

An ongoing ethnographic look at Paganet and CERC's Pagans.

by: Jennie Woods

Undergraduate

Christopher Newport University

Contact information:
(757) 249-9552
cupnjava@hotmail.com
201 Pointer Circle
Apt #4
Newport News, Va. 23602

Abstract:

This presentation summarizes an ongoing ethnographic study of a group of Pagans in South-Eastern Virginia. The usefulness of standard anthropological typologies for characterizing the beliefs and actions of the participants is questioned. The task of anthropology to interpret and explain the group in a manner that reduces prejudice and defensiveness is emphasized.

It is *Beltane*¹ and people gather at a city park in Newport News, Virginia. Upwards of 40 people are there. At the picnic shelter, food is out. To the left of the picnic shelter a group is playing catch. Children are running, playing and laughing. Groups of adults are standing and talking. Smiles, laughter and hugs are all around. To the right of the shelter, is a maypole with ribbon hanging down and a circlet on top. An altar table is set up close to the maypole. Someone calls the attention of the group and announces that ritual is about to begin.

All but a handful of people create a circle around the altar table. Onlookers begin to gather. The quarters are called. The Lord and Lady are invoked. A woman walks the circle passing out cookies and juice whispering “May you never thirst” and “May you never hunger.” The High Priest and High Priestess explain the meaning behind the *Sabbat* and do a small reenactment. This *Sabbat* glorifies the union of the Goddess and the God. The High Priest and Priestess kiss and everyone cheers. The Goddess and God are thanked. The quarters are thanked. The circle is opened.

People leave the ritual area to eat and socialize. The maypole dance is announced and drumming begins; more onlookers gather. Males and females grab a piece of ribbon and run around the pole, weaving the ribbon onto the pole as they dance. The drumming increases in intensity and the dancing hurries; the ribbon is woven around the pole and the circlet does not drop. A man walks up to the pole and shakes it....and shakes it. Finally the circlet drops. People cheer and someone says to me “consummation.” The maypole dance is repeated a few more times because there are not enough strands of ribbon for everyone that

¹ Selected words will be defined at the end of the paper.

wanted to participate. On the last dance, I grab a piece ribbon and dance. By this time there are enough onlookers to makes us feel like actors on stage. What the bells, cloaks, robes, candles, loud talking and dancing did not attract, the drumming did.

The wheel of the year turns and it is now *Maboon*. Again, people gather at a park in Newport News, Virginia. This time it is a smaller group about 29. Approximately equal numbers of males and females are attending and an overwhelming majority of the attendees appear to be are above 35. I use the pre-ritual social time to talk to several attendees. One male, mid-forties, has been a *solitaire* for 25 years. Another male, approximately 50, was Mormon for 13 years before finding his current path. A woman, mid-thirties, is clergy and has won a two-year court battle to become state licensed to perform legal *handfastings*. Another woman, mid-forties, has also become state licensed to perform legal handfastings. She told me that she went to the courthouse with more documentation than required. When the clerk saw the religious affiliation, she threw the documentation on the floor. The other state registered woman nodded knowingly. This small group spoke with me about religious discrimination for nearly an hour.

An announcement was made that ritual was about to begin and this time they were going to try to get the group to sing. One of the women I spoke with earlier stood up and began singing half of the refrain and first verse of "We all come from the Goddess." Everyone immediately chimed in. The group sang as the circle was formed. The quarters were called, with different words than for

Beltane. The God and Goddess were invoked, with different words than for Beltane. The High Priest and High Priestess (different people than for Beltane) explain the Sabbat (this one celebrates the time of the year when light gives way to dark) and they bless some apples for the congregation. The congregation is supposed to take an apple, put intent onto it and give it back to the Earth. The High Priestess motioned to the High Priest. He bent down and picked out a particular apple and stood up. They then announced that their hungry son had taken a bite out of one of the apples. They turned the apple around and showed the big bite. There were giggles in the circle. This threw me for a loop. My background said that giggles during worship were not acceptable. I looked around and realized that I too had giggled. I looked for scornful glares....there were none. Without anyone saying a word to me , this group had taught me that in their faith it is all right to mix fun and worship. The God and Goddess were thanked, the quarters were thanked and the circle was opened. During the opening of the circle the group sang, "May the circle be open, but unbroken." There was more socializing and eating afterward.

The wheel of the years turns again and this time there will not be a Sabbat celebration. For *Samhain*, there will be a religious tolerance vigil in Virginia Beach. This group is huge. Estimates are of 350 attendees (Paganet News, Yule 2000). The group gathered on top of a hill at Mount Trashmore. There was drumming and socializing, during this time I sought out the High Priest from Maboon. He told me that he was fully out of the "broom closet" and I could use

his real name in my research². “John” is a middle school teacher and his wife is a sign language interpreter. I asked him if they have had any problems because of their religion. He reported that they have experienced only small problems. He had a problem with a student’s parent that was quickly quieted down and his wife, “Elizabeth”, had a woman reach up and turn “Elizabeth’s” pentacle over. We spoke for a little while longer; I thanked him for talking to me and made my way back to the drums. I located the candles and program for the event and was given a bumper sticker that read, “Freedom of religion means any religion.”

The attention of the group was gathered and the drumming stopped. An overview of the event was stated. The group formed a circle around the flagpole on the larger hill at Mount Trashmore. The drumming began again and the candles were lit. A poem was read about the Burning Times by selected speakers and the refrain “Never again the Burring Times” was stated by everyone at the circle. After the poem was read individuals would walk into the circle, hold a candle up and state the name of a person lost during the Burning Times.

It was here that anticipated protesters were observed. There were about four people at the top of the hill outside the circle, substantially fewer than were expected. One man on his knees bowing and praying was close enough for me to partially hear. I heard the words “Jesus”, “save”, “soul” and “forgive”, but I could not make out an entire sentence.

After the circle, people gathered in a parking lot and stood in a circle. Then, a circle within the circle was formed. The group sang, “We are a circle

² Out of concern for protection, I will use pseudonyms for individuals

within a circle, with no beginning and never ending”; the group was so large that song turned out to be sung in round. The circles closed in on themselves and eventually there turned out to be several circles within circles.

Weary of singing and swaying, I made my way out of the circle. There on a grassy area beside the parking lot some pre-adolescent girls were sitting and some younger children were playing. Two men were standing a few yards from them. The men began to walk toward the young girls and I heard the word “pedophile”. Several people left the chanting circles; the young girls and children were taken away from the men. I then heard the word “fundies” and more people left the chanting circle. I walked up to a group containing the “fundies” , four pagan women, and a man who described himself as a Shamanistic Witch. One of the “fundies” was holding a Bible. I stood next to the Shamanistic Witch. I came into a discussion about “the truth”, listened to the discussion, and asked the “fundies” if they knew that this was a religious tolerance vigil not a religious rite. One of the men evaded the question and began to speak of the “the truth” and referring to the Bible in his hand. I asked my question again. He told me that he did not know what was happening here and he began to speak of “the truth” again. I looked at him and said, “So, you are not aware that you are protesting religious tolerance?” The “fundie” without the Bible in his hand looked at me questioningly and the one with the Bible began to speak of “the truth” again. A woman spoke up and said most of these people come from a Christian background and we already know about your truth and we do not accept your truth. The conversation turned into an “I-can-quote-more-verses- than-you-can”

type of argument. I observed the debate for quite a while. The Pagans seemed to know a great deal about the Bible and Christianity. My main thought was that these men choose to approach this group on a day where violence by the edge of the Christian cross was being remembered and that these men could not have chosen a worst time. The conversation ended about the time the park was closing.

Who are these people who meet when the year-wheel turns, with their robes, candles, drums and pentacles? Practicing a faith where women and men are held with equal esteem. They are not one coven or one tradition. They are of mixed gender and ethnicity. They are Norse, Dianic, Celtic, Egyptian, Shamanistic and all other paths. Some call themselves Wiccan, some call themselves Shamanistic Witches, some call themselves witches, and some call themselves Pagan. They all have attended Sabbats and events co-sponsored by Paganet and CERC, Crossroads Earth Religion Center. The word Pagan is easiest to define³ in the negative. Pagan is an umbrella term referring to a group of faiths not of the Abrahamic traditions and not Buddhist or Hindu. Under the heading Pagan there are different sub-groups. These are Wiccan, Native American, Gaiast, etc. Under Wiccan there are different traditions, these are Norse, Celtic, Egyptian, Dianic, various family traditions (called fam-trads) etc. The traditions separate into individualistic paths. Pagan is the broadest term and I will use the word Pagan.

³ This is a working definition.

Where do these Pagans fit into the larger anthropological classification schemes? Anthony Wallace created a fourfold typology of religions rooted in the concept of cult. “A cult is an organized system of cultural beliefs and practices pertaining to the control over specific supernatural powers (Bailey and Peoples, 1999 p.202). A cult is not the same as the religion of a people” (Bailey and Peoples, 1999 p.202). Bailey and Peoples cite Wallace’s classification as distinguishing between four kinds of cults: individualistic, shamanistic, communal and ecclesiastical (1999 p. 202).”

There are some issues with this typology and its application to Pagans. First, according to Scott Cunningham a prominent Pagan author and author of *Wicca: A Guide for Solitary Practitioners* states the magick⁴ in Paganism , specifically Wicca, is not supernatural (above nature) , but rooted in nature (1999). I also have issue with using the word “cult”. The word cult has a different meaning in the vernacular, than in anthropological nomenclature. The word cult is offensive to many Pagans.

However, Wallace’s typology is widely accepted and I will use it with the understanding that problems will be noted. Under Wallace’s typology Christianity would be fall under ecclesiastical cult (Bailey and Peoples, 1999). Paganism with its multitude of paths could fit under the individualistic, communal or shamanistic cult headings. Individualistic Cults are defined as “ each individual has a personal relationship with one or more supernatural powers, who sever as his or her guardians and protectors. The aid of the powers is solicited when

⁴ Intentional spelling. The “k” denotes religious magick as opposed to stage (slight of hand) magic.

needed” (Bailey and Peoples , 1999 p.203). The communal cults are defined as “the members of a particular group gather periodically for rituals that are believed to benefit the group as a whole or some individual member. There are not full-time religious specialists as is true of individual and shamanistic cults”(Bailey and Peoples ,1999 p.203). The most generic form of Paganism would fit under individual cult with cross over into the communal cult heading. The belief set is rooted in the individual , but groups do meet for the Sabbats, Esbats or any other time. There are calendrical rituals (Sabbats and *Esbats*) and crisis rituals (rituals held for various reasons) Sabbats and Esbats are performed primarily with group intent and occasional individual intent. Crisis rituals are typically with individual intent (healing, purging negativity, protection, etc.) but can have group intent (healing for Earth). Obviously, a true *solitaire* would be individualistic whereas someone who only performs rituals with his/her *coven* would be communal.

Pagan practitioners that lean toward shamanistic beliefs and practices would fit under the shamanistic heading. Shamanistic cults are defined as “some individuals -- shamans -- are believed to have contact with the supernatural that ordinary people lack. They use these powers primarily for socially valuable purposes to help (especially cure) others in need. They may also act on behalf of their band or village to cause supernatural harm to the group’s enemies” (Bailey and Peoples, 1999 p.203). Herein lies another inconsistency between Pagans and the accepted definitions. Pagans especially Wiccans have an ethic or code of conduct that is commonly called The Reed. The Reed in its short form is “Do

as thou wilt, an' in it harm none"⁵. Not all Pagans follow The Reed per se, but I have not seen anyone argue for harming anyone. This leads to another inconsistency.

Many refer to themselves as witches. However, the term "witchcraft" or "witch" is often described in negative terms. Bailey and Peoples, in their book *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, define witchcraft "as the use of psychic power alone to cause harm to others" (1999). The Encyclopedia Britannica entry of witchcraft refers to the "exercise of alleged supernatural powers for antisocial, evil purposes" (Britannica.com). Wiccan Witches do not just have The Reed, they have what can be summarized as the five tenets of belief. There is the Karmic Law or the Three-fold Law, which states whatever one does, good or bad, will be returned to the originator three-fold. There is the Ethic of Self Responsibility, which means that the self is responsible for the self. There is no "the devil made me do it". There is also, an Ethic of Constant Improvement. Lastly, there is the Ethic of Attunement. This means that Wiccans should strive to align themselves with the deities (or deity), nature and themselves. Specific traditions have additional ethics or laws, but every Wiccan I have met (and most non-Wiccan Pagans I have met) accept and follow these tenets or something of similar meaning⁶. The implications of these beliefs integrate into a level of social control that deters causing evil or negativity. The role of Anthropology is to hold a

⁵The Reed can be found quoted in numerous places including wall hangings. It is a commonly accepted ethic and I cannot locate an original source. I have always seen it written with quotes around it, but no reference to a source.

⁶The tenets of belief can be found at several different sources. I found the website "All one Wicca, the Universal Eclectic Wicca" to be the most concise. The URL will be listed with references. I have not been able to locate an original source.

mirror up to a culture and report on the reflection to those that lack the ability to see the actual culture. The current vocabulary is not useful or sufficient for this particular culture -- the culture of the Pagan.

Selected Definitions

Beltane- a sabbat held around May 1st that celebrates the union of the Goddess and the God and the following times of fertility.

Coven- A group that worships together. Membership into a coven varies by tradition.

Esbat- A full moon ritual.

Hanfasting- A Pagan union ceremony similar to a wedding. Not necessarily heterosexual and not necessarily recognized by the government.

Maboon- A sabbat celebrated around the autumn equinox that celebrates the end of the harvest season.

Sabbat- A high holy day.

Samhain- A sabbat celebrated at the end of October where the veil between this world and the spirit world is considered to be the thinnest. It is a time for remembering a deceased one's life, not necessarily a solemn celebration.

Solitaire- An individual that worships alone.

Works Cited

“All One Wicca: The Universal Eclectic Wicca”

http://home.att.net/~macmorgan_design/book.html

Bailey, G. , & Peoples, J. (1999) Introduction to Cultural Anthropology.

(Instructor’s Ed.) Belmont, Ca : Wadsworth Publishing.

Cunningham, S (1999) Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner. (24th printing) St. Paul, MN : Llewellyn Publications

Paganet, (2000, Yule). Event News. Paganet News. p. 8 (no author listed)

www.britannica.com

References

Berger, H (1998). The Earth Is Sacred: Ecological Concerns in American Wicca.

In M. Cousineau (ed.), Religion in a Changing World. (pp. 213-220).

Westport: Praeger Publishers

Cimino, R. & Latin, D. , (1999, April). Choosing My Religion, American

Demographics, p.60-65.

Clifton, C. (ed.) (1996). Living Between Two Worlds Challenges of the Modern Witch. St. Paul, MN : Llewellyn Publications

Conway, J. D., (2000) By Oak, Ash, & Thorn Modern Celtic Shamanism. (7th printing) St. Paul, MN : Llewellyn Publications

Cookson, C., (1997) . Reports from the Trenches: A case Study of Religious Freedom Issues Faced by Wiccans Practicing in the United States.

Journal of Church and State, (Autumn). accessed online via

www.briannica.com

Cunningham, S. (1991). Earth Air Fire and Water: More Techniques of Natural Magic. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications

- Edwards, C. (1999, October 25) Wicca Casts Spell on Teen-Age Girls. Insight on the News. located online via www.findarticles.com
- Finley, N., (1991). Political Activism and Feminist Spirituality. Sociological Analysis, 52(4), pp.349-362.
- Hubbard, E. (2000, August 24) What Pagans and Christians Share. Themestream [online] www.themestream.com
- Hubbard, E. (2000, August 17) Why Pagans are the Christian's Bogeymen?. Themestream [online] www.themestream.com
- Kirkpatrick, R.G., Rainey, R. & Rubi, K. , (1986) An Empirical Study of Wiccan Religion in Postindustrial Society. Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology (14)1, pp.33-38
- Lozano, W. & Foltz, T., (1990) Into the Darkness: An Ethnographic Study of Witchcraft and Death. Qualitative Sociology, (13)3 pp.211-234
- Neuman, W. L. . (2000) Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches (4th ed.) Boston: Allyn and Bacon
- McNatt, L. (2000, October 30) Quiet Gathering Irks Isle of Wight Ministers. The Virginian-Pilot. via www.pilotonline.com
- Moyers, B. (no date) Religious Diversity: A Challenge for Democracy. Kentucky Humanities. [online] via www.kyhumanities.org/magazine/diversity.html
- Paganet, (2000, Maboon). Paganet News.
- Paganet, (2000, Lughnasadh). Paganet News.
- Paganet, (2000, Samhain). Paganet News.
- Ravenwolf, S. (1998) Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications.
- Ritzer, G. (2000) . Sociological Theory (5th ed.) McGraw-Hill Co. Inc.
- Scarboro A. & Luck, P.A. , (1997) The Goddess and Power: Witchcraft and Religion in America. Journal of Contemporary Religion ,(12)1 pp.69-79

Scruton, R. (1999, September 27) The Rise of Neo-Paganism (Wicca). National Review. located online via www.findarticles.com

Wilkinson, L (1999, November 15) The Bewitching Charms of Neopaganism. Christianity Today. located online via www.findarticles.com

www.census.gov

www.FBI.gov

A note of thanks: I would like to thank Paganet and CERC for being so open with me, their support in my research; and, the individuals that have helped me to clarify my observations and understandings. Additionally, I would like to thank the professors in the Sociology and Anthropology departments at Christopher Newport University for offering their knowledge and experience. Special thanks to Lea Pellet for her time, energy and believing in me. For without any of them, this would not be possible.