

Book review: sabina
magliocco's witching
culture: folklore and
neo-paganism in
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Neo-paganism is one of the fastest growing religious movements in North America that is widely misunderstood due to its influence of historical pagan beliefs of pre-Christian European cultures which include folklore and witchcraft. Sabina Magliocco's *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* explores the rising of Neo-Paganism and the revival of witchcraft through her ethnographic research. The author describes the book to be about "how North American Neo-Pagans use folklore, or traditional expressive culture, to establish identity and create new religious culture" (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 3). She does this by dividing up her exploration into three parts 'Roots and Branches', 'Religious Experiences', and 'Beyond Experience: religion and identity'. 'Roots and Branches' explain the origins of Neo-Paganism, 'Religious experiences' explores the ritual practices as well as the use of magic among the religion and 'Beyond Experience: Religion and Identity' describe the values, goals and identity associated with the Neo-Pagan Community. The book contains several passages of the authors field notes which give the reader unedited detailed descriptions of Magliocco's first hand experiences. The author experiences her own altered state of consciousness while attending a religious ritual which gives the book an interesting take on the Neo-Pagan culture and delves into the religion with an insider and outsider approach.

Western Neo-Paganism and revival witchcraft are rooted from ancient tradition. Paganism is followed by those who reject institutional religion, as well as consumer modernist thoughts. She states that the Neo-Pagan community consist of "predominantly white, middle class, well-educated urbanites who find artistic inspiration in folk and indigenous spiritual

traditions' (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 7)., mainly women. The culture is focuses on folklore and witchcraft rituals now suppressed by Western culture claiming witchcraft and ritual to be superstitious and false. Pagans believe that this detachment from folklore causes humans to lose attachment to nature and its sacredness. It helps one discover the past and connects them to spirituality. Mangliocco refers to philosophers Jean Jacques Rousseau and Johan Gottfried Von Herder and how they found connectors and authenticity ancient European customs as well as Edward B. Tylor's and James Frazer's ' Doctrine of Survivals' in which folklore is believed to preserve tradition to show its influence on modern Pagan beliefs (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 41). Neo-Paganism is also a highly varied, eclectic culture that encompasses several categories. As she describes " Neo-Paganism is not an organized unified movement, but a loose association of overalapping and interlocking network stretching across the country and, in some cases the globe" (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 59). This broad categorization gives the religious movement great appeal but also makes it difficult to defining what the Neo-Pagan community actually is. The origins of Neo-Paganism illustrate that the culture is built on reviving ancient culture and tradition that has been oppressed and looked down upon by the Westernized world.

Myth, legends, folklore and ritual activity are composed into experiences in the Neo-Pagan community. Sabina Magliocco states that " the single rubric that unites Neo-Pagan and Witchen groups is experience" (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 97). Experience is what moves pagans, experiencing magic and rituals is the route pagans take to find divinity. This type of magic involves channeling earth's spirits to harness energy and attain oneness with nature. These

rituals and magic are capable of altering consciousness and achieving religious ecstasy. Magic follows a set of laws described in Druid Isaac Bonewits book *Real Magic* which gives magic a more refined definition than the unrealistic definition it is given in western culture today. To the Neo-Pagan Society magic is realistic and much different than what modern society thinks of magic to be. “ Belief in magic, therefore, should not be interpreted as an irrational faith in process that violate rules of nature, but as a fundamental way of organizing and understanding the patterns and workings of the cosmos” (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 102), it is how pagans explain the unexplainable, it is their religion. Magliocco describes several rituals she has attended in her field notes and well as several stories of those who have attained altered consciousness through these rituals. Reclaiming rituals as a part of Neo-Pagan culture was important because these occasions allowed creative expression through symbolic acts which formed a special kind of social order (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 127). These rituals can serve as a form of healing, celebration, social interaction within a coven or larger community building a bond between the culture itself. An interesting addition to the book includes the authors own experience of attaining an altered sense of consciousness during a Neo-Pagan ritual itself. This event caused the author to feel a variety of emotions and disconnect from the world which lead her to understand the importance and effectiveness of ritual and magical practice in the Neo-Pagan community.

The identity and the worldview of the Neo-Pagan society is what is discussed in the final chapter of Magliocco's book. Witches and Pagans have a negative connotation in western culture, but people choose to identify with these

labels as “ emblems of their identity” (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 185). Their identities are created in in opposition and contrast to typical American culture. It is their opposition of cultural norms that created the Neo-Pagan identity itself. Magliocco states that opposition is important to give rise to cultural critique and revitalization which create revolutionary resistance movements such as Neo-Paganism. Cultural reform normally occurs due to class, gender and race but Neo-Pagan culture does not fit into this cultural profile. Although this is true Neo-Pagans and Witches also suffer discrimination due to their unorthodox rituals and magic. Magliocco also explores the creation of the Neo-Pagan ethnic identities and their worldview. She explains that the Neo-Pagan culture has been accused of culture borrowing due to the fact that the creation of this new religion had access to resources like the internet where other cultural practices could be learnt. Native Americans especially have accused pagans of stealing their cultural practices and claiming it as their own (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 215). Due to the large area that the Neo-Pagan culture it becomes difficult to determine one identity for all of the Neo-Pagan culture rather it becomes up to the individuals choice.

Sabina Magliocco's book gives the reader an insider and outsider point of view of the Neo-Pagan Society. As a participant of rituals herself she was able to attain an altered state of consciousness experience causing her to gain more understanding of what Neopaganism has to offer. She expresses her experience beautifully in an interesting manner and uses it to support her ethnographic data. Although sharing her experiences brings clarification to the reader it makes me wonder how objective her research could have

been after her experience. She acknowledges this notion in the book and responds to it by saying that "the ethnographic perspective is not about being an objective observer of culture, but rather about containing within one body multiple simultaneous frames of reference with which to interpret experience, and being able to shift easily from one another" (Magliocco, 2004, pg. 15). Although the author states this I find it difficult to believe that she took a cultural relativistic approach to her research. Another aspect of the book I found to be confusing was where the author describes her research on the ethnic identity of Neo-Pagan. She states the term culture borrowing and explains all the concerns related to the Neo-Pagan identity yet fails to define her findings or what the Neo-Pagan identity is. Through the information provided the reader is able to realize that the Neo-Pagan identity is fluid and can be interpreted in many ways but it is not clearly stated in the reading itself.

Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America successfully illustrates and educates the reader of the wildly misunderstood Neo-Pagan Culture. Sabrina Magliocco clearly describes the origins of Neo-Paganism, the religious experiences and rituals, as well as the religious identity struggles associated with this culture throughout the book. She uses her ethnographic research as well as her own experiences to solidify her opinions and arguments. This insider and outsider approach to her writing gives the reader several points of view in order to better understand the culture. Although the novel describes the Neo-Pagan culture well I feel that it is not a completely objective interpretation of the culture due to the author's active participation in the culture. The Neo-pagan culture offers a different

perspective of the world through its rituals, magic and tradition. Its rejection of popular mainstream beliefs serves as a form of escape for individuals who oppose these beliefs. The author uses her insider and outsider point of view to encompass several different opinions and angles on this culture giving a thorough understanding of what Neo-pagan ritualistic culture is. The culture focuses mainly on experiences which the author attends to fully understand its culture and ends up finding spirituality in it as well. As one of the first books published describing the nuances of Neo-Pagan and Revival Witchcraft culture this book is a good reference for scholars, and anthropologists looking to educate themselves on Neo-Pagan Culture.

Bibliography

- Magliocco, S. (2004). *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.