

SEARCHING FOR REFLECTIONS: WOMEN'S PATHS TO A FEMINIST PAGAN SPIRITUALITY GROUP

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Increasingly women are participating in groups which challenge masculinist images of the religious cosmos. In Australia there is evidence of a flourishing 'feminist spirituality movement' across the range of traditional religious institutions as well as in pagan or goddess oriented groups. The power energising these groups is the need to identify and/or create a symbolic cosmos that affirms women's ways of being and translate these into an ethos that will transform human structures of relating. However, primarily, women seek the emotional and spiritual support of feminist spirituality groups because they affirm women's ways of being. This paper presents the results of a preliminary study that sought women's reasons for joining a pagan women's spirituality group which operated in Brisbane from 1992-1999. It identifies the dynamics of internalised voices of oppression as well as the outer questing of women, who, having rejected Christianity, seek a spiritual worldview that can reflect and affirm some deeply felt sense of female being which they experience

Dorothy A. Lee asks "Can women ever reach wholeness by socio-economic change alone while their access to deification, in language and ritual, is hedged about by qualification, doubt and ambiguity?" (1999:10). She answers in the negative. Spiritual feminists focus on critical tasks that include the transformation of internalised images of oppression. However, until recently they have been the ignored and marginalised other of mainstream women's studies (King, 1995:20; Magee, 1995: 103). The 1999 volume of *Australian Feminist Studies* edited by Kath McPhillips was the first significant gesture towards recognition of the spirituality stream of Australian feminism. Dedicated to the works of feminist scholars of religion the publication signalled the existence of a diverse and thriving women's spirituality movement in Australia. My purpose in this paper is two fold. Firstly, I want to describe the broad features of Australian spiritual feminism as a way of delineating the dimensions of women's activism in different religious contexts. This will serve as a backdrop to locate my present study which explores women's experiences of joining a pagan feminist ritual group and the existential phenomena that accompanied their decision to attend.

For public and communication purposes the group was called 'Shades', however the women also gave their group a private name. I was a member of the group during most of the seven years of its operation and during that time I gained the women's permission to study Shades. Three women started the group in August 1992. One of the initiators had participated in a workshop with Starhawk in England and returned to Australia with the hope of raising women's awareness of the wiccan tradition here. Shades gathered for rituals twelve or thirteen times a year until 1999 when it was closed by the remaining three members. Twenty-five women came and went from the group during the seven years of its life. Shades was avowedly not a 'therapy' group for individuals as are some others reported in the literature (e.g. Jacobs, 1989; 1990; Neu, 1996), though healing and support was an enduring by-product of the group's functioning. As is characteristic of other spiritual feminist groups (e.g. Griffin, 1995: 41), the Shades' philosophy was characterised by a commitment to the principles of shared leadership and the generation of women centred rituals celebrating and sacralising female power, embodiment and symbolism.

To varying degrees, Eller (1993) in the United States and Krüll (1995) in Germany provide overviews of the feminist spirituality movements in those countries. Eller describes the American movement as being a distinct sociological entity with networks through "neopaganism, political feminism, Jewish and Christian feminism, the New Age, and Native American spiritualities" (1993:ix). The movement has generated a large literary base ranging from poems and stories, art and music to social criticism and the analysis of archaeological artifacts. Krüll (1995), focussing on goddess oriented groups, indicates that in Germany, small ritual and healing groups flourish, many led by women who have researched and claimed their heritage. Prominent German women have also generated foundational texts that inspire their sisters.

Rather than list the many types of groups in Australia, a task that would take a much broader research muster than is possible for this paper, my intention is to identify the broad cultural forms taken by women's spiritual activism. This will be supported with some examples from observations I have made in the course of researching women and religion in Australia during the last ten years.

Generally spiritual feminist associations can be found in every religious tradition and culture as well as in groups and organisations separated from traditions. Indigenous women take up the double issue of critiquing the colonisers and their religion (See for example, Pattel-Gray, 1999). Spiritual feminism in this country takes many cultural forms, including nationally networked goal-oriented organisations, academic associations and the built space of places developed specially for women to meet and develop a women-centred spirituality. In more fluid forms activity can be located in the workshop and healing circuit and in small local ritual groups. A good deal of academic and practical literature has also been generated in the Australian context.

Christian examples of nationally organised goal-oriented women's groups include the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW, Anglican) and Ordination

of Catholic women (OCW, Catholic), activist groups that lobby for the recognition and acceptance of women into the all male domains of the priesthood. While some level of acceptance of women has been achieved in Anglicanism MOW still finds a role in supporting women who have been ordained. OCW keeps the issue of ordination for Catholic women alive and pursues an agenda of information dissemination, lobbying and education about the current state of the debate. Women and the Australian Church (WATAC) is a movement initiated by Religious Orders in the Catholic church which aims to raise the consciousness of women as to their roles in the church and the broader society. WATAC literature indicates their commitment to valuing feminine images of god, the use of inclusive language and the networking of small locally based study and worship groups.

Various centres in Australia are dedicated specifically as spaces for women to gather and conduct activities that are experientially meaningful to women's religiosity. Sophia, situated in Adelaide, South Australia, was established by the Dominican Sisters. Though not exclusively a women's space it is the hub of women's meetings, rituals and workshops. A Sisters of Mercy initiative in Melbourne, 'The Grove' is an all women's spirituality centre, post-church in its origins which provides a place for women to create and celebrate women's spirituality. It was the prototype for 'Womenspace' in Brisbane which aims to provide a "Soul-Space for women" where they can share and reverence life's stories "in order to shape and challenge our cultural milieu" (*Womenspace* brochure, 2000). Womenspace was created with financial support from the Presentation Sisters and the Sisters of Mercy but adheres to no denominational affiliation. These women's spirituality centres, particularly The Grove and Womenspace, encourage diverse expressions of religiosity. Rituals performed in those places defy attempts at labeling according to the recognised categories such as pagan, eastern, western, christian or post-christian.

Two academic associations support and advance the work of women scholars in religion. The Australian Feminist Theology Foundation provides funding for women to pursue cutting-edge research in feminist theology. The Women Scholars of Religion and Theology Association established in 1994 is an association of women scholars in the Pacific regions, New Zealand and Australia. Composed of women from diverse disciplinary backgrounds it aims to foster scholarship dealing with the many varieties of spiritual expression found in the Pacific region. The Association runs international conferences and publishes a peer-reviewed journal entitled *SeaChanges*.

Small local groups of women are less visible but one becomes aware of their existence while attending festivals or women's spirituality workshops. One well-established group is Women-church, a Sydney-based, goddess-oriented group aimed at resacralising women's experience and constructing associated rituals and ethos (McPhillips, 1994:114-115). Hume (1997: 83-88) includes a general overview of the functioning and activities of pagan feminist spirituality groups in her treatise on *Witchcraft and paganism in Australia*. The study of Shades from which this paper is drawn is an attempt to gain an in-depth view of a particular, feminist pagan group by

way of examining its structure and functioning, and particularly to ascertain the value it served for its members.

Neo-Paganism and Feminist Goddess Rituals compared

At the outset it is important to delineate the differences between neo-paganism as generally understood and practiced, and feminist groups that follow an earth religions path. The latter have been referred to variously as 'feminist wicca' (Warwick, 1995), 'feminist witchcraft' (Finley, 1991) or 'wicce' (Luff, 1990) and are composed exclusively of women. Within paganism, all-female groups are known as 'Dianic' (Warwick, 1995:123), an appellation derived from the name of the Roman goddess of the hunt, Diana (Griffin, 1995: 37). Pagans would agree that there is no accepted definition of paganism or prescribed path of practice, however Hume (1997) characterises the main features of these groups. All share a desire to be attuned with nature and the natural forces. They seek to revalue the divine feminine and may appropriate many cross-cultural images of goddess as the creative force. However, where pagan and wiccan groups invoke the dual divinity, the god and the goddess, a feminist group will focus on the goddess (Hume, 1995: 83-88; Griffin, 1995) who is believed to be able to represent the full range of human qualities and traits. Through ritual, experience and personal stories, women create images of female as powerful and active, thus redefining the relations between power, authority and sexuality (Griffin, 1995: 35).

Pagans and feminist goddess groups vary in the ways they construct authority and share knowledge. In many pagan groups, priests and priestesses preside over group activities and assume the roles of authority figures with knowledge to train others through levels of initiation into the coven's culture (Hume, 1995: 99-102). However, as Finley (1991:354-355) indicates, feminist groups adhere to consensual decision-making and shared leadership in ritual design and practice. Some Dianic women may train for a year and a day to become priestesses but some, feeling themselves to be embodiments of the goddess (as in *Womancircle* described by Griffin, 1995: 41), use the title without formal training.

In *Shades*, the term 'priestess' was avoided and the title 'Lillith' was given to the women who volunteered to lead a ritual. Lilliths ensured that all women participated actively in the proceedings. Each woman in the group was responsible for advancing her own knowledge of goddess religion by reading, dialoguing with the group and incorporating any new knowledge into the rituals which she had volunteered to organise.

Few Dianic groups in Australia have been the focus of research attention. Research into small local feminist spirituality groups in other countries has revealed their capacity to heal individual women, foster their empowerment and aid in managing life-cycle transitions (Jacobs, 1989; Krüll, 1995; Neu, 1996). Harrow (1994) highlights tensions between women who take a pagan path seeking to create new forms of

religious expression, and those women who seek to re-invent Christianity. While participating in Shades I observed that for many of the women their joining a pagan women's group seemed to be a momentous occasion. So one aim of this study was to better understand women's religious decisions and perhaps to add something new to the literature in the field. This preliminary research was designed to discover what led women to join an avowedly 'pagan' feminist spirituality group. I focussed on the backgrounds of women who joined Shades and the needs they hoped this kind of group could fulfill. I was interested in what was happening in their spiritual lives that prompted them to approach a pagan women's group particularly. My knowledge of Shades' processes was combined with other methods of obtaining data in the hope of generating theoretical formulations about individuals and their participation in this Dianic group.

Gathering Information

During Shades' life I gained the members' permission to conduct a study of the group. Taking a grounded theory approach by which hypotheses are generated and refined from the progressive accumulation, sorting and analyses of data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I used a number of methods to gather information. The group kept archives of yearly plans, the group philosophy, examples of rituals, correspondence and photographs. These documents were useful for listing all the members who had passed through the group during its operation. Participant observation during the group's life provided my information about group processes and other activities, some of which were not committed to writing. By way of gathering information on women's anticipations and aspirations about participation in the group I devised a Sense-Making questionnaire.

Sense-Making Methodology focuses on an individual's situation defining and their communicative moves. It allows researchers to classify those moves that helped and/or hindered their attempts to re-negotiate balance between self and others. The researcher does not set the boundaries of a situation, but compares the perspectives of various actors moving in a given structural condition, from their points of view. (Dervin, 1993:55; 1992; 1983:157). In Dervin's words "experiences can be infinitely variable across respondents, [but] they are given systematic order because recollections are guided in terms of the Sense-Making metaphor and focused on gap defining and gap bridging" (1992:68). Sense-making then provides a theoretical model of how to conduct interviews with respondents which provides structure but not content. It is composed of three parts: Situations; Gaps; Uses. Circling each situation involves description of the situation, identification of the gaps in knowledge and understanding and the means by which attempts were made to bridge the gap. For example people may ask questions, formulate hypotheses and emote in making-sense of circumstances or resolving a situation. These communicative attempts at bridging gaps are then accessed by inquiring about the ways they helped or hindered progress in or resolution

of the situation (Dervin, 1992:68).

In its interviewing approaches, Sense-Making mandates that researchers elicit from informants their recollections and constructions relating to the facing of critical incidents or ongoing situations. For the purpose of this study I was focusing on the events that led to women's decisions to attend their first ritual with Shades. The questionnaire contained mostly open-ended questions and followed the basic formula of Sense-Making's foundational interviewing approach, the Micro-Moment Timeline interview (Dervin, 1992:61-84). Questions were formed as follows:

Respondents were asked to write, in just a couple of sentences, what led them to want to attend their first Shades ritual.

They were then asked to record their progress towards making their decision in time-line steps; The first thing that happened? Then what happened? What happened next? And so on to, 'I made the decision'.

Then for each time-line step, participants were asked to record:

1. What thoughts, questions or confusions did you have at this time?
2. Did you have any reactions, emotional or physical at this time?

For each of these questions over all time-line steps respondents were asked to indicate:

What question (thought), feeling (emotion) of all those you recorded was the most important to you at the time?

Referring to the most important thoughts and feelings, how did these thoughts etc (reactions, etc) help/facilitate or hurt/hinder/constrain your decision making progress?

This questioning process is a modification of Sense-Making interview protocol as respondents were not asked about connections with earlier life experience. Further, while Sense-Making normally focuses on the time-line step as a unit of analysis I was focusing on the whole person. The usual demographic questions were asked about age and education. Added questions inquired about women's participation in other religious groups, their religious socialisation, permission to use the group's name (which was not granted) and a request to provide a pseudonym for discussion and publication purposes.

Twenty questionnaires were mailed to those members who could be traced, and thirteen were returned. A further three women preferred a personal interview to completing a questionnaire. I conducted these interviews using the same questionnaire as was mailed to everyone. Two interviews were face to face and one was a telephone interview as the person lived out of town. In all, the return of sixteen completed questionnaires was considered a good response, particularly as I was in contact with the women individually and three who did not reply were facing life crises at the time they received the mailing. It should be noted that two questionnaires were worded

slightly differently. Two of the respondents were women who initiated the group and as can be appreciated, the situation on which they were required to reflect was their process of deciding to 'start' a group rather than to 'join' a group. Transcripts of the returned questionnaires were entered into NUD*IST 4.0 (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1997) data management software to enable collation and comparison of themes.

Shades Profile

Of the fifteen replies retained for this part of the analysis, two women had participated in goddess centred ritual groups before joining Shades, these were Mari who was one of the initiators of the group and Ann who had participated in a group in Glastonbury, England. For the remaining women, Minerva, Beverley, Inanna, Joy, Galadriel, Astra, Ertha, Morgan, Pam, Vivienne, Mira Wildspace and Kali, Shades was their first experience of a Dianic group. Women's ages at the time of joining the group varied from eighteen to fifty-two years. Compared with the Australian population, the women represented a highly educated group, with half of the respondents having completed tertiary education, five women having undertaken some tertiary and one woman having completed her secondary education. All but two of the respondents had attended more than four Shades rituals. Lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women belonged to the group. Some were partnered, some married and some single. In its membership profiles Shades was revealed to be a typical example of Australian pagans as characterised by Hume (1997).

Finding my Place

As other literatures indicate, women frequently describe their arrival in a goddess ritual group in terms similar to an experience of 'coming home' (Eller, 1993:24; Warwick, 1995: 130; Harrow, 1994: 201). This was often the case for Shades women except for Beverley who said "*it was like giving birth, there's no decision to be made it's just going to happen*". But the emotional path to finding one's place was not so smooth as the expression seems to imply. I am going to trace three themes that create a picture of women's journeys to, and acceptance by, the group. The first is the religious pathways by which they developed a feminist spiritual consciousness. Secondly, I will describe women's experience of inquiring as to whether they could participate in the group and deciding to attend their first ritual. Similar to other pagan groups discussed by Hume (1997: 97), Shades had devised a clearly delineated screening process for admitting new members. The third issue that bears on women's *entrée* to the group is the effectiveness and value of the Shades acceptance process.

Pathways to Paganism

All of the women who responded to questionnaires received a formal socialisation in a Christian tradition. By this I mean that as children they attended

such things as Sunday services or Sunday school on a regular basis. Seven of the women came from Catholic families of origin, three from Anglican backgrounds and the remaining four from other Protestant traditions. Prior to joining the group only Mari and Ann had previous experience of Goddess ritual circles. Mira Wildspace had attended various other religious gatherings but none on a sustained basis. After having left Catholicism, Vivienne had spent two years with a Buddhist group in Brisbane. None of the other women had tried an alternative religious practice to Christianity. In religious background and progress, the profile of Shades members is remarkably similar to that of the German Wiccan group described by Krüll (1995:136). Not surprisingly, given the explosion of literature on earth religions in the last decade, all women had acquired an 'intellectual' understanding of Goddess religions either in reading and/or through conversations with other women. Most of them described themselves as having rejected Christianity with its patriarchal mindset and were searching for, or exploring something new. Morgan said, "*I'd heard about Goddess religion and witchcraft and Wicca and I was on the lookout. One of the things I found unsatisfactory was the male focus of Christianity so I was interested in something that addressed me as a woman*".

Searching for Reflections

It is well known in object relations theory that individuals come to a secure sense of self-identity through identification with others and having their experiences of self recognised and reflected by others. In the responses women gave to questions it is clear that it was this experience; of finding self, of coming home to self that they were searching for and they needed to have this sense of self reflected in a gathering of women. When asked to describe the state of their spiritual life at the time of deciding to join Shades, seven of the women indicated that they had been isolated and languishing in their spiritual practice. Inanna recalled. "[I was] *Frustrated. I was searching for an outlet, a way that felt right for me to celebrate life with others. I wanted practice that allowed spontaneous expression and was supportive and non-judgmental.*" Five women described their spiritual lives as burgeoning and growing, in Astra's words, "*Blossoming, there were lots of interesting avenues opening up to explore*".

An important aspect of joining a ritual group was the potential to make a previously cognitive understanding 'real' by acting out personal experience in a social situation. Ertha was... "*hoping ritual would be a good experience after all the talking that went on in the beginning of [the] formation of the group. Was it REALLY going to be experiential?*"

Though women had been searching for connection with other women of like mind, the actual process of making the decision to join a pagan group was accompanied by mixed emotions and feelings. All but three women reported feelings of excitement at the prospect of exploring new territory. Astra described the "*Excitement ... it meant I was about to embark on an adventure*". But feelings of excitement, joy and

anticipation were frequently mixed with doubt and apprehension. Joy reported she felt, “[a] lot of apprehension. I had been brought up with fear of witches, devil worship, black cats and a lot of superstitions. Part of me craved it and part of me was repelled”, and Minerva experienced related images, “Fear – of being caught by my parents, the media, the police, crazy people, of losing credibility. Joy – that this was a moment I had been leading up to for several years, to be among my own”.

It is revealing to note that women’s apprehensions were fuelled by images that connote notions of evil doing and punishment. These internalised messages functioned in a prohibitive way when women took practical steps to seek their own path of spiritual expression and fulfillment. However, for the most part, positive expectations of adventure and finding a place to belong overrode their initial misgivings. Joining a group not only meant finding a spiritual sisterhood but also the experience of crossing a threshold; once across they sensed that their world would never be the same again. People experiencing this kind of angst can be vulnerable to suggestion and overreact to unusual phenomena. The founders of the group were conscious of these kinds of issues as well as of the kind of bad press that quasi-deviant groups may receive if participants have a bad experience. The propensity for pagans to engage the dark as well as the light sides of reality leaves it vulnerable to charges of ‘evil doing’. For these reasons a process was devised whereby women were introduced to basic ideas about the functioning of the group and the kinds of images that are invoked before being invited into a ritual setting with others.

Negotiating the Threshold

Shades did not advertise for members nor actively seek newcomers. Members talked about their beliefs and membership in the group as the topic arose in the rounds of daily activity with friends and acquaintances. A prospective newcomer demonstrated interest by asking for further information and discussion. If she inquired about participating in the group, the Shades’ member would be quite affirming and delighted and indicate that she would discuss the request with the group at the next ritual. At the same time the group member was expected to ensure that the prospective newcomer had been introduced to texts that described the kinds of images and ritual practices that she could expect to find in Shades.

The name of a prospective new person was usually put forward during the ‘business’ part of a ritual. A member would discuss what she knew about the person and her perception of the person’s commitment to Goddess ideas. During this process the group members would ‘tune in’ to the kind of energy that seemed to be being reflected. Either they would suggest further preparation before welcoming the woman to her first ritual or they would recommend she be invited at the next opportunity. There was also a practice of not inviting newcomers to heavier/serious rituals with prolonged trance or meditation, or that focussed on the dark elements. The idea was to ensure that women became comfortable with the group before entering on more challenging journeys of self-discovery. The newcomer was encouraged to treat her

first ritual as a trial to see if it was the kind of thing with which she was comfortable. Two of the women who responded to questionnaires had attended only one ritual.

The process described above was designed as a screening measure but also ensured that women's vulnerabilities were treated with care. They had time and space to adjust to new ideas and practices and to build confidence and trust through their acquaintance with a Shades' member. From the individual's reports on the questionnaire it is clear that such a process would have been helpful in allaying anxieties and in facilitating their decision to join the group. Potential participants also gained an impression of what to expect from the group. In relation to women's groups this last issue is particularly important as women often expect a group to be a support group or a therapy group. While following up questionnaires I had occasion to talk to one woman who had not experienced the group's acceptance process. She was still, after some five to six years, angry and abhorred by her experience at the ritual she attended which was Beltaine. Beltaine would be counted amongst the more challenging sabbats, and therefore not for newcomers, as it is the occasion for exploring and celebrating the erotic in its many forms and dimensions.

She indicated to me that on the night in question she did not want to be at home when her violent husband returned from work and a group member with whom she was friends invited her to come to the ritual she was attending that night. She had had no preparation for what she might expect to experience in the ritual and found the kinds of symbolic items arrayed on the altar "*most inappropriate*". The absence of any preparatory decision-making was evident in the contents of her returned questionnaire, she felt "*strange and bewildered ... uncomfortable*". She perhaps expected some support in her dilemma, she wrote, "*I felt like a fish out of water and this type of group was not a place I could relate to ... I didn't feel this was a nurturing women's group*". This situation raises ethical issues that have only come to light now in the course of doing this research. From my discussion with her, it was clear that no further contact would help to alleviate the repulsion and anger she still felt towards the group.

Future Directions

In undertaking this preliminary study I was interested in the kinds of things that led women to participate in a Dianic group. Few women who joined Shades had seriously tried any religion besides Christianity before entering the group. Perhaps, through the goddess literature with which most women reported having been acquainted, their ideas of female symbolism and sacrality had become increasingly natural to their ways of understanding their spirituality. Most women who joined Shades were already in the midst of what Luhrmann (1989: 312-313) has characterised as an 'interpretive drift' from a Christian framework for interpreting the world to a pagan one. But before entering Shades they felt isolated, languishing and frustrated

in their spiritual practice, or they were hoping for the opportunity to put a cognitive understanding into practice. It is very clear that for these women, part of the process of adopting another framework for interpreting religious meaning involved the embodied practice of ritual in the company of other women.

Shades' women were very clear about their search for reflections of the divine feminine but at the moment of decision, of turning an idea into a practice, of claiming power to create sacred myth, doubt and apprehension accompanied their excitement. What is surprising about their misgivings is the stereotypical images of evil they evoke, "devil worship", "black cats", "being caught by the police". These are precisely the images that have been propagated by fundamentalist religious groups with the help of the media to discourage people's involvement in competing expressions of spirituality.

Luff (1990) suggests that the feminist study of religion is strategically positioned to illuminate women's internalised voices of oppression thereby divesting them of dis-empowering messages and their blocks to autonomous action. The situation of joining a pagan group constituted a moment for women who were raised in Christian traditions to identify the characters of their internalised voices and to evaluate them in the light of lived experience. This state of vulnerability is a phenomenological site for further research into the reasons some participants who leave groups describe them as evil and as having attempted to brainwash them. Such a research agenda might also discover if similar unexamined fears contribute to the tension between Christian and pagan feminists.

Shades women's progression almost directly from Christianity to Dianic ritual suggests that some people who form new religious groups may share certain kinds of affinity influenced by their religious upbringing and ideological focus. Further research could explore the pathways to contemporary constructions and practices of spirituality as some may not be as *ad hoc* as the metaphor of the 'spiritual marketplace' seems to suggest. If certain women share affinities an understanding of their dimensions may indicate the essential elements of the spiritual needs of women in contemporary society. This, together with an examination of the messages encoded in internalised voices of oppression may help create common grounds for discussion between spiritual feminists on different religious paths. It remains to be seen where Shades' women find themselves now and how they understand themselves to be furthering the feminist agenda. This is the focus of stage two of the study of Shades.

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