THE RECLAIMING COMMUNITY OF MONTREAL:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Document de travail / Working Paper
2010

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Dépôt légal : 2010
ISBN : 978-2-921631-34-1
ISBN : 978-2-921631-35-8 (numérique)
Bibliothèque nationale du Canada
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

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 de nombreux chercheurs : Josiane Le Gall (Université du Québec à Montréal), Marie-Nathalie LeBlanc (Université du Québec à 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 Géraldine Mossière (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.

Table of contents

Introduction

The Reclaiming community of Montreal is a local Pagan group based on an international movement known as Reclaiming witchcraft. Reclaiming witchcraft, also called the Reclaiming tradition, is particular among contemporary Pagan groups in that it aims to connect earth-based spirituality with sociopolitical and environmental activism.

In this paper, I give a brief overview of contemporary Paganism, followed by background information about the Reclaiming tradition. Next, I focus on the Reclaiming community of Montreal, using information gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews, as well as through my own involvement with the group. I then move into a more specific examination of gender identity, sexual orientation, and other topics falling under the banner of sexuality; I chose to focus on these issues because they are important to a large number of people who identify with Reclaiming witchcraft, and because they set Reclaiming apart from other religious groups and other contemporary Pagan traditions.

Contemporary Paganism

Contemporary Paganism is a relatively new religio-spiritual movement that has been on the rise in Western (primarily English-speaking) cultures since the mid-1900s, gaining momentum in conjunction with the feminist and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 70s. Several different terms are employed to describe this movement, by practitioners

and researchers alike, the most common being contemporary Paganism, Neopaganism, or simply Paganism. While Wicca, perhaps the most visible branch of the movement, is sometimes used interchangeably with these terms, most practitioners draw a fairly distinct line between what is Wicca and what is Paganism in a broader sense.

In the broader sense, contemporary Paganism encompasses diverse practices such as goddess worship, Ceremonial Magic, Druidism and neo-Shamanism, as well as a number of movements based on mythologies and magical traditions of ancient cultures such as Norse, Greek, Egyptian and Celtic. The movement itself is extremely diverse, with some considering it an attempted reconstruction of pre-Christian beliefs and practices, and others focusing on creating a new spiritual system that addresses a range of issues pertinent to current society and draws upon a variety of religious and cultural elements. Contemporary Pagans usually practice some sort of polytheism, animism, pantheism, panentheism[1], or a combination of some or all of these at once. In short, the Pagan movement is extremely diverse, comprising a myriad of sub-movements, traditions, belief systems, communities and individual orientations.

Reclaiming witchcraft

One of these sub-movements is Reclaiming witchcraft, which was born out of a teaching collective in San Francisco in the late 1970s. Author and activist Starhawk was one of its founders, and continues to be a visible presence in the movement. Today, Reclaiming is a non-profit religious organization in California, and there are many other communities and groups identifying with this tradition throughout North America, Europe and Australia (Reclaiming 2006).

The name *Reclaiming* comes from a desire to focus on reclaiming power in a number of ways, such as the power to be creators and healers, political and social power to fight back against destructive and oppressive societal forces, and the power of community that transcends class and racial boundaries (Salomonsen 2002).

Self-positioning

In a field that is increasingly interested with intersubjectivity, phenomenology and the positioning and repositioning of the self, there is a growing number of anthropologists who are conducting research "at home" (Jackson 1987), within communities to which they themselves belong[2], or who are becoming involved in their research to a greater and more personal extent (or at least are finally willing to admit their involvement). Anthropologist Linda Jencson writes, in a text about anthropologists who are also practitioners of Paganism and Shamanism:

> The witch who took me under her wing to teach me as an apprentice witch taught me techniques of hypnosis used in vision quests to contact spirits. She proudly told me that she had learned them in a shamanism workshop from Michael Harner, an anthropologist as well as a practitioner of the magical arts… And in the tradition, I, the anthropologist, within a year of entering the field, went on to teach the same technique to other budding witches (Jencson 1989: 4).

In a similar vein, I chose to conduct research within a community that I am not only involved in as a participant, but as an active organizer and teacher, and to the extent that the term is applicable, a leader.

The religious group

Group structure and governance

The Montreal Reclaiming community is but one branch of the larger Reclaiming tradition, and all of the diverse local groups are autonomous structurally and hierarchically, connected only by a shared identification and common threads of belief and practice. Because of this, I will explain how the movement functions on both levels, even though my research was centered primarily on the local community and not on the Reclaiming tradition as a whole.

On an international level, there is no explicit governing structure. There are groups who make decisions about the internal workings and evolution of the Reclaiming tradition; for instance, one such group deals with all things related to the Internet, such as maintaining websites and moderating electronic mailing lists. Another is in charge of coordinating Witch Camps, intensive retreats held throughout North America and Europe. At different points during Reclaiming's history, people have come together to make decisions regarding the direction of the tradition; for example, "The Principles of Unity", a document outlining the core principles and beliefs shared by those who identify with Reclaiming, was written collectively at a visioning retreat in 1997 (Reclaiming 1997). It subsequently became an institutionalized and more or less "official" definition of Reclaiming witchcraft.

As the Reclaiming tradition attempts to operate in a non-hierarchical fashion, the concept of religious leader as a pastor, priest, charismatic figure, prophet or any individual who bestows spiritual information upon the masses is highly discouraged. Instead, I have observed that those who stand out as "leaders" are those who take on more organizing

responsibilities, who regularly have a role in rituals, and/or who facilitate workshops or teach classes. In the Montreal community, there are a few people who are considered leaders by this definition, but no one has more official power than anyone else. Anyone who comes to a meeting has a voice in the decision-making process, which is generally carried out using the consensus model[3].

As opposed to some branches of contemporary Paganism that place a great deal of importance on initiation and coven hierarchy[4], the Reclaiming tradition is relatively egalitarian. This is not to say that hierarchy is completely absent, but there is a conscious effort to eliminate it as much as possible.

One area in which this becomes quite interesting is teaching. In the Reclaiming teaching model there is usually an experienced teacher (called the "teacher") and a less-experienced teacher (called the "student teacher"). Anybody who has an interest in teaching, and feels knowledgeable enough about the subject matter, can become a student teacher, provided they find a more experienced teacher to work with. In my own case, a few months after having been a student in a course called "Elements of Magic", which explores the elements of air, fire, water, earth and spirit in a magical context, I co-organized and co-facilitated a series of workshops on the same topic. I was a student teacher in this sense, working alongside a more experienced teacher. While this model can lead to clear-cut hierarchical boundaries, I have participated in classes in which it was impossible to tell who was the teacher and who was the student teacher, which speaks to the ease that both felt as sharers of knowledge, as well as the ability to work outside of conventional social hierarchies.

Organizing and facilitating rituals is also carried out in a non-hierarchical way. In the Montreal community, a handful of people meet to plan a ritual, and each one usually

takes a role in the ritual itself. If there are more roles than there are people at the planning meeting, a call-out will be made (usually on the electronic mailing list, or "e-list") asking for volunteers, or, if it is a smaller, less formal ritual, roles may be assigned right before the ritual starts. There is usually an effort to include as many people as possible in the ritual, and participants enjoy considerable personal freedom as to how they interpret their role.

Dogma, doctrines, beliefs and norms

A long-time Reclaiming teacher told me that she had a lot of difficulty in describing the tradition's beliefs. She had been asked to represent Reclaiming on an interfaith panel at a conference, and replied, "What would I say? I have no idea!", since there are so few, if any, beliefs that are common to all participants (personal communication, November 2007). Part of this difficulty stems from the fact that many people who identify with Reclaiming also identify with other groups or movements, or at least incorporate a certain amount of syncretism with other belief systems into their practice; the resulting spiritual practice and belief system is therefore quite unique and personal[5].

However, just testifying to participants' diverse beliefs does not give a very complete picture of this tradition, so I will elaborate on certain aspects of Reclaiming philosophy and theosophy that appear to be widespread among practitioners I have met.

<u>Immanence</u>

Immanence means that all divinity/deity/spirit is found in the matter of the universe: in humans and other animals, in trees and plants, in mountains, in dirt and stones. Nothing

exists outside of the material, but this is not to be confused with materialism, a philosophy often paired with an atheistic view referring to a world devoid of divinity/deity/spirit. Immanence is, in a sense, opposed to the notion of transcendence, whereby divinity is separate from the material world, something found in a higher realm, an astral plane, a heaven; one must leave the world and everything material to reach it. In an immanent perspective, divinity is everywhere, in everything, but it also means that divinity *is* everything.

Divinity

Although divinity is immanent in all matter for many contemporary Pagans, particularly those in the Reclaiming tradition, there are many different ways to conceive of gods and goddesses. Mythological and polytheistic traditions from around the world are very important in most Pagan traditions, and certain well-known figures such as Odin and Freya (Norse), Athena (Greek), Isis (Egyptian), among many others are often invoked in public ritual and personal practice alike. Whether these deities are conceived of as archetypes, manifestations of universal power, or as individual gods and goddesses, differs according to the group and the practitioner. In Reclaiming, it is common to invoke deity in a more general or open sense, rather than calling to specific goddesses or gods; "Mysterious Ones" is one term often used in Reclaiming rituals[6]. There are also some practitioners who have a more animistic view of the world and who do not refer to any conception of deity.

In many contemporary Pagan traditions, and especially in Reclaiming, gender figures strongly in decisions about working with deities. Many Pagans work with a female and a male deity specifically to create "balance" in their practice. However, some practitioners

do not view divinity as gendered at all, and work with deity deemed to be queer, that is, possessing neither explicitly female nor male traits, or possessing equal amounts of both, and often having the capacity to move fluidly between genders.

The earth

> …[T]he earth is alive and all of life is sacred and interconnected. We see the Goddess as immanent in the earth's cycles of birth, growth, death, decay and regeneration. Our practice arises from a deep, spiritual commitment to the earth, to healing and to the linking of magic with political action (Reclaiming 1997).

This paragraph demonstrates very well, in my opinion, the attitude toward the earth that is found in the Reclaiming tradition. Many other Pagan traditions share these sentiments, but the emphasis on political activism as well as magical action is one thing that sets Reclaiming apart.

Local and global dynamics

Connections between the different Reclaiming communities are, for the most part, fluid and informal, in the sense that there is no real structure or hierarchy that ties them together. It is often said that one needs only to call oneself a witch to become one, and it is much the same in this case. Any group of people can declare themselves a Reclaiming community and it is so; there is no application process, no documents to fill out and no tithes to pay. It is only understood that the group has chosen to respect the Principles of Unity.

Still, it is important to note that there are often ties between communities, and small local communities at times come together to create larger regional communities. Witch Camp

is one example of this. The closest camp to Montreal is in Vermont, and several members of the Montreal Reclaiming community travel south to Vermont for the week-long intensive retreat each August, where they meet with other Reclaimers from primarily New England and Eastern Canada.

Gender, ethnicity and class

In contemporary Paganism, the vast majority of practitioners are white and middle class, with a high percentage being women. The Montreal Reclaiming community is not much of an exception, although it is possible that the average income level is less in this community than in other Pagan groups in the city, due to a mixture of a significant number of students, working class people, and anarchists who choose not to participate in the wage labor system. Because of this, it is rare to charge for events, and in those cases where money is needed (such as for space rental), facilitators generally choose to use a sliding scale.

Relatively speaking, there is not much ethnic diversity in contemporary Paganism as a whole, mostly because the Pagan movement is centered on reviving and reinterpreting pre-Christian European religious beliefs and practices. As such, the majority of adherents are of European ancestry. As gender is the focus of the second part of this paper, I will save my reflections on this issue for a later section.

Ritual

Ritual holds an enormous importance in the Reclaiming community, as it is the primary reason for people to come together. Most rituals are held for one of three particular reasons: sabbats, esbats, and rites of passage.

Sabbats

There are eight sabbats during the year: four solar holidays (the solstices and the equinoxes), as well as four "cross-quarter" holidays, usually referred to by their Celtic names, found in between the previous four (Imbolc or Candlemass around February 1st, Beltane around May 1st, Lughnassad or Lammas around August 1st, and Samhain or Halloween on October 31st). They are often celebrated in large public rituals, especially Beltane and Samhain, which can draw out more than 100 people, many of whom are involved in other Pagan traditions or do not consider themselves to be part of a particular group at all.

Esbats

While sabbats celebrate the cycles of the sun, esbats celebrate the cycles of the moon. Lunar rituals are often smaller and more private; there have been very few public esbats in Montreal in the last few years besides those organized by the Reclaiming community.

Rites of passage

Rites of passage mark life changes for individuals, and can be celebrated whenever there is a need. Included in this category are the birth of a new life into the community, the passage from adolescent to adult (often at menarche for girls), marriage, childbirth,

the passage from adult to elder, and finally the passage into death. There are no set beliefs regarding life and death that all Pagans ascribe to, but many, if not most, incorporate some version of reincarnation into their belief system, and many view these stages of life as part of a continuous cycle.

Ritual structure

While ritual can be fairly different from tradition to tradition and group to group, a common framework is used in most cases.

A Reclaiming ritual commonly begins with everybody standing in a circle. A “grounding”, usually a short, guided meditation, leads participants to feel their connection to the earth; this is followed by the casting of a circle, which serves to set the ritual space apart from ordinary space, and to create an energetic container around the participants. Next, the elements are called upon, invoked, embodied, or invited, depending on intention and individual preference, followed by any deities that figure in the ritual. The central action can take on many different forms, depending on what the ritual is about; it can be long or short, active or calm, participatory or personal. Next is a time for raising energy, but this too, varies greatly. It most often consists of singing and dancing to a point where participants feel filled with energy, which is then sent off toward a goal or taken in to be used in personal healing. After this, the deities and elements are thanked, usually in reverse order, and the circle is released.

All of this can take anywhere from twenty minutes to three hours, depending on the group, the goal, and the central action. After a ritual, there is often feasting and merriment, which usually means a potluck meal.

The body and altered states of consciousness

The Reclaiming tradition is considered an "ecstatic" tradition, highlighting an emphasis on altered states of consciousness. Singing, dancing, meditation and trance are all examples of tools used to achieve ecstatic states, setting Reclaiming apart from most other contemporary Pagan traditions[7].

The body is a tool through which practitioners achieve such altered states, and the concept of immanence enters here. While many adherents of other religions strive to reach a "higher" consciousness outside of the body, the Reclaiming tradition does not see the body as something to escape, but rather as a conduit or tool through which to experience ecstasy—even as embodied ecstasy itself, as an expression of divinity in corporeal form.

Modes of expression and new technologies

Speech is used in Reclaiming rituals, although perhaps less so than in other Neopagan traditions, whose rituals might consist almost entirely of recitations of verse. When speech enters into a Reclaiming ritual, it is often in the form of a guided meditation, or a verbal invocation of deities or elements, but other kinds of invocations are also very common. Song plays a large role in Reclaiming ritual, and it is not unusual to have a ritual in which more is sung than spoken. Likewise, expression through movement and dance is extremely important, and a ritual can consist primarily—or entirely—of non-vocal expression.

Along with the question of expression comes that of language, which is of particular interest in a bilingual city. The Reclaiming community in Montreal is primarily Anglophone, as it is in the rest of the world, but there has been in recent months a growing Francophone presence at rituals, particularly for the lunar celebrations. Because of this, effort has been put into more bilingualism in ritual, and into finding more Pagan songs in French[8].

Another prominent mode of expression is through electronic means. The Montreal Reclaiming community uses an e-list for disseminating information, arranging meetings, and personal networking and conversation. The community also has a website, which is updated regularly and which contains all the necessary information about Reclaiming events[9].

Several scholars of contemporary Paganism have made note of the rapid growth in numbers of Neopagans in the last decade, which they ascribe largely to the prevalence of the Internet[10]. In the local community, there has been a definite correlation between wider online visibility and new participants. Once the informational website was in place, there was a rise in ritual participation and e-list membership; before this, information was spread primarily through word of mouth, and the community grew at a much slower rate[11].

Healing practices

Healing is an important aspect of Reclaiming witchcraft, and many rituals have a certain amount of focus on healing, whether of the self (physically, emotionally or spiritually), of others, or of the planet (common in an earth-based spirituality).

Many people in this tradition are also involved in various holistic healing practices, such as massage, *reiki*, and herbalism. Along with *reiki*, another popular Eastern practice involves working with the *chakra* system. Each of the seven *chakras* found in different locations of the body represents a different energy, has a different sphere of influence, and is tied to different types of emotion and activity that we experience. Performing "*chakra* alignment" and "*chakra* cleansing" is quite common, and *chakras* are frequently referred to in ritual.

Another reason for the importance of healing lies in the fact that many people involved in Reclaiming are recovering from drug and alcohol addictions. Because of this, events generally have a no-substance policy. This is yet another way in which Reclaiming diverges from other contemporary Pagan traditions, many of which have a practice of passing around an alcoholic drink as part of ritual.

Modernity

There is a significant amount of research in the field of Pagan Studies about contemporary Paganism and modernity. A religion that aims to revive, reinterpret and reestablish beliefs and practices from ancient times, but that is at the same time very anchored in the modern age (urban life, using new technologies, globalized cultural exchange), offers many different avenues to approach this question and examine the ramifications of what seems to be an incongruity.

A well-known academic specialist on contemporary Paganism, Margot Adler, writes that Pagans "share the goal of living in harmony with nature and tend to view humanity's 'advancement' and separation from nature as the prime source of alienation" (Adler

1997: 4). Based on my experiences, as both a practitioner and a researcher, I agree with her to a large extent, but I would add that for many people this does not lead to rejection of the city and urban life, or of technologies. Many are indeed eager for a "return to nature", but others are quite content in their modern, urban lifestyles, and choose to find magic in an urban milieu. I have discussed this topic at much greater length in my master's thesis (Roberts 2009). Without going into detail, I would simply note that it has been fascinating to observe and experience the ways in which modernity and the anachronism of contemporary Paganism are consciously incorporated into the worldview and actions of the Reclaiming community.

Gender and sexuality in the Reclaiming tradition

In this research, I chose to concentrate on questions of gender and sexuality, which here include homosexuality, bisexuality and transgender (some of the terms included in the word "queer"), sex-positivism and heteronormativity versus non-normative identities and experiences. I decided to examine these concepts because I have found that the expression of sexual identity and orientation outside of a normative framework—that is, in ways that are not generally considered "normal" in the wider society—is not only widespread among contemporary Pagans, it is often expected. By this, I mean that what is considered abnormal in much of society has come to be more or less normal in many Pagan communities. All of these concepts, identities and experiences are important in Pagan discourse, although they are treated quite differently depending on the tradition. I

focus here on Reclaiming, because of the emphasis on non-normative gender and sexual identities that is more pronounced than in many other Pagan traditions.

In a spirituality based on immanence, the body is divine, for the divine is everywhere, the matter of which everything is made. While, in many transcendental traditions, the body, the flesh, and all corporeal functions and pleasures are seen as part of an inferior world that must be surpassed to find enlightenment, immanence celebrates these things. Not surprisingly, one finds a relatively open and positive attitude toward sexuality in many Pagan circles, and even more so in those with more immanence-based outlooks.

Queerness and heteronormativity

A theme that surfaced quickly in many of the interviews I carried out with members of this community is identification within the concept of "queer". One woman I interviewed, Vivian[12], said, "it's rare that I meet Pagans who are totally heterosexual. There are *a lot* of bisexual Pagans. I think that Pagans who identify as completely hetero are in the minority" (interview, August 2007).

According to a survey of Pagans in Canada, 10% of Pagan men identify as homosexual, and 20% as bisexual (Reid, forthcoming), much higher than the general population, where 1.3% of men are homosexual and 0.6% bisexual (Statistique Canada 2004). Among Pagan women, 5% identify as homosexual, and 30% as bisexual (Reid, *ibid*), compared to the general census results of 0.7% lesbian and 0.9% bisexual women (Statistique Canada, *ibid*)[13].

My own research would suggest that there is a slightly elevated percentage of queer people in the Reclaiming tradition as compared with many, but not necessarily all, other

Pagan traditions. One of the potential factors, according to Vivian, is the emphasis on activism in the movement. She explained to me that "the intersection of pagan and activist communities brings in the queer element, because activism around sociopolitical issues attracts a lot of people who identify as queer" (interview, August 2007).

Another participant in my research, Luke, who identifies as a gender queer gay man, told me about his trajectory in Paganism as a search for a way to integrate his queerness with his spirituality. After being involved in Wiccan groups for a time, he discovered the Radical Faeries, a gay men's Pagan movement. What attracted him most was:

> The idea of not just a spiritual community but any kind of alternative community really organized around gay life—I realized that this sense of community is what I was missing in men's groups and men's mysteries. I didn't need *men's* that, I needed *gay men's* that. And specifically a gay men's "that" that really celebrates the different ways that one can feel when one is feeling like a man, the many different things that "that" can mean. (interview, July 2007)

Luke highlights an important point, that not all Neopagan traditions have the same attitude about queerness, nor do they have the same discourse about heteronormativity. British Traditional Wicca, for example, emphasizes male/female polarity and the duality of God/Goddess. Sometimes, although rarely, to my knowledge, this can be interpreted to mean that homosexual people are not capable of working magic, for which sexual energy between a woman and a man is necessary. In many of these traditional Wiccan communities, homosexuality is not necessarily viewed as bad or sinful, as in many other religions, but is simply discouraged in a ritual context.

While there are a lot of queer people who do identify as Wiccans, I spoke with a number of people who expressed their feelings of alienation with regard to the heteronormativity and gender polarity that they found in this system. This spurred them on to explore other

Pagan movements, and some of them ended up finding a spiritual home in the Reclaiming tradition, where they discovered a belief system and a gender discourse that corresponded much more closely with their own identities and discourses around sexuality and queerness, such as viewing gender as fluid rather than fixed, on a continuum rather than binary, and often as a cultural construct rather than an inherent reality.

Vivian also started her Pagan trajectory in a more traditional branch of Wicca, the Wiccan Church of Canada (WCC). She told me:

> The symbol for the WCC is a chalice with an athame [a ritual knife] doing the Great Rite [the gesture of lowering the athame into the chalice, symbolizing the sexual union of the God and the Goddess], and it wasn't until I met a lesbian Pagan couple that I realized how alienating that symbolism is. After that I didn't want to identify with Traditional Wicca anymore. That was when I started getting interested in Reclaiming (interview, August 2007).

Luke came to Reclaiming through a similar thought process, having realized that Traditional Wicca "simply wasn't set up for people with different sorts of gender identities" (interview, July 2007). While researching other Pagan traditions, he came across *The Spiral Dance*, a book by Starhawk that was formative to the Reclaiming movement.

Many religions of the world continue to debate the acceptance or exclusion of queer people, and some continue to position themselves completely against anything other than strict heteronormativity. Contemporary Paganism is situated towards the opposite end of the spectrum, given that its practitioners are free to identify as they please and share their experiences in an open, inclusive environment. However, when we take a more critical look at Pagan traditions, it becomes apparent that there are still a significant

number of controversies between various traditions around sexual identification and gender, and the incorporation of heteronormative roles and images.

Sex-positivism

Sex-positivism refers to an openness toward sexuality in general, but also toward identities and behaviors considered non-normative, such as queer identity and polyamory (ethical non-monogamy), generally seeing all acts of consensual sex as positive. This perspective is framed in opposition to sex-negativism, characterized by a negative view toward sexuality, or toward any act, identification, experience, or desire that does not fit neatly into the heteronormative, monogamous, for-reproduction-only marital institution.

There are many examples of sex-positivism in the Reclaiming tradition, but I will share one anecdote that occurred at Witch Camp in Vermont in 2007. I was participating in the creation and maintenance of a "Temple of Love", which was a small lean-to cabin in a rather remote area of the camp that was reserved for people who wished for a private place to make love—in any sense of the word—during the week. The Temple was decorated with red and purple velvets, gauzy curtains, and anything else that people had been able to bring along with them for this purpose; it was also well-equipped with massage oils and safer-sex tools, such as condoms, dental dams and gloves. During the course of the week, in addition to being visited by individuals, couples or small groups of people looking for some intimate time, the Temple was also used for workshops relating to sexuality, massage, group meetings, and more.

On the first day of camp, several people came to the Temple for a ritual to bless the space and set the intention as a safe and sacred place. After having cast a circle and called in the elements, as well as several deities often connected to love and sexuality, the central action of this ritual began: an exercise called a “circle of allies”. The idea of a circle of allies is to show support for others no matter what they are going through, and so each individual can know that they are supported. In this case, it was specifically around our experiences with sexuality. Each person had the opportunity to enter the center of the circle, at which point they could say something, such as, to give one example, “I am gay”. At that point, anyone else in the circle who was also gay could join them in the center; they would all take hands and look into each other’s eyes. The designated facilitator would say “See who your allies are”, and would then ask them to turn out to face the larger circle, saying “Now see who supports you in this experience.” My field notes explain in more detail how this unfolded:

> It is left open to whoever feels moved to enter the middle, and though the very beginning is, as usual, slow due to the fact that no one wants to be first, it gets off to a good start. A whole variety of aspects are called upon, and everyone present is drawn to the center at some point or another, some several times. The mood changes from joyous to contemplative to grief-stricken and back again several times, as different experiences and identifications are called upon. Sometimes the center circle is large, such as when one woman enters, saying “I am bisexual”, drawing over half of the outer circle to the center, or when another says “I was sexually abused as a child by someone who said they loved me”, which calls in almost half of the participants. Other times the inner circle is small, such as when the transsexual woman of the group enters, saying “I live in a gender different from the one I was born into” (Field notes, August 27, 2007).

This ritual turned out to be quite lengthy, with about an hour dedicated to the circle of allies alone, but I found the experience to be very powerful. Having grown up in a primarily sex-negative culture, it is hard for many people to feel comfortable discussing

sexuality in such a positive, open setting. I know this is true for myself, and many others expressed this as well, including right there at the ritual.

Conclusion

A Reclaiming woman once said to me that she considers the presence of transgender or transsexual people at Pagan gatherings and festivals to be a good omen. I took this to mean that events that attract trans people are probably going to be more sex-positive than those that are avoided by people with different gender and sexual identities.

I found that for a lot of people who identify with the Reclaiming tradition, the way that most people in this movement approach sexuality is very important. In particular, those who identify as queer in any way—homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, intersex, asexual, autosexual, polyamorous, kinky—often feel that they are more able to express themselves openly in a tradition that is not only accepting of their experiences and identities, but actively embraces them; indeed, where many more people actually share their experiences as well. Considering that many practitioners deeply integrate their gender identity and sexual orientation into their spirituality, the importance that their gender plays in finding a spiritual home is not so surprising.

Conducting research on the Montreal Reclaiming community, at the same time as being involved in it as a participant, turned out to be an interesting challenge. Additionally, I was at the same time involved in research in the broader Pagan community of Montreal

for my master's thesis, which focused on exploring syncretism between Pagan traditions, other religious practices, and non-religious elements (Roberts 2009). Syncretism with non-religious elements primarily took two directions: socio-political and environmental activism, and gender identity and sexual orientation. Thus I chose to focus on gender and sexuality issues for this project.

Much of the research that I conducted was mixed in with my own participation. People in the communities that I was involved in were well aware that I was both a participant and a researcher; I believe that the fact that I was first a participant, having chosen to conduct research there after I had already been involved for a time, helped significantly. Becoming a participant in my own research was an interesting experience as well, especially as it tested my boundaries with regard to how much I am comfortable sharing about my own experiences and involvement. While I am forthcoming about my participation in the Reclaiming community, I am more vague when it comes to aligning myself with any of the other identities, orientations and experiences I have discussed here, which is something I have observed among other anthropologists as well.

The greater topic of religious diversity in Montreal is a fascinating field of inquiry, as it intersects with so many other factors, such as immigration, multilingualism and modernity, and I am excited and honored to have been involved in this project. While contemporary Paganism may seem at first like a bit of a departure from most of the other religious groups examined throughout the course of this project, particularly in that there is very little intersection with immigrant populations, part of my motivation behind conducting this study was precisely to bring this spiritual movement further under the academic lens. As one of the fastest-growing New Religious Movements in North America (Kelly 1992; Clifton 2004; Reid 2006), contemporary Paganism is beginning to

have a place among world religions, though that place is still tenuous. Religious scholar Michael York writes:

> Paganism occupies a particular theological niche. It can be placed into comparison with the other major world religions. The reason why this theological niche has not been generally recognized, however, can be largely attributed to the Judeo-Christian global dominance which has caused a hegemonic exclusion in considering paganism among the full range of theological speculations (2000: 4).

This may be changing. As more scholars of contemporary Paganism, particularly those studying it in a context of common threads with the world's diversity of religions, share their findings and perspectives, this religious movement is finally coming to be understood in its particular theological niche.

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Biography

Rosemary Roberts just completed her master's in anthropology at the Université de Montréal, having studied the processes of religious syncretism in Montreal's contemporary Pagan community.

Rosemary Roberts vient de terminer sa maîtrise en anthropologie à l'Université de Montréal. Elle a étudié les processus du syncrétisme religieux au sein de la communauté néopaïenne de Montréal.

Notes

[1] Pantheism is the belief that divinity is everywhere or that everything is divine, while pan*en*theism is the belief that divinity resides *in* everything, or that everything has a piece of the divine in it.

[2] Many, if not most, scholars of contemporary Paganism fit into this category, and several ethnographies have been published by academic scholars who are also practitioners. For a few examples, see Wallis (2000), Harvey (1997), Magliocco (2004), York (1995).

[3] Because of the ties between the Reclaiming tradition and various activist movements (environmental, feminist, anarchist, among others), great importance has been placed on consensus decision-making. In larger, more formal gatherings, this is used in a formal sense, where there is discussion leading to a proposal that is tested for consensus and re-worked through more discussion and proposals until consensus is reached. In smaller, less formal meetings, the process is usually less strict and simply means that participants eventually come to an agreement through discussion.

[4] This differs from tradition to tradition, but in Wicca, a coven is usually led by a High Priest and High Priestess, who are seen as the leaders. A "maiden", who is often the youngest woman or girl in the group, serves as an apprentice to the High Priestess. Other roles may exist as well, and each is placed on a hierarchy that influences what they are allowed to do, in their own practice as well as in ritual, and what kind of information they are privy to.

[5] I discuss this type of syncretism at length in my master's thesis (Roberts 2009).

[6] "Mysterious Ones" is also often used specifically as a gender-neutral deity, as most gods and goddesses (and indeed the terms themselves) are gendered in mythology and in contemporary usage.

[7] The only other rituals I have participated in that had such an emphasis on ecstatic states were in the Anderson Feri tradition, which is one of the major influences behind Reclaiming.

[8] The few Pagan songs that have already been translated into French were translated specifically by people connected with the Reclaiming movement, for the 2001 protests against the FTAA in Quebec City. Reclaiming had a large presence at that protest, and organizers, who came mostly from the United States, hoped to include the Francophones who joined them in the streets by singing bilingually.

[9] http://www.cosmic-muse.com/reclaiming

[10] Scholars who have written about this include M. Macha NightMare (2001) and Douglas Cowan (2005).

[11] Indeed, it took me several months of searching just to find out if there were local people interested in the Reclaiming tradition at all!

[12] All names used here are pseudonyms.

[13] Of course, there are several factors that could influence these statistics. A queer person who identifies with contemporary Paganism might be more comfortable responding truthfully about their sexual orientation in a Paganism-geared survey than in one put out by the Canadian government. It is also likely that those who are involved in Pagan communities, which in most cases are accepting of a wide variety of sexual identities and expressions, might be more honest and open about their orientation than a person who lives a

life of secrecy for fear of discrimination from the religion that they practice. Furthermore, surveys and censuses are definitely problematic when it comes to the question of sexual orientation, as seen in the vastly different numbers collected by different organizations.