

Earth, Air, Fire, Water and the Big Smoke

Urban Paganism: Ritual performance, identity construction and meaning making within and without the city.



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Foreword: This paper concerns my experience conducting fieldwork in the summer months, between April 20th and July 31st, of 2018. During this time I was privileged to meet with individuals engaged with and practicing varying forms of Nature Spirituality - namely Druidry and Wicca, and to observe, participate and converse with them about how pagan spiritual practice was conducted in the United Kingdom. Oscillating between rural and urban wildernesses I followed pagan adherents in their daily lives, on their journeys toward self development, community connectivity and environmental/ecological consciousness discovering how these themes entwined with and were implemented through their spiritual praxis.

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To The Muses:

*Whether on Ida's shady brow,
Or in the chambers of the East,
The chambers of the sun, that now
From ancient melody have ceas'd;*

*Whether in Heav'n ye wander fair,
Or the green corners of the earth,
Or the blue regions of the air,
Where the melodious winds have birth;*

*Whether on crystal rocks ye rove,
Beneath the bosom of the sea
Wand'ring in many a coral grove,
Fair Nine, forsaking Poetry!*

*How have you left the ancient love
That bards of old enjoy'd in you!
The languid strings do scarcely move!
The sound is forc'd, the notes are few!*

William Blake (1783)

Introduction

A Spiritual Dearth?

**“G O D I S D E A D,
G O D R E M A I N S D E A D,
A N D W E H A V E K I L L E D H I M”
(Nietzsche 1882)**

The dilution and/or disappearance of religious ideals throughout western societies has been identified as a result of the turn of the enlightenment, the advent and advancement of scientific rationale, processes of industrialization and fundamentally the political and societal separation between church and state (Nietzsche 1882, Jung 1964). Post-enlightenment philosophies have worked to distance individuals in their relationship to religious institutions, notions of God and spiritual modes of consciousness. And the secular model on which “modern” nations have developed oftentimes relegate spirituality or faith praxis to the peripheries of contemporary societal action and discourse. Voas (2015) widely asserts a reduction in the number of individuals identifying with a specific religion, who believe in God, and who may deem spiritual beliefs as “important” across New Zealand, USA and Canada respectively. This “secular transition” is predicted to continue in separating individuals from identities incorporating religious characteristics and ideals, in forms such as church affiliation and prayer, as societies continue to develop and modernise (ibid.).

In the United Kingdom the estrangement of religion from daily life has, of late, also been frequently publicised. “Religious faith...expressed through the established church, is in precipitous decline” (Stourton 2015), and tales that regail the demise of local parish churches “adapted for secular use, demolished or abandoned” (Thompson 2015) are seemingly not uncommon. Amongst those included are the alterations to religious structures in the town, village and surrounding area I grew up in the south east of the UK. The local priest, at one time solely responsible for the one village church and congregation now, accounting for reductions in the

numbers attending his order, spreads his ecclesiastical duties between three parishes. Falling numbers of church attendees can be seen to signify an unbinding from the prior necessity for Christian practice in the daily lives of the areas inhabitants. When the church is not being used every third week for Christian communion it functions as a site for secular events, craft markets, music concerts and even wildlife tours, with the initial religious significance now somewhat veiled. Developing this point, the role of the Sunday church service in the neighbouring town has been substituted for Sunday shopping hours. The high streets bustles on this extra day we have to peruse the “cathedrals of consumption” (Varul 2008: 237), the church and its grounds in the centre of town remain inactive, a lone gardener tends to the weeds around its doorway. Drawn to the architecture, stained glass windows and acoustics of this place when revisiting I often lift the heavy bolted door to move inside of the building itself. Cool silence and stillness resound, my own footsteps isolated in their reverberations around the cavernous hall as the sunlight attempts to penetrate the thick dust covering the windows above.

The Church of England, somewhat paradoxically still considered the state church of the UK due to its affiliations with educational institutions and political decision making, promotes a Christian doctrine in the form of Anglicanism. In the past, this institution would have offered spiritual and social forums where individuals could come together in shared communion. The church was often at the centre of community providing a locus for spiritual expression and aiding at an organisational level in the support of local ceremonies and events, most routinised in smaller rural settlements. Countrywide surveys, however, now quantify shrinking church congregations, declining amounts of British born Christians¹ and predict Anglicanism to “disappear from Britain in 2033” (Thompson 2015). These publications expound a notion whereby the role of the church, religion and *traditional* spiritual expression is depreciating, cultivating the idea that the UK is fast becoming one of the least religious nations in the world (Guardian 2015) - a country where “more than half the population say they have no religion” (Sherwood 2017, Crabtree 2012).

¹ British Social Attitudes and British Election Studies surveys show “between 2001 and 2011 the number of Christians born in Britain fell by 5.3 million — about 10,000 a week.” (Thompson 2015)

“The English have lost any sense of what religion is”
(Very Reverend David Edwards in Paxman 1998: 105)

Having lived abroad for some years, the perceived lack of spiritual identification with the Church of England and its specific brand of Anglican Christianity, was evident when returning to the UK. There were, and still are, many Anglican churches around the towns and villages I inhabited when I was younger, yet to set foot in them communally is a rare occasion. Reserved for specific times of year such as Christmas or Easter mass or personal events i.e. weddings, christenings or funerals the everyday use of churches as sites of worship and expression of this conventional spiritual identity seemed contemporarily uncommon. Wishing to problematize this notion of the UK being devoid and disconnected with spiritual practice I began to search for alternative faith communities identifying and expressing spiritualities contradicting the seeming disinterest in religion, or atleast with the predominant, pre-existing Christian narrative within the UK².

Personal Motivations and Background to the Field

Finding Paganism

Reflecting on this dissociation with faith, specifically Anglican Christianity, I focussed on the idea of a diversion, or rerouting, of spiritual expression and/or faith affiliation. Humanity has found myriad ways of expressing reverence for or being conscionable of forces deemed greater than the individual and it is difficult to comprehend the essentiality of religious or spiritual perspectives (Moberg 2001 in Schlehofer et al 2008) being totally eradicated from contemporary western society. The concepts of faith, belief and spirituality may seem out of place in modern, industrialised contexts where dominant methods of extrapolating and interpreting “truth” have in recent history been envisioned and delivered through empirical scientific objectivism. However, it is evident that aptitude for spiritual expression and praxis continues to manifest in western societies, remaining “important components in people’s lives” (Schlehofer, Omoto & Adelman

² It must be noted that the religious makeup of the UK is diverse. I am utilising Christianity, more specifically Anglicanism, as a reference due to its institutional familiarity and connections with other aspects of the state placing it as the “dominant” religion where by over 50% of the population associated with a religion identify as Christian (Field 2018: 1)

2008: 411, citing Adler et al. 2005). Maintaining that the “religious makeup of the UK is diverse, complex and multicultural” (Crabtree 2012) I broadened my perspective with regards to manifestations of religious identity within the UK.

Remembering seasonal festivities - May Fairs and Harvest festivals and their seeming religious/spiritual connotations in the form of prayers unconsciously recited as a kid at school I became drawn to films and literatures concerning Paganism (Valentino 2015, Butler 2012, Hardy 1973, Hutton 2013, Cunningham 2001) and contemporary earth-based nature spiritualities³. Defined as “a polytheistic or pantheistic nature-worshipping religion” (Pagan Federation International 2018) Pagan orders are noted to be growing in numbers (Pitzl-Waters 2012) offering alternatives to spiritual practice and expression from those proposed by traditionally established religious ideologies. The distinctions between mind-body, body-soul and nature-culture, as proposed by Descartes in the 17th century, heralding the advent of scientific objectivism, have oriented humans relationship to the world as “in opposition to nature” (Greenwood 2005: 2) positing the “power of culture over nature and hostility between them” (E Turner 2012: 13). I considered this an interesting perspective when becoming aware of the multitude of Pagan groups and comparing their stated reverence for the natural world with this historical ideological separation between man and nature implied through the empirical gaze.

Across the UK, society's' relationship with nature has also recently been brought into question. Contact with aspects of the natural environment have been argued to be in decline and a seeming disconnect with, and disregard for nature has been identified (see Gelsthorpe 2017, Guardian 2017, Vaughan 2013, Black 2012). As well, environmental actions concerning humanity's plight

³ It is necessary to highlight the relationship between these two concepts as well as to attempt to offer definition. Although “religion” and “spirituality” have oftentimes been considered synonymous and literature notes “considerable overlap” (Schlehofer et al. 2008: 411) the concepts have also been compared and considered “increasingly distinct” (ibid.). Zinnbauer et. al (1999), analysing different dimensions of the constructs determined that “religion” was often associated with negative qualities such as dogma, institutionalisation, cult and/or fundamentalist behaviours/persuasions, as opposed to “spirituality” which is linked with more positive qualities of “expanding self awareness” (see Schlehofer et al. 2008: 412). Verghese notes that spirituality is recognised as a “globally accepted concept” (2008: 233), however one must also be aware of the individualized nature of “spiritual” expressions (ibid.) and the manifold ways in which universal qualities such as “love, honesty, patience, tolerance, compassion, a sense of detachment, faith, and hope” may be experienced.

within the context of the ensuing ecological crisis and destruction of natural habitats is well documented (EEA 2019, United Nations 2019, McCarthy 2018). Wiccans, Druids, Heathens, Thelemites, Odinists, Animists and Sacred Ecologists are all distinct groups comprising a wider Pagan community (Pitzl-Waters 2012, BBC 2006). I wondered how this diverse set of spiritual groups honoured and/or worshipped in the “modern” world so seemingly separate from nature, for what reasons individuals found themselves affiliated with these religious/spiritual orders, and what impacts/manifestations a relationship with nature, based on veneration, occurred through identifying as Pagan. The background for my research had been realised, it was then necessary to enter the field to establish collaborative relations with individuals ascribing to Pagan praxis so as to elucidate my tentative research inquiries.



Fig 1. A huge pile of fly-tipped rubbish at Theydon Bois, Essex, South East England, at a site owned by the Woodland Trust. Photograph: Judith Parry/The Woodland Trust/PA (Guardian 2017)

Presenting the Field I

“Paganism” - a brief historical overview

The term “pagan” stems from the Latin - *paganus*, meaning “country dweller” or “rustic” and initially came to denote communities living outside major Roman cities. Tied to the countryside, connected to the land through agriculture and practicing pre-Christian faiths, considered as the “old ways”, these groups contrasted with the burgeoning Roman Christian ethos (Taylor 2005, Winter 2014, Rev. Rachelle in Valentino 2015). Applied broadly by the Roman Empire in the 4th century (Taylor 2005), “pagan” was used to determine any non-Christian group or individual worshipping or venerating a pantheon of deities often associated with nature. The term was implemented during the invasion and conquering of territories in the expansion of the Roman imperial state and the subsequent imposition of Christian theology. Through collectively categorising nuanced indigenous faiths under one umbrella term the imperial doctrine enabled the slow suppression of non-Christian practices, working to homogenise “rituals, beliefs and traditions [that] were undefined and fluidly interpreted” (Winter 2014), simplifying complex spiritual modalities in the efforts to marginalise and eventually replace them with fixed Christian counterparts. Hutton (2003: XIV) notes that ancient paganism is best understood as a “spectrum of different religions” whereby polytheism was the predominant method of spiritually orienting oneself in the world. However, oftentimes one god, goddess or deity was chosen for primary worship, resulting in the formation of sects or cults linked to specific sacred sites, aspects of the landscape or agricultural practices. One of the earliest pagan cults expressing this link to the land appears in the form of the cult of Robigo - “The Averter of Plant Rust”. Through the veneration and worship of this deity, agricultural workers of ancient times sought to protect their crops from the onset of blight and disease (Rives 2006, Slaughter 2017).

During the Renaissance of the 1500’s pagan iconography and symbols resurfaced and began to be incorporated into public artworks alongside depictions and monuments of Christian saints as well as in music and literature. However, it is the Romantic cultural movement of the 18th century that has been accredited for the development of modern Paganism⁴. Arising as a reaction

⁴ A distinction between ancient paganism and contemporary Paganism has been implied by scholars writing on the development of nature religions. Ancient paganism refers to a plethora of defined and

to the enlightenment and industrial revolution proponents of Romanticism endorsed ideas which valorized classical mythology, philosophy and artistic expression and sought to offer a counterpoint to the then scientific rationalisation of the natural world in the “possibility of [attaining] good health” (Taylor 2005: 1247). The prose and poetry of William Blake surmise the Romantic views towards expansion of urban landscapes and the encroachment of the city into the countryside, as well as identify the distancing of society from “the ancient love” (from *To The Muses* by William Blake 1783). Blake's poetry highlights a will to engage with notions of an ancestral past as well as rendering an image of the landscape of the British Isles as sacred (see *Milton/Jerusalem in Blake* 2005: 211). The Romantics promoted folk expression to a form of high art in turn emotionalising and sacralising the natural world. These elements as well as the recognition of the importance of mythos are also considered defining characteristics of contemporary Pagan spiritual expression.

Taylor (2005) citing Hutton (2000) outlines four ways in which adherents of contemporary Paganism, like the motivations of the Romantics, attempt to connect with the ancient nature venerating religions of Europe. Firstly, through the performance of ritual and creation of and engagement with ceremony contemporary Pagans celebrate eight annual seasonal festivals which fall at the transition between the seasons as well as on the solstices and equinoxes each year cycle (see *Pagan Wheel of the Year* - Fig. 2). Secondly, practices categorised as “hedge witchcraft” or “folk magic” often referring to the utilisation of nature through the creation and application of “herbal remedies” and communion with “classical deities” in the maintenance of a healthy life. Thirdly, he recognises that knowledge and appreciation of art and literature of the ancient world works to build contemporary Pagan identity and spiritual practice. Finally rites of passage, which have been somewhat removed from the modern context, are considered an important aspect in affirming and developing Pagan ideals and identities (Taylor 2005: 1247).

distinguished religions, sects and cults, whereas modern Paganism is either considered one religion or one theme that runs through, linking individuals identifying with various earth based nature spiritualities and those communities who celebrate and venerate nature contemporaneously.



Fig 2. The Pagan Wheel of the Year shows the 8 seasonal festivals celebrated annually (source AscendantBooks.org 2018).

As previously stated, the broader Pagan community is particularly diverse with multiple spiritual groups each variously nuanced yet common in their idea of a “spirituality focussed...on human relationships with the Earth, places and physical reality” (Taylor 2005: 1247). Acknowledging the origins and development of these Pagan pluralities yet aware of the nature venerating strand running throughout these differing spiritual incarnations I primarily focussed on Druidry and those identifying with Druidic Orders around the UK.

Meeting The British Druid Order (BDO)

Prior to entering the field I had attempted to make contact with several individuals and groups linked to and/or seemingly expressive of Pagan/earth-based nature spiritualities. The personalised nature of this form of spiritual expression made it difficult to find individuals willing to delve deeper into and divulge *their* particular outlooks. This factor was expounded when finding out that I was to be using a camera in my efforts at conducting research. Solitary witches and Red-Men⁵ were reluctant to engage with someone outside of the community.

⁵ The red-men are mischievous sprite-like characters played by actors in the ritual celebration of the fire festival Beltane which marks the seasonal transition from winter into summer. It was during the

Whether this was due to my outsider-ness and the ease of ignoring electronic mail correspondences (Brosch 2008), or the possibility that they were too busy with other aspects of their life to be willing to share and communicate their forms of Paganism my early attempts at gaining access to Pagan arenas were unsuccessful. Resorting to literature regarding the magical/spiritual rendering of landscape in the UK I figured it would be prudent to contact some individuals who had already had the experience of anthropological inquiry. Philip Shallcrass, cited in Greenwood's "The Nature of Magic" highlighting the bricolage nature of contemporary Druidry and shamanic practice (2005: 28), provided the first successful link to an active EBNS community, and after a period of email communication I was invited to an assembly of the British Druid Order (BDO) where I could meet Philip, The Chief, and other "core members" of the order.

This initial meeting took place at a "centre of inspiration, creativity, celebration and transformation", named "Wild Ways" (Wild Ways website 2018), situated on the border of Wales and England in rural Shropshire. The site is enclosed by ancient woodland in a somewhat secluded area of the British countryside and managed by an elderly couple, both practitioners of nature spiritualities and pagan ideals, living close to the land, farming sheep, growing crops and pursuing creative practices of carpentry and ceramics production. The group gathered that day were affiliated primarily with the BDO, yet it was also apparent that individuals were not restricted from accessing other spiritual groups and holding multiple Pagan alliances. The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) was the predominant other, yet some individuals were also following more feminist based Wiccan traditions. The discussion I was invited to join primarily revolved around the promotion and promulgation of Druidic ideology as writ by the BDO and how the order wished to progress into the future.

"Rekindling the sacred fires of Druidry as a living, breathing, animistic, shamanistic, life-affirming, Earth-honouring spirituality for the 21st century" (The British Druid Order 2018)

preliminary stages of fieldwork preparation that I was considering attending this large scale public performance of ritual held on Calton Hill in Edinburgh, Scotland, on the last day of April each year.

After having made my journey from east to west across the southern regions of the UK, been welcomed and introduced to this gathering of Wiccans, Bards, Ovates and Druids, the meeting commenced outdoors on a sunny day in late spring, beneath a grove of grape vines grown and harvested in the previous years.

The makeup of the group is relatively diverse, a roughly equal split of male and female Pagan practitioners, the majority of whom are in their late 40's and some older, yet a number of younger individuals are also present and active participants throughout the discussion. Assembling in Shropshire from dispersed regions over the UK the group is predominantly ethnically white, yet each member speaks of various aspects of their heritage stemming from different nationalities. Recognition and promotion of a "multiethnic, multicultural" profile is an aspect members of the BDO considers important in carrying Druidry into the 21st century. The discussion centres around the identity of the order and how they wish to make themselves and their spiritual ethos more accessible to younger, urban demographics in the hope of "getting the countryside into the city". The BDO has existed since 1979, established by Philip Shallcrass who, as the Chief of the order, is in the process of completing a collection of Bardic, Ovate and Druidic "courses" designed to guide members and potential initiates through the steps of becoming a comprehensive spiritual practitioner. Aligned with principles of "caring for the earth, empowering spirit, promoting peace and understanding" (BDO website 2018), and promoting a close connection to the natural world in gaining "access to truth" the courses offer "the most intelligent and erudite sequential introduction to modern Druidry available" (Hutton 2018, Druidry.co.uk).

Reverence and respect for the deities of nature and the Druidic path towards self development do not, however, exist in a vacuum. There is a necessity for the BDO and its members to orient with respect to modern systems of bureaucracy, organisational red tape and to navigate the dominant "capitalist culture". This necessary (evil) interaction between the spiritual and secular domains does not go unrecognised. The courses offered by the BDO cost money, which ultimately goes toward sustaining their creator, Philip. Conflict which needs assuaging is apparent as he

questions whether one should charge money for anything spiritual. Yet, when “this is *all*” Philip does to sustain life in the modern context it seems an inevitability that he is somewhat forced into. There is an incongruence between the modern world and the spiritual ethos of the BDO, for its seeming egalitarian structure is reliant on the capitalist structures which it has been born into. Other members announce their positions when it comes to making a living in the modern world and how this relates to their earth-based spirituality. As opposed to a willingness to engage with capitalist modernity it is acknowledged as an *acceptance* of a relationship with wider market, economic and secularist principles which if they could be avoided would be.

The modern context, despite its capitalist pitfalls, also brings into question the image of the BDO. Tired of the stereotyped image of Druid practitioners as “old bearded men in old white robes” both younger and older members of the group collectively express their “shame” at the archaic public representation of Druids and their practice. Mainstream media focusses on the exotic and sensational elements of Druidic ritual and the somewhat alternative, non traditionalist, and at times anti-establishment relationship members of these spiritual orders have to other institutions (Haynes 2017). Public ceremony at ancient historical sites around the UK summons media portrayal of “silly” Druid groups according to the BDO. The controversy surrounding Stonehenge as a sacred site for Druids and the conflict with conservation organisations endowed with maintaining this feature of British heritage makes up a number of headlines ultimately colouring the public perception of what Druidry is (see BBC 2015, Haynes 2017). The BDO want the power to represent themselves as a “sensible” group of Pagans with the ideas of “rebranding” and “re-imagining” referenced during the conversations regarding the orders future actions, signifying a necessity for conscious self-marketing if they are to bring nature-spirituality to a wider audience.

The air of inclusivity and a hope to engaged others in Druidic practice circulated through the discussion. It was clear that the involvement of younger individuals with Druidic ethos was important for sustaining as well as redirecting the identity of the group, and my presence as a 28 year old Visual Anthropology student did not go unrecognised in this venture. Changing with the

times the BDO wishes to accommodate the plurality of identities existent in the heterogeneous context of British society. Recognition and alteration of Druidic practice that may have once appeared binary and non fluid to individuals outside of the community needed to be addressed, as well as practical matters as to how ceremony and rites were to be conducted in the future⁶. A focus on maintaining positive mental health through the different aspects of Druidic nature spirituality in the form of communion with nature, meditation and acquisition of mythological knowledge is another important endeavour highlighted in this initial meeting.

Beltane with the BDO

My successive invitation, by members of the BDO, to celebrate Beltane in the proceeding weeks was a welcome surprise. Interpreting this as way to participate in and observe contemporary Pagan practice I considered it an opportunity to further acquaint myself with Pagan custom, celebration and ceremony, and accepted.

Beltane is an ancient Celtic festival symbolising the seasonal transition from winter to summer. One of the 8 celebrative events on the Pagan wheel of the year it falls on May 1st, sharing timing with Mayday - the Anglo-Saxon spring fertility festival. Beltane is also a time devoted to recognising the regenerative properties of the land and creation of new life in the spring praying for agricultural abundance during the summer months to come. Traditionally, energies are focussed on encouraging a fruitful harvest through the naming of the Lord and Lady of the Land - a personification of the feminine and masculine principles symbolically married in the efforts to encourage bountiful crops, as well as the lighting and stepping through the purifying Beltane fire in recognition of the past and acknowledgment of future hopes. The BDO allowed me to participate fully in this Pagan celebration.

At the same site where my initial meeting with the BDO had taken place a week long Pagan camp was established. A multitude of activities, ritual, ceremony and performances were

⁶ Traditionally, ceremony conducted by the BDO would be divided along the basis of sex. Male and female sacred lodges would be established and practitioners separated respectively. This aspect of ceremony was however being brought into question at the meeting due to members of the group recognising the potential unease others may experience if forced to identify solely on their gender.

conducted in honouring the land allowing adherents to “reconnect” with nature important in expression of their spiritual practice. This essence of reconnection with the natural was expressed through the locale of the site, the “spirit” of place itself flowing from the ancient forests we found ourselves in. Many of the camp attendees came from other areas of the UK, few living in such rural settings and considered it welcome change to the built environments they normally moved within.

As well activities such as “nature walks” where adherents were guided by knowledgeable members of their cohort through the surrounding woodland and grasslands in identifying various edible and medicinal plants, shrubs and trees. On these walks the plants were also identified for their mythic as well as their practical properties. The Hawthorne tree identified as a site of liminality where spirits and individuals could situate between worlds, and the Lady of the Elder - a spirit associated with the Elder tree (*Sambucus niger*), who if disrespected through excessive/misuse of the Elder wood will disrupt life in this physical realm of existence. A symbolic representation of this knowledge acquisition is the Ogham - an ancient Celtic language. Each character within this language is representative of a specific type of tree, which bares certain attributes. Many of the Druid practitioners sported Ogham tattoos or created artworks and crafts incorporating the characters of this language into the artefacts they created from wood and ceramics.



Fig 3. Hand Carved Ogham talisman by Adrian Rooke (RookeTherapy.co.uk 2018)

As well the expression of Druidry as aligned with nature has been linked to the etymology of the title itself. The proto Celtic word “druwit” translated to “oak-knower” and the pre Indo-European roots - *deru*, meaning “solid, strong or steadfast” and *weid*, meaning “to see” (See Druid Tree

Lore druidry.org 2018) combine to define Druidry/a Druid as “a steadfast seer, a knower of magic and enchantment...a sage of the forest...know[ing] the secrets of the oak and the wildwood” (ibid. 2018).

The camp also offered a “safe space” - a place for healing, allowing individuals to express difficult or traumatic accounts openly. The space was “secured” through the “beating of the bounds” whereby the group walked in procession to the four corners of the camp (North, South, East, West) addressing the different totemic animals associated with each direction (Great Bear of the Starry Night, Stag in the heat of the chase, Hawk of Dawn and Salmon of Wisdom). Through performing this process the site is sanctified and personal spiritual work could begin. The concept of “work” or working on oneself was something frequently iterated in conversation and also dealt with during the creation of “sacred lodges”. These were spaces established at the beginning of the Beltane ceremony in which individuals chose to spend time supported by other attendees in talking through aspects of their lives they may have felt marginalised in or powerless to act on. Through group work individuals aired issues and worked on them with the help of the collective reading of the Mabinogion⁷. These processes opened my eyes to the prospect of Paganism as a source of empowerment, healing, mental and physical wellbeing and maintenance of a stable psychological condition in relation to the “modern” world.

Despite my expectations and wishing to film at the Beltane camp I soon realised that it was not the right environment to be using the camera. The people I had initially met at the BDO meeting were few and far between - Phillip was at the camp, yet he remained somewhat detached from the proceedings, only appearing for the parts of the camp he was leading. I made my introductions to the new faces, yet at the camp of 40 people it was difficult to get to know many who felt comfortable in sharing so much until later on in the proceedings. Being only a week long, it didn't seem worth using the camera at such a late stage, rather cover the camp in its entirety - perhaps next year now that I have made the contacts and begun building relationships amongst others within this community.

⁷ The Mabinogion is a collection of ancient Celtic folk stories and oral prose collated and set to paper in the 12th century BC.

The camp proved to be a healing place for many people. It was a serious event where a “safe space” was established and individuals were able to work through issues with the support from the rest of the community. There were “fun” aspects of the camp, but the general sentiment was one of working through problems, developing oneself and facing issues with the guidance of Druidic/Pagan practices. Meditations, communal workshops, singing, playing music, dancing and general maintenance of the camp built upon the connections individuals within the community had with one another, however, I considered this time too personal and sacred for these people to be following them around with the camera. I have managed to document the majority of my time during this week just with notepad and pen, as well taking some still photographs - even though this was also sometimes frowned upon, the reactions toward any kind of recording equipment were not ones of acceptance. The video camera therefore stayed in its case so as to build and preserve better, more considerate relations with those I wanted to study with and from.

The camp finished and the connections I had made at this locus spread back out into the rest of the United Kingdom and further abroad. I had witnessed a concentrated experience of communal Druidic spiritual expression and participated as fully as possible in the camp proceedings from carrying out general tasks such as cooking and wood collection to embodying the spirit of the Lord of the Land/May King in the May day May-Pole ceremony. For me this was a much greater insight and experience than if I had been attempting to navigate this novel land from behind the camera.

The week long of ceremony and practice took place in an isolated context and short period of time. I was left wondering what these adherents did outside of this special celebratory setting. What were the reasons as to why such meetings were organised and attended, and how did individuals sustain pagan identities outside of these calendrical gatherings? I wanted to discover how Paganisms were expressed outside of these specific ceremonial gatherings, I wanted to witness how they intertwined with the seeming spiritually void landscapes of late modernity.



Fig 4: May Day celebrations - Pagan adherents dance around the Maypole - traditionally a tree would have been felled to create this necessary ceremonial prop, however it was considered unsustainable to continuously chop down trees from the surrounding forest by the camp members. The group therefore selected a live tree which they reused each year for the Beltane celebrations in a move towards a more sustainable festivity.

A New Field

Meeting earth based nature spirituality (EBNS) practitioners as part of Beltane celebrations inspired me to follow up on what I had experienced. How those ascribing to nature venerating ideals at the camp in Shropshire integrated these expressions in other areas of their lives. Leaving the camp and rural settings of the Wild Ways retreat I returned eastward aiming to develop relations initiated during my first meeting with the BDO and with those seeming most open to my research during the camp.

Focussing on three Pagan practitioners, whom I shall introduce shortly, my research became predominantly based in the East End of London. My inquiries into Pagan lifeworlds would also take me to the west of the city and outside of its bounds entirely, on various excursions to more rural locales where my collaborators would export aspects of their spiritual practice to be “closer to nature”, the ancestors and spirits they worshipped.

LONDON - A CASE OF “SUPERDIVERSITY” & “OVERHEATING”

Also known as “the Big Smoke” the capital city of England, surprisingly, came to be my home and predominant site of study when furthering my exploration of Pagan spiritual expression during the summer of 2018. Beginning this project in the lush, green, ancient woodlands in the west of England I now substituted these organic ecosystems with those of a more man-made and industrial nature. Heavy traffic, concrete tower blocks, construction sites, crowded and at times hectic urban landscapes substituted the idyllic ancient forests of the Borle in Shropshire. The “satanic mills” now ersatz to those “pleasant pastures seen” (William Blake 2005: 211).

The population of the city has steadily grown throughout the ages since its establishment by Roman forces, developing as a capital and trading hub during British Imperial expansion and now in its post-industrial form is inhabited by upward of 9 million inhabitants. Now described as “the most cosmopolitan place on earth” (Benedictus and Godwin 2005: 2 cited in Vertovec 2006: 1) the city has been throughout history and remaining to this day a culturally diverse settlement. Home to people from all over the world, a place where over 300 languages are spoken and

inter-cultural contact is the norm, the social makeup is heterogeneous and complex. Vertovec's notion of "superdiversity" (ibid.) is apt when thinking of this built environment and my new field site in the study of Pagan spiritual expression.

This rate of interaction, idea exchange and heterogeneity has been identified as an outcome of processes of globalization and the freedom and speed with which flows of people and information now travel. Hylland-Eriksen focuses on these interactions and processes of change within this hyperdiverse context equating the speed with which change and diversity propagates to a vehicle "shifted to a higher gear" within the last 25 years (Hylland-Eriksen TED talk 2017). New technologies, global population growth, energy use, tourism and migration: economic and/or politically motivated have all increased adding to the complexity of interaction and acceleration of change especially within cities and urban contexts, bringing with it a sense of what he calls "overheating" due to these increases in energetic activity. The "anthropocene" is defined as the earth's latest geologic period where human actions impact and influence the planet, Hylland-Eriksen recites in his recent TED talk (2017) a mantra of "cool down, slow down and scale down" in the hope of preventing humanity's seeming impending doom.

The city as a "source of increased social complexity" due to these two aforementioned concepts impacts on those that inhabit such a space (Hylland-Eriksen 2016). The impacts of urbanism on populations has been considered since the time of Aristotle who noted the effect on relationships between city dwellers in a densely populated area (Wirth 1938 in Gmelch & Zenner 2002: 71). Segregation based on identifiable features and weak social bonds due to the frequency at which individuals meet in a heavily populated site lead to a "less intensive knowledge" of those one shares space with (ibid.: 72). The "superficiality" with which social interactions are conducted in the urban has been compared and contrasted with rural modes of living where sustained "face to face contacts" are seemingly the social norm (ibid: 53). This rural-urban dichotomy may simplify contemporary social organisation and disregard the role of the internet and other technologies which are now disseminated throughout society rather than remaining concentrated in developed/urban contexts, especially in the UK. However, it is helpful as a point of departure

when considering how individuals navigate urban landscapes and how Paganism spiritualities fit into these super diverse dynamics of overheating.

THE URBAN CONTEXT - A SITE OF DISCONNECT?

Literatures concerning this period of late modernity and the urban context build on the musings of Aristotle utilising metaphors to consider the diffuse and disparate relations individuals based in cities grow accustomed to. Contemporary urban living during this age of intensive flow of individuals, communities and ideas forges the city as a space devoid of “stable orientation points” (Bauman 2000: 7). Implying a sense of difficulty in connecting with one another due to the sheer diversity of perspectives and the dissolution of conventional social anchors, such as religious institutions i.e. the Anglican church, the city is painted as the “factory of fragmentation” (Harvey 1992). Traditionally the site of mercantilism, trade and the free market Harvey continues to emphasize that capitalism thrives on the “production of difference” (ibid.: 216) and the “flux of globalization” (Meyer & Geschiere 1999: 9) impacts upon inhabitants’ sense of self-identity (Giddens 2016) in a time Bauman has labelled “liquid modernity” (2000). Constantly changing, the metaphor of fluidity when considering late modernity and how individuals navigate such contexts as the “Big Smoke” seems appropriate. Focussing on why and how earth based nature spirituality fits into and is implemented in the city - a space historically associated with stress, strains and “psychic overload”⁸ (Milgram 1970, in Gmelch & Zenner 2002: 83).

⁸ “Psychic overload” refers to the heightened frequency of sensory stimuli experienced by individuals inhabiting urban environments (Milgram 1970)

Methodology and Methods

Participant Observation

The research method predominantly employed when gathering “data” regarding the expression of Pagan spirituality was participant observation. Through both *doing* as well as *seeing/watching* how my collaborators performed aspects of their spiritual practice I hoped to both involve myself in an attempt to gain personal insight into some of their practices yet also aimed for a kind of objective standpoint as a social scientist. I found this distinction at times difficult to manage in a somewhat conflicted position as to whether I should participate in the ritual/ceremony I wanted to understand from both the inside and the out, or merely watch from the sidelines. This conflict was at times exacerbated by the presence of the camera which I shall talk more about shortly.

“Participation is transformative in relation to the everyday material world” (Greenwood 2009: 29). Heeding this I did not want to simply spectate during the spiritual activities of my collaborator. Blum states that the “reduction in the study of religion is unavoidable” oftentimes as the two perspectives, of the researcher/scholar and researched/religious subject are “irreconcilable” (2012: 1026). However, for myself to simply observe was to distance myself from those I was attempting to work with. To understand as fully as possible the rituals and ceremonies my collaborators were performing I also wanted to take part; in an attempt to comprehend through “tacit” rather than “explicit” aspects of the Pagan culture studied (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 1). The urge to develop knowledge through personal experience led me to, at times, participate fully in Pagan ceremony and to make certain decisions throughout the fieldwork process using practices suggested by my collaborators, including forms of divination. As I sat one afternoon on Grove Road in Mile End, east London with Jonathan, a Druid I had met at the first BDO meeting, I was deliberating as to whether to join Emma, another Pagan practitioner whom I had met during Beltane. She was planning a trip to Avebury - a small village located 70 miles west of London featuring an array of megalithic and neolithic monuments regarded as important sites of ancestral worship by Pagan adherents. The premise of the trip was to “wild camp” at West Kennet Long Barrow, a neolithic tomb dated to around 5500 BC she would be visiting as part of her spiritual praxis. Indecisive as to whether to attend, questioning

what I might miss by being out of the city, Jonathan suggested to conduct a Tarot reading so as to determine my future actions. Using a set of digitized Tarot “cards” I drew one with my question intently held in mind. I forget which card it was that was chosen at random, yet the outcome stated I should go lest I be disappointed for what could have been experienced. I subsequently left to gather what was required to spend a night in an ancient burial site in the British countryside. There was something interesting in this way of navigating the world like this, through reliance on esoteric practice - I would later discover that the use of Tarot cards and various symbolic artefacts was common practice when conducting ritual ceremony in the making of important decisions as well as venerating and/or communing with deities one feels a particularly strong connection with.

Personal positioning and Access

As someone with little practical experience of Pagan ritual it was necessary to find someone willing to take me along on their own spiritual journey so as to discover the intricacies of Pagan spiritual expression more intimately. I have lived most of my life with little to no formal religious education, but I considered my interests in ancient and classical mythologies, the occult and environmentalist actions to be an in-road to making contact with members of the Pagan community. However, being outside of the UK whilst planning this research proved problematic. Sending emails to individuals inquiring if I could follow them and their spiritual expression was met with little enthusiasm, and my preliminary questions considered too personal to divulge through electronic communications and/or internet forums. Positioned outside of the Pagan community did not act in my favour, and my somewhat ambiguous identity as visual anthropologist in training also raised questions as to my intentions when involving myself with practitioners. I perceived there was some concern as to how individuals felt they and their spiritual outlook may be represented if they were to accept my request.

Visual Anthropology seems a somewhat strange and unknown discipline to those not on “the inside”. At times throughout my fieldwork I heard “I’ve heard of anthropology, but what is it...*visual*?”, “you study films, visuals to study people?”. Trying to explain what it is to those

within the research demographic can be difficult especially without the physical presence between researcher and participant potentially leading to misunderstanding and confusion as to the motives of the researcher. To say one is making a “documentary” can work to sidestep an awkward explanation of what ethnographic cinema is, but it also omits how invasive creating a visual ethnographic account of somebody's life could be. What we as visual anthropologists are carrying out is more imposing upon individuals as “research subjects” than may be considered when talking of a document/documentary focussed on a specific topic or theme. It is not a clean, dry, sterile academic record one is producing, but a rich, sticky, account of people's' lives that is to be distilled from the period of “fieldwork” - a term which implies a relationship constituted for the purpose of providing fruitful analytical data sets as opposed to being concerned with creating caring, considered relations with those we are studying with and from.

It was thanks to relevant literature (Greenwood 2005, 2009) that I was encouraged to make contact with Phillip “Greywolf” Shallcrass, who had already the experience of ethnographic inquiry, and lead me to meet “core members” of the British Druid Order at their general meeting previously mentioned. This introduction paved the way for the development of my fieldwork. It allowed me to meet Jonathan who became instrumental in portraying Pagan ritual performance when I returned to the city, as well as Emma another collaborator willing to express her spirituality to me in the context of the city whom I had met at the Beltane celebrations I had been invited to by the BDO after said meeting.

The Camera as Research Tool - Observational style vs Ethno-Fiction?

Focussing on the ritual conduct and ceremonial expression of those Pagan adherents I was following, it was useful to record these processes with the video camera. The video material offers insight on the sincerity of my collaborators actions. However, the camera at times became a source of distancing - the ethical concern around filming in sacred spaces, or filming the spiritual exploits of my collaborators was raised multiple times. Spiritual expression can induce states of vulnerability and at times I considered it inappropriate to film those I was with experiencing such states. At times I was also told that it was not respectful to film as the deities

individuals were communing with did not appreciate my presence with the camera. de Bromhead (2014) identifies the alteration of situations with and without the video camera. Conducting research in predominantly “masculine” arenas she found that the use of the camera dissolved her identity as a woman making it easier to integrate and document those she was working with. As for my research in spaces focussed on care, nurturing and more “feminine” principles the introduction of the camera, and myself as a male presence did not act in my favour. Individuals, especially at the Beltane camp, were at times sceptical of my presence. I attribute this to being there at the very start of my fieldwork and not having had the time to properly build relationships with the Pagan adherents I was there to collaborate with (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009).

I had intended to employ an observational film style throughout my fieldwork. Young (1995) cites that this is a style of filming concerned with *showing rather than telling* the viewer what it is they are witnessing. I wanted to use the camera discreetly and merely as a tool to record the everyday nature of those I was studying from. However, there were times when collaboration led to the suggestion of specific forms of spiritual expression which could be filmed for ethnographic purposes. In this sense the observational film style I had opted for transitioned into a more considered, perhaps calculated form of film making. The performance of specific rituals for the camera, suggested by my collaborators, led me to rethink the way in which I was collecting ethnographic data. It transpires that some elements of film followed a structure similar to the ethno-fiction pioneered by Jean Rouch⁹ whereby a loose “script” is decided on between researcher and researched, and in what Loizos terms a process of “projective improvisation” aspects of my collaborators lives were acted out in front of the camera (Sjöberg 2008: 229). Altar consecrations, house blessings and the preparation for and carrying out of the pilgrimage (which became the main focus of my film) were predetermined actions, that would have taken place without the camera present, yet through discussion and collaboration efforts they were decided distinct events that, if filmed, would be most expressive of Pagan ideals. In this sense, as an anthropologist I can be seen to be joining the interests of the research group in their quest for a form of representation amenable to them.

⁹ See Jaguar (1957-1967) and Moi Un Noir (1958) as examples of this experimental form of ethnographic research.

Informal Conversation, Semi-structured interview, Fieldnotes

As it was, many of the accounts of my collaborators were noted when the camera was not present, as informal chats were freer to unfold without the camera between myself and those I was conversing with. The informations gathered and topics discussed would then be handwritten and noted at the time of talking, or shortly afterwards. Habitually recapping the days events of an evening functioned to allow me to consider the patterns between individuals and their forms of spiritual expression as well as focussing attention on recurrent themes worthy of following up in the successive days.

Filmed, semi-structured interviews did also offer some valuable “data”, yet these were mainly in moments when the interviewee had seemingly forgotten about the presence of the camera, often catching themselves afterwards asking “were you filming *that?*”. I found the method of conducting structured interviews with my collaborators too strict and removed from the actuality of their lived lives and opted for asking questions at times when they were engaged in seemingly mundane activity. For me, the flow of these conversations was more natural and I feel unveil informations in a less contrived manner as collaborators were “distracted” by these other tasks, less concerned with being on camera and subsequently more at ease with talking about their personally stylised form of spirituality. Davies (1999) encourages a reflexive form of ethnography whereby the researcher is aware and accountable of their positioning within the field of “researcher/researched” interrelations and I was very conscious of filming, especially at the start of the fieldwork - which highlights aspects of my practice as anthropologist which I should develop. “Complete participation” (ibid.: 4) is considered a method to minimise the effects of the researchers presence, yet this is not always possible especially whilst filming. Fieldnotes therefore acted to mediate the overt-ness of camera based research and my positioning within the field with the camera acting as a reflexive tool highlighting my own processes of development as a visual anthropologist.

Pagan Portraits

The lives and spiritual proclivities of my collaborators

Three individuals were most receptive to showing me their contemporary Pagan spiritual expression and how it manifested in their daily routines within the “fragmented” urban landscapes of London - the “Big Smoke”. I will now describe specific aspects of these individuals’ lives encountered on my ethnographic journey in order to establish foundations on which to base further analysis of Pagan spiritual expression in the built environment.

Collaborators:

Emma

A Walk In the Park - piecing together Paganism

“I’m a Pagan” Emma states proudly as we amble lazily together through Bushy Park - the second largest park in London, a short walk from her flat where she lives on above Hampton Road which runs west out of the city. The grasses tall and lush shrouding the numerous deer which also inhabit this green area offer a peaceful alternative to the traffic and congestion just some minutes east.

Set within the sprawl of the urban landscape, Emma practices *her form* of Paganism. Subscribed to, and loosely following the Druidic courses offered by the British Druid Order (previously mentioned) and the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids she combines aspects from these more recent traditions along with ideas from eastern mysticism and other ancient customs. She tells of her previous spiritual forays into Japanese Buddhism, yet notes that after some years she came to find this path too “dogmatic” and even “corporate” in comparison to the Pagan journey she now finds herself on. There is a “freedom to find” her own way in this earth based nature spirituality allowing her to be expressive of a *personal* spiritual dimension fitting with her day to day routine and experience; the courses acting as a “non-prescriptive” guide for her, to be followed as closely as one wishes to.

Continuing on our way through the pleasant meadow Emma explains the history of the 1100 acre Royal Park - at one time Henry VIII's hunting ground, and the relationship she has come to establish with this wide green space. She collects various objects from these natural surrounds and recounts how she once found an antler from one of the deer that graze the area. These objects, however, are not simply stumbled upon, they are in fact "gifted" to her by the land she acknowledges and respects. For this gift she received she continues to care for the space in a process of litter picking and clearing of rubbish left by other users of the park.

Asking if there is a particular direction we are heading she informs me that we are walking towards a specific area of the park that she feels a particular connection with. Following a small stream we reach a hazel tree which she calls her "magic tree" and the site where she often comes to in order to practice her form of Paganism. I ask how she came to establish this connection with this place and she describes a process of being "guided" to the site by a row of Parasol mushrooms which had bloomed along the way.

*I went out to the hazelwood,
Because a fire was in my head.*

W. B. Yeats

The hazel tree is symbolic for Emma, it represents a "liminal" space and is traditionally a symbol denoting space "between worlds" - ingestion of the hazelnut is argued to induce visions and according to "tree lore" (related to the Druidic Ogham language, see Freeman 2019 <https://www.druidry.org/library/trees/tree-lore-hazel>) hazel wood is associated with the acquisition of knowledge, used for its healing properties and acts as a source of creativity and inspiration. She refers to it as a "safe space", a site where she comes to do "work" on herself and conduct ritual and ceremony. Secluded down on the banks of the stream at the foot of the hazel tree there is a sense of tranquility as we sit and discuss her spiritual practice, her animist¹⁰

¹⁰ Animism as referred to by Emma is a spiritual perspective denoting the sense of spirit she perceives to be "flowing through everything". Experiencing nature as alive and similarly "inhabited and traversed by a light or hidden fire circulating through it" (Faivre 1994 cited by Pearson 2000).

perspective on the material world, and the function of the site. Two Red Deer calmly sip the trickling water on the opposite bank as blue dragonflies flit above the rocks and ripples. Emma comes to this point to bathe in the sense of peace it offers from the built and bustling city surrounding it, drawing a kind of power and inspiration from it by being surrounded by nature and the proximity the hazel places her in in relation to the spirit realms and the different spiritual “communities” she is in communion with - be they the spirits of the trees, fae folk, the ancestors or other non-human persons she happens upon whilst cohabiting this space. Making example of the rituals she has conducted when feeling “upset” or “in a bad head space” she comes to the hazel tree “to do some work” - insinuating the personal therapy she receives from being in this more natural environment when she needs it.

“Back to the Real World”

Returning to her small, somewhat cramped one room roadside apartment where she lives alone we sit amongst colourful paintings, prints, sculptures and shrines Emma has created with the use of, and inspired by, the objects she has received from the nearby natural habitats. An ornately carved “offering bowl” separates the bed and the sofa she is nestled on and is filled with dried flowers, pine cones, stones, shells and bones she has collected on journeys both locally and further afield. The antler reserves a pride of place in her current shrine devoted to Blodeuwedd - a figure of Celtic mythology acknowledged and explored during the Beltane festivities she also attended¹¹.

Leafing through a book on Chaos Magic she begins to tell me how she has been making and incorporating sigils into her spiritual praxis and ceremonial conduct. As I understand, she adopts and combines certain symbolic references, say a character from the Ogham or Runic alphabet, and affords a particular meaning to this hybrid image whilst rendering it as either a drawing or piece of embroidery. The sigil is then deployed during ritual designed to deal with the specific

¹¹ Emma will alter the deity/mythological figure she acknowledges when creating new shrines dependent on the aspects of herself she wishes to work upon. I will later discover that she has created a shrine to the Hindu Goddess Kali, another representation of the Divine Mother and capacitated with destroying forces of evil.

attributes it is associated with usually through ceremoniously destroying that which it represents. Her spiritual practice allows her to draw on many different traditions as well as invent new ones creating her own personalised style of nature based spirituality.

WORK LIFE

The artworks that decorate the walls of Emma's apartment are also sold and make up an informal part of her economy in her bid to sustain life in the city. Professionally, however, she works as an Occupational Therapist for the National Health Service (NHS). Throughout the week she provides care in the community, making house calls to those in need of varying physiological and psychological help and, although I wasn't able to follow her so closely in this aspect of her life due to carer - patient confidentiality, she regularly described the stresses and strains that developed from this kind of profession and employment. Not only did the job seem particularly challenging in terms of the interactions with those she was caring for, but also through conflicts and confrontations with co-workers (Quine 1999) alongside systemic issues within the NHS were difficulties she has to deal with on a daily basis. It has not gone unnoticed that under the current Conservative government NHS staff are "overworked and underpaid" (Mason & Slawson 2017, Forster 2017) and conversations with members of my own family working in similar nursing positions reiterate the effects of the exhaustive demands and targets to be met by medical staff due to rampant public sector cuts.

"Work is stressful" and there is a yearning for drastic changes in Emma's life. These difficulties of modern life are exacerbated by a sensation of "disconnect". I infer a sense of powerlessness to affect the world around and our conversations often circle themes of anxiety and depression when it comes to existing in the modern world mostly stemming from the necessity to "make rent" and inability to create and sustain meaningful relationships. The struggle to make enough income to go on living in the city is fueled paradoxically by the difficulty to find employment elsewhere outside of urban contexts. Resorting to technology and social media to promote her artworks and "make a bit of extra cash" doing something she feels "comes naturally" she states she is "stuck" to her smartphone in her efforts to promote her creative exploits. Jokingly she

confesses she can only afford herself a “three second attention span” due to the high-tech, high-speed flows of never ending informations colouring her actions and interactions both on the digital and material plain. Yet this is a seeming necessity if she wants to maintain living in London with rising rents and competition on the housing market.

Practical Nature Reverence

VISITING THE ANCESTORS

The concrete confines of the “Big Smoke”, the arduous trek east into the city and the fraught interactions Emma faces in her professional life are not only assuaged by the pockets of nature she sources closer to home. “Wild camping” is a practice she is enthusiastic about and which melds with her Pagan spiritual expression. Visiting ancient monuments throughout England, as well as familiar areas of woodland Emma sleeps out in the open air, albeit with a sleeping bag and occasional tarp, to be “closer to nature” and to “connect with the land”. In England it is illegal to camp outside of designated camping areas, yet in the past years a trend has been building whereby individuals are finding remote areas to bed down for the night without the modern prescriptive trappings of the state. During these wild camping events she incorporates ceremony and ritual in honouring the spirits and the land she is in proximity to.

I will describe one wild camping excursion Emma invited me to. Leaving London I travel westwards where I will make my way from Swindon, a large town 35 miles west of the capital, to the sparsely populated, rural village of Avebury - a quaint and somewhat remote settlement famed for its standing stones, neolithic monuments and ancient burial mounds and described as an “alternative Stonehenge”.



Fig 5. The standing stones of Avebury draw many visitors and the grounds are maintained by British Heritage.



Fig 6. Silbury Hill is the largest prehistoric man-made mound in Europe.
Now a UNESCO world heritage site



Fig 7. West Kennet Long Barrow c.3600BC

Emma and I meet at the only pub in the village where we are joined by another woman we both met at the Beltane celebrations in Shropshire. Waiting until the early evening, when the general public will have retired to the comfort of their houses the three of us depart from the central hub and inhabited area of the village carrying our backpacks and sleeping bags towards West Kennet Long Barrow - a neolithic burial mound c.3600 BC approximately 2 kilometres south of the village.

The burial mound is by no means in the “wild”, situated atop a small hill and surrounded by farm fields in close proximity to Silbury Hill - the largest man-made hill in Europe, these sites attract numerous tourists and visitors and there are several people still there when we arrive at the long barrow. It is cared for by English Heritage - a conservation organisation caring for ancient monuments, houses, gardens and sections of the countryside around England and is a public space. However, Emma is keen to begin her spiritual work and quietly wishes the other members of the public to leave.

As the sun begins to set Emma begins to drum on her hand decorated bodhran - a contemporary copy of a traditional Irish drum popular amongst many of the Pagans I have been meeting until this point. She faces the sun directly as it disappears behind the horizon, beating the drum she sings in somber sweet tones until it has completely vanished beyond the horizon.

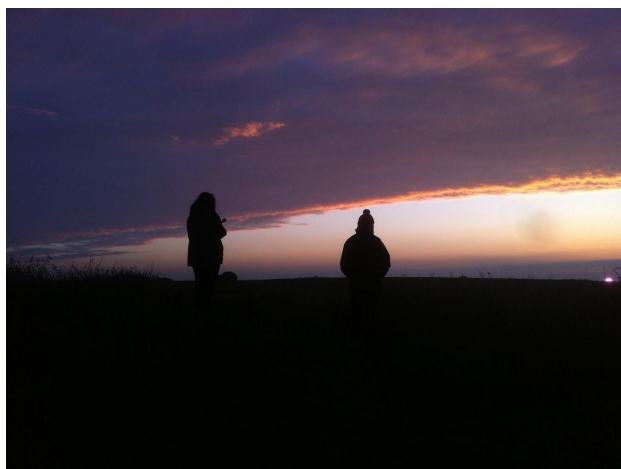


Fig 8. Emma and Helen drumming and meditating atop the ancient burial mound

The three of us are now alone on this remote hill top, the elements have been kind to us and we are prepared well enough to withstand the temperate summer night. Moving into the ancient tomb where we are to spend the evening, our bivi bags with sleeping bags inside lay on the ground, close to the earth, at the mouth of the huge stone construction. Emma prepares a brew of mugwort tea sweetened with honey and infused with Amanita Muscaria on a small, contained fire she has lit. She informs us that this mixture is to act as a “flying ointment” - a concoction used to bring the user closer to the spirit world, it has a dissociative affect on the senses inducing a trancelike state deemed important for making contact and honouring the ancestral spirits of that place. As the tea takes its affect the central area of the tomb, referred to as the “womb”, is lit with candles and soon becomes a sounding space for more drumming and chanting - the ceremony unfolds free form as Emma incorporates chants and rhythms that feel right to her in accordance with her non-prescriptive Pagan paradigm. “Awen” - an ancient Celtic word for inspiration is repeated in varying tones, and hours, which “feel like 10’s of minutes”, pass inside the close, damp cave-like walls. I leave for some time as the thought of all the past human activity this ancient site may have seen over those thousands of years becomes overwhelming. When the time feels right the ceremony comes to an end, Emma acknowledges a “presence” felt whilst inside the tomb and crawls into her sleeping bag after extinguishing the candles and small fire that have been flickering into the first hours of the morning.

Waking early with the rising sun the family of swallows nesting inside the tomb are already passing back and forth above our heads to feed their young as we pack up and walk back to the village of Avebury. Emma seems energetic and “revived” and with a spring in her step enters a small tourist shop filled with esoteric books, crystals, talisman and musical instruments. Spending nearly an hour choosing “the right” rattle from the selection of percussive instruments she will decorate this newly acquired ritual tool with various icons meaningful to her - a blue dragonfly we witnessed when visiting her hazel tree that afternoon in Bushy Park, an owl representing the form Blodeuwedd takes in the fourth branch of the Mabinogion and a crescent moon symbolic of feminine energies. A quiet contemplative mood settles over us as we sit in the bus on the way back to Swindon, to re-enter the “Big Smoke”.

REFLECTIONS

Despite Emma's enthusiasm for showing me her form of Pagan spiritual expression other obligations befell her regarding sustaining a life in the city she became busy with projects determining her foreseeable future. Work continued to stress and city life dictated it was not always possible to follow her and her Pagan journey. Despite living in the same city we were situated in opposite corners (note on transient nature of interactions in the city). I felt, albeit regretfully, that I was imposing myself too much in her life when she needed to focus. In hindsight, I think it might have actually been a positive experience for her to be with someone from different circles. Someone who she could have shared the difficulties of her life with who came with little preconception. Instead I decided to head back east, rather than feel like I were placing more strain on her life. We remained in contact, meeting several times throughout the summer but I had also found other Pagan adherents willing to engage with me and I still wanted to get a broader understanding as to the practices others ascribing to this spiritual mode committed to in the city. I interpret her willingness to show me her Pagan life partly because of the creative exploits which bloomed from her spiritual beliefs. Unlike earlier attempts to meet Pagans, I consider that it was easier for Emma to show as she was *so* expressive in terms of the material culture she was producing.

Jodie

Enter the House of Covvens

On a secluded street in New Cross - London's East End, sandwiched between a collection of retail outlets and small scale industrial units the sound of singing bowls can be heard emanating from a dilapidated door way. The sound grows as I move closer, and the sight of roughly bound bouquets of herbs seem to decorate the shady looking facade. Curious to what is on the other side I grasp the heavy, aged door, paint flaking in my grip, and force a little to stumble upon a "New Moon" sound performance.

Unsure as to what exactly I have discovered I move inside this makeshift arts space to notice printed flyers promoting what looks like a Wiccan inspired community art event. The auditory

accompaniment to this serendipitous find evokes an ethereal atmosphere, ambient chimes, field recordings and ASMR-like sounds¹² reflect on the whitewashed brick work overlaid with more floral bunches - a contrast to the urban decay that surrounds . A large round table cloaked in ample black cloth dominates the room and other inquisitive passers by start to file in from the street soaked in the early evening sun.

Jodie is an artist and graduate from Goldsmiths University of London based in New Cross - the south east of the city where I am resident for my time in the field, and she is responsible for organising this intriguing manifestation. Displaying posters in the surrounding streets she invites the public to join the “House of Covvens”, an artistic gathering which aims to involve the neighbourhood in creative discussion regarding the viability of a political system based on feminist Wiccan principles - “where the circle, not a hierarchy is the goal”. Following the lunar cycle this event was to last 28 days her artistic practice hopes to offer a “space to come together, reflect, tell stories and share ideas against the backdrop of the current social climate”. Ten group discussions were to be held in the small, informal arts space on Hart Lane where the individuals participating could explore alternative ideas regarding social issues through conversation and creative activities. “All events are free and everyone’s welcome!” reads a side note on the flyer a side note on the flyer, and I will be certain to join these meetings in the next days, but for now I sit with several others, eyes closed, listening to the meditative sounds that initially seduced me to this event and programme.

COMMUNITY COVEN

A coven is a term denoting a gathering of witches - historically sinister affairs where outcasts commune on dark windswept heaths or in secluded forest to recite evil incantations, enter into orgiastic rites and offer children up in sacrifice to the Devil! At least if we are to believe the picture painted by writers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries during the “witch-craze” (Russell & Alexander 2007: 37). No, instead the meeting Jodie has organised is a rather civil

¹² ASMR aka Auto-sensorial-meridian-response can be induced by listening to certain high frequency sounds. Many people find them relaxing to listen to, stimulating a physical response such as tingling across the body. Recordings of the sounds of miscellaneous objects now litter the internet and are being incorporated into therapeutic compilations.

event. Sat around the large circular table are a number of individuals from the local neighbourhood of New Cross congregating to sip tea and take the time to discuss issues they perceive to be of importance. Two single mums, a widower, an unemployed gentleman and three students, along with myself comprise the group and after initial introductions Jodie explains a little about the concept of the project and its aim to question “the meaning of engagement with politics through the imaginative possibilities of an alternative system based on empathy, cooperation and community”. She proposes a sense of detachment from one another and the political system the UK is currently under and a topic for discussion is proposed as a focal point.

“Consumerism and consumptive strategies” sparks up one of the students around the table and discussions quickly develop around how “it would be nice” to shop ethically, organically and ultimately locally. But, as one of the single mothers, who has managed to find this small slice of time in her busy schedule, says “it’s not always easy” to live a “healthy life”. She alludes to keeping two jobs, extortionate day care for her kids and a lack of community interaction in the area. Fortunately her mother has come to visit, allowing her time to attend this freak event. She seems concerned with “Brexit”, and the unknowingness such a democratic decision will entail (as do most others around the table), and also raises questions about the public sector cuts to schools and the police force under the Tory government. Fed up with being forced to take the “easy option” when it comes to providing for her children, i.e. the unhealthy option, she is glad of this meeting but also sceptical as to what developments may arise from it. Powerlessness to act, a paralysis in the face of uncertainty.

Concluding the round table discussion there is a general consensus that responsibility should be taken by individuals rather than relying on the “false promises” of politicians. Jodie places a piece of clay in front of each of the attendees and instructing the group, as part of her artistic practice, to take a moment to engage emotionally with the topics raised and then, however they feel, to mould the clay. The group sit in silence for some seconds, slightly perplexed as to this creative exploit after such intense discussions but after a while take the blob of clay between their fingers. Some with more focus, others “unconsciously” shaping the matter, eyes closed.

After some minutes the group re-engage one another to present their creations. A mix of forms and contorted shapes, vegetable and bone-like productions and each takes the time to describe and explain what they have made. The concerned single mother has made an “abstract piece” a twisted mass, the unemployed man has moulded a carrot, and one of the students a vulva-like object. The pieces are collected, threaded with twine and hung on a ring above the table. Over the proceeding days further “covens” will take place, and the suspended mobile will be filled with more clay representations.

URBAN FORAGING

As well, Jodie had organised several “foraging walks” with a herbalist healer prepared to take groups on a tour around the urban environment exploring the medicinal and nutritional properties of plants that could be found in the city. Meeting again at the arts space eager to roam the city in search of edible flowers and herbs a group of us, mainly comprised of young professionals and some student friends of Jodie, are invited in to take a seat at the large round table upon which lie a collection of books referring to plant medicines and their particular physiological effects. The table has been evolving and over the past days others have been part of the “covven” meetings and have added to the hanging clay creations, as well as decorating the black cloth with various doodles and symbols relating to discussions concerning gender, community, environmentalist actions and sustainable modes of living. The Wiccan veneration of the Goddess influencing concepts such as environmental management and rethinking patriarchal politics. Leading the tour is Rasheeqa, a herbalist operating a private practice aimed at providing medicinal plants to those wishing to find alternatives to particular ailments. She proposes the idea of “getting to know plants and their properties” as if to build a personable relationship with “our vegetable friends”.

Moving out onto the streets of the capital it is surprising how diverse the pavements and shrubs are in terms of plant species which can aid with numerous conditions such as uterine infections, liver and kidney problems, respiratory issues and stress. Alongside the scientific health benefits, Rasheeqa is also knowledgeable of the mythological associations of certain plants, and as we

come across a tall Elder shrub on the edge of a housing estate she tells the group to be respectful of the Lady of the Elder otherwise fear repercussions for exploiting “her gifts”.

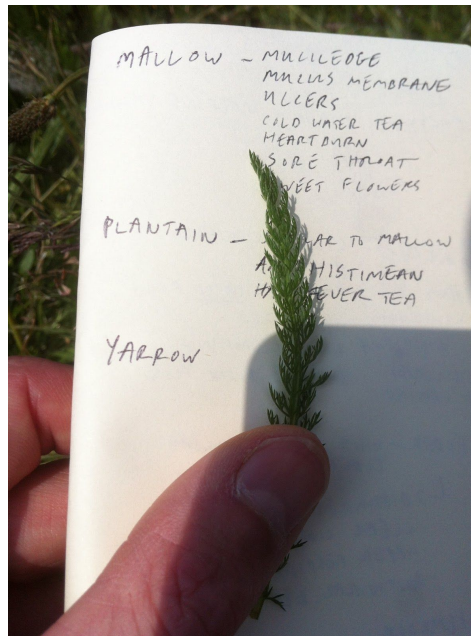


Fig 9. Excerpt from note book - plants and their properties

The group is also advised to pick only what they need so as to assure the plants regrow next year, and to be aware of polluted sources and potentially poisonous varieties as we come across a huge patch of Hemlock - Socrates’ final drink. Returning to the arts space, the group laden with many different edible and medicinal of plant from the nearby area, a selection of teas are made and we are instructed to take note of how each of the plant concoctions make us feel and the parts of the body we perceived them to be acting on. The group seem content in having learnt these practical informations about the vegetations surrounding them in their local area.

Further Discussions

Meeting with Jodie after this event I asked her how she became involved in and influenced by Wiccan and Pagan ideals, and how she envisions spirituality in the context of the city. Coming from outside London, having grown up in relatively rural towns and villages she cites an “urge to reconnect” as to the why she incorporates aspects of Pagan spirituality into her art. She states a

feeling of disconnect between people, from the natural environment, from the current conservative political system, heightened by consumerist culture ultimately leading to a sense of isolation from others as well as oneself. In an attempt to bridge this isolation the communal gatherings and conversations became an important aspect of her artistic practice. The feminist principles of Wiccan practice, reverence for the Goddess and ultimately the earth harmonise with her anti-establishment ethos and attempts to re-imagine the current political system founded on patriarchal principles of resource exploitation. Inspired by the persecution of women during the witch trials of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries witchcraft and Wiccan affiliations can be seen as a reaction to the previous hegemony of Christian doctrine and control of the conventional constructs of the state.

Health and mindfulness are two key concepts Jodie is concerned with and wants to address through her personal and artistic performances. Working part time at an “alternative” clinic in order to supplement her economy as an artist she highlights her interest in non conventional medicines (in the west), practices such as acupuncture and hypnotherapy, as well as ancient methods of caring for oneself utilising herbal remedies in a world where it is “so easy to forget our connection with others as well as ourselves”.

Jonathan

I first met Jonathan at the general meeting of the British Druid Order in the rural settings of Shropshire at the Wild Ways on the Borle site where he was keenly taking the minutes. One of the younger individuals sat around the outdoor table that early Summer day he worked to direct the conversation and flow of the discussion regarding the development of the order and the work that was likely needed to carry this group of Druids and their ideals into the 21st century. Enthusiastically typing all that is mentioned onto his computer he poses an image quite contrary to some of the other, older members of the group - younger, technologically literate, energetic and somewhat camp the discussions revolve around the re-branding of the “shameful” image of Druids as “old bearded men in old white robes” to a “re-imagining [of] Druidry” in an attempt to

“sexy-up” the BDO. Addressing the image of Druidry is something shared amongst these “core members” in the hope to promote themselves as a “multiethnic, multicultural” organisation accessible to young, urban demographics, aware and inclusive of LGBTQ identities with the hope of “getting the countryside into the city” - an aspect of their agenda heavily linked with the promotion of positive mental health through re-connecting individuals with “natural” elements of their world.

Sacralising Space in the City

At 30 years old Jonathan recently completed his PhD in Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He moved to London shortly afterwards in the hope of finding work that, like the other members of the BDO, synthesise his spiritual beliefs and provide enough to make a living in the modern world. His situation when I meet him in the city is somewhat transient, having just found somewhere to live, a task considered difficult when making first attempts at moving to the English capital, he is in the process of settling into his new accommodation - a site from which he will have been uprooted from in a few months by the time my fieldwork comes to an end, forcing him to find a new place to live. Boxes are still to be unpacked and the apartment is in the process of being furnished. Blank white walls await adornments, yet time has been taken to arrange a few sacred objects displayed in pseudo altar spaces - waiting the right time for proper ceremonious recognition. Jonathan explains the meanings of the figures stationed on the windowsills one representative of the Norse fertility God Freyr acquired on a trip to Sweden and another, a bronze owl, representing his patron Goddess Sulis Minerva - a deity historically worshipped at the thermal springs of the city of Bath and whom he appeared to him whilst there prior to completing his doctorate. This “meeting” was described as one which aided him in the completion of his academic project, appearing to him in a “time of need” Sulis Minerva became an important deity whom, he now worships and symbolically embodies in the form of the stylised “S” tattoo on his forearm. Later in our collaboration he will perform an altar consecration to Sulis Minerva, displaying his reverence for the Goddess he has personally connected with and whose inspirational powers he has drawn from when required.

At this point in time, however, he is planning to “bless” his new abode. Beginning by removing the trash from the main living quarters of his apartment he returns, opens the window and faces out across the East End roof tops. Muttering an inaudible incantation, eyes close and arms raised he snaps out of this meditative state to make rounds of each of the rooms, clapping loudly as he goes directing the sharp sound he is producing into the corners of the small flat dispelling “negative energies”. Having returned to the window he then moves to the gas cooker in the adjoining kitchen where he lights separately each of the hobs and then a candle passing the hot air above the flame over his head three times. Producing a small leather bound book he scans the pages to find a prayer/reading of his own creation and begins to acknowledge the hearth Goddess Brigantia sprinkling salt into the fire of the one hob still aflame. Ceremoniously washing the warm air over himself a second time he takes the candle and, in a similar fashion to the first rounds in which he was clapping, passes with the flame into each of the rooms, warming the corners of the spaces, reviving them with “new energy”. Returning to the “hearth” the ritual cycle has been completed, extinguishing the candle he turns to myself (and the camera) smiling. The house blessing has been accomplished.

The overground train rattles past in the warm May air some metres from Jonathan’s window and the objects stationed there. Another collection of statuettes are situated on a bright yellow shelf to the side of us. This set are identified as a buddhist shrine consisting of a bronze crane, buddha and bonsai tree, belonging to Jonathans’ flatmate, harmoniously inhabiting the same space as his Pagan idols. My focus is taken by the bountiful bookshelf displaying an array of literary works concerning Druidry, magic, sacred landscapes and spiritual practice alongside less esoteric, more academic texts by the likes of Tim Ingold and George Monbiot indicative of his education and also political positioning. A writer for the Guardian - a popular liberal newspaper in the UK, Monbiot is often proposing solutions society must adopt in saving aspects of the diminishing wildlife and dwindling natural habitats. An avid reader and articulated speaker Jonathan blends his spiritual knowledge with that of more grounded scientific/environmentalist theories through the acquisition of knowledge, disseminating this information through his use of social media. This synthesis of Pagan spiritual expression and environmentalist political actions taking the

form of anti-fracking demonstrations are not uncommon throughout my fieldwork as he refers to The Warriors Call - a Pagan fronted activist group fighting fracking campaigns across the UK.

The British Pilgrimage Trust

The sights and sounds of the busy city bustle just outside the door of the flat which Jonathan rents with one other city-dweller, who is scarcely present. For now, situated on Grove Road - a congested artery of east London running north-south teeming with cars and iconic red double-decker buses, Italian pizzerias, Afro-Caribbean salons, Turkish Kebab shops, residential properties and people from multiple international and religious backgrounds, Jonathan spends his time working in and navigating the city. The British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT), a charitable organisation founded in 2014 which aims to “advance British pilgrimage as a form of cultural heritage that promotes holistic wellbeing, for the public benefit” (The British Pilgrimage Trust website 2018), is his main source of income when coping financially in the city, albeit the workflow is not as reliable as he would like. The locale of his work is not specified, as labour takes the form of online management and the sending of emails. Working in cafes and coworking “hubs”, as well as from home on his laptop, I did not witness Jonathan having to be in a specific place to complete his tasks of employment. No office or workspace was required to be checked into, yet the time I met him at “work” outside of his apartment involved visiting St. Katherines precinct - a community based project south of his residence providing a “Yurt Cafe, Art Studios, Community hub and Reflective Space” (St. Katherines Precinct website 2018). The informal setting filled with young urbanites ardently typing away on their computers cocooned within the textile walls of the yurt from the rising concrete and grinding traffic works surrounding the site provided space within the city, where from time to time Jonathan would take coffee and complete the administrative tasks required of him by the BPT alongside his one other work colleague.

Pagan Pasts

The formal economy sourced through working with the British Pilgrimage Trust is supplemented by Jonathan through Tarot readings he offers in nearby cafes and popular esoteric book stores in

the city. This practice of reading into the past, present and future has not always been so profitable as he recounts previous situations where his thirst for esoteric and Pagan knowledges as having a marginalising affect on him by others. Life during university was coloured by opposing atheist and Christian dogma, a rhetoric encountered when holding the position of Graduate Green Officer and his involvement in the Zero Carbon Cambridge initiative aimed at encouraging the university to divest from using fossil fuels. This position left little room for openly expressing his Pagan theology. Attempting assimilation between mythology and environmental activism is a passionate concern of - “the whole point of a myth is that it relates so much to everyday life...that people use it to think about things” (Ryan 2019). Applying this rhetoric he continues to focus on the ethical investment of large scale institutions in combating the ecological crisis facing the global population currently.

Openly identifying as a gay man also clashed with aspects of his past. Brought up in a Catholic family and attending military school with a strong Christian ethos led him to hide these aspects of his identity. Stating “I don’t believe in sex before marriage” enabled him to sidestep the awkwardness during adolescence and deal with the incongruences between his Catholic upbringing and sexuality. Finding Druidry at the age of 20 allowed for the expression of a reverence for something greater through mythology and care for the natural world as well as access to a more inclusive spiritual cohort less concerned with the “sins” he may have been committing if remaining a member of the Catholic church. He also notes his Pagan ancestry through his connection with the “Bardic Chair of Wrexham” a position held by a relative in the past and his efforts at learning Welsh in connecting with his celtic ancestors building on Pagan identity.

The British Druid Order (BDO) and the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) have guided his spiritual progress through the bardic, ovate and druidic courses and subsequent initiation rites. He describes the creation of QOBOD - a queer branch of the Pagan group OBOD established in response to more traditional Pagan praxis and the worship of explicitly male and female deities, identifying animism as a spiritual outlook which “dissolves” these gender

binaries. The communities he identifies with do not seemingly have a distinct presence in the city. They are to be found at gatherings arranged to celebrate distinct points on the Pagan wheel of the year and his interaction with other Pagan adherents comprise of sporadic encounters when in the city and collective celebration in more rural settings. In arranging a pilgrimage along the Ridgeway he hopes to connect with more like minded individuals and to build the numbers of those connecting with the landscape of Britain through spirituality.

Being “in” Nature

Connection with nature and specifically features of the landscape be it urban or rural for Jonathan, as a Druid, is considered a primary source of “inspiration”, “truth” and insight. During our time together in the city much of it is spent walking through the built environment finding quieter, greener spaces to speak about being in such a place and to physically practice his spiritual beliefs. In attempting to understand the methods employed by Druids in attaining connection with these different sources of “power” I participated in walking with him, following as he interacted with the natural elements found throughout the area he lived and observed his actions whilst in the green spaces the city has to offer. Mile End park is just opposite his flat and this landscaped grassy area, home to a number of plants, shrubs, trees, birds and animals as well as a community arts space was a site he frequented often. The park is sandwiched between Grove Road and the Regents Canal, along which industrious development could be seen and heard as new flats and apartment blocks were being built. Jonathan would wander through the park stopping to look at the trees and plants that had been planted there, commenting on the state of the vegetation - weather it were healthy or in need of attention due to the particularly hot dry summer in 2018, feed the animals that were inhabiting the park, and seemingly “bask” in the presence of these non-human inhabitants. Conducting meditation and building his awareness of the features of the urban landscape through his spiritual practice he would recount the features and histories of the areas surrounding making sense of the city through a historical knowledge of the space incorporating these cognitions into his meditative practices.

All Along the Ridgeway

During fieldwork Jonathan began organising a pilgrimage for Pagan adherents along an ancient trackway known as the Ridgeway, c. 3000 BC. The route chosen was significant due to the numerous sacred sites the pilgrims to cross and interact with - namely neolithic tombs and ancient megalithic structures. The final destination was Avebury, a small village enclosed by a megalithic stone circle, and situated close to other prehistoric/neolithic structures. The Ridgeway track itself and megalithic monuments proved significant in the expression of Pagan spirituality as they symbolised ancestral interaction with the land. Acknowledgment and incorporation of an understanding of an ancestral past is important for expressing Pagan spirituality. As well, through performing the pilgrimage Jonathan took his spiritual practice out of the confines of the city, allowing him and others to interact with features of the landscape around the south of the United Kingdom at a time of year significant to Pagans. We were to reach Avebury in order to ceremoniously celebrate the summer solstice on the 21st June 2018, also known as Litha.

Participating in the pilgrimage meant walking for four days along the Ridgeway, camping out on the side of the track as we made our way to the site of celebration. Prior to setting off Jonathan exclaims his excitement regarding the trip, hopes for inspiring others to make a similar spiritual journey, and also tentatively how the pilgrimage is a “bit of an experiment”. However, the journey itself is deemed significant for himself as a Druid as it will allow him to connect with the features of the landscape (considered as previously mentioned a “source of truth”) and also walk in the footsteps of his ancestors at the time of year “they would have been most free to walk the land”.

Despite the preparation for the pilgrimage only four people managed to make it. They were, Jonathan - a Druid, Lee - a practitioner of Wicca, myself and a non-Pagan, Max - who wished to join as a sort of holiday from not having left the city for over a year. From June 17th to 21st we walked towards Avebury, stopping at various sites of significance and sacrality. The Pagan adherents made offerings and led the pilgrimage as Max and I followed. Jonathan frequently explained the importance of the different sites through historical contextualisation as well as

mythological background unveiling how he came to find meaning in the sites and how this affects his day to day existence. Reciprocally learning from the sites and features of the landscape allowing them to inform his wider beliefs on living a sustainable, environmentally conscious and righteous life.

Theoretical Analyses - Unpacking Pagan Ethnographies

In analysing the data collected from my collaborators I will utilise a theoretical framework akin to the anthropology of performance whilst comparing and summing these ethnographic accounts. Focussing on the function of ritual I will endeavour to explore how ritual performance is employed by Pagan adherents inside and outside the city, what my collaborators attempt to achieve through the performance of specific rituals and how this in turn reflexively feeds back into the construction and imagining of Pagan identity and community relative to other forms of role performance.

Paganism - a method towards a synthesised self?

An initial conflict I encountered amongst those Pagan adherents was the balancing of spiritual and “real world” roles. To be both Pagan and a fully functioning, “successful” citizen in the post-industrial, capitalist economy of Britain seemingly posed problems in finding a congruent narrative by which one could navigate the modern world. I sat and listened to members of the British Druid Order as they sought alternatives to the 9am-5pm office jobs, and the “environmentally unconscious” and destructive labour roles they’d rather avoid which evidently resulted in individuals resorting to small scale cottage industry art/craft productions and esoteric services to sustain themselves and their economy.

The formation, application and management of varying roles with regards to the multiple social fields individuals inhabit, especially in the city, remains a cornerstone of anthropological inquiry. Goffman and Barth both provide models whereby one may maintain various aspects of identity with regards to the complexity of social form, highlighting the ways in which a multiplicitous self is born from social structures (Goffman 1959), as well as how social actors employ (with agency) specific roles required in certain social fields (Barth 1966). The marginal/left field status of Paganism in contemporary society leads Pagans to employ this aspect of their self in a limited set of contexts when deemed “appropriate” (Giddens 1991: 14), seemingly solitarily - during personal ritual, or amongst other self identifying Pagans. However, it is within the “arena” of ritual performance where the mundane and spiritual intertwine. Goffman refers to the “front

stage” and the “backstage” using the metaphor of theatrical performance when unpacking the social presentation of the self. In this instance the front stage refers to the “conventional”/“professional” self - say, how Jonathan might present himself as Graduate Green Officer, or Emma to her work colleagues, and the backstage the seemingly unconventional practices such as sleeping in a neolithic tomb to commune with the ancestors, or offering mistletoe to the River Thames in an act of “healing” during times of environmental degradation (see Ryan 2019). Through the processes of ritual these real world issues are acknowledged and countered by the beliefs held by these Pagans. Burke & Reitzes (1981) note that the “relationship between identity (self) and behaviour is complex and probably reciprocal” i.e *identifying* as a Pagan can be a precursor to certain forms of behaviour, such as ritual acknowledgement of the eight seasonal festivals on the wheel of the year. Yet also through practical endeavours, such as developing a relationship with the land/area and the other inhabitants of the space one builds an identity as a Pagan - identity and belief are therefore mediated by the practical endeavours Pagans apply themselves to.

Forming a cohesive identity in this period of late modernity can be tricky due to the “‘openness of the world’ to the individual” (Giddens 1991: 513) where an “indefinite range of possibilities present themselves” to identify with (ibid.) relating to Bauman’s notion of Liquid Modernity and the fluidity with which forms of identity may be (required to be) transitioned between. The invention of new Pagan traditions can be read as a reaction to the “radical melting of the fetters and manacles...suspected of limiting the individual freedom to choose and to act” (Bauman 2000: 5), and the heterogeneous nature of the urban environment proves fertile ground for “the construction of new boundaries” (Meyer & Geschiere 1999: 5). Through the creation, adoption and personalised adaptation of ritual expression Paganism, as a spiritual mode, seeks to “inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition” and “implies a continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983: 1). Be it through mythological familiarization or acquainting oneself with ancient sites it is evident that Pagans create a sense of who they are through imagining “a notion of how [they] have become” (Taylor in Giddens 1991: 512). And the recognition of the past builds meaning within the present most evident in the visiting of

ancient sites by Emma offering her perspective and feeling “empowered” to tackle other areas of her life. I interpret this sense of “empowerment” through ritual act as an overt acceptance of difference and defiance to the purveying cultural norms, ultimately working to strengthen her identity as a Pagan and someone on the peripheries of conventional society. As Turner states in his reading of the ritual process in order to “exist” one must “‘stand outside’ the totality of structural positions one normally occupies in a social system. To exist is to be in ecstasy” (1966: 138).

The Pagan Community and the Ritual Process

Each of my collaborators, although there is considerable overlap between them, seems to express and exemplify specific aspects of their Pagan values unique to one another. To simplify Emma displays a practical expression by going out into nature to conduct ritual, Jodie utilises her Pagan outlook to imagine an alternative political structure and inspire a sense of community, and Jonathan develops his Druidic practice via synthesising his thirst for classical literature with environmental activism. There is no fixed way of being Pagan and each proposes a unique expression of their spirituality, yet they are linked through their shared imaginings of a communion with nature and how this spreads into other aspects of their lives.

Anderson’s considerations on the faculty of “imagination” can be useful in unpacking the relationships individual Pagans have with other members of their community. Living alone in the city separates my collaborators from the concrete realities of “face-to-face contact” (Anderson 2006: 6) with other Pagan adherents, or at least limits them to meetings centred around the recognition of the eight festive points on the Pagan calendar. They rarely see one another and links with other Pagans are therefore imagined and sustained through media representations - the internet forums they frequent and the sporadic events created and attended when enough time can be found in their busy schedules. The practice of walking alone or in a group, however, was a predominant feature in getting to know aspects of the Pagan lifeworlds of my collaborators, and I argue that this process also worked to build “collective histories and imaginations” (Pink 2008: 182). Meaning was afforded to specific sites, and this meaning then shared and recounted

between individuals. The function of communal ritual, such as the pilgrimage in this context seemingly works to affirm associations between individuals sharing that moment as well as to reinforce the imagined reality of a wider Pagan community connected to one another through shared practice and celebration as seen towards the end of the film *All Along the Ridgeway* (Ryan 2019). A form of “*communitas*” (Turner 1969) develops in these scenarios whereby each member plays an important role in legitimizing the performance of the ritual in honouring of the earth, ancestors and spirits of place. There are individuals who are better versed in the proceedings of ceremony due to familiarity yet there is a non-hierarchical essence to proceedings based essentially on “universal human values as peace and harmony between all men, fertility, health of mind and body” (Turner 1969: 138). This creation of community and shared sense of *communitas* through the seeming dissolution of roles and statuses (ibid.) are, however, infrequent happenings and the hopes of more communal experiences and mass ritual is expressed amongst these individuals. For example when Jonathan is seen talking about how in future years he hopes more people will become involved in the practice of making pilgrimage in the following years during the celebration of the summer solstice - thus exemplifying the imaginative aspect of community creation as well as the role memory will play in sustaining this tradition around this time of year.

Ritual for Pagans seems to function on multiple levels. For the individual ritual aids to build on one's identity as a Pagan where “*various characteristics of the self are internalised, labeled, valued and organised*” (Levine 2003: 191). Similarly, as previously stated, the collective ceremony of ritual performance can be considered to exemplify the idea of a wider Pagan community. However, one must also consider how these actions establish the Pagan community in relation to the rest of society and societal values. I interpret that the expression of Pagan ideals are formulated from a perspective alternative to “mainstream” society and are therefore built in relation/reaction to conventional societal constructs vis-a-vis Jodie's Wiccan politic vs patriarchal politic. Bauman posits the idea that ritual “implicates others” (in De Coppet 1992: 98). By walking the Ridgeway and acquainting oneself with the various landscape features through myth, organising urban foraging events, or reciprocally interacting and caring for green

spaces Jonathan, Jodie and Emma, as Pagan adherents, are not solely acting to build upon their own spiritual identities. They are performing in scenarios which draw attention to wider political issues concerning our relationship to the natural and to each other subsequently attempting to “convey a message across a cultural cleavage to ‘others’ or to an outside ‘public’” (ibid.).

Conclusions

Starting this project wishing to problematize the idea of a spiritual dearth in the UK I found a complex array of individuals affiliated with different communities in different states of construction working to imagine a Pagan identity for the 21st century. The de-Christianization of the UK does not prove a loss of faith in general, but a redirection focussed on individualised, non-doctrinal belief practices focussed on building a spiritual rendering of the natural world for both personal and political gains. Pagan identity is employed creatively in an attempt to imagine a future for the rest of society in a world where current rhetoric implies a sense of change that is required if we want to cease our progress towards environmental destruction and the “danger zone” of the biodiversity crisis (Watts 2019). Individuals involved in these communities worked to question the current structures of spiritual and political discourse through personalised and independent motivations as well as shared imaginings of a desired future based on an emphasis of “reconnection”. I have come to conclude that this sense of wanting to reconnect with the natural, other people and aspects of the self is exacerbated by living in urban environments which can prevent these individuals from experiencing these elements as readily as they may wish to. Through ritual and ceremony - a major aspect of Pagan spiritual expression, adherents “work” through conflicts encountered in daily life and aim to inspire others with practices recognising and respectful of nature.

The bricolage composition of Pagan spiritual expression alongside its relatively recent formation and adherence can be viewed as a reaction to the heterogeneous and complex milieu within which my collaborators exist. The “flux” and “flow” (Meyer & Gescheire 1992: 9) of the multiplicitous, fast-paced urban interactions influence a mode of spirituality that allow one, in Emma’s words, “to slow down, be healthy, acknowledge and appreciate” aspects of the world at

times overpowered by the high-tech and high-speed navigations assumed whilst living in the city; without the doctrine and/or dogma of more established religious ideals. Performing Pagan identities in the arena of ritual/ceremony allows one to maintain aspects of both physical and mental health in what Dickens refers to as “postmaterialist” rejection of “material well-being in favour of quality of life” (1996: 173).

The ethnographic process, accompanied with the aid of the camera opened my eyes to the imaginative and creative potentials of those who feel pressured by the current social and political climate in the UK. Personally engaging and participating in ritual events I feel that I have taken away from the experience that which is difficult to put into words. However, as Turner states:

*“We can learn from experience - from the enactment and performance of the
culturally transmitted experiences of others - peoples of the Heath
as well as of the Book”
(1982: 19)*

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Appendix of definitions:

Although often disputed I have attempted to offer some definitions of a few terms recurrent in this paper. These definitions have been sourced based on their connection to the groups and concepts which they are defining so as to preserve an emic level of interpretation.

Bard - “In ancient times a Bard was a poet and storyteller who had trained in a Bardic college. In modern times, a Bard is one who sees their creativity as an innate spiritual ability, and who chooses to nurture that ability partly or wholly with Druidism.”

<https://www.druidry.org/druid-way/what-druidry/what-druidism/what-bard>

Druid - “In ancient times a Druid was a philosopher, teacher, counsellor and magician, the word probably meaning ‘A Forest Sage’ or ‘Strong Seer’. In modern times, a Druid is someone who follows Druidry as their chosen spiritual path.” (<https://www.druidry.org/druid-way/what-druidry/what-druidism/what-druid>)

Druidry - “It’s an attitude, an understanding, an exquisitely simple and natural philosophy of living. For a great many it is a rich and ancient religion, a mystical spirituality. For others it’s simply a guiding way of life. It is absolutely open and free for anyone to discover”.

Emma Restall Orr, Druid Priestess (<https://www.druidry.org/druid-way/what-druidry>)

Ovate - “In ancient times an Ovate was a prophet, seer, healer and diviner. In modern times, an Ovate is one who studies or practices herbalism, healing and divination within a Druidic context”.

Pagan - “Paganism is the ancestral religion of the whole of humanity. This ancient religious outlook remains active throughout much of the world today, both in complex civilisations such as Japan and India, and in less complex tribal societies world-wide. It was the outlook of the European religions of classical antiquity – Persia, Egypt, Greece and Rome – as well as of their “barbarian” neighbours on the northern fringes, and its European form is re-emerging into explicit awareness in the modern West as the articulation of urgent contemporary religious priorities. The Pagan outlook can be seen as threefold. Its adherents venerate Nature and worship many deities, both goddesses and gods.” From *What is Paganism?* (<http://www.paganfederation.org/what-is-paganism/>)

Wicca - “A modern Pagan religion with spiritual roots in the earliest expressions of reverence for nature. Some major identifying motifs are: reverence for both the Goddess and God; acceptance of reincarnation

and magick; ritual observance of astronomical and agricultural phenomena; and the use of magickal circles for ritual purposes.” From *Definitions of Wicca, Pagan and Witchcraft* (<https://wicca.com/celtic/wicca/definitions.htm>)

Witch - A practitioner of folk magick, particularly that kind relating to herbs, stones, colors, wells, rivers, etc. It is used by some Wiccans to describe themselves. This term has nothing to do with Satanism. From *Definitions of Wicca, Pagan and Witchcraft* (<https://wicca.com/celtic/wicca/definitions.htm>)