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CAYA Coven: Eclectic Paganism in the East Bay Area

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Author

stover, jennifer

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You Are” Coven. The goal of my thesis is to situate Eclectic Paganism into the broader context of religion and spirituality in America. In this paper, I will show that CAYA Coven has a broad theology that attracts practitioners who support one another through shared values that can be characterized, among other things, as culturally American, including individualism, diversity, and pluralism. I will support this claim in three ways: 1.) I will use a brief history of Paganism to explain the origins of CAYA, showing that within Pagan ritual, an eclectic space is created that can hold a range of differing beliefs about the divine, 2.) I will explain the construction of rituals as collaborative (but emphasizing personal) creativity, and 3.) I will describe how rituals are received and interpreted by the participants in a way that encourages individual experience.

II. Methods

My method for conducting this project has been primarily through participant observation. I participated in multiple rituals created by priests and priestesses who are part of the East Bay CAYA clergy. The clergy members are trained and ordained in CAYA’s tradition for creating public rituals for all and consist of about 50 members when combined with South Bay clergy members. I was able to spend time with about 20 of these members



Lady Yeshe Rabbit, Presiding High Priestess

at different times during my research. By becoming an Aspirant and committing to a year of training along with seven other participants, I have aspired to learn more about the coven, receiving an insider’s view of their organization. The Aspirant meetings are taught by the presiding High priestess, Lady Yeshe Rabbit, along with initiates (about seven people) who are working toward their own ordination in their “year-and-a-day” training. Among nearly five hundred people that participate in

CAYA in one way or another, I conducted twenty formal interviews with clergy members, Initiates and Aspirants, to get a better understanding of some of the history of the coven, how rituals are created, and descriptions of the deeper individual experiences from the long-term members. I also conducted many informal interviews with participants both before and after rituals to broaden my perspective.

III. Theoretical Framework

To understand CAYA within a contemporary religious framework, it is important to define what religion actually is, but religion is a complex topic. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, religion is “the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods,” but what about religions that have no gods, such as Buddhism? Merriam-Webster adds that religion is a “commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance,” but what constitutes religious faith? Throughout anthropological history, this definition has been analyzed in more depth.

From Emile Durkheim’s quest for a simple religion, and what he came to define as the sacred and the profane in 1912 to Clifford Geertz’s notion in the 1960s of religion as a “cultural system” or system of symbols and meanings. These definitions are insightful, but in 1993 Talal Asad critiqued the very defining of religion stating that “there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its elements and relationships are historically and culturally specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive process.” In order to understand religion in American cultural context, I look to one important scholar that sheds some light on the origins of individualism in America: Max Weber in his 1905 piece, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He shows that the spirit of modern capitalism is a product of the Protestant ethic, which emphasized individual and personal responsibility or duty. He describes Protestantism and capitalism as elective affinities because one is derived and influenced by the ethics of the other. Individualism in Paganism could surely be ascribed to its continued marginalization throughout history by the dominant religions, but as a modern movement, especially since the 1960s explosion of Neopaganism, it is clear that this individualism, not in terms of capitol or profit, but as an ethos, is a characteristic that is partly shaped by and easily situated into the American cultural context.

As I attempt to situate CAYA in the context of modern religion and spirituality, I also ask the question: what constitutes spirituality as separate from religion? As many members of CAYA describe themselves as “not-religious”, they strive to separate themselves from the authoritarian or dogmatic elements that can often be associated with religion. In 2010, Courtney Bender explored the modern idea of “spiritual, not religious” in her study on spiritual practitioners in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She explains that, according to sociologists, this twentieth-century emergence of religiously unaffiliated individuals is an indication of ongoing social fragmentation and weakening social ties. But what she found in her work was that there were actually large networks of spiritual practitioners who, through talking and writing about their experiences, found their own authority on the spiritual nature of their claims. Foucault defines spirituality as “the search, practice or experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth.” This definition is the one I will be using in my project. As I follow the work of Bender and Foucault in the context of Weber’s history, I am able to discuss CAYA and their broad theology as a product of American values.



Gerald Gardener

IV. Background

Paganism is a broad term that encompasses the polytheistic religions of pre-Christian Europe, and some definitions may include all non-Abrahamic religions. A more recent Pagan tradition called Wicca, or modern witchcraft, stems from the works of Gerald Gardener, who was “initiated



Z Budapest

into a surviving English coven in 1939... systematiz[ing] the rites of Wicca and fill[ing] in the gaps where the tradition was lacking or fragmented.”¹ Paganism, including Wicca, is a larger movement that is created in the spirit of rejecting authoritarianism, orthodox dogmatism, and patriarchy in religious practice. The Presiding High Priestess who founded CAYA was originally trained in the ways of Dianic Wicca, a women’s spirituality movement that was started by Z Budapest in 1971² and was one of many traditions that were inspired by the movements of the 1960s and the third wave of feminism. CAYA, however, has been moving toward the eclectic since it began in 2003, making CAYA much more diverse with regards to spiritual diversity as well as with regards to age and gender, including men, women, children (at *Sabbats*), and transgender individuals.

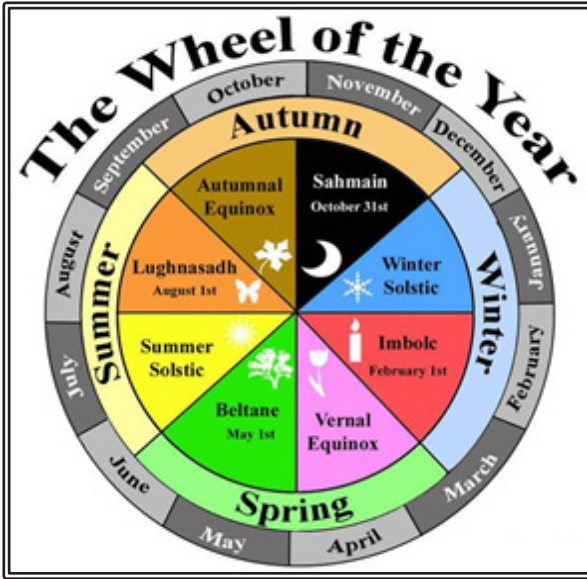
V. The CAYA Community

According to many of my informants, Pagans often tend to be individualistic and seek the divine from multiple sources, but in CAYA, this is something that can be done as a group. According to many of my informants, Pagans often begin as solitary practitioners, learning mythology or forms of magic through self-education and developing personal practices. Many reach out to a coven because the ritual experience can be more energetically

1 Bahnisch, Mark. *Sociology of Religion in Postmodernity: Wicca, Witches and the neo-pagan Myth of Foundations* (Sydney, Queensland University of Technology 2001)

2 The Dianic Wicca Website (Z Budapest). “The Birth of the Women’s Spirituality Movement.” www.dianic-wicca.com/dianic-women-spirituality.html

powerful, but covens are generally made up of a closed group of women or men that privately practice a specific tradition. Many of my informants have belonged to a number of traditions and often more than one, but the common complaints by individualists seeking to join a coven were that covens were difficult to find or uninviting, that the conception of the divine was limited, or that the rituals were unorganized, making it difficult for personal transcendence.



Because CAYA's rituals are public and eclectic, they are designed to encompass a diverse range of Pagan beliefs, drawing from Pantheons from all over the world. One of CAYA's main Tenets reads, "We honor one another's unique spiritual practices, and seek to enrich our sense of community with diversity."³ In Foucault's terms, this means that they respect each other's individual experiences as truth. This is one of the ways that CAYA resolves the tension between the desire for both spiritual individualism and community.

CAYA rituals consist of Esabats, which are women-only (including self-identified women) or men-only, and Sabbats "for all," which include men, women, and children. The Esabats are held on full moons and the

3 The Caya Coven Website. "CAYA's Governance Statement," (CAYA Coven, 2012). <http://www.cayacoven.org/mission.html>



Sabbats follow the Pagan Wheel of the year and are celebrated during seasonal markers such as equinoxes, solstices, or times of harvest. For example, the final harvest of the Pagan year is called “Samhain,” when the veil to the spirit world is very thin, known in modern times as Halloween. Within these rituals, their broad theology is designed to focus more on creating a public space for shared practices rather than on any one practitioner’s name for the divine.

There is a standard ritual structure across Pagan traditions known as *tripartite*, meaning that the ritual has three parts.⁴ CAYA uses this shared outline as a tool that frames their ritual space. The beginning and end of the rituals are reserved for the casting of a circle which protects the sacred space, the calling of the ancestors, and the calling of the quarters. The middle of a ritual usually consists of the main theme, the invocation of a deity, a divination activity, singing, dancing, drumming, and events generally constituted as “energy raising.” Though this ritual structure can seem somewhat systematic to an anti-dogmatic practitioner, one priestess explained that ritual structure helps to orient the participants so that they can focus less on what to do next, and more on their own individual experience. Each ritual also has a different way of approaching these three portions of the ritual across ritual types and throughout the year as their themes change.

The construction of rituals is collaborative within the coven, and yet leaves plenty of room for personal creativity and spontaneity. The clergy members vote on annual shared practices, annual themes, and ritual themes. A few weeks before each ritual, a planning meeting takes place in

4 Magiocco, Sabina. *Witching Culture* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004)

which the general outline of the ritual is decided upon by the group; ideas are brainstormed and individual roles are decided. Each member is then able spend a few weeks exploring their roles on their own time to create their part for the ritual.

When a ritualist is creating a ritual role, the process is very personal. Sometimes they will research the characteristics, histories, and strengths associated with particular deities. For example, in a woman's Esabat, one initiate was performing for the first time and her assignment was to research the goddess Ashira and perform a story in the ritual. Her story was about Ashira making a journey to a temple and as she spoke of walking through fields and feeling the Mediterranean breeze blowing by, she herself was walking around the ritual space with a pace and demeanor that reflected her story. She explained to me after the ritual that she had made up the story herself using elements of the history of Ashira that she came across on the internet.

Experienced ritualists may look to more personal sources, according to a priest I interviewed. He explained that for him, meditating about a deity or with objects associated with a deity usually put him in the right mind space, and when he began his ritual, the words would just flow out. Other techniques include the use of previous knowledge from other traditions. One priestess referred to this as "cross pollination," meaning that practitioners use their previous experience in other traditions to contribute their own "flavor" to the CAYA recipe.

The ritual space for the coven is always a circle, and priests and priestesses rotate as ritualists throughout the year; there is no one preacher at a pulpit. When someone is carrying out their role in ritual, they generally speak or sing as they move throughout the circle, making eye contact with each participant. In these portions of ritual, the participants are respectful and take on the role of an audience, but most of the activities are designed for participation, whether singing, dancing, or other activities.

These activities tend to be interpretive and designed to create very individual experiences for participants. One example was an activity at a women's Esabat. We were each asked to choose three tarot cards as they were passed around, one from each of three decks. We were then given a paper to fill out that asked for the name of each card and a description of the image on the card. They mentioned that those of us who knew nothing of the tarot would be at an advantage because we could fully interpret the

cards as we understood them. I felt as if the cards were tools for self-clarity, only requiring my own intuition and perception.

Another aspect of individuality in ritual can be seen in simple eye contact with other participants. At my very first ritual, the circle was cast at an Esabat through song. As we sang the words “*hand to hand, heart to heart, the circle is cast and the magic starts*” we each acted out the words as we sang them. As we linked hands, it was a consecutive process so the song was repeated for each individual until the circle was complete. What stood out to me was that when my turn came to link with the woman before me, her eyes never broke contact with mine; looking her in the eyes was very powerful and though I desperately wanted to look away, I didn’t. Interestingly, when I turned to the next woman, she was unable to make eye contact with me at all. I understood right then that this group of women was there to help each other become strong individuals and, as I’ve experienced throughout my research, the teachings are about knowing yourself, finding your own truth, and creating power in action in your own life.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, I return to Asad’s theory, one of the most recent anthropological ways of approaching religion. For Asad, religion is an anthropological category, meaning that CAYA can only be understood in relation to its own cultural context. Some religious characteristics can be applied to the data, like Durkheim’s description of sacred and profane where “collective effervescence” describes the sacred energy raised in the circle⁵ or in Geertz’s terms as participants are able to find personal meaning in ritual activities through their own interpretation of symbols presented.⁶ From this view, to call eclectic paganism a religion would be easy to do, but is not the goal of this paper.

To restate the definition of spirituality in Foucault’s words, spirituality is “the search, practice or experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to

5 Felds, Karen E. tran. *Emile Durkheim: The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995)

6 Geertz, Clifford. “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistok Publications, 1966)

have access to the truth.”⁷ As I have pointed out throughout this paper, individualism as a culturally valued ideal is an underlying characteristic of the ritual experiences in CAYA. Though Protestants seem an unlikely religion to parallel a movement like Paganism, it is important to notice that individualistic ideals were shaped by the cultural history that Weber describes in America’s Protestant origins. In looking at CAYA in terms of their own cultural identities, I show that they gain agency through valuing their own spiritual experiences as truth.

In order to further situate Pagan eclecticism in the context of the practitioner’s own experiences, I build on the work of Sabina Magliocco, in her book *The Witching Culture* on Neopaganism in America. She eloquently summarized Pagans as “individualistic freedom seeking Americans” that are invested in the idea of individual spiritual authority as they are *orthopractic* or concerned with practice, rather than *orthodox* or concerned with belief. The question she poses is how a practice and experience based movement like Paganism that consists of shifting, complex networks can achieve a degree of cohesion.⁸ But as Bender shows us, spirituality is not necessarily something that emerges due to weakening social ties, but rather a practice that can become socialized through practitioner’s own experience. Through the process of analyzing my data in my experiences with CAYA, I have found that Pagan eclectics demonstrate through ritual performances that individualism can be maintained within a diverse community of practitioners *because* they are determined to support and respect each other, regardless of personal beliefs. CAYA’s eclectic approach poses an excellent model for other spiritual organizations as many modern Americans move toward what Bender calls “spiritual, not religious.”

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