

THE GENDERED ALTAR:  
WICCAN CONCEPTS OF GENDER AND RITUAL OBJECTS

by

JESSE DANIEL SLOAN  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2005

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## ABSTRACT

Many ethnographic accounts within the annals of anthropological literature describe the religious beliefs and magical rituals of peoples throughout the world. Fewer scholars have focused on the relatively young Neo-Pagan religious movement. “*Neo-Pagan*,” explains Helen Berger in *Voices from the Pagan Census* (2003), “is an umbrella term covering sects of a new religious movement, the largest and most important form of which is...Wicca” (Berger et al. 2003: 1). This thesis examines the relationship between practice and ideology by analyzing the material culture of Wiccan altars as used by Wiccans in Central Florida, USA. Particular attention is paid to beliefs concerning concepts of gender associated with ritual objects, and concepts of gender and sexuality as understood by practitioners. Many Wiccans see divinity as manifested in two complementary beings: the Goddess and the God. The fertility that these divine beings achieve through sexual union is the subject of an elaborate ritual called the Great Rite. A pair of Wiccans, often a masculine High Priest and a feminine High Priestess, conduct this ritual by manipulating specific objects, which are believed to be strongly gendered. I argue that Wiccan rituals reflect, construct, and reinforce the Wiccan precept of a gender-balanced cosmos through the interaction of these primary ritual actors and the gendered objects they manipulate. As a practicing Wiccan, my theoretical approach is aligned with that of the native scholar. The native scholar faces challenges distancing her or himself from research, but gains opportunities from insider knowledge. Wiccan ideology stands in contrast to heteronormative conventions of gender and sexuality. However, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Wiccans may need to actively negotiate for representation in this movement, where fertility is stressed. Wiccans continuously reinvent established practices in an attempt to create a more satisfying religious community.

This thesis is dedicated to Scott Stearns, Abraham Kooiman, James W. Price, Patrick Stewart, Jerome Birnbaum, Gary Combs, Jan Deanna O'Rourke, A. Douglas Wilkey, John P. Graff, Stephen P. Snowberger III, Jason A. Schumann, Tiffany Stone, Casey Trapani and the over 1,800 self-identifying Wiccans who have served and currently serve in the Armed Forces of these United States. Dedication also extends to their spouses, family, friends and dutiful clergy, who led the effort to have the Pentacle added to the official registry of religious emblems that may be engraved on government-issued memorial markers.  
May Liberty's torch shine on us all.

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my friends, some of whom became informants, and to my informants, many of whom became friends, I can say only this: we all walk the paths set before us by our Gods, but when we're united in the bonds of true and loyal friendship we need never walk alone.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Within the realm of cultural anthropology, many scholars have observed and offered commentary on the religious and magical practices of cultures all over the world (Boas 1940; Evans-Pritchard 1929, 1936; Geertz 1993, Lévi-Strauss 1963; Malinowski 1970; Radcliffe-Brown 1945; Wallace 1956). These studies are some of the most well-known and best-respected examples of an anthropological approach to the study of religion. Relatively little has been written, however, on a recent religious movement known as Neo-Paganism, which has been gaining in popularity throughout Europe, North America and Australia. “*Neo-Pagan*,” explains Helen Berger, “is an umbrella term covering sects of a new religious movement, the largest and most important form of which is Witchcraft, or as it is also called, Wicca” (Berger et al. 2003: 1). Within the last decade, a small number of scholars within anthropology, sociology, and other fields have conducted studies of Neo-Pagan and Wiccan religious groups (Berger 1999; Berger et al. 2003; Harper Bisso 2005; Hutton 1999; Jencson 1999; Magliocco 2001, 2004; Salomonsen 2002; Scarboro et al. 1994). My own research adds to the existing body of literature on Wiccan religious practices as well as the disciplines of gender studies, material culture, feminist spirituality and the anthropology of religion.

My perspective on this research is informed by my position as a practitioner of Wicca. This position carries with it a degree of bias towards studying aspects of Wicca, though I feel it also greatly aided my data collection. Carol Barner-Barry, a non-practitioner, writes that “most of the Pagans that [she] came to know were...afraid to identify openly as Pagans” (Barner-Barry 2005: 4). I believe that introducing myself as both an anthropology student and a Wiccan put my informants at ease and helped build rapport quickly. As a practitioner who has written and

performed rituals, I possess insider knowledge regarding Wiccan practices and ritual objects. This knowledge, while useful in conducting my research, also potentially creates strong bias. I retain my own labels and meanings for ritual objects used during Wiccan ceremonies, called *Sabbats*, which I've learned through experience. I needed to be careful not to let this personal knowledge lead my informants in their answers to my interviews (Appendix B) and surveys (Appendix C).

To combat potential bias, I encouraged my interview participants to generate all the names and meanings behind the objects. I accomplished this by printing my photos of altars and placing numbers beside each of the altar objects. The numbers began with the leftmost object visible in the photograph and continued towards the right, in ascending order, until every object had received a number. During interviews I asked my informants to name and describe the functions of the objects in the order of the numbers I'd placed beside them. For my surveys, participants were presented with a list of ritual objects and asked to comment only on those objects which were familiar to their particular forms of worship. Presumably, objects with unfamiliar names would be left blank by anonymous participants.

When an anthropologist studies a culture of which she is also a member, she is referred to as a "native" anthropologist (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984: 584). Once considered taboo within the discipline, this theoretical approach is becoming more common as attitudes change. Scholars who have discussed "native" anthropologists within the context of contemporary ethnography will be considered in greater depth in the methodology section of this thesis introduction (Montejo 1999; Narayan 1993; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984). My position as a native scholar of Wicca was at times difficult to negotiate, but I drew inspiration from some existing studies conducted by scholars who also practice Neo-Pagan religions.

Several recent scholars of Neo-Pagan religions also claim membership in these communities (Magliocco 2001, 2004; Harper-Bisso 2005; Scarborough et al. 1994). Shirley Stave, a member of the research team that produced *Living Witchcraft* (1994), was a practicing Wiccan. After a conversation that began at an academic conference, Allen Scarborough, Nancy Campbell and Stave decided to conduct research within Stave's Georgia *coven*, called Ravenwood (Scarborough et al. 1994: ix). Some Wiccans worship together in small formally organized groups, called covens, in which traditional practices are learned by initiates, who rise in rank as they gain experience (Berger 1999: 55). Sabina Magliocco, a folklorist and art historian, wrote a book called *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art and Altars* (2001), which examines the diversity of altar objects within Neo-Paganism. According to a program at a convention I attended in 2007, she is a practitioner of Wicca. At the same conference, I met Susan Harper-Bisso, who conducted her dissertation research among various Neo-Pagan groups in Texas. Harper-Bisso comments in her dissertation on the many informants who "openly told [her] that, had [she] not been NeoPagan [herself], there was no way they would have spoken to [her] or welcomed [her] into their homes, temples, and circles" (Harper-Bisso 2005: 44). Clearly, the insider status held by these scholars aided in their development of rapport with their subjects and opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed.

The history of the Wiccan revival is rich and complex, and a brief overview is necessary. Wicca, as it is practiced today, is over half a century old and comes most directly from the writings of Gerald Gardner, particularly his book *Witchcraft Today* (1954). Gerald Gardner was born in 1884; he was a British national, but spent many years abroad, managing plantations in Ceylon, North Borneo, and Malaya, according to historian Ronald Hutton (Hutton 1999: 205). An avid antiquarian, amateur archaeologist and folklorist, Gardner had a longstanding interest in

the occult (ibid.: 205). Hutton describes how, following Gardner's retirement to the English countryside in the 1940's, Gardner combined ancient English folk traditions with the anthropological theories of Margaret Murray<sup>1</sup> and formal practices of ceremonial magic (ibid.: 210). In *Witchcraft Today* (1954), Gardner writes that he was initiated into a traditional coven, which had existed since pre-Christian times, and was instructed in the ways of the ancient religion of Witchcraft (Gardner 2004 [1954]: 26). In *Drawing Down the Moon* (1981), Margot Adler expands on this idea. She writes that Gardner's coven, located in England, was known as the New Forest Coven and led by a woman named "Old Dorothy" (Adler 1981 [1979]: 61).

Little evidence exists today, besides Gardner's testimony and the claims of his students, which attests to the existence of any coven pre-dating the mid-1950's. "The veracity of Gardner's claims to have found secret, organized, traditional covens is doubted today, even by most of his [followers]," writes Linda Jencson, a cultural anthropologist (Jencson 1989: 3). However, *Witchcraft Today* and Wiccan texts by subsequent authors were widely published and have inspired many people all over the world to practice Wicca, particularly in England, the United States, and Australia (Gardner 1954; Buckland 2002; Farrar and Farrar 1984). According to Barner-Barry, Gerald Gardner "founded what is now known [by practitioners] as the

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1) Margaret Murray, an early archaeologist and Egyptologist, actively published for the *Journal Man* in the 1920's and hypothesized that a pan-European Witch cult persisted from the Paleolithic into modern times. In one article from 1919, Murray described her impressions of the hierarchical structure of a Witch coven. She identifies the male leader of the coven as "the divine man, the incarnate God, known to the Christian recorders as 'the Devil'" (Murray 1919: 137). Margot Adler, author of *Drawing Down the Moon* (1981 [1979]), cites several authors who are critical of Murray's work; these authors include historians Norman Cohn and H.R. Trevor-Roper (Adler 1981 [1979]: 46-54). Murray is known to have cited evidence collected under torture during the time of the Inquisition, which calls into question the validity of her data. Murray's work has been rejected by most modern scholars but proved influential both to spiritual feminists and to the writings of Gerald Gardner, and thus, to the modern Wiccan movement.

*Gardnerian* tradition, considered by many to be the dominant tradition in contemporary Wicca” (Barner-Barry, 2005: 36). In many ways Gardner’s writings are foundational to all modern Wiccan rituals.

Neo-Paganism, in general, distinguishes itself from other Western religious movements in several ways. Neo-Pagan groups worship multiple gods, often in the form of a divine couple: Goddess and God. In the case of Gardnerian-inspired Wicca, the interactions of feminine and masculine powers are considered sacred, and part of a complex ideology, which varies widely among practitioners. Berger describes the eight seasonal holidays, called *Sabbats*, celebrated by most Wiccan groups, and explains the complex ideology of the birth, death and rebirth of the Horned God, the “consort” of the Eternal Goddess, which accompanies these celebrations; Wiccan ideology will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2 (Berger et al. 2003: 4). Many Wiccans choose to join covens, where they learn and worship together in groups (Berger 1999: 55). However, a majority of Wiccans, according to Berger, practice as *solitaries* “at least for some period of their lives” (Berger et al. 2003: 4). Solitaries operate autonomously and do not belong to a formal coven, but may “remain connected to the larger Neo-Pagan community by attending public rituals and festivals, reading Neo-Pagan magazines [and books], and participating in online Neo-Pagan chat groups” (ibid.: 4).

Neo-Pagans live throughout the United States and are predominantly (90.8%) Caucasian, according to the book *Voices from the Pagan Census* (2003), based on a survey given to a significant number of American Neo-Pagans (Berger et al. 2003: 29). Multiple studies suggest that a majority of Neo-Pagans are female, but estimates vary (Berger et al. 2003; Jorgensen and Russell 1999; Orion 1995). Berger’s study reported a breakdown of 64.8% female, 33.9% percent male, and 1.3% not reporting (ibid.: 27). Of all the Neo-Pagan respondents in Berger’s

study, 54.7% listed Wicca as their “primary spiritual path,” supporting her assertion that most Neo-Pagans are Wiccan (Berger et al. 2003: 91). Berger reports that Wiccans, as compared to most Americans, are politically liberal, with 44.5% reporting as “Democrat” and only 5.6% reporting as “Republican;” many Wiccans also claimed to be “Independent” (26.6%) (ibid.: 95). They tend to be “urban or suburban” and have a higher level of education than the average American, but make less money (ibid.: 93). Berger suggests that this monetary disparity may be because women are the majority in Wicca and tend to make less than men overall, or that Wiccans have “a greater interest in self or spiritual development than in career advancement” (ibid.: 31).

Most practitioners first become involved with Wicca through one of many religious texts available for purchase online and in most bookstores (Sloan 2007). Jencson writes that “a common feature in the life stories of American [Wiccans] is that the concepts of the belief system are first contacted on the library shelf” (Jencson 1989: 4). Many documents exist that bind this movement together; one example, noted above, is *Witchcraft Today* (1954), another is called “The Principles of Wiccan Belief”. Dereck Daschke and W. Michael Ashcroft reproduce “The Principles of Wiccan Belief” in their book *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader* (2005).

“The Principles of Wiccan Belief,” (Appendix A) created in 1974 by the Counsel of American Witches, is a primary document that represents a self-conscious effort by American Wiccans to come to a consensus about basic Wiccan ideology (Adler 1981 [1979]: 97). Organized as a series of 13 statements of belief, “The Principles” establish American Wicca as a religion that is deeply tied to nature and committed to the perpetuation of life. Wiccans vehemently deny any parallels to Devil worshippers or Satanists, as they often face prejudice

from conservative Christianity. This document also establishes the monotheistic/duotheistic nature of divinity in Wicca. Principle 4 begins, “[Wiccans] conceive of the Creative Power in the Universe as manifesting through polarity- as masculine and feminine- and this same Creative Power lives in all people, and functions through the interaction of the masculine and feminine. We value neither above the other, knowing each to be supportive of the other” (Daschke and Ashcroft, eds 2005: 102). The polarized “Creative Power” to which this passage refers can alternately be interpreted as a singular, balanced force, or as the Divine Couple, Goddess and God. Many Wiccans place great value on what they perceive as a balance between feminine and masculine qualities. I argue that this precept is reinforced, in part, through the performance of rituals in which gendered objects are involved.

My thesis research examines the relationship between Wiccan ideology and ritual objects commonly used during Sabbat ceremonies. Sabbat ceremonies were chosen for this study because they generally involve a significant portion of the coven or group, are planned well in advance of the date of celebration, and are generally open to non-coven members. Sabbat rituals generally include a formal ceremony involving an altar and numerous ritual objects. The average number of objects on the three altars I was able to photograph was between 20 and 25. Jencson offers a seven-step model of typical Wiccan Sabbats, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter (Jencson 1991: 197-198). Several Wiccan texts also exist that describe alternate versions of the different sections of Wiccan rituals (Buckland 2002; Farrar and Farrar 1984). These will also be related in detail in the following chapter.

Specifically, I focus on the relationships between the genders represented by the primary actors in a ritual -commonly a feminine High Priestess and a masculine High Priest- and the genders ascribed to ritual objects by practitioners. The gendering of objects is discussed below.

My preliminary hypothesis is that Wiccan rituals reflect, construct, and reinforce the Wiccan precept of a gender-balanced cosmos through the interaction of the primary ritual actors and gendered objects in the performance of rituals. If, for example, both male and female actors manipulate gendered ritual objects, and these objects are considered central to the enactment of rituals, then these rituals can be said to physically illustrate the concept of a gender-balanced worldview consistent with Principle 4 from the “Principles of Wiccan Belief” (1974) (Daschke and Ashcroft, eds 2005: 102).

However, if rituals include actors of one gender only, and/or these actors utilize ritual objects associated with one gender (or no gender at all), then the rituals cannot be said to illustrate the Wiccan concept of a gender-balanced worldview. Some Neo-Pagan groups are comprised of women only. Berger describes Zsuzsanna Budapest’s “Susan B. Anthony coven” as “a feminist form of Witchcraft” (Berger et al. 2003: 13). Berger contrasts Gardnerian-inspired Wiccan traditions with feminist Witchcraft. “Wicca, as it came from England, requires the balancing of male and female polarities in rituals and involves the veneration of the gods and goddesses,” Berger writes, “Witchcraft as developed by Budapest, and as it is still practiced by women-only groups, acknowledges the goddess to the exclusion of the gods, or god force” (ibid.: 13). Such groups do not see polarity as a necessary aspect of Neo-Paganism (Eller 1993; Salomonsen 2002; Starhawk 1989[1979]).

Feminist forms of Witchcraft, to varying extents, were influenced by the writings of the author Starhawk, particularly her book *Spiral Dance* (1979). Jone Salomonsen’s ethnographic research took place in San Francisco among one such group of Witches called the “Reclaiming Collective” (Salomonsen 2002: 1). Salomonsen defines “utopian” witches by their shared interpretation of “Wicca along Starhawk’s lines as a religious and social gospel for the



emancipation and rescue of the world” (ibid.: 97). Starhawk’s books have made a strong impact among the more feminist-oriented Neo-Pagans, but her readership is by no means universal among all Wiccans, as suggested by Salomonsen (ibid.: 9). What Salomonsen fails to take into account is the strong regionalism that exists within the diverse Neo-Pagan movement. What is observable in one region may be absent in others. Therefore, as is true of most ethnographic research, a small group under study should not be assumed to be representative of the entire culture in question.

To test my hypothesis that Wiccan rituals construct and reinforce Wiccan ideology, I conducted ethnographic research among Wiccans in central Florida from summer 2007 to early 2008. I was unable to locate any women-only groups, but, as a man, I may have had difficulties attending rituals even if such groups were found to exist in central Florida. I observed three Wiccan Sabbat ceremonies conducted by three separate groups, as they occurred during my research window. I recorded the genders of the primary actors involved and the use of ritual objects during these rituals. I administered semi-structured interviews to several primary actors following each ritual and recorded details about the meanings of the objects that appeared on the altar. I undertook a more substantial interview with the High Priest of a Wiccan coven (Lord Lugh) in his home, at a time between ritual celebrations. I also mailed and otherwise distributed short surveys to individuals attending rituals with each group, in order to see if the beliefs of attendees differed generally from the beliefs of the primary actors.

Analyzing the phenomena of Wiccan ritual practices raises theoretical questions that warrant detailed consideration. What functions do rituals serve for the societies in which they are practiced? In what ways do ritual actions recapitulate societal values? Durkheim addressed these questions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fiona Bowie, in *The Anthropology of Religion: An*

*Introduction* (2000), explains that Durkheim chose to view religion as the outward expression of the symbolic values of a society (Bowie 2000:17). J. Milton Yinger, a sociologist, notes that Durkheim attempted to develop a strong theory of religion as a social phenomenon in his classic 1912 text, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Yinger 1958:489). Durkheim himself writes that, “how the society imagines man and the world is expressed in the traditions whose memory the mythology perpetuates” (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 379). In other words, rituals can be interpreted as indicators of the beliefs and values of a given group.

Several scholars have followed in Durkheim’s footsteps and further developed the interpretation of ritual practices. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown urged his fellow social scientists to disregard the differences in religious concepts between disparate cultures and focus on the social function religion serves for a society. “Any religion is an important or even essential part of the social machinery,” he writes, “as are morality and law, part of a complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations,” (Radcliffe-Brown 1945: 33). Franz Boas described the development of what he calls “esoteric doctrines” (Franz Boas 1940: 312). According to Boas, the innovations of individuals can gradually change religious practices within a society. As Wicca continues to spread around the world, through individual innovators, published works and the Internet, it is important to consider the idiosyncratic ritual practices of individuals and groups.

Clifford Geertz calls for better research methods to be developed from a solid understanding of religious symbols. He writes that, “sacred symbols function to synthesize a people’s ethos- the tone, character, and quality of their life...” (Geertz 1993: 89). Rather than just decrying old theories, Geertz encourages current and future scholars to focus on the symbolic aspects of religion, and not to take for granted that the meanings are obvious. Only

when we can interpret the meanings of sacred symbols will we be able to suggest their possible functions in society. Geertz writes: “What men believe is as various as what they are- a proposition that holds with equal force when it is inverted” (ibid.: 122).

Mark Allman (2000) is careful to stress that the written form of the ritual means little without the corresponding actions performed in the context of an active congregation. Allman references Mark Searle and explains that “one participates or enters into liturgy through word and song; through gestures ... visually through symbols ... and mentally through the open disposition of the participants/inhabitants [also participating in the ritual]” (Allman 2000: 60). For this reason, it was crucial that my observations of Wiccan rituals be taken from events that I witnessed first-hand, rather than published accounts or second-hand stories. I discuss specific Wiccan rituals in the second chapter of this thesis. My questions to informants helped to expose the multiple meanings behind ritual objects, as well as their associated genders. To understand how objects that are considered inanimate may nevertheless be given human qualities, we turn to the body of literature on material culture.

The study of material objects has been the domain of archaeology since its earliest beginnings. Carl Knappett writes, “of all disciplines it is archaeology that needs material culture most” (Knappett 2005: 1). This is no great leap in thinking, as archaeology is chiefly concerned with the extraction, analysis and preservation of artifacts. Knappett, like many other scholars on material culture, believes that the social sciences have been painfully slow in adapting material culture theories to their own fields (ibid.: 2). Tim Dant underscores the importance of early theorists like Karl Marx and George Simmel in emphasizing the material components of human existence (Dant 2005: 13). Marx claimed that objects only become products through the process of consumption; in other words, a pen only becomes a useful tool when it is used to write (ibid.:

17). Georg Simmel noted “the importance of outward appearance, adornment and fashion” (ibid.: 19). Simmel believed that the value of objects was related to their “appeal” to the consumers (ibid.: 19).

The editors of the *Handbook of Material Culture* (2004) point to Franz Boas and Radcliffe Brown as early proponents of the analysis of objects (Tilley et al. 2006: 2). “A post-1960’s shift from the theoretical dominance of functionalist to that of structuralist and symbolic anthropology paved the way for a reintroduction of the study of material culture into the mainstream of anthropological research,” they claim (ibid.: 2). Levi-Strauss is particularly associated with this shift as well as French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (ibid.: 2). “Bourdieu’s work on Kabyle society has heavily influenced a host of archaeological and anthropological material culture studies of relatively undifferentiated small-scale societies, while his studies of French society in his book *Distinction* (1984) and elsewhere have provided a springboard for numerous anthropological studies of contemporary consumption” (ibid.: 9). Recent scholarship has been conducted in numerous subfields and specializations, always with an eye towards objects and the meanings humans ascribe to them.

From the perspective of the material culture of religion, objects may be thought of as communicative symbols (Hoskins 2007: 111). They carry meanings that are immediately recognizable to practitioners, and, through the performance of rituals, may reinforce the core values of the religion itself (Bowie 2000:17). Roger Ivar Lohmann and Susan Starr Sered, in an introduction for a special issue of the *Journal of Material Religion*, claim that “the practice of assigning gender to artifacts and natural objects is common but not universal in religions”(Lohmann and Sered 2007: 5-6). “While not all objects are gendered,” argues Janet Hoskins, “if an object has a clearly gendered identity, it is more likely to be powerful” (Hoskins

2007: 116). Hoskins further explains that objects used during rituals can be interpreted as “gendered images that make a statement” (Hoskins 2007: 111). She cites Alfred Gell, who believes that art objects, as well as most purposefully created objects, “are produced in order to influence the thoughts and actions of others (Gell *in* Hoskins 2007: 116). In this sense, gendered ritual objects become a means of communication.

By what process do ritual objects acquire genders? Lohmann and Sered state that “objects often have gender assigned to them because of their salient characteristics” (Lohmann and Sered 2007: 6). “Salient characteristics” may include shape, relative size, and even, in the case of Roger Lohmann’s study, the sound produced by an object. Lohmann noted that the men of a native group in Papua New Guinea would traditionally play drums that were considered female (Lohmann 2007: 88). When the drums were played, the low, hollow sounds were culturally understood as the sound “which emanates from a woman’s vagina during sex” (*ibid.*: 88). Similarly, Wiccan ritual objects may acquire genders for a range of reasons.

Within Wicca, for those ritual objects that are seen as gendered (explained below), gender assignments seem to be based, to some extent, on an object’s physical characteristics. Anthropologist Linda Jencson briefly discusses the gendering of Wiccan ritual objects in her dissertation. According to Jencson, the *chalice*, an object used during most Wiccan rituals, is a highly feminized object (Jencson 1991: 201). Physically, the chalice is the shape of a goblet or grail, with a large rounded cavity supported by a thin, tapered base. Wine is poured into the chalice during Sabbat rituals. Jencson asserts that wine in the chalice is understood by practitioners as “the fruit of the Goddess within a symbolic womb” (*ibid.*: 201). Thus, the chalice takes on a feminine gender due both to its hollow, round shape, and its ritual function, as a vessel for wine. The complement to the chalice is the *athame*, or ritual knife, which is phallic in shape

and considered male (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 35). Janet and Stewart Farrar are respected elders in the Wiccan community, occupying a similar status to Gerald Gardner, as innovators and holders of cultural knowledge. In their book *A Witch's Bible* (1984), the Farrars give detailed examples of the rituals of one particular Wiccan tradition from an insider's perspective; I've witnessed this book being referenced in the writing of Sabbat rituals by one of my informants from the Green Meadows Neo-Pagan group. The process of innovation is ongoing.

Based on interviews with my informants and observations by Jencson and others, I argue that the consecration of wine, accomplished by joining the chalice and the athame, is the central part of most Wiccan Sabbat rituals (Jencson 1991: 197-198). According to the Farrars, consecration of the wine is achieved through the union of the chalice and the athame, when the blade is lowered into the wine in a symbolic act of procreation (ibid.: 35). The chalice is then passed around the assembled group, and the wine is shared by the ritual participants; cakes are also distributed (ibid.: 258). This ritual is called the "Great Rite" by insiders and it symbolizes the union of feminine and masculine energies that manifest fertility (ibid.: 35).

I feel that the imagery of communal consumption of wine and wafers in Wicca bears at least a superficial resemblance to the Roman Catholic Eucharist. Mark Allman discusses this Roman Catholic ritual in which bread and wine are *transubstantiated*, or become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ (Allman 2000: 64). In this state, they are emblematic of the sacrifice of Jesus and serve, for some Catholics, as an offering to God (ibid.: 64). My informants also noticed this similarity, and their responses speak to the somewhat oppositional relationship between Neo-Paganism and Christianity in the United States, discussed in greater detail in chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis.

Margot Adler categorizes Wiccan ritual space as a place “between the worlds,” an insider term (Adler 1981 [1979]: 107). Wiccans picture ritual space as separated from the normal flow of time and out of the bounds of reality. This imagery, discussed in greater detail in chapter 2, allows practitioners to experience multiple levels of meaning and consciousness as they occur during rituals. Summarizing Tanya M. Luhrmann’s thesis, Harper-Bisso explains that Luhrmann “illustrates that it is not just ‘primitive’ people who believe in magic, nor does belief in ritual and magic's efficacy make a person any less educated or intelligent” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 57-58). In this sense, otherwise rational individuals can accept the essentially irrational phenomena of magic and spirit possession during designated ritual occasions (Luhrmann 1989). This is true of Wicca, as well as other religions.

Comparison between Wicca and other modes of religious expression helps to situate this relatively new religious movement within the established canon of anthropological research on religion. Based on numerous similarities in the belief systems and the social structures of the religions, I feel that Wicca is most usefully compared with Santería. Miguel A. De La Torre describes Santería as a decentralized nature religion of African origin (De La Torre 2004: 15). Wicca can also be considered a decentralized religion, in which practitioners are bound together more by similar philosophies and practices than by rigid dogmas. While Santería is of African origin and Wicca of European origin, the two belief systems share many other general similarities. In *Santería in New York City* (1999), Steven Gregory writes that “there are roughly equal numbers of male and female practitioners in [the Santería group he studied];” this is also generally observed in Wicca, as mentioned above (Gregory 1999: 47). Practitioners of Santería, as well as Wicca, believe that a brief period of rejuvenation follows physical death, and prepares the soul for reincarnation in a new body. According to De La Torre, the soul of the individual

who has died will go to “a good heaven (orun rere), where the [soul will] experience complete consciousness and contentment” (De La Torre 2004: 24). Some Wiccans have a belief in a journey to the Summerlands, where they will await reincarnation (Buckland 1995: 130). Both Wicca and Santería, unlike Buddhism and Hinduism, consider rebirth to a cycle of new lives to be a blessing (ibid.: 24).

Sabina Magliocco was the only scholar I read who directly compares Wicca with Santería (Magliocco 2004: 226-7). She relates the story of one of her informants, a gay man who found acceptance by practicing both Wicca and Santería, but decided to keep each religion separate, rather than creating a fusion of the two (ibid.: 227). Many Wiccans turned away from monotheistic religions in favor of polytheistic paths. The reasons are myriad, but at least some practitioners believe Wiccans to be more accepting of non-traditional sexual identities. The issues of sexual identity and gender are a contested matter in Wicca. Differential access to representation and prestige may indicate a discrepancy in the status held by men and women, as well as heterosexuals, bisexuals, and homosexuals. These issues will be discussed further in chapters 3.

Both Wiccans and followers of Santería maintain altars in reverence for multiple divine beings. Steven Gregory, a practitioner and scholar of Santería, explains that many spirits, called *Orisha*, are worshipped in this religion (Gregory 1999: 75). Altars are kept in the homes of practitioners, and meticulously decorated in accordance with the seasons and associated ceremonies (ibid.: 75). Marta Moreno Vega, a practitioner of Santería, insists that “every altar must be maintained and cleaned so it may attract positive spiritual energy to the surroundings;” the idea that altars are instrumental in raising energy was a frequent topic of discussion by my Wiccan informants during interviews (Vega 2001: 32).



Vega explains the significance of the statues of saints that inhabit most Santería altars. “The statues,” she writes, “disguised the images of the Yoruba spirits and *orishas*, who managed to survive the terrible journey of the Middle Passage and to enter the Americas in the souls of enslaved Africans” (Vega 2001: 32). The statues were used by the slaves to disguise the fact that they had not converted to Catholicism, but retained their ancestral religion. Miguel A. De La Torre explains that Santería literally means “the way of the saints” (De La Torre 2004: xi). Magliocco, in *Neo-Pagan Sacred Art and Altars* (2001), discusses numerous examples of Wiccans and other Neo-Pagans who create elaborate statuary, full of symbolic meaning, for their altars.

Santería is particularly known for ecstatic rituals, full of movement and music, in which individuals may experience possession by otherworldly spirits. Followers may receive messages from their guiding spirits who possess the bodies of other practitioners during intense rituals. Gregory explains that “it is through possession trance that the Orisha become most accessible to their devotees and exercise the most influence over their social relations and religious beliefs” (Gregory 1999: 84). Individuals possessed by various Orisha may impart warnings or advice to fellow practitioners and these statements are often followed as a matter of religious obligation (ibid.; 87).

Some Wiccan rituals exhibit a similar, though far more staid and subtle form of spirit possession. In a particular ritual called “Drawing Down the Moon,” both the High Priestess and High Priest call out to the Goddess and God and welcome them into their bodies. Adler explains that, “in these rituals [the Priestess and Priest] *become* the gods within the circle” (Adler 1981 [1979]: 107-8). During these rituals, the High Priestess often delivers standardized prayers, “The Charge of the Goddess” (Appendix E), while embodying the feminine divinity (Farrar and Farrar

1984: 296). These prayers reinforce Wiccan values, such as individuality and nonviolence, and some Wiccans believe that the prayers come directly from the Goddess, via the high Priestess (ibid.: 296).

Margot Adler writes that in their possessed state, the priestess and priest “can have a spiritual and physical union that is truly divine” (Adler 1981 [1979]: 108). Jencson comments on the accessibility of spiritual beings in Neo-Pagan belief systems, and it may be through rituals such as “Drawing Down the Moon” that followers believe that they experience the divine directly (Jencson 1991: 140). If we accept this perspective on the Great Rite, then the fertility manifested through the interaction of the chalice and the athame comes about not only through the interactions of ritual actors of complementary sexes, but also by the interactions of divine beings who are inhabiting these actors. The meanings of the Great Rite are complex and contested, and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2 of this thesis.

Chapter 3 addresses directly the issues of gender and sexual identity as understood by Neo-Pagan practitioners. To shed light on the possible origins of these views, we turn to discourses on the human body and the idea of gender reinterpreted through feminist scholarship. Martha J. Reineke describes what she believes is a biological explanation for the widespread denigration of women in many cultures. Citing anthropologist Mary Douglas, Reineke writes “the more [any] symbol is drawn from a common fund of human experience, the more wide and certain its reception” (Mary Douglas 1985: 114, ref in Reineke 1989: 395). “The body,” Reineke writes, “is the most intimate and certain of boundaries,” and a universally recognized symbol; all humans can relate to the division between self and other (Reineke 1989: 395). Sherry B. Ortner discusses cross-cultural examples in which women, whose menstrual cycles are tied to the moon, are associated with nature, while males, who often hold positions of power, are associated with

culture (Ortner 1972: 9). “Women are universally devalued,” Reineke explains, “based on the assumption of a hierarchy of culture over nature” (Reineke 1989: 406). She further writes that “women, who symbolize with their bodies the powers and dangers to be contested, are also the humans least likely to have the power to protest the literal inscription of social meaning on their bodies” (ibid.: 396). My own research, as well as that of Harper-Bisso, reveals that Wiccans invert the gender roles cited by Ortner and Reineke. Within Wiccan communities, women hold positions of power and, in some cases, men are devalued, as nature is emphasized over culture. This inversion is most easily understood against the backdrop of feminist theory, especially as feminism addresses religion.

Mary Jo Weaver describes the history of the spiritual side of the feminist movement in her article, “Who is the Goddess and Where Does She Get Us?” (1989). Weaver describes Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage as early pioneers of women’s spirituality. These authors, “in urging women to reject the authority of the Bible and the institutional church [raised] a challenge that, although ignored or condemned in their own time, has been taken up by [Neo-Pagan] feminists” (Weaver 1989: 49). Weaver writes that October 31<sup>st</sup> of 1979 is a significant date in the history of feminist spirituality and Neo-Paganism. “This date is memorable for the publication of two major works on witchcraft and Goddess religion: on that pagan feast Margot Adler covered the East Coast with her comprehensive study of [Neo-Paganism], *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979), while Starhawk represented the West Coast with *The Spiral Dance* (1979), her handbook of witchcraft as Goddess religion” (Weaver 1989: 50-51). These books have been widely read within the Wiccan community as I examined in an earlier study (Sloan 2007), and have had a strong impact on Wiccan attitudes toward gender roles and the spiritual position of women. “Feminists,” Sabina Magliocco writes, “reclaimed the concept of

the witch as a symbol of feminine power that stood in opposition to patriarchy” (Magliocco 2001: 3). From the efforts of early reformers, contemporary Wiccan rituals feature women in prominent spiritual roles: in every way the complement to men.

Many Neo-Pagan religious movements have been strongly influenced by feminism and feminist spirituality, which often seek to create a new social order based on equality or reverence for women. “At its heart,” writes Jean Heriot, “practitioners of feminist spirituality believe that women will eventually be able to change the patriarchal social order to an egalitarian one in which connections among individuals, the social and physical world, and the divine (usually referenced as a goddess) are developed and enhanced” (Adams and Salamone, eds. 2000: 116). This revolutionary aspect of feminist spirituality fits nicely with the theoretical model of a *revitalization movement*. Anthony F.C. Wallace defined a revitalization movement as “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (Wallace 1956:265). The Wiccan movement has been profoundly affected by feminist philosophy regarding the female body, women’s roles in society and strong critique of western spirituality (Adler 1979; Starhawk 1979; Weaver 1989).

In summary, the ethnographic study of Wicca, and related Neo-Pagan traditions, is a relatively new discipline. The few scholars who have approached this subject have done so in unique ways. Helen Berger, a sociologist, compared demographic information of Neo-Pagan practitioners to that of the total United States population through surveys based on questions from recent census records (Berger et al. 2003). Linda Jencson considered the religious movement in terms of cult formation. She defined Wicca as a “magical, shamanistic, Goddess-worshipping religion, practiced by witches (of both sexes), and called “The Craft” by insiders” (Jencson 1991: 18). Jencson examines the meanings associated with several ubiquitous ritual

objects, which she calls “tools” (ibid.: 26). Magliocco also studied ritual objects associated with Neo-Pagan worship. “To an outside observer,” she writes, “the material culture of the Neo-Pagan movement is one of its most striking features” (Magliocco 2001: X). Ritual objects convey significant information among practitioners. In Wiccan practices, feminine and masculine genders associated with some objects are a means of physically emulating the fertility associated with the Goddess and the God. When Sabbat celebrations are enacted in locations that have been ritually prepared for these events, primary actors in a ritual -commonly a feminine High Priestess and a masculine High Priest- have the opportunity to access the divine through the manipulation of these ritual objects. Some practitioners believe that reverence for, and manipulation of, this divine force may create positive and necessary changes in the world, or in an individual’s life. The objects used in Wiccan rituals are inexorably tied to a complex ideology which practitioners share and cultivate as a means of establishing a distinct community.

## Methodology

A central concept of anthropology is gaining an understanding of another person, group, or culture from multiple perspectives, including emic (insider) and etic (observer). The valuable insight gained from the perspective of the native scholar is gaining acceptance in anthropological studies as one of multiple methods of describing cultures. Victor Montejo, in his book *Voices from Exile* (1999), relates his experiences growing up as an ethnic Mayan. He believes, as a Maya, that he is uniquely qualified to discuss the plight of his people from an emic, or insider, perspective. Montejo’s ability to speak the native language, as well as his experiences as a refugee, gave his work on refugees an insight and authenticity that would be difficult for an

outsider to achieve. I am a practicing Wiccan and I have been for over ten years. Like Montejo, I rely on my status as a “native” anthropologist to contextualize the use of ritual objects from an emic perspective. While my position allows me to make connections with my informants, I am aware of the ethical issues associated with studying my own religious group. I have let the concerns of other scholars guide my design for my survey and interviews.

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney discusses the potential problems associated with the work of native anthropologists. One of the most important things emphasized by Ohnuki-Tierney is the need for these scholars to distance themselves from their subjects (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984: 584). Kirin Narayan, however, suggests that the distinction between native and non-native anthropologist may, in fact, be a false dichotomy. Narayan explains that “the loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux” (Narayan 1993: 671). In essence, Narayan is arguing that the identity of the anthropologist is constantly being shaped along a continuum which includes race, gender, age and all other categories he or she might be placed into. In this sense, there is no set line between the scholar and the subject because these relationships are constantly being negotiated. These issues are ongoing within anthropology and my study will proceed with them in mind.

Modern ethnographers also pursue knowledge by obtaining information directly from informants. Surveys and interviews are among the ethnographer’s most useful tools. Stuart Plattner describes the importance of *informed consent* to all research projects. “The information,” he writes, “should be in language the person [can] readily understand and be readable enough so that the individual will actually attend to it” (Plattner 2003: 3). Ethics dictates that research conducted on humans be of as little risk as possible, while preserving the intent of the research. Plattner believes that “the weight of bureaucratic oversight over research should be related to the

level of risk of harm” (ibid.: 4). Administering a survey is one of the lowest risk ways of gaining access to an individual’s particular perspective on the world in which they live. When an informant can be assured that his or her identity will remain confidential, that person is freer to give honest responses without facing reprisal by peers.

Interviews may be used in concert with surveys. An interview involves a subject responding to a series of open-ended questions which can be adjusted to each individual participant. The subject of an interview can also be assured that her identity will remain confidential. Rather than drawing exclusively from existing scholarly writings, it is important to utilize these ethnographic methods to generate fresh data from real people. In this way, the existing body of knowledge on a topic is constantly checked against the most recent developments among the people under study. The surveys and interviews that I administered have helped me gain a sense of how practitioners of the religion of Wicca understand gender roles and test the hypothesis that during rituals their sacred objects become physical representations of such roles.

My survey, included in this thesis (Appendix C), was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Central Florida, where I am a student. The survey was distributed to four groups of Wiccans in the Central Florida area, with whom I was also able to observe Sabbat Rituals. They were administered anonymously and I received 23 completed surveys of the 90 that were sent. The body of the survey consists of a 3-page questionnaire. As indicated in the survey, several questions come directly from the survey distributed by Helen Berger’s team in *Voices from the Pagan Census* (2003). My surveys were marked with the initials of the group for which they were distained; in this way, I was able to calculate the percentages of returns for each. A sequential number was assigned to each completed survey and

results compiled using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Interesting trends in the data are discussed in chapters two and three of this thesis.

One key element of my survey was question six. This question asks participants to identify ritual objects they often use and indicate which gender, if any, is associated with each object. Participants in the survey indicated the genders associated with ritual objects based on a numerical scale in which a “1” corresponded to “Very Feminine,” a “2” to “Somewhat Feminine,” a “3” to “Neutral,” a “4” to “Somewhat Masculine” and a “5” to “Very Masculine.” Participants were instructed to leave blank any unfamiliar objects, and space was provided for the addition of other ritual objects generated by the participant. In this way, I was able to elicit information about the possible genders associated with ritual objects while not letting my own assumptions guide the research.

In addition to the short survey, I also conducted interviews with the primary actors who fulfilled the roles of High Priestess and High Priest at the Sabbats I attended (Appendix B). Participants in this interview signed a consent form before the interview began. These interviews included questions aimed at identifying various sacred objects on the altar, and the specific genders (if any) associated with these objects. Open-ended questions about the participant’s understanding of gender were asked, and I was careful not to ask participants to confirm the names and genders to the ritual objects, but rather, to generate them; my position as an insider means that I have my own names and associations with these objects that I did not want to impart in the interviews and bias my data. A digital audio recorder was used during each interview. This device produces MP3 audio files, which were stored on my home computer. I transcribed the interviews and these were kept with completed surveys securely in my home.



I also conducted a second interview (Appendix D) as a preliminary gauge for future research. Entitled “Sexual Identity and Religious Expression,” this interview allowed me to ask questions related to participants’ sexuality in conjunction with their religious beliefs. In the course of her field research, Harper-Bisso observed that many different sexual identities are at play within Neo-Pagan groups. Unlike some Wiccan rituals, which focus on concepts of gender that can be considered heteronormative, or prescriptive towards traditional models of masculine and feminine gender roles, all permutations of sexuality and gender identification are represented among the members of these groups. Harper-Bisso discusses the differential status achieved by Wiccans of different genders and sexual identities (Harper-Bisso 2005: 228). Intrigued by this observation, I conducted an interview with two informants from one of the groups I’d observed who self-identified as homosexuals. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the questions posed in this interview, the identities of both informants were kept anonymous, neither having to sign a consent form as a condition of participation.

Throughout this thesis, participants’ identities are kept confidential. No legal names are used in this thesis; instead I’ve assigned pseudonyms to most my interview participants. In at least one instance, however, an informant asked to use a particular name known within the Neo-Pagan community. Such names, used by some practitioners of Neo-Pagan religions, are known to insiders as a “Craft” or “Magical” names (Harper-Bisso 2005: 42). Harper-Bisso discusses the fact that she did not refer to informants by such names, as a condition that they remain anonymous even to their own groups (ibid.: 43). Some of my informants expressed their wishes that my thesis might be helpful in dispelling untrue stereotypes about Neo-Pagans. Out of respect for their wishes, I’ve included their actual “Craft” names in this thesis. I make no distinction between either group, however, to preserve anonymity.

Participants were recruited through my attendance at Wiccan rituals and an existing social network I maintain in the Central Florida area. Wiccans often have excellent networks along which information travels, as related by Berger's study, which relied heavily on social networks for surveys to be distributed to as many subjects as possible. Berger's study characterizes Neo-Pagans as a "hidden population," and sampling methods included "snowball sampling," in which contacts among a small number of individuals lead to social networks from which many informants can be drawn (Berger et al. 2003: xvii). I am acquainted with several people who participated in my research. From these participants, I made contact with other practitioners and other groups. Though my research represents data collected from only four groups, the qualitative nature of the data I collected did not necessitate a statistically significant sample.

### Analysis Strategy

Photographs of Wiccan Sabbat altars were a crucial element of my research. I had interview subjects refer to printed versions of altar photos during the interview process. The ritual objects in these photos were assigned numbers, as discussed above, to reduce potential bias. Once transcribed, quotes from informants were included in the text of this thesis. To further assist with data analysis, I have included diagrams based on one of my photographs of a Samhain Sabbat altar from a group I refer to as Green Meadows (Figure 3, 4). I created these diagrams using ArcGIS, a spatial mapping system. The diagrams record the positions of ritual objects on the altar and other relevant data, such as gender, gathered during interviews; this application of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) software is a novel approach (Conolly and Lake 2006:

3). To my knowledge, spatial mapping software of this type has not been used to diagram the layout of objects on an altar. I've also produced graphic representations which illustrate how survey participants rated some specific ritual objects as gendered. Bar graphs inserted throughout this thesis were created through SPSS software.

### Thesis Outline

Chapters 2 and 3 present my research on the concepts of gender and religious expression among Wiccans in the central Florida area. Chapter 2 provides basic demographic information on Wiccans and further examines gender from the perspective of material culture. Ritual objects are discussed in detail. Data from interviews and surveys are also considered, and support is offered to the hypothesis that Wiccan rituals reflect, construct, and reinforce the Wiccan belief in a gender-balanced cosmos.

Chapter 3 examines gender and sexual identity in terms of the social structure of Wiccan groups. The history of spiritual feminist theory bears heavily on Wiccan concepts of who men and women are and how they should relate to each other in society. Patriarchal and misogynist religious structures have caused many women (and men) to abandon their childhood religions in favor of Neo-Pagan modes of belief. The general assumption is that the latter traditions present women with greater freedom and respect. This assumption may prove false, however, as suggested by Jencson. The expectations placed on women within Wicca may, at times, prove as oppressive as any other religion or social system. The roles and status of women and men in Wicca may also be affected by an individual's sexual identity. Differential access to prestige and resources are directly related to both gender and sexual identity. Harper-Bisso addressed this

issue in her dissertation (2005), and I address the same issue in this chapter. My research into the concepts of sexual identity and status is preliminary, but it opens the door for further consideration in the future.

The final chapter, chapter 4, presents a discussion of the data, as well as some personal reflections on my research experiences. Generally consistent among most Wiccan groups are ritualized enactments of fertility and of the balance between complementary genders. While ideology remains basically the same, content and the order of services of Sabbat rituals can vary widely, even over a small geographic area. Wicca is a religion that is highly regionally diverse within the United States. In addition to the existing diversity, rituals are constantly being edited and updated by individual innovators. These two factors mean that blanket conclusions about Wicca in the United States are problematic. This chapter presents conclusions based on the data collected, and offers some suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2: MATERIAL CULTURE AND RELIGION

### Introduction

Wicca, like all religions, is filled with sacred symbols that hold special meanings to followers. Clifford Geertz writes, “sacred symbols function to synthesize a people’s ethos- the tone, character, and quality of their life” (Geertz 1993: 89). A general understanding of some key beliefs and symbols is essential to understanding the significance of Wiccan ritual practices. Wiccans celebrate the changing seasons with eight yearly celebrations called *Sabbats* (Adler 1981 [1979]: 108). Margot Adler characterizes the Sabbats as “the great festivals of European Paganism,” emphasizing their pre-Christian origin (ibid.: 108). These planting and harvest ceremonies have been adopted by modern Wiccans. The “lesser” Sabbats, according to Adler, occur on “the solstices and equinoxes,” and the “greater” Sabbats occur between these times (ibid.: 108). Table 1(next page) is a graphic representation of Adler’s Sabbat descriptions. While different Wiccan groups invariably use different names for the individual ceremonies, and some meanings may change, Wiccans generally share this ritual calendar. Adler also notes that, while she witnessed great diversity among different groups, “almost all traditions at least celebrate Samhain and Beltane” (ibid.: 109). As explained below, Samhain, pronounced “**sah**-win”, is considered the ending of one year and the beginning of the next. It is also the time when the God dies and travels through the underworld, to be born again near the beginning of spring. Beltane falls opposite from Samhain on the Wiccan ritual calendar. Where Samhain is a celebration of death, Beltane affirms life and focuses on fertility and sexuality, both divine and human.

**Table 1 “Sabbat Names, Themes and Dates”**

<u>Sabbat Name</u>	<u>General theme</u>	<u>Approximate date</u>
Samhain	Final harvest/ Celtic New Year/ communion with dead ancestors	November 1
Yule	Winter purification festival/ preparing for the sun’s return	December 21 (winter solstice)
Oimelec	Early signs of spring	February 1
Ostara	Beginning of spring/ new life appearing	March 21 (Vernal equinox)
Beltane	Marriage of Goddess and God/ great fertility festival	May 1
Midsummer	Sun God’s power begins to wane	June 21 (summer solstice)
Lughnasadh	First harvest/ sacrifice of the grain God	August 1
Mabon	Second harvest	September 21 (autumnal equinox)

As noted in chapter 1, Wiccans are *polytheists*; the majority of traditions acknowledge both a Goddess and God (Adler 1981 [1979]: 120). In *Voices from the Pagan Census* (2003), the authors give a brief description of the deities of Wicca. “The Goddess is a central image within [Wicca],” they write, “[she] can be spoken of either as a single deity or as many” (Berger et al. 2003: 5). The Goddess is seen as a personification of the earth, but is also intimately linked to the cycles of the moon and the seasons (Barner-Barry 2005: 31). “The phases of the moon, [waxing, full and waning], which are commemorated as the three aspects of the Goddess- maid, mother, and crone- are celebrated as the *Esbats* (or moon ceremonies) by both inclusive and women-only groups” (Berger et al. 2003: 4.) In her moon aspect, the Goddess moves through the cycle of waxing and waning every month and in this way, she is simultaneously associated with a young girl (maid), a mother, and a wise elder (crone).

The lifecycle of the Goddess and her consort, the God, is also played out on a larger, yearly cycle, in which the actions of the divine couple correspond with the changing seasons. Berger writes that “the Goddess is eternal” while the Wiccan God is born and dies each year (Berger et al. 2003: 4). “The God is born of the Goddess at Yule (December 21). He Grows to manhood and becomes the Goddess’s consort, the Horned God, at Beltane (May 1), and in the fall (October 31) he dies, to be reborn the next year. In rituals this mythology is related to the changes that are occurring in nature and, by analogy, in individual’s lives” (ibid.: 4). In this sense, the Wiccan God is synonymous with the cycles of the harvest, and the relative strength of the sun during different points in the year (ibid.: 4). The Goddess is like a fertile field from which the God perpetually grows and is cut down, or harvested.

Anthropologist Linda Jencson characterizes the Goddess and God of Neo-Paganism as “accessible” to followers, and discusses the way Neo-Pagans link pivotal events in the lifecycle of deities with perceptible changes in nature (Jencson 1991: 140). “By dramatizing their life cycle,” she writes, “the [Wiccan follower] can tap [the deities’] power and can send unwanted personality traits and problems to the underworld with the God at Samhain; can achieve material gain during the fertility rites of Beltane...and can bring desired boons to oneself and others at the birth of the God on the winter solstice.” (ibid.: 140). Wiccan devotees may also practice rituals that include a mild form of possession by these divinities, further emphasizing the access Wiccans have to their Gods (Adler 1981 [1979]: 107-8). Wiccans may dramatize these cycles differently, but many gather together during the eight Sabbats to worship in groups.

My research on Wiccan rituals was conducted during Fall 2007 and Spring 2008. I chose to attend Sabbats for several reasons: they are often open to the public (that is to say, covens allow non-members to attend), they are times when large groups of Wiccans congregate, and are

often planned well-in advance. Most importantly for my research purposes, Sabbat rituals generally include a formal ceremony involving an altar and numerous ritual objects. Jencson describes the order of events typical during Wiccan Sabbats.

1. Purification (readiness), accomplished by “cleansing” with the four elements.
2. Creating sacred space, accomplished by ritually “casting a circle” of magical energy.
3. Raising power, invoking elemental spirits from the four directions, and then invoking the Goddess (and usually the God).
4. The working, i.e. magic directed toward a specific goal.
5. Sharing the gifts, a Wiccan communion of consecrated wine and cakes, accompanied by magical teaching and testimonials.
6. Dismissal, in which the deities and spirits are returned to the “other world.”
7. Grounding, in which magical power is dispersed and individual awareness is brought back to the mundane world.

(Jencson 1991: 197-198)

I will describe some of the meanings behind individual ritual actions, and then discuss my field data.

#### Casting the Circle: “Creating a Sacred Space”

Margot Adler describes the Wiccan circle as a “portable temple,” and a “declaration of sacred ground” (Adler 1981 [1979]: 106-7). Circle “casting,” or circle creation, is one of the first actions which begins any Wiccan ritual. The goal in Wiccan rituals is to “raise energy,” concentrate it and then release it to manifest a desired result (Buckland 2002.: 64). Berger explains that “magical energy is raised at rituals through dancing, chanting, or meditation and [is] cast into the world to enact a change for an individual or the larger community” (Berger et al. 2003: 6). The magical circle is like a container for this energy. Raymond Buckland notes that the

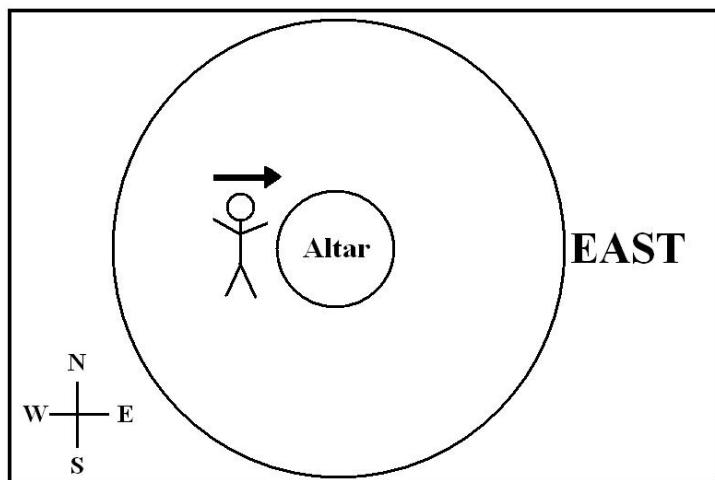


circle is a boundary, and it “not only keeps the unwanted out, it also keeps raised power [or magical energy] in” (Buckland 2002.: 64). In the Wiccan worldview, the circle is also the “place “between the worlds,” where contact with archetypal reality, with “Gods,” if you will, becomes possible” (Adler 1981 [1979]: 107). In this sense, when inside the circle, the priest and priestess are ritually cleansed and become vessels fit to receive the transcendent power of the Gods and function as their earthly representatives. The circle stands in-between the mundane world and the greater, spiritual reality.

Casting of the sacred circle (as noted above) is an important part of all Sabbat rituals, and is one of the first actions performed by the priest and priestess to consecrate the ritual space. Several *traditions* (similar to Christian *denominations*) of Wicca are practiced by modern followers. These traditions share many common features and ideology, however, they differ somewhat in their specific ritual practices. In the following section, I draw upon Wiccan religious literature and describe two of the most widely practiced methods of circle casting, from the Gardnerian and the Alexandrian traditions. From the perspective of material culture, the circle is constructed by the High Priestess and the High Priest, both of whom assert vital and complementary roles in its production. Like Principle 4 states, each gender in Wicca is seen as being “supportive of the other” (Daschke and Ashcroft, eds 2005: 102). The following rituals require both primary actors to perform specific actions; while complementary, the roles for each person are distinct and explicit.

The Gardnerian method of circle casting (Figure 1 below) is described particularly well by Raymond Buckland, a student of Gerald Gardner and the man “credited with bringing Wicca to the United States” (Berger et al. 2003: 12). Buckland suggests that a circle should be marked out on the floor or the ground with the athame, and a candle placed in each of the four cardinal

directions (Buckland 2002: 86). He writes that the altar should be placed “in the center of the Circle so that, when facing it [the priest/ess] is facing east” (ibid.: 86). The Priest and Priestess enter from the eastern quadrant and walk *deosil* (clockwise) to face the altar (ibid.: 64). The candles at the perimeter of the circle are now lit in deosil order, beginning with the east. The priest and priestess acknowledge the element corresponding to each cardinal direction. It is important to note here that each direction also has an associated gender and color; East (air) and South (fire) are considered masculine while West (water) and North (earth) are considered feminine (ibid.: 86). When the priest and priestess return to the eastern quadrant, the next step begins.



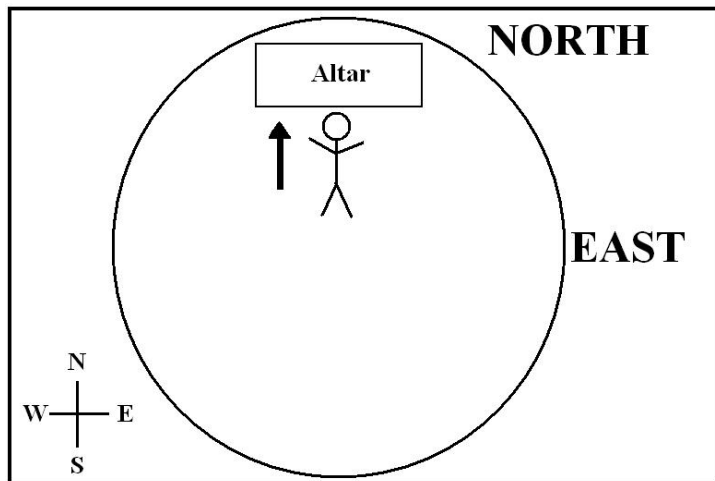
**Figure 1: The Gardnerian Circle**

The priestess takes a sword or the *athame* (a ritual knife) from the altar and traces the boundaries of the circle, beginning in the east and, as always, walking deosil. When she returns, the priest and priestess consecrate a water bowl by adding salt to it and reciting a short prayer (Buckland 2002: 86). They then walk around the circle with burning incense and sprinkle the water along the line of the circle (ibid.: 86). The circle is now said to have been purified by each

of the four elements: fire, earth (salt), water and air (incense smoke). Interestingly, Buckland's description for the events of the ritual is out of sync with Linda Jencson's observations; numbers one and two are reversed (Jencson 1991: 197-198). The other members of the coven are now sprinkled with the salted water as they are led into the circle from the east. They are now said to be "consecrated," or ritually purified (Buckland 2002: 86). Following their entry, the other coveners arrange themselves within the circle around the altar. "The covener closest to the east turns outward and moves to face the east candle," writes Buckland. The covener then invokes the element of air, believed to be centered in the east, by reciting a short prayer (ibid.: 87). This same action is taken by coveners in the south (fire), west (water) and north (earth). The God and Goddess are then invited to enter the circle; they may now enter since the purification of the space is nearly complete (ibid.: 88). Wine is poured into a goblet and a portion is offered to the Gods by spilling "a little of the wine onto the ground, or into the libation dish" (ibid.: 88). The goblet is then passed deosil around the circle and each member of the coven takes a sip. The priestess then announces that the temple is erected. Buckland writes, "erecting the temple is done at the start of every meeting. It is, basically, the consecration of both the meeting place and of the participants" (ibid.: 88). The circle casting is now complete.

As noted above, the Alexandrian tradition of Wicca is very similar to the Gardnerian. Margot Adler writes that Alex Sanders, the founder of Alexandrian Wicca, claimed to have been initiated into the Craft in 1933, several years before Gerald Gardner published his first book. "At the age of seven," writes Adler, "[Sanders] found his grandmother standing nude in a circle in the kitchen. She then initiated him into the Craft" (Adler 1981 [1979]: 93). Like Gerald Gardner's initiation, little evidence exists to support this story. Janet and Stewart Farrar believe that, sometime in the 1960's, Sanders obtained a copy of Gerald Gardner's liturgical manual and

founded his own coven (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 4). Some alterations were made to Gardner's rituals by Sanders and his followers today practice similarly distinct rituals, including another version of casting the circle.



**Figure 2: The Alexandrian Circle**

The Farrars give an account of the circle casting ritual followed by many in the Alexandrian tradition (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 295). The Alexandrian altar is often located in the northern quadrant, rather than in the center, as with Gardnerians (see Figure 2 above). Placing the altar in the north is said to associate it with the element of earth, believed to be located in the north. The Farrars write that they prefer the altar in the north, as do many covens, because it permits easier movement within the circle (ibid.: 295). On the altar are laid some of the same objects from the Gardnerian ritual: a candle, an *athame*, a bowl of salt, a bowl of water, and incense (ibid.: 295). The priest and priestess create holy water by adding the salt to the water with a prayer (ibid.: 295). “The High Priest then leaves the Circle to join the coven in the North-East,” while the priestess walks the perimeter of the circle with the sword (ibid.: 295). She begins in the north and walks deosil until she returns to the place she began.

The priest and three coveners are then admitted to the circle (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 296). The guests are consecrated then proceed to walk the perimeter of the circle holding the holy water, burning incense, or a lit candle. When the three complete their trip around the circle, the rest of the coven has already been admitted to the circle. Prayers are said to the four directions, as with the Gardnerian rite, invoking the power of the four elements: air, fire, water and earth. The priest now invokes the Goddess in a rite called “Drawing Down the Moon” (ibid.: 296). Symbolically, the priestess becomes the embodiment of the Goddess and addresses the coven as such. Her words, detailed in the ritual, are referred to as the “Charge of the Goddess” (Appendix E) and represent some of the oldest elements of the ritual, dating back to the late 1800’s<sup>2</sup>. The coven members join hands and move around the circle in a clockwise motion; their objective is to raise energy (ibid.: 299). When the priestess feels that the time is right, “she orders: “Down!” and all sit, still in a ring facing inwards” (ibid.: 299). At this point, the rest of the ritual can begin.

Both methods of casting a circle are very similar. Each method stresses the importance of the four elements and the four cardinal directions. The duties of the priest and priestess in the circle casting ritual are distinct, rarely overlapping; this is another example of the complementary

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<sup>2</sup> Charles G. Leland published his best known work *Aradia, or Gospel of the Witches* in 1899 based on oral histories he had recorded from gypsies around Tuscany, Italy. The book, recently reprinted by New Page Books, tells of the Goddess Diana and her daughter, Aradia, sent to earth to free the witches from bondage. The “Charge of the Goddess” (see Appendix E), a short passage from Leland’s writing, has been widely reproduced and reinterpreted by subsequent Wiccan authors, and remains a defining element of the faith. Linda Jencson questions the veracity of Leland’s research, since he traded occult knowledge to his gypsy informants in return for their own occult knowledge. “Leland himself served as a medium for the spread and growth of the very phenomena which he was studying,” writes Jencson (Jencson 1989: 3). Jencson explains that this approach to gaining information from informants is inconsistent with modern techniques of ethnographic data collection. However, “The Charge” is still very important to some Wiccans, such as the Farrars.

nature of gender within Wicca. Movement is almost always clockwise or deosil, which is believed to facilitate energy building. However, as my research demonstrates, Wiccans are not stringently bound to any established liturgy. A spirit of eclecticism pervades formal covens, and informal worship groups may even be freer in their adaptation of circle casting methods. What seems most constant throughout the practices I observed during the course of my research are the intentions behind the Sabbat ceremonies, the essential themes, and the associations practitioners make with commonly used ritual objects.

## Ritual Objects

### *The Altar*

At this point, we shift focus from the ritual circle to the altar itself. Wiccan altars may be of any shape or size, and can be made from many different materials. I attended a Mabon ritual that was supposed to be held outside, but was celebrated inside due to inclement weather. In a pinch, the flat countertop of a breakfast nook made a handy altar for the ceremony and nobody openly objected; though they may have criticized this choice in private. At a Samhain Sabbat I attended, a folding card table was erected in an outside patio and onto this was placed a wooden slab engraved with magical symbols. The leader of the group considered the slab to be the “altar” and the card table simply a prop to give the altar some height. Whatever form the altar takes, its function remains the same: the purpose of the altar is to provide a place to organize ritual objects and to serve as a staging area for the ritual actions described above (creating holy water, blessing wine, etc.).

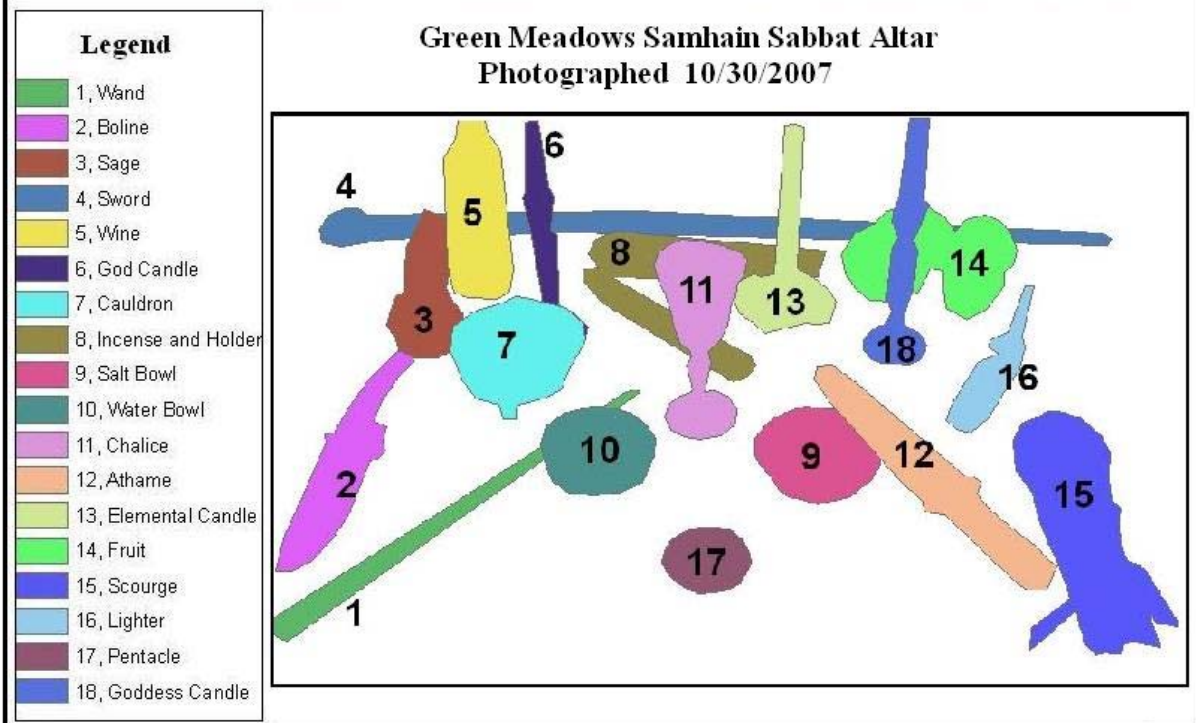


Figure 3: Green Meadows Samhain Sabbat Altar

The above diagram (Figure 3) was created using ArcGIS software. I took this photograph during a Samhain Sabbat ritual that was held in my home on the night of October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007. The High Priestess was Lady Juno and the High Priest, Lord Janus, both close friends of mine. We belong to a Neo-Pagan religious group at UCF that I helped create several years ago. Since legal names of my informants may be found on the roster for this group, I refer to it in this thesis as Green Meadows (GM). Green Meadows does not represent a formal coven, with an established tradition and hierarchal rank, but rather an eclectic worship group. Many of the members choose to celebrate Sabbats together and create unique rituals based on models provided by Wiccan manuals, such as *A Wiccan Bible* (1984) by the Farrars. The roles of High Priest and High Priestess are open to any member of the appropriate gender who chooses to lead a ritual and has mutual consent of the group. Often, members of the group who are romantically involved are encouraged to lead rituals together; to date these have always been heterosexual couples. It is believed that the bond of the relationship aids in the generation of energy during rituals.

The Samhain Sabbat altar in Figure 3 is typical of the altars I've generally seen during the course of my research at Sabbat ceremonies. On the diagram, I've categorized the individual ritual objects that have been placed on the altar. One can match the numbers of the objects to their names, which were provided during interviews with Janus and Juno. All of my informants were very helpful in identifying the names and functions of ritual objects, and throughout this thesis I try to let my informants speak for themselves.

Many different ritual objects may be found on Wiccan altars, and different traditions have slightly different requirements when it comes to which ritual objects are used. From the perspective of material culture, objects may be thought of as communicative symbols (Hoskins 2007: 111). They carry meanings that are immediately recognizable to practitioners, and, through



the performance of rituals, may reinforce the core values of the religion itself (Bowie 2000:17).

Roger Ivar Lohmann and Susan Starr Sered, in an introduction for the *Journal of Material Religion*, claim that “the practice of assigning gender to artifacts and natural objects is common but not universal in religions”(Lohmann and Sered 2007: 5-6). Janet Hoskins suggests that, “if an object has a clearly gendered identity, it is more likely to be powerful” (Hoskins 2007: 116).

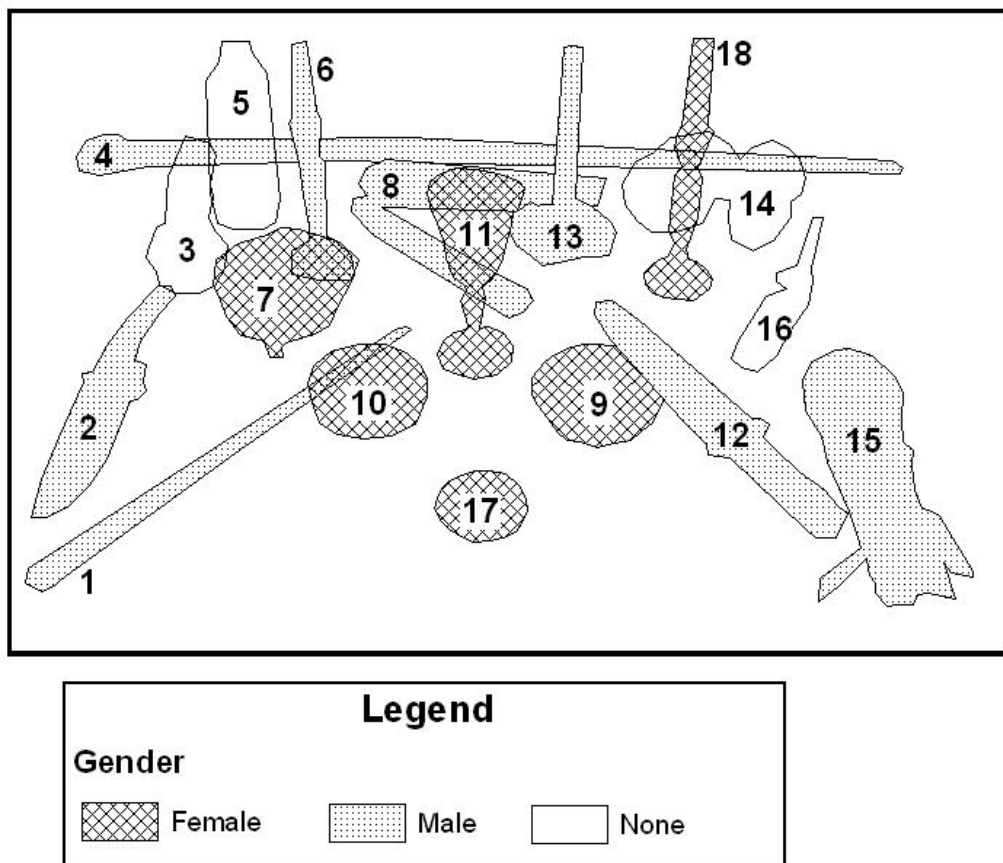


Figure 4: Objects on the Green Meadows Samhain Sabbat Altar Separated by Gender

Interestingly, the female objects seem to occupy a central location on the altar, while the male objects occupy the far left, right and rear of the altar. This stands in seeming contrast to the

data gathered from Janus and Juno, who both stated during separate interviews that there are distinct male and female halves of the altar; left and right, respectively. While I had originally assumed that objects would be placed on the side of the altar that corresponded with their gender, this does not appear to be the case. It seems that the altar maintains a gender classification that is independent of the objects that are placed on it.

The following sections present brief descriptions of the most commonly occurring ritual objects my informants discussed during interviews. I will discuss the ritual objects individually, and then address the importance of the interaction of the athame and chalice during the high point of most Wiccan Sabbats, the Great Rite. I conclude by arguing that Wiccan rituals reflect, construct, and reinforce the Wiccan precept of a gender-balanced cosmos through the interaction of ritual enactors and gendered objects in the performance of rituals.

### *The Athame*

Paraselsu: “For me, my athame, of course, is very central to what I do, for several reasons. I identify with it because I made it. We talked about that. It’s a signature of me as a person and as a smith. I have the role of being a high priest as well as the role of being a smith. So, it brings it all together for me; it’s a multi-level kind of a thing.”

The above quote from Paraselsu, the High Priest of what he identified as a “Wiccan church” southeast of Orlando, illustrates the central role the athame plays in his worship, and the many levels of meaning it possesses for him. The Farrar’s write that the athame, a ritual knife, is “normally made of steel,” but they stress that materials are often a matter of personal preference among practitioners and that an athame may be made of anything from copper to bone (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 252). They note that, “traditionally the [handle] is black,” but this is neither essential nor universal among Wiccans (ibid.: 252). It is generally held that the athame “is a

purely ritual tool and should never be used for actual cutting,” though some traditions do not follow this custom (ibid.: 252). Athames may be purchased over the internet, or, like Paraselsu, some Wiccans choose to make their own (Figure 5). Wiccans of any gender can own an athame, but the athame itself is generally considered to be a masculine object in and of itself.



**Figure 5: Paraselsu's Athame**

The main function of the athame, according to my informants, is to direct energy during rituals and magical rites. Paraselsu describes the athame as a magical tool of ancient origin, used to “subjugate the spirits that might be negative; to keep them at bay, so to speak.” Valeria, a long-time practitioner of eclectic Wicca, notes that the athame can be used during circle casting. “It’s used for carving symbols in the air,” she says, “particularly, when you’re casting a circle, you carve the pentacle in the air and you visualize energy coming from you, either from above, through you or just from you, down your arm, through the blade and coming out of the tip in a nice fine point, so you can see a nice blue line coming out of your athame as you do it.” Valeria associates the athame with the element of air, and mentions also that it is associated with the “suit of swords in tarot.”



**Figure 6: Multiple Athames on an Altar**

Lord Lugh is the high priest of an Alexandrian coven north of Orlando. During our interview, he was gracious enough to allow me to view several photographs that had been taken during Sabbats held by his coven. The above photograph, (Figure 6), is represented here with his permission. When asked about several athames placed prominently in the center of this Sabbat altar, he illustrates the Wiccan concept that energy is contagious and can be transmitted from one object to another.

Each athame (on the altar) is a specific person's athame. In our tradition, when we gather our athames together, we always have them touch on the altar in the center. This way, the energies meld and mix together; they share energy with each other when they're on the altar. Metals, specifically, pick up energy and vibrations and store them. (Metal) conducts electricity and heat; it also conducts spiritual energy as well. That's why we use a metal athame, to direct energy and why we want them to touch on the altar; so they can share.

Clearly, Lord Lugh's coven places special significance of the athame's ability to transmit energy.

It is this ability that, according to Lord Lugh, genders the athame as masculine. "Because it is used for projection and directing energy," he explains, "it is masculine." However, Lord Lugh also comments on the shape of the athame leading to its classification as a masculine object.

"From a physical standpoint," said Lord Lugh, "[the athame] is phallic. Its shape, its physical

characteristics give it that.” From Lord Lugh’s perspective, multiple categories can simultaneously reify the gender ascribed to a ritual object. Survey results support the idea that the athame is a masculine object.

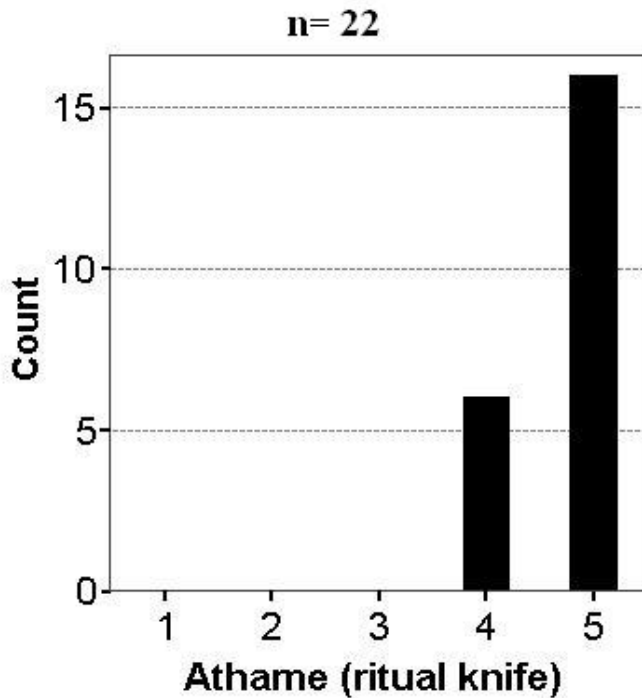


Figure 7: Athame Bar Graph

Copies of my short survey (Appendix C) were distributed to each of the four groups I was able to observe during the course of my field research. Of the more than 90 that were distributed, only 23 were returned in the self-addressed stamped envelopes I provided. The sample size was small, but the results support the data that I received during my interviews. All respondents considered at least some ritual objects to be gendered, but sometimes differed on the intensity of this gendering. Figure 7 is a bar graph that represents the responses generated by 22 out of the entire 23 participants on the gender of the athame. The scale for this part of the survey was based on a numerical scale in which a “1” corresponded to “Very Feminine,” a “2” to “Somewhat

Feminine,” a “3” to “Neutral,” a “4” to “Somewhat Masculine” and a “5” to “Very Masculine.”

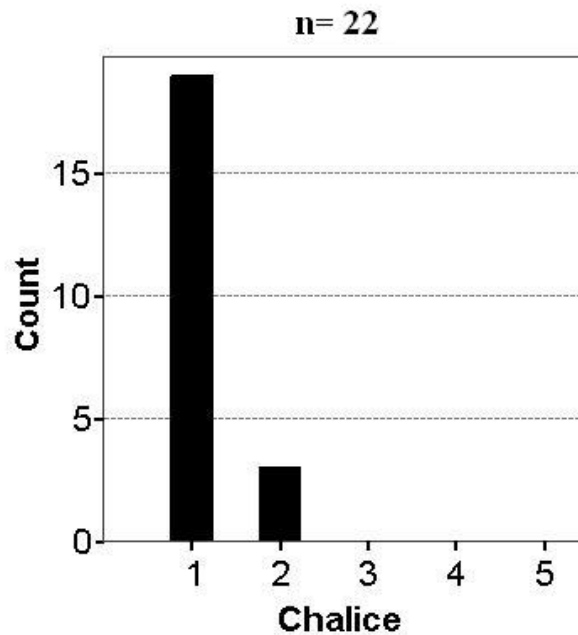
This graph illustrates that all respondents consider the athame to be a masculine object, with most identifying it as “Very Masculine.” My interviews and observations lead me to believe that, while the athame may be used by either men or women, it remains one of the most masculine of the Wiccan ritual objects, according to practitioners.

### *The Chalice*

Lord Janus: “It holds the wine. It’s the vessel for the Great Rite. It represents the woman, where the athame represents the male. [The chalice] is, to me, the most feminine object on the altar. It’s [also] one of the more prominent objects on the altar. Other things can come and go, but [the chalice] is central.”



**Figure 8: The Author’s Chalice**



**Figure 9: Chalice Bar Graph**

The chalice (Figure 8) is another important Wiccan altar object. It is alternately known as the cup or the goblet (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 258). The Farrars write that “the cup represents the element of Water and is the feminine symbol *par excellence*. Its chief use in the Circle is to hold the wine, in which it is consecrated and passed [around the circle]” (ibid.: 258). Nearly all respondents to my survey described the chalice as “Very Feminine,” echoing the phrase from the Farrars above (Figure 9). Jencson also concludes that the chalice is a highly feminized object (Jencson 1991: 201). Physically, the chalice is the shape of a goblet or grail, with a large rounded cavity supported by a thin, tapered base. Lord Janus explained to me that, in his tradition, “[any ritual object] that has a recess in it is considered feminine and anything that is protruding is masculine.” Jencson asserts that, the wine in the chalice is understood by practitioners as “the fruit of the Goddess within a symbolic womb” (ibid.: 201). Thus, the chalice takes on a feminine gender in Wicca due both to its hollow, round shape and its ritual function; as a vessel for wine. Most of my respondents spoke less about the chalice itself and more about its interaction with the athame during the Great Rite. It is to this function that I will return after discussing some other prevalent ritual objects.

### *The Pentacle*

Valeria: “You’re familiar with the symbolism of the pentacle, right? It’s the four elements, earth, air, fire and water and the [divine] spirit. The pentacle was also sacred to Pythagoras; it contains the golden ratio.”

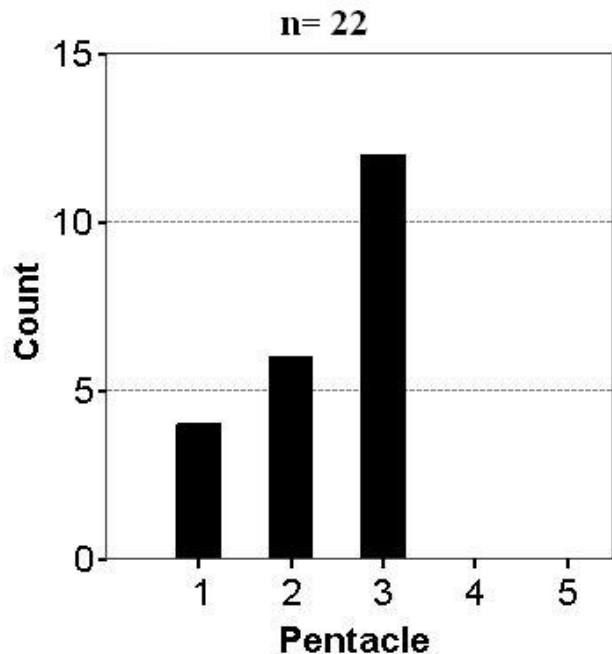
Mephistopheles: “I’ve actually heard that some pagans associated the pentacle with the wounds of Christ, to avoid having to explain to people at the time what [the pentacle] actually meant. I heard that many years ago.”



**Figure 10: A Brass Pentacle**

Valeria and Mephistopheles are a heterosexual couple and were interviewed together a few months after they led a Samhain Sabbat with a Harry Potter-themed ritual. They offered a great deal of information about the ritual objects used during the ceremony, particularly about the pentacle (Figure 10). The Farrars write that the pentacle “is the centerpiece of the altar, on which objects are consecrated; the water and salt bowls, too, are placed on it for blessing” (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 259). Traditionally the pentacle is a flat tile, often circular, with an upright, five-pointed star in the center, but it may be made of various materials (ibid.: 259). Many other symbols may also adorn the pentacle, but those depend greatly on the particular tradition a Wiccan follows. The Farrars write that the pentacle is not strongly associated with a particular gender, though it would be considered more feminine than masculine (ibid.: 259). I’ve observed some ambiguity as to the gender of the pentacle.





**Figure 11: Pentacle Bar Graph**

Mixed feelings about the gender of the pentacle were represented in responses to my survey (Figure 11). The slight majority of respondents categorized this object as “Neutral,” though almost half consider it either somewhat or strongly “Feminine.” During interviews, this ambiguity was discussed. Janus, who functioned as the high priest during the Samhain Sabbat at Green Meadows, made statements similar to those made by Valeria and Mephistopheles about the ritual function and gender of the pentacle:

Janus: “Basically everything is consecrated over [the pentacle]. Even though it is an earth elemental object, and a feminine object, the symbol represents all elements and spirit, in one. Therefore, you consecrate things over it.”

JS: “You said that it’s first-off a feminine object. I’m not trying to catch you in the wrong here, but it contains the four elements and deity. In some sense, is it balanced as well?”

Janus: “Earth is a very balanced element...The [pentacle], in the circle, is earth, and earth is feminine. The icon of the pentacle, when not related to a specific element, represents

all the elements and spirit; it represents a connection to everything. It depends on what you're using it for. When wearing it, the iconography is totally separate."

JS: "If you were to rank [the pentacle], by the scale in my survey, would the pentacle be considered a little less feminine than something like the chalice?"

Janus: "I think so."

Clearly, a great deal of symbolism surrounds the pentacle, but it is not considered as strongly feminine as the chalice. Janus also discusses the different situations in which pentacles are used. In a ritual, the pentacle is the site of consecration, but pentacles are also worn as talismans by Wiccans, who see the pentacle as a protective charm. When I conducted my interview with Paraselsu, he told me that he didn't wear a pentacle very often. At this point in my audio file, a woman who had attended the Mabon ritual with Paraselsu's Wiccan church said, "Some people wear [the pentacle] as a form of protection. I know a lot of people who wear it because they feel it protects them." The use of the pentacle is situational, appearing in both day to day wear as jewelry, and on Sabbat altars as a ritual object; its gender may change depending on its intended use.

### *Other Ritual Objects*

Many other ritual objects adorn Wiccan altars. Often there is a bowl of water, representing the feminine, according to the Farrars. There may also be a bowl of salt, both masculine and an earth element. This excerpt from the circle casting ritual by the Farrars illustrates how these objects are combined by the priest and priestess to create holy water, used for blessing the circle and the participants in the Sabbat ritual:

High Priestess puts the bowl of water on the pentacle, and the tip of her athame in it, and says:

*'I exorcise thee, O Creature of Water, that thou cast out from thee all the impurities and uncleanness of the spirits of the world of phantasm, in the names of [The God and Goddess].'*

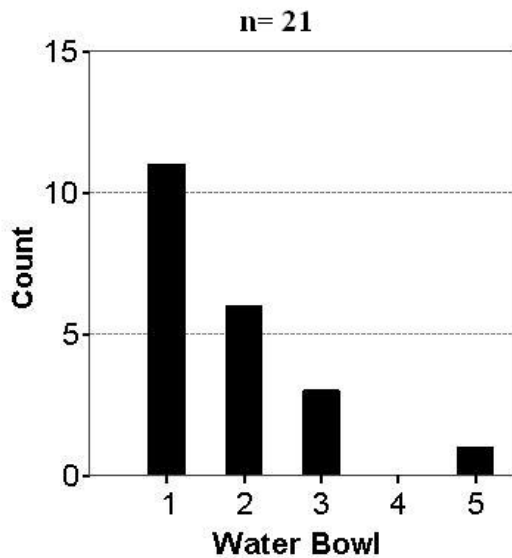
She then holds the bowl of water before her. High Priest puts the bowl of salt on the pentacle, and the tip of his athame in it, and says:

*'Blessings be upon this creature of salt; let all malignity and hindrance be cast forth thencefrom, and let all good enter therein. Wherefore I bless thee and invoke thee, that thou mayest aid me, in the names of [The God and Goddess].'*

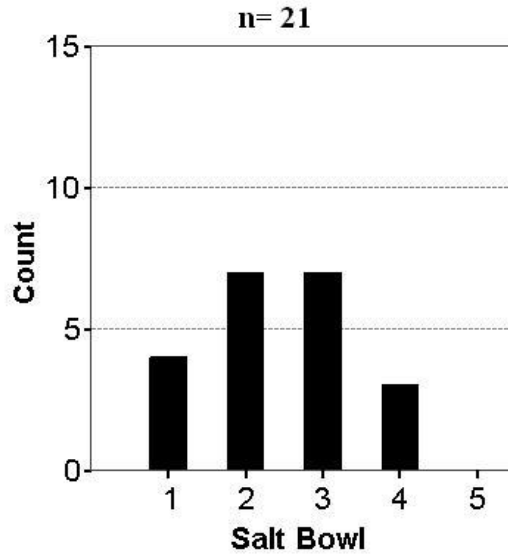
He pours the salt into the High Priestess's bowl of water, and they replace both bowls on the altar (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 295).

This passage illustrates the fundamental parts played by both the High Priest and High Priestess in Wiccan rituals. The High Priestess utilizes her athame to conduct energy, through the tip of the blade, into the water, which is placed over the pentacle to be ritually cleansed. The same is true of the High Priest and the bowl of salt, earlier considered a masculine object. Only through the balanced interaction of male and female effort is the holy water created.

The Farrars paint a simplified picture of the creation of holy water, which becomes much more complicated in practice. First of all, my survey respondents did not identify the Salt and Water bowls by the same genders as the Farrars. Based on the bar graphs I was able to produce through the SPSS program, respondents generally consider the Water Bowl to be a feminine object, with a majority identifying it as "Very Feminine" (Figure 12). However, three people considered it "Neutral", and one identifies the object as "Very Masculine." The identity of the Salt Bowl (Figure 13) is even less clear. The general trend in my data indicates that it could be considered feminine, but a significant portion of the respondents identified it as either "Neutral" or "Somewhat Masculine." Why should this be?



**Figure 12: Water Bowl Bar Graph**



**Figure 13: Salt Bowl Bar Graph**

One possible explanation for the ambiguity of the genders of these ritual objects lies in their associations, some of which are contradictory. When it comes to the water bowl, not only is the bowl itself a cavity, which, in the context of my interview with Janus would assign it a feminine gender, it is also deeply associated with the element of water, considered a feminine element by practitioners. The strong feminine association of this object, based on responses to my survey, is not very surprising. The salt bowl, on the other hand, is also recessed, but associated differently in different situations, a bit like the pentacle. Several interview participants identified salt with the element of earth, often considered a feminine element, as compared to fire and air which are generally considered masculine. In the context of the creation of holy water, the salt bowl's association with the masculine would bring the genders involved back into balance, an important Wiccan concept. However, it seems as if the differential associations that surround the salt bowl preclude its strong association with either a masculine or feminine gender.

Other objects may be used on some Sabbat altars, but are not common to all Wiccan rituals. Lighters, for example, are useful for lighting candles, and may or may not be considered ritual objects in and of themselves. When asked if his lighter was consecrated, Janus replied, “It’s just a lighter. Certain things are considered naturally consecrated.” For Janus, the lighter is necessary for rituals but need not be treated in the same way as something like an athame or a chalice. However, some Wiccans readily add religious significance to something as utilitarian as a lighter. During my interview with Valeria and Mephistopheles, we playfully decided that the lighter would certainly be considered masculine, due both to its phallic shape and the way it produces fire from its tip. Even something as mundane as a citronella candle can take on significance when placed in a ritual circle. “Yea,” explains Valeria, “If you want to consider the sacred meaning of [the citronella candle]...it was a chemical means of ‘sweeping the circle’ [ritually cleansing the area before a ritual].” My sarcastic follow-up suggestion that it “banishes insects” was met with peals of laughter from both Valeria and Mephistopheles. Negotiating multiple meanings for individual objects is a common theme in Wiccan worship.

Of the many objects on the Wiccan Sabbat altar, some carry strong gender associations, and others are more neutral, some may be both masculine and feminine, depending on the situation and who you ask. My surveys show that the most highly gendered ritual objects are the chalice, the athame, and images of the Goddess and God. These objects consistently show up in my surveys and interviews as being highly associated with either masculine or feminine qualities. Interview participants discussed the athame and chalice in detail, and were particularly talkative on the subject of the “Great Rite,” which involves the interaction of the High Priest and High Priestess, who manipulate the athame and a chalice filled with wine. The chalice, as well as cookies or other confections, called “cakes,” are blessed and passed around the circle as a

communal meal. It is this particular aspect of the Sabbat ritual that I will describe in greater detail.

### The Great Rite

Janus: “The Great Rite is really symbolic sex. It represents male and female combining as one, to become one. It’s probably one of the most active [parts of any ritual]. It’s also very strong; there’s a lot of power in it. Generally, I’d say it’s performed at every major Sabbat, and at many Esbats, but that depends on the group, and who is there.”

The greatest expression of the union of the masculine and feminine during the Wiccan Sabbat, according to the Farrars, is the “Great Rite” (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 48). This ritual action corresponds with number 5 in Jencson’s order of ritual events, which she refers to as “a Wiccan communion of consecrated cakes and wine” (Jencson 1991: 197-198). From the perspective of the observer, the Great Rite involves either the interaction of the chalice and athame by High Priest and Priestess, the actual act of sexual intercourse by the same individuals; or a combination of the two (ibid.: 48). For the Farrars, if the Great Rite involves actual intercourse, “all of the coven except the man and woman concerned leave the Circle and the room, before the ritual becomes intimate, and do not return until they are summoned” (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 48). I have never personally witnessed an enactment of the Great Rite involving actual intercourse, nor have I ever attended a ritual in which intercourse was an integral part. In the span of my interviews, however, my informants describe the different “levels,” or “tiers,” on which the Great Rite may be enacted.

The following excerpt from my interview with Lord Lugh, an Alexandrian High Priest, further develops the different “tiers” of the Great Rite:

JS: “I’ve encountered Great Rites being enacted physically with two practitioners, generally male and female. But then also symbolically, through the interaction of the athame and the chalice. I’m curious about that differentiation.”

Lord Lugh: “Simply put, in the Alexandrian tradition, we have three levels of the Great Rite. The first, and simplest, is the athame and the chalice. Male and female union; God and Goddess union. When that happens, it creates life-force energy; which is why the wine is blessed. Then we have the Great Rite Symbolic, which is half-way done; and then, instead of having actual intercourse, it goes and reverts back to the wine, the chalice and the athame.”

JS: “Ok, so the second tier Great Rite [symbolic] begins with two individuals?”

Lord Lugh: “How many ways are there to practice Alexandrian Witchcraft? How many Alexandrians are there in the world? That’s basically my answer. But in our specific coven, we decided a long time ago that the Great Rite was a very special act and that we wanted to include it in our Sabbats, like other Alexandrians. But we didn’t want to do it every Sabbat. So, what we decided is that the Great Rite Symbolic will be performed at the Greater Sabbats. So, at the height of every season.”

JS: “So, neither equinoxes nor solstices?”

Lord Lugh: “Correct. So, it’s [Oime]lc], Bealtane, [Lughnasadh] and Samhain; four times a year.”

JS: “And, in this case, the symbolic [sexual] act begins what later turns into the physical act of the athame into the chalice?”

Lord Lugh: “Then there’s the last level, the third level, which is the actual act of sex. But it’s only done between two people who have already had a previous relationship.”

JS: “As an aid to creating energy, or as a form of private worship, maybe?”

Lord Lugh: “Both.”

During the Great Rite, the chalice and athame are so strongly gendered that their interaction is read by participants as penetration of the vagina by the penis. The act of lowering the athame into the chalice, as stated by Lord Lugh, is meant to channel “divine procreative

energy” into the chalice, which contains wine that is then distributed to all the people in the ritual circle. In this way, participants take into themselves the potent energy of their Gods. Lord Lugh refers to this act as the first level or “tier” of the Great Rite. In the next level, the “Great Rite Symbolic,” the High Priest and Priestess lie down before the altar, separated by a cloth, called a “veil” and simulate intercourse as a prelude to consecrating the wine. I witnessed this level of the ritual with Lord Lugh’s group, but not with any other group I’ve observed. As he stated, this level of the Great Rite is enacted only four times during the year, because it is so central to his coven’s religious worldview.

Valeria and Mephistopheles echo Lord Lugh’s description of the Great Rite. When asked about this part of the Sabbat, Valeria explained that “the athame entering the chalice full of wine is supposed to represent to joining of male and female during intercourse.” When I asked if the Great Rite always needed to be enacted by a man and a woman, these two informants had different ideas. Mephistopheles claimed that he “will never do it alone” and that, in the very least, a properly executed Great Rite usually involves a woman to hold the chalice and a man to hold the athame. Valeria, however, occasionally practices the Great Rite by herself. “If I’m doing a ritual at home alone,” she said, “I will lower the athame into the chalice, because that’s how I bless [the wine] in the chalice and energize everything. I’m channeling energy into it, and I think of it as communion with the Gods.” So, for Valeria at least, having the appropriate ritual objects at hand obviates the need for a male partner.

When I observed Paraselsu’s Wiccan church during their Mabon Sabbat, I witnessed an unusual enactment of the Great Rite. The High Priestess during this ritual picked up the chalice to begin her part. The High Priest, following his cue, lowered his index and middle fingers down, nearly touching the wine inside the chalice; the wine was then distributed among the participants



in the sacred circle. I noted this because I'd only ever seen the Great Rite enacted with the chalice and the athame. I asked Paraselsu about this discrepancy during our interview, and he seemed surprised about the lack of an athame. While Paraselsu is highly placed within his particular church, he did not lead this Mabon ritual himself, instead he cued musical interludes at appointed times during the ritual. Later in our interview, he asked the High Priestess (HPS) why the High Priest (HP) did not use an athame to bless the wine in the chalice. Her response follows:

Paraselsu (To HPS): "Maybe you can answer the question. Why didn't (the HP) use an athame?"

HPS: "He just forgot his Athame. And he didn't want to put his finger into the Chalice." [She breaks into a riot of laughter] That was it."

Since the Mabon Sabbat was meant to take place outside, but was moved inside due to inclement weather, it seems the High Priest misplaced his athame (or forgot to bring it entirely) and did not realize until it was too late. He was forced to improvise, and blessed the wine with his finger. The incident was particularly funny because for a man to use his fingers on female genitalia is an entirely different sexual act than the one most often compared to the Great Rite. However, given the circumstances, it was decided that the High Priest acted appropriately. There seems to be more leeway than I was expecting in the enactment of the Great Rite. I had anticipated that the significance of the ritual for the Wiccan church would lead to a rigidly formal enactment of the Great Rite, but, like other elements of Wicca, the Great Rite may be successfully enacted in multiple ways.

Lord Lugh makes a distinction about which primary actor, either the High Priest or High Priestess, holds which ritual object based on the "level" of the Great Rite that is being practiced. On the first level, which involves only the interaction of the chalice and the athame, the High

Priest holds the chalice for the High Priestess. “For the first level,” he said, “I [the High Priest] am holding the chalice up for the Priestess to bless it [with the athame], because the Priestess is the representative of the Goddess.” In other words, the High Priest is assisting the High Priestess in the enactment of the ritual. “When you’re doing the first level, it’s less sexual,” he stated. In the next level, in which man and woman pantomime intercourse, the High Priest wields the athame and the High Priestess now holds the chalice. When asked why the objects change hands, Lord Lugh explains that placing the gendered object in the hands of the person of the same gender emphasized the sexual aspect of the ritual. We did not discuss whether the third level made use of the chalice and athame at all. Perhaps the intensity of sexuality is so powerful at this level that the wine is consecrated by virtue of both partners participating in intercourse as “representatives of the Gods?” In any event, Lord Lugh conceives of the Great Rite on increasing levels of intensity, which necessitates the exchange of ritual objects between the primary actors in the ritual from the first level to the next.

### *Parallels with Other Traditions*

I believe that the symbolism of the Great Rite is similar to the Eucharist ritual practiced by Roman Catholics. To me, this seems like an easy comparison to make. Both rituals involve wine and grain that is blessed and distributed among those assembled in the ritual. My informants, as well, see many parallels between these traditions. I must consider, however, that the similarities I see are a result of my position as a practitioner of Wicca, rather than a researcher of Wicca. I and many of my informants come from Christian families, and many of my informants were at one time practitioners of Christianity, particularly Catholicism.

Conversions to Neo-paganism often involve an outright rejection of the birth religion, which can lead to complex impressions of the contested histories of Wicca and Christianity.

As mentioned in the introduction, some Wiccans place great importance on linking Neo-Pagan beliefs and practices with pre-Christian pagan rituals. For these practitioners, the religious tradition that performed a given ritual “first” can claim ownership of that ritual. Since Neo-Pagans see themselves as the spiritual descendents of the original pagans of Europe, they have a vested interest in defending the antiquity of the Great rite over that of the Eucharist. During an interview, Valeria described the Great Rite as a communal meal with deep historical roots.

Valeria: “This is the idea of sharing a meal, of community. But it’s also the sacredness of the food, because the origins of the food go back to the mythos in Wicca of the dying God, you know. The Goddess is eternal, but the God dies and is reborn each year. He dies in the harvest season.”

JS: “He’s in the sheaves of wheat?”

Valeria: “Exactly, so the food you partake in is symbolic of the gift the God has given you. The wine is the same thing; it’s like the grape and the grain. Wine has ties to Dionysus as the dying God. It also ended-up in Christianity. There’s a lot of communion symbolism behind the [Great Rite], but it goes back to way before the Christian church.”

Similar statements were made by other informants during interviews. Both Valeria and Lord Lugh jokingly suggested that the Christians had “stolen” the practice from the pagans of the past.

Linda Jencson discusses what she considers the “superficially oppositional” relationship between Neo-Paganism and Christianity (Jencson 1998: 257). For some Neo-Pagans who associate Christianity with negativity, calling the legitimacy of Christian beliefs into question may be considered a positive thing. In some ways, denigrating Christian beliefs may serve to enhance or affirm Neo-Pagan beliefs. Through interviews, I’ve seen this oppositional relationship expressed both playfully and maliciously, but it is often perceptible. As a practitioner, I’ve formed my own opinions and judgments about Christianity that reify my choice

to practice Wicca. An unbiased comparison between the Great Rite and other ritual communal meals is out of the scope of this thesis, and may be something that I, as a practitioner, cannot undertake due to my strong bias on the subject.

## Discussion

Like all religions, an understanding of the sacred symbols at play within Wicca is essential for gaining a perspective on the ideology of followers. In general, Wiccans adhere to a ritual calendar that includes eight holidays; four are major (Oimelec, Bealtane, Lughnasadh and Samhain) and four are minor (Ostara, Midsummer, Mabon and Yule). These sequential holidays convey a sacred narrative in which the God is born of the Goddess in the spring, becomes her lover, and dies, along with the harvest, as the days become shorter and colder. Intimately connected with the seasons, the Sabbats allow followers to experience the divine drama in their own lives. Jencson explains that the Gods of Wicca are “accessible” to followers, meaning that Wiccans emulate these beings as a means of connecting with them (Jencson 1991: 140). One of the ways Wiccans connect with their Gods is to enter a sacred circle and participate in elaborate rituals.

The sacred circle is an area that must be ritually cleansed and prepared before any celebration. The area may be outdoors or in a home, but a symbolic distinction is created between what is outside, the mundane world, and what is inside, an “archetypal reality” where energy may be raised and contained, and individuals may come into contact with divine beings (Adler 1981 [1979]: 107). The altar resides within the circle, and contains an array of objects that allow the ritual to proceed. These objects carry powerful associations among practitioners, and

their proper manipulation may mean the difference between a ritual that is deemed successful by the group or one that is considered a waste of time.

Depending on the Wiccan group, their tradition and the personal preferences of the ritual leaders, rituals are often enacted with a female High Priestess and a male High Priest. Wiccan texts describe the gestures and prayers of the Priestess and the Priest, their motions during rituals, and the sequence in which ritual objects are utilized. These texts often form a guideline by which innovators can experiment with new sequences or novel prayers. In practice, a Sabbat ritual may bear only a passing resemblance to the model on which it was based. This may work well. Wicca is a religion that is constantly changing and growing as influences from a plethora of ancient and modern belief systems are wedded with the writings of Gerald Gardner and others. Core beliefs are slower to change, however, and traditional ritual objects remain generally consistent. Based on the groups I kept contact with during my research, the interplay of primary actors and ritual objects remains an important part of Wiccan Sabbats.

Many ritual objects within Wicca are strongly associated with either a masculine or feminine gender. The athame, used by both male and female Wiccans, remains a decidedly masculine object. The gender of the athame may be established (or reinforced) by its phallic shape, its association with a masculine natural element (air or fire), or its use during rituals. Often, all of these factors were mentioned by interview informants as a justification for the athame's masculine distinction. Similar categories are applied to the chalice, associated with water (feminine), and conceptualized as a womb during rituals. The High Priestess and High Priest manipulate these objects during the central point of the Sabbat ritual: the Great Rite.

Jencson calls the Great Rite a "Wiccan Communion," making note of the symbolic parallels between this ritual meal and ritual meals seen in other traditions (Jencson 1991: 197-

198). The history of the beliefs themselves is as diverse as the sources Gerald Gardner drew upon to create *Witchcraft Today* (1954). It is enough, for this thesis, to say that the Great Rite is often performed during Sabbats and the symbolism of the ritual is consistent among most practitioners. Wiccans emphasize the sexual overtones of the ritual, in which the phallic athame is lowered into the womb-like chalice. The objective, according to Lord Lugh, is to focus “divine procreative energy” into the wine, pass this wine around the circle, and allow all participants to share in the blessing.

Emphasis on the Great Rite seems to be on the male and the female. At no point in any of my interviews was I told that two members of the same sex ever lead the Great Rite. I am aware of feminist traditions in which women worship the Goddess in the absence of men, but I am unaware if they practice the Great Rite in such groups (Berger et al. 2003: 13). Valeria, my informant, chooses to conduct the ritual on her own, with the aid of gendered ritual objects. Rather than simply emphasizing the physical act of sex, several informants stressed fertility as the object of veneration during the Great Rite. Paraselsu described the Great Rite as “the union of male and female,” and discussed the importance of sexual reproduction to the evolution of life on Earth. Paraselsu believes that the creation of new life, the result of the union of male and female, is a sacred, magical event.

Rather than emphasizing heterosexual intercourse, which might be the impression that is given, the Great Rite sacralizes fertility and the act of reproduction. This reproduction is symbolized in the actions of ritual leaders who serve as a proxy for the Gods during the Great Rite. This “energy” or symbolism is generally expressed through the manipulation of gendered ritual objects by male and female actors during the Great Rite. In this way, Wiccan rituals can be said to reflect, construct, and reinforce the Wiccan precept of a gender-balanced cosmos. To

focus on a single sex, from this perspective, would negate the fertility achieved when male and female connect. Wiccans know that fertility in the natural world is the result of two complementary genders. It is for the sake of this sacred fertility that Wiccan Sabbat altars are so strongly gendered and, perhaps, so emotionally fulfilling for participants who can understand the symbolism.

## CHAPTER 3: GENDER, SEXUALITY AND RELIGION

### Introduction

The Wiccan religion is characterized by a sacralization of sexuality and fertility. The Sabbat celebrations engage practitioners in the story of the lifecycles of the Gods; it is through the combined fertility of the Gods that the earth is renewed every spring (Adler 1981 [1979]: 109). The second half of Principle 4, of the Principles of Wiccan belief (Appendix A), states that “[American Wiccans] value sexuality as pleasure, as the symbol and embodiment of Life, and as one of the sources of energies used in *magickal* practice and religious worship” (Daschke and Ashcroft, eds 2005: 102). I have argued above that gendered ritual objects reflect, construct, and reinforce the Wiccan precept of a gender-balanced cosmos through their manipulation by the primary actors who perform rituals. During the course of my research on four Wiccan Sabbat rituals, I’ve observed that these ritual performers are either one man and one woman, or, in one case, a group of men and women. From an outsider’s perspective, it may seem that the performance of gender roles by Wiccans mirrors the “middlestream,” or majority, gender roles of the United States (Harper-Bisso 2005: 24). However, the Wiccan movement is deeply indebted to the feminist movement, particularly to feminist spirituality. The performance of gender among Wiccans is constantly negotiated between the heteronormative concept of divine fertility and the general acceptance of non-traditional lifestyles among practitioners.



## Concepts of Gender, Sexuality and Religious Expression

### *Feminist Influences on Neo-Paganism*

Mary Jo Weaver describes the history of the spiritual side of the feminist movement in her article, “Who is the Goddess and Where Does She Get Us?” (1989). Weaver characterizes authors Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage as early pioneers of women’s spirituality. These authors, “in urging women to reject the authority of the Bible and the institutional church [raised] a challenge that, although ignored or condemned in their own time, has been taken up by [modern] feminists” (Weaver 1989: 49). A tension then developed within the feminist spirituality movement; one side believed Christianity was hopelessly patriarchal and wished to create a belief system more in line with feminist ideals, and the other side attempted to reform Christianity from within and counter the patriarchal symbols that had become institutionalized (ibid.: 51).

Weaver describes Mary Daly’s opinions on the differences between men and women when it comes to religious symbolism (Weaver 1989: 51). Daly argued “that men were naturally necrophilic [fixated on death], their religions inexorably patriarchal, and their world on the verge of collapse” (ibid.: 51). Women, on the other hand, were said to be naturally “biophilic,” appreciating of life, and required a supportive environment for worship (ibid.: 51). Rosemary Ruether is described by Weaver as a “more moderate critic of conventional Christianity”; here was a woman willing to reform Christianity from the inside (ibid.: 51). Carol P. Christ then wrote a review of the available literature that “categorized feminist theologians either as ‘reformist’ or ‘revolutionary’ on the basis of their response to Mary Daly’s work” (ibid.: 53).

These polemical terms remained within the feminist spirituality discourse for a decade. Christ favored those who discarded Christianity entirely in favor of a new Goddess-centered religion, while Ruether chastised this group as “narrow-minded in their reading of the Bible” (ibid.: 55).

Some “revolutionaries” sought historical evidence on which to base their claims of a pre-Christian, and therefore, non-patriarchal society. “Many spiritual feminists,” writes Sabina Magliocco, “posited the existence of a matriarchal golden age in which women and men lived in peaceful communities” (Magliocco 2001.: 3). These scholars reached out to the work of Margaret Murray, who, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, proposed that “an ancient, universal matriarchal tradition [had been] practiced in secret underground societies throughout human history” (Weaver 1989: 57). Murray had long been discredited as a social scientist, but this fact did not deter other women from searching for evidence of vanished matriarchies. “Revolutionary” feminist scholars believed that the lack of evidence of such societies was a testament to the repressive ethos of monotheism towards women (ibid.: 57). By this logic, history was not a reliable source, and new histories would need to be created.

Some scholars, such as Judith Ochsorn, were “criticized by both male and female scholars” for their lack of historical understanding (Weaver 1989: 57). Other feminists, such as Naomi Goldenberg, chose “to ignore historical problems in favor of the psychic reality Goddess religion has for its adherents” (Ibib.: 58). “While the myth of a matriarchal golden age has now been critiqued within the movement,” Magliocco writes, [the myth] “remains a powerful sacred narrative that motivates many spiritual feminists to continue to work politically and spiritually to bring about a new moral order that includes feminism and environmentalism among its basic tenets” (Magliocco 2001.: 3).

The willingness to ignore the historical absence of these imagined Goddess-worshipping cultures mirrors the pseudo-historical beginnings of the Wiccan religious movement. Margot Adler writes that “the Wiccan revival starts with a myth,” which paints Witchcraft as “a religion that dates back to Paleolithic times, to the worship of the god of the hunt and the goddess of fertility” (Adler 1981 [1979]: 45). It is significant to note that Margaret Murray, who influenced many feminists, was also an influence on Gerald Gardner. While many modern Wiccans question Gardner’s claims to have discovered a surviving, pre-Christian religious tradition (Jencson 1989: 3), Barner-Barry points out that he began a tradition that is practiced by a majority of Wiccans today (Barner-Barry, 2005: 36). This illustrates the feminist concept of a psychic reality carrying greater weight than a historic reality (Weaver 1989: 58).

The date of Samhain (October 31<sup>st</sup>), 1979 is a significant date in the history of both feminist spirituality and Neo-Paganism (Weaver 1989: 50). “On that pagan feast,” Weaver writes, “Margot Adler covered the East Coast with her comprehensive study of [Neo-Paganism], *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979), while Starhawk represented the West Coast with *The Spiral Dance* (1979), her handbook of witchcraft as Goddess religion” (ibid.: 50-51). These books have been widely read within the Wiccan community as I examined in an earlier study (Sloan 2007), and have had a strong impact on Wiccan attitudes toward gender roles and the spiritual position of women and men.

Susan Harper-Bisso describes Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979) as “an early survey of many different NeoPagan traditions, and [an attempt at] a systematic demographic examination of the population” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 49). This unique work was read in both academic and Wiccan circles. “Adler is required reading in many NeoPagan training programs,” Harper-Bisso continues, “and [her book] is typically handed out both to prospective converts and

to non-NeoPagan friends and relatives who want their questions answered” (ibid.: 49). Adler observed that people become Neo-Pagans through “word of mouth, a discussion between friends, a lecture, a book, or an article” (Adler 1981: 14). She writes of her own experience, “I never converted in the accepted sense- I never adopted any new beliefs. I simply accepted, reaffirmed, and extended a very old experience” (ibid.: 20). For Adler, turning to Neo-Paganism is not a conversion but a return to beliefs held at an earlier time in one’s life. In this sense, Neo-Paganism is described almost as a natural, or in-born religious belief.

Starhawk’s book, in contrast, is far more of a self-conscious attempt to define for readers a religious tradition free of patriarchal structures. Like other authors of her time, Starhawk sets her religion in the distant past. “According to our legends,” writes the author, “Witchcraft began more than 35 thousand years ago” (Starhawk 1989[1979]: 17). Like other proponents of feminist spirituality, Starhawk attempts to create a utopian form of religion that returns humanity to this imagined past. “As we have seen, Goddess religion is unimaginably old, but contemporary Witchcraft,” she writes, “could just as accurately be called the New Religion” (ibid.: 22). She then discusses the Goddess as a symbol by which women can see themselves as divine (ibid.: 24). “Through the Goddess, we [women] can discover our strength, enlighten our minds, own our bodies, and celebrate our emotions (ibid.; 24). Not surprisingly, Starhawk’s message resonated particularly strongly among spiritual feminists.

Starhawk describes a religious movement in which ethics are not based on rigid dogmas, but on a deep respect for life and for the environment, a religion where practitioners actively try to shape the world to fit their vision of a just society (Starhawk 1989[1979]: 27-29). This revolutionary aspect of Starhawk’s spirituality fits nicely within the theoretical model of a *revitalization movement*. Anthony F.C. Wallace defined a revitalization movement as “a

deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (Wallace 1956:265). “At its heart,” writes Jean Heriot, “practitioners of feminist spirituality believe that women will eventually be able to change the patriarchal social order to an egalitarian one in which connections among individuals, the social and physical world, and the divine (usually referenced as a goddess) are developed and enhanced” (Adams and Salamone, eds. 2000: 116). In Starhawk’s own words, “We must bring about change through nonviolence, physical and spiritual. We are called to take a radical leap of faith, to believe that people, given the opening to dream of new possibilities, with tools and visions will create a living future” (ibid.: 11).

Harper-Bisso notes that Starhawk founded what became known as the “Reclaiming Collective” in California (Harper-Bisso 2005: 56). Jone Salomonsen conducted ethnographic research in San Francisco among some of these “Reclaiming Witches” (Salomonsen 2002: 1). Salomonsen writes that her fieldwork “was formally conducted in the periods 1988-89 and 1990 for a doctoral dissertation, with a predoctoral research period in 1984-85, and several return trips in 1991 and 1994” (ibid.: 22). In all, her research covers a period of 10 years. In her ethnography, Salomonsen defines “utopian” witches in this area by their shared interpretation of “Wicca along Starhawk’s lines as a religious and social gospel for the emancipation and rescue of the world” (ibid.: 97). Salomonsen writes that Starhawk’s message was particularly influential when taken together with the influence of local anarchist groups in this part of California, making the Reclaiming Collective a driving force for radical social change.

### *Goddess Worship and Misogyny*

Feminist spirituality has obviously exerted a strong, shaping influence on the multifarious traditions of Wicca. Harper-Bisso notes of her own field research that Neo-Pagan and Wiccan “practitioners of both sexes mentioned the “misogyny” they saw in Christianity as principal reasons for drifting away from both Protestant and Catholic Christianity” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 181). Misogyny, in this sense, means the institutionalized denigration of women based on religious traditions. For some, Neo-Pagan belief systems provide an alternative to “middlestream” religions that are seen as hopelessly biased towards males. Neo-Paganism, however, is by no means free of misogynist trends. The situation is far more complicated than it has been explained in many religious texts. Jencson discusses these topics in her article, “In whose Image? Misogynist Trends in the Construction of Goddess and Woman” (1998).

According to Jencson, there are actually many aspects, or incarnations of “the Goddess” to which both Wiccans and spiritual feminists refer. “Each of the many Goddesses comes with Her own political agenda,” Jencson writes, “political in the sense that Her forms represent different role models for power relationships between the sexes, both in the public and private realm of daily life” (Jencson 1998: 249). Jencson places these Goddess forms along a continuum in which different groups validate their own concepts of women through each incarnation of the Goddess. “At one extreme we find the empowering creator-healer Goddess of the feminists,” Jencson writes, “[and] at the other we find a subservient whore-Goddess, based on the most demeaning of male fears and fantasies” (ibid.: 248). Jencson claims that the use of the Goddess, “both in ritual and in daily life” can “both explain and determine the gender roles of Her worshippers” (ibid.: 248).

Jencson makes the point that worshipping the Goddess does not necessarily make someone a feminist. She points to several instances during her years of fieldwork in which the status of women was not elevated in the context of Goddess worship. “There was a certain male Goddess worshipper who had a habit of seducing female newcomers after rituals,” Jencson writes (Jencson 1998: 249). This man would ask women back to his home, under the assumption that they would be worshipped as Goddesses, only to “use them for sex once, and shun them afterward” (ibid.: 250). While conducting interviews with some of the women shunned by this man, Jencson notes that the women felt used and “suffered a loss of self-esteem” (ibid.: 250). The author uses this example to underscore the point that the “worship of a goddess at the head of his pantheon in no way created a respect or reverence for women” (ibid.: 250). Far from it, in fact, since the system of belief into which the man placed himself allowed him to reduce women to objects of sexual conquest.

Jencson further develops the concept of misogyny by delving into the history of the Wiccan revival. She argues that Gardner’s original writings depict women as sexualized objects. Jencson notes that “rituals were done in the nude, sexual arousal was a source of magical power, and the High Priestess was to perform ritual sex acts with the High Priest” (Jencson 1998: 255). Jencson does not explicitly state it here, but I believe she is referring to the symbolic Great Rite. Gardner’s writings are dense and, at times, intentionally cryptic; the author notes on several occasions that he is bound by an oath not to reveal too much about specific rituals. In *Witchcraft Today* (1954), Gardner writes about hedonistic rituals where naked revelers of both sexes danced in the night, and women anointed their bodies with “powerful scented oil” (Gardner 2004[1954]: 53). He seems to delight in describing these lurid scenes in rich detail. Jencson cites these points as evidence of Gardner’s misogynistic point of view.

Some of Gardner's writings, however, can be interpreted as putting women in a unique position of power. He describes particular rituals "where a man must be the leader, but if a man of requisite rank is not available, a chief priestess belts a sword on and is thought of as a man for the occasion" (Gardner 2004[1954]: 44). He adds that although a woman may take a man's role in his absence, a man may never take the place of a woman during rituals (ibid.: 44). Perhaps the ability of a High Priestess to embody both male and female, an ability denied to the High Priest, is an indicator of a high status for women within Gardner's Witchcraft. At other points in his book, Gardner comments on the writings of Dr. Margaret Murray and writes that "the leader of a [coven] may be a man or a woman, but a high priestess... must be present to celebrate rites" (ibid.: 114). I am not here to argue that Gardner prefigures the feminist revolution in his writing, just that he wrote during its infancy. I would argue, however, that the Neo-Pagan religions, created by Gardner and others, had a greater acknowledgment of the importance of women to spiritual matters than did Christianity during the same time period.

There exists, according to Jencson, a "complex (superficially oppositional) relationship between Christianity and Neopaganism" (Jencson 1998: 257). Neo-Paganism, as mentioned in the introduction, is characterized by the worship of dual or multiple divinities, while "middlestream" Christianity resolutely worships no gods before God the Father. Jencson explains that the false dichotomy that is created from the opposition to Christianity places women in an awkward position. "To many of the most abused survivors of Christian misogyny, [conversion to Neo-Paganism] at first appears liberating" (ibid.: 259). The author observes that many women who become involved in Neo-Pagan and Wiccan groups from a Christian background define their identities in opposition to their former religion. She warns, however, that "an eagerness to be as un-Christian as possible becomes a trap for many Neopagan [women] who



do not think through the implications of simply turning Christian codes of behavior upside down” (ibid.: 259).

Jencson illustrates her argument with the example of the concept of open sexuality, or promiscuity. If promiscuity is considered “evil” within Christianity, in the spirit of opposition it must be considered “good” in Neo-Paganism, at least according to new converts that seek such opposition to Christian norms (Jencson 1998: 261). The expectation, according to Jencson, is that Neo-Pagan women should be sexually promiscuous, and happy about it, lest they face ridicule for being prudish and “matronly” (ibid.: 259). “Fear of the Christian variety of patriarchy is used as a threat to keep female devotees of the misogynist Goddess in line” (ibid.: 264). The other “devotees of the misogynist Goddess,” presumably sexist Neo-Pagan men, threaten to shun females who do not conform to their concept of correct behavior of women within Neo-Pagan circles (ibid.: 264). Jencson’s example may be a bit extreme, but she makes a good point about the way gender roles are a contested subject within Neo-Paganism; we turn now to the subject of sexual identities which are also contested within this belief system.

### *Sexual Identity and Status Differences*

Harper-Bisso, like Jencson, discusses the perceptions of female sexual promiscuity in her dissertation, *Negotiating Gender Identity and Social Identity in an American Neopagan Community* (2005). “The downside of the sexual freedom many find in Neopaganism,” writes Harper-Bisso, summarizing accounts from her informants, “is a type of fetishization of female sexuality” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 229). Because Neo-Pagan women are open about their sexuality, it is assumed, by some, that they “are indiscriminate in their choice of lovers, or that they are available for the asking” (ibid.: 229). Harper-Bisso cites specific examples of women who were

subjected to unwanted advances, presumably by both men and women, while attending large festivals (ibid.: 229). “While most Neopagan festivals deal swiftly and decisively with inappropriate advances toward women, they do happen”; the author observes that openly bisexual women are most at risk of being fetishized (ibid.: 229-230).

Harper-Bisso’s work considers Neo-Paganism from the perspective of a complex social system in which sexual identity and status go hand in hand. Many different sexual identities are at play within Neo-Paganism, and the author discusses the differential status achieved by Wiccans of different genders and sexual identities. “Heterosexuality [for women] is seen by some as something to be overcome; bisexuality is seen as a higher stage of spiritual evolution, something that will come ‘in time,’ by many members” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 228). The author relates many examples from her years of field research in which her informants characterized female heterosexuality as “limiting, repressive or restrictive” (ibid.: 224). Compulsory heterosexuality was linked with Christian intolerance, while “openness and nonjudgmentality” were stressed by informants in relation to Neo-Paganism (ibid.: 225). Unlike Jencson, Harper-Bisso paints a picture of Wicca as a religion in which women are free to consider for themselves where their sexual orientations lie, with slight preference given to bisexuality as the norm.

Harper-Bisso explains that homosexuality in women is widely accepted, due in large part to the contributions feminist spirituality has made to Wicca. “In much the same way as claiming a female godhead has been construed as an overly feminist act,” writes Harper-Bisso, “so too can the act of claiming the identity as [a woman] who loves other women be seen as feminist” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 222). The ideological links between spiritual feminism and Neo-Paganism have been discussed in detail, but overtly feminist forms of Wicca should briefly be considered.

Several Wiccan groups have been directly influenced by Starhawk. Building on the writings of this author, Zsuzsanna Budapest created Dianic Wicca, which Berger calls “separatist Witchcraft” (Berger et al. 2003: 14). Berger describes Budapest’s “Susan B. Anthony coven” as “a feminist form of Witchcraft” which “acknowledges the goddess to the exclusion of the gods, or god force” (ibid.: 13). In practical terms, some groups denied membership to men and other groups, to heterosexual women. Harper-Bisso explains that some early Dianic groups “required members to be lesbian, bisexual, or at least ‘non-practicing heterosexuals’” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 245). I do not mean to suggest that this is true of all separatist groups, or even the majority, but the practice does exist in some form. Berger suggests that such groups have had a major impact on the way Wicca is practiced in this country, distancing American Wicca from British originals (Berger et al. 2003: 15). This is but another interesting aspect of the conception of the feminine within Neo-Paganism.

Harper-Bisso contends that “the construction of femininity within NeoPaganism is complex and not without its complications,” but warns that constructions of masculinity are often overly simplified (Harper-Bisso 2005: 232). The author writes of Neo-Pagan men that they “are subtly but undeniably constructed as spiritually inferior to women” (ibid.: 235). General acceptance of “strong women” and “compassionate men” is widespread among Neo-Pagans, according to the author’s research, but a double standard exists (ibid.: 230). “While it is quite normal for women to cast circle and conduct ritual without men present, it appears that it is considered inappropriate by much of the community for men to do the reverse” (ibid.: 236). This quote harkens back to Gardner’s claims that women are essential for celebrating rites (Gardner 2004[1954]: 114). The ideal Neo-Pagan male, according to Harper-Bisso is one that “embodies the qualities of the God” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 235). While this identification varies widely, he is

generally meant to be virile and strong, but not overly aggressive or sexist (ibid.: 235). Harper-Bisso suggests that some of her male informants had internalized the notion that monotheistic religions, in which men hold power, had done great harm to the world, and they must make “penance for patriarchy” and let women lead (ibid.: 239).

Harper-Bisso comments on the “paucity of resources” for Neo-Pagan men, but explains that homosexual and bisexual men are further alienated (Harper-Bisso 2005: 246). “Gay and bisexual men,” according to the author, “often reported feeling somewhat disenfranchised within the Neopagan community” (ibid.: 246). “The presence and centrality of the Goddess, whose power derives from her female sexual power, provides a model for sexually liberated women as manifestations of the Divine. Women who love other women,” Harper-Bisso argues, “are the ultimate or extreme manifestation of this- as the Goddess is whole unto Herself, so lesbian and bisexual women do not ‘need’ a masculine counterpart to be complete” (ibid.:248). The reverse is not true for males, who, it can be argued, embody the God. The God’s primary function, as noted above, is as son and lover to the Goddess; he is the consort of the Goddess and is defined in relation to the feminine. In this sense, gay males, while socially accepted, are spiritually undercut by Wiccan theology.

I found Harper-Bisso’s observations of a hierarchical order in Wicca, based both on gender and sexual identity, to be fascinating. Not only has her research inspired me to conduct additional research among my informants, but I’ve also tried to look critically at my own position as a heterosexual male Wiccan who has certainly internalized the ideology that monotheistic religions are patriarchal and often denigrating towards women. I consider myself an ideological feminist, but have always felt that my gender precluded me from fully understanding feminism the way women seem to understand it. I also feel that Wicca provides many options for

women to explore their identities, but fewer options for straight men, who are generally encouraged to be supportive of other sexual and gender identities but otherwise silent on the subject. What follows is a brief breakdown of the preliminary research I've conducted among two of my informants, one a homosexual male and the other a bisexual female. I will lend support to Harper-Bisso's observations through my own research.

### Interview Data

The following observations were generated from data collected on March 2, 2008, when I interviewed two individuals from the Green Meadows Wiccan group (Appendix D). Unlike my previous interviews, these sessions were not audio-recorded. This was a stipulation mandated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UCF due to the sensitive nature of the information I was collecting. The names of my participants are kept confidential, and they, like my other informants, will be referred to by pseudonyms that I've selected. The preliminary nature of this research means that I've developed more questions than conclusions at this stage. However, I've observed that the responses of my informants are quite similar to the descriptions made by Harper-Bisso, and I believe that this is productive topic for future study.

Artemis, an 18-year-old female, identifies herself as both Pagan and a lesbian with "bisexual tendencies." Early in our interview, she described a situation that had occurred while she worked on drive-through duty at Starbucks. She and a coworker were talking about church. Artemis said that she couldn't go into a church. The co-worker asked if this was because she was gay *and* pagan. At this point, a car had pulled up beside her window. The co-worker's comment was overheard by the driver, who responded with funny looks. For Artemis, being both homosexual and Neo-Pagan puts her in a position that is far removed from more "middlestream"

Americans with whom she interacts on a day to day basis. Artemis has only been practicing for about one year, but feels that belonging to the Neo-Pagan community has given her a new outlook on life. She sees her current religion as “open to so much.” She also feels that she has access to many sources of ideas and support from the larger community.

Shiva, an 18-year-old male, identifies himself as a Celtic Wiccan who is also gay. He explains that he was raised as a Christian and remembers having to read a children’s Bible when he was very young. As he grew older, he began to see Christianity as inherently contradictory, specifically the Bible itself, but found it difficult to point to specific examples during the interview. Shiva first experienced Wicca as a pop culture phenomenon with such television shows as “Sabrina the Teenage Witch,” and “Charmed,” and the movie “The Craft” (1996). He explains that he has been practicing his new faith for about four or five years. Shiva’s Wiccan identity meets his spiritual needs because his new religion is not rigid and dogmatic. He explains that “Wiccans are encouraged to make the religion their own.”

As a more recent convert to Neo-Paganism, Artemis feels that her childhood religion of Christianity did not suit her changing views about the social and spiritual aspects of life. Like Shiva, she categorizes her home religion as “Basic American Christianity,” and did not stress a particular denomination. Her mother had been very devout and was a major factor in Artemis’s early religious education. As Artemis became more curious about other faiths, she began to feel that Christian theology was “confining and limiting” and, like Shiva, explained that “you can only develop it so far.” The concept of sin was difficult for her to understand, and Artemis gave some hypothetical examples in which eternal punishment for mistakes or accidents struck her as excessive.

“Faith just fades,” said Artemis, referring to her experience with Christianity. She believes that many Christians remain practitioners because they fear being condemned to Hell. At one point in her life, Artemis became an agnostic. Then she explains that she and a friend happened upon some Wiccan books at a chain bookstore. Jencson writes that “a common feature in the life stories of American [Neo-Pagans] is that the concepts of the belief system are first contacted on the library shelf,” which seems to hold true for Artemis (Jencson 1989: 4). Artemis explains that many aspects of Neo-Paganism just “make better sense” to her. Instead of eternal damnation, she describes her new belief in Karma as a force that brings the universe into balance. With this new view, she is content that positive acts will be rewarded and negative acts will be punished according to their severity.

Both Artemis and Shiva identify themselves as homosexuals, and both informants held these identities before adopting their new religious views. Artemis explains that she was bi-curious since the age of 13, but only acted on her attraction to women in this last year. Shiva told me that he has identified himself as a gay male since the age of 13, but explained that he participated in homosexual activities beginning at an earlier age. At one point in Harper-Bisso’s dissertation, she discusses how one of her informants preferred to identify percentages by which she considered herself “gay” and “straight” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 226). The author seems interested in the idea, but stopped short of actually implementing it. When I asked my informants how they felt about the author’s idea of a continuum of gay to straight, they seemed to readily internalize this idea. Artemis would categorize herself at a [75-25] (75% gay-25% straight), reflecting the “bisexual tendencies” that she notices in herself. Shiva places himself at a [90-10] (90% gay-10% straight). Since the atmosphere of the interview was one of a friendly conversation, I identified myself as straight, but along the same lines I would place myself at a

[5-95] (5% gay-95% straight). This may be a useful guideline to follow for future research, since my subjects readily classified themselves in these terms.

Both informants explained to me that they were more open with new people and casual friends about their Neo-Pagan identities than their sexual identities. However, my face reddened a bit when Artemis explained to me that she wouldn't introduce herself to someone new by identifying her sexual identity, and that the topic of religion comes up more often in conversation. At this point, I realized my interview questions were quite formal and perhaps a bit too blunt. Artemis feels that she is a very feminine lesbian, and contrasts her own personality with the "butch" lesbian stereotype, which she feels is a more obvious indicator of sexual identity. We came back to the idea of stereotypes throughout the rest of the interview.

When meeting new people, Shiva's strategy is to "feel them out" and try to determine if they are conservative and what their feelings about gay males may be. When he first came to college, he made a list of everyone he had met locally and applied his cautious system to each of them, to determine if it was safe to come out to them. Shiva mentioned that he did this with his roommate in the campus dorms, who, it turned out, was supportive of his identity. Shiva said that he is "out" about his sexuality when it comes to his nuclear family, but feels it is best not to mention it to extended family, who, he explains, are "aligned heavily with the military" and conservative.

Both Shiva and Artemis expressed a belief that American society has many double standards when it comes to homosexuality. Artemis brought up the fact that some straight men consider lesbian sex a strong turn-on, which makes homosexual women less threatening to them than homosexual men. Shiva explained that homophobia is still present in this country, and that the sexual identity of "straight men" is challenged more by homosexual males than by lesbians.



While both subjects believe that the Neo-Pagan community is less shaped by these double standards, the prejudices are still evident.

For Shiva, every individual embodies masculine and feminine qualities. This is especially true of homosexuals, he said. Shiva categorizes homosexuals as “biological representations of the balance of feminine and masculine nature in every person.” For this reason, homosexual Neo-pagans can be thought of as more balanced, spiritually, than heterosexual practitioners, who embody one gender to the near exclusion of the other. Artemis believes, however, that some homosexuals exceed this middle point, and gives “butch lesbians” as an example of women who are very masculine in their temperament.

Harper-Bisso writes that “queer Neopagans [often] reported feeling somewhat disenfranchised by the focus on male/female polarity within many Neopagan traditions” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 248). When participants who feel a sexual attraction for a member of the same sex participate in the Great Rite, the impact of the metaphor may be more difficult to relate to (ibid.: 249). Neither Artemis nor Shiva felt that their sexual identities were represented during the Great Rite, but deal with this discrepancy in different ways. For Artemis, the ritual union of male and female energies is a vital practice that she would not change. Shiva explained that he would change the ritual, if able. If he were conducting the Great Rite, he would include his partner in the ritual. We could only speculate about how such an enactment of the Great Rite would be perceived by heterosexual practitioners. Shiva acknowledges that same-sex couples do not embody the same fertility as traditional couples, and that fertility is a central concern of the Great Rite. He concludes that the ritual is “still beautiful, no matter how you look at it.”

## Discussion

Susan Harper-Bisso eloquently summarizes the tendency of Neo-Pagans and Wiccans to be simultaneously accepting of non-traditional gender and sexual identities, while also putting them out of mind. “NeoPagans,” she writes, “tend to outwardly reject the polarity of genders, instead invoking a spectrum of gender. In practice, though, they often fall into polar thinking, seeing things in terms of masculine and feminine, male and female, active and passive” (Harper-Bisso 2005: 251). The gendering of ritual objects is an extreme example of this process. For some objects, such as the athame and chalice, Wiccans impart qualities that are essentialist and simplified. The athame is male because it is phallic, and because it projects energy. The chalice is female because it contains wine, as a womb holds new life. As I’ve explained in this chapter, human genders and sexual identities are a much more subtle and nuanced matter. American Wiccans cultivate a belief system set in stark relief to Christianity, which is often considered patriarchal and oppressive towards women. Deeply indebted to feminist principles, Wiccans emphasize the importance of both male and female divinities, with particular emphasis being placed on the female as “Great Mother.” Sexuality is a central concept, according to the Principles of Wiccan Belief, but that sexuality is also linked with a sacrilization of fertility (Daschke and Ashcroft, eds 2005: 102).

My informants helped me to raise some interesting issues surrounding Neo-Pagan concepts of gender and sexuality. It seems, according to Harper-Bisso, that status and acceptance in Neo-Paganism is based, to some extent on sexual identity (Harper-Bisso 2005: 228). Bisexual women often attain a higher status than other women, and their identities may be celebrated

through rituals, religious literature, and access to support networks. Bisexual and homosexual men, however, are less well represented in the same social and religious categories.

While I find this issue fascinating, I only became aware of it late in my research. More ambitious data collection may be attempted in the future, but I was only able to conduct two interviews to date. My informants were aware that status differences exist in their new religion. For them, the Neo-Pagan community is shaped by some of the same prejudices that are prevalent in American society. However, Neo-Paganism and Wicca offer unique access to a satisfying system of belief that celebrates diversity and innovation. Both Shiva and Artemis became Neo-Pagans in part because the ideologies are malleable. They may become innovators and create a new tradition. New rituals may be written and come into wide practice among Neo-Pagans who, like spiritual feminists, aspire to create a more satisfying world that meets their physical, social, and spiritual needs.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Numerous studies have been conducted on the subject of religious expression among human populations across the globe. Classic examples include Durkheim's 1912 treatise *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Wallace's 1956 conception of the social mechanism of the revitalization movement, and dozens of others. These groundbreaking works have established the anthropological approach to studying the universal phenomenon of religion among diverse groups. A few modern scholars have sought to describe a relatively new religious movement called Wicca, which is growing in popularity in its native England, as well as the United States and Australia. Founded by Gerald Gardner in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, and based on bits and pieces of ancient folklore, Wicca is a vital and ever-changing religion that is still in its infancy. Many documents, both religious and academic, have been written detailing the basic beliefs and ritual practices of Wiccans, but innovation is encouraged among practitioners. Wicca in the United States is a protean faith, regionally distinct due to the influences of feminism, environmentalism, and Native American spirituality, as well as individual innovators. At best only a general overview of Wiccan beliefs can be described, with the understanding that ethnographic observations of one group will vary markedly from another group, even within the same geographic region.

Wiccans generally worship a pair of divine forces, the Goddess and the God. These divinities are seen as complementary, mutually supporting each other as they contribute to the continuance of life on earth. This complementary relationship can be seen as a metaphor for the ideal situation that Wiccans try to uphold in daily life: the equal importance of both male and female. One sees the complementary relationship of male and female repeated throughout the

religion. Principle 4, of “The Principles of Wiccan Belief,” discusses the Wiccan tenet that “the Creative Power in the Universe [manifests] through polarity- as masculine and feminine” (Daschke and Ashcroft, eds 2005: 102). Wiccans worship fertility, in both humans and in nature, and they know that fertility is the result of the union of male and female. In rituals that mark the changing seasons, the Wiccan altar is populated with ritual objects, some of which embody either masculine or feminine qualities.

The gendered altar objects of particular prominence among both my interview and survey participants are the chalice and the athame. The majority of my informants considered the athame to be very masculine and the chalice to be very feminine. Among my interview participants, shape and ritual function often reinforce the genders assigned to these two objects. During the Great Rite, the High Priestess and the High Priest use the chalice and the athame to bless cakes and wine, which are shared equally among all who participate in the ritual. In this way, I argue, Wiccan rituals can be said to reflect, construct, and reinforce the Wiccan precept of a gender-balanced cosmos. The qualities of each object, as with each gender, are mutually supportive of the goal of the ritual: to impart “divine procreative energy” into the cakes and wine. While most Wiccan rituals draw from a common sequence and ideology, the potential for innovation is nearly endless, as evidenced by my observations from the field.

During the course of my ethnographic research, I was able to participate in rituals with three different Wiccan groups in the central Florida area and I conducted an extensive interview with the High Priest of a fourth group. While all these groups included individuals who consider themselves Wiccan, the approach to and enactment of rituals in each group was idiosyncratic. The Green Meadows Group constructed a Samhain altar based primarily on the rituals contained within *A Witches' Bible* (1984), written by the popular husband and wife team of Janet and

Stewart Farrar. A photograph of this altar is included in chapter 2 of this thesis (Figure 3). While Janus was instrumental in tailoring the ritual to the tastes of the Green Meadows Group, it was Juno who wrote the bulk of the ritual, and decided to conform closely to the format emphasized by the Farrars. The Green Meadows Sabbat was thus fairly traditional in its enactment, with many specific prayers read by both Janus and Juno during the ritual. Here, the Great Rite was performed with the High Priest and High Priestess kneeling at the center of a circle of standing participants, myself included.

A different theme ran through the Mabon celebration performed by Paraselsu's Wiccan Church. Not only was the Sabbat better attended, by approximately 50 individuals, but the staid manner of traditional reverence at Green Meadows gave way to musical interludes and a group of men exuberantly dancing with swords. Granted, the purpose of the celebration was different from that of the Green Meadows Group; Samhain is focused on death and lost loved ones while Mabon emphasizes the bounty of the second harvest (Adler 1981 [1979]: 108). Still, I was struck by the amount of planning that had obviously taken place before Paraselsu's ritual. In a conversation with Paraselsu following the Sabbat, he explained to me that it was not uncommon for his group to plan nearly a year in advance of major celebrations. These large productions often include elaborate costumes with electric lights, complex musical cues, and rehearsals that rival theater productions.

No matter how well planned an event may be, there are always elements that can go wrong. Paraselsu's Mabon Sabbat had been planned as an outdoor event but was moved inside due to inclement weather. The enactment of the Great Rite during this ritual involved the High Priest and High Priestess standing in the center of a circle of seated guests. The High Priest had misplaced or forgotten his athame, but improvised by blessing the wine with his fingers. The

ceremony progressed as normal, and guests gathered for a potluck meal afterward. Some joking occurred, due to the irregular substitution of fingers for a ritual knife, but the general notion was that the ritual had been a success. This event also illustrates the flexibility inherent in many Wiccan rituals.

The third Sabbat ceremony I attended was by far the most unique. The group to which Valeria and Mephistopheles belong created a ritual that incorporated themes and imagery from the Harry Potter book series by J. K. Rowling. Specifically, this ritual was based on the seventh and final book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007). This was to be a Samhain ritual, but it was conceived as a family-friendly ritual and included many elements of Halloween. Several hours before the ritual began, I arrived at the ritual location with Mephistopheles to help convert a two-story home into an approximation of “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” where the characters from the novel interact with their strange professors. On this night, the parts of the professors were played by multiple priestesses and priests, who would later lead the Sabbat ritual. Mephistopheles played Professor Severus Snape, potions master and expert on the “Dark Arts.” The “school” was open for children to explore, as if it were a haunted house. I spent most of my time behind the scenes, as it were, setting up decorations and tables for the main ritual.

The Samhain ritual itself was clearly based on Wiccan themes. A time when Wiccans reflect on death and loss, Samhain represents the final harvest and communion with deceased loved ones. During the ritual, one of the Priestesses related a story from Rowling’s seventh book. In this myth, three brothers receive gifts from a figure called “Death,” who is not unlike the grim reaper of popular culture. These gifts, though powerful, bring the first two brothers to ruin. The third and cleverest of the brothers receives a cloak that renders him invisible from all, including

the grim reaper. “Death” only finds the final brother when he is an old man and removes the cloak to give it to his son. The old man then follows “Death” to the land that lies beyond the world. I’ve never read Rowling’s books, but I was told by Mephistopheles that the ritual represented *Deathly Hallows* faithfully. The symbolism of accepting death and reuniting with loved ones is a central theme of the season for Wiccans. The fact that this group was able to completely rework the typical format of a Wiccan ceremony and still maintain a familiar message is something I hadn’t expected to document during my field research. This Sabbat, more so than others I’ve attended, supports the idea that Wiccans are innovators and that it is difficult to describe a “typical” Wiccan ritual.

American Wiccans of all ages, economic brackets and sexual identities gather together to celebrate the Sabbats. The issues of gender and sexuality are topics of open and often playful discussion following Sabbat rituals. From tongue-in-cheek jabs about the sexual imagery of rituals to stereotypical images that persist about women being indiscriminate in taking lovers, sex is a popular topic among Wiccans. While egalitarianism between the genders may be the stated ideal, this is often not achieved in practice. Depending on the group, females or males may be afforded a higher status based on rank or the level of secret knowledge they possess. Differential status may also be given to certain sexual identities, to the virtual exclusion of others.

The status of women in Wicca has much to do with the influence of feminism in the form of feminist spirituality. As part of the notion of female liberation from patriarchal bonds, Wiccan women assert their freedom in different ways. Some Wiccans consider bisexuality the norm, at least for females, and these females may be considered more spiritual than other Wiccans, according to Harper-Bisso’s research (Harper-Bisso 2005: 245). Some women come to Wicca from more “middlestream” faiths, seeking greater representation and less of what they see as



patriarchal or even misogynistic influences. Jencson warns, however, that this desire for change may cause women to overlook misogynistic trends within Wicca. Jencson gives several examples in which men who identify as Goddess-worshippers show great disrespect towards the women with whom they interact (Jencson 1998: 249). The expectation for women to be sexually free within Neo-Pagan religions may be just another box that women find themselves forced into. The role of women in Wicca is a contested matter.

Harper-Bisso does much to discuss the uneven representation for males and females, as well as hetero- versus homosexuals. If males are cast as an oppressive force in “middlestream” American Christianity by some Wiccan females, it is not surprising that some Wiccan males have also internalized this concept. Harper-Bisso discusses the fact that some men feel they are doing “penance for patriarchy,” even as they practice feminist-inspired Wicca (Harper-Bisso 2005: 239). The opportunities for men to find representation in Wicca may be limited, but for homosexual men, representation is even harder to come by.

During preliminary interviews, my informants discussed some of the issues of differential status based on sexual identity. As relates to the Great Rite, they felt as if they could freely participate in the ritual, but not, perhaps, in the manner in which they would choose. Emphasis is placed on fertility during this ritual, which has traditionally been based on the need for both male and female participation. The emphasis on fertility, however, may be masked by the sexual overtones of the Great Rite, which, in this light, appear heteronormative. Focus is firmly set on the phallic athame and the womb-like chalice, and this may seem prescriptive towards heterosexual sex, rather than the concept of fertility. These are issues that GLBT Wiccans must confront during rituals, and my informants each developed different coping strategies. Further research

may lead to the identification of distinct categories or methods of coping common to large numbers of GLBT Wiccans.

The concepts of gender *and* sexual identity within Wicca are topics that present an opportunity for more detailed study. My research examined the use of gendered ritual objects, and the meanings and ideologies Wiccans apply to these objects. This analysis lends support to the assertions of Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz, who argued that a group's ritual practices reflect the worldview of that group (Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Geertz 1993). Taken together, this information supports my original hypothesis that Wiccan rituals reflect the complementarity of gender roles within the Wiccan cosmos. However, the very act of using both masculine and feminine ritual objects may be alienating to Wiccans who identify as homosexual or bisexual. My interview participants from chapter 3 are aware of this issue, but more data is necessary before a conclusion can be reached. Gender in Wicca is complex and contested, and, like Wiccan rituals, interpreted differently by individuals. I have shown that Wiccan rituals reinforce Wiccan beliefs, but also that these beliefs are constantly in a state of change. The way in which Wicca is practiced at this time in central Florida is a snapshot in time and space. It is perhaps enough here to simply say that the Wiccan religion, in which I participate, is in a constant state of change, looking towards the future even as it clings to its past.

## APPENDIX A: THE PRINCIPLES OF WICCAN BELIEF

“The Principles of Wiccan Belief” (1974)

1. We practice rites to attune ourselves with the natural rhythm of life forces marked by the phases of the Moon and the seasonal quarters and cross-quarters.
2. We recognize that our intelligence gives us a unique responsibility toward our environment. We seek to live in harmony with Nature, in ecological balance offering fulfillment to life and consciousness within an evolutionary concept.
3. We acknowledge a depth of power far greater than is apparent to the average person. Because it is far greater than ordinary, it is sometimes called “supernatural,” but we see it as lying within that which is naturally potential to all.
4. We conceive of the Creative Power in the Universe as manifesting through polarity- as masculine and feminine- and that this same Creative Power lives in all people, and functions through the interaction of the masculine and feminine. We value neither above the other, knowing each to be supportive of the other. We value sexuality as pleasure, as the symbol and embodiment of Life, and as one of the sources of energies used in magickal practice and religious worship.
5. We recognize both outer worlds and inner, or psychological worlds- sometimes known as the Spiritual World, the Collective Unconscious, the Inner Planes, etc.- and we see in the interaction of these two dimensions the basis for paranormal phenomena and magickal exercises. We neglect neither dimension for the other, seeing both as necessary for our fulfillment.
6. We do not recognize any hierarchy, but do honor those who teach, respect those who share their knowledge and wisdom, and acknowledge those who have courageously given themselves in leadership.
7. We see religion, magick, and wisdom-in-living as being united in the way one views the world and lives within it- a world view and philosophy of life, which we identify as Witchcraft of the Wiccan Way.
8. Calling oneself “witch” does not make a Witch- but neither does heredity itself, or the collecting of titles, degrees, and initiations. A Witch seeks to control the forces within him/herself that make life possible in order to live wisely and well, without harm to others, and in harmony with Nature.
9. We acknowledge that it is the affirmation and fulfillment of life, in a continuation of evolution and development of consciousness, that gives meaning to the Universe we know, and to our personal role within it.

10. Our only animosity toward Christianity, or toward any other religion or philosophy-of-life, is to the extent that its institutions have claimed to be “the one true right and only way” and have sought to deny freedom to others and to suppress other ways of religious practices and belief.

11. As American Witches, we are not threatened by debates on the history of the Craft, the origins of various terms, the legitimacy of various aspects of different traditions. We are concerned with our present, and our future.

12. We do not accept the concept of “absolute evil,” nor do we worship any entity known as “Satan” or “the Devil” as defined by Christian Tradition. We do not seek power through the suffering of others, nor do we accept the concept that personal benefits can only be derived by denial to another.

13. We work within Nature for that which is contributory to our health and well-being.

(Daschke and Ashcroft, eds 2005: 102)

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

Date

Time

Location/event name

Sample questions:

- 1) Describe the ritual objects on your altar.
- 2) What is the meaning of each object?
- 3) Are certain objects strongly associated with a particular gender or elemental power?
- 4) Which object(s) is(are) the most important to the ritual?
- 5) Are objects owned by individuals or a group?
- 6) Where are the objects stored when not in use?
- 7) Are ritual objects treated differently during rituals than at other times?

\*Questions may be altered or expanded as the situation requires, as per the methodology section of this proposal

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**IRB APPROVAL DATE: 6/26/2007**

## APPENDIX C: SHORT SURVEY



Short Survey (for non-altar builders)

\*Sex \_\_\_\_\_ \*Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

\*Do you primarily consider yourself to be: (if you list more than one, please indicate which is most important, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agnostic            | <input type="checkbox"/> New Age                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Atheist             | <input type="checkbox"/> Odinist                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Buddhist            | <input type="checkbox"/> Pagan                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ceremonial magician | <input type="checkbox"/> Shaman                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Christian           | <input type="checkbox"/> Spiritual, but dislike labels |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Druid               | <input type="checkbox"/> Unitarian-Universalist        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Goddess worshipper  | <input type="checkbox"/> Witch (non-Wiccan)            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jewish              | <input type="checkbox"/> Witch (Wiccan)                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Magic worker        | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) _____  |

\*What is/are your tradition/s or orientation/s (e.g., Eclectic, Gardnerian, Dianic, Keltrian, etc.)? If more than one, please prioritize if possible:

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Approximate number of years you've practiced this religion/belief system \_\_\_\_\_

\*What religion(s)/religious denomination(s) were you raised in, if any?

---

For the following questions, please indicate which answer (or answers) most closely reflects your personal beliefs.

1) I worship:

- A single divine force that has no gender, or is unknowable
- Only a divine feminine force
- Only a divine masculine force
- A divine couple (Goddess and God)
- Multiple Gods and Goddesses
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

- \*2) What is the primary manner in which you work/worship?  
\_\_\_ In a group (or Coven)  
\_\_\_ With a magical/spiritual partner (including apprenticeships)  
\_\_\_ As a solitary practitioner

\* indicates questions taken directly from: Berger, Leach and Schaffer  
*Voices from the Pagan Census* (2003), Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

(If you described yourself as a **solitary practitioner**, please go directly to **question 6**, otherwise, please continue)

- 3) In my spiritual belief system, rituals are enacted by:  
\_\_\_ One priestess alone  
\_\_\_ One priest alone  
\_\_\_ Both a priestess and a priest  
\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

- 4) If the ranking high priestess could not attend an important ritual,  
\_\_\_ another female in the group could stand in for her.  
\_\_\_ the ritual would need to be cancelled/postponed.  
\_\_\_ Other situation (please explain):  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5) If the ranking high priest could not attend an important ritual,

\_\_\_ another male in the group could stand in for him.

\_\_\_ the ritual would need to be cancelled/postponed.

\_\_\_ Other situation (please explain):

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6) Please assign numbers to the following ritual objects based on the scale below. If a ritual object is unfamiliar to you, leave it blank.

(Very Feminine)	(Somewhat Feminine)	(Neutral)	(Somewhat Masculine)	(Very Masculine)
1	2	3	4	5

\_\_\_ Athame (ritual knife)

\_\_\_ Goddess Image (or statue)

\_\_\_ Bell

\_\_\_ Helmet

\_\_\_ Boline

\_\_\_ Incense

Other ritual object(s):

\_\_\_ Book of Shadows

\_\_\_ Libation Dish

\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Cakes

\_\_\_ Pentacle

\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Chalice

\_\_\_ Salt Bowl

\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Circlet

\_\_\_ Scourge

\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Cords

\_\_\_ Sword

\_\_\_ Garter

\_\_\_ Wand

\_\_\_ God Image (or statue)

\_\_\_ Water Bowl

7) Please complete the sentence below by adding a number from the scale in question #6

“I consider myself to be (#)\_\_\_\_\_.”

8) In my belief system, the layout of ritual objects on an altar:

\_\_\_ conforms to a specific arrangement that is part of a tradition.

\_\_\_ is largely a matter of personal preference; what I feel works well.

\_\_\_ Other (please explain):

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IRB APPROVAL DATE: 6/26/2007

## APPENDIX D: SEXUAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

## Interview Questions

What words best describe your religious affiliation?

How long have you practiced this particular religion/belief system?

Were you part of another religion or belief system previously?

If so, how did you come to your current beliefs?

What made you change your beliefs?

In what ways does your current belief system meet your spiritual and social needs?

Did your previous belief system fail to meet these needs in some way?

What words best describe your sexual identity?

How long have you held this identity?

Who in your life knows about your sexual identity?

Have you purposely concealed your sexual identity from anyone with whom you interact?

In what ways does your sexuality influence your religious beliefs (or vice versa)?

Do you often worship alone, with a spiritual partner, or with a group?

If you worship with a partner or group, do you believe that your sexuality has an effect on individual rituals or spells you enact?

About how often do you participate in group rituals?

In general, do you find group rituals fulfilling?

Do you feel your own sexuality/sexual identity represented in the language and rituals of your religious practice?

How important is this to you?

How do you picture Divinity (or the Gods)?

Do you believe that most people in your religion think the same way?

What makes you think this?

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## APPENDIX E: THE CHARGE OF THE GODDESS



## “The Charge of the Goddess”

The High Priest says:

“Listen to the words of the Great Mother; she who of old was called among men Artemis, Astarte, Athene, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Dana, Arianrhod, Isis, Bride, and by many other names.”

The High Priestess says:

“Whenever ye have need of any thing, once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, then shall ye assemble in some secret place and adore the spirit of me, who am Queen of the witches. There shall ye assemble, ye who are fain to learn all sorcery, yet have not won its deepest secrets; to these will I teach things that are yet unknown. And ye shall be free from slavery; and as a sign that ye be really free, ye shall be naked in your rites; and ye shall dance, sing, feast, make music and love, all in my praise. For mine is the ecstasy of the spirit, and mine also is the joy of the earth; for my law is love unto all beings. Keep pure your highest ideal; strive ever towards it; let naught stop you or turn you aside. For mine is the secret door which opens upon the Land of Youth, and mine is the cup of life, and the Cauldron of Cerridwen, which is the Holy Grail of immortality. I am the gracious Goddess, who gives the gift of joy unto the heart of man. Upon earth, I give the knowledge of the spirit eternal; and beyond death, I give peace, and freedom, and reunion with those who have gone before. Nor do I demand sacrifice; for behold, I am the mother of all living, and my love is poured out upon the earth.”

(Farrar and Farrar 1984: 42-43).

## APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVAL FORMS



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Notice of Exempt Review Status

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board**  
**FWA00000351, Exp. 5/07/10, IRB00001138**

To: **Jesse Sloan**

Date: **June 28, 2007**

IRB Number: **SBE-07-05062**

Study Title: **The Gendered Wiccan Altar: A Study of the Wiccan Conception of Gender and Ritual Objects.**

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol was reviewed by the IRB Chair, Vice-chair or designated reviewer on June 26, 2007. Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.101, your study has been determined to be **minimal risk for human subjects and exempt** from further IRB review or renewal unless you later wish to add the use of identifiers or change the protocol procedures in a way that might increase risk to participants. Before making any changes to your study, call the IRB office to discuss the changes. **A change which incorporates the use of identifiers may mean the study is no longer exempt, thus requiring the submission of a new application to change the classification to expedited if the risk is still minimal.** Please submit the Termination/Final Report form when the study has been completed. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <https://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

The category for which exempt status has been determined for this protocol is as follows:

2. Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures, or the observation of public behavior, so long as confidentiality is maintained.
  - (i) Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that the subject cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subject, **and/or**
  - (ii) Subject's responses, if known outside the research would not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subject's financial standing or employability or reputation.

A **waiver of documentation of consent** has been approved for all subjects. All data must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Participants do not have to sign a consent form, but the IRB requires that you give participants a copy of the IRB-approved consent form, letter, information sheet, or statement of voluntary consent at the top of the survey. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Janice Turchin on 06/28/2007 12:01:31 PM EDT

IRB Coordinator



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

## Notice of Expedited Review and Approval of Requested Addendum/Modification Changes

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board**  
FWA00000351, Exp. 5/07/10, IRB00001138

To: **Jesse Sloan**

Date: **February 26, 2008**

IRB Number: **SBE-07-05062**

Study Title: **The Gendered Wiccan Altar: A Study of the Wiccan Conception of Gender and Ritual Objects.**

Dear Researcher:

Your requested addendum/modification changes to your study noted above which were submitted to the IRB on 02/21/2008 02:30:00 PM EST were approved by **expedited** review on 2/26/2008.

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.110, the expeditable modifications were determined to be minor changes in previously approved research during the period for which approval was authorized.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Subjects or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

This addendum approval does NOT extend the IRB approval period or replace the Continuing Review form for renewal of the study.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 02/26/2008 10:31:58 AM EST

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Joanne Muratori'.

IRB Coordinator

Internal IRB Submission Reference Number: 002211

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