

Proceedings of the annual meeting of the Southern Anthropological Society

Volume 47
Number 1 *Public Interest and Professional Anthropology in the South*

Article 5

2023

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Recommended Citation

McDermott, Matt (2023) "Casting Your Own Spell: The Role of Individualism in Wiccan Beliefs," *Proceedings of the annual meeting of the Southern Anthropological Society*. Vol. 47: No. 1, Article 5. Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/southernanthro_proceedings/vol47/iss1/5

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Casting Your Own Spell:

The Role of Individualism in Wiccan Beliefs

Matt McDermott

What is the role of individualism within the neopagan religious movement of Wicca? To answer this question, this research study was carried out in western North Carolina using participant observation and interviews with ten practitioners in 2021. This paper argues that Wiccan adherents cultivate an individualist agency that manifests through an openness to beliefs and practices. One of Wicca's key characteristics is a lack of commitment to dogma. This allows Wiccans to bring aspects of their own identities and personalities into their practices. This individualist agency is shaped by solitary and collectivist forms of Wicca, which place value on liberating, anti-authoritarian, and creative modes of religious expression.

Keywords: Wicca, individualism, collectivism, identity, witchcraft

Introduction

We stood in a circle facing inwards towards the central altar. It was a cold November night in western North Carolina. The moon and stars that lit the sky were obscured by the dense forest that surrounded us. There was little light in the area, except for

candles on the altar and a campfire that was too far away to keep many of us warm. However, the cold could not break the twenty to thirty people at the gathering; we were all too preoccupied with the ritual at hand. The sounds of invocations, prayers, songs, and magic filled the air. Everyone was focused on honoring the Goddess and the spirits of their ancestors. The atmosphere was calm and jovial, with everyone coming together as a community of witches. Our attention was cast to the Goddess, nature, and our ancestors as we celebrated through the night. This was the beginning of my first Wiccan ritual.

I've been interested in paganism ever since I discovered it around 2013, when I was 15 years old. Paganism is an umbrella term for religions interested in pre-Christian mythology, nature-based spirituality, magical ritual, and beliefs about reincarnation (Berger 2005; Urban 2015; White 2014). This paper is based on ethnographic research studying Wicca, the largest branch of paganism (Berger 2005, 28). My research was conducted in 2021, from January through May and August through early November. I worked alongside ten informants, all of whom were located throughout western North Carolina. Most of my informants were around the Asheville area, but some were around Rutherford County. The primary method I used to gather data was ethnographic interviews. I used this method because I had little access to participant observation and site visits: most of the practitioners I spoke to did not gather in groups and did not allow me to participate in their rituals. Additionally, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccines not being readily available until about halfway through the year, as well as my own anxieties surrounding the pandemic, meeting with people in-person was a bit of a

challenge at times. These factors led me to rely on the interviews and conversations that I had with practitioners (primarily Zoom, Google Meet, and over the phone, with some held in-person) in order to understand their beliefs, instead of being able to travel to specific places and visit groups. However, I was able to take part in participant observation towards the end of my research. This event will be discussed later.

This paper explores the role of individualism in Wicca. During my study of Wicca, I kept noticing how important individualism was to the practitioners and how it allowed for Wiccan practices to vary greatly. It seemed that each of my informants had their own way of practicing their spirituality. These differences were sometimes so strong that it seemed like there was little in common between practitioners. The longer that I attempted to understand Wiccan practice, the more I realized that understanding individualism had to be at the center of my ethnographic research.

This paper argues that Wiccan adherents cultivate an individualist agency that manifests through an openness to beliefs and practices. This allows Wiccans to bring aspects of their own identities and personalities into their practices. This individualist agency is shaped by solitary and collectivist forms of Wicca, which place value on liberating, anti-authoritarian, and creative modes of religious expression.

History of Wicca

The origins of Wicca are a debated topic, but the creation of modern Wicca is commonly attributed to an Englishman named

Gerald Gardner. The story begins in the early twentieth century with Gardner discovering a group of Wiccans in New Forest, England. This group claimed to be passing down an oral religious tradition that pre-dates Christianity. The Wiccans taught Gardner about their practices, but with the requirement that he keep them secret. He did not gain their permission to publish their beliefs until after 1951, when England repealed the last of their anti-witchcraft laws (Berger 2005; Hutton 1999; Luhrmann 1989).

There is a debate as to whether this story is accurate. Many, including scholars and practitioners, have called this story into question (Berger 2005; Hutton 1999; Jorgensen and Russell 1999; Luhrmann 1989; Urban 2015). Some scholars have noted that Gardner was heavily influenced by his interest in the British anthropologist Margaret Murray and her theories of prehistoric matriarchal cults, European mythology and folklore, freemasonry, occultism, and folk magic (Berger 2005; Jorgensen and Russell 1999; Luhrmann 1989; Urban 2015; Vance 2015). Although there are criticisms of the story, there is evidence to support some claims, such as the idea of female divinity being important to paleolithic peoples. Ronald Johnstone (2001) argues that there is archaeological evidence showing a goddess as the supreme deity in many stone age societies, as well as noting female creator deities in the religions of ancient China, Australia, and Egypt. Additionally, sculptures known as Venus figurines have been found throughout the paleolithic world and are often interpreted as a feminine deity that would be prayed to for fertility purposes (McCoid and McDermott 1996, 319).

Wicca, as described by Gardner, is focused on the worship of two deities (a God and a Goddess), the divinity of nature, the

practice of magical ritual, and reincarnation (Berger 2005; Hutton 1999; Luhrmann 1989; Urban 2015; Vance 2015; Waters 2019). Although not every Wiccan follows the Gardnerian tradition, these concepts are often very common throughout Wicca with some degree of difference, as I observed through my fieldwork. Most Wiccans I spoke to were primarily focused on worshipping the Goddess, with the God working as her consort, and venerating nature. However, others were disinterested in deities, and some made no references to the importance of reincarnation. Additionally, the God and Goddess were not always viewed as specific beings like Abrahamic figures. Individual conceptions of these deities were often influenced by other religions around the world.

One reason for these differences derives from Wicca's commitment to individualism. Individualism became an integral part of Wicca during the 1960s and 1970s, roughly a decade or so after Gardner published his earliest works. During this time, Wicca came to the United States and was influenced by the growing counter-culture movement, placing a greater emphasis on individualism, as well as environmentalism, feminism, pacifism, and anti-authoritarianism (Berger 2005; Urban 2015; Vance 2015). Helen A. Berger (2005) claims that the international influence of American culture allowed for these values to spread to Wiccans worldwide.

It is worth noting some common terms that Wiccans use, since they will be appearing throughout this paper. Wicca and its practitioners take on different names. Wicca is often referred to by practitioners as simply "witchcraft," "the craft," and "paganism," due to Gardner perceiving the religion as a continuation of ancient

European witchcraft practices. By considering their religion as a part of witchcraft and pagan traditions, Wiccans often identify themselves as Wiccans, witches, and pagans. There seems to be no term preferred above the others. However, it is important to note that there are other forms of paganism and witchcraft apart from Wicca, some of which I have encountered in my fieldwork. Keeping all of this in mind, I will use terms such as “Wiccan” and “witch” interchangeably since these are the most common terms used by practitioners.

Individualism

Throughout my study of Wicca, it was impossible for me to ignore the vast diversity of beliefs that practitioners embrace. Wicca has the ability to take on many different forms, depending on who is practicing. Through my observations, I have talked to people who are influenced by various ideas: atheism, Gardnerian Wicca, Judaism, feminism, Norse mythology, Cherokee traditions, and Egyptian mythology, among others. The possibilities for Wiccan practice seem endless. Although I found this diversity to be one of the most exciting things during my study, it was, no doubt, a big obstacle to overcome. Throughout my research, I was often asked by those I know to explain Wiccan beliefs. This was not always easy, because of Wicca’s immense diversity. I once talked about this with my informant Claire to which she jokingly responded, “Well, that’s a big task!” This begs one of the big questions at hand: how can I make sense of a religion that is practiced differently by each person? I think that the answer to this question lies in how and why Wicca encourages diversity among its practitioners.

Wicca's earliest forays into individualism, as stated earlier, come from the influence that 1960s American counter-culture movements had on Wicca (Berger 2005; Fisher 1976; Vance 2015). This influence led to Wiccans placing a greater emphasis on individual practitioners to carve their own paths in Wicca. This emphasis on the individual means that Wicca can be described as an "experiential" religion: placing a greater emphasis on the experiences of the self over that of texts and religious dogma (Luhrmann 1989; Vance 2015). This is how practitioners are able to carve, what seem to be, drastically different interpretations of the religion from one another. This is how atheists and polytheists can call themselves Wiccans without causing conflict with the worldview of Wicca. This is because of Wicca's belief that the divine is best experienced in a way that best reflects oneself.

Individualism makes Wicca more personable and liberating. "Most people that join this religion don't really like authority," my informant Charlie tells me. "It seems like a lot of people that come into witchcraft don't like organized religion. They don't want their practice to seem too much like Christianity, which is what many witches come from." The Wiccans I've spoken to have largely come from a Christian background, be it Southern Baptist or Irish Catholic. Oftentimes, they leave Christianity for reasons along the lines of it not being able to answer their questions, but also, like Charlie said, because they did not like having a religion that was too restrictive. Wicca allows practitioners to explore their spirituality, choose between which gods and goddesses they will pray to, if they choose to pray at all, and sometimes how to perform rituals. The Wiccans that I have spoken to have often said that this

open religious structure allows them to feel more personally liberated.

One of the rules of Wicca is what is known as the “Wiccan Rede.” The Rede states: “an it harm none, do what you will,” or, in other words, “do what you want, so long as it harms no one.” The Rede deters its practitioners from using magic for evil purposes, but still enables diverse practices of religious individualization (Lewis 1999; Reed 2000).

The Goddess and the God

There are religious principles that are widely adhered to in Wicca. All of the Wiccans I have spoken to recognize a divine feminine and masculine. The divine masculine and feminine are figures within Wicca that are often represented as gods and goddesses in various religions around the world. Different interpretations can arise when it comes to the divine masculine and feminine. Most Wiccans see them as the God and Goddess, with each individual choosing their own god and goddess to follow. My informant Jefferey, a Wiccan priest, sees the God and Goddess as Cernunnos and Cerridwyn, two Celtic deities he chose to reflect his Welsh and Irish heritage. Similarly, my informant Chava views them as Azna and Yahweh, which is inspired by her Jewish heritage. These approaches are largely in-line with traditional Wiccan views of divinity, where a god and goddess are venerated.

Some Wiccans view the divine masculine and feminine differently, with some embracing atheistic interpretations. My informant Claire, for instance, was raised by an atheistic father and

a Wiccan mother. They agreed to not raise her to practice any particular religion. However, by the example, but not direction, of her parents, she eventually became an atheistic Wiccan. This occurred through primary socialization, where children develop their worldviews through the influence of their parents (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Additionally, she is strongly influenced by her passion for the natural sciences, leading her practice to be influenced by her “scientific brain” as she told me. “I think science has a lot more to do with it than God does,” she told me. Since she is an atheist, Claire views the divine masculine and feminine as spiritual forces that she calls energies. “I think there are energies and a spirit to everything that’s living,” she tells me. “Like, you and I have a spirit, and trees, and plants, and animals have a spirit.” This view of divinity is different from the more traditional approach used by Jefferey and Chava. However, it is in-line with Wiccan concepts of gendered spirituality, since she still believes spiritual forces are represented by masculine and feminine energies.

Wiccans vary on which deity will hold prominence in their beliefs. This can be very different for each practitioner. Some of my informants have told me that the God and Goddess hold equal importance to their practice. “I mean, for me, what I believe in is duality,” Wiccan High Priest Shawn told me. “So, I believe in the God and Goddess concept, just because I see that reflected in people, animals, plants, and all aspects of the world. For me that’s how I view it, as equality.” Jefferey also shares this idea, viewing a balance of the God and Goddess as being reflected throughout nature, an important part of Wiccan spirituality, and based on science.

My informant Meghan also saw a balance of gender as being important to her, but for different reasons. Meghan identifies with she/they pronouns, an identity reflected in their spirituality, which “ebbs and flows.” She told me, “There are some days where I’m very much in tune to the feminine and goddess side of Wicca. Other days, I strive more towards a balance. All of us, no matter what our gender, even though I hate thinking in binary terms, we all have masculine and feminine aspects and there is a balance within us of both. Somedays I definitely feel very feminine and others I just feel like a person. I think that’s where the gender identity comes from. I just hate that we’re divided like that, like, I just hate divides.” Her perspective on this aspect of Wiccan faith shows a way that the God and Goddess can be used creatively to reflect on the personal identity of practitioners. For Meghan, the God and Goddess can be used in a way that balance their feminine and masculine powers. This allows her to interact with the divine in a way that reflects her identity. On days where she feels feminine, she leans more towards the Goddess, but on days where they feel gender neutral, they prefer a balance of the two.

There are also Wiccans that focus their practice on one deity. Notably, Goddess worship seemed to develop a bit of traction within Wicca. The significance of the Goddess became increasingly important as the religion continued to develop, especially as it was influenced by feminism and the American counter-culture movement in the mid-twentieth century (Luhmann 1989; Ruether 2005; Urban 2015; Vance 2015). Some Wiccans choose to practice a form of Wicca focused on the Goddess, either by only worshipping her or by putting prominence on her (Ruether 2005; Urban 2015). Lisa embraces this path. Lisa focused her practice on the Goddess

because she finds the idea of a strong, powerful, feminine figure to be important to her. She credits this to the influence of her mother, another example of primary socialization influencing spirituality. “My mother was a feminist in actions, but not words,” she said. “That left a big impact on me growing up. She set a good example.” Lisa told me she is very passionate about women’s rights and regularly volunteers at Planned Parenthood, so her connection between her spirituality and feminist beliefs are not very surprising. However, Lisa doesn’t avoid male deities. She invokes them in her practice to create a balance between the masculine and feminine divinities.

Individual Experience in the Community

Wiccans traditionally organize themselves through collectives. This form of organization has been a staple of Wicca since its founding. Gardner claimed to have discovered a Wiccan coven in the early twentieth century. Decades later, he would train his followers in these coven-based practices (Luhrmann 1989). At the heart of Wicca’s history lies the idea of working together in a group. Although this practice has been called into question by some, it is still very much alive.

Throughout my research, the most common term that I encountered to describe a group of Wiccans is a coven. Covens can be traced back to Gardnerian traditions, making them one of the earliest structural means of practicing Wicca. Usually, covens have a membership of around thirteen people. This was based on Margaret Murray’s theories of what pre-Christian witch cults looked like in Europe (Murray 1921). Wiccan covens enjoy autonomy from

one another, with only central Wiccan tenets binding them together. Covens can vary over the strictness of their hierarchy. However, most covens are led by a High Priestess and High Priest and are also based on what are called degrees: first degrees are “initiates,” second degrees are given more influence, and third degrees are the highest rank one can achieve (Hutton 1999; Lewis 1999; Luhrmann 1989; Vance 2015).

During my time doing research, I met several people actively involved in Wiccan organizations. Like so many others I spoke to, I met Jefferey over Facebook. He made a post in one of the Facebook groups I belong to, describing himself as a Wiccan priest. When we met over Zoom, Jeff’s camera was off, but I could hear the world around him, including his dog, birds, bugs, cars, and other sounds one might expect from a residential area. He was friendly and engaged throughout our conversation. He was clearly passionate about his beliefs, as one would likely expect from a Wiccan priest.

We began our conversation with basic questions about his upbringing, discovering Wicca, what was most important to his practice, and so on. What I wanted to focus on most, though, was what drew him to getting involved with Wiccan priesthood and a collective practice. “The reason I began looking for other people to practice with is that I wanted to learn more. I wanted to learn more than what I learned in a book. I wanted to actually be out there and practicing with other people. I wanted that community and comradery and so forth. I wanted to participate in ritual and not just watch the ritual. You know, to move out of the Outer Court and into the Inner Court. I wanted to have a role in it and be a part of it,” Jefferey told me. He goes on to explain more about the Inner

and Outer Courts of Wicca, terms that explain people who have been initiated into the practice or coven (Inner) and those that are not (Outer) (Lewis 1999; Treleven 2008). “That’s what made me decide to go from an Outer Court member and be an Inner Court member. I wanted to know the mysteries of the god and goddess,” he said. “If you’re only in the outer court of a group then it’s kind of like being part of a church. You’re just sitting on the outside of the pews, just sitting there and watching. But when you’re in the inner court you’re just... just... it’s just more. More of an experience, more information. And that’s what I wanted. I wanted to have more. So that’s where I decided I would join a group, study, do more.”

Jefferey feels a strong desire to learn about the mysteries of Wicca. His transition from being solitary to collectivist was based largely out of a desire for deepening his knowledge of the magical world. He tells me, “Most people that.. most people becoming a priest or priestess is pretty normal. Most people join an Outer Court, and your next step is to move towards your first degree. And that’s so you’re learning about the tradition that you’re in, or the beliefs of the groups, or so forth. So, it’s kind of like a training thing and to get everyone up to speed on the different Sabbaths and what they mean. And to be able to start doing some minor energy work and learning to meditate and doing things like that. So, it’s kind of like a natural progression like that and once you get your first degree it’s kind of your choice to decide to continue on with that. And I just decided I want to continue on with it.” Jefferey’s statement shows that he feels the greatest way for him to learn more about Wiccan practice is to get involved with other Wiccans and learn from them. As exemplified from this quote, learning from and

working with others, and having a teacher were crucial to his ability to widen his understanding of his spirituality.

Jefferey was not alone with this claim. Charlie, a self-identified “traditional witch” I met at a ritual, feels similarly to why Wiccans might be interested in joining a group. “There’s a lot that you can learn from others,” he tells me. “You know, being able to learn from someone else, someone of a higher degree, can really teach you so much more about the mysteries of magic.” Charlie elaborates that he can’t tell me any of these mysteries since I’m an outsider, but he assures me that they’re nothing “Earth shattering.” “It’s more like secrets that my wife and I would have in the bedroom. They’re not for you, they’re only for us,” he explains. Charlie was always able to get his points across through easy-to-understand metaphors. Secrecy seems to be a longstanding Wiccan tradition, arguably having roots in the Gardnerian story of discovering a clandestine group of witches practicing the religion (Berger 2005; Hutton 1999; Luhrmann 1989). Tanya Luhrmann (1989), in her study of secrecy in contemporary English witchcraft, found that secrecy was partly used in order to protect practitioners from outsiders that would look down on their practices, but also because witches enjoy their secrecy. This secrecy, she finds, allows for witches to have a greater sense of ownership over their knowledge as well as strengthening the believers’ faith.

Related to ideas of secrecy, Claire tells me that she enjoys that witchcraft has maintained an underground status: “I like that it’s this small, little, close community, you know what I mean? Part of me kind of likes that, in a sense. Something about that also feels a little magical that not everybody knows about it. It causes you to do your own research. You can’t just join and not do anything.” This

quote could also help better understand why Wiccans would enjoy maintaining a certain degree of secrecy towards their practices. In order to gain access to this hidden knowledge, one has to put in time and effort and prove dedication to the craft in order to prove that they deserve to know these secrets.

Other Wiccans that I met echoed similar desires to those of Charlie and Jefferey. During an observation I did at a ritual hosted by the Piedmont Church of Wicca I spoke to their High Priest, Shawn, and High Priest Emeritus, Tony. I asked them both questions about their goals for starting the church. “What made you decide to start a coven?” I asked Shawn. “We’re not a coven. We’re a church.” I was quick to apologize for my mistake and asked him to explain more. “Covens are a bit smaller while churches can be a bit larger. Covens can also sometimes be very top-down, and we didn’t want that. We wanted something that everyone could be a part of, more congregational,” he told me. “We really wanted to create a community for witches,” Tony said. “You know, you go to a church for the first time, and you leave with someone to paint your house, fix your car, and a new best friend. We wanted to do the same thing for witches.”

During the ritual itself, I saw several moments that promoted individualism. At the beginning of the ritual, for instance, Shawn asked each person in attendance to call out the deities that they prayed to. This was a deliberate attempt to bring individualism into the ritual. As Shawn told me later, they normally call to the God and Goddess separately. Instead, he chose to call to the “one unknowable divine” that night so everyone could call their individual Gods and Goddesses together.

In the middle of the ritual, there was a period – about fifteen to twenty minutes long – where we could go to different altars set up throughout the ritual site to communicate with their ancestors. This took place during an important Wiccan holiday called Samhain (pronounced *sah-when*), which is a celebration of winter and ancestors, with symbolism related to death being common. Each altar set up during the ritual had a different way to communicate with ancestors: tarot cards for divination, lighting candles and offering prayers, as well as floating flowers down the creek right next to us (to symbolically let go of any negative energies so they could be carried down the stream). Much like calling out to individual deities, this was another way for the crowd of people to express themselves based on their own ways. Each person was allowed to go to as many stations as they wanted, depending on how they wanted to communicate with the ancestors they were trying to get in touch with.

Collectivism is an important aspect of Wiccan practice. Wiccan groups, teachers, and hierarchies seek to enhance individual experiences. By becoming initiated in a group and rising through the ranks, one can learn more about and achieve stronger experiences of the divine. These experiences are not ones that they feel can be obtained through working alone and reading books. They come from active participation in groups and having other people guiding the members toward greater knowledge. However, even at ritual gatherings, individualism can still hold prominence. As the Piedmont Church of Wicca showed, it is possible to bring individual practices into a collective setting. This was done through calling individual deities into the ritual and by allowing individuals

to reach out to their ancestors in ways that make the most sense to them.

Wiccan collectives are not the only way that people practice the craft anymore. As one might expect in an individualistic religion, there is more than one way to practice magic. Some, in stark contrast to the collective structures of traditional Wicca, have taken individualism to extremes in their practices and have abandoned gatherings all together. This will be the next group of Wiccans to be explored in this paper.

Experience in Solitude

Within Wicca, individualism can take varying degrees. Some prefer embracing the collectivist individualism of covens as Gardner intended. Others prefer to take a far more solitary approach to the religion. Some will go so far that they will distance their practice from Wiccan communities altogether. These Wiccans are called solitary practitioners, often shortened to “solitaries.” Based on my contacts with solitaries in western North Carolina, they tend to prefer practicing separately from Wiccan groups and may dissociate their practice from Wiccan norms. Another term for solitaries is “eclectics,” since their practices often “eclectically” embrace a variety of influences from religions that are not from witchcraft and pagan traditions.

Most of the Wiccans I spoke to could be identified as solitaries. They either spoke about their dislike for practicing in groups or why they left organizations. The stories that I heard cover a variety of reasons, but a common theme was that they feel organized ritual

interferes with their experiences. Solitaries may have once belonged to a group but lost interest over time. “I learned my practice from having a teacher,” Lisa tells me. “I was involved in a coven for a while. Once he passed away I lost interest in the coven work.” Lisa’s journey to solitude was transitional. She once belonged to a coven and relied on others to help introduce her to Wicca and to teach her the mysteries of the religion, but now she practices alone.

Solitaries reflect a desire for a practice based entirely around the experiences of the self, where the individual’s beliefs and actions are unregulated by the practices of others. The solitaries that I spoke to told me that following along with others during rituals interfered with their experiences. As one may expect, it is hard to practice a religion based on individual experience when a group structure impedes that experience.

Helen A. Berger (2019), in her study of solitary neopagans, argues that solitary practice is the most common type of pagan practice. She argues that the beliefs of solitaries and collectivist Wiccans are largely the same, but there are differences in actions. This is because both groups will likely be reading the same books and visiting the same websites to learn more about Wicca. This means that even if a solitary and a collectivist believe the same things, they may have different ways of experiencing their beliefs, or of expressing devotion for their beliefs. Some may feel empowered by joining others in a ritual while others might feel hindered by it. Berger also notes that young people make up a majority of solitaries in a survey she did, while Baby Boomers make up a majority of those practicing in groups (although she notes that young people only made up 36% of her survey) (2019, 2, 26 - 27).

For the solitaries I spoke to, individual experience was the most important aspect of their beliefs. The importance of the self in the creation of their beliefs was arguably *the* defining factor, embracing the anti-authoritarian and individualist values often reflected in post-1960s Wicca. This leads me to ask the questions, what does an individualized Wiccan practice look like? And most notably, how does the self appear in the practices of individualist, solitary Wiccans? This is where the identities of individuals come into play. For the next part of this paper, I will be exploring the practices of solitary Wiccans and how their identities are reflected in their beliefs and practices.

Collectivist Wiccans vs. Solitary Wiccans

Although there is general acceptance among Wiccans that there is no right or wrong way to practice the religion, tensions between practitioners still exist. This is particularly true among collectivists and solitaries. Throughout my research, I often heard both sides argue that there was something missing from the other side.

Claire was one of the more outspoken solitaries in her disinterest in collectivist practice. “I tried to get with a group on campus to do like a full moon practice or something like that, but I just really didn’t like it,” she said. “I just think that everyone has such different ways of doing this that I don’t really want to change how I usually do stuff, so I kind of just, I like to do it by myself just for that reason because... not everyone is the same and different stuff doesn’t work as well for me. I’m like, they were trying to do like a five-minute meditation or something and I can’t do that. It

takes me a little while to get into that zone. So, I have to do like at least 10 minutes for me to actually be able to meditate or else I just won't. Yeah, so it's like that kind of stuff. That's why I usually practice by myself."

Claire's personal distaste of collectivist practices is shaped by her hyper-individualized Wiccan practice. Rituals require her to be in a specific headspace which can sometimes take a while to create. This is even harder when being forced to work with the routines of others. I once asked if I could observe one of her rituals, but she never got back to me. Based on her reaction, I imagine that the idea of working around others would have likely interfered with creating this headspace or the possibility of sustaining that energy. Claire needs to feel comfortable in order to practice magic and solitude makes this easiest to achieve. Her practices are based around the ideas of personal comfort: long meditation, self-care, and working at night (since she feels more spiritual energy at this time). Working with others interferes with the processes required to start ritual work.

On the other side of the spectrum, Jefferey expressed his own disinterest for solitary practice. "Individuality is important in Wicca, but there is also a belief in having a teacher or a high priestess or so forth that passes information down and shares that with you," he told me. "With Wicca, and with other pagan beliefs, or witchcraft, initiation is a big part of it, too. So, you can say, 'oh, I'm a witch and I practice witchcraft now,' but there's something more when you are part of a group and go through the same process that they have. That's what's more important to me in my practice."

Jefferey's perspective was backed up by Charlie. "Eclectics and solitaries seem to be the growing trend nowadays," he tells me. "There's something missing from that, though. There's so much more than what you can learn from a book. Having a teacher can be so important." Charlie also talks about common misconceptions solitaries have towards collectivist practice. "Solitaries think that us traditionals do everything by the book, but that's not true," he says. He continues by channeling his metaphoric skills, "It's like being a musician. When you're alone, you play whatever you want. You have no one telling you what you need to do. But when you come together in a band, then everyone has to follow the same beat. We're not required to follow the books all the time, but it gives us a framework for when we come together. It's something that keeps us all on the same page."

These differences and tensions between the two groups lead to the constructions of distinct identities among Wiccans. This tension creates distinctive identities by having Wiccans take on different practices and associations. Solitaries find themselves identifying with isolation, while collectivists prefer working with others. This identity construction plays an important role in the preferred ways that witches practice magic.

Despite these clear tensions, all those mentioned above (Claire, Jefferey, and Charlie) agree that people should be able to practice however they feel, even if they might not personally agree with it. What I heard most often regarding this issue was something along the lines of, "it's great that they choose to practice that way, and they have every right to, but it's not how I do things." There is a recognition of a need to uphold the core Wiccan value of "do what ye will." There are tensions between collectivists and solitaries, but

they should not be viewed as coming from a place of hate. Instead, they reflect disagreement with how Wiccan spirituality should be experienced: through either group-based or solitary practices. Both sides feel that the other side is missing something, but no side looks down on the other in a necessarily hateful way.

It is also worth noting that the two sides share a degree of unification within the belief system itself. Because solitary and collectivist practices have the same roots (stemming from Gardner's work in the 1950s) the two practices share similar beliefs. Both sides venerate nature, practice magic, believe in a divine feminine and masculine, and turn towards various cultural mythologies to create their practice. Being held together by the core principles of Wicca allow for the two groups to have understandings with one another, both personally and ideologically.

Conclusions

This study has investigated individualism as an important element to Wicca based on ethnographic research in western North Carolina. I argue that Wiccans cultivate an individualist agency that manifests through an openness to beliefs and practices. Individualist agency is fostered and encouraged because of Wicca's non-dogmatic approach to their religious structure and belief system, best exemplified through the Wiccan Rede which promotes the idea that anyone should be able to do whatever they want, so long as no one is harmed. This lack of dogma means that there are flexibilities and openings within Wiccan belief systems. Wiccans bring their own personal identities into their beliefs, enjoying the freedom to practice as they please. These identities were

exemplified by the practitioners I spoke to through concepts such as personal interests, gender, and heritage.

Individualist agency is shaped by solitary and collectivist forms of Wicca, which place value on liberating, anti-authoritarian, and creative modes of religious expression. Solitaries engage in isolated practices, viewing groups as stifling to their experiences of the divine within Wicca. Collectivists work alongside others as teachers and in ritual practice. Both forms of Wicca cultivate expressions of individualist agency. Indeed, Wiccans embrace a philosophy of individualism, no matter how they choose to practice. It is clear that for the people I interacted with, individualism is at the heart of what they do.

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