most essential level, I felt I needed to confront my own anxiety about Wicca, given that my initial reactions to it were bigoted in the way that only ignorance can inspire. I could not rationally support my concerns about Wicca, nor could I support them experientially. What witches said they were and what I believed them to be were in conflict, and I wanted some resolution.

Second, given my impression that Wicca was becoming an important feature in feminist activity, I felt a need to have accurate information about its nature, its scope, and, of course, its power, including its effects on individual women and its influence on women's movement activities and feminist scholarship.

Third, if I were to discover that witches' ideology were in concert with witches' practice, this could be of scientific and social importance: if witches are as social science defines them, they are uniformly malevolent, never beneficent, and to be feared by anyone with whom they come into contact. On the other hand, if witches do not fit this definition, they have been done, and are being done, a disservice by social science, and one which has important ramifications for their daily lives.

After a literature search which yielded much popular writing, some professional writing outside the social sciences, and very little directly describing Wicca in the professional social sciences
literature, I was further convinced that ethnographic work with this population would have the potential to make a contribution to academic literature. I also became intrigued by one theoretical approach to Wicca, and became hopeful that not only would the theoretical model be useful in examining Wicca, but that modern American witchcraft would serve as a good case study in the general applicability of the model under consideration.

I believe that the relationship between the scholar the problem under study is an important factor in the conduct of research, and should be useful to critics or subsequent researchers who build upon its products. For this reason, I have provided these details of how I came to do this work, and my fears, hopes, and aspirations for undertaking it.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOCIAL SCIENCE LITERATURE

Western social scientists have used the term "witch" to define and describe a variety of people in diverse cultural and historical contexts. We have regarded witches as people who practice malevolence against those around them, either through psychic or magical means. Recently, the traditional vision of the witch has been called into question by social scientists who have provided ethnographic data which contradicts our usual understanding of witches (Luhmann, 1989; Matteson, 1988; Hallen and Sodipo, 1986; Russell, 1980) and by those who object to the use of the term to describe what they consider disparate phenomena (Hallen and Sodipo, 1986).

In anthropology, the definition of "witch" as a character in possession of special malevolent power and skill has been traced to Evans-Pritchard's 1937 description of Zande witchcraft (Hallen and Sodipo, 1986; Mair, 1969). Coupled with anthropology's search for cultural universals, Evans-Pritchard's vision of the witch apparently became accepted as the foundation for understanding witchcraft across cultures and throughout time (Hallen and Sodipo, 1986; Mair, 1969).
Hallen and Sodipo (1986) explicate this trend by documenting the belief that anthropology could understand 16th and 17th century European witchcraft by studying 20th century African witchcraft. Using Quine's (1953) caution against transferring "standing" or abstract concepts from one language system to another, they support Mair's (1969) perspective that the use of the term "witch" to describe social phenomena in diverse settings leads to analytical insensitivity, over-definition, and inaccuracy.

Clearly, there exists some question over the utility of approaching the idea of witchcraft as though it constituted a common trans-historical, trans-temporal category. More specific challenges to our vision of the witch as malevolent in one way or another have been provided in recent literature on Westerners who label themselves witches (Luhrmann, 1989; Matteson, 1988; Kirkpatrick, Rainey, and Ruby, 1986; Russell, 1980; Truzzi, 1974), as well as in descriptions of African people to whom the term has been applied (Hallen and Sodipo, 1986).

Luhrmann (1989), Matteson (1988), Russell (1980) and Truzzi (1974) all offer descriptive material on contemporary Westerners who call themselves witches. Although Luhrmann (1989) is most concerned with magicians, her description of British witches, like the material provided by others (Russell, 1980; Matteson, 1988;) gives us a vision of witchcraft different from that common in anthropology; witchcraft, by these descriptions, is a goddess-oriented nature religion. These
reports demonstrate the presence in the world of people who call themselves witches, and who do not conform to the most common etic definitions of "witch."

Truzzi (1974), despite his own caveats against generalizations about modern witches, given the dearth of ethnographic data on them, offers a general typology of western witches. He distinguishes between "white witches," whose practices and beliefs he traces to the writings of anthropologist Margaret Murray (1929), and "black witches," who worship the Christian satan. Truzzi subdivides white witches into several groups: Gardnerians, whose practices center on the writings of Gerald Gardner (1952, 1954); Alexandrians, whose practices are founded on the teachings of Alex Sanders; Continental witches, who trace their traditions to pagan practices in non-British Europe; and, finally, "eclectic revival witches," whose rituals and beliefs are not clearly grounded in the writings of any particular person, but which, instead, constitute an amalgamation of various elements form non-institutionalized religions.

Truzzi (1974) also provides information about the importance of secrecy and status legitimation in witchcraft groups. He reports that witches become witches through the acquisition of secret knowledge. Such secret knowledge is obtained from another witch who has deigned to share it. The idea that one can become a witch represents a departure from Evans-Pritchard's (1937) frequently cited description of the witch as someone with innate characteristics that allow one to be a witch.

Russell (1980) offers a different perspective on modern witchcraft. Russell defines witchcraft, also called the Wiccan Religion, as a
variety of paganism, making an important distinction between "pagans" and "witches;" he regards witches as a subgroup of pagans differentiated from other pagans by the practice of magic. Russell recognizes the diversity of traditions among those who call themselves witches, and sees the common element among them as the veneration of nature. Although he does not provide an intensive description of modern witchcraft, Russell describes the small-group structure of Wicca, the rites of passage through which an initiate may go, and a general introduction to the philosophy of modern witchcraft, as it is encapsulated in the Wiccan Rede, "An ye harm none, do as ye will."

Russell (1980) identifies three approaches to witchcraft. He calls the vision of witches as evil the historical approach. He describes the anthropological approach to witchcraft as involving a vision of the witch as a sorcerer, although this a rather circular definition. The perspective that witches are people who practice a goddess-oriented nature religion is, Russell says, the modern witches' approach.

Kirkpatrick, Rainey, and Ruby (1986) attempt to provide more particular data on witches and their beliefs and practices in an article entitled, "An Empirical Study of Wiccan Religion in Post-Industrial Society." Using a snowball sampling technique, the researchers collected survey data through pagan publications and organizations. Based on the responses, they conclude that "pagans" constitute a subgroup of "Wiccans," in direct contradiction with Russell's classificatory scheme.

Only 53 percent of Kirkpatrick et al.'s (1986) respondents call themselves Wiccans. Nonetheless, the authors use all of their
respondents' reports in constructing their "empirical analysis" of Wicca. They report that 50 percent of their informants are male, and 43 percent live in rural areas or small towns, although this information doesn't reflect findings by other researchers. Like Russell, they present Wiccan philosophy as characterized by the Wiccan Rede, as well as by the "law of three-fold returns," which they characterized with the following verse: "What you do to me and mine, thrice it be to thee and thine" (1986, 35).

Like Russell, Kirkpatrick et al. describe Wiccans as people who care much for nature, although they report that only 28 percent of the people in their sample are "naturalists and pantheists concerned with living in harmony with Nature and Planet Earth" (1986, 35), that only four percent advocate "safe" technology ("technology" is left undefined), and that only four percent "mention ecologically sound technology as necessary for a Pagan life." In addition, only 12 percent "mention limits on technology from the perspective of ecology or naturalist safety" (1986, 36).

Interestingly, Kirkpatrick et al. report that 47 percent of the people in their sample approve of ritual sex. They present the finding that "many witches perform the Great Rite each month on the new moon. The Great Rite is sexual intercourse between the High Priestess and the High Priest of the coven inside the Circle as part of the religious ceremony" (1986, 37).

Kirkpatrick et al. (1986) do not speculate about the causes of the disparities between their findings and those of others. They cite the work of Margot Adler (1979), author of the most comprehensive popular
work on modern Western witchcraft, but fail to introduce Adler in any speculation about the causes of their divergent findings, although her insights might be useful. Adler, for example, notes that most followers of Wicca are women, most do not subscribe to pagan journals or belong to pagan organizations, and few condone ritual sex. Kirkpatrick et al. (1986) fail to discuss how their findings may have been affected by collecting data through pagan organizations, and they fail to analyze the responses of their informants in ways which might explain some of the results which diverge from those of other researchers. For example, if Kirkpatrick et al. (1986) were to analyze responses by gender and also by group according to their self-definition as "pagan" or "Wiccan", we might more easily understand the various trends which lie under their broader generalizations.

Some feminist-informed discussions of modern witchcraft have entered the social science literature under the rubric "goddess worship," a term popularly interchangeable with "Wicca" "witchcraft," and, sometimes, "women's spirituality" or "women's mysteries." Carol Christ's "Why Women Need The Goddess" has found its way into Cole's All American Women: Lines that Divide, Ties that Bind (1986). Christ's feminist analysis of goddess worship, usually seen as a central feature of Wicca, examines the psychological and political implications of the traditional Judeo-Christian singular male godhead for women's perceptions of self in the West. She asserts that the function of the goddess can be thought of as:
1) the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power; 2) the affirmation of the female body and the life cycle expressed in it; 3) the positive evaluation of will in a goddess-centered ritual, especially in the goddess-centered ritual magic and spell-casting in women's spirit and feminist witchcraft circles; and 4) "a revaluation of women's bonds and heritage" (1986: 349-354).

Ultimately, Christ concludes that the symbol of the goddess has potential to serve women in their resistance to the "devaluation of female power, denigration of the female body, distrust of the female will, and denial of women's bonds and heritage that have been engendered by patriarchal religion" (1986, 357).

Porterfield (1987) would support this analysis of goddess religion or Wicca as empowering women; Wicca can be seen as a kind of feminist spirituality. Porterfield couches goddess religion (and I read here Wicca) in the framework of Anthony Wallace’s (1956) cultural revitalization model. She proposes that goddess religion and feminist Judeo-Christianity be regarded as two components of a movement she labels "feminist theology."

Although she regards feminist theology as a single movement, Porterfield identifies different prophets, in accordance with Wallace’s model, for each of its branches. Feminist scholar Mary Daly is the woman Porterfield identifies as the prophet of goddess religion. She supports her contention that Daly is the prophet of goddess worship by citing the dates of her early writings on woman-centered religion, as well as her "prophetic" style of presentation. Porterfield regards
Daly as responsible for the initiation of revivalist "goddess religion" or Wicca in America—for its vision, its direction, and its popularity.

Porterfield (1987) characterizes goddess religion as fitting the classic version of Wallace's (1956) model because it has arisen at a time of cultural turmoil and under the visionary leadership of Daly, who has served to present her disciples and followers with a "mazeway reformulation." Feminist Christians, under the leadership of Rosemary Radford Reuther, also hold dear a mazeway reformulation which makes more central to their religions women and the feminine, and which has been inspired by Daly work. Although there are important distinctions between between "feminist theologians" who follow Daly and those who follow Reuther, in the Porterfield analysis, their contexts and visions are, according to Porterfield, similar enough that they may be considered kindred features of one movement (1987).

Porterfield's analysis is derived from the writings of Reuther and Daly, although she uses some ethnographic data on witches from Starhawk's work (1979). Porterfield offers no ethnographic evidence to support her position that goddess religion is neatly characterized by the features of Wallace's model, or that Mary Daly is the charismatic prophet of "goddess theology."

Because this paper will assess the usefulness of Wallace's (1956) model in characterizing Wicca, I will briefly review its central tenets here. Wallace defines a revitalization movement as, "a deliberate, organized conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture." Revitalization, he specifies, is "a special kind
of culture change phenomenon: the persons involved in the process of revitalization must perceive their culture, or some major areas of it, as a system; they must feel that this cultural system is unsatisfactory; and they must innovate not merely discrete items, but a new cultural system, specifying new relationships as well as, in some cases, new traits" (1956: 256).

Wallace identifies five stages involved with the "processual structure" of revitalization movements. I offer capsulized versions of these below:

Stage I: Steady State: In this stage, "culturally recognized techniques for satisfying needs" effectively meet the needs of most members of society.

Stage II: Period of Increased Individual Stress: During this period, the recognized techniques for stress reduction and need fulfillment become increasingly satisfactory for individual members of a population (Wallace notes that these individuals may constitute a whole society or a "definable social group" within it); their stress increases as a result.

Stage III: The Period of Cultural Distortion: During this period, increasing stress, decreasing fulfillment, and individuals' perceptions that their social system is distorted by internal incongruity, "symptoms of anxiety over the loss of a meaningful mazeway," (the mental image of functioning society) become manifest. Wallace posits that at this point "disillusionment with the mazeway, and apathy toward problems of adaptation, set in."

Stage IV: Revitalization: Wallace says that revitalization movements may be either secular or religious movements which attempt to steer the society away from the destruction toward which it is heading, given members' levels of stress and apathy. He postulates that religious revitalization movements must perform at least six major tasks: 1) They must reformulate their vision of society by
rearranging various elements and subsystems of the existing system. Wallace holds that the new "mazeway" is usually originally conceived in the transformative, hallucinatory dream of the person who will become the movement's singular prophet; 2) The dreamer becomes a prophet by communicating his vision to others, making clear that "the convert will come under the care and protection of certain supernatural beings, and that both he and his society [sic] will benefit materially from an identification with some new cultural system; 3) An organizational structure develops, giving the movement shape: "as god is to the prophet, so (almost) is the prophet to his followers," in large part because of (his) charisma; 4) the movement adopts various strategies to adapt to the resistance it encounters; Wallace reports that in most cases it is the movement's prophet who determines the ways in which the movement's doctrines and strategies will be modified; 5) the new religion comes to be accepted by significant segments of the society, and individuals' stress is once again effectively reduced; if elements of the religion come to be seen as useful and effective at reducing stress in non-ritual contexts, it becomes integrated with various non-religious social structures; 6) When this occurs, the movement organization limits itself to the religious sphere of influence; becoming routinized, it no longer constitutes a revolutionary movement.


In contrast to Porterfield's analysis of goddess worship as conforming to the Wallace model outlined here, Matteson characterizes feminist Wicca as a multi-cephalous religious socio-political movement (1988). Although the writings of particular movement figures are used as references and resources by her informants, they are not seen as dogmatic, directive or necessarily inspiring imitation among witches. Matteson's (1988) conceptualization of Wicca as a "religious socio-
political movement" may be seen as superficially analogous to Wallace's general presentation of "cultural revitalization movements." Nonetheless, her characterization of Wicca as a multi-cephalous movement differs dramatically from Wallace's classic model, as well as from Porterfield's (1987) application of that model to Wicca or "goddess religion."

The nature of Wicca creates certain difficulties for the social scientist interested in investigating it for quantitative, qualitative, or theoretical analysis: Wiccans who practice in groups, known as covens or circles, usually meet in private homes, often in relative secrecy; they do not necessarily maintain affiliations with other groups or publicly visible pagan organizations, so their numbers are hard to measure; the diversity of their traditions makes it difficult to typify their practices, as well as their beliefs, beyond the most basic common principles; and, as always, the Western researcher, dealing with something "esoteric" in her/his culture of origin, must be wary to avoid seeing the expected. Given these challenges, it is not surprising that the social scientific literature on contemporary witchcraft, is marked by contradiction, definitional confusion, and methodological problems. This ethnography addresses these issues by presenting extensive ethnographic detail on a small number of witches representing several groups.

Before we explore the ethnographic data generated by this study, however, it will be useful to explore the literature generated by witches themselves about their religious beliefs and practices. We may then compare what witches say about themselves with that which social
scientists say about them, and compare internal movement literature with the behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes I have encountered among witches during the course of my fieldwork.

POPULAR LITERATURE

Much popular literature has been produced during the last decade by Americans who call themselves Wiccans, goddess-worshipers, and witches. On Hallow's (Halloween) 1979, two influential texts on Wicca saw their first publication. Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* has served many as a Wiccan primer. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshipers, and Other Pagans in America Today* represented the culmination of four years of research by National Public Radio reporter Margot Adler, herself a Wiccan priestess. Adler's work is a comprehensive national study of contemporary pagan sects, and, with its revision in 1986, remains probably the richest and most accurate report on American Wicca.

In her postscript/update to "Women, Feminism, and the Craft" in the 1986 edition of her book, Adler reports that perhaps a thousand covens have been founded in the United States in the last decade solely in response to *The Spiral Dance*, and claims that they reflect a remarkable and growing interest in witchcraft among American women. Adler suggests that the majority of these new covens exist to meet the expressed need of many feminist women for a spiritual politic in concert with feminist consciousness and activism. "It has become
clear," Adler says, "that many women regard political struggles and spiritual development as interdependent, and feel that both are needed to create a society and culture that are meaningful to them."

Adler identifies the following as the values central to general neo-paganism: spontaneity, animism, sensuality, passion, the goodness of pleasure, religious ecstasy, the goodness of this world, and the possibility of other worlds. Adler describes witchcraft, "or Wicca, or the Craft, or the Old Religion/s," as a specific neo-pagan nature religion which "has a specific history -- clouded though it may be -- and a specific way of being in the world." Thus, Adler differentiates witches/Wiccans from the broader category, "neo-pagan."

Traditional paganism, and traditional forms of neo-pagansim, center on male gods and female goddesses. While some goddesses may enjoy privileged positions over gods, it remains that traditional paganism recognizes a complementarity between male and female psychic and spiritual forces in the world. Wiccans, especially those who practice feminist witchcraft, often reject the traditional pagan construction of an essential balance between male and female, men and women, and have asserted instead the primacy of the female. Feminist Wicca often fails to acknowledge the male deity, the god; when it does, it is generally in ways which do not accord him status equal to that of the goddess/es (Adler, 1986).

Western monotheistic tradition may contribute to the conceptualizing of the goddess as a single entity with many forms. Like the feminist Wiccan concentration on the female, this represents a departure from older pagan ways. Historically, pagans have worshipped
a vast number of gods and goddesses regarded as individual entities, not as multiple manifestations of the same force (Adler, 1986).

Beyond this attention to the Goddess, Wicca, as a dynamic religion not characterized by a formal canon, formal leaders, common public institutions or organizations, or even standard or necessary rituals, is difficult to characterize in the "usual" academic ways. Despite the diversity in the religion, however, the numerous popular writings generated from within it, including Adler's work, point toward common core values of the tradition/s.

Adler (1986), Starhawk (1988), and Stein (1988), for example, seem to agree on the centrality to Wicca of the values identified hereafter. Prominent in the Wiccan construction of values is an apparently simple one: the valuing of life. The life-force is seen as fundamentally female; women are primary expressions of life. Consequently, the deity associated with the life-force is the goddess, an expressly female entity. The goddess is often referred to as the Great Mother, and her embodiment is understood to be the planet, as well as individual women and their life-forces.

The ramifications of the valuing of life as central to the religion are far-reaching. First, they result in an ideology which endorses respect for all life forms on the planet. Second, and consequently, given the state of the planet's ecology, they translate into religious concerns for the "natural environment." Third, this value introduces the ethic of helpfulness, supportiveness, and "doing good" through
religion. The Wiccan Rede, "an ye harm none, do as ye will," appears in virtually every publication authored by Wiccans about their religion.

Revering life, the planet, and "the goddess in every woman" holds implications for the ritual expression of the religion. For example, rituals are generally conducted according to the phases of the moon, which is regarded as female and intimately connected to women's biological cycles. Rituals sometimes consecrate "moon-blood" to the goddess; they usually contain physical elements of the natural world (e.g., rocks, feathers, crystals, bones, skins, gourds, herbs, etc.), and these are employed in the conduct of ceremonies (Adler, 1986; Starhawk, 1988; Stein, 1988).

Self-determination and autonomy stand as other important values in the Wiccan systems. The second phrase of the Wiccan Rede is "do what ye will." In the ideology of the religion, the official mandate to express one's will serves as the impetus for the formation of a great number of local covens with local traditions. Each woman or group of women adopts the central tenets of the religion and perhaps the central principles of the effective practice of the craft (and here I mean the principles behind spells, healing activities, etc.), and from here improvises and invents the Craft anew.

Much value is placed by Wiccan authors on the dynamic nature of rituals themselves; the participants in rituals are usually the people who have planned them, and they are also the people who may change them. The content of ritual -- ranging from personal healing to abolishing apartheid -- is left to the determination of the individual
witch or coven. The ideology of the religion asserts the trustworthiness and intelligence of its members to sensibly set their own spiritual agendas, and directs them to do so. As a safeguard, a caveat, or simple reinforcement, however, the "law of triple (or threefold) return" is as frequently cited as the Wiccan Rede. The law says that anyone working malevolent magic can expect to receive the force of her negative energy directed against herself, but, as reported in scientific accounts of Wicca, with triple the magnitude of her initial effort (Adler, 1986; Starhawk, 1988; Stein, 1988).

Apparently not in contradiction with the Wiccan assertion of autonomy, community is frequently cited as one of the values of the feminist Wiccan religion. Community is seen as enhancing the spirituality of the Wiccan practitioner. One of the activities frequently associated with Wiccan rituals is the "raising of power," a practice through which each individual's energy is melded with the energy of all other members of the circle in a directed manner and then released for use in attaining a particular goal (stopping the approval of a nuclear power plant, for example). Community is also seen as a source of protection against the discrimination and harassment often encountered by witches who are known as such (Adler, 1986; Starhawk, 1988; Stein, 1988).

In addition to these theoretical or philosophical values, there exist in texts about Wicca indications of certain Wiccan functional values; these are the goals of practicing Wicca. Again, as in any religious tradition, while these goals vary from individual to individual and sect to sect, they are generally identified as common
elements of Wicca. Personal transformation appears as central among the functional goals of Wicca. The nature of the transformation sought among contemporary witches is usually seen in the context of the patriarchal-industrial Western culture in which Wiccans live. Wicca is seen as "women's liberation theology" with the possibility of reconciling individual women with the feminine divine alienated from them by the patriarchy. Through personal transformation, social transformation focused on the re-establishment of the female principle of life on the planet will be accomplished.

Healing is a related functional goal of Wicca. Many rituals incorporate activities focused on healing; others are designed expressly for the purpose of healing. Individual women may be healed, as may friends, relatives, partners, and covens not participating in the ritual. Healing of the planet is a theme/goal common to Wiccan ritual as well. Healing may be seen as physical, psychic, or both.

In more explicitly feminist groups, personal transformation may ultimately refer to dismantling Western patriarchy through psychic, spiritual, and, sometimes, explicitly political means. While some Wiccan groups, especially those influenced by Starhawk's work, include men in their groups and acknowledge a male principle, feminist Wicca is usually seen as either actively destroying male dominance or simply displacing it by bringing into power another, more life-affirming ethos.

These are the beliefs, values, and practices of members of the Wiccan religious socio-political movement, as they are described in the literature created by members of the religion itself. Clearly, they
include some of the features noted by social scientists attempting to describe the religion, although the movement literature also challenges the features of reports and analyses from a number of academicians who have attempted to describe it without thorough grounding in ethnographic description. The witches' texts defy the classic anthropological definition of "witch;" not only do they fail to advocate using witchcraft for malevolent means, and instead encourage its use for what they define as socially responsible goals, they generally deny belief in the supernatural or supernormal, and instead believe in what they call the supranormal; they regard their goddess as immanent, of this world, and of themselves, and they say that the principles of their "craft" or "magic" are grounded in the natural world.
CHAPTER III

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF MODERN AMERICAN WITCHES

METHODOLOGY

I conducted my fieldwork among contemporary American witches from November, 1988, through June, 1989. Having acquainted myself with the popular literature of the religion during the fall of 1988, I began participant observation shortly after the Wiccan holiday Samhain, or Hallows, commonly known in America as Halloween. The main site of my study was a relatively large city by Midwestern American standards (population about 1.5 million in the metropolitan area). During the course of the fieldwork period, I included in my participant-observation a trip to a semi-rural village for an opportunity to observe a group of non-urban witches.

My original intention was to observe a number of groups of witches in their ritual practices, and, thereafter, to interview members of each group. Ultimately, I observed the rituals of three groups, and conducted interviews with members of five distinct groups. I also interviewed one witch who does not maintain an affiliation with a local coven, but who instead considers herself what is elsewhere defined as a
"family traditionalist;" away from her family, from whom she learned her craft, and uncomfortable with the practices of many neopagans, she practices as a "solitary" witch.

The majority of my participant-observation time, contrary to original plan, was spent with one coven. Serendipity (my informants might say "the Goddess of Serendipity) landed me my first coven experience among a group which officially defines itself as a "training/teaching coven." As well as maintaining a fairly stable group of core members, the coven describes its raison d'être as introducing the Craft, as they also sometimes call Wicca, to people interested in learning it. During one of my initial experiences with this group, the recognized leader, a high priestess, announced that she would soon begin instruction of neophytes. I asked if I might be admitted to the Beginners Group, and she granted her assent.

My field work, then, consisted of 1) participant-observation at "regular," non-training rituals, most of them conducted by group A, hereafter called Muses' Loom; two conducted by group B, Daughters of the Moon, which defines itself as a "closed coven," and which admits strangers rarely; and one conducted by group C, the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Coven, a rural group; 2) participation in the "beginners group" organized by Muses Loom, which met weekly from February through April, 1989; 3) formal interviews with seven members of group Muses' Loom, one member of group Daughters of the Moon, one member of group D, the Order of the Crystal Pentagram, two members of group E, the Coven of Eclectic Wicca, and the single aforementioned solitary witch; 4) informal conversations about the study with many of my interviewees and other
Wiccans during the course of the research; and 5) observation of three of my informants on a panel discussion on witchcraft before the introductory anthropology students I taught during the spring quarter of 1989.

Informant recruitment occurred through *in vivo* "snowball" networking. My informal announcements to acquaintances and colleagues that I hoped to do thesis research on Wicca resulted in the development of an informant network more vast than I could accommodate in the course of this project. To my surprise, informants seemed eager to participate in my study, to help me make connections, and to offer their time and expertise to me; it should be noted, of course, that it is likely I encountered witches who did not reveal themselves to me, so those who did may represent a special subset of the population of witches in the area.

Although I did not directly ask those I interviewed why they agreed to participate in the study, I suspect that there were numerous motivations for their doing so. Some clearly hoped that their perspectives, which they considered divergent from those of other Wiccans, would be represented. Some regarded themselves as experts with important information to share. Some, it is my impression, viewed being interviewed as a valuable act of confronting their own fears and reservations about being known as witches. Others, I believed, welcomed me as a potential new group member.

Fearful of imposing structure on a religion which has been frequently inadequately characterized in the scientific literature, I did not develop a set of formal interview questions, but instead
devised a schedule of "themes;" as a result, I think informants were more likely to offer anecdotes, and to fully develop their narratives about themselves and their religion, than would have been the case had I used structured interviews. Most interviews ran about one and a half hours and were tape recorded; one interview was not taped. The shortest interview lasted only 45 minutes, while the longest lasted three hours. Interviews were usually conducted in the homes of my informants or at mutually convenient local meeting places. I conducted one interview in my apartment.

INFORMANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Adler (1986) notes that although she was suspicious of the widely held popular conception of Wicca as a religious movement predominantly composed of middle-class white women, she found her informants to reflect the stereotype. My experience has to a great extent mirrored Adler's.

Although the composition of Muses' Loom fluctuates because of its work as a "teaching coven," the group recognizes 16 people in its current membership. Thirteen of these are women; three are men. Each of the men in the group is in a primary partnership (marital or co-habitational) with a woman in the group. Of the other ten, two constitute a couple, while others are single or maintain partnerships with people not involved in the group. One informant reports that among the 13 women in the group, five are heterosexual and the
remainder are lesbian or bisexual. This is an interesting feature of the group, especially considering that the sexual identity of witches has generally been unreported or unexamined in the academic literature. Two women in the group belong to Latin ethnic groups; the remainder of the members, men and women alike, are white Americans.

Adler (1986) and Kirkpatrick et al. (1986) differ in their assessment of the educational level of Wiccans; Kirkpatrick et al. report witches as more highly educated than the population at large, while Adler characterizes them as caring little for formal learning though much for self-education; Adler characterizes witches as avid readers.

The members of Muses' Loom seem to support both Kirkpatrick and Adler. The majority of group members hold undergraduate degrees. During my fieldwork period, one member earned a master's degree in a public administration field. One of the founding members of the group, a person key in early recruitment and, in fact, the person who served as my initial connection to the coven, holds a doctoral degree. Those members who do not hold degrees do not seem less educated than those who do; they, as reported by Adler, are articulate, intelligent people, and avid readers.

In terms of educational level and occupation, the majority of the members of Muses' Loom could easily be considered middle class; among them are a lab technician, a university educator, an administrative associate, two retail employees, a temporary worker, a bank employee in international exchange, and a general contractor. The majority live in rental homes or apartments.
I am aware of only one child among the members' households. One heterosexual couple in the group expects their first child to be born in the fall of 1989; the pregnancy's progress has been the focal point of much attention and interest by group members since its announcement during the winter. Although I do not have age data on all group members, the most are between their mid-twenties and mid-thirties, though at least one member is near age forty.

The religious backgrounds of my interviewees from Muses' Loom is predominantly Christian. The interview group includes members who were raised in households defined as Catholic, Lutheran, and Christian-ecclectic, as well as one defined as fundamentalist Christian and one defined as agnostic.

Daughters of the Moon, which at the time of my observation was composed of seven members, reflects many of the trends found in Muses' Loom, and in more clearly defined ways. All members of Daughters of the Moon are self-defined lesbians. All are white. All hold at least one college degree, and there are a number of advanced degrees held by group members, as well as aspirations for earning more.

Daughters of the Moon members are employed, for the most part, in white collar jobs: one is a professional writer, one a therapist, one a legal staff member, one an industrial psychologist, one a recently graduated social scientist seeking employment, one is a business owner, and one, the exception, is a construction worker. The youngest member of Daughters of the Moon is 26. the eldest in their late thirties or early forties. Among the group members are two couples; the three remaining women are single or in partnerships with women outside the
group. All define themselves as "in recovery;" all participate in Twelve Step programs for recovery from alcohol and drug addiction and/or childhood sexual abuse and/or "co-dependent" relationship patterns, etc. The group is regarded by members as the expression of the "higher power" central to Twelve Step recovery.

I observed the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Coven only once, and did not conduct formal interviews with group members. Informal conversations are the basis of my knowledge about the structure and composition of the group. The Stanton Coven constitutes a closed coven; unlike Daughters of the Moon, the nature of exclusiveness seems to center on numbers of participants more than on particular statuses or identities of those participants. Generally closed to men, the coven conducts "open" rituals on pagan holidays. It was one of these rituals which I observed. My familiarity with the local territory and the residents of the area allows me to make the following general assessment of the participants in the Stanton Coven's open ritual.

The majority of participants in the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Coven's open ritual were white; to my knowledge, only one person of color participated. The majority were women; of 32 participants, four were men. A good number of the participants, perhaps two-thirds, were students at the local liberal arts college. Several participants, including those organizing the ritual, were between the ages of 35 and 50. One third were lesbians. Fewer in this group than in others were white collar workers; nonetheless, at least three were recognized as people well known in the town.
I interviewed one member of the Crystal Pentagram, and was acquainted with the group as well through an ethnographic description produced for publication by my informant (Bado, 1989). This coven consists of three white women who are initiated into the coven, as well as a number of students seeking eventual initiation. The group is not exclusively female, and is described by my informant as similar in class, education, and occupational status to Muses' Loom and the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Coven above.

My two Coven of Eclectic Wicca informants are white, middle class, heterosexual business owners married to each other. The man's religious upbringing was in Judaism; the woman contemplated becoming a Carmelite nun before discovering Earth Religions. They are the High Priest and High Priestess of their group; the offices were handed down to them when the group's founder moved away from the area in which the group had been practicing for years.

The final member of my interview group, a solitary witch who defines herself as "hereditary Dianic" in experience and belief, is Afro-American. Like others among my informants, she holds a college degree. Unlike my other informants, she explicitly traces her religious tradition through her ancestors, particularly through her maternal relatives. She reports that while some of her relatives call themselves Christian, their Christianity incorporates their "craft." She says that her family encouraged her to cultivate her unique psychic and spiritual gifts, gifts similar to those of all the women in her family within memory.
In some cases, I use the "magical names" of my informants to identify them throughout the ethnography. In others, I have use pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Muses' Loom is the public name of group A, and I use it with permission. The other group names used herein are fictitious, although I believe that they convey the general feeling of the names of the groups with which I am familiar.

Throughout the ethnography, I shall use the terms "witch" and "Wiccan" interchangeably, in keeping with the practices of the majority of my informants. I use the term "pagan" to refer to spiritual practices outside the realms of institutionalized religions. The words "circle" and "coven" refer to groups of witches. "Circle" may also designate actual ritual space in which witches work. The context of this term should make its meaning clear.

RECRUITMENT

My informants became involved with Wicca in a variety of ways. The majority were introduced to covens by friends, lovers, or partners, a process Matteson (1988) has called "recruitment through extra-movement bonds." Feminist movement connections are critically involved in the recruitment of many. For example, Ell, a member of Daughters of the Moon, initially encountered Wicca during the period in which she began to identify herself as a lesbian-feminist:
I had hit an emotional bottom before I came out as a lesbian. And I remember praying to god: I said, "God, please help me"...and two weeks later I met all these lesbians, and how that relates to me about god was after I had come out...that's when I heard someone talk about god as being a female. The first time I heard that I thought, "This is it. This is what I've been missing." So I really thought that was for me, and it was really exciting.

Other informants encountered speakers on Wicca in their women's studies classes, and through such connections inquired about attending rituals. One informant, who joined a group as it was being organized, quickly recruited friends who shared her interest in "women's spirituality," as well as her reluctant Catholic-raised lover, who soon became a regular member of the group.

Although most initially encounter Wiccan groups via social networks, some make connections by responding to announcements of group activities published in pagan newsletters, journals, and the like. Clearly, the ways in which people are introduced to Wiccan groups reflect the structures, rules, and interests of those groups.

For example, Muses' Loom, as a teaching coven, makes itself visible in the local community by its willingness to educate outsiders, by its group involvement in political and social events, and by announcements
it runs in pagan publications, one of which the group itself produces. Muses’ Loom is identified as an "open coven." Daughters of the Moon, in contrast, is known as a "closed coven." Outsiders (new recruits, people with sincere spiritual interest in witchcraft, and sympathetic anthropologists) may attend rituals by invitation only, and may participate in additional rituals only if they enjoy the approval and confidence of all group members. Guests may attend only rituals designated by all members as "open rituals." Ell describes this process:

If somebody expresses interest...we share with them personally. We kind of let them know what’s going on and if they’re still interested in time, we invite them to (open) circle. Within the group, we’ve come to the decision that...we trust each other’s decisions about who to invite. For instance, because I invited you, people trust that I’m making a good decision...that I wouldn’t just pick some Jane off the street...If somebody has a problem with it, that’s their problem. They might want to share and let me know they don’t like the person, or maybe the person’s energy isn’t really great for the circle. Well, then I wouldn’t invite someone back...In order to be invited back, we’d have to see there’s some sort of seriousness, not in a dead kind of hard-ass seriousness, but interest in goddess worship, in worshipping the earth...That’s how people come to learn, at least through us.

Making a connection with a group is often reported by my informants as an important event in a longer process of religious seeking. Many report dissatisfaction in childhood or adolescence with the religious traditions of their families, a dissatisfaction which led them to explore various Western religions, non-Western religions and
philosophies, and the occult. Their dissatisfaction does not generally result in atheism; they long for a spiritual system, but cannot reconcile themselves with "traditional," institutionalized religions. Jack, a Muses' Loom member in his thirties, recounts his struggle:

Well, I started out, was born and raised a Catholic...if you're really into guilt, it was easy to stick with that religion. Since I wasn't into guilt and wasn't into dogma or the like, I find that I was a rebel against that...very early. I tried everything in the Church, though; I really tried it, really tried to believe in it. Couldn't get past any of the dogma or guilt.

The report of another informant, a woman belonging to another group, echoes:

Well, as a kid, I'd always wanted to believe in Jesus, and I really tried, but I couldn't. I really wanted to do what my girlfriends were doing...and I always believed in God in a sense, but I never really believed God could do anything in my life, and I felt separate from God.

Another woman from Muses' Loom, Moondragon, made more explicit the connection between her discomfort with traditional Western religion, its misogynist content, and the appeal of goddess worship:

I went searching for positive female role models in Christianity, and I found one, who was Ruth. And I did not consider Mary to be very positive, because she was too fucking self-sacrificing. And Magdalene was very brave, but everyone just kind of scammed out on her; how could she be positive? I mean...if God made us in His image, where is my image that I can be close to?...The goddess can have many faces and she can be...what you want and what you need, and she is a mirror, because you are the goddess, and we're connected to her in ways that you're never connected to the Almighty-Father-Hallowed-Be-Thy-Name.
Explorations of spiritual alternatives led many of my informants to libraries and bookshops where they first encountered writings about witchcraft. Books like Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* and Starhawk's *Spiral Dance*, as well as older texts written by Gerald Gardner (1952, 1959), inspired the interest of many to a degree which subsequently allowed them to accept opportunities to participate in witchcraft activities with enthusiasm.

Some trace their interest in witchcraft back to childhood, and use early interests and experiences to support their adulthood involvement with Wicca. One woman from Muses' Loom, Valery, reports:

One of the first books I ever read was about the Salem witch trials and old Tituba and the girls...I said, 'Wow, that sounds interesting,' so I would read everything I could in that library...And so I did a lot of reading like that in junior high...very intense...For a while there, me and my sister and another girlfriend, we played that we were witches because we always liked that idea. We never did bad stuff. But we did do one little thing...for people we didn't like, called the trip-and-fall spell. We'd look at them and say, 'Trip and fall, trip and fall.' And believe it or not, one time it did work, and we never did it again."

At one Daughters of the Moon ritual, a participant revered for her storytelling skill told a "True tale" about the first time she made a spell. Her story inspired others to share similar anecdotes, and left those without such memories feeling disappointed.

In addition to having notable interests in witchcraft prior to becoming Wiccans, many of my informants have longstanding attachments to science fiction and fantasy writing. This reflects several general tendencies among the Wiccans I have encountered: 1) a high regard for
creativity; 2) a pronounced interest in realities beyond those defined and prescribed by Western culture; and 3) a need to construct such alternative realities.

Some make a more explicit connection between their science fiction and fantasy reading and Wicca; during the course of my fieldwork, I received suggestions from more than one witch that I read Ursula LeGuin and Marion Zimmer Bradley. One woman, Moondragon, saw her interests in science fiction and fantasy as crucial to the process of discovering Wicca:

I'd always been interested in women's science fiction, women's fantasy, and by that time, I'd gotten involved in comic books and women's literature, per se...I was aware politically, mentally, and emotionally of women's spirituality. And WM (another woman) and I basically discovered this together, because we were going to the Women's Studies Library and we hit on some history, women's history, and we just took it from there.

In sum, witches' stories of their introduction to Wicca as a religion characteristically include the following components: 1) experiencing discomfort and dissatisfaction with traditional, institutional religions; 2) exploring religious alternatives, either through library or experiential research; 3) hearing about Wicca through friends, encountering literature about modern witchcraft, or some combination of these; and 4) making contact with witches' groups, either through social networks or pagan publications.

In addition, many report what could be called a "predisposition" to adulthood witchcraft. Support for this predisposition is constructed through stories of childhood interest in witches, witchcraft, and
spell-casting, and adeptness at employing the creative visualization and other-worlds orientation involved with appreciating science fiction and science fantasy writing.

The most notable exception to this pattern is the family traditionalist. Raised with Wiccan values and beliefs, early including "witch" in her identity, and constantly encouraged by family to develop her own special sensitivities and creative talents, the "hereditary" witch I interviewed felt no need to separate herself from her family's spiritual tradition. Therefore, the process of rejecting tradition and seeking out an alternative spiritual system does not characterize her experience.

It should be noted, too, that none of my informants is a "non-hereditary solitary" witch; such a witch, I postulate, follows the typical process I have outlined above, with the possible exception of seeking out group experience. Some solitary witches begin to practice solo after encountering Wicca in print; others seek out training from a coven or another solitary witch, then begin their own solo practices after an initiation.

THE TRAINING OF WITCHES

Although most witches I have encountered have asserted that initiation "does not make one a witch," the groups which have provided me with data all practice initiation, and see it as an important rite of passage in the life of a witch. The seeker who decides s/he would
like to be trained as a witch or would like to join a particular Wiccan
group generally undergoes a training period prior to initiation, which
can be seen as either a ceremony to formalize bonds with a particular
group or a ceremony to signify the initiate's commitment to witchcraft
in general.

Groups establish various traditions for training, initiation and,
sometimes, post-initiation rank achievement. Daughters of the Moon,
for example, subscribes to the motto "a year and a day" as a guideline
for setting initiation dates; the first year of a woman's involvement
with this group constitutes a trial period, for both the student and
the group.

Muses' Loom, the open, teaching coven, conducts initiation twice
annually, once at Samhain, the holiday commonly known as Halloween, and
also at Litha, the summer solstice. In order to prepare students for
initiation, the high priestess conducts "beginners' groups" between
initiations to introduce newcomers to the art, craft, and spirit of
Wicca. In the meantime, beginners participate in a full range of
activities undertaken by the group, including regular moon rituals,
special holiday rituals, coven meetings, and group outings.

Self-initiation has been reported of solitary witches; although
informally reactions to this are mixed, self-initiating is generally
regarded as theoretically valid, assuming that the self-initiated witch
subscribes to Wiccan philosophies. The family traditionalist among my
informants did not report an initiation; indeed, she expressed some
wariness about the practice; her brand of witchcraft does not require
"big, loud initiations."
Similarly, informants from the Coven of Eclectic Wicca present initiation as an interaction more between the student and the universe than an interaction between the student and the coven. The priestess of the Stanton Coven conceptualizes the process of initiation thus:

Initiations usually start out happening through ordeals to people. It is kind of funny, but once you start out seriously pursuing initiation, weird stuff starts to happen to you. Could be anything; usually it's real irritating things that start happening to you, like your car goes on the fritz, or here comes somebody you really didn't want to see, or you lose your job, or something like that. And the idea of it is that once you open yourself to initiation, the universe cooperates magnificently in providing you all the information you need. It...(hits you over the head) with a two-by-four 'til you wake up and say, "Oh, that's what I'm supposed to be doing. Oh, alright, let's just start dealing." and the ordeal quits. You get smart when you learn to anticipate the ordeals by making the interior changes before bad things happen to you.

More pragmatically, pre-initiates are trained in Wiccan ritual, craft, worship, and ethics during their initial association with a coven. As a member of Muses' Loom winter-spring 1989 Beginner's Group, I became familiar with the knowledge and skills with which the group expects a student to be acquainted before initiation.

Sunsnake, the High Priestess of Muses' Loom, conducted Beginners' Group meetings in her home on a weekly basis for two and a half months. Beginners were asked to donate ten dollars at the beginning of the training period to cover the cost of materials with which we would be provided, specifically, literature xerographically reproduced.
The training period began with a series of instructional rituals designed to give participants a general introduction to witchcraft as it is practiced in Muses’ Loom. Beginner’s group meetings provide practice in ritual organization and technique, including the use of ritual tools, introduced us to goddess worship and goddess symbolism, encouraged our development of meditation, trance, and creative visualization competencies, and sought to instill in us a clear understanding of Wiccan ethics and philosophy. The final sessions of the training period were presented as opportunities for each beginner to create and conduct a ritual. Accomplishing this assignment was presented as a prerequisite for initiation.

A group member’s status after initiation is, again, constructed differently from coven to coven. Daughters of the Moon, for example, considers all members priestesses with equal standing; all hold certificates of ministry from Covenant of the Goddess, a Wiccan organization, and are therefore eligible for state licensing as ministers. Muses’ Loom recognizes one high priestess; the remaining coven members are not distinguished from one another by rank. The Coven of Eclectic Wicca includes a designated priestess and priest; members of the group are considered to hold one of three degrees at any given time. The priest, Parker, explains:

*We use the term(s) "initiate," "adept," and "priest" rather than first, second, and third degree. I think that the degree system is rather arbitrary; it’s hard to say, and it doesn’t matter if someone recognizes you, if you are a priest, you are a priest, and that is based on your own internal development. The function of the initiate is to be a student, the function of an adept is to take what you’ve learned and use it, go out and be a practitioner, develop your own style.*
Although the groups with which I have come into contact treat training and initiation differently, it is clear that they hold in common an attitude that encourages the witch to regard training, skill-development, and independent learning about the craft as an ongoing process, not one which stops upon initiation into the craft, the coven, or the priesthood. Regardless of status, witches expect themselves and each other to be continually thoughtfully engaged in activities which will enhance their spiritual practices. Such activities include studying herbalism, studying and practicing holistic and spiritual healing techniques, conducting research on paganism, practicing mediation, and so on.

THE PRIESTHOOD

I have previously briefly described the leadership and formal status structures of the groups with which I interacted. The construction of roles and statuses within Wiccan groups is a process of much concern to witches, particularly among those who consider themselves feminists; feminist witches often criticize the traditional organizational model involving priestess/priest and followers. Issues of power, focused on formal leadership roles within groups, create challenges for witches hoping to construct more harmonious, egalitarian ways of life.

The members of Daughters of the Moon, all of whom are involved in Twelve Step recovery programs, consider the issue one of intimacy. An
informant from this group suggests that the designation of a leader hinders other members' participation and development. "If," she asks, "within my coven there is one leader appointed or two leaders, and that's it, if there's not shared responsibility, how does that affect my magic? If I'm not willing to take a risk, get out there and do it, how does that affect my magic?"

Clergy and non-clergy alike, in those groups which make the distinction, regard the priest/ess role as one of spiritual guidance, as well as organizational leadership. The priest of the Coven of Eclectic Wicca describes his perspective on the priesthood as a training office:

The function of the priest is like the function of chickens: to make more chickens... You step back and let these adepts do their thing, but at the same time you encourage them subtly, not directly, say, "Hey, you're doing a great job!" It's a more subtle thing. It's a magical connection, that if you're not sensitive enough, you may not be aware of it. But the function of a priest is to go back and try and live a normal life, even though you really can't.

The priestess of the same group provides a description of the meaning of the priesthood beyond the confines of the group:

It's putting, bringing, the magical current you carry and putting it to work in the mundane, everyday world, thus making the mundane magical. The hundredth monkey effect has something to do with all this stuff: if there are enough people who own true nature and the transcendence of duality and the essence of the universe, life will get better for all of us real fast. And this is what I'm pushing for in the priesthood: to wake up people, "You know, you're really good, start acting like it!" And, well, no more wars, no more cruelty or abuse, neglect, hunger, starvation...
Two newer members of Muses' Loom, which recognizes a single high priestess, describe the appeal of having a leader who serves as teacher:

Jack: Well, I suppose if you have an organized coven, it's important to have a main priestess...I think the priestess and priest aspect of it is important. I'm not far enough along the path to consider myself one or think that I could start a coven yet, but I think there's a time when I would probably break off and want to form my own little group.

Valery: I think of LS as a teacher, as a guide because she's studied so much more and she's been doing it for years. She told me...that her way is of course...not the only way, and the people she's learned from have done things differently...It's more or less as a guide, as a teacher, as door-opening: "Here, come in, read my books, learn my way, think for yourself."...She is the high priestess or priestess, or whatever you want to call it, because she has started it and everything. I think of her as a teacher or resource. Well, now, I want to know about this. She'll say, "I don't know much about it, but so-and-so does. Read their book."

Moondragon, who became involved in the Beginners Group of the same coven in the summer of 1987, and who has been a regular member of the group since, describes the role of her high priestess as guide, exemplar, and organizer:

She came from a much more Christian background than I did, and you are indoctrinated to show your pastor respect...I sometimes forget, but when I'm in the circle, what she says goes...Not because she's some perfect person, but mainly because...she's almost ten years older than I am, she's been involved in goddess worship a lot longer than I have, she has much more background, more experience and more confidence (as far as ritual
goes). She's also the type of person who has a very melodic, methodic, and trance-inducing voice, and you can find yourself able to trust her because you know her as a person...The more I know her, the more I can trust her, the more I get out of each ritual.

And I like having the high priestess for the fact that we're all pretty strong individuals and if we didn't have a designated high priestess we'd probably be going in all different directions and not be getting anything done...A high priestess, she's somebody who knows what the hell they're doing, because they can harness a lot of power through the circle...She can also find ways to mediate problems. I find talking to her out of circle about problems I have...helps a lot.

So you need a strong person, you need a person with a wide variety of backgrounds, because you get bored with someone who does the same type of rituals with the same thing, trying to do the same thing...You also have to have someone who's not going to have an ego that's going to get bruised easily, so that when someone comes with an idea and says, "I'd like to do this ritual," they can say, "Fine, no problem," because they have enough trust in themselves and the people in the circle...She's gotta have strengths, she's gotta have background, she's gotta have her head together, she's gotta have a basically non-malicious personality, and be able to handle the energy and the forces that she can conjure up."

Because the priestess and priest typical of older, more traditional covens have been regarded as symbolic of the goddess and god dyad traditionally worshipped by Wiccan covens, it is not surprising that leadership structures among the groups studied here seem to co-vary with the nature of the groups' ritual interests and sexual composition.

The Coven of Eclectic Wicca, for example, which recognizes both a priestess and priest, and includes male and female coveners, worships female and male deities; Muses' Loom, which is composed of a majority
of women, recognizes a priestess and worships male god forms only rarely. Daughters of the Moon, composed exclusively of lesbians, has little, if any, interest in worshipping male deities; this represents the most extreme deviation from traditional Wiccan practice, and the group's decision to acknowledge each member as a priestess with equal standing also represents the most radical departure from traditional group structure seen among these covens.

Clearly, Wiccan groups vary in their attitudes toward clerical structures and functions. Many Wiccan groups recognize priestesses and priests, but such ministers are not seen as necessary to a group's definition of itself as a Wiccan coven. Despite the wide differences among groups in their construction of clergy and their internal concerns about the meaning and value of priesthood, it has been clear to me that diverse groups readily recognize the validity of disparate structures and beliefs. Witches may, as individuals, question the worth of traditions different from their own; they may find others' organizational patterns or ritual practices odd or "unbalanced." Nonetheless, if a group adheres to the philosophy of non-malevolence, witches in other groups recognize it as being "of the Wicca."

THE SMALL GROUP STRUCTURE OF WICCA

Wiccan groups, referred to by their members as "covens" or "circles" are usually relatively small, frequently consisting of fewer than 20 members. Muses' Loom is composed at present of 16 members,
including students, initiates, and clergy. Daughters of the Moon consisted of seven members at the time of my fieldwork. It has been reported to me that the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Coven, the rural coven, consists of 13 core members. The Crystal Pentagram is composed of three initiated witches. Although a number of students are associated with this group, they are not considered group members and will not be until they are initiated.

Reasons for the small size of Wiccan groups vary. Some explain the small size of Wiccan groups as conducive to effective witchcraft; although involving many people in a holiday ritual may provide a change of pace, much more may be accomplished with fewer people working together intimately and directly over time, and see this as enhancing the group's magic.

One informant speculated that group size is best dictated by the space in which the group meets; it may be that no more than 15 can comfortably sit in a circle in the average pagan living room. One informant identified a more general function of the independent group structure of Wicca:

It's like the many arms of Kali. Even Wicca itself is not centralized...That's the great thing about Wicca...You can fall in with people you think are not healthy or not going in the direction you want to go, and you can just say, hey, you know, I like you...I've learned a lot from you...but I'm not going in that direction. I need to go, and I need to go my own way.

Although each group makes its own traditions, standards for membership, and internal structure, covens do have relationships with
one another. These develop through personal networks developed at pagan festivals, through invitations to "open" rituals, usually on the holidays, and through connections made in newsletters that circulate among groups. Sometimes groups across the continent conduct "synchronized" rituals directed at certain issues or events. One group may place an ad in a pagan publication announcing the date and local time of the ritual they will conduct and invite other groups to conduct rituals at the same time for the same cause.

HOW WICCANS SEE WICCA

One of my informants defined Wicca with the following succinct description:

It (Wicca) is a religion. It's an Earth religion. A goddess is worshipped. A god may or may not be. The god has nothing to do with the definition of the religion. The goddess is immanent."

Despite some disparity of opinion over the role of "the god" in Wicca, this characterization seems to reflect the attitudes of my informants as a group. Wiccans see Wicca as an earth religion involving goddess worship, nature worship, and magic broadly defined. They regard the religion as "free from dogma" and as representative of pre-Christian spiritual beliefs and practices. I examine the centrality of nature in the religion, as well as perceptions of the god/dess elsewhere in this paper. In the next two sections, I offer a
considerations of witches' perceptions of Wicca as rooted in pre-Christian religion and as a religion devoid of dogma.

WICCNANS' HISTORY OF WITCHCRAFT

The following interview with Jack and Valery typifies responses to my inquiries about the status of Wicca's historicity.

Ault: Do you think it's pre-Christian...

Valery: ...Definitely.

Jack: Yeah, 'cause when I first started this, all the books you could read said witchcraft started in the 1500's. Wrong. No. That's what the Christians want you to believe, that it started then, but it's way beyond that. The earlier the better for me.

Valery: I would tell me, well, they stole that from the pagans, you know...When I was little, Mommy just said you always dyed Easter eggs on Easter and you always had a Christmas tree, and then as you read and study, you think, "Well, that's where the idea of the Christmas tree came from." When I took Latin, they said that Christmas was based on the early Roman holiday, Saturnaya. So I checked into it and did a report on Saturnaya, and that was honoring Saturn, and then the part about the Yule tree, and I think, wow...they just took that for themselves and said, "Since everybody's used to it...we'll just say, 'Well, sure, have a tree, but it means something different now.'" It's easier to just take it over. And like with the Easter egg and halloween.

Jack: And over in England, all the churches that are built on old circles. It's amazing. You try and explain this to some modern-day Christian.

Valery: "No, no, no!" (Quoting the Christian)
Jack: "That is wrong, you're lying." Except for maybe the Jehovah's, who are the only ones who go along with that it's all pagan holidays. Well, right on, it's pagan holidays. Let's celebrate it.

Valery: But, oh, definitely pre-dates...When you see...prehistoric symbols of the goddess, right there, the early, early ones...It's an idea, and then, "Let's bastardize and take it."

Jack: Along the way somewhere some man, as much as I hate to admit it, it was some man who sat down and, "This isn't right. Okay, we'll write this in here. Okay, women should be subjugated." That's what happened. It's like some man decided, "Hey, this is getting out of hand. We can't control it as long as the women are controlling everything, so we'll change everything."

Valery: I think it definitely pre-dates so-called Christianity.

Jack: I do believe Christ was a great teacher and healer, but as far as the son of God and all that, I'm sure wherever Christ is right now, he's saying, "Goddess, what hath went wrong?"

Witches commonly report a history of "the Craft" which includes the features of the story above: goddess worship preceded Christianity; earth/goddess religions (read here "witchcraft") were persecuted by Christians during the institutionalization of Christianity and patriarchy; many witches and accused witches died as a result of perceptions of their threat to Christianity and patriarchy; witchcraft went "underground" for centuries, maintained by family traditionalists, clandestine covens, and ostensibly Christian groups whose beliefs remained essentially pagan; and Wicca resurfaced with legal liberalization in the West, particularly expressed in the repeal of the British anti-witchcraft laws in the early 1950's. Current practices (rituals, for example) are not seen as exact replicas of those of the
spiritual forebears.

Given the popularity of this history of Wicca, I frequently tried to gauge its importance as a foundation for participants' commitment to Wicca. Repeatedly I have been assured that if the Wiccan origin story were contradicted by archaeological or historical data, adherence to the religion would remain strong. Clearly, witches believe that their tradition is related in some way to pre-Christian spirituality; nonetheless, the focus of the religion is immediate, in the here-and-now. Wicca is seen as a religion with a long history as well as direct relevance to the contemporary world. One priestess, Nola, expressed this feeling as follows:

It draws from the pagan excellence of the Greeks and Romans...and it's also post-Christian, in the sense that...you've got Nature Buffs, but at the same time, I know a lot of witches who are computer whizzes and are very much into high-tech. And I think high-tech, rightly applied, is wonderful; it makes the Global Village, makes us aware of what's going on in other countries and continents...Nowadays, it does seem to be more post-Christian than pre-Christian. It's like the Russians seeing that communism doesn't work...I think a lot of people are seeing the major world religions, the traditional, organized ones, as being sort of spiritually bankrupt and not having anything for them.
WITCHCRAFT AS FREE OF DOGMA

Wiccan informants also frequently consider their religion against the backdrop of contemporary Christianity when they describe it as free of dogma. "The Pope" served as a point of reference in this regard during at least two of the interviews reported herein. The first presented below comes from an exchange between Parker and Nola:

Nola: There's no dogma or encyclicals...
Parker: Or catma.

Nola: ...Or catma. Or pronunciations from the Pope.

The second exchange comes from my interview with Jack and Valery:

Jack: It's (Wicca is) what you make of it and it's what you know individually, so...what right does Pope John have to be the head of the Catholic church? Or is it Paul? I don't know, see. Hell, I don't know.

Valery: John Paul.

Jack: George Ringo.

Valery: George Ringo. Pope George Ringo, yeah. He's no better, really, than anybody else, on the level of connecting. So, hey, let's all be popes. We can all be a pope, really.

"Freedom from dogma" finds many expressions. It includes eclecticism in the content of rituals, recognition of many valid possibilities for ritual behavior, tolerance of difference among individuals and groups calling themselves Wiccan, acceptance that each witch has much to learn (i.e., being less than expert is acceptable),
and a general attitude that witches can, should, and do "take what they like and leave the rest." This phrase, borrowed from the subcultural lexicon of Alcoholics Anonymous, is used by Wiccans participating in AA, as well as by Wiccans who have no affiliation with that organization, to describe the openness they see as characterizing the Wiccan religion.

One woman, one of the priestesses in Daughters of the Moon, describes her coven, its perspective on creating rituals, and her own sense of not needing to know "everything there is to know" in the excerpts which follow:

Our coven is very eclectic, as you've probably noticed...I mean, we just do whatever the hell we want to do, we draw from a lot of traditions. Some of them I wouldn't even know...It's just like something that works, so I don't make a big distinction about it. I wouldn't even know the damn difference.

There's a lot of things...like I said, I don't know the right answer to. Sometimes that makes me nervous. I'm taught to be a student. I have to know the book answer...I really am lacking, but that's been one of my lessons about my experience in circle with witchcraft...like I said, I just keep showing up. And it's how I've been able to learn, and I've really been against, for myself..."Now, I'm going to sit down and study this, I'm going to know all of the holidays and when they happen and what they mean, and this goddess does this and this stone does that, this is the colors of the chakra, they go in this order." I really don't know the answer to a lot of it.

But part of what I'm willing to do is just realize that I do (know some things) and that this is really enough, the way I experience it is enough. That's what magic and witchcraft remind me. It doesn't matter, so fuck it. It doesn't matter. You don't have to get it right. You don't have to know the answer. You don't have to know what this little stone is all about. You don't have to know
what to call this. Maybe I've gotten that belief out of the way we do ritual, that nothing that we do in the ritual can be wrong, that there's no right way to do it, that we don't have to do it just right. And I've been to things that were like clockwork, and I think a lot of people (who) participate in ritual that way are afraid to expand. I just think, oh, that's so closed. That to me is not what the experience is all about.

Two members of Muses' Loom express the eclectic nature of their Wiccan spirituality, as well as their disdain for dogma, in the following exchange:

Valery: So, see, with studying Wicca, you can use other aspects and work them into whatever you do. And it's not like, "I'm Lutheran, that's Catholic, we're never going to do that because we're Lutheran, and vice versa." You can pick what you want from the different things and make it fit for you.

Jack: Yeah, you take what you want and leave the rest. You know, you take a little bit of this and a little bit of that. If you like a little bit of Hindu, well, then, you take a little bit of that.

Valery: So, you're not limited. You're limitless... He's exactly right, you know: you can pick from this and use it, and you know, it's just, it's comfortable. You can just pick what you like and use it, instead of having it forced down your throat; "You have to do this, you have to do this, you have to do this."

Moving outside the religion and its membership, most Wiccans with whom I spoke seem reluctant, not surprisingly, to "force" their religious identities on others. Ell describes this as an issue of "service," as well as an avoidance of rejection or discrimination:
How can I be of service to the goddess, how can I be of service to other people? When I'm doing one, I'm doing the other. And sometimes to be of service does not mean to go around saying that I'm a witch and freaking people out. And I don't need to put that kind of pressure on myself, either, because it's very painful, and I've experienced that.

A philosophy of tolerance and acceptance toward other religions also pervades Wiccan ideals. Clearly, negative comparisons with Christianity are often employed in descriptions of Wicca. Nonetheless, I have consistently heard stray disparaging remarks about "Christians" quickly disclaimed during Wiccan gatherings. Despite the obvious value witches assign to "the Wiccan way," they do not tout it as the "only way." Ell sums this up in the remarks below:

I'm not so concerned about what the fuck you call it. I could care less. Somebody could be a Christian, and if they were doing for their life, in their life, the healing and the kinds of things I see as magic, I don't care what the fuck she calls it...So I don't think Wicca is the end-all and be-all. I don't think that it's the only thing. In fact, I would be very opposed to the opinion that it is, or to people who want to believe that it is, or that there's only one way to do magic, that there's only one way to do healing. I think that's bullshit. So I think that it's one of many, and that all these things come together and are transforming people and people's lives and the earth, healing the earth.
All of my informants agree that Wicca is an "Earth Religion." The planet, its ecology, and the place of people in nature are central concerns of Wicca. The planet is frequently characterized as "the goddess" or "the mother," and witches criticize what they see as Western capitalist patriarchal desires for power over nature. My informants work to conceptualize people in nature, or as part of nature, and reinforce this effort with support from spiritual traditions outside the scope of white, Western, male-dominated institutionalized religions. For example, casual as well as formal references are made by Wiccans to Native American traditions which regard human beings as not separate from nature, and which are understood to regard harming the planet as harming oneself.

The centrality of nature (i.e., the non-technological environment) in Wicca is visible in many features of religious ritual, as well as in the personal beliefs and political activities of individual Wiccans and Wiccan groups. I will consider each of these areas. My discussion of "nature" in ritual will be brief here, but extended in another section. Ritual areas, sometimes called "altars," vary in degree of elaboration, but usually minimally include representations of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

During the course of my fieldwork, I have observed the ritual use of fire (both that of candle light and open outdoor flame) water, salt and incense, clay goddess figures, wooden and metal wands, feathers, animal bones, gourds, antlers, hens' eggs, marine shells, paper, herbs,
drums hewn from logs and covered with animal hide, seeds, animal pelt, sticks, charcoal, and a wide variety of gems and minerals. Coven members frequently give each other gifts consisting of such items.

The "earth magic," the "work" of witches, involves using natural tools, as well as spiritual/bodily energy, to effect particular goals. For example, one may make an herbal amulet to draw money, or carry crystals "charged" with the circle's energy for protection, or practice herbal healing or midwifery or divination in conjunction with Wiccan religious commitments, knowledge, and philosophy.

While practitioners of Wicca seem constantly to be elaborating or modifying the rituals and "spells" of their religion, or creating new practices to suit witches in the modern age, the antecedents of Wiccan practices are thought to be grounded in the necessity of people living in earlier times to understand and make use of the natural environment. The family traditionalist with whom I spoke described the history of her family's craft in these terms:

To give you some examples of things that people in my family do and have done: We're midwives. Dousers. And herbalists. Seers. Most of us can grow anything; stick it in the dirt and it's gonna pop up. Okay. Or what you might call an animal caller, someone who can go into the woods and call animals for, you usually do it when you're hunting. Or weather calling, or weather prediction, things like this...So our craft is based on function...It seems when I look at a lot of craft today, it's very...symbolic. And it's very, almost, dreamlike, and sort of -- what's the word to use? Fey. Or something ephemeral. We're very...practical. Though it's getting less and less so, because there's no need for people to go out into the woods and call animals, or with modern medicine, there's not as much, not as much need for healers.
The belief that Wicca, as a tradition within more general paganism, reflects the needs of historic or prehistoric people living rural lifestyles is widespread. This belief seems fundamental to witches' understanding of Wicca as an "Earth religion," and one deeply rooted in pragmatism.

I will elaborate elsewhere on the perceptions of deity/deities in Wicca, but in order to continue my discussion of the place of nature in witchcraft, I must note here that the Wiccan goddess is generally regarded as nature. To worship the goddess, then, is to worship this planet (as well as others) as part of nature; to integrate the Wiccan religion into one's life involves practical attention to conservation of the earth's resources. "The Charge of the Goddess," a prosaic invocation widely used in Wiccan circles and found in Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (1982) eloquently conveys the conception of goddess as nature:

I, who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe. From me all things proceed and unto me they must return.

One man I interviewed expressed this understanding of goddess, and its connection to political commitment, in the following way:

How do I want to put this? I wouldn't say I believe in goddess. I just know goddess exists because I know the planet exists, and I know that is where goddess is, is the planet...With all the things going on in the world out there...of all the
things you could be into and stand up for. I think the most important thing is the planet... If you're going to take a stand on something, take a stand on the planet, because everything else will take care of itself once the planet is together.

Worshipping the goddess, worshipping the Earth/mother, creates for the witch an imperative for action. I have observed expressions of worship of the Earth/mother in several forms beyond explicit ritual. I can analytically separate these expressions into three categories: 1) education, 2) collective action, and 3) individual responsibility. Religious ceremonies constitute a fourth category.

Readers should note, however, that what I will call the Wiccan worldview does not necessarily impose such analytical distinctions on these activities; the word "ritual" is employed broadly by witches. In discussing ritual, witches again frequently refer to the Charge of the Goddess: "All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals." Thus, protest marches, bardic circles, love-making, and conservation activities have been described to me at various times as "rituals."

Consequently, the categories of expressions of ecological concern I supply here are externally imposed ones. Nonetheless, I think that the presentation of Wiccan nature-oriented activities in such a structured way will assist the non-Wiccan reader in understanding the pervasiveness of nature-worship in the religion. I shall provide brief examples of Wiccan nature worship as expressed in education, collective action, and individual responsibility below. My discussion of Wiccan ceremonial ritual elsewhere in this paper should make clear the centrality of nature in religious rites.
Nature education takes place in a variety of ways among Wiccans. Groups frequently organize study groups around topics related to herbalism, herbal healing, and the use of gems and minerals in healing and other ritual work. Groups organize trips designed to educate members about the natural environment. For example, one group with which I am acquainted organizes "nature walks" with the intention of increasing members' familiarity with woodland flora and fauna. During my fieldwork, this group also made an outing to a local gem and mineral show; group meetings immediately following this event served as forums for members to share stones they acquired at the show and to discuss the physical and magical properties of these acquisitions, as well as the uses to which they might be put.

Nature education also occurs less formally, as members share information with one another. Not infrequently, members of Muses' Loom present newspaper clippings related to environmental topics to each other at gatherings. Such consciousness-raising usually carries with it suggestions for ritual and/or political interventions in situations which threaten the natural environment. During the period of this study, this kind of education occurred around Secretary of the Interior James Watt's sale of national reserve land to industry and about the Exxon oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska.

At this juncture, the conception of the planet as goddess becomes germane to the discussion in another respect: the Wiccan reverence for the Earth/Mother inspires concern not only for nature, but for the feminine as well. Hence, Wiccans devote much time and energy to understanding and improving the situations of contemporary women.
While Wiccan interest in women might initially seem to require strict conceptual separation from Wiccan interest in the environment, I contend here that within the philosophy internal to the religion, the two do not exist as distinct categories. The central position of the Earth/mother/goddess in the religion creates the feminine, the planet, and human women as metaphors for one another; to love the goddess is to love the planet as a woman and to love womankind as the goddess. Earth religion considers humanity part of nature; goddess religion constructs both the planet and women as quintessential expressions of the feminine divine.

Consequently, "women's issues" receive much attention from Wiccan circles. During the time of this study, Muses' Loom's educational activities centered on women ranged from informal discussion of current political events like the United States Supreme Court's consideration of a case which potentially threatened legal abortion in the country to the organization of a "BloodLodge," a day-long ritual and workshop focused on women's "bleeding times."

Collective action as the expression of nature worship among Wiccans also takes many forms. One coven with which I am acquainted undertakes various collective efforts focused on improving the environment and the lot of women. For example, during the time of this study, the group gathered clothing and donated it to the local women's shelter, amassed aluminum cans from individual households for recycling, and, on the evening of one new moon, attended a "take back the night march," a political march organized to bring attention to the issue of sexual assault against women.
Individual efforts to "heal the planet" also take many forms. Some see the essence of healing the planet as lying in personal transformation. One woman, a witch in recovery from alcohol and drug addiction, elaborates on this in the interview excerpt below:

I was a very angry person. I was one of the women among many who would march in the street shouting for social change. And then I got sober, and people said, "Oh, that politically correct shit...just stop that shit." A lot of the women I met when I was first sober...had been in the same place I was, but found it didn't really work, and are now using other tools for transformation. And I think what was true for me then and what was happening in the sixties was everybody was marching around demanding this and that change, but not looking within and doing that personal transformation and healing. And that is what I see as magic...It's more about what I'm doing, and through that I'm able to help heal the world. I heard someone in a meeting say once, "Well, you know, the only piece of the world that I can heal is myself." That's my little piece of the world, is me...I really believe that, and I take that with me in my spirituality..

For others, involvement with Wicca leads to increasing acceptance of an onus of responsibility for the planet's ecology. I present the following interview excerpt to demonstrate this connection. Although the passage is lengthy, I find it particularly telling; the speaker's introduction of the topic of conservation occurs as a spontaneous digression from his consideration of a question I posed about the status of Wicca as a pre-Christian religion. The excerpt begins with a description of a ritual:

There's a big circle, and everybody's drumming and hooting and hollering, it's a full moon night, and I'm just sitting there and trancing out on what's going on around me, and I swear it could've been a
thousand years ago...And then it felt like it was a thousand years in the future. It was just like all the different planes of times existed at the same time...It just seemed like, it felt ancient...but it was right, and it was right where I wanted to be. It's getting to me...before it was just something I did on a full moon only, but now it's become a way of life. It's like, well, you know, if you're going to do this, well, then, all this plastic crap you gotta stop buying, because that's nothing but poison for the planet, too, so I find I don't buy nothing wrapped in plastic anymore. And then you find that eventually I drive my car and I'm thinking, man, this nothing but burning up dinosaurs. I guess I shouldn't be burning up so many of them, because it's not going to be around for so long. And I...don't use so much gas. It just connects. It's really amazing to me.

All of the people who participated in interviews for this research expressed concern for ways in which they might allow the nature-worship central to their religion to pervade their lives. Wicca clearly extends beyond monthly ritual gatherings in the lives of my informants. One informant voiced the goal shared by many: "My challenge," she said, "is to integrate it (Wicca) into my life and all my daily affairs." Such integration takes the forms described above: education of the self and others, participation in transformative collective action, and the undertaking of activities expressive of individual responsibility for planetary healing, as well as involvement with religious rites focused on the worship of the planet and its expression in the Wiccan pantheon.
THE GOD/DESS OF THE WITCHES

Wiccans worship an "immanent goddess." Sometimes they also worship a god. I have never observed an invocation of the god, so I limit my discussion here to the goddess, with the exception of a few initial remarks about informants' attitudes toward the god.

We have seen Sunsnake describe Wicca as a religion with a definition which "has nothing to do with a god." Attitudes of witches toward the place of a god in the religion vary. Some groups, like those with which I have most closely associated, feel that the god offers little to their spiritual practice, though they recognize his existence. Consequently, they rarely or never invoke the god. Others feel that to ignore the god is to ignore an essential polarity between male and female and, consequently, to create an unbalanced spirituality. One informant, new to the religion, makes the following observation on this issue:

Some people say...goddess only. Forget all the others, goddess, goddess, goddess only...That might be because the goddess has been put down or subjugated for all this time, and now they say, now it's her turn...that's fine too, but there are other entities; there are gods, that if you go along with that plus and minus, positive/negative, yin/yang...the balance...there are two sexes...it's just you can't rule one out completely. So...fine, go ahead and do it: I like goddess, she's good to me. But that doesn't mean that later on I'm not going to want to appeal to one of the others...Like..."Hey, Pan! Yo, Pan," you know.

I noted earlier that the clerical structure, as well as the degree to which worship of the god was integrated with worship of the goddess
in the covens studied, seems to reflect the sexual composition of those groups. Some participants of Muses' Loom have suggested to me that as increasing numbers of men become affiliated with the coven, which originally involved only women, rituals will increasingly include male forms of deity. Says Moondragon, "I imagine we'll be seeing more of the Summer Lord."

While the degree of inclusion of the god varies, the goddess holds a central position in the religion. Even so, conceptions of the goddess and witches' experiencing of her are difficult to typify. Generally, the goddess is described as "the goddess (or The One) with many names, many faces." The many names and faces of the goddess are referred to as "aspects," and some groups focus more on particular aspects of the goddess than on others. Dianic covens, for example, emphasize the goddess Diana or "the Dianic aspect" of the goddess. The covens with which I have worked all consider themselves "eclectic" covens; as such, they invoke a variety of aspects of the goddess.

Aspects of the goddess generally involve the names and features of goddesses worshipped or acknowledged by various religious traditions in various cultures throughout human history. Although witches say that Wicca's roots lie in Celtic tradition, eclectic witches acknowledge and invoke aspects of the goddess derived from other areas of the world. During the course of my fieldwork, I have participated in rituals which invoked Kali, a Hindu goddess capable of both destroying and giving life, Hecate, the Greek goddess of darkness, and Kwan Yin, an Asian goddess who relieves suffering by assuming it, and who cultivates virtue of various sorts in her followers, as well as others.
Sometimes, witches merely call upon the goddess as "Goddess," without identifying a particular aspect to be invoked. In this general case, the witches often perceive of "Goddess" as the three-fold goddess, Maiden, Mother, and Crone. Maiden, Mother and Crone reflect the stages of a woman's life-cycle, as well as the phases of the waxing and waning moon.

One of my informants used the image of one aspect of the goddess to demonstrate that the vision of the goddess of many names and faces allows Wicca to be accessible to a wide range of people:

Women's spirituality is like Kali, the many-armed goddess; there's an arm for everybody. The goddess can have many faces and many names, and she can be at that time what you want and what you need.

Common in witches' descriptions of the goddess is the sense that the goddess is immanent. For my informants, this seems to mean that the goddess is experienced in the present, in the material world as well as the psychic world, in the self and in others, and as a very accessible spirit. The goddess is nature, the goddess is self, the goddess is universal, and the goddess is individually constructed.

Moondragon describes her experience of the goddess:

We're connected to her in ways that you're never connected to (Christian God). And I understand a lot more because she is more like a Mom, because moms will back off and let you go... and just grind their teeth while you fall down and make these almost life-threatening mistakes, but she's gonna let you do them... At the same time, when I need you, I need some strength, I need some help, and that's what she's there for.

I'm a Gemini, so I see her with wings. I see her at times with wings. Whatever I need her to be at
that moment, whatever she needs me to see her as, because it is two ways. Very much shamanic African, as opposed to -- I love Magdalene, but I could never see my goddess that way...Again, that goes back to too pure to touch, too elevated to get near to, and I could never...someone I need as much as I need my goddess, I could never imagine (like that). She's also a little bit overweight.

The importance of a witch's ability to identify with the goddess carries practical importance, in terms, for example, of political action to save the planet/goddess/mother from destruction, as well as spiritual and psychological significance. One woman compared this aspect of Wicca to Judeo-Christian concepts of god-as-other:

In a lot of religions the idea is that the human is separate from god...and that is what makes us evil. And so the point is to be with god...I see the reason why all these things (against earth and goddess) are going on is that we're separate from our humanness in that when we are with our creator. We are with our higher power. And so, it's not that we are fixed separately from god. We weren't born separate from the goddess, but when we're so out of touch with the earth that gives us everything, we do crazy shit...And that to me is what my addiction is all about...And that's what I think I learned in this culture, this society, is my addiction...Is to keep me away from my god, to keep me away from my magic, my inner knowing, my spirituality.

Another Wiccan, Jack, describes the immanence of the goddess as allowing for a more egalitarian relationship between himself and deity than would be possible in other religions:

When you go to worship, it's like, I'm giving my emotions to you, to you, to you, but I'm not getting nothing back...When you're in the circle, you always get something back, you always feel like goddess is there...
To worship the goddess is to worship the planet and to experience oneself as part of the "natural divine." The idea that humanity constitutes part of nature (i.e., humans are not above or separate from nature) and that nature and the goddess are one, allows the witch to see and experience goddess in a very immediate way. Jack says:

I can't imagine wanting to believe in something that's out there, when you could believe in this, in nature, in the earth. It's funny: it's like everything else is a question of faith, you know. If I have faith in anything, it's in myself...and knowing that, just knowing that goddess exists here and now, and we're just part of it...

The immanence of the goddess inspires calls to action to save the planet, to improve the status of women, and to create personal transformation in concert with the conception of goddess within. In addition, the presence of the goddess in the modern world inspires the constant revision and elaboration of witches' visions of the goddess. A good example of this is to be found in the good-humored "new myth making" inspired by Morgan Grey Julia Penelope's Found Goddesses (1988).

"Found goddesses," as opposed to "lost goddesses" are aspects of the goddess newly discovered as useful to witches in contemporary society. One of the most popular among my informants is Asphalta, whose description appears in Penelope's book, and upon whom I have heard informants call spontaneously on a number of occasions:

Asphalta, Asphalta, full of grace,
Help me find a parking space.
Found goddesses illustrate the idea that Wicca is a flexible, adaptive, creative religion, and its understanding of the goddess, while grounded in the goddess traditions of many of the world's cultures, focuses on life in the contemporary world. The goddess of many names and faces, witches say, transcends culture and time.

WICCAN RITUAL

The Wiccan ritual cycle contains sabbats and esbats. Sabbats mark the moments between seasons. Witches consider the closeness or distance between earth and sun at these moments significant for the extremes in darkness and light associated with them, and for the changing distances between the material and spiritual plane marked by them. Eight sabbats, Winter Solstice, Candlemas, Spring Equinox, Beltane, Summer Solstice, Lammas (First Harvest) and Samhain (Hallows or Halloween) constitute the holidays on the Wiccan "Wheel of the Year."

Esbats, rituals between the holidays, occur in a variety of patterns. Daughters of the Moon, for example, meets every Sunday night. Having divided the year into "Witchets," a term members coined for the periods from holiday to holiday, they meet weekly but perform esbats bi-weekly, using the weeks between rituals for study groups and "processings," during which they address coven issues.

By contrast, lunar phases determine Muses' Loom meetings. On full moon nights, the coven conducts open rituals for men and women; women-only healing rituals take place on nights of the new moon. During the
course of my fieldwork, this schedule sensitized me to the phases of the moon; to my surprise, the appearance of the planet became something of a call to meeting. Now, knowing my way to the appointed place, I believe I could find my way to Muses' Loom meetings without aid of written calendar or clock, should I so desire.

In addition to these regular rituals, Muses' Loom often conducts additional ones oriented to particular goals or events. For example, "birthday rituals" occur on occasion, as do social change rituals coordinated with those of other covens and solitary witches across the continent. Beyond these, individuals conduct rituals in their own homes for a variety of purposes, as they see fit.

Some witches do not conduct formal rituals with great frequency. The solitary family traditionalist I interviewed, for example, reports creating explicit rituals only upon occasion, usually in thanksgiving, although she says her family usually holds gatherings at the time of the sabbats, at which they catch up with one another and eat a lot, a tradition she considers "holiday ritual."

Including such exceptions, the ritual lives of my informants seem full and rich. Witches who enjoy ritual constantly create and recreate ritual ceremonies; although rituals may resemble one another in structure, no two are ever the same, an expression, informants say, of Wicca's freedom from dogma.

It is beyond the scope of this report to provide elaborate detail about Wiccan ritual; it is beyond the scope of any report, I think, to provide a comprehensive and accurate description of Wiccan ritual, given the dynamic nature of the religion and the processes of
elaboration constantly affecting the content of Wiccan ritual, as well as the ritual variations produced by individual styles, skills and preferences. Nonetheless, in this section of the thesis I attempt to provide the reader with a rudimentary understanding of the most predictable structure of Wiccan ritual, and to suggest the scope of the content such rituals may involve.

The fundamental goal of the Wiccan ritual is to create a space for its participants between "the two worlds," the seen and the unseen, the material and the spiritual, the world of form and the world not in form. In this space, one may see what one may not normally see, understand what may not usually be understood, and may influence the world of form in ways not possible when one is less consciously "between the worlds." In this space, a witch's ritual work is conducted.

Ritual areas vary in size, permanence, and degree of elaboration. Some groups always met outside; others rarely do. During the course of this research, I attended one outdoor ritual, conducted by the more rural witches I visited. I speculate that in this part of the Midwest only the most hardy conduct rituals outside in the inclement weather of winter, and that in the city, only those privileged enough to have secluded backyards take the liberty of working outside frequently. When the weather is warm enough, the city groups with which I have associated do make efforts to organize ritual meetings in private yards and city parks.

Altars are usually temporary. Witches do not build churches for themselves. Some create altars in their homes, and these remain intact
over time, but can usually be disassembled quickly and easily. For example, an altar may be a table upon which ritual materials reside. Some designate one room in their homes for ritual use. Although I have seen photographs of permanent stone altars, I have never encountered one. Those Wiccans with whom I am acquainted an create altars anew with each ritual.

Witches mark off ritual areas with circles in mind. Solitary witches cast a spiritual circle around themselves in Wiccan ritual; covens generally assemble in the circles and cast the ritual circle around themselves. I will discuss the casting of the spiritual circle below; for now, suffice it to say that ritual areas need to accommodate physically the number of people involved in a ritual when they organize themselves into a circle.

The two groups with whom I have participated in rituals indoors use white cloth squares, roughly five feet long and wide, to designate the place of the altar and the circle around it. In one group, people sit outside the edges of the cloth during ritual. In the other, people customarily sit on the cloth's edge, space permitting. If the assembled group forms a body too large to fit along the cloth's periphery, or if dancing or other activity which would irreparably damage the material is planned, the coven may dispense with its use. Such a cloth is not necessary for the ritual.

Such cloths may be embellished in a variety of ways. One I have seen carries on it an encircled, embroidered pentagram, a common symbol in witchcraft. Another group made colored triangles, one for each member of the group, which they lay atop the cloth so that narrow
points meet in the center, forming a colorful design representing each member's connection to the goddess and to each other.

Witches usually create their altar per se in the center of the ritual area. Usually, the altar consists of representations of the four elements, earth, air, water, and fire, associated with the four cardinal directions, north, east, south, and west, respectively. In the center of these usually resides some representation of the goddess or an aspect of the goddess and, possibly, the god. These markers of the directions and the goddess will become enriced by the coven (or by the circle cast by a solitary witch) during the ritual. I saw one deviation from this pattern at the outdoor ritual I attended; there, the ritual area, much larger than the circle of participants, was marked by four altars far beyond the ring of people assembled around a central fire.

Various materials suggest the elements. I offer a brief description of a few, noting that the possibilities seem quite vast. Witches traditionally use salt in the north to signify earth. I have seen rock salt used there, as well as crystals and other stones, seeds, and a pair of antlers. Incense frequently represents air in the east, as do bells, feathers, and flowers. A candle may represent fire in the south, as may things forged of fire; I know one man who uses his silver wedding ring "forged of fire and passion" to mark the south. Water in containers, shells, and figurines of mermaids, frogs, and the like can appear in the west as representations of the element water.

The goddess may be represented by a wide variety of things, depending on the aspect invoked, the season at hand, the materials
available, and the aesthetic sense of the person arranging the altar. Sometimes statues of the goddess, stand, sit, or lie in the center of the altar. In one spring equinox ritual, I observed the fertility of the goddess represented by a basket of eggs with a candle centered in them. Perhaps the most common representation of the goddess is a candle or group of candles.

Sometimes ritual areas are much more elaborate than this; the outdoor ritual I attended included an ornate altar to the spirit of each direction, as well as a fire in the center of the ritual area. One of the simplest altars I have seen consisted of a crystal plate upon which a pentagram had been outlined in fluorite crystals around five small candles representing the elements and the goddess. Such an altar has the advantage of mobility; it can easily be moved from the center of the circle after the ritual has begun, should witches need the center space for activities like "trance dancing," or for lying down during "spirit journeys" into the Other World.

I must note here that while these material altars are common in witchcraft, witches do not consider them absolutely necessary to carrying out rituals. The elements, the directions, the circle, and the goddess may be envisioned by the witch, and the ritual as effectively executed as with the use of material trappings.

To begin a ritual, covens gather around the altar. Sometimes this is a matter of someone giving a signal that it is time to get started and people begin meandering over to the ritual area. Sometimes, groups have particular ways of entering the ritual area. For example, people may line up single file according to some criterion (e.g., age) and
form a procession into the ritual area. In any case, I have never
known of a ritual to start promptly upon the appointed hour. I have
never observed circles more than one person deep, though some circles I
have seen have included 50 people.

Inside, people sit on the floor in the assembled circle. Many
remove shoes, to increase their connection to the earth, as well as
non-ritual jewelry and eyeglasses because the metals in them may
"interfere" with one's reception of earth energy. Because winter wind
and rain blessed the outdoor ritual I attended, nobody in attendance
sat down, though one woman, suffering a back injury, knelt on the ground
to relieve the pain of standing. Needless to say, participants wore
heavy clothing -- military jackets, rain gear, heavy boots, and gloves.

Much has been written about witches working "sky-clad," or nude. I
hear reports that some covens exclusively work unclothed; nudity is
considered to reduce class inequities between people, to relieve them
of the defenses and pretenses of modern living, and to signify freedom,
as well as to increase their connections with the natural world.

I have not observed such practices, although at one ritual
conducted during hot weather, two women and one man discarded their
shirts and danced bare-breasted. Several members of one group recently
attended a pagan gathering at which it was possible to comfortably
disrobe, and they did. Sunsnake describes the pleasures of freedom
from clothing in a Northwind Network News article published shortly
after this event (1989). "Free at last," she exclaims, "Goddess
almighty, I'm free at last."
When the coven has assembled in the circle, the ritual begins. Three things usually happen during the course of the beginning of the ritual: 1) the circle is cast and closed; 2) the elements and the goddess are invoked; and 3) energy or power is raised. These events may occur in any order. The group may raise power to close the circle, then invoke the spirits. The coven may call the directions, close the circle, and raise power. The order in which these events occur matters not; they must, however, be done.

Closing the circle allows the coven to create a space between the two worlds impervious to the "psychic flotsam" to which it might be vulnerable if the circle were not closed for ritual purposes. Lost spirits, negative psychic energy generated by maladjusted or unethical people working in the realm of the invisible, or negative psychic energy explicitly directed at the group or individuals within it all have the potential to invade the group's arena if the space is not properly protected.

And so the circle is closed. Coveners, sometimes holding hands, envision white light encircling them, raise power (see below) to close the circle, or simply pronounce it closed. Such a pronouncement usually accompanies any method used. "The circle is closed; this is a safe and sacred space; only Good may enter here; the circle is closed" is such a pronouncement. The circle is closed by all; the pronouncement may be made by one person or divided into parts and shared by several.

Invocations consist of invitations to the spirits of each direction, often called "elementals," and the goddess (and perhaps god)
to join the circle. Invocations take the form of welcomes or invitations, not commandments or demands, at least among those I have observed. Each direction and elemental corresponds to particular human qualities or aspects of human life, and these often receive mention in the invocation. For example, to invoke water, one might say, "Spirit of Water, Guardian of the West, giver of life to the planet, we welcome you to the circle tonight and ask your blessing upon us." The goddess may be called by name or addressed as "Goddess." Usually, Wiccans I have observed call the Spirit of Air first and proceed clockwise around the circle to fire, water, and earth before invoking the goddess.

Wiccans usually "raise power" by "opening a channel" in their bodies (usually visualized as the spinal column) through which the energy of the earth, which is understood to be alive, may be drawn. Earth energy is then combined with one's own bodily energy (and sometimes energy drawn down from the sky) and expanded beyond the body so that it melds with the energy of the others present in the circle, through touch, will, or both. The group then psychically shapes the energy into a "cone of power" or an energy sphere. Witches usually maintain the cone of power throughout the remainder of the ritual, using its energy as a resource for their work, and, ultimately, release it toward a specific destination or for a specific purpose.

The content of the ritual, predictably, varies remarkably. Holidays noted earlier usually serve as causes for contemplating and celebrating the passing of the seasons, though the form these celebrations take differs markedly from group to group. Esbats also vary widely. I have witnessed/participated in rituals for social
change and healing the planet, rituals to increase psychic skill, rituals centered on particular aspects of the goddess, and rituals focused on journeys into the Other World for the purpose of finding the spirit animals of particular individuals. I have heard reports of rituals designed to reduce the unsettling effects of a disembodied spirit plaguing the residents of a house, rituals for cleansing homes of the negative psychic energy accumulated through the events of daily living, and even a ritual created to "cleanse the cat," who needs it because she serves as a repository for human emotion and therefore needs relief from the "negativities" accumulated through contact with people.

It is important for me to note here that more than one of these goals may be accomplished in one ritual. For example, a healing may take place in conjunction with a ritual spirit journey. In addition, a degree of ritual spontaneity is characteristic of the groups with which I have associated. If someone needs to be healed, healing may be incorporated into a ritual not originally oriented toward healing. If someone requests that energy be sent to some person or purpose not included in the focus of the ritual, s/he is usually obliged.

The release of the cone of power toward its intended destination or purposes usually signals the beginning of the end of the ritual. After the release of the cone, participants "earth the energy" excess in their bodies, returning themselves to stasis. The elementals are dismissed, one by one, usually with some version of the following formula: "Spirit of Water, Guardian of the West, thank you for joining
us in the circle tonight. Farewell, and Blessed Be." One person may say this, or the group may do it in unison. The goddess is dismissed in a similar manner.

Groups develop idiosyncratic ways of "opening the circle" and saying good-byes to one another, although they seem to follow a common theme. One group sings a song which involves the names of participants in the circle. An example of the standard verse is: "Karen be well! Karen be well! All manner of things shall be well!" The verse is repeated to include the name of each member of the circle. Following this song, members usually repeat some version of the closing common in circles: "The circle is open, but unbroken. May the peace of the goddess go with us. Merry meet, merry part, and merry meet again!"

Sometimes people linger to chat after the circle is opened; sometimes they disperse quickly. On sabbats, pot-luck dinners are frequently shared before or after the ritual. Embraces often accompany the farewells following the ritual. Participants report feeling "happy," "charged up," and generally energetic after rituals. Jack, for example, says:

Yeah, you get a lot of energy reserve...Still being a doubting kind of person, I'm not sure where that energy comes from, but I know it exists and I know it just charges me up. I'm not sure if it's just really drawing it from the earth...I tend to go that way, but I think a lot of times it's just the camaraderie and the love in the room, you know, without sounding like David Letterman, there is love in this room. I mean, people just care about you. And that makes me feel as good as anything I can think of.
MALEVOLENCE AND WITCHCRAFT MORALITY

Central to witchcraft is witches' non-malevolence. Wiccans cite the Wiccan Rede, "an ye harm none, do as ye will" and the Law of Three-fold Returns, "What goes around comes around magnified by three" as proscriptions against malevolence.

The following represents the typical initial responses I received when I introduced the subject of malevolence in interviews:

Ell: And if there was somebody who claimed to be a witch who was manipulative in a negative sense about her magic, then I would not believe her to be a witch.

Another woman, Sunsnake, used my question about malevolent witches as a segue into a discussion of satanism. This transition was so common among interviews I conducted as to have become predictable; "malevolent witchcraft" is seen by Wiccans as satanism; satanism is seen as "Christianity, inverted and perverted, as if it's not perverted enough to begin with." Witches commonly report that one "has to be a Christian to be a satanist," considering that satan is a religious feature of Christianity. Sunsnake's comments follow:

Ault: What do you know about witches who aren't Wiccan? Do you call them witches?

Sunnake: I don't call them witches. They are around. People assure me that they are indeed around...I know a lot of people do it. But they always rationalize, or they always repress, or they don't hold themselves accountable for what they're doing. It's always hard for me to believe that there are people who are actually setting out to do this kind of thing. I know someone who works with a police department farther up north, and she assures me there are indeed satanists out there...
Ault: Those are satanists?

Sunsnake: Yeah, they are probably people that are doing similar things and calling themselves witches because they got it out of books, you know, the writers writing, saying, "If you do this, you're a witch," and they're going, "I want to do that, I must be a witch, then." But they have no connection to the Wiccan movement. They are misguided individuals or groups who get their ideas out of...books, you know, the "satan-bashers" that are defining what is witchcraft. So they're taking that definition, but I never really heard of anybody that is actually part of the Wiccan movement and that deliberately does negative things like that. There are people who do hurtful things (but it is) out of ignorance or their own ego or stuff like that.

Witches do tell stories about "slips" they have made, usually early in their craft careers, and which taught them the efficacy of the goddess in returning their intentions to them in this lifetime. One of the most striking of such reports comes from Moondragon:

This is my amethyst. I've been having a lot of trouble with headaches, and frustration with my job. I hold onto that and I've been using it as my worry stone. And the largest plane, I just take all of this negative energy and stick it in here. And my manager came in, the over-manager of the four stores, and I said, 'Hi, John.' "Bleeeeach!" He was jumping all over (criticizing) the store. He turned around, and without even thinking, I aimed that crystal at his neck and pushed. And I... not a conscious decision. And he didn't do anything. (Then) he bends down to pick up this box and he screams. And I go over to him and say, 'John, what's wrong?' And he says, 'Oh, God My neck! My neck!' And when I touched his neck, which was at the place I aimed this, it was just all of his muscles were pulled into knots. And I felt so bad because the other rule is that what goes around, comes around, three times... So that meant that because I did that to him, something three times as
bad is going to happen to me...Two days later I got a gastroenteritis attack, and I thought I was gonna die. I had diarrhea and throwing up and fever. I had that four days. I really believe that's because I maliciously tried to harm him...

Wiccan conceptually separate "malevolence" from "destructiveness." Destructiveness can be considered a necessary part of the life-cycle of the world, and I have, during the course of my fieldwork, seen "the dark aspects" of the goddess invoked a number of times. Rituals involving destruction have focused on destroying what are perceived to be social evils. Sunsnake clarifies the place of destructiveness in Wicca:

There is much fear of the dark goddesses, and destructiveness, because the goddess destroys. That's real hard to deal with growing up in our culture, where destruction was just destruction never ending, and there wasn't any re-birth involved; it was always just more destruction. And more and more people are starting to work with that. Because there is a destructive aspect: we must destroy the old before we can (bring about) the new. That night we did the Hecate ritual, (we worked to) destroy greed and racism and ignorance, and those things need to be destroyed. It's not bad, necessarily, to destroy...As long as you're accepting destruction as part of the circle, not the whole circle, destructiveness doesn't have to be evil.

Two other informants, Parker and Nola, also illustrated for me the complex nature of destruction, intention, and ethics as they are played out in the Wiccan system. Parker offered me a quiz. The question: "Is it ethical to send nightmares to someone? What would you say?" After some cogitating, I say sending nightmares is not ethical. Parker responds, "How about if their bed's on fire and it's the only way to
reach them?" Parker and Nola remark that people are "thick-headed. So, if nightmare is the only way that people are going to wake up, it's going to have to be more nightmare."

To illustrate "nightmare," Parker and Nola introduce the Alaskan oil spill, which had occurred that week, as an example:

Parker: The Alaskans for years have been saying, "F*ck you, we're going to drill all the oil we want." So, you know, now they've got a hundred miles of ocean covered with oil.

Nola: That's nightmare.

Wiccans, then, see the principles of their religion as working on group and global scales, as well as affecting individuals. The Alaskan oil spill is seen as a warning, as well as an act of destruction designed to awaken people to the idea that harming the environment will provoke the environment into responding in kind.

Wishing to hurt others, or employing one's religious skill to do so, runs counter to Wiccan philosophy. My observation has brought me to the conclusion that the most common way for Wiccans to respond to those they perceive as threatening is not to call damage upon them, but, instead, to work for their "enlightenment" or, as Parker and Nola conceive of it, "to wake them up."

One of the most sophisticated insights on Wicca, its place in American society, and the nature of its threat to the status quo was offered me by Sunsnake:

I can't say that people shouldn't fear us. There are a lot of people who try and say we're real harmless. But we're not harmless. We're not at all harmless...to our culture as it is...to the people
who don't want that change, who are most invested in the status quo. People who would define witches as not harmful are equating "harm" with "evil," and we're not evil. Definitely we're not evil...(we're just) sinfully rebellious people who won't accept...authority.

In sum, witches do not engage in malevolence as it has been constructed in anthropology's definition of witchcraft; witches do not work to harm others, and, instead, they hope to bring about social and environmental changes which will serve themselves and others. They recognize, nonetheless, that their desire for change represents a threat the Western establishments, and that it can be understood as a desire to harm the institutions perceived as threatening to women, the environment, and life on the planet Earth. Witches consider themselves non-malevolent, but not powerless, and not harmless vis-a-vis Western socio-political institutions.

WICCA AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Throughout this ethnography, we have seen suggestions that witches regard Wicca as a social movement. Such suggestions appear in Nola's description of the priesthood as an effort to awaken people to their own divinity in order to make the planet a better and safer place, and in her remarks on Wicca as a post-Christian religion; in Sunsnake's statement on the threat witchcraft poses to the status quo; and in the voices of others hoping to transform themselves and the world in which we live.
Because of my interest in Porterfield's (1987) characterization of goddess worship as part of a cultural revitalization movement including feminist revisions of Christianity, I asked my Wiccan informants directly whether Wicca is a social movement, who its leaders are (Porterfield calls Mary Daly the "prophet" of goddess religion), and whether they see it as part of a broader movement including the feminization of Christianity.

With the exception of one woman, my informants tend to regard and experience Wicca as a social movement. Moondragon's response to my question, "Do you think that Wicca is a social movement?" reflects the common sentiment:

> How could it not be? Because you're talking about women in the environment, women involved in government, women involved with the homeless, women involved with the battered, women involved in abortion, women involved with animal testing, I mean, if you take...you can probably get a Network (the journal her coven publishes) and include that in your thesis: just take a look at the calendar. And menstruation, childbirth, lesbian affirmation, taking back the night marches, gay pride parade. How could it not be a social movement? That's the thing about our religion: people tend to think of religion as only spiritual. Because we believe something so strongly, it's going to affect every facet of the world. It's going to permeate everything that you do.

A social scientist versed in the concept of revitalization confirmed this:

> Well, of course, I see it as a revitalization movement...I believe that Wicca is one of many things, many of the same kind of energy, of the same source of transformation, personal transformation. And to me, personal transformation is the key to social transformation...I don't think
that my humanness was very valued [growing up]. I don't believe that it is in this culture, or in the world in general. For me, it's about kind of confronting that, and I look at my magic as a tool for personal change and global change.

When I inquired about the leaders of the movement, I usually asked about Mary Daly's status as a prophet. Reactions ranged from exasperation to confusion; those who knew Mary Daly were exasperated; those who didn't were just confused or curious. Below, I provide responses from Moondragon and Ell to my query about "key figures;" I used this term because every my informants rejected the idea that Wicca has leaders.

Moondragon: There are [key figures]...Names that I am familiar with are Shekina Mountainwater, Morgan Grey, who wrote Found Goddesses, Spider, who is going to do the Blood Lodge with us, Merlin Stone, Barbara Walker, all of those women represent wildly different systems within the term "Wicca."

Ell: Now, like I think, Starhawk, Z Budapest, I think they are certainly looked up to as writers of the craft. Weinstein...I'd take a look at who's selling the most fucking books. That's a good way to find out who's being read. And I don't know if they're looked at in that sort of sense of a leader, as it were. I guess it's a personal opinion. There's Salina from Circle Sanctuary...Amber K, the woman that wrote the books that I gave you...I happen to look up to her more than any of the other women. I also know her personally. I think, again, it will come down to whether or not a person who is getting involved or who is involved in witchcraft, if they are looking for someone to lead them. If they are looking for someone who will, quote, take responsibility, unquote, that's what they will find.

It is important to note that these two women list different people as the "key figures" in Wicca.
I asked how social change could happen without a leader. In addition to the remarks on personal transformation as global transformation, I was given the following opinion by Jack:

I think you could have social change without a leader, if everybody's focused on the same idea. I think you fall into the Christian cult-type thing when you have one leader. Any group that I come across where they say this is it and forget everything else, that's when I go...I think social change can come about without a leader if we all could get focused on that point and make that our focus.

As for being part of a movement which includes the feminization of Christianity, the people I talked with generally rejected the idea. Below, Valery and Jack consider the possibility:

Valery: Yeah, I can see where some of the ideas and concepts would be the same, but, again, I really do think it's separate.

Jack: Well, I don't say you can be a Christian and a Wiccan. You know, that seems like that'd be a basic (contradiction)...Christians just don't believe like Wiccans do. They still believe in something beyond all this. Well, this is what's important, not the next life.

Ell, asked if the feminization of Christianity, as in the work of Rosemary Radford Reuther, constituted another branch of the movement of which Wicca is part, responded as follows:

Absolutely not. I mean, I don't know. No witch I know looks to the testament as a source of any kind of comfort. If anything, oppression...like the idea was to revise the Bible. But to me, witchcraft is more about pitching it. It's not about sending a suit to the dry cleaners. It's about throwing out the whole suit and running naked.
Wiccans see witchcraft as a social movement distinct from Christian religious revision or revitalization. Because of their understanding of the roots of their religion as pre-historic, their sense that global social change constitutes the only sane answer to the problems of a world they perceive to be in deep trouble, and because they have a vision of the kind of changes necessary to avoiding destruction, their movement can aptly be more specifically classified as a revitalization movement. Importantly, however, Wiccans see their movement as having no leaders. "Everybody can be a pope," they say. Key figures may circulate information, but they do not dictate dogma. This does not fit the classic model of Wallace's cultural revitalization movements, and I will discuss its significance in greater detail in the next chapter of this manuscript.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

RECONSIDERING "WITCH:" GENERAL FINDINGS

The ethnographic data presented in this paper provide us with a picture of witches which does not match our usual image: contemporary Americans who call themselves witches do not subscribe to an ethos of malevolence; they do not worship satan; and they do not uniformly characterize themselves as in possession of extraordinary talents, skills or capacities relative to those of the people around them. These witches regard witchcraft as a goddess-oriented nature religion. They believe that this religion harkens back to pre-Christian spirituality.

The Wiccans upon whom this report focuses see witchcraft as a particular religion under the umbrella of paganism, a collection of non-Judeo-Christian and non-institutionalized Earth religions. They do not distinguish between "white witches" and "black witches," those who have been called black witches they define as satanists, and consider part of the Judeo-Christian complex. Witches become witches through family traditions or through acquiring knowledge about witchcraft, either directly from others or from books.

Wiccans regard their religion as essentially free of dogma. The two basic principles of the religion are the Wiccan Rede, "an ye harm none,
do as ye will," and the Law of Three-fold Returns, which says that intentions and energy are returned to the person from whom they issue, their intensity magnified three times. Instead of "hexing" or sending "negative energy" to people regarded as violating Wiccan values, these witches cast spells or perform rituals focused on the offending party's enlightenment.

Witches described here meet in small groups to perform rituals in accordance with their groups' own traditions. The small group structure of Wicca is seen by these informants as supporting the diversity within the religion, and its lack of rigid dogma. These witches deny that they follow a "prophet," though they recognize various writers as influential in what they call "the Wiccan movement."

The content of Wiccan rituals varies widely, but frequently focuses on the earth's natural environment and issues of ecology, as well as on women's issues. Both the ecology and women's issues are connected to the religion's understanding of deity as female and immanent in nature.

Clearly, there are in the contemporary Western world people who have adopted the label witch, and who see themselves as the spiritual heirs of pre-Christian goddess worshipers, as well as related to those who were persecuted in European history as witches. I have attempted to provide insiders' perspectives on modern American witchcraft. As I understand them, these perspectives conflict with the conventional Western vision of witches.

I argue here that we need to refine our understanding of witchcraft in ways which distinguish between historical and contemporary witchcraft, and between witchcraft accusations, witchcraft
beliefs, and the beliefs of witches themselves. I, like Hallen and Sodipo (1986) take the position that to apply the term "witchcraft" to diverse phenomena across cultures leads us into a conceptual mire from which it is very difficult to extricate ourselves. Ultimately, witchcraft must be regarded as a Western phenomenon, in both its reputation and its practice. The beliefs and practices of modern witches must become part of our definition of "witchcraft." Inclusion of Wiccans in the definition of witchcraft allows us to begin to consider the meaning of witchcraft in contemporary Western societies, and offers us the possibility of accurately representing a group often mischaracterized by the popular and academic press.

WICCA, REVITALIZATION AND MOVEMENT LEADERSHIP: A RECIPROCAL ANALYSIS

In an attempt to understand "feminist theology" from a perspective outside itself, Porterfield (1987) employs Wallace's (1956) cultural revitalization movement model as an analytical framework. She identifies feminist theology as the broader movement subsuming feminist Christianity and goddess worship, which I assert we may read as Wicca, and she sees these as separate but related movements. Porterfield (1987) uses Wallace's classic terms to characterize the "goddess religion" movement in America. She identifies Mary Daly as the prophet of this movement.

I, too, think that Wicca is usefully understood within the general framework of Wallace's (1956) cultural revitalization movement model.
outlined elsewhere in this report. The witches described in this ethnography display the discontent with their social milieu, the feelings that society must be restructured, and the vision for such a "maze way reformulation," as Wallace calls it, that characterize cultural revitalization movements. Given the movement's religious nature, and its adherents' sense that they are collaborating to "bring back the goddess," Wicca can easily be considered a religious revivalistic revitalization movement, in accordance with Wallace's original description.

Despite the degree to which Wallace's description of the essence of cultural revitalization captures the spirit of revivalist witchcraft, the classic description of the leadership structure of revitalization movements does not seem to match the structure of the Wiccan movement. Adler (1986), Matteson (1988), and my informants (see Chapter Three) regard Wicca as a non-centralized religious movement without a prophet.

If revitalization movements have prophets, and Wicca seems to have none, we are faced with several options. The first is to reject the idea that Wicca is a revitalization movement. The second is to expand the classic model. The third is to negate the reports of Wiccans who say they belong to a religious social movement, and to find the prophet.

In her consideration of goddess religion as a revitalization movement, Porterfield makes the mistake of forcing the phenomenon to fit the formula. I argue that, given ethnographic data in which informants describe Wicca as a social movement but reject the notion that it has a prophet, we can reasonably call Wicca a revitalization
movement, but one without a formal institutionalized leadership structure. I argue that it is not leadership structure which defines revitalization movements, but, instead, those subjective perspectives and experiences described by Wallace, as well as a sense of collective membership on the part of participants, that are the essence of revitalization movements. Such a perspective calls for an expansion of Wallace's original (1956) model.

In addition to the ethnographic support for this position provided by the data herein, there is theoretical support for such a perspective. Wallace's prefatory remark on religious revitalization movements, for example, reads: "With few exceptions, every religious revitalization movement with which I am acquainted has been originally conceived in one or several hallucinatory visions by a single individual" (1956: 270). We cannot know whether the exceptions to which Wallace refers are those of individuals whose visions are not hallucinatory (he mentions John Wesley as an example of such a prophet) or whether the exceptions are movements not centered on individual prophets. I read his statement as a note of recognition that movements may be structured differently from those characterized by the pattern upon which he focuses.

Bourguignon (1974), in a discussion of altered states of consciousness in religious movements, suggests that it may be useful to distinguish leader oriented movements from group oriented movements, and does not confine revitalization movements to leader oriented groups. In addition, Bourguignon suggests a connection between the social structures and the social action of religious movements. In the
case of Wicca, the connection between the group’s structure and the nature of its social action is clear: as a non-centralized movement, the social action of the movement is broad, diffuse, and carried out at the discretion of individual members or small groups of adherents. Although they recognize no prophet, members to recognize an ideology, and it inspires their actions.

Porterfield herself (1987) suggests that goddess religion may deviate from Wallace’s structural specifications. While she regards Daly’s “followers” in the predicted hierarchical relationship to Daly, she notes that Daly refuses to regard a supernatural deity as greater than herself, thus modifying the classic structure which posits movements characterized by prophet-disciples-followers over whom a powerful deity reigns.

I believe that expanding the classic model of cultural revitalization movements to include non-hierarchically structured movements is important for a number of reasons. First, such expansion allows us to include in revitalization phenomena a wide range of activity we must otherwise reject as revitalization movements. Second, it allows us to fit form to function in understanding these movements, instead of imposing upon them the structures the old operational definition of revitalization movements dictates. Finally, I speculate that non-hierarchically ordered movements may be those which originate in especially marginalized populations, populations especially in need of investigation.

Wicca, for example, is a woman-oriented, woman-dominated social movement. Taylor (1989) has supported Cassell’s analysis of the
contemporary women's movement as a non-centralized movement, and this movement, too, reflects the essence of Wallace's revitalization model. It strikes me as significant that the movements Wallace uses to demonstrate his model are all male-dominated movements, and that, to my knowledge, Porterfield's application of the revitalization model to goddess worship is the only effort yet made to apply the revitalization concept to a woman-oriented movement.

The ways in which Porterfield's (1987) analysis do not make sense of Wicca demonstrate the limitations of the classic formulation of revitalization movement structures: the prophet-disciples-followers formula renders invisible certain kinds of phenomena otherwise well captured by the tone of Wallace's original (1956) description of revitalization. Given our understanding of Wicca and others' work on the feminist movement (see Taylor, 1989), I speculate that the classic model forces us to ignore contemporary Western women's movements in particular as revitalization movements. Anthropology's idea that revitalization movements are essentially Messianic reflects a Western patriarchal way of thinking and perceiving founded on dominance (especially male dominance), submission (especially female submission), the need for control over others, and perceptions of "followers'" needs for leadership. To apply such models to movements which are not created by white Western men may impose upon them an analytical framework which does not adequately describe them and which perpetuates the idea that both the world which needs to be revitalized and all the forces which would transform it are structured to reflect patterns of Western male dominance.
DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future investigations of contemporary Western witchcraft may take a number of approaches. A clearer picture of Wicca may be derived, for example, from regional comparisons of Wiccan covens; interesting psychological and social movement analyses may result from work on differences between solitary witches and coven members; investigations of particular Wiccan practices, such as healing and divination, may generate information useful in many different kinds of research; and examining Wicca as a particularly female religious revitalization movement may give us new insights on sex, gender, and religion.

I believe that looking more closely at Wicca in terms of the stages of revitalization and institutionalization proposed by Wallace's (1956) model could prove particularly interesting and fruitful. There are indications, in recent official governmental recognition of Wicca as a religion, that the movement is becoming more visible and more involved with American institutions. Examining this trend could prove an interesting test of Wallace's stages as they appear in a group oriented movement's development, and could afford us a useful framework for understanding witchcraft as a modern social movement.
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