

**Druids in Quebec:  
*Ethnographic Fieldwork among Druids in Montreal***

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## Diversité religieuse au Québec

Les documents de travail de la série « Diversité religieuse au Québec » sont des rapports réalisés dans le cadre du projet de recherche « Groupes religieux, pluralisme et ressources symboliques », mené par des membres du Groupe de recherche diversité urbaine (GRDU) et d'autres collègues depuis septembre 2006. Ce projet s'intéresse aux groupes religieux établis au Québec depuis les années 1960, qu'ils représentent de nouvelles religions, des religions déjà implantées ailleurs et importées au Québec par des immigrants, voyageurs québécois ou autres, ou encore de nouveaux courants de religions qui se sont établies dans la province.

Le projet a bénéficié d'une subvention FQRSC « Soutien aux équipes de recherche » (Fonds québécois de recherche pour la société et la culture) et d'une subvention de recherche du CRSH (Conseil de recherche en sciences humaines du Canada). Deirdre Meintel dirige ce projet auquel collaborent ou ont collaboré de nombreux chercheurs : Josiane Le Gall (Université de Montréal), Marie-Nathalie LeBlanc (Université du Québec à Montréal), François Gauthier (Université du Québec à Montréal), Khadiyatoulah Fall (Université du Québec à Chicoutimi), Géraldine Mossière (Université de Montréal), Sylvie Fortin (Université de Montréal), John Leavitt (Université de Montréal), ainsi que Claude Gélinas et Fernand Ouellet (tous deux de l'Université de Sherbrooke). Le projet est coordonné par Véronique Jourdain (Université de Montréal).

Chacun des documents de recherche de cette série présente l'étude spécifique d'un groupe religieux ayant fait l'objet d'une étude ethnographique approfondie. Exception faite de ceux de Deirdre Meintel et de Géraldine Mossière, ces documents constituent des versions abrégées et condensées des rapports exhaustifs rédigés par chacun des assistants, à la suite de leur travail de terrain.

Les chercheurs et les assistants du projet souhaitent que les résultats de leurs recherches contribuent à une meilleure connaissance de la diversité religieuse actuelle du Québec. À cette fin, les documents de cette série ont été adaptés à un public assez large, soit non seulement aux étudiants, enseignants, chercheurs et intervenants sociaux et en santé, mais aussi à tous ceux qui s'intéressent au pluralisme religieux québécois.

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## Introduction

Between September 2007 and April 2009, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in two different Druid networks in Quebec. They are both a part of the broader Montreal Pagan Community, which includes many practitioners of different Pagan faiths. The majority of my participatory observation work took place in 2007 and 2008 among the English-speaking Druids who are members of the *Ar nDraiocht Féin Druid Fellowship* (ADF), and I continued to participate in some of their rituals and social gatherings in 2009. The goal of the fieldwork was to collect data for a study group on religious pluralism in Quebec.

During the same period, I also attended five rituals within a primarily francophone network of Druids informally known as *La communauté celtique* (The Celtic Community) and also as *Les druides du Québec* (The Druids of Quebec). Celebrating rituals within a second network allowed me to gain a broader understanding of the issues surrounding the revival of Druidry in Quebec. The contents of this report mostly reflect the practices of the first group, the English-speaking ADF Druids, but in the last section I will also examine some aspects of the practices observed in the francophone Druid network.

I will begin by providing some reflections about my fieldwork among modern-day Druids, and mentioning some methodological challenges that came up. I will then discuss the revival of Druidry (also known as Druidism) within the context of

Neopagan earth worship, and provide an overview of ADF Druid beliefs and practices, including their ritual structure. I will also describe what it is like to be a contemporary Pagan along with the phenomenon of coming out of the Pagan broom closet. The last two sections discuss the role of social media in modern Druid networks, and present thoughts on linguistic performativity as well as speech community affiliation within the two Druid networks.

## **1. Reflections on Fieldwork Among Druids**

During the course of my fieldwork, I was presented with a number of ideological challenges that I will briefly mention here. In my quest to understand and respectfully portray the Druidic philosophy, I felt that I had to crack open my Judeo-Christian shell in order to gain access to Pagan spirituality, and allow myself to experience it. This had to be done carefully, because many of my family members are devoutly Christian, and to them, Paganism is synonymous with satanic worship. Adler (2006) also observed the demonization of Paganism by mainstream society in her analysis of the history of Paganism in North America.

To my atheist academic colleagues, Paganism is perceived as New Age cult nonsense, and therefore not worthy of intellectual discussion, and thus rejected as a valid academic topic. When I expressed my research interests to those around me who were not part of the study group, I was often met with disapproval, worry about my salvation, or ridicule. This led to some methodological challenges such as having to conceal or downplay my activities among Pagan groups to avoid

backlash from my peers and family. The experience led me to conclude that modern-day Pagans indeed have legitimate reasons to keep their beliefs and practices in the shadows, or “in the broom closet”, as they sometimes joke, in order to avoid subtle as well as overt discrimination.

Furthermore, the task of describing Pagan spirituality led me to encounter what many practitioners refer to as magic (sometimes written as "magick"), the use of personal spiritual energy to produce intentional transformations in the material world. As a neophyte researcher, conveying this concept to an outside audience with terms that are scientifically acceptable seemed difficult to me at first. I was at a loss for how to adequately describe certain key elements of Druid ceremonies, such as calling down the gods and goddesses into ritual circles. The idea of being in contact with an invisible world and doing spiritual work with a pantheon of Celtic or Norse gods may seem far-fetched and ludicrous to some members of the academic community, because their personal conceptual framework relies upon rational and observable aspects of the universe. However, my desire to respectfully portray Druidry has motivated me to find useful ways to describe the creation of magic in accessible terms. With utmost respect for modern-day Druids, and in appreciation for the experiences they shared with me during interviews and in the ritual setting, I will do my best to present the main aspects of Druidry as it has been revived in our current era.

## **2. ADF Druidry and the Revival of Earth Worship**

## *2.1. Neopaganism*

The current revival of Druidry in Quebec is taking place within the context of the Neopagan spiritual movement in North America, so I will begin by saying a few words about this fascinating subculture. “Neopaganism” is an umbrella term used to describe a diverse and non-hierarchical movement of people practicing earth-based spirituality who are reviving ancient European polytheistic nature religions that predate Christianity (Adler 2006). Modern Pagan communities include goddess-worshipping Wiccan circles, as well people embracing Norse, Greek and Celtic religious traditions, reviving Druidry and other forms of worship such as Asatru, the religion of the early Vikings. Most Pagans share the goal of living in harmony with the natural cycles of the Earth and reviving pre-Christian spiritual practices that originated in Europe (Corrigan 2009, Greer 2005).

Neo-Druidry seeks to revive the ways of the ancient European Druids, who were the sages, philosophers and oracles of the prehistoric Celtic world. Theirs was by no means a static tradition; the Druids transmitted a complex cosmogony and system of thought over the course of several millennia, from the Bronze Age to the Roman Empire (Chadwick 2006). Contemporary Druids clearly do not live in the same context as the ancient ones, but most of them strongly identify with Celtic and/or Norse cultures, and draw heavily upon mythology and early accounts of Druids in order to re-create ancient Druidic practices. They also integrate cosmological elements that go back to the prehistoric religious worldview of the Iron Age Indo-Europeans, who were at the origin of Celtic culture (Mallory 1991).

The origins of Druidry seem mysterious to us because the Celts did not employ a standardized system of writing. Instead, their knowledge was transmitted through oral traditions: the memorization of sacred poetry and song, and philosophical dialogues examining the guiding principles of the universe (Bonewits and Carr-Gomm 2006). The Roman historians who encountered Druids at the time of the Roman Empire were fascinated by their practices, but their writings reveal only a partial understanding of the Druids' way of life (Chadwick 2006). Over time, the Roman conquerors pushed Druids toward the fringes of the Celtic and Roman worlds, and their role in society diminished, such that Druid priests eventually disappeared, and their schools were dismantled. However, since medieval times in Europe, elements of Druidry have been revived by fraternal and spiritual organizations, and Druidry is currently seeing a resurgence in many Western countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Canada and the United States (Bonewits and Carr-Gomm 2006). The *Ar nDraiocht Féin Druid<sup>1</sup> Fellowship* (better known among Pagan groups as ADF) is one of many branches of Druidry that has an active and growing presence in North America, and on the Internet.

## *2.2. What is ADF?*

*Ar nDraiocht Féin* (ADF) is a new religion that emerged within the Neopagan movement in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. ADF holds the status of non-profit organization and was founded in Arizona in 1983 by Isaac Bonewits (1949-2010), an independent scholar and spiritual seeker with a strong interest in ancient Indo-European religions, particularly the Druidry practiced in ancient Ireland. Following

Bonewits' lead and inspired by his publications, many Druid congregations called "groves" began to be formed, and dozens of them now exist, with practitioners located in Canada, the United States, Ireland, Australia and the Czech Republic. ADF rituals are standardized according to certain guidelines determined by the "Mother Grove" in Arizona, and these ceremonial parameters are mostly traceable to the Druid traditions of Ireland and also to the Norse sages of pre-Christian Scandinavia. ADF bases its reconstruction of prehistoric rituals on reliable, systematic scholarly research that discuss ancient Indo-European archaeology, languages and mythology (see Jones and Pennick 1997, Mallory 1991, Puhvel 1989). On the ADF Website<sup>2</sup>, the ADF grove is defined as follows:

«An ADF grove is any group of three or more voting members of ADF over the age of 18, who live in the same general geographical area, who gather together at least twice a month to study and practice Druidism within the context of Ár nDraíocht Féin, and who are chartered by the Mother Grove (the Board of Directors) of ADF as a local congregation.»

ADF Druids are quite active in Canada, especially in Ontario and in Atlantic Canada, in both rural and urban settings. *Thornhaven Grove*, a thriving Druid community located south of Ottawa, serves as a spiritual retreat for rural Pagans. *Island Willow Protogrove*, at the time of research, was a focal point for urban English-speaking Druids in the Montreal area. One of the goals of ADF in Canada is to become recognized as an official religion in the eyes of the Canadian government. For this to happen, the Druid liturgy must become standardized among the different groves. Some Pagans argue that it is impossible to standardize an esoteric religion that was not written down in ancient times, so ADF's initiative for official recognition sets it apart from other Neopagan organizations that do not seek such recognition. If one day ADF Druidry is recognized as an official religion

in Canada, then Druid clergy could enact marriage rituals for members of their religion, and members who pass away could have official Druid funeral rites.

### *2.3. ADF Druids in the Montreal Area*

The first ADF grove in Montreal, *Silverfox Grove*, was formed in the early 1990's and disbanded in 2000. For a few years, ADF was inactive in Montreal, although some of its members continued practicing as solitary Druids. In 2006, an ex-*Silverfox* Druid named Raven began hosting some ADF-style rituals near his home in Pointe-Claire, and in 2007, with some new members, he began a small "proto-grove" (a newly formed grove with at least three members) called *Island Willow Proto-grove*. It has a core of three organizing members, and approximately a dozen or so other members, some of whom attend the rituals regularly, others sporadically. The social dynamic in Raven's proto-grove is very friendly and rather non-hierarchical; all are encouraged to participate and get involved in the ritual planning. The core members are close friends of his, which provides a family-like and welcoming atmosphere to first-time participants. Typically, the other members who attend the ADF rituals are also easy-going and non-authoritative people. Most are happy to speak about their spirituality among like-minded, respectful people, but they are usually discreet when it comes to discussing their beliefs with outsiders who are not Pagan.

Raven is currently the go-to person for Druidry among the Anglophone Pagan community in Quebec. Kindly and knowledgeable, as a group leader, he is required by ADF to be publicly accessible and thus he answers e-mails and responds to

questions about his religious practices. Within the structure of *Island Willow Proto-grove*, Raven initiates the planning of the rituals, sets the exact date and time, and provides most of the necessary elements for the ceremonial altar, such as candles, holy water, objects representing the four elements, runes, offerings, incense, mead, etc. The two other core members, Val and Carla (pseudonyms) alternate in helping Raven write the liturgy, and prepare what is needed for the ritual on the day of the event. Other members of the group also participate actively in the rituals by reading poetry, singing and making offerings. Non-core members can also help with important tasks when needed, such as organizing a large-scale Druid ritual for the Montreal Pagan Community at public events such as the Yule Fair, an annual winter solstice event that takes place in downtown Montreal.

Most of the Druids in *Island Willow Proto-grove* are young Montrealers, between the ages of 20 and 35, living in suburban as well as urban areas, and most are middle-class Anglophones. Based on my observations, the participants are mostly second or third generation immigrants from Northern Europe who rejected Christianity in their early teens, in favor of exploring alternative spiritualities. Identifying with their family's Celtic or Scandinavian ethnic background, most of the ADF Druids I met immersed themselves in the ancient lore of their ancestors at a young age, and were often attracted to witchcraft and inquisitive about the type of knowledge that can be found in the occult.

Some ADF members started off as solitary Druids or Witches until they got in touch with the rest of the Pagan community through the Internet, on Pagan forums and

community Web pages, and discovered Druid communities on those sites. A few of the non-core members I encountered reject being labeled as Druids. While they are pantheistic and followers of Druid traditions, they also incorporate elements from other religions such as Hinduism and Wicca into their personal practice, so they feel that their spiritual identities are not only defined by Druidry, but by a bricolage of diverse beliefs and spiritual traditions. These individuals do not see themselves as Wiccan either, as this term also seems to be too restrictive or specific to them. Some of them simply prefer to be called Pagan, and others like the term “occult practitioner”.

Many Pagans, including many of the ADF Druids, have cut all doctrinal and social ties to Christianity, and no longer identify with their Christian upbringing. When I asked why, many said that they disagreed with what they saw as the Catholic Church’s violent and dominant behavior throughout history. Others said that while they appreciated Jesus’ teachings, the Catholic Church itself had strayed far from its original tenets of love and forgiveness. Many ADF proto-grove members in Montreal mentioned that they did not believe in the concept of ‘original sin’ and that they did not wish to live their lives feeling guilty about their bodies or about their sexual orientation. Some Druids feel that Christianity has also played a role in disempowering humans and disconnecting them from the natural world. Neopaganism seeks to restore the sacred bond between humanity and the Earth, and Pagans believe that connection to be an important factor in preserving the environment in our modern era (Adler 2006, Ellison 2005).

Pagans see themselves as part of Nature's Web, not rulers of the Earth and its resources. Through veneration of the Earth and spiritual beings, practitioners are empowered by natural and ancestral forces, and over time they develop a kind of personal intentional energy that allows them to create 'magic' in their rituals, an ability that helps them overcome obstacles in their lives, instigate changes in their environment and accomplish their goals. In general, Pagans prefer to explore the nature-centered beliefs of their ancestors rather than follow the doctrines of Christianity.

### **3. Druid Beliefs and Practices**

Because most of the original Druidic knowledge was not preserved through writings, some newcomers to Druidry worry about questions of cultural legitimacy and wonder whether it is in fact possible to recreate early traditions. The ADF Druids at the Mother Grove in Arizona believe that through close observation and veneration of nature's cycles, they are following the same spiritual path as their ancestors. Here is how their Website deals with the question of the authenticity of today's Druids:

«Historically, there are no real Druids left. The Paleopagan Druids were wiped out centuries ago and only fragments of their traditions survived. Spiritually, we believe that we are following the paths once trod by our namesakes and that no other name is nobler or more suited to our modern intentions -- and that makes us real as far as we're concerned!»

#### *3.1. The Wheel of the Year*

There are no precise scripts or holy books that Druids abide by, but the knowledge they access is encoded in the passage of the seasons. Pagan societies used astronomical markers to plan their seasonal activities and to forge alliances with their deities, in order to assure their own material wellbeing. Ancient Druids made up the priestly class whose role was to store, calculate and teach knowledge about the cosmic order and also to enter into contact with the gods (Chadwick 2006).

Druids celebrate the turning of the planet in accordance with the Sun, which is called the 'turning of the Wheel of the Year' (Bonewits & Car-Gomm 2006). This is done by observing *Eight High Days of the Year*, the two solstices and the two equinoxes, as well as the four halfway points in between, which were originally known as large-scale fire festivals in ancient Europe. These eight high days are known as Samhain (October 31<sup>st</sup>), Yule/Winter Solstice (December 21<sup>st</sup>), Imbolc (February 2<sup>nd</sup>), Ostara (March 21<sup>st</sup>), Beltane (May 1<sup>st</sup>), Midsummer/Summer Solstice (June 21<sup>st</sup>), Lughnassadh (August 1<sup>st</sup>), and Mabon (September 21<sup>st</sup>).

Anchoring cosmic awareness through these eight high day rituals is seen by modern-day Druids as a fundamental aspect of their religion. Rituals celebrating the Wheel of the Year help put the participants into a meditative state of consciousness, which facilitates the integration of mind and spirit, and it can help them achieve personal growth, evolution and balance in their lives (Corrigan 2009), and ultimately increase the power of personal and collective magic.

### *3.2. What is a Druid Ritual Like?*

ADF rituals are open and accessible to people from all socioeconomic classes, and information about local events are available through the ADF website. There is no differentiation or discrimination based on class or background, and participants are asked to donate \$1-5 dollars to cover the costs of the ritual, but no one will be turned away for lack of funds.

According to my observation of ADF rituals in Montreal, all ceremonies usually take place outdoors (except in case of extreme weather) on one of the eight high days, and the ceremony is organized according the following basic structure<sup>3</sup>. How each section is actually carried out in practice depends on the creativity, attitude and mood of the members who are present at the specific ritual in question. Here are the basic steps involved in an ADF Druid ritual: 1) The preparation of the altar in the designated sacred space: the leader and core members set up the appropriate materials in the ritual area, lighting the central fire and making sure to lay out all elements that will be used in later steps. 2) The procession: the group of participants solemnly enters the place where the ritual is to be held, circling the ceremonial space three times, and then standing around the central fire near a tree. 3) Opening prayers: the group leader speaks, making a general request for the gods, goddesses and land spirits to bless the ritual. A few coins are offered to appease the Outdwellers, spiritual beings who may wish to participate in the ritual but who are not welcome for the specific spiritual tasks at hand, and are kindly asked to stay out of the circle. 4) The purpose of the rite is then stated and made clear to the gods: various participants voice their intentions and speak about why they are gathered at this time of year. The point in the Wheel of the Year is

described within its context in the cosmic order. For example, Samhain (October 31<sup>st</sup>) is the date designated to honor one's deceased ancestors, because the ancient Celts understood the date to be the time of year when the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead was at its thinnest (Corrigan 2009).

5) The Sacred Center is established: in the ADF tradition, this is done by anchoring the center of the ritual space through three important elements known as 'Gates to the gods' or the Triple Centre – the central Fire, the container of water (known as The Well), and the presence of a Tree. The Well is known as the Deep Gate, the Fire is referred to as the Bright Gate, and the Tree is revered as the All-Reaching Gate and each has a spiritual significance (Bonewits and Carr-Gomm 2006). Establishing the Sacred Center creates a safe sacred space within which to conduct the ritual.

6) Completing the cosmology and invoking the presence of specific deities associated with the ritual at hand. Different times of year are linked to particular deities, and the group leader names the gods and goddesses who are asked to participate in the circle.

7) The Opening of the Gate to the Other World: this step allows the participants to share space and begin direct communication with their gods and goddesses, who are now present in the circle with them.

8) Invocations of the local land spirits and the Ancestor Kindred are pronounced, and general offerings can be made to them by throwing grain, bark, plants, or paper messages directly into the fire. This step honors the original spirits of the land (who can be Native American) as well as the souls of deceased ancestors who may also be called into the ritual.

9) Honoring the deity of the ritual: specific songs are sung, and poems are recited in honor of the main deity being worshipped at that time of the year.

10) Personal offerings: individual participants take the time to make small

speeches or offer specific items that are related to the goals or desires they may wish to express. 11) The Prayer of Sacrifice: the performance of a poem or song containing a lot of repetition, or with a call and response structure between the reader and the participants. 12) The Omen: at this point in the ritual, the Druid leader may choose three runic stones from a cloth bag and interpret their messages for the participants. This is seen as a divinatory message from the gods, who may have a message for the participants of the ritual. 13) The Calling for Blessing: the participants speak in the circle and express their openness to receive divine blessing from the gods. 14) Hallowing the waters: the participants pass around wine or mead in the circle – this is sometimes accompanied by a “toast or boast” in which the person who is about to drink toasts to something general, or states a recent accomplishment or a desired intention. 15) Affirmation of blessings: the Druid leader affirms the actions taken by the participants in the ritual and begins to draw the ceremony to a close. 16) Thanking the Beings: all the non-human participants are clearly acknowledged and thanked for their presence in the ritual. 17) Closing the Gates: because the energetic gates to the world of the gods were opened earlier in the ritual, it is important to close those gates so that the humans can return to a normal state of consciousness, close the sacred space, and safely leave the ritual space. 18) Thanking the Earth Mother: the participants thank the Earth for all her gifts. 19) Statement of Ending: The Druid leader declares the ritual to be over, and the participants perform a procession three times around the ceremonial space, in the opposite direction from when they entered, and then they exit the ritual space.

### 3.3. *Druid Initiation*

ADF encourages its members to read and research as much as they can about Druidry before embarking into the ADF Druid initiation program, which is known as *The Dedicant's Path*. This program is based on scholarly study as well as personal exploration involving journaling, trying new meditation techniques and working with natural elements to increase one's ability to connect with the spiritual power of nature (Corrigan 2009). The Mother Grove encourages its members to base their beliefs on solid experience, scholarly concentration and frequent correspondence with others who are in the ADF Druid Clergy or who are also on The Dedicant Path. The program is a personal path of spiritual discovery, studies, prayer and introspection.

Raven completed his Dedicant Path years ago, and core members Val and Carla began their Dedicant Paths in 2007. It is necessary to undertake the Dedicant Path to be able to absorb the religious knowledge involved in ADF Druidry, because much of it occurs on a personal, individual level. Many of the Druidic concepts mentioned in the ritual structure, such as "Establishing the Triple Centre" and "making an offering to the Outdwellers" are better understood by neophytes when they are read and thought about before seeing them in action in ADF rituals.

The ADF Druids do not try to convert anyone to Druidry, nor do they try to convert other Pagans to ADF Druidry. Taking the plunge is always a matter of personal choice. Raven observed during his interview: « The way Pagans do things, we're very *non-evangelical*, so we don't go out and try to convert people. If people are

interested, we'll answer questions and we'll give out information, but we never really try to convert people.»

Myrdynna was another ADF member who I interviewed who was also following the Dedicant Path. Years ago, when she had embraced Paganism, she had gone through the process of filing an official letter of Apostasy with the Catholic Church.

She described her experience to me:

« When I wrote the Apostasy letter I had a sense of abandonment, to a degree. Not because of the religion, but because of the family. When you talk about ancestry... I have a picture of my grandparents and they were *pure Christian*, they were beyond Christian, they went to church every Sunday. And I am looking at them and I am like, to a degree, rejecting something they gave me. Because that's what Catholicism is, right? As soon as you're born, it's about giving to your child. It was kind of... That was the only moment the emotion really affected me... »

Myrdynna expressed some regret about abandoning the religion of her grandparents in favor of adopting the practices of her ancient ancestors, but ultimately felt confident in her decision.

There are several spiritual concepts generally adopted by most ADF Druids. One is the belief that divinity can be found within each person, and that it is also present in the external world. Finding and exploring the spiritual knowledge within oneself is another crucial aspect to the Druid path (Bonewits & Car-Gomm 2006). Furthermore, most Druids believe that divinity can manifest itself in female as well as male forms in nature, and these are conceived of as gods and goddesses, making the Druid cosmogony decidedly polytheistic. Masculine and feminine spiritual energies have equal importance; accordingly, initiates learn that it is

crucial to venerate both forces in nature to maintain spiritual balance (Greer 2005). These forces are present on multiple levels of reality and are both worthy of love and worship. They are personified with various characteristics that can be seen as positive or negative, but none of these qualities are seen as ultimately evil (Greer 2005). While the beliefs outlined above are generally accepted by all ADF members, each person has different ways of interpreting these concepts and expresses them in his or her own way. The ADF movement encourages intellectual debate and discussion about every aspect of the religion.

As previously mentioned, many Pagans are drawn to Druidry after having been involved in Wicca, either as solitary Pagans or as Wiccans who were part of covens. Wicca, also known as 'Neo-Pagan Witchcraft' is one of the fastest growing alternative religions in North America for people under 30 years of age (Adler 2006). Wicca and Druidry are both earth-based religions that have a lot in common. As is stated on the ADF Website, "The primary differences between Druidism and Wicca are these: Druidism is polytheistic, large-group oriented, and public. Wicca is duo theistic, small group oriented, and private. Nonetheless, the two religions have far more in common than they have separating them."

#### **4. Out of the Pagan Broom Closet**

Based on my observations in Montreal, most Neopagans, including the ADF Druids, tend to be very open-minded and tolerant, curious about many religious traditions and customs, and willing to experiment with their lives. Because their

beliefs are eclectic and seen as heretical by mainstream Christians, Neopagans have often been discriminated against, or misunderstood, which sometimes forces them into what they refer to as the Pagan Broom Closet, an analogy to the gay closet.

ADF Druidry encourages, but does not require, its members to go public with their beliefs. Being open about their beliefs is, according to the ADF Website:

“something that many Neopagan traditions have been reluctant to do. Granted, it may remain necessary for another decade or two for some Neopagans to remain in hiding wherever fundamentalist hate is rampant. Even for those of us in publicly oriented Neopagan groups, it will take courage and caution for us to safely *come from the shadows.*”

One of the reasons that Pagans are discriminated against is because outsiders believe that their spirituality is based on the imagination. The ADF Druids encourage debate as well as spiritual and academic research rather than indulging in fantasies. Here is an excerpt from the ADF Website that deals with this topic:

« ...we promote no tall tales of universal matriarchies, of Stonehenge being built by Druid magic, or of the ancient Druids originally having been shamanic crystal-masters from Atlantis. We do not whitewash the occasional barbarism of our predecessors, nor exaggerate it. »

All the participants are conscious of the fact that Neopagan Druidry is a fringe religion, far away from the mainstream. Many of them do not discuss their personal beliefs with outsiders, because they are met with criticism or disapproval. Myrdynna, who is a Druid and is also gay, mentioned in her interview:

«You know, it's kind of sad, but you are going to discover that some people are not accepting. I've had high school friends that I have reconnected with, and they are like, what? You are a Druid

now? A Pagan? Oh my God... You know, I have had more discrimination about the religion than about my homosexuality.»

Myrdynna's observations led me to understand that while much progress has been made in terms of respect towards sexual orientation, followers of fringe religions still experience discrimination because of their beliefs.

#### *4.1. Being Pagan Today: Exploring Ethnic Ancestry*

Exploring ethnic ancestry is an important component of contemporary Paganism and Druidry. Participants seek to connect with the spiritual path of their ancestors, which involves digging into their personal family history. The ADF Druids in Montreal explored the connections to their ethnic ancestry in Ireland, France and Scandinavia. Raven told me about his experience exploring his ancestral roots from Norway. Since adopting an alternate religion at the age of 15, Raven always felt different from other people. He began learning about Paganism on his own and then began attending rituals with other Pagans in his late teens.

«I had chosen the Norse pantheon of deities to deal with, because that's what my roots were, and that's what sort of made sense to me. And I was just starting to realize what that meant, because a religion is more than just gods and goddesses that you deal with, it's also a cultural thing. The way that cultural group approaches things, so I was just starting to study that...»

He also began to learn the Old Norse language so that he could recite prayers in the language of his ancestors.

Some ADF participants, such as Mana, were concerned about ethnic legitimacy. She stated in her interview that she does not have Celtic or Norse roots, but has Danish and Italian roots, and wondered if her Druid beliefs and practices were

somehow inauthentic, based on the identity of her ancestors. Here is what the ADF Website says with regards to questions of ethnic legitimacy:

« You don't have to be Irish to be part of ADF. Despite the Irish name for our organization and the use of the Celtic term for clergy ("druids"), our members come from a wide variety of ancestries, including European, Asian, Native American, and African. We have no time or sympathy for racist nonsense or cultural bigotry. Our members honor Celtic, Germanic, Lithuanian, Polish, Greek and other Indo-European deities, ancestors and nature spirits. If you're sincerely interested in any of the old Indo-European cultures and its metaphysics, arts, and customs, then you're welcome in our ranks. »

Nevertheless, Mana continued to worry about ethnic legitimacy, and was also hesitant to embrace one particular pantheon; these may have been some of the factors that led her to discontinue her interactions with the other ADF Druids in 2009.

#### *4.2. ADF Druids and Gender Issues*

Since Raven worships goddesses as well as gods, he has a strong reverence for women. During his interview, he stated, «being Pagan...it makes me less of a chauvinist! Because if I don't respect women, how can I respect my goddess, on basic levels?» Raven also affirms that Paganism in general has made him more open and tolerant of homosexuality, since many members of the Pagan community are gay. Many did not find support within the Catholic religion, and turned to Paganism. He told me that about a quarter of the Druids in the *Silverfox Grove* were gay, and they were close friends of his, «at least five of the twenty *Silverfoxers*, back in the day, had a lifestyle choice like that... I'd be pretty surprised to see Pagans who have a problem with it. » In general, like many

members of the Neo-Pagan community around the world, Raven is tolerant towards different sexual orientations.

Most of the informants I interviewed did not specifically bring up gender dynamics within their families. Myrdynna, who is gay, did mention that at age 20 she came out of the closet as well as the Pagan broom-closet to her family at the same time. Her father cried for two days, and then accepted her and her family has not given her any problems since she came out. In her interview, she stated: « ...Like my father, [...] he was curious about the other part. He goes to me, well, what's Pagan? And I tell him it's about nature, it's an earth-based religion... and he loves nature... so he says, well maybe I'm Pagan! »

#### *4.3. Spiritual Trajectories*

The people I interviewed had a similar spiritual trajectory that played out in distinct ways: they were often very curious about spirituality and world religions as children, were often raised in devoutly Christian settings, discovered Paganism in their early or mid teens, through books or online, and began researching it fervently and adopting elements into their lives throughout their adolescence, dabbling in Wicca, and shedding or transforming their Christian background. For some, this was also coupled with research into their families' ancestral ethnic background. Raven, at 15, began questioning Christianity and decided to learn about the religion of his Norwegian ancestors. Rakshann, a participant who attended ADF rituals sporadically, said that at age 12, fell in love with the medieval world and began

investigating her French roots and different aspects of Western mystery traditions, involving aspects of Paganism. Mana affirms that she began doing solitary Wiccan rituals in her room, as a teenager, never telling her parents what she was doing. Myrdynna began seriously exploring Paganism at the same time as she began exploring homosexuality in her teens.

Each member spoke about his or her religious identity in an open-minded, inclusive and conscious way. They all know that their spiritual path is constantly unfolding and changing and it incorporates many elements from Druidry, as well as other Pagan spiritual branches, and other religions they have researched, and their ethnic background, forming a unique kind of bricolage for each individual, based on heritage, study and spiritual experience. Mana and Myrdynna are quick to say that their identity is constantly changing and adapting itself as they continue down the Dedicant Path. Myrdynna has a strong desire to participate in spiritual traditions with a community and standardize her beliefs according to one a single system. Mana, on the other hand, is not ready to just accept the Druid system of beliefs and is still interested in incorporating other elements, even though she was also on the Dedicant Path at the time of research. Raven also attests that his Druid practice is constantly evolving as he gains more experience. In Rakshann's case, she participates in ADF rituals but does not identify as an ADF member, and her religious identity is extremely eclectic: she incorporates elements from Tibetan Buddhism, Christianity, Paganism, Hinduism and many different New Age currents.

## 5. The Use of Social Media in Druid Networks

ADF Clergy members pride themselves on making all of their religious information as accessible as possible, available through their website. Many of the contacts and exchanges with other Pagan and Druid branches are done by communicating through online networks, exchanging books at Pagan events, and participating in festivals and workshops. Online technologies currently play a crucial role in event organization, and in the general development of contemporary Neopagan networks. For example, the first Pagan meeting I attended in Montreal was organized by Raven via the website [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com), an online meeting planner which allows individuals with similar interests in the same geographical area to find each other. I would not have met the ADF Druids had I not consulted that website.

Two of the solitary occult practitioners who sporadically attend ADF rituals, Rakshann and Le Mage, met each other via the [www.vampirefreaks.com](http://www.vampirefreaks.com) online network, and quickly become very close friends. They had also met other Pagan friends through similar networks, or by reading their blogs. By sharing their occult knowledge through online profiles, like-minded people find each other. Rakshann and Le Mage admitted to me that it was very rare to find people with their particular interests, and they were grateful for their online meeting.

ADF Druidry has a vast and active website, [www.adf.org](http://www.adf.org) that is used for everything from member sign-up and grove sign-up to sharing online documents related to ritual structure, etc. Many of the ADF Druids correspond with each other through

the website and the religion would not have the impact and scope that it has at present without the Internet. Mana and Myrdynna had been visiting the ADF Website for many years before finally deciding to start the Dedicant Path initiation program in 2007. Val and Carla, core members of the *Island Willow Protogrove*, also frequently consulted the site to obtain information and guide them in the Dedicant Path training. Raven used it to help plan rituals. By mid-2008, Raven also began using Facebook to invite people to rituals. He also makes frequent use of email to contact other members in Montreal and in the rest of North America.

For new people interested in ADF, the Internet has been a major factor in allowing the community to come together online and then celebrate their high days together in person. ADF leaders such as Raven who announce their public rituals on the Web have no problem integrating new members who are respectful and eager to understand Druidry. The involvement of some of the ADF members in contemporary online gaming culture links their current practice to the realm of fantasy, but for the most part video games stay out of the picture, even though some participants may hang out after rituals and play video games together.

The rest of the Montreal Pagan Community also consistently uses the Internet to share information, via its main Website, <http://mprc-crpm.ca/>. Most if not all of the Anglophone Pagan news in Quebec circulates in the city of Montreal, with the closest neighboring English-speaking links being in Ottawa and Toronto. Within the Montreal Pagan Community, Raven maintains links to the Concordia University Undergraduate Pagan Society (CUPS) as well as the Montreal Pagan Resource

Centre, which is located in a store called *Mélange Magique / The Magical Blend* that sells Pagan and magical supplies in the downtown Montreal area. Maintaining these two contacts, and the online networks affiliated to them (forums on their websites, Facebook groups, e-mail list-servs) Raven manages to disseminate information about his proto-grove to people who traditionally align themselves with Wicca or Asatru (the ancient Viking religion) while those who are interested in ADF Druidry can obtain the information necessary to attend a ritual and see if they want to join the proto-grove.

Most ADF participants I met are enthusiastic about using modern technology, such as the Internet, to learn more and connect with other like-minded people throughout the world. They often use personal blogs and online forums to get their ideas out into the public. However, some of the participants have lively debates about using modern technology for ‘unnatural’ purposes, such as the government using the web to track its citizens and infringe on their private lives.

## **6. Language in Druid Rituals: A Mirror of the Past and Present**

In my fieldwork, I became interested in the mechanics of the interactions between the human and non-human participants in the Druid rituals, and saw language as a communicative tool that humans would use to contact their gods. In this last section, I will use my background in linguistic anthropology and briefly explore linguistic performativity in Druid rituals, and discuss the social role of language and linguistic affiliation in the two Druid networks I engaged with.

Language is mobilized in the Druid ritual setting in order to unite the participants and to call upon the gods. Ceremonial language is therefore often solemn and planned in advance. If improvised, it is often slow, poetic and grave. Poetry and chant often punctuate the different parts of the ritual, and the participants use these oral tools to engage with the non-human participants of the rite in different ways. The importance of the spoken word in a ritual setting goes back to the time of the early Indo-Europeans, who understood the power of language. It is now known that in early Hindu and Irish oral traditions, the solemn pronunciation of a truth was used in order to produce a definite and often immediate effect on the external world (Chadwick 2006). It was believed that an active intellectual force, when verbally expressed, could ensure the society's prosperity, abundance and fertility, protection from plague, calamity and enemy attack.

As many of the ADF participants explained to me, the power of the spoken word derives from its ability to channel and express sacred truths. The mastery of poetic art was treasured by Druids of the past and highly regarded by modern-day Druids. The recitation of poetic formulas definitely holds an important place for Druids today. For example, as Raven explained in his interview, "the songs are like offerings" and play a role as gifts dedicated to the gods.

In ancient Celtic society, the Druids were the transmitters of cultural and spiritual knowledge, and often they did this by reciting hymns in the praise of the gods. This would ensure that the gods continue to bestow wealth and health to the

community. Today, songs and poems sung together still help build a sense of community and purpose. Poetry and chants often punctuate the different parts of the ritual, and the participants use these oral tools to engage with the non-human participants of the rite.

But how exactly is human language used in order to contact the gods? In the words of Boutios, a modern Francophone Druid who sometimes celebrates rituals with the Druids in *La communauté celtique* (The Celtic Community), the sounds of language are composed of primordial cosmic energetic vibrations that resonate in the air. Vowels harmonize with each other to create new vibrations, which reach the gods. Vowels in conjunction with certain consonants can produce transcendental effects. The deities are receptive to these sounds because they can apparently understand human languages, and sense the energy directed towards them. Here is an example of a French Druidic prayer that I heard at every francophone ritual in the Celtic Community; it directly addresses the gods and invokes their collaboration in the ritual:

« Esprits Bienfaisants, et Âmes des Celtes, veuillez accepter l'aide de nos bras et de nos forces, pour qu'elle soit harmonieuse avec vos Intelligences. Veuillez nous aider, nous guider, nous conseiller, pour que de nos efforts conjugués renaisse une Patrie plus belle, dans laquelle vivront éternellement les Âmes des Celtes, dans un Ciel entièrement nôtre, sous la Lumière de l'Incréé. »

The ADF tradition perceives the use of poetic language slightly differently. In the words of Raven of ADF, "poetry and chants are like verbal forms of offerings to the gods, just like we offer grain and water and mead to them." Ceremonial language is therefore often planned in advance and becomes set in stone as part of the uttered

liturgy, because it must be perfect if it is intended as a gift to divine entities. Here is an example of an ADF prayer, which can also be found on the ADF Website:

«I come to the sacred grove of the elder ways, toward the sacred center, to the meeting place of the worlds. I approach the gods in pride and wonder, as a seeker of blessing, bringing offerings in honor of all of the kinds of spirits. I come to the well and kindle fire to make an oath of dedication to the path of old wisdom, the eternal way. » (*A Dedicant's Oath Rite*, ADF)

The Druids all assert that the power of the spoken word comes from its ability to channel and express sacred truths. Traditionally, they believe that solemn pronunciation of a truth can produce a definite and often immediate effect on the external world, such as ensuring the practitioners' prosperity, abundance and fertility, and protection from disease and calamity (Chadwick 2006). In both Druid groups, the rituals are primarily conducted in the members' native language, but there is some effort to incorporate short prayers in Old Irish among the Anglophone Druids, and some poetry in the Breton language among the Francophone Druids. However, this revival of ancient languages is not the primary focus of the rituals.

The two Quebec Druid communities I encountered demonstrate their relationship to their past and present cultural ties in different ways. The Anglophone Druids explore connections to their ethnic ancestry in Ireland & Scandinavia, and in the present, they maintain links to the rest of English North America through the ADF fellowship, which has become a large network that has collaborators working on various aspects of the liturgy and structural organization of the religion. Operating within this context has resulted in a standardized Druid practice for Anglophones in Quebec, linked to ADF groves throughout North America.

The Francophone Druid community<sup>4</sup> has members of all ages, but most of them were much older than the Anglophone Druids in the ADF network, between 40 and 60 years of age at the time of our research. They were mostly males of European descent and have middle to upper class backgrounds. Some of them have studied the cultural links between the ancient Celtic Druids of Gaul and the original Brahmans of India, both of whom composed the priestly classes of early Indo-European societies. In consequence, many of the members integrate yoga into their lives and some even study Sanskrit. These eclectic Druids come from diverse backgrounds. Many of them have been involved in the provincial educational system as teachers and administrators, and they all strongly promote the conservation of Francophone Québécois culture, seeing it as a facet of Celtic culture that has survived until the present<sup>5</sup>.

Contrary to the ADF Druid network, the francophone Celtic Community does not have standardized rituals and members do not always agree on how the reconstruction of ancient Druidry should be put into practice. Those who gravitate towards one of the francophone Druid orders in Quebec, the *Druidic Order of Arvernica*, try to impose a more dogmatic view of Druidry, drawing upon strong links to the culture of northern France. Two of these Druids argue that they maintain an unbroken lineage to their Druid ancestors in France. They argue that Druidry is actually the base of Christianity and that Jesus spent part of his youth in the sacred teaching centers of Bibracte in ancient Gaul, these views are circulated in the pamphlets they have available at rituals. These Druids put a lot of emphasis on the role of compassionate love and personal sacrifice in their doctrine, and incorporate

elements that actually seem very Christian, like the ritual use of wine and bread. This is quite a departure from other Neo-Druidic practices in North America. Members of ADF would never argue that Jesus was a Druid, because they feel there is no way to prove this theory.

The other viewpoint found within the same francophone Celtic Community is embodied in the members who are affiliated to another Druid branch, *Kredenn Geltiek*; they value not only a return to the Celtic Breton roots of local Québécois culture, but also seek to revive some aspects of peasant witchcraft that early colonists brought with them here from France, as well as practices that later immigrants brought to Quebec from Ireland. These particular francophone Druids reject Christianity completely – after all, they did grow up during Quebec’s Quiet Revolution.

The source of the reconstruction conflict between the two Francophone Druidic orders is clearly based on what appropriate tradition, or temporal period of the past, should be revived, and how. All the Druids in the Francophone network can agree on their common prehistoric Indo-European heritage, as well as their Celtic heritage, but they argue about which Celtic elements from the last 5 millennia should be interpreted as the most important for present-day rituals in the modern context of Quebec. In any case, the Francophone Druids usually manage to compromise, and when they perform their rituals in their sacred site in the forest near Lachute, they usually adopt a style more in line with the *Kredenn Geltiek*, that is reviving early Québécois folklore, and when rituals are performed in Acton Vale,

the rather dogmatic *Arvernia* style concentrating on imagined or interpreted information from early Gaul is adopted.

In contrast to the ADF group, the Francophone Druids refer to their ancestral connections to the early French colonists, as well as their forefathers in ancient Gaul and Ireland. These Druids do not forge links with English North America, but rather to two different Druid orders in Europe. The result of this fragmented practice is a non-standardized practice of Druidry amongst French Quebecers. From what I observed, the fact that the ADF rituals are practiced in English and are mostly organized according to Irish traditions reflects the identity of Anglophone immigrants who arrived in North America over the past few hundred years.

The Francophone Druid community has been much more discreet about their activities than the ADF network. The members are from an older generation, and one of the main differences from ADF was that they have little interest in online networking and video games. All of the Francophone Druids expressed a deep connection to Mother Earth, and commitment to reviving the spirit of the Celts in Quebec. However, it was harder to gain their trust when I began attending their rituals. They were more secretive about their belief system, and more reluctant to give interviews. Some were hesitant about revealing their Druid identity, as some of them had lost their jobs over such issues in the 1980's. Given the marginality of their religious practices and beliefs, many of the francophone Druids feel they have reasons to remain 'closet Pagans' their whole lives.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, in a desire to practice a religion that is alternative to Christianity but still connected to their ethnic roots, some Quebecers belonging to both English and French speech communities are reviving Druidic practices whose origins lie in ancient Europe. Practitioners of Druidry are interested in connecting to nature, cultivating personal energy (known as 'magick') and connecting with other like-minded people through rituals scheduled on the solstices and equinoxes, and dates between them. The modern revival of Druidry is part of the larger Neo-Pagan movement taking shape throughout the Western world, and is linked to environmentalism and alternative spiritual belief systems. Many practitioners still hesitate to reveal their beliefs to outsiders, for fear of judgment. The two groups I encountered in Quebec saw the challenges of attempting to standardize a new official version of a prehistoric religion that never existed in a standardized form throughout the many temporal and cultural contexts of the Celtic past. The revival is therefore based on study of texts as well as personal and collective re-interpretation of ancient rituals. The Anglophone community's revival of Druidry is relatively recent, and is affiliated to a larger North American fellowship of Druids, whereas the Francophone community has existed for a number of years, yet is more isolated from the rest of the continent, although maintaining links to France. Modern Druidic practices will continue to evolve among the youth, as the use of online technologies, including social media, are mobilized to connect like-minded individuals with a strong passion for reviving ancient culture.

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## **Biography**

Anna Luisa Daigneault obtained her M.Sc in Anthropology from Université de Montréal in 2010. Her area of focus is linguistic anthropology and has specialized in the conservation of indigenous traditions, as well as the use of digital technology to promote minority languages. She currently works for Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, and is based in the U.S. She is also a sound artist.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See the group's website for an explanation of the name: <https://www.adf.org/about/basics/what-is-adf.html> (consulted on Nov. 26, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The ADF website is open to the public and located at [www.adf.org](http://www.adf.org)

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed accounts of modern-day Druid rituals, see Bonewits and Carr-Gomm 2006, Corrigan 2009, and Ellison 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Studied by Véronique Jourdain. Whose report will be published in the same series as this one.

<sup>5</sup> According to Jourdain, this group's composition has changed somewhat since the time of the fieldwork.