

“We are a Circle”: Interpellation and Liminality in Neopagan Witchcraft Rituals at Circle Sanctuary

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12/14/16

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ANT 402

Abstract

Circle Sanctuary, as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), interpellates Neopagan practitioners into ideologies such as interconnectedness through rituals following the structure of rites of passage. In the liminal stage of rituals, Altered States of Consciousness may be induced due to the physiological and psychological triggers in rituals, which produces psychological effects like hyper-suggestibility in practitioners. From this state of hyper-suggestibility, Circle Sanctuary reverends are able to easily interpellate practitioners into Neopagan ideologies through repetitive chants and other suggestions. In addition, Neopaganism is a felicitous system for this specific historical and cultural moment in America, due to its universalist, activist, and oppositional nature, which appeals to many people as modern Americans face the social and environmental crises of their time.

Introduction

“At Circle Sanctuary, the world is beautiful, spirits are everywhere, magic is afoot, and there’s always a campfire burning outside the barn” (Field Notes 2016).

It is infamously difficult to accurately portray one’s experience in writing, especially when the experiences you’re trying to describe are extraordinary. During my fieldwork at Circle Sanctuary, I was exposed to magic, Altered States of Consciousness, liminality, and possibly a spirit. How am I to truly convey the feeling of being in the center of the valley in the middle of the night, Milky Way clearly visible overhead, dividing the dome of infinite stars in half, walking amongst cloaked Witches as we followed a line of torches — the only lights other than the stars breaking up the darkness and space around us? How can I communicate the feeling of a magical working rising in intensity to the point where the tent I’m sitting in feels like it’s spinning, while a man in a top hat, face painted like a skull, looks down upon the whole scene? To Anthropologists who have studied ecstatic religious experiences, these scenarios and difficulties are very familiar. There is a growing group of religious Anthropologists who study directly as a participant in rituals, the ultimate reflexive anthropology. They go further than traditional participant observation as a member of the religion. They have ecstatic experiences and later, they reflect back anthropologically on their experience. One of the premiere scholars of the field, Sabina Magliocco, summarizes Young and Goulet’s approach: “Rather than looking upon extraordinary experiences as ‘supernatural’ or ‘paranormal,’ [David] Young and [Jean-Guy] Goulet propose that we ‘entertain the notion that what is seen at first as an “extraordinary experience” is in fact the normal outcome of genuine participation in social and

ritual performances through which social realities are generated” (Magliocco 2004: 13, quoting Young and Goulet 1994: 9).

To view these experiences through this anthropological gaze then, I experienced religious ecstatic experiences with my participants due to specific structures of social and ritual performances and our “genuine” participation in these rituals. In examining the rituals I participated in, I discovered a common theme: they all followed the form of rites of passage, as theorized by Victor Turner and Arnold Van Gennep (Turner 2013). I also noticed that certain ideas were repeated nearly constantly throughout my fieldwork. I learned that Circle Sanctuary, as an officially recognized church, represents an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) as theorized by Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (Althusser 1979). An ISA is a private institution, like a church, that socializes (or interpellates) participants into ideologies valued by the institution. I argue that Circle Sanctuary, as an ISA, interpellates Neopagan practitioners into ideologies such as interconnectedness¹ through rituals that echo the structure of rites of passage. In the liminal stage of rituals, Altered States of Consciousness may be triggered due to the physiological and psychological triggers deliberately included in the rituals, which produces psychological effects like hyper-suggestibility in practitioners. From this state of hyper-suggestibility, Circle Sanctuary reverends are able to easily interpellate practitioners into Neopagan ideologies through repetitive chants and other suggestions. This is not to say that Circle Sanctuary is some sort of bad brainwashing institution, all religious rituals aim to interpellate their practitioners, and in fact, I will argue that Neopaganism is a felicitous ideological system for this historical and cultural moment in America.

¹ An example that I will explain later in the paper. Neopagans believe in the immanence of divinity in Nature and aim to connect with Nature, other Neopagans, other people in general, and the universe across geography, time, linguistic and cultural barriers, and the physical body.

Field Site Description, Methodology, and Ethics

This project was a result of fieldwork done at Circle Sanctuary near Barneveld, WI during two periods: the first was a full moon ritual called “Witchways” (10/17/2016) and a three day Samhain² festival (10/28/2016-10/30/2016). Circle Sanctuary is a 200 acre nature preserve, as well as an officially recognized nature-based spirituality church called The Church of Circle Wicca (Circle). Circle was incorporated in 1978, and the nature preserve and current location of Circle Sanctuary was purchased in 1983 (Fox “Circle Sanctuary,” Lewis 1999: 57-58). I attended these events with permission by Circle Sanctuary and head priestess Selena Fox and employed Anthropological field methods of participant observation and taking field notes. As a practitioner of Reclaiming Witchcraft, I wanted to be able to participate in and enjoy the group rituals, without being fettered by field notes. Thus, I came up with a system in which I participated in each activity, and then spent 10-30 minutes afterwards writing up detailed field notes. In workshops or classes, I took notes throughout, since others were also taking notes. The reason for choosing these fluid and informal methods, and also not using formal interviews or surveys, was that I recognized the nature of the festival format made more formal methods unwieldy. Throughout the festival, participants went on their way — to workshops, back to their tent, to volunteer, etc. — or sat and had relevant conversations anyways, and I felt that more formal methods would intrude upon, and possibly cause me to miss what was continually happening around me.

² According to Selena Fox, “Samhain is a festival of the Dead. Meaning ‘Summer's End’ and pronounced saah-win or saa-ween, Samhain is a celebration of the end of the harvest and the start of the coldest half of the year. For many practitioners, myself included, Samhain also is the beginning of the spiritual new year” (“Celebrating Samhain” 2016). Its practice is similar to All Saint’s Day in Christian traditions - practitioners honor and remember ancestors who have passed.

As I touched on earlier, my ethical considerations for this project included formally asking for Circle Sanctuary's permission for my research, which was approved. I also followed Circle Sanctuary's guidelines to not take pictures of anything or anyone besides scenery (Circle Sanctuary 2016). I was open and honest about my fieldwork to anyone who asked and mentioned my project whenever I was introduced. As far as confidentiality, I have decided to keep all of my participants' names confidential besides Selena Fox and Dennis Carpenter, since their names are so synonymous with Circle Sanctuary that situations wouldn't make sense without their names in context.

Finally, I was aware of my biases throughout my fieldwork as a member of this community and a student anthropologist. This essay can be understood, then, as a work of reflexive anthropology. In fact, this project has many uncanny parallels with the work of Sabina Magliocco, one of the premiere scholars of Neopaganism in America, who was initiated into the Reclaiming tradition, the same tradition that I practice. Her work was fundamental to my understanding of my fieldwork, as well as my own path to Neopaganism. As she elaborates throughout her book *Witching Culture* (2004), practitioners of Neopaganism are very diverse, yet are often very similar in upbringing and interests. She says "Like most of my Pagan consultants [practitioners], I am a white Euro-American with a middle-class upbringing, and I share with them a liberal and rather critical worldview...I share with many Neo-Pagans a childhood love of fantasy literature and imaginative games: as a small girl, I created elaborate cultures and folktalelike scripts for my troll dolls...To me, Neo-Pagan rituals felt very similar to this kind of play" (Magliocco 2004: 12). These themes echo my upbringing and some of my participants' upbringings. She also discovered Neopaganism at a critical transitional point in her life, like

myself, and experienced “extraordinary experiences” throughout her fieldwork, as I did (Magliocco 2004: 13). Her work also lead me to the “experiential approach” I employ in my fieldwork, which includes “the conscious, willing, and full participation in ritual experiences intended to induce alternate states of consciousness” (Magliocco 2004: 15) and the compassionate method employed by Jone Salomonsen studying Reclaiming Witchcraft in which “we enter [a] mystical path as apprentices, experiencing it as real *but without ever forgetting that we are scholars*” (Salomonsen 1999: 10). In summary, I recognize my biases as a Witch³ studying Witchcraft and the influence of Sabina Magliocco and other famous scholars such as Starhawk in the ways that they have shaped my interpretive analysis and methodology.

What is Neopaganism?

Sabina Magliocco defines Neopaganism as “a movement of new religions that attempt to revive, revitalize and experiment with aspects of pre-Christian polytheism (Adler 1986: 10). Their goal is a deeper connection with the sacred, with nature, and with community” (Magliocco 2004: 4). The Neo- prefix in Neopaganism is used by some scholars to signify the movement’s difference from pre-Christian paganism, often spelled in lowercase. Others may use capital Paganism to designate the modern religions. Although these movements claim to be revivals of pre-Christian pagan religions, various scholars have shown that these movements and religions are invented and syncretic bricolages of some pre-Christian traditions, various intellectual and

³ An important note in this study is that not all Pagans identify as Witches, but most Witches can be classified as (Neo)Pagan. As Magliocco states, “Witches form the largest majority of North American Neo-Pagans, [but] the term *Witch* itself is hotly contested within the movement. For some...this word is an important tool for reconnecting with a legendary past and for reclaiming positive qualities with which they strongly identify...the trouble with this word is that...it has a long history of bad associations” (Magliocco 2004: 72). “The Witch word” was discussed at the Witchways full moon ritual, and while most present identified as Witches, others identified as “Wiccan,” “Nature faith practitioner,” “magical practitioner” and my favorite response: “Depend[s] on how tired I am, Feuerbachian Atheist” (Field Notes 2016).

historical movements such as Romanticism, and modern New Age and postmodern religious practices (Adler 1986, Hutton 1999, Luhrmann 2013, Magliocco 2004, Sage 2009). Some traditions (denominations) of Neopaganism are polytheistic, worshipping various incarnations of gods and goddesses, while others may be monotheistic; for example, some Feminist traditions only recognize a Goddess (Magliocco 2004: 69)⁴. Given that Neopaganism is a largely self-defined practice, definition is inherently problematic. Thus, it is much easier to define traditions of Neopaganism, rather than the overall movement.

Arguably the most popular traditions in Neopaganism today derive from some form of Gardnerian Witchcraft, often referred to as Wicca. According to Margot Adler, followers of Wicca, who often call themselves Witches, “consider themselves priests and priestesses of an ancient European shamanistic nature religion that worships a goddess who is related to the ancient Mother Goddess in her three aspects of Maiden, Mother, and Crone” (Adler 1986: 10-11). They may also worship a god as the horned god of the hunt and forests. One of the most important aspects of Wiccan religious identity is its creation myth: the Burning Times. According to Ecofeminist theorist and Reclaiming Witchcraft author Starhawk, The Burning Times represents a sort of “mythic history, not a Ph.D. thesis in archaeology” (Starhawk 1999: 263). Various historians have found the myth of the Burning Times false, based off of the faulty history and archaeology of authors like Margaret Murray, Merlin Stone, and Marija Gimbutas (Hutton 1999, Magliocco 2004).

⁴ Pages 88-89 depicts the differences in personality in the main traditions using “why did the chicken cross the road?” joke format. It is truly hilarious, and I wish it was spread around the Neopagan community more broadly.

During the first session of my fieldwork, Circle Sanctuary priestess Selena Fox told our circle one rendition of the Burning Times myth;⁵ she said that witches used to be the respected “wise ones” of pre-Christian European society, but that changed with “1600 years of bad PR” after the witchcraze of the Middle Ages. In the 1400s, edicts from Roman Catholic popes targeted witches and witch symbols such as black cats. In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII, “not so Innocent,” published an edict that said “Witches exist, they’re a threat, and they need to be killed.” In the mid 1400s, with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press came the printing of anti-witch literature, including the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*, which was a “manual for torturing and killing witches and conveyor of witch hate.” Thousands were accused or killed from the 1400s to the 1700s and “75-80% of the accused were women.” This myth is very important to the perspectives of modern day practitioners because as Magliocco paraphrases Starhawk’s explanation, “All in all, nine million innocent people were executed during the Burning Times. Yet despite these persecutions, some practitioners of the Old Religion survived” (Magliocco 2004: 90, paraphrasing Starhawk 1989: 21-22); “To be a Witch is to identify with nine million victims of bigotry and hatred and to take responsibility for creating a world in which prejudice claims no more victims,” and by extension, to take up their supposed mission of idealized connections to nature, folk magic, and healing (Magliocco 2004: 90, quoting Starhawk 1989: 21-22).

Repetitive Theme: Connection

From the Burning Times myth, we can draw out a key theme that I encountered throughout my field work and scholarly study: connection, or interconnectedness. While

⁵ The following section is a rephrasing of some of my field notes from the Witchways full moon ritual. Quotations signify quotes from Selena Fox.

analyzing my field notes, I realized that the term connection appeared on almost every page, examples of connecting to each other, to the land, to the ancestors, to the spirits, and more. As T. M. Luhrmann put succinctly: “Above all, witches try to ‘connect’ with the world around them. Witchcraft, they say, is about the tactile, intuitive understanding of the turn of the seasons, the song of the birds; it is the awareness of all things as holy” (Luhrmann 2013: 309). However, Luhrmann misses another aspect: witches aim to connect across geography, time, linguistic and cultural barriers, and the physical body.

My first experience of this form of connection was in the first full moon ritual. Throughout the ritual, there were various chants and opportunities to participate vocally.⁶ The ritual started with the calling of the four quarters, according to usual associations⁷, as well as the sky, Earth/ground, and spirit.⁸ We chanted with Selena three times each in welcoming these elements. Then in other chants, we called upon witches in the past for their presence. We memorialized witches who have died; their names were said aloud by participants in the circle. This eventually turned to honoring present teachers of Witchcraft. Everyone took a handful of mullein and when we felt like it, during chanting, we could cast it on the fire. We asked for healing for members of family, pets, friends, etc. and spoke their names aloud. We chanted “healing to them” and then “bless them.” Every so often, the moon would come out from behind the clouds and we would turn around and just meditate on the moon and different concepts

⁶ The following section is paraphrased from my field notes.

⁷ These associations can be found in accessible popular books such as *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (Cunningham 2004) and *Green Witchcraft: Folk Magic, Fairy Lore, & Herb Craft* (Moura 1996). The accessibility of these sources explains how even the first time group ritual participants, like myself, knew and understood these associations without explanation. These associations are also described in more academic sources such as *Drawing Down the Moon* (Adler 1986) and *Witching Culture* (Magliocco 2004).

⁸ Included as abnormal because as Selena Fox describes in “Sacred Circle, Sacred Sphere: Mapping Consciousness with Seven Directions,” “The inclusion of Sky/Cosmos, or Up, direction...underlies my preference for referring to Contemporary Pagan philosophy as ‘Nature Spirituality’ instead of as ‘Earth Spirituality,’ ...I view the term Nature Spirituality as a broader term that reflects communion with Nature not only on this Planet, but beyond it” (2016).

Selena would call out, such as connecting with present witches and future witches. Then, the participants would meditatively try to emotionally and psychologically connect with these present and future witches. After this, the circle was broken in chants declaring it still whole, and dispersed the energy outwards (Field Notes 2016).

After I left, I wrote reflectively on my experience saying, “I felt very connected. I realized I have been really neglecting my spirituality lately and been feeling very disconnected. Separation is a myth and everything is connected” (Field Notes 2016). This statement didn’t mean much to me until well after I finished my fieldwork. I realized the significance while analyzing my field notes; that I had participated in a ritual that throughout the whole process employed chants and meditations on interconnectivity. During the ritual and after departing, I felt this interconnectivity on a very deep level, and iterated an underlying ideology of Witchcraft — that “Separation is a myth and everything is connected.” It was this insight that led me to see that the way that Witchcraft is practiced and taught lends itself to Marxist analysis.⁹ Circle Sanctuary, as a church, is an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) as Marxist theorist Louis Althusser calls private institutions (like churches) that enculturate (or interpellate) practitioners into ideologies (Althusser 1979: 143); these ideologies reflect and indoctrinate the values of the group. Interpellation is like other forms of socialization, it is relatively unconscious and difficult to really see or analyze unless one specifically looks for it or it is very explicit, such as through the constant repetition in the full moon ritual. So, during the full moon ritual, I and the other

⁹ Although I discuss ISAs and Interpellation in this paper, there are many other aspects of Neopaganism that reflect Neo-Marxist (the fusing of Marxism with Intersectional Feminism and Critical Race Theory) themes, including the focus on ending alienation, inequalities, the valuation of the subaltern, and hegemony. These and other ideas exceed the scale of this paper. Lundskow (2005) also hints at the grander Marxist-Neopagan connections that can be made.

practitioners were interpellated into the Neopagan ideology of interconnectivity: “Separation is a myth and everything is connected.”

Interpellation and Rites of Passage

The interpellation that Circle Sanctuary accomplishes occurs for much more complex reasons than just repetitive chanting. Another aspect of the rituals is that they echo Victor Turner and Arnold Van Gennep’s structure of rites of passage: 1) Separation, 2) Liminality, and 3) Reaggregation or Reincorporation (Turner 2013: 91). Just as Turner argued, I also argue that the most critical stage is the “betwixt and between” stage of liminality. First, the form of most rituals echoes these stages. They begin with a calling of the four quarters and a casting of the circle, which translates to a separation of the magical space and the mundane, everyday world. Then, the ritual proceeds in a variety of different ways, depending on the purpose of the ritual. This stage is where the most happens and from which magic is supposed to occur. The final stage is the thanking of any deities and the quarters, and a closing of the circle. Circles are often closed with a chant like the one the full moon ritual closed with: “Merry meet, merry part, and merry meet again” (Field Notes 2016, also discussed in Magliocco 2004: 34 and Hutton 1999: 56). The result of this chant is a reincorporation of the Circle members between each other, the surrounding space, and the mundane world.

The liminal stage, the central aspect of the ritual, is where interpellation happens most readily. One reason for this is that the act of participating in group rituals may bring about an Altered State of Consciousness (ASC) because rituals incorporate a variety of physical and psychological triggers for ASC. According to Arnold M. Ludwig, ASC are “any mental state(s) induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or

agents...recognized subjectively...as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms...during alert, waking consciousness” (Ludwig 1969: 9-10). The effects of ASC are 1) “Alterations in thinking,” 2) “Disturbed time sense,” 3) “Loss of control,” 4) “Change in emotional expression,” 5) distortions of bodily perception, 6) “Perceptual distortions” such as hallucination or visual imagery, 7) “Change in meaning or significance” including “feelings of profound insight, illumination, and truth,” 8) “Sense of the ineffable” or unexplainable, 9) “Feelings of rejuvenation,” and 10) Hyper-suggestibility (1969: 13-17). The last characteristic, hyper-suggestibility, is the most relevant to this analysis. By using physical and psychological triggers in group rituals, participants experience ASC in which they are hyper-suggestible and thus, more open to interpellation of ideologies.

As an example, the most moving and meaningful ritual of my experiences at Circle Sanctuary was the main Samhain ritual during the Samhain festival. This ritual was the climax of the festival; the activities before it increased in energy and intensity, and the activities after it decreased in energy and intensity.

¹⁰“It was a beautiful, gorgeous night, the stars were completely out, you could see the Milky Way across the sky, it was absolutely beautiful. Torches were lit throughout Circle Sanctuary to show paths and points of interest. So we walked down to what had been the dining tent, a sort of a carnival-esque, red and white event tent. The people outside of the tent were excited, they were getting ready for the big ritual, and we were motioned in for the ritual to begin. A steward directed us to seats while reverends in black cloaks sang chants. There were three rows of white folding chairs around the center pole of the tent. At the base of the pole sat Selena Fox completely shrouded in black fabric, presumably a cloak of some sort and a black dress, which completely obscured her. Everyone filled in the seats, but some were left empty and the ritual began.

A man walked into the center in a stylish black suit with a top hat and cane and his face painted like a skull. The man slowly walked around the center of the tent in a clockwise direction, and he talked to us about life and the cardinal directions. Then, four reverends were

¹⁰ This section is paraphrased and quoted from my field notes. It is set in single space to designate it as previously-written.

called forward to call in the quarters. We welcomed North, East, South and West, and the reverends talked about the associations, saying, for example, “I am water, I am the emotional threads.” They always connected their topic back to Death, the ancestors, and our everyday lives. They emphasized the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and the physical manifestation of the Circle in our literal circle.

When they were done, Selena Fox stood up and began addressing us in creating a portal for spirits and ancestors to pass through and join us. We cast a protective circle of white light around the tent and land. Selena used a quartz wand to cast the circle, and the portal was symbolized by a black crystal on top of a pedestal. Before the portal was opened, Selena asked us to think about whom we would want to summon into the circle, and I thought of my deceased grandmother. The portal was opened theatrically with group incantations and Selena circling the black crystal with her wand high in the air. Nothing happened immediately after the portal was opened. We sat in silence. Then, Selena asked us to listen for any messages the spirits had for us and some people started crying, there was a little sob or a hiccup or nose blowing from across the room. Slowly, people’s emotions heightened and I caught a glimpse of a mist in the middle of my gaze that darted quickly down. I thought it was a glare in my glasses because I had been moving my head at the same time, but I sat for a while longer and I saw it again a little bit lower, just a very quick darting mist, and then I felt my hands go icy cold, as if there was a spiritual presence in front of me, and while I did not feel a specific presence — a name wasn’t given to me and the presence didn’t speak to me — I still had the impression that someone was holding my hand! It felt like a cold air just around my hands and as though the grip of the “hand” changed as the ritual went on. I started to react, crying and saying a few words, because I thought it might be my grandmother. Then the height of the ritual came, which was very, very powerful.

Selena asked us to start slowly making the sounds of mourners and people suffering, and to express suffering starting with a very low moan. At first, it was quiet; some people were crying and there was just a very low hum, or a moan, throughout the circle, and slowly more and more people started crying. The emotions, crying, and atmosphere made me feel dizzy, and I felt a swirling vertigo. I felt as the sound picked up in tone and speed, the room started spinning faster and faster, and with the red and white stripes of the tent, I felt the scene had a very Mardi Gras or Vodou kind of aesthetic, as the man with the skull face and top hat watched over and orange and white Christmas lights illuminated the whole scene. The energy rose until there were people sobbing at their height and others were vocalizing very loudly, some very high, some very low, just very loud. I was crying quite a bit, and my neighbors were as well, one of my neighbors a few seats down was distraught. After a while, the vocalizations faded back down to an organic close. Selena had us say parting words to the spirits, who she also said were occupying the chairs around us that were empty as light and positivity. She told us to take our neighbor’s hands, and I didn’t want to let go of the spirit’s hands, but my neighbor on my right hand side was a bit insistent on holding hands for the symbolic recognition of community that Selena was going for. My left hand partner didn’t seem to mind as much and so, I continued to hold the spirit’s hand until the portal was closed, and I felt the coldness reduce on my hand. I took my other neighbor’s hand, and we chanted together: “community is healing, community is support.” There was a very strong emphasis on supporting each other in grieving and suffering, and we were told to rise and come to the center of the circle, which quickly became very full, and we chanted, laid hands on one another, and hugged. Finally, Selena had us shout one more

time “Happy Samhain!” and we were told to make our way through the side door of the tent towards the bonfire site. (Field Notes 2016).

The separation began with the theatrical, otherworldly presence of the man representing Spirit. His address about the cycles of life, death, and rebirth were to frame our understanding of the ritual. The four reverends helped us to truly separate by casting the circle and creating a liminal space in the tent. Once liminality had been established, Selena Fox rose to begin the magical working. Her suggestions to think of spirits we might want to summon into the circle, and that the black crystal represented a spirit portal, reflects some of the literature on Witchcraft — that Witchcraft requires a measure of “training the imagination” to see and believe in magic, fantastical possibilities, immanence, and other abstract concepts (Luhmann 1989, Magliocco 2004: 100-178). It was these suggestions and the inherent validation in these suggestions that made seeing spirits a social and psychological possibility for practitioners. In the liminal space of the ritual, ASC were produced, which induced the effects of ASC, and made these sorts of experiences possible.

The repetition of themes such as interconnectivity in this hyper-suggestible state makes interpellation all the more effective. The holding of hands with neighbors, chanting, and then physical connection (and more chanting) at the center of the circle, solidified in practitioners’ minds that separation — in death, between bodies, in space and time — is a myth, because we experienced the breaking down of these barriers in the liminal space of ritual. Everything can be connected in ritual and magical practices, but furthermore, these experiences open up the possibility and, in fact, suggest that perhaps in the mundane world, these separations are not as real or as impassible as they may seem.

Conclusions: Why Neopaganism? Why Now?

It is this last sentiment that struck me most clearly, heading home from the Samhain festival. Normally, I must confess that I have a bit of road rage because I am always late and thus, in a hurry. However, after leaving the closing ritual, with its affirmations of community and connectedness, I realized that I was not stressed or passing the slower drivers that I was stuck behind because my first thought was “what if they are one of my Circle siblings?” This thought preoccupied me all the way home, because it seemed so out of place and out of context with the rest of my life — and in a way, it was. The closing ritual had interpellated and affirmed ideologies of connectedness and community, to the point that when I was saying my goodbyes, one participant hugged me and said “Well now you *have* to come back because you’re a part of the community!” (Field Notes 2016). These ideologies, in contrast to mundane life, can seem very foreign in our westernized American culture. Due to technology, modernization, and industrialization, our lives and relationships can seem very alienated.

I realized that these discourses of immanence, interconnectivity, anti-alienation and anti-modernization that Neopaganism teaches can be very appealing to an increasingly alienated society (Ivakhiv 1996). In modern America, and the world in general, we are experiencing social and environmental crises as a result of many Neoliberal, industrialist, and capitalist movements of the last 100 years that have led to global warming, economic inequalities, political polarization, and social inequalities. To liberal environmentalists then, the Romantic, anti-establishment discourse of Neopaganism is appealing, and could provide an oppositional framework to these problems. The cultural conditions seem right for many people now to seek postmodern religions like Neopaganism, not only because of the appeal of the historical discourses Neopaganism draws on, but also for its oppositional nature.

As Vanessa Sage explained, Neopaganism and New Age spiritualities were born out of the counterculture of the 1960s and 70s (Sage 2009: 35). Both are “eclectic, pluralistic, creative...and utopian...with no ‘central organization’ and are rife with activism and sense the importance of advocacy (Hunt 2003: 133-134, 148, Sage 2009: 35). To practitioners who may resent the social inequalities of modern America — the continued devaluation of African American and indigenous lives and the increasing economic inequalities to name a few examples — the universalist ideologies of Neopaganism are appealing, in which there is “a strong emphasis on the individual and on freedom, a sense of responsibility for the earth and the larger human community, and the quality of perennialism, whereby the inner core of all religions is found to be universally true (Heelas 1996: 18-28)” (Sage 2009: 35). Sage goes further than the 1960s though, and connects modern Neopagans to Romantics of the nineteenth century. She says that Romantics and Neopagans “hope to reenchant the world” and are “products of modernity” that “emphasize imagination and emotion,” “question the place of rationality in” knowing, value the individual and community connections, “look to the past for a model of the future”¹¹ and “take nature to be the main vehicle for the realization of their goals” (Sage 2009: 36-37).¹²

My experiences at Circle Sanctuary validated and encouraged these Romantic and countercultural values, but they also went further than that. As Magliocco states, “some Neo-Pagan beliefs arise from what they experience during religious ecstasy and that the marginalization of such experiences in mainstream American culture lies behind Neo-Pagans’ need to create a context in which they are pivotal and valued” (Magliocco 2004: 9). By

¹¹ Both also use past ideologies of primitivism and the Noble Savage, an idealization and romanticization of indigenous life ways.

¹² There are other parallels that can be traced between the Romantic movement, countercultural movement of the 1960s, and Neopaganism, because in a way, each draw on the same historical discourses and have built on each other as time progressed.

participating in rituals at Circle Sanctuary, practitioners create a space where these values, and ideologies such as interconnectedness, are “pivotal and valued.” They create a space that is oppositional to the alienation of modern mundane society, and practice their idealized vision of society in the liminal festival space. Because these rituals induce ASC and hyper-suggestibility, practitioners can be easily interpellated into Neopagan ideologies. It seems, then, that Neopaganism sits at a crucial junction at this specific moment in American culture and history; Neopaganism exists at the intersection of Romanticism, Transcendentalism, the rise of New Age Spiritualities and postmodern religions, and intensifying social and environmental crisis, and it supposedly has answers and a path for practitioners. This could explain how it is one of the fastest growing religions in America, along with other ecstatic religions (Magliocco 2004: 163-164).

To return to the beginning of this paper, I have argued that Circle Sanctuary, as an ISA, interpellates Neopagan practitioners into ideologies such as interconnectedness through rituals following the structure of rites of passage. In the liminal stage of rituals, Altered States of Consciousness may be induced due to the physical and psychological triggers in rituals, which produces psychological effects like hyper-suggestibility in practitioners. From this state of hyper-suggestibility, Circle Sanctuary reverends are able to easily interpellate practitioners into Neopagan ideologies through repetitive chants and other suggestions. In addition, Neopaganism is a felicitous ideological system for this specific historical and cultural moment in America, due to its universalist, activist, and oppositional nature, which appeals to many people as Americans face the social and environmental crises of their time.

In addition to analyzing the connections between seemingly disparate academic theories, I hope that I have also succeeded in my attempt to represent my experiences in a way that is not only clear and understandable, but also relatable, since that is an important goal in writing about one's experience — to relate to the reader — to connect with them. In a way, the act of reading and writing is magical — I invoke the muses, and type out symbols that are imbued with inherent meaning; the reader engages with these symbols like sigils and manifests visions in their minds of magical places, and conjures not-so-magical theories. In a way then, reading and writing are a form of witchcraft, an act of invoking knowledge and connecting across geography, time, linguistic and cultural barriers, and the physical body. It seems appropriate, then, to close this liminal “circle” and return to the mundane world.

The circle is open but unbroken: “We are a circle, within a circle, with no beginning, and never ending...Merry meet, merry part, and merry meet again!” (Field Notes 2016).

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