

Transcending Dichotomy: Functions of Ritual among the Pagans of Fife

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Entering the circle

It was just before dawn on the morning of May 1st, 2011. The sound of voices mingled with the glow of electric lighting, as a drum beat and the faint notes from an old cassette broke the silence of sleep. In the kitchen of a Scottish farmhouse, I found myself surrounded by a crowd of about twenty people, some familiar, others less so, all assembled in this place with a particular sense of purpose. We drank tea together, as a sort of fortification against the cold we were all dreading outside, comparing the lengths of sleep we'd managed to get the night before, and discussing enthusiastically the sleep we intended on getting once our business was finished. In this room, we were individuals, joined with the purpose of participating in a ritual to honour the fertility of Spring, and to banish the Winter until the year came full circle once more. We assembled in the fields, singing dissonant songs of the warring seasons, simultaneously individuals, each with differing views of the concept of divinity, and part of a collective; a group observing a practice whose origins are as old as Mankind itself. Here, in the context of the ritual, the distinction between the concepts of the 'self' and the 'other' commingle in the morning light. Each individual present attended the ritual to experience a deeply personal communion with the divine—a personal experience that could not have been the same without the communal aspect of the group. The ritual places the participant between the poles of 'self' and 'other', and in those moments just before the sunrise, we experienced both, simultaneously reinforcing the significance of personal communion, and the significance of being a part of all that is: a communion with each other.

Calling the quarters¹: the elements converge

Sitting in the crowded coffee shop I had chosen for my first venture into an anthropological understanding of the Pagans of Fife, I could not help but recall memories of my first meeting with the people I would later come to work with. I have always had an interest in Paganism, particularly in the strong community bonds of those who identify themselves as Pagans share. The term 'Pagan' is an umbrella term, used to encompass a wide variety of religious beliefs, generally

¹ A term used to describe the procedure of invoking the presence of the elements (Earth, Air, Fire, Water) to the ritual, and similarly, a way in which to describe the convergence of the 'elements' of my story that led to an anthropological question.

characterized by polytheism, a reverence for nature, and a sense of individual agency—the belief that an individual has the ability to actively take part in the practice of their beliefs through some form of ritual.² Anthropologist Sabina Magliocco illustrates this point well by suggesting that ‘Neo-Pagans rely on a shared concept of the magical, interconnected universe as one determinant of community membership’ (Magliocco 2004: 126), and it was with this concept in mind that I became interested in the way ritual can bound individuals as a community. John, the man who now sat patiently across from me, was my introduction to the practice of ritual, and so I felt talking to him would be a good place to start.

Ever since I first met the Fife Pagans in 2009, I was always struck with the significance they placed on meeting and being together as a group of like-minded individuals. In our conversation, John spoke of the feeling of finding Paganism (in his case, Wicca, a type of Paganism) as a feeling of ‘coming home’. He described the act of ritual in a similar way, saying that ‘core rituals often happen with people who are almost like family.’ To John, ritual represents, on its most fundamental level, a method of ‘community building’ and of creating stronger interpersonal connections, as well as ‘a symbolic language of communication between the human and the divine.’ He reflects these beliefs in the nature of the rituals that he and his wife, Kitty, hold in their homes around all of the major Pagan festivals³. Welcoming, social events, the rituals held by John and Kitty are generally comprised of a seasonal ritual compiled by them, followed by a group meal; they are events that give people the chance to talk and form friendships with other like-minded members of the community.

It was not until long after my first encounter with John that these statements were challenged, presenting an interesting dilemma for what would later become the foundation of my fieldwork. While having a conversation about Paganism with two of my informants, a friend of mine joined us and began listening in. This third party knew nothing about Paganism, and in hearing our conversation, asked the seemingly simple question, ‘What exactly is Paganism?’ After a prolonged period of argument and negotiation, we arrived at the conclusion that it was different for each

²While it is impossible for me to provide a complete definition of Paganism within the space of this text, Margot Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon* is an excellent introduction to modern Paganism in its myriad forms, and the way these forms came about.

³For a more detailed description of the way modern Paganism came to be, I refer the reader to Ronald Hutton’s *The Triumph of the Moon* for historical contextualization of the beliefs, as well as Graham Harvey and Charlotte Hardman’s *Paganism Today* for a broad spectrum of modern Pagan beliefs and practices.

individual, and sent our inquirer off, no more informed than she had been in the beginning. This encounter, while initially seemingly insignificant, actually posed an interesting dilemma to the conversation I had with John beforehand. Through this encounter, it became obvious that Paganism was, for them, a very broad term. When asked what their specific branch of Paganism was, none of my informants answered in a simplistic manner. They described their paths as influenced by many beliefs, and often these elements are culled and stitched together to create a blend of Paganism specific to an individual. One informant described her path as ‘mainly Greco-Roman with some important additions in terms of deities, but [not following] any particular trad⁴ in terms of worship or ritual.’ This illustrates the complexity of the individual path, as well as the reason it was difficult to give a succinct answer when asked what Paganism was. Due to the individually constructed nature of the belief systems, no two Pagans within the group I studied believe exactly the same thing.

My research arose from the difficulty I had in reconciling these two encounters. According to John, ritual was both fundamentally a way of maintaining interpersonal relationships, providing opportunity for interaction amongst participants, and a language of communication between human and divine. Ritual is a way of experiencing divinity communally, and many of my informants spoke of being able to physically ‘feel’ the energy created by joining together to be a part of the divine. What was most difficult to understand, however, is the fact that each individual in the group has a different conception of this ‘divine’. For the Fife Pagans, ritual is both a communal experience, and one that embraces the individual experience and beliefs of each participant.

Drawing down the moon⁵: encounters with ritual

Many of the individuals who attend the rituals hosted by John and Kitty are members of other groups and ‘covens’, or formal working groups which consist of a stable, very familiar membership. Some of the participants come from out of town specifically for certain rituals, while others are able to attend more of the rituals due to their proximity⁶. The nature of the group is one of constant flux, comprised of some regular attendees, as well as students, whose ability to attend is

⁴An abbreviated form of the word tradition, preserved to keep to the informant’s exact words.

⁵Another Pagan term, used to describe a certain type of ritual in which male and female participants invite the god and goddess of their beliefs to ‘control’ their bodies, literally enabling them to ‘become’ the Deities in question.

⁶The ritual on Beltane (May 1st) is a particularly popular ritual, and generally the largest turnout (20+ participants this year), whereas other rituals such as Spring Equinox are generally smaller, with only the locally-living members in attendance.

based around the academic calendar. This contributes somewhat to the nature of the rituals undertaken, because unlike in a coven, where individuals are emotionally closer to one another through the small, permanent membership, these rituals are often attended by a combination of people who know each other well, and people who barely know each other at all. It was as a relative stranger that I first encountered the group, and it was in this way that three of my friends made their first encounters with ritual, enabling me to see the way the experience acted upon them.

It was the evening of the Spring Equinox, and I had agreed to meet two of my friends, Molly and Cecilia, prior to the ritual so that we could proceed on as a group. As we were outfitting ourselves to leave the house, we paused for a moment and looked at each other, laughing a little at how colourful the three of us were in the attire we had chosen. The moment was a light-hearted one, but one that resonated with an important concept of individuality. At the ritual, we comprised part of a wide spectrum of clothing, ranging from t-shirts and jeans to robes made specifically for ceremonial purpose. When Molly had asked me earlier what I thought she should wear, I remember responding that it didn't matter, and that people really just wore what they felt comfortable in. I had not really given much thought to my hurried response as we prepared to leave that evening; however, the visual reminder that greeted me made me stop and consider the words that I had repeated. They were not originally mine, but words shared with me before my first ritual, by the friend that introduced me to the group. Joanne Pearson, in an introduction to *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality, and the New Age*, writes that in Paganism 'individual creativity is highly regarded and encouraged, allowing personal interests to be followed in a ritual setting' (Pearson 2002: 3). In this sense, ritual clothing is a personal, reflective decision, much in the same way an individual's choice in pantheon and mode of prayer is personal.

The experience of the communal here begins with the individual, and I am reminded once again of my conversation with John, who shared with me that 'given individuality, there is a lot of commonality between Pagans.' He mentioned, in particular, a 'welcoming of plurality', a characteristic of Paganism that is recognizable in ancient examples, where myriad gods represented important aspects of nature and human life. 'The plurality of modern Paganism', he says, 'has some common elements with the plurality evident in ancient polytheism, in which the aim was to honour the many diverse forms of the divine rather than to proclaim one divine form as

the universal and exclusive truth.’ It is this same sense of comfort with plurality that seems to allow for the emergence of the individual in the rituals of the Fife group. Of course, with such a lengthy discourse on individuality, it begs the question of why a communal ritual is important in the first place. If each participant has a different set of gods, different beliefs, and different ways of relating to these gods, surely the purpose of the ritual—to celebrate the passing of the seasons through a common mythos—is defeated. This is a difficulty I came across as I began to observe the phenomenon of extreme individuality within the context of a group, and one which I struggled to understand. It was during the course of a conversation with another of my informants that I began to comprehend the nature of the issue, although ironically, it was through his own difficulty in discussing his reasons for attending ritual.

Steve is a Pagan quite easily described as ‘welcoming of plurality’, as a self-defined ‘omnipolypanthiest’. Translated by him, his ‘path is best described as an attempt to follow every path’, and in this sense, his views are self-created, and individual in the most extreme sense of the word. We had a long conversation about his involvement with the local Pagans, and his own personal beliefs, but when I asked him why he felt the need to attend the rituals, he paused. After some contemplation, he told me that it didn’t feel right to do formal rituals on his own. Certainly it was possible, but ‘it’s a more deliberate action to get together with a group of people and have a ritual rather than do it alone.’ Steve’s main concern was difficult for him to express, but it centred around the need for intent. He suggested that perhaps it was because having a group of people together to participate in a ritual meant that these people had gathered for a purpose. He knew it was important that a ritual take place amongst others, but could not entirely explain why.

My initial beliefs that ritual was important to the Fife Pagans on the grounds that it was simply a mode of communication with the divine were fundamentally flawed. Certainly, communion with the divine is an element of the ritual’s importance, but if that were the only reason for ritual, it could easily be performed alone. Magliocco suggests that ‘rituals serve as the principal occasions for social interaction and exchange, both within the [group] and the larger community’ (Magliocco 2004: 129). The communal aspect of ritual is one which cannot be highlighted enough, and one which plays a role just as important as that of the individual. One of my informants told me she ‘felt a strong connection with the group and knew it was all [she] wanted.’ She had previously been a member of a coven in the town she used to live in, but after moving and a period of disconnect,

she felt the need to participate in a group again. She spoke of a sense of comfort and trust that emerged from the group, as well as a feeling of elated joy after participating in a group ritual. Steve made it clear in my conversation with him that joining with others was an important part of ritual, and this was also something that I had noted from my conversation with John. He suggested that, as much as ritual could be thought of as a personal communion with the goddess and the god, it could also be seen as an event that draws people into a shared experience, and one that bonds a community. It is not possible to know someone's religious beliefs to the extent that sharing in a ritual enables without knowing at least a little bit about the person. According to John, 'people participating in a ritual are always observing others.' It is this aspect of ritual that binds the communal to the individual, and indeed, places the participant in a position that is neither entirely individual, nor entirely communal. The ritual is a mediator, and it is in this space that these boundaries are blurred.

Grounding: making sense of emotions

Returning from the field, and confronted with a notebook full of thoughts and impressions, I am faced with the difficulty of translating the words of my friends and informants into the language known as ethnography. In my attempt to understand the nature of ritual and its impact on community, I found a dichotomy in which a ritual participant is suspended—a balance of individualism, and of shared experience—merged into one, powerful encounter. The position of the participant in ritual can be likened to concepts of 'liminal space' developed by Arnold van Gennep and, later, by Victor Turner as an 'anti-structural betwixt-and-between' (Bowie 2006: 152). In the book *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann discusses the concepts of liminal space as they relate to the practice of ritual. Liminal space is defined in Turner's words as 'that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both' (Turner in Luhrmann 1989: 230). In the context of ritual, she says, 'the liminal subject will experience *communitas*, comradeship between equals, with fellow participants, and she will feel discontinuous moments of sacred, suspended time' (Luhrmann 1989: 231). Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing suggest that ritual comes about from 'the way that spontaneous *communitas* felt by those who together 'drop out' of society must evolve into something more routine... if it is to maintain itself over time' (Rapport and Overing 2007: 269).

While I read this, I could not help but feel that it very eloquently describes the things I was told,

and the things I observed, in my field. To those who took part, the ritual was not merely a way in which to honour the gods. Many of them told me that Paganism was inextricably intertwined with who they were as people, and that communion with the gods could be achieved at any time, whenever they felt it was appropriate to do so. They lived life alongside divinity, and it was not the rituals that they attended that enabled them to be in touch with it. The purpose of the ritual, then, is one of deconstructing boundaries. It gathers the individuals together, and transforms them, each one becoming, for a time, both a unique individual, and a part of a greater purpose, standing amongst equals in an experience Luhrmann describes as 'neither mundane, nor non-mundane, but an uneasy mixture of the two' (Luhrmann 1989: 231). In my experience, however, there was nothing uneasy about a mixture of these two things. That which is so frequently referred to as 'mundane', the goings on of everyday life, are frequently interspersed with the 'non-mundane', Pagan elements. As John put it, 'the culture we grew up with compartmentalizes religion as a separate part of life, whereas Pagans consider religion a part of life.' Ritual's blending of the individual and the community is by no means an uneasy coexistence, but one that is natural to the way Fife Pagans conceive of ritual: as a space for worship through individual communion, as well as a way of learning about other members of the community through a communal experience.

Closing the circle

The ritual concluded perfectly choreographed with the rising sun. We broke apart, some of the more intrepid souls venturing to the sea for an early morning dive, while others of us remained, watching the sky erupt into dramatic colour as we lingered on what had been. We had been together no longer than perhaps a few hours (although time has a habit of being hard to gauge during rituals), and yet, we had shared something intimate. We had all become, for a brief space of time, the anthropological 'participant observer', watching one another, and by doing so, coming that much closer to understanding those with whom we shared simultaneously everything and nothing. We had become aware of the presence of others, the way their presences acted upon us, and the way we, as a collective, had overcome the separation of the individual paths we followed to take a synchronized step together. We had blurred what had once seemed such defined boundaries, between the individual and the other, between the anthropologist and the informant. In the liminal space of ritual, we were simultaneously all of these, and none of these. In the words of Margot Adler, historian and Pagan, 'the witch is the changer of definitions and relationships' (Adler 1979: 44).

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