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Wicca

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There are many disputed histories of Wicca (also called ‘Neopagan Witchcraft’ or ‘The Craft’). Narratives range from mythical claims of great antiquity promoted by the belief system itself, to scholarly endeavors to sort through evidence of a much more recent invention dating no further back than the late nineteenth century, synthesized into recognizable form in the early twentieth. Significantly, many of the scholars involved in this historical interpretation are themselves members of The Craft, a situation which has complicated issues of authenticity from the beginning of recorded references in the 1890s to what would become Wicca. This chapter attempts a synthesis of varying Wiccan practitioner, scholar, and scholar-practitioner sources on the origins of Wicca then proceeds through a description of much less obscure developments dating to the latter twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Wicca is a set of magical ‘witchcraft’ rituals and beliefs that practitioners characterize as being more than a mere occult practice – they see it and experience it as a genuine religious faith. This assertion can be tested through one of the most widely accepted social science definitions of religion, that of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who basically states that a religion is a system of ritual practices, justified by myth, which create powerful emotions (moods) and motivations, which inform and direct the behaviours and lifestyles of the religion’s members. Wicca clearly meets these criteria in its retelling of global myths which reinterpret many gods, goddesses and lesser spirits as manifestations of Wicca’s polytheistic Great Goddess, her Horned God consort, and hosts of lesser spiritual beings. It also fulfills Geertz’ definition through Wicca’s heavy emphasis on ritual practice as a means to evoke these deities and achieve practical (magical) results, as well as Wiccans’ utilization of ritualized beliefs to justify and encourage specific (yet widely varied) sexual, gender, class, social, environmental and political behaviours in the everyday lives of participants.

Certain other theories of religion might reject Wicca from full qualification as a religion, most notably that of sociologist Emile Durkheim, whose definition requires the existence of a formal church and its congregation. But by his criteria, most of the small, tribal religions studied by anthropologists would fail the test. Anthropologist A. F. C. Wallace clarifies the theoretical issue by stating that there are four ways to organize a religion; they may be individualistic, shamanic (with part-time specialists serving individuals), communal (with shared rites among equals), or ecclesiastical
(having fairly passive congregations led by professional religious specialists), thus demonstrating the limitations of Durkheim’s definition of religion which would only fully recognize the latter as religious. As will be shown, the wide variety of Wiccan encompasses all four organizational styles, while still touching upon the same overlapping core of beliefs, myths, and ritual practices.

It should be stated explicitly that the Wiccan variety of witchcraft is not Satan worship; the Wiccan faith does not believe in the Christian worldview which posits a cosmic war between good and evil, personified by God and Satan. The primary deity of most polytheistic Wiccans is a nurturing Goddess, not a destructive male demon. Yet the vernacular meaning of the term witchcraft in the English language (as well as the technical anthropological definition) is evil magic intended to harm. Fear of those who do not understand, and even greater fear of those who project Christian fears of Satan-worship onto Wiccans is a major issue in the Wiccan mythical past. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Wiccans continue to identify with the victims of mediaeval and early modern witch hunts, which Wiccans describe as ‘the Burning Times’. Persecution, and fear of persecution both contribute to the difficulty of tracing modern Wicca’s late nineteenth and early twentieth century history due to the secrecy imposed upon those who were shaping Wicca into its modern form. Although England’s harshest anti-sorcery laws had been repealed by 1735, a much weaker law against fraudulent mediums still had a dampening influence on open practice of the magical arts until its repeal in the 1950s. Repression still influences Wicca in the twenty-first century, as Wicca continues to be perceived all too often as unworthy of the constitutional rights granted ‘real’ religions.

Wicca is an immanent religion, one where direct contact and interaction with the spirit world is believed possible and desirable (as opposed to worship of a distant deity in a distant heaven). It is also a set of magical practices which the faith promotes as having practical results, such as help in making one confident, healing the sick, or influencing the outcome of an endeavor such as a job search or political campaign. Wicca is one of the Pagan religions (or Neopagan, a distinction emphasizing that it is modern, cosmopolitan, a living religion, as opposed to an ancient, rural, out-dated superstition of the past. Neopagan religions include revivals of ancient Greek, Norse, and Roman religions, as well as modern reinterpretations of tribal religions, borrowing from Africa, the Pacific, and Native America. They may also be composites of many religions, such as Huna, which combines deities of ancient Egypt with those of native Hawaii. Nearly all Neopagan faiths share an emphasis on the sanctity of the earth and nature, the interconnectedness of all forms of life, the place of humanity within this web of sacred interconnection. As such, Neopaganism may be defined as animistic – finding sacredness and power in all of creation, which can be tapped by human practitioners through ritual. Most are polytheistic, focusing ritual behaviour toward many deities and spirits. Congregations tend to be small, although larger festival gatherings may unite hundreds, or even thousands. All of this applies well to Wicca, which is considered to be the largest faith within the Neopagan fold. In his 2011 compilation of Neopagan faiths, Graham Harvey states that Wicca is the public’s most common conception of a Neopagan religion, and ethnographer Loretta Orion prominently describes Wicca as ‘the core of a collection of other pagan traditions’ on the back cover of a popular scholarly text on Wicca. There are many
divergent denominations or traditions of Wicca, with a variety of regional, cultural or socio-political bases.

Due to misunderstanding and fear of persecution, Neopagan religions also tend to operate in secrecy, therefore numbers of Neopagans are extremely hard to estimate.\textsuperscript{14} Wiccan and National Public Radio reporter/broadcaster Margot Adler estimates that there may be 400,000 Neopagans (but how many of these are Wiccan?) in the United States; she also cites research by the American Religious Identification Survey that estimates 750,000 Neopagans in the United States.\textsuperscript{15} Accurate global estimates of Wiccans are too impossible to be worth citing any attempts.

Wiccan beliefs centre around the Great Goddess and her male consort, the Horned God. The most basic Wiccan ceremony most regularly involves congregants gathering to worship in a sacred circle – often indoors, but ideally outside. Practicing groups (called ‘circles’, or ‘covens’) often fall short of, and occasionally exceed, the ideal number of 13. Sacred space around participants is created by the casting of a ritual circle of energy – usually by pointing a consecrated knife or wand while reciting appropriate invocations. Participants stand and dance within this circle. At its centre is a makeshift altar, on which is placed consecrated wine, ‘god cakes’, water and salt for purification, one or more candles, and other ritual paraphernalia. Spirits of the four cardinal directions are usually invoked by a member of the group facing each direction, and candles lit at the cardinal points; sometimes six directions are called upon, as sky and earth spirits may be invoked as well. Next the God and Goddess are invoked. This may be done in the form of ‘drawing down the moon’, a possession ritual in which the Goddess (and God) are summoned to enter and share the bodies of the High Priestess (and High Priest) or another pair of chosen celebrants. Ritual cakes and wine are passed around the circle for participants to consume in communion.\textsuperscript{16}

Magic is then performed in a variety of ritualized ways, for example, in my own participant/observation research, objects symbolic of personality traits that worshippers wanted to outgrow were tossed into a fire. On another occasion a globe was passed from hand to hand to symbolically heal and protect the Earth. In one ‘scrying’ ritual – an effort to learn the otherwise unknown – we passed around a bag of Nordic rune stones, drawing one out and interpreting what it meant for each participant’s near future. On yet another occasion two young children of coven members, dressed as Greek Goddesses, were initiated into the faith, blessed by affectionate laying on of hands, and allowed to participate in their first communal sharing of the wine and cakes. Such ritual actions of magic are accompanied by dancing around the circle, chanting, and musical accompaniment – usually with a variety of percussion instruments. Rhythmic repetition of the names of deities (for example: ‘Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inana’), or even the names of participants (for example: ‘Ronald is alive, magic is afoot! Mary is alive, magic is afoot!’) are common chant formats. Dancing and chanting is repetitive and can be highly energetic, often resulting in emotional states of ecstasy, and varying degrees of trance. Lengthy prayers and invocations may be recited, sometimes read from handwritten ‘grimoires’ (personal spell books), other times taken directly from published books, including texts on the history of religions, anthropology, folklore, classical studies, and archaeology, as well as those penned by witches for witches.\textsuperscript{17} The magical energy produced by these ritual acts is believed to be released into the world when the ritual circle is ritually
broken. The groups studied by the author exited the ritual space after expression of solidarity through a friendly ‘Pagan hug’ before moving on to the less formal part of the festivities – a shared feast.

The mythic version of Wiccan history, which informs belief and ritual practice, states that Wicca dates back all the way to the dawn of religious sensibilities in humankind – to the Paleolithic. At this time, the myth states, a Mother Goddess, and her son/consort (a seasonal hunting deity, the Horned God) were universally worshipped by our human ancestors. Ancient images of pregnant women, such as the Venus of Willendorf, and ancient cave paintings of horned shamans in deer skins are cited as evidence. It is further stated that all gods and goddesses of all religions are re-imaginings over time of these two original deities; evidence for this is perceived in the maternal nature of many goddesses, and the high frequency of horns and other animal traits appearing in images of ancient gods, such as Pan, Krishna, Woden. Horns interpreted as expressive of the Horned God even appear in mediaeval images of Moses, as well as the animals that are depicted as surrounding the newborn Christ child. The evolution of monotheism is viewed as problematic in Wiccan dogma, as the monotheistic, patriarchal religions, particularly European Christianity, are remembered as hostile to the ancient worship of the Goddess and Horned God. The late mediaeval era of witch burnings are interpreted as direct assaults upon the historic traditions and practitioners of Wicca. Thus, fear of a return to ‘The Burning Times’ figures prominently in Wiccans’ uneasy relationships with the dominant religions of today. Orion emphasizes this when she states, ‘the Neopagans feel that the threat of another burning times is ever present’. The Wiccan origin myth states that the faith was then driven underground, being shared and perpetuated by word of mouth and by secret, hand-copied ‘books of shadows’, largely within the traditions of secret witch families. Around the turn of the twentieth century, through the research and writings of several anthropologists, folklorists, and practicing magician-scholar-witches (who interviewed and trained in The Craft with traditional family practitioners) the practice of Wicca was brought to public awareness. Thus began the open proselytization through mass media, and initiation of new converts to the practice that we see today.

Genuine historical evidence for the origins of the core beliefs and practices of Wicca point to the religion’s coalescence far more recently than the Stone Age, antiquity, or even the mediaeval period. It is a fascinating narrative of literate scholars, well-read and articulate magician-scholar-witches with credentials in both the world of academia and witchcraft circles who used their unique positions to weave together disparate sources and form the first truly Wiccan covens – no earlier than the early to mid-twentieth century. So essential to the process are reading material and scholar-practitioners that Marcello Truzzi has coined the terms ‘audience cult’ for those who learn a religious system through reading rather than face-to-face social contact and ‘anthropologist-witch’. This latter term describes insider-practitioner-scholars who are able to articulate a religious system to the outside world, while adding their own synthesis of written and experiential sources to the body of lore available to insiders within that religion. The published texts most responsible for the rise of Wicca in the early twentieth century rise were composed by Margaret Murray and C. G. Leland. Ironically, the two researchers never acknowledged one another’s works, which disagreed drastically on
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even the most basic principles. Murray had written two texts, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches* in which she speculated that mediaeval witchcraft beliefs were based on much more ancient folk belief in a horned, shamanic nature god, a lord of the animals dating all the way back to the Old Stone Age.\(^24\) Leland, on the other hand, believed that mediaeval witchcraft had its origins in the worship of a goddess, Aradia, conceived of as the daughter of the Roman deities Diana and her brother/lover Apollo, also called Lucifer, ‘bringer of light’.\(^25\) Both authors stated that the ancient beliefs they studied had powerful survivals in modern European folk practices, but neither author in any way validated or acknowledged the primary deity or the theories of the other.

Murray’s hypothesis was that myriad European folk beliefs and magical practices were survivals of an ancient, organized, continent-wide religion whose deity was the Horned God. She further believed this pre-classical god was a survival of an even more ancient nature deity from the Paleolithic. Her evidence includes the many and various images of horned shamans and sacred beings which she traces from Ice Age cave paintings through mediaeval and Renaissance images of devils.\(^26\) Serious scholars today discount her excessive synthesis of unrelated imagery as symptomatic of folkloristic’s early, unscientific obsession with finding ‘ur-forms’, the supposed single-source origin, and ‘pure’ original version once believed to lie behind every later custom, narrative, or folk belief. Later studies of Murray’s methods and evidence can best be summed up by Eliade, who summarizes ‘the countless and appalling errors that discredit Murray’s reconstruction’.\(^27\) Even most modern, well-read Wiccans – however appealing the story might be – would agree that Murray’s theories far overstate the antiquity of their god.\(^28\)

The Horned God is not the primary deity of the modern Wiccan faith, it is the Great Goddess. She is first described and associated with surviving magical folk-practices by the highly respected nineteenth century folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland. Unlike Murray whose research took place in libraries, Leland had done some actual fieldwork among the strege (folk witches) of Tuscany, as well as in England and Europe. But despite his criticism of prior scholars who ‘all made books entirely out of books’,\(^29\) Leland himself relied heavily on the assistance of anonymous others to do much of his collecting – in the form of written documents allegedly penned by authentic folk witches. Such is the case for the primary material on which he based his contribution to the eventual synthesis of Wicca. It was titled *Aradia: Or the Gospel of the Witches*. The gospel which forms the basis of the book was allegedly collected for Leland by an assistant named only as Maddalena, presumably a practicing folk-witch with many elder contacts among the Tuscan strege, from whom she gathered hand-written stories, spell-books, and the ‘witches gospel’. Leland states that Maddalena was not available for questioning about the document, it having apparently arrived by mail in 1897.\(^30\) Thus, even in the unlikely case that *Aradia’s* source material came from a genuine folk-witch author, Leland’s interpretation of it, which comprises much of *Aradia’s* content, are clearly his own, not those of any actual Tuscan strege individual, let alone any kind of traditional community.

In *Aradia*, Tuscan witchcraft of the late nineteenth century is described as the wreckage of classical Roman (and earlier Etruscan) religion, degraded through time by inaccurate transmission from generation to generation, and by the imposition of feudalism on an oppressed, yet rebellious peasantry. Murray’s organized,
pan-European religion of the Horned God is nowhere to be found. The primary deity is instead Aradia, a witch-goddess descended from classical Diana (no longer a virgin as she was in antiquity) and her brother Apollo (Lucifer – the Bringer of Light, no longer exclusively a god of the sun, and now his sister’s lover). Aradia, the witch-goddess, is sent to earth by Diana to instruct and befriend the rebellious peasantry who ‘dwelt in the mountains and forests as robbers and assassins, all to avoid slavery’. Absent are the benign aspects of a nurturing mother goddess so central to most Wiccan practice today, and fully absent is the term ‘Wicca’.

Despite obvious remoteness from modern Wicca, *Aradia* is the earliest known written source for important liturgical prose-poetry still common in Wiccan practice at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For example, the first several stanzas of a liturgy that evolved into the highly honored ‘Charge of the Goddess’, are found in *Aradia*, although Leland did not use that title for it. Clearly, Leland’s *Aradia* is a significant source-book for Wicca. Yet, significantly, rarely do twentieth century Wiccans focus any ritual or narrative mythic attention on the witch-goddess Aradia, although, as we shall see, Diana has become important to lesbian branches of The Craft, who in fact refer to themselves as Dianic.

It would take Gerald Gardner, and the witchcraft circles around him in the mid twentieth century to unite Murray’s god and Leland’s goddess into a single religion. Gardner was also apparently the first author to connect the term ‘Wicca’ to a particular style of ritual, claiming that the term derives from the Old Anglo-Saxon word for witch. It would have been pronounced ‘witch-a’ in Old English, but it is pronounced ‘wikk-a’ today. Gardner had been an insignificant overseas bureaucrat in the British Empire, having served in the Far East, prior to his return to Britain where he eventually became curator of the Museum of Witchcraft, Isle of Man. Over the course of his lifetime he traveled extensively in the Far and Middle East, and participated in the 1936 archaeological excavations at the city of Lachish. He wrote a respected book on Malaysian weaponry, and was an active member of various learnt societies, including The Royal Asiatic Society and the Folklore Society, where he presented papers in the company of such respected scholars as anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. In an era when amateur/professional statuses were not so clearly delineated as they are today, he self-identified as both witch and anthropologist, although it has come to light that he entered scholarly society through deceptive claims to have university degrees which were entirely fictitious.

In his writings, Gardner claimed to have discovered families and covens of witches, practicing a traditional form of magic, and participating in a faith of great antiquity, into which he was initiated. Yet even most of his spiritual descendants today doubt the veracity of these claims. It seems far more probable that he instead synthesized Wicca from his historically verifiable initiation into secret societies practicing a particular form of Occultism – Ceremonial Magic (traditions based on Masonic and other rites with strongly Christian, mediaeval origins). Gardner most likely combined his training in Ceremonial magic, his experiences with anthropologists and archaeologists, with the highly speculative theories of Murray and Leland. For example, Gardner claimed to have learnt the words and accompanying ritual gestures of ‘The Charge of the Goddess’ not from reading Leland (nor from direct contact with Tuscan folk witches), but from traditional family witches in England. This is an obvious untruth; even if the liturgy had existed from ancient times and been translated into different languages in antiquity from an original source, the early translators would not have made the same
word choices – no two independent, historically remote translations of a poem from Italian (or any other language) into English are going to come out with such similar phrasing as ‘Whenever ye have need of anything, Once in the month, and when the moon is full, Ye shall assemble . . .’ and ‘Whenever you have need of anything, once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, you shall assemble . . .’.

Neopagan historian, and Ceremonial Magician, founder of the New Reformed Order of the Golden Dawn, Aidan Kelly believes that Gardner created ‘The Charge’ out of the more rudimentary material in Leland. Isaac Bonewits, Neopagan historian and former Archdruid of the Redformed Druids of North America, believes that the process was one step removed. He thinks that literate folk-witches who had learnt something of witchcraft from their ancestors (people he blithely labels ‘Fam-Trads’), read Leland and incorporated the material from Aradia into their eclectic practices, and later taught it to Gardner. In his version, Gardner may or may not have realized its literary origins. Bonewits is quoted in Adler as seeing the entire process of Wicca’s emergence in the early twentieth century as dependant on academia and the publishing industry, stating,

Somewhere between 1920 and 1925 in England a group of social scientists (probably folklorists) got together with some Golden Dawn Rosicrucians and a few Fam-Trads to produce the first modern covens in England; grabbing eclectically from any source they could find in order to try and reconstruct the shards of their Pagan past.

I believe Bonewits goes too far in implying that the attempt was organized, and operated within a limited five year period, yet the fact that several folklorists and anthropologists were hot on the heels of folk practices and beliefs relating to witchcraft around the opening decades of the twentieth century, while reading in interpretations based on classical and archaeological sources, cannot be denied. Nor is it that unusual for scholar-practitioners to embellish the teachings of their folk informants or entirely make them up. Leland’s Maddalena is a case in point; her existence is unverifiable, as is that of her alleged source for the witch’s gospel. In another blatant example, Carlos Castaneda, the less-than-fully credentialed anthropologist whose best selling book, The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge, contributed significantly to the spread of mysticism and the hippie counterculture, in which the author alleged to have learnt Native American Yaqui magic from a mysterious folk practitioner, don Juan. It was later proven beyond doubt that Castaneda made it up; there was no don Juan.

Bonewits’ own magical pedigree is an example of the scholars-as-the-actual-folk-source feedback loop. In his Druidic writings, Bonewits makes the exotic claim that he and other founding Reformed Druids of North America learnt much of their ancient practices from a mysterious spiritual teacher named John the Messenger. However, it is common knowledge in Neopagan circles that modern American Druid practice emerged from a Carleton College (Minnesota) student club focused on the re-creation of ancient ritual pageantry – one that eventually lead members to begin believing in the spirits and magical forces at the heart of their ritual pageants, and led to the eventual founding of a Reformed Druid religion with thousands of adherents. After I published a study on the scholar-practitioner origins of Neopaganism in Britain’s Anthropology Today, I received a letter from anthropologist John
Messenger (at that time teaching at Ohio State University), in which he explained that he had been one of the Carleton College club’s advisors, had indeed taught the students what he knew of anthropological sources on ancient Druidism, and that he was fairly certain that he, in fact, was the person who had been inflated into the prophet John the Messenger in North American Druidic tradition.\footnote{47}

Gerald Gardner claimed that an important source for his own training in The Craft of Wicca, beginning around 1940, was an elderly witch named Old Dorothy.\footnote{48} Unlike Leland’s elusive Maddalena, or the utterly fictitious Don Juan, Dorothy’s existence has (debatably) been confirmed; it is claimed that she was Dorothy Clutterbuck-Fordham, and has been proven to have lived in New Forest, as Gardner claimed.\footnote{49} However, as in the case of the Reformed Druids’ John (the) Messenger, her role may not have been exactly as reported by her famous disciple. She is elsewhere described as a respectable churchgoer, and her own surviving diaries, while they contain poetry about the glories of nature, make no mention at all of Craft participation.\footnote{50}

That Gardner was initiated into several circles of Ceremonial Magic (also called Western Mysticism) is beyond dispute. His writings constantly reference the Masonic, Cabbalistic and alchemical traditions which form the core of Ceremonial Magic.\footnote{51} Around World War Two, Gardner circulated in London occult circles centred on the Atlantis Bookstore. Those who haunted its aisles were primarily members of a variety of Ceremonial Orders, including the Ordo Templis Orientalis (OTO), the Order of the Silver Star, and other offshoots of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. It was there that he met a number of Ceremonial Magicians, several of whom would eventually report being initiated into Gardner’s brand of witchcraft only later, through Gardner himself.\footnote{52}

Sources concur that Gardner himself was initiated into the OTO, and Gardner was an acquaintance (if not friend) of the notorious Ceremonial Magician cum Satanist, Aleister Crowley, whom he had met by 1947, perhaps earlier.\footnote{53} Although Gardner is cited as saying that Crowley was ‘a bit of a joke’,\footnote{54} some sources state that Gardner paid Crowley to write much of the liturgy that was to become the core of Wiccan practice.\footnote{55} Others claim that although Gardner may have gotten some Golden Dawn, Rosicrucian and other Ceremonial Magic secrets from Crowley, Crowley could not have contributed the most important aspects of Wicca, particularly the shift to significant roles for High Priestesses, and the focus on the Goddess as primary deity. The man was simply too misogynist.\footnote{56}

Another contributor to Gardner’s Wicca, whose importance seems to grow as more evidence comes to light, was Doreen Valiente. As a British housewife with a Spanish husband, she experienced considerable prejudice and rejection, leading her to seek companionship in unconventional circles. She was initiated into Gardner’s coven in 1953, after many years’ experience in Ceremonial Magic.\footnote{57} She became a prominent High Priestess, author of books on witchcraft, and founder and co-founder of many covens of her own, in both Britain and the United States. Valiente told Adler that when she joined, the rituals were disjointed – clearly being spliced together from many sources. Valiente believes, ‘They were heavily influenced by Crowley and the O.T.O., but underneath there was a lot which wasn’t Crowley at all, and wasn’t the Golden Dawn or ceremonial magic either’.\footnote{58} Valiente concurs with Bonewits’ conclusion that folklorists got together with traditional family witches in the 1920s

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to synthesize practices and beliefs which Gardner then encountered at the end of
the 1930s. Many however believe that it was Valiente who pushed Wicca even further
toward its Goddess emphasis, its ‘harm none’ ethics, and roles for powerful priest-
esses. As she told Adler near the end of her life, ‘Yes, I am responsible for quite a lot
of the wording of the present-day rituals; but not the framework of those rituals or the ideas
upon which they are based’.59

Whereas Crowley’s prime commandment was the amoral, ‘Do what thou wilt shall
be the whole of the law’, Gardner’s covens chose the far more ethical ‘An ye harm
none, do what ye will’, to be the Wiccan Creed (also called Wiccan Rede), a tenet
which continues to be cherished in most Wiccan circles.60 Yet Gardner did like Crowley,
emphasize sexuality as a powerful source of magic in his teachings. The ‘Great
Rite’ aims to generate powerful emotions, hence powerful magic, through ritual sex
between a coven’s High Priest and Priestess. Gardner, many of his early followers who
founded covens of their own, and a few Gardnerian Wiccan covens today still practice
it. Most Wiccans practice it only symbolically (just as one might say that Christians
practice symbolic ritual cannibalism by eating the Host in their most sacred rite of
communion). In a dozen years of participant observation in the 1980s and 1990s,
I had only witnessed the symbolic form – in which one of the sacred couple holds
a chalice, into which the other plunges a phallic dagger.61 Gardner was a ‘naturist’
(‘nudist’ to Americans) and he emphasised that the proper way to do magic was
‘sky-clad’, or naked.62 Gradually most Wiccans came to do ritual dressed in colourful
robes as a symbol of freedom, some covens are ‘clothing-optional’, and only a minor-
ity require nudity, often only for rare occasions, despite the continued popularity of
‘The Charge of the Goddess’, which strongly recommends bare witches.63

In 1963, a Gardnerian coven initiated Alex Sanders and his wife, Maxine. Together
they would bring Wicca to America, although in modified form, dubbed the Alexand-
rian Tradition for its founders, who were darlings of the mass media in the 1970s.
Among their innovations was the now common ritual invocation of the spirits of the
four directions, as well as other classical and alchemical symbolism. Like Gardnerian
covens, Alexandrians tend toward hierarchical structuring, with significant power
over coven members granted to a high priestess and priest.64 The couple’s initiates
rapidly splintered off, forming dozens of covens of their own. As is the norm in Wic-
can circles, the splintering of covens led to splintering into new traditions. Driven
by the spiritual explorations of the Sixties counterculture as impetus, formal covens,
less formal circles, and new traditions erupted exponentially. It was the Alexandrian
Tradition that popularized Wicca in continental Europe, beginning in the Nether-
lands, Belgium, and Luxemburg. Perhaps the largest of these groups, Greencraft
(an environmentally conscious version of The Craft) spread westward again into
North America.65

Following upon the 1960s interest in alternative spirituality, Wicca was given
a great boost in the 1970s, especially in the United States, by the women’s move-
ment. Its Goddess-centred practices were of natural interest to many feminists.
Many of America’s best-known Wiccan authors, are advocates of strong feminist
traditions within The Craft; these in turn are linked with and draw inspiration
from a variety of non-Wiccan, Neopagan ‘Women’s Mysteries’ circles. Emphasis on
study of goddess mythologies is encouraged, and a belief in ancient matriarchies –
cultures run by nurturing, elder female leadership – is promoted in these traditions.
Feminist traditions also emphasize use of magic to promote gender equality through women’s empowerment, always with the clarification that a Crowleyian dominance over others is not the goal; women’s empowerment is about self-mastery (not master/slave relations with others), and the development of agency to do one’s will within the bounds of the Wiccan Creed’s ‘an ye harm none’. However, Luhrmann’s participant-observation (ethnographic) studies of Wiccan and other magical groups on both sides of the Atlantic demonstrate that the feminist interpretation of The Goddess is not a forgone conclusion; British covens are much more traditional, hence patriarchal – men still apparently dominate leadership and decision-making there. My own participant-observation study in the western United States demonstrates that worship of a Goddess does not necessarily lead directly to empowerment for women. The research shows that symbols are created, interpreted, and utilized by human beings with widely diverging motives. With its strong emphasis on sexuality, Wicca can be demonstrated to be quite a convenient tool for lustful males wishing to dehumanize women into objects for male sexual gratification – through deceptive utilization of Wiccan imagery, as in ‘hey, baby, wanna get worshiped?’

This should in no way detract from the contributions which feminist traditions of Wicca have made for the empowerment of women and non-traditional men. As Harvey states, ‘feminism has affected all Pagan traditions in one way or another’. Explicit Wiccan feminism began with the founding of a lesbian tradition of Wicca – Dianic. Although not all Dianic sub-traditions of covens are lesbian, all are united by emphasis on the Goddess, to the exclusion of the God (and often of men). Sexual components of ritual will either be left out or enacted between women. Zsuzsanna Budapest (who goes by the first-name initial, Z.) was a refugee of the Hungarian Uprising and its horrific repression, who settled in the United States. She co-founded the first Dianic coven in 1971. They called it the Susan B. Anthony Coven. Its intent from the beginning was to unite spirituality with political activism for women’s empowerment, human rights, and, eventually the environment.

One of Budapest’s hundreds of initiates is Miriam Simos, who goes by the ‘Craft name’ of Starhawk. She went on to co-found several covens with their own sub-traditions, all feminist, but many also inclusive of feminist men. One of these, The Reclaiming Tradition focuses publicly on feminist and environmentalist politics, teaching its spell craft through workshops geared toward personal empowerment and political/social change. For several decades, Reclaiming Wiccans have been organizing ritual activities at otherwise secular colleges, demonstrations, training retreats, and political occupations. These rites are often a contact point between Wiccans and the general public, thus Reclaiming can be an entry point for future practitioners who may wind up in any of the other Wiccan (or Neopagan) traditions, or stay within Reclaiming itself.

With the politicization of Wicca came the impetus to organize, and the latter decades of the twentieth century have seen the proliferation of Wiccan and Neopagan newsletters, magazines, publishers, networking, and advocacy organizations. In Britain, these associations date back to the 1960s, with the publication of The Wiccan newsletter, later renamed Pagan Dawn. It focused heavily on ensuring that Article 18 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights be upheld for
the rights of Wiccans. By the 1970s there was an expanding association, the Pagan Movement of Britain and Ireland, and today several organizations, including The Pagan Federation (PF), The Sub-culture Alternatives Freedom Foundation working toward the same goals and monitoring mass media for inaccurate and disparaging depictions of Pagans. In America, similar groups including the Pagan Educational Network perform the same functions.

In America (the home of the Woodstock Rock festival), a major impetus for the formation of integrative Wiccan and Neopagan networking organizations was to facilitate the production of large outdoor festivals. One such group evolved in Chicago, becoming the Midwest Pagan Association, in 1976. By 1980, they had teamed up with another organization, The Covenant of the Goddess; that year they held a Pan Pagan encampment with about 600 participants. By the mid-eighties, there were about fifty regional festivals. By 1995, Adler states that the United States had nearly 350 well-advertised, public Neopagan encampments – so many that the Covenant of the Goddess was publishing an annual listing. Open to the general public, festivals attract many who come for the fun and wind up adopting the beliefs; they also spread beliefs and practices from one local group to another. As Adler says, ‘festivals created a national Pagan community, a body of nationally shared chants, dances, stories, and ritual techniques’.

Wicca and other Neopagan practices were given an additional boost in the United States by the founding of Llewellyn, a publishing house based in Minnesota which expanded by the late 1970s from its initial focus on Gnosticism, Ceremonial Magic, New Age, astrology and general occultism into a lucrative business selling Wiccan texts as well. They also organize and sponsor festivals.

The growth of Wicca has clearly relied upon the printed word from the very beginning. The age of the electronic word expanded growth opportunities for Wicca exponentially, as new ‘audience cults’ proliferated on the Web. Words such as ‘Cyber Pagan’ and ‘Techno Pagan’ have been coined to describe those whose initial, primary, or perhaps only contact with the wider Wiccan and Neopagan communities is through their computers. To many modern Wiccans, the work that goes into magic is similar to executing a project on a computer – it exists only as a form manipulable energy, worked upon by human will, until it becomes reality. Just as paper publications and festivals can spread and unify practice, so too can the Web. By the early 2000s, the most popular Wiccan website was The Witches Voice (www.witchvox.com); it lists tens of thousands of local contacts for covens, festivals, stores, rights advocacy and other Wiccan and Neopagan organizations, as well as providing news and chatting opportunities. The web has also facilitated the expansion of Wiccan charities – a function often seen as essential to governmental recognition as a legally functioning religion. Several websites have grown out of the major US festival-generating, and religious rights organization, Circle.

Out of its humble beginnings (be they in the rural heaths of Britain and Tuscany, or the occult bookshops of London and San Francisco) Wicca has emerged in the early twenty-first century as a growing, rapidly splintering, yet expanding spiritual adaptation to life in the modern, urban, technological, and highly interconnected world. It provides meaning, a sense of hope, a creative outlet, systems of values, personal growth, and religious fellowship for hundreds of thousands. As such it is likely to continue to do so.
Notes

1 Although the terms are often used interchangeably, the author chooses the more specific terms ‘Neopagan’ and ‘Neopaganism’ for use throughout this essay. Out of respect for practitioners, I also make the choice of capitalizing it, as one does in the English language with the name of any faith.

2 The author’s research on Wicca began as a graduate student in cultural anthropology at the University of Oregon. The study involved both mundane library research, as well as participant/observation – direct involvement and interaction with practicing Wiccans in the Northwestern United States. This included interviews, study with Wiccan teachers, and participation in rituals. My 1989 dissertation, ‘Neopagan Witchcraft: Cult in Cultural Context’ was passed ‘With Distinction’ by the University of Oregon Department of Anthropology.


11 Davy, Introduction to Pagan Studies.

12 Harvey, Contemporary Paganism.

13 Orion, Never Again the Burning Times.

14 Davy, Introduction to Pagan Studies; Harvey, Contemporary Paganism.

15 Adler, Drawing, Revised ed., 103–104.

16 Ibid.,


18 This core belief is expressed in nearly every publication about Wicca, for some examples, refer to: Adler, Drawing, Revised ed.; Budapest, The Feminist; Gerald Gardner, The Meaning of Witchcraft (London: Aquarian Press, 1959).
19 Jencson, unpublished field notes collected in 1983.
20 Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times*, 225. This fear is particularly salient in the United States, where Christian extremist groups focused on the persecution of others, such as the Ku Klux Klan, anti-abortionists, and anti-gay hate groups have actively terrorized innocent citizens throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.
21 Descriptions of the written spellbooks kept by Wiccans can be found in the following: Adler, *Drawing*, Revised ed.; Budapest, *Feminist*; Gardner, *Meaning*.
22 This process is outlined in: Adler, *Drawing*, Revised ed.; in Jencson, “Neopaganism and the Great Mother Goddess.”
26 Murray, *Witch Cult in Western Europe*, and *God of the Witches*.
30 Ibid., vii.
31 Ibid., 2.
32 Leland’s untitled liturgy from *Aradia*, 6–7 reads in part:

When I shall have departed from this world,
Whenever ye have need of anything,
Once in the month, and when the moon is full,
Ye shall assemble in some desert place,
Or in a forest altogether join,
To adore the potent spirit of your queen,
My mother great Diana. She who fain,
Would learn all sorcery yet has not won,
Its deepest secrets, them my mother will
Teach her, in truth all things are yet unknown . . .
And as assign that ye are truly free,
Ye shall be naked in your rites, both men
And women also: this shall last until
The last of your oppressors shall be dead . . .

Compare with Starhawk’s prose poem, the ‘Charge of the Goddess’ from *The Spiral Dance*, 76, based upon Gardner’s writings, which reads in part:

Whenever you have need of anything, once in the month, and better it be when
the moon is full, you shall assemble in some secret place and adore the spirit of
Me who is Queen of All the Wise. You shall be free from slavery, and as a sign that
you be free you shall be naked in your rites. Sing, feast, dance, make music and
love . . .

33 For example, Budapest’s work, *The Feminist Book of Lights and Shadows* is entirely Dianic.
37 Adler, Drawing, 61–64.
39 Leland, Aradia, 6.
40 Starhawk, Spiral Dance, 76.
42 Adler, Drawing, Revised edition, 76.
45 Harvey, Contemporary Paganism, 18.
46 Jencson, “Neopaganism and the Great Mother Goddess.”
48 Bracelin, Gerald Gardner: Witch.
49 Adler, Drawing, Revised and updated ed., 80.
50 Howard, Modern Wicca.
51 Gardner, Witchcraft Today and Meaning.
52 Bracelin, Gerald Gardner: Witch; Howard, Modern Wicca.
53 Bracelin, Gerald Gardner: Witch.
54 Howard, Modern Wicca, 70.
55 Ibid.
56 Sex and gender have been important throughout the development of Wicca, at times exhibiting polar opposites from one era or tradition to another. Crowley had a universal reputation as extremely deviant and violent in his sexuality, as well as extremely abusive to women. He described women (including his daughter) as whores. He beat women and girls, held them prisoner, and abandoned more than one in foreign counties without means of support. Many of the women under his influence died young of neglect, drug addiction, hunger, and disease including one of his abandoned daughters according to Bracelin’s Gerald Gardner: Witch. At least one of Gardner’s High Priestesses, Madeline Montalban, spoke of Crowley as a ‘fraud and a pervert’, Howard, Modern Wicca, 69. Allegedly, Crowley told Gardner that he ‘had not followed the way of the witches’ because he ‘refused to be bossed around by any damned woman’, Bracelin, Gerald Gardner: Witch, 158. It is highly unlikely that such a man contributed to a religion with powerful High Priestesses.
57 Howard, Modern Wicca, 121.
58 Adler, Drawing, Revised and updated ed., 81.
59 Ibid.
63 Davy, Pagan Studies, 151–152. Harvey, Contemporary Paganism, 43–44.
64 Ibid., 44.
65 Adler, Drawing, Revised and updated ed., 119–121.
67 Luhrmann, Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft.
69 Harvey, Contemporary Paganism, 83.
70 Adler, Drawing, Revised ed., 125–130.
71 Ibid., 123–125.
72 Howard, Modern Wicca, 244.
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73 Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism*, 215.
75 Ibid., 430.
76 Ibid.
77 Jencson, “Neopagan Witchcraft.”
78 Howard, *Modern Wicca*.

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