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# Casting Your Own Spell: The Role of Individualism in Wiccan Beliefs

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## Abstract

Wicca is a neopagan religious movement that gained popularity in the mid-20th century. One of its characteristics is a lack of commitment to dogma. This lack of dogma creates an individualized practice that allows people to able to bring in their own identities and personalities into their practice to make it most suited for themselves. This individualism creates an endless possibility for people to practice the religion. This research is, therefore, meant to understand the importance of individualism within Wicca and how practitioners use individualized beliefs to bring their identities and personalities into their practice. Utilizing ethnographic interviewing with some participant observation, this research explores questions such as: how individualism is utilized at the individual and collective level, what aspects of their personal identities practitioners bring into Wicca, and how are these identities reflected into their beliefs. This project was completed throughout 2020 and the first half of 2021 and involved ten participants from Western North Carolina.

## 1. Introduction

Imagine yourself in a world full of magic and witches, where all things found in nature (people, animals, plants, stars, the sky, etc.) are alive with spirit and energy. Picture yourself in a place where you can use these energies and spirits to impact yourself and the world around you. To many people, this world may seem make believe, like something out of a fantasy novel. But to many people I have spoken to this past year, this world exists, and it's our world.

I've been interested in paganism ever since I discovered it around 2013, when I was roughly 15 years old. Paganism is an umbrella term for religions interested in pre-Christian mythology, nature-based spirituality, magical ritual practices, and can also involve a belief in reincarnation (Berger 2005, 28 – 29; Urban 2015, 158 – 159; White 2014, 60). As my interest in anthropology developed when I was in college, I came to realize that my interest in paganism was really the first time that I dabbled into the field. This made it pretty clear to me that paganism would be an interesting site to conduct my undergraduate research, since I had years of experience in familiarizing myself with some of the dialogue and information that I would encounter during my fieldwork. I specifically chose the pagan religion Wicca as my area of study, which is the largest branch of paganism (Berger 2005, 28; Jorgensen and Russell 1999, 333; Urban 2015, 158).

My first steps into the field were based around ideas of how identity and liberation tied together in Wiccan worldviews. The idea came to me after trends I had been noticing in many pagan and witchcraft Facebook groups shortly after the death of George Floyd and the protests that followed. It seemed as though many people began exploring the way that magical practice and paganism could tie in with activism and social justice. When I began my fieldwork, however, I noticed this was not the case among the Wiccans I met. What my informants were most focused on was using individualism to craft their beliefs around their personalities and experiences. This made me shift the focus of my research towards studying the importance of individual experiences in Wicca and how Wiccans bring their identities into their beliefs. My paper will be divided into three main concepts surrounding this theme: background information (history/terminology), individual experience among solitaries, and individualism in Wiccan groups.

I conducted my research during the Spring and Fall of 2020, from January until May and August until early November. I worked alongside ten informants, all of whom were located throughout Western North Carolina. Most of my informants were around the Asheville area, but some were around Rutherford County. The primary method I used to gather data was ethnographic interviews. I used this method because I had little access to participant observation and site visits: most of the practitioners I spoke to did not gather in groups and didn't allow me to participate in their rituals. Additionally, because of the covid-19 pandemic, vaccines not being readily available until about halfway through the year, as well as my own anxieties surrounding the pandemic, meeting with people in-person was a bit of a challenge at times. These factors led me to rely on the interviews and conversations that I had with practitioners (primarily over Zoom, Google Meet, and over the phone, with some being in-person) in order to understand their beliefs, instead of being able to travel to specific places and visit groups. I was able to take part in participant observation towards the end of my research, however. This event will be discussed later.

## 1.1 History of Wicca

The origins of Wicca are a debated topic, but the creation of modern Wicca is commonly attributed to an Englishman named Gerald Gardner. The story begins in the early 20th century with Gardner discovering a group of Wiccans in New Forest, England. This group claimed to be passing down an oral religious tradition that pre-dates Christianity. During his encounters with them they would teach him their practices, but he had to keep them secret. He didn't gain their permission to publish their beliefs until after 1951, when England repealed the last of their anti-witchcraft laws (Berger 2005, 31; Hutton 1999, 205 – 206; Jorgensen and Russell 1999, 326; Luhrmann 1989, 43 – 44; Urban 2015, 159, 161, 164 – 165; Vance 2015, 101 – 102; Waters 2019, 218 – 219).

As stated, there isn't strong consensus on this story. Many, most notably scholars but also practitioners, have noted that Gardner statements are largely influenced by his interest in the British anthropologist Margaret Murray's theories of prehistoric matriarchal cults, European mythology and folklore, freemasonry, occultism, and folk magic (Berger 2005, 31; Hutton 1999, 206; Jorgensen and Russell 1999, 326; Luhrmann 1989, 44 – 45; Urban 2015, 159, 161, 164 – 165; Vance 2015, 102; Waters 2019, 218). Although there are criticisms of the story, there is evidence to support some claims, such as the idea of female divinity being important to paleolithic peoples. Ronald Johnstone argues that there is archaeological evidence showing a goddess as the supreme deity in many stone age societies, as well as noting female creator deities in the mythologies of China, Australia, and Egypt (Johnstone 2001, 219). Additionally, sculptures known as Venus figurines, have been found throughout the paleolithic world and are often interpreted as a feminine deity that would be prayed to for fertility purposes (McCoid and McDermott 319, 323).

Wicca, as described by Gardner is focused on the worship of two deities, a God and a Goddess, the divinity of nature, the practice of magical ritual, and reincarnation (Berger 2005, 32 – 33; Hutton 1999, 235 – 236; Luhrmann 1989, 45 – 47; Urban 2015, 165; Vance 2015, 101; Waters 2019, 219). Although not every Wiccan follows Gardner's tradition, these concepts are often very common throughout Wicca with some degree of difference, as I observed through my fieldwork. Most Wiccans I spoke to were primarily focused on worshipping the Goddess, with the God working as her consort, and venerating nature. However, others were disinterested in deities, and some made no references to the importance of reincarnation. Additionally, the God and Goddess were not represented in the same image (as will be explored later). These figures were often viewed based on different gods and goddesses from religions around the world.

The reasons for these differences to be allowed in Wicca is because of contemporary Wicca's commitment to individualism. Individualism became an integral part of Wicca during the 1960s and 70s, roughly a decade or so after Gardner published his earliest works. During this time, Wicca came to the United States and became influenced by its growing counter-culture movement, placing a greater emphasis on individualism, as well as environmentalism, feminism, pacifism, and anti-authoritarianism (Berger 2005, 36 – 37; Urban 2015, 160; Vance 2015, 103). Helen A. Berger claims that the international influence of American culture allowed for these values to spread to Wiccans worldwide (Berger 2005, 37).

## 1.2 Important Terminology

Understanding how Wicca developed is not the only way one can get a background into Wiccan worldviews. I feel that in order to properly explore Wicca, one has to familiarize themselves with the common terminology used by the practitioners. There are lots of different terms that could be used to describe Wiccans and their beliefs. Often, these terms are used interchangeably by the practitioners. It's particularly important to understand the ways that Wiccans

self-identify themselves when discussing their beliefs and interacting with one another. This section will be dedicated to providing a brief overview of important Wiccan terminology.

For starters, Wiccans consider themselves to be pagans and consider their religion to be a branch of paganism. As discussed in the introduction, paganism is interested in ancient mythology, nature-worship, and magical practice, and Wicca is the largest of all contemporary pagan denominations (Berger 2005, 28 – 29; Jorgensen and Russell 1999, 333; Urban 2015, 158 – 159; White 2014, 60). It was common for me to hear Wiccans identify themselves as pagans and also call their religion the "world's oldest religion." This may have been partly due to Gardner's origin story, but also a belief that all pre-Christian mythology is largely the same, a claim I heard frequently when talking to some of my informants. I often heard Wiccans tell me that they believe the Gods and Goddesses of pagan religions are the same, because they tend to represent similar traits.

However, more so than pagan, I heard Wiccans identify themselves as witches. They call themselves witches because Wicca is considered to be a religion that practices witchcraft. The Merrian-Webster dictionary has several definitions for witchcraft, with two being especially useful in this context: "the use of sorcery and magic," and "rituals and practices that incorporate belief in magic and that are associated especially with neopagan traditions and religions (such as Wicca)." Based on my experiences talking with witches throughout 2021, I would define witchcraft as being a set of beliefs and practices based around nature, often derived from ancient traditions that pre-date the rise of Judeo-Christianity, and an emphasis on using spiritual power to influence and change the material world. What I've seen is that witchcraft itself is not a religion but can be incorporated into different religious traditions. It is also important to note that, although witchcraft has been historically associated with satanism and devil worship, it is not exclusively practiced in this regard. The Wiccans I've spoken to all actively try to distance themselves from these labels and make sure people are aware their beliefs have nothing to do with satanism, especially since their beliefs are rooted in traditions that existed before Christianity.

Because Wicca is based on witchcraft practices, most Wiccans I spoke to would often call themselves witches instead of Wiccans (although the latter term was still used). However, throughout my research, I have preferred using the term Wicca and Wiccan in my writing over witch and witchcraft. This is because Wicca is not the only witchcraft religion. There are many witches throughout the world that call themselves witches but don't practice Wicca. In fact, there can sometimes be tensions between Wiccans and non-Wiccan witches, as I've observed in the witchcraft Facebook groups I'm in. From what I observed, this tension is based on a difference between moral codes towards how magic should be used, and sometimes a belief that Wicca is an appropriative religion. Additionally, I've seen that some witches may not be necessarily pagan. This is because witchcraft practices can be brought into various religious systems. Some witches may practice Christianity, others satanism, and others may be influenced by contemporary cultural traditions from around the world. Because of these reasons, I argue that every Wiccan is a witch, but not every witch is a Wiccan. I will be using the term "Wiccan" and "Wicca" when referring to Wiccans because of this, so there won't be confusion with other witchcraft practices.

It is also important to spend some time discussing my use of the word "magic." When some people hear or see the word magic they may think of illusionists pulling rabbits out of hats or eating swords. This is not the kind of magic practiced by witches. Witches practice ritual magic more akin to our concepts of sorcery. The Wiccans I've spoken to are interested in the elements (air, earth, fire, water), nature spirits, the cardinal directions (which they call "the quarters"), and energies that they believe exist throughout all living things. Tanya Luhrmann explains this as "mind affects the matter," meaning that Wiccans can use their knowledge of how these elements, spirits, quarters, and energies work in order to create change in the physical world.

These terms are important to understand if one wishes to explore Wiccan beliefs. Having a familiarity in these common terms will help outsiders navigate Wiccan and witchcraft belief systems with greater ease. With knowledge of these terminologies, we can see that Wicca is a nature-based pagan religion that uses witchcraft practices as a means of altering events in the physical world.

## 2. Individualism

Throughout my study of Wicca, it was impossible for me to ignore the vast diversity of beliefs that practitioners embrace. Wicca has the ability to take on many different forms, depending on who is practicing. Through my observations, I have talked to people who are influenced by various ideas: atheism, Gardnerian Wicca, Judaism, feminism, Norse mythology, Cherokee traditions, Egyptian mythology, etc. The possibilities for Wiccan practice seem endless. Although I found this diversity to be one of the most exciting things during my study, it was, no doubt, a big obstacle to overcome. Throughout my research, I was often asked by those I know to explain Wiccan beliefs. This

wasn't always an easy task to accomplish, because of its immense diversity. I once talked about this with my informant Claire to which she jokingly responded, "Well, that's a big task!" This begs one of the big questions at hand: how can I make sense of a religion that is practiced differently by each person? I think that the answer to this question lies in how and why Wicca encourages diversity among its practitioners.

Wicca's earliest forays into individualism, as stated earlier, come from the influence of 1960's American counter-culture movements had on Wicca (Berger 2005, 36 – 37; Fisher 1976, 46; Vance 2015, 103). This influence led to Wiccans placing a greater influence on individual practitioners to carve their own paths in Wicca. This emphasis on the individual means that Wicca can be described as an "experiential" religion: placing a greater emphasis on the experiences of the self over that of sacred texts (a foreign term for Wiccan vocabulary) and religious dogma (Luhrmann 1989, 7; Vance 2015, 109 – 110). In Wiccan worldviews, the self is the most important concept. This is how practitioners are able to carve, what seem to be, drastically different interpretations of the religion from one another. This is how an atheist, agnostic, and polytheist can call themselves Wiccans without causing conflict with the worldview of Wicca. This is because Wicca's belief that the divine is best experienced when it is done in one's own way.

The response I usually get when asking about the importance of individualism is that it makes the religion more personable and liberating. "Most people that join this religion have a bit of a disdain for authority," my informant Charlie tells me. "It seems like a lot of people that come into witchcraft have a disdain for organized religion. They don't want their practice to seem too much like a religion like Christianity, which is what many witches come from." The Wiccans I've spoken have largely come from a Christian background, be it Southern Baptist or Irish Catholic. Oftentimes, they leave Christianity for reasons along the lines of not being able to answer their questions, but also, like Charlie said, because they didn't like having a religion that was too restrictive. Wicca allows for practitioners to explore their spirituality, choose between which gods and goddesses they will pray to, if they choose to pray at all, and sometimes how to perform rituals. The Wiccans that I have spoken to have often said that this open religious structure allows them to feel more personally liberated.

It should be noted, too, that there are set religious structures in place in Wicca. For instance, all of the Wiccans I've spoken to recognize a divine feminine and masculine, although these are typically viewed differently, most often as the God and Goddess. Additionally, all that I've spoken to practice magic, believe that nature is divine, and astrology is often used alongside their religious practices and beliefs. However, each Wiccan places a different emphasis on each of these aspects. For instance, some put most of their attention towards the Goddess, while others try to find a balance between the divine feminine and masculine. Additionally, some may practice magic frequently, while others may do it on occasions, and some may rarely or never perform rituals. Some Wiccans that I spoke to also preferred gathering in groups, while others felt that following the rules of others got in the way of their own religious experiences.

I think that the best way to understand why and how this happens is to look to the religion itself. Wiccan religious structure encourages individuality and self-expression. One of the rules of Wicca is what's known as the "Wiccan Rede." The Rede states: an it harm none, do what you will. The Rede works as one of the ways Wicca deters its practitioners from using magic for evil purposes. Ellen Cannon Reed argues that it is more of "a guideline, something to base your decisions before you take any action" (Lewis 1999, 303; Reed 2000, 111 – 112). With keeping the Rede in mind, we can see how and why practitioners are able to justify their diverse practices while still maintaining a clear identity that they are wiccan.

It is also important to note that Wicca is not a rule-free religion. There are still rules and laws that bind practitioners together. Take the Rede, for example, which is a part of Wicca that is observed by all practitioners. Additionally, there are other guidelines such as the Law of Three and Wheel of the Year (both will be explored later in this paper) that all Wiccans I have spoken to observe. Characteristics of the religion, as well, such as the divine feminine/masculine. Magic, and nature worship are all important to Wiccan belief systems and are observed by all practitioners that I have spoken to, as well.

## 3. Experience in Solitude

Within Wicca, individualism can take varying degrees. Some prefer embracing the tradition as Gardner intended. Others prefer to take a far more individualized approach to the religion. Some will go so far that they will distance their practice from Wiccan communities altogether. These Wiccans are called solitary practitioners, often shortened to "solitaries." Solitaries get their name from their preferred way of practicing Wicca: in solitude. Based on my contacts with solitaries in Western NC, they tend to prefer not associating too closely from Wiccan groups and

dissociate their practice from Wiccan norms. Another term I've heard be thrown around to describe solitaries is "eclectic," since their practices often "eclectically" embrace a variety of influences from religions that don't belong to witchcraft and paganism.

Most of the Wiccans I spoke to could be identified as solitaries. They either spoke about their dislike for practicing in groups and why they left organizations. The stories that I heard cover a variety of reasons, but a common theme was that they feel organized ritual interferes with their experiences. Some of my informants, like Claire and Meghan, both made claims such as this one. Sometimes, solitaries may have once belonged to a group but lost interest overtime. "I learned my practice from having a teacher," Lisa tells me. "I was involved in a coven for a while. Once he passed away I lost interest in the coven work." Lisa's journey to solitude was transitional. She once belonged to a coven and relied on others to help introduce her to Wicca and to teach her the mysteries of the religion, but now she relies on herself alone.

At the core of the solitary experience is the desire for a practice based entirely around the experiences of the self, where the individual's beliefs and actions are unregulated by the practices of others. The solitaries that I spoke to often told me that following along with others interferes with their experiences. As one may expect, it's hard to practice a religion based on individual experience when a practice impedes on said experience.

Helen A. Berger, in her study of solitary neopagans, argues that solitary practice is the most common type of pagan practice (Berger 2019, 1). She argues that the beliefs of solitaries and collectivist Wiccans are largely the same, but there are differences in actions. This is because both groups will likely be reading the same books and visiting the same websites to learn more about Wicca (Berger 2019, 2). This means that, even if a solitary and collectivist believe the same things, they may have different ways of experiencing their beliefs, or of expressing their devotion for their beliefs. One may feel empowered by joining others in a ritual while solitaries might feel hindered by it. Berger also notes that young people make up a majority of solitaries in a survey she did, while Baby Boomers make up a majority of those practicing in groups (although she notes that young people only made up 36% of her survey) (Berger 2019, 26).

For the solitaries I spoke to, individual experience was the most important aspect of their beliefs. The importance of the self in the creation of their beliefs was arguably *the* defining factor, embracing the anti-authoritarian and individualist values often reflected in post-60s Wicca. This leads me to ask the questions, what does an individualized Wiccan practice look like? And, most notably, how does the self appear in the practices of individualist, solitary Wiccans? This is where the identities of individuals comes into play. For the next part of this paper, I will be exploring the practices of solitary Wiccans and how their identities are reflected in their beliefs and practices.

## 3.1 Nature and the Environment

One of the most common characteristics of Wiccan practice that I found was the belief in the divinity of nature. This view of nature is one that can be observed throughout Wicca and is one of its earliest traditions. Gardner, in his earliest publications, wrote about the important role that nature plays in Wicca and the tradition has been carried on ever since (Berger 2005, 32 – 33; Luhrmann 1989, 45 – 47; Urban 2015, 165; Vance 2015, 101; Waters 2019, 219). I have not spoken to one Wiccan that doesn't view nature as being important. All that I have spoken to have some degree of admiration and feel some connectedness to the natural world.

Oftentimes, the Wiccans I spoke to would call themselves "animists," a term invented by the anthropologist E.B. Tylor in the latter half of the 19th century. Tylor argued that animism was the religion of "primitive" peoples and that animists believe that all aspects of nature possess a soul, just like humans. Thus, animism views all of nature as divine (Tylor 1871, 260). [1]

When Gerald Gardner first invented Wicca, he used the concept of a God and Goddess as the basis for the religion's framework, including the religion's animist ideas. The God is often associated with summer, the sky, animals, and the sun. The Goddess is often associated with winter, the earth, fertility, stars, and the moon (Fisher, 1976, 53 – 54; Hutton 1999, 206). However, based on my encounters with Wiccans this past year, I've realized that these definitions are not as cut and dry. This is because the God and Goddess are most often represented based on various deities throughout various cultures and history. This means that the way one practitioner may express their devotion to the God and Goddess may look different to another, because they are worshipping different facets of these deities.

Reasons for becoming involved in animist beliefs can vary among practitioners. Often, the reasons that I got involved animism answering questions that the practitioners had or from a passionate interest in the outdoors. Sometimes, it involves more philosophical reasonings. For instance, Shawn, the High Priest of the Piedmont Church of Wicca, told me that his interest in nature veneration comes from a feeling that he believes we once had with nature. "I think the

Industrial Revolution went too far. Before that we had more of a connection to nature, but since then we've just been growing further away from it," he told me. "Wicca allows me to connect with nature in a way

1. Tylor's use of the term animism was to justify his social evolutionary theory and white supremacy. The Wiccans I spoke to were likely unaware of this connection and their use of the term shouldn't be interpreted in this way. My use of the term is solely to get an understanding of emic Wiccan language.

that we once had." For Shawn, Wicca provides him an outlet to explore beliefs of the past in regard to nature. It gives him the ability to escape the modern, post-industrial society we live in to connect with nature in a way that he feels our modern society doesn't often provide. Shawn's statement reminds me of Karl Marx's critiques of industrial capitalism and the alienation it created (Marx 1844, 29 – 30).[2]

Shawn wasn't the only Wiccan I spoke to with a passion for nature. My informant Claire shared a deep passion for nature and its divinity. Claire is a UNCA environmental science student with a minor in biology. I met her over the Instagram page UNCA Anon, a page followed by around 2,000 people and often used by UNCA students to relay messages to one another. Often, this is done anonymously, as the name implies, but this is not always the case. I met Claire through a non-anonymous ad that I placed on the page in March, explaining my research and hoping any potential Wiccans in the school could help me out. Claire responded, telling me that she has Wiccan family and would be willing to help.

It became clear to me quite quickly that nature was essential to Claire's beliefs. Growing up, her family valued being in nature. "We were always, like, outdoors and hiking and doing things like that," she told me. Her family's passion for the outdoors resonated with Claire as she grew older, which is part of what influenced her environmentalist and Wiccan beliefs. Claire's mother is also a practicing Wiccan and her views influenced Claire as she grew older. "I formed my belief system more based on what my mom believed." said Claire. "My mom is a witch as well, and my grandma, and, as far back as I know, all of the women in my family have been." Although her father was an atheist, and she wasn't raised to believe in any particular religion. But her mother's views and experiences with nature always stood out to her. "My dad saw going outdoors as doing something fun while my mom thought of it as something spiritual," she told me.

As I mentioned before, Claire is studying environmental science and biology. Although her studies may seem very different to her religious practices, Claire's spiritual identity and her scientific identity are both connected, even though she understands that her Wiccan views can't be proven by science. "Being able to learn about nature and having classes outdoors makes me feel like I'm more connected to the environment," she said. "I feel like I'm a part of it now, rather than just me being in it. If that makes sense?" "Yeah, that makes sense. You know how it works and so it's not just, like, a tree anymore. You know how it works," I replied. "Yeah, exactly," she responded. "It's so cool! I love learning about all of that type of stuff."

Central to Claire's animist beliefs is her belief in energies. Claire believes that all of nature is full of energies and spirits, telling me, "I think there are energies and a spirit to everything that's living… Like, you and I have a spirit, and trees, and plants, and animals have a spirit." For Claire, these energies are interconnected with one another, and she is able to harness them through ritual. Additionally, these energies are always impacting her, particularly noting that it occurs during seasonal changes. Claire tells me:

Claire: "Yeah, it definitely does impact me. 100%. I think the first day that it was, like, warm, I felt a surge of energy. And I was outside quite literally all day. And then a good part of last week I was spending my time just walking around and it also prompts me to, like, eat healthier and it just overall makes me a lot happier. Which makes sense, you know, vitamin D. That's what'll happen. But yeah, it's kind of like a big energy shift for me from cold to it finally being warm again. So, it definitely affects, like, a lot of stuff."

Me: "Like, positive or negative, sort of?"

Claire: "Yeah, it's… Yeah, that's how I feel about it honestly. I don't like the cold and it makes me sad. It's just so much harder to do stuff. It's so much harder to get out of bed… I don't wanna say negative, but that's just how I feel. I feel very negative during winter time."

Claire's views towards these energies are directly related to her preferences for warm weather over cold.

2. Marx believed industrial capitalism separated the worker from his product, in a similar way that Shawn believes industrialism separated people from nature.

It's possible to break these associations down into understanding the symbols and metaphors behind these relationships. Since she spiritually reacts positively to the warmth, she enjoys warm weather more. Since she is happier when it's warm, she practices a healthy lifestyle, behavior she identifies as being "good." From this we can see that warm energies = warm weather = healthy lifestyle = good behavior. Or, in short, warmth is a metaphor for good (warm = good). On the other hand, Claire has a negative spiritual reaction to cold weather, which she enjoys less. She finds it harder for her to live a healthy lifestyle and practice behavior she deems "good." So, we can break this metaphor down similarly: cold energies = cold weather = less healthy lifestyle = bad behavior, or cold is a metaphor for bad (cold = bad). These interpretations of seasonal energies are all based upon her preferences for certain kinds of weather.

For Claire, there are more to these energies than just representations of seasons. Claire feels a strong connection to energies she associates with the animals. These energies are very important in her life, both spiritually and personally. Early on when we first met over Zoom, she told me about her connection with animals. "I think my interest in working with animals is both personal and spiritual," she said. "It's something that I really like to do, but I also think that through animals I can connect with myself more, cause I feel like if you're doing something you love, that helps you connect to yourself. And of course, the environment because they're animals." She continues to say that it's "like a spiritual duty in a way, like it's my responsibility or something."

Claire believes that animals are in a different spiritual "realm" than humans. Despite the separation between the human and animal realm, she is able to access the animal realm, often from being around them or through magical practice.

"Each animal has its own symbol. I use an animal tarot deck which is… Basically every animal has a sort of medicine that goes along with it… So, like, wolf is loyalty. So, if you draw the wolf card you need someone in your life to be loyal or you've experienced something negative with that. It helps you piece together what's going on if you have, like, a question about something or you just don't understand what's going on."

These symbols are important for the ways that Claire understands the natural world. She uses her tarot cards very often, especially when she comes across animals. "I'll come across animals in real life, like raccoons or beavers, and I'll refer back to that deck to see sort of what it meant, because it crossed my path for a reason, I feel like. And especially since I feel like I have a connection with them it means even more," she said. Claire tells me she has an especially strong connection to hawks, which she sees every day. She's likely talking about the red-shouldered hawks that live in the Botanical Gardens or the red-tailed hawks that regularly come to the UNCA Quad looking for food.

The symbols of these animals are used by Claire as ways to guide her life. Every animal is meant to help and guide people, hence why she says their symbols are a "medicine." Every time an animal crosses Claire's path, she views it as them guiding her to answer questions she has at that moment, or to focus on a certain aspect of her life. When we met in the UNCA student union, Claire explained in greater depth to me why she holds this belief, saying, "Have you ever been out with a friend, and you see, like, a little bunny across the road and you're like, 'do you see that bunny?' and they're like, 'no. I didn't see it?' They weren't meant to see that. That wasn't for them. That was for you." These instances are when animal symbols present themselves to only one person, allowing Claire to see that whatever guidance the animal was offering wasn't meant for the other person. It was only intended for one person to see because their guidance is only applicable to one person's life.

Claire's belief in animal and nature spirits is not something unique to her perspectives. Other practitioners that I spoke to also expressed a belief in these spirits. Chava, another close informant of mine, also expressed similar beliefs. I met Chava over Facebook. Similar to how I found Claire, I posted an advertisement in one of the pagan and witchcraft Facebook groups I am in. There I wrote a description of my project and hoped any Wiccans could help me out. Chava responded, telling me that she was interested in helping me out. She also gave me an overview of her beliefs, being influenced by her Jewish and Cherokee heritage, as well as Egyptian mythology. We set up a plan to meet with each other virtually.

We logged into Google Meet for our interview in late March. After we finished greeting each other, I asked if it was ok for me to record the interview, as I always do. She told me it was and so I began recording. However, something went wrong, and I lost connection with her just as I started recording. Google Meet certainly isn't the most convenient way to conduct an interview, but in the days before Covid vaccines, it seemed like the only way. We both closed out of the meeting and rejoined, hoping it was a fluke. I tried recording again and this time it worked. "Sorry about that!" I said. "No worries!" she responded gleefully. With the recording now working, I officially began our interview.

Chava explained to me her belief in nature spirits, and I thought they were similar to Claire's, although with different approaches. Like Claire, Chava focuses a lot of her spiritual practice on nature spirits. However, because of the focus she puts on her heritage, she calls these nature spirits "angels." She tells me, "Basically, the angels, I think of them as

nature spirits, or guardians or whatever you wanna call them. But they're higher celestial beings in this universe and everyone has some that are out there, and the biggest thing is that they want to work with people. They want you to ask for things, they want you to ask for what you want. That's what they're there for." This desire for nature spirits, or angels in this case, to work with humans is something that is important to Chava's spell work. "Raphael is my guardian angel. I'm a nurse and he works with healing a lot. I do a lot of ritual work with healing, so I focus on him in my spells," Chava tells me. "In Kabbalic traditions," she continues, "Raphael works exclusively with the Mother Goddess. He also represents the element of air."

Another name Chava uses to describe nature spirits is the Little People. Her use of this term comes from her Cherokee heritage. James Mooney, in his collection of Cherokee myths in the late 19th century and early 20th century, described the Little People as "little fellows, hardly reaching up to a man's knees, but well-shaped and handsome, with long hair falling almost to the ground" (Mooney 1902, 333). Chava told me, "I don't know if they're a class of spirit or fairies, but it was said that they would appear to them [the Cherokee]. I don't know if it's Fayetteville where they have the fairy lights where people can go see lights, like lightning bugs, but not lightning bugs. It's said that's the Little People."

Chava claims that she has interacted with the Little People before. "One year, at Mabon (a Wiccan holiday)," she says, "I put out an offering at dusk for the Little People. I went out later and I was wondering if the bowl would still be there, so I looked up at the trees and there were these lights. Like fireflies but too high and moving too inconsistently. I got my mom and said, 'please come out and tell me you see this. Tell me I'm not going crazy.' We sat there and watched these lights flying through our trees here. And there's an ash tree at the end of our driveway and it glowed almost white. In my head I heard 'portal', so I think that's the portal into their realm. I dove into reading about the Little People and the connection between fairies, spirits, and Little People are very similar. So, every year I see them, and I leave offerings for them."

For Chava, her view of nature spirits is taken from her heritage. She sees no difference between angels, little people, or spirits. For her, they are all the same. This is different from Claire's way of explaining the spirits as energies, but the essence of their beliefs are the same. Though the terms may be different, the belief is the same: that the natural world is full of spiritual animation that makes all of nature divine.

## 3.2 Gender

I noticed that throughout my research, the concept of gender kept popping up in my interviews. For some, gender only plays a small role in their spirituality, but for others it's a crucial part to understanding their spiritual worldview. Traditional wiccan theology, rooted in the writings of Gerald Gardener, is based around two deities, the God and the Goddess (Mooney 2018, 16; Ruether 2005, 277; Urban 2015, 165). The inclusion of one male and female deities in Wicca can be viewed as complements of one another, both working as symbols to represent different aspects of the spiritual and material worlds deemed masculine and feminine. I heard this claim often among the practitioners that I interviewed.

Gardener's inclusion of a male and female deity into Wicca is a belief inspired by the anthropologist Margaret Murray, who claimed that medieval witchcraft was actually a form of goddess-worshipping paganism passed down from the Stone Age. This theory is reflected in Gardener's story on the origins of Wicca: where he discovered a Wiccan coven in an English forest that practiced a pagan, witchcraft religion passed down from the Stone Age (Mooney 2018, 16; Ruether 2005, 277; Urban 2015, 165). The importance of the Goddess in Wicca became increasingly important as the religion continued to develop, especially as it became increasingly influenced by feminism and the American counter-culture movement in the mid-20th century (Luhrmann 1989, 52; Ruether 2005, 274 – 275; Urban 2015, 160; Vance 2015, 103). I saw the importance of the divine feminine come up many times in my interviews. For reference, all but four of my contacts so far have been women, and all but one of these women use she/her pronouns. One can see, with these statistics, why the symbol of a strong, feminine spirit was something that came up fairly often.

How the divine feminine was embodied depends on the practitioner, however. Lisa, for instance, found the symbol of a strong, feminine deity to be very important to their spirituality. "I work with the Norse pantheon," Lisa told me. "There were times where I prayed to other goddesses, though. I used to work with Kali from Hinduism a lot. I was in a dark place at that time, and she helped me get through it." She credits her fondness for strong women to be from her mother. "My mother was a feminist in actions, but not words," she said. "That left a big impact on me growing up. She set a good example." Lisa told me she is very passionate about women's rights and regularly volunteers at Planned Parenthood, so her connection between her spirituality and feminist beliefs are not very surprising. Lisa doesn't avoid male deities, however. But she only uses them to create a balance between the masculine and feminine divinities.

Meghan, another UNCA Wiccan, also told me that gender was important to her religious expression. When we met over Zoom, Meghan told me that her veneration of masculine and feminine divinities "ebbs and flows," because she uses she/they pronouns. "There are some days where I'm very much in tune to the feminine and goddess side of Wicca. Other days, I strive more towards a balance," she said. "All of us, no matter what our gender, even though I hate thinking in binary terms, we all have masculine and feminine aspects and there is a balance within us of both." I asked her, "Do you think this has to do with your gender identity?" "It could, yeah. Somedays I definitely feel very feminine and others I just feel like a person. I think that's where the gender identity comes from. I just hate that we're divided like that, like, I just hate divides." Meghan's use of gender in her spirituality is often reflective of how she uses her own gender. On days that she feels more feminine, she is more likely to turn towards feminine divinity, but on days that they feel more gender neutral, they will more likely look for a balance in their practice.

Meghan's points about how her spirituality can represent her gender neutrality is an interesting take on the God and Goddess. The dualistic aspect of Wiccan theism is not viewed by her as being a binary. Instead, she uses Wicca's dualism as a way to express a gender plurality. She is able to focus on the God and Goddess differently depending on how she is identifying. When she is feeling more feminine, she is more in tune with the Goddess. But when they are feeling more gender neutral, they are more interested in finding a balance between the two. This means that the dualism of Wiccan theism shouldn't be mistaken for an inherit binary, since they can be used to reflect a spectrum of gender identities.

Claire also made similar statements to Lisa's and Meghan's. However, Claire's view of the divine feminine and masculine differ from Gardner's Wiccan perspectives. Unlike Gardner, Claire is an atheist, so she doesn't believe in the God and Goddess. "I don't think that one thing could have possibly done all of this," she tells me. "I just don't think it's possible. Especially with my scientific brain in the works here. I think science has much more to do with it than God does. I also think it's not respectful to work with a god you may or may not believe in." Claire also credits her atheism to her father's beliefs. By the example, but not direction, of her father, she had become socialized into not believing in deities. This, as well as the way that she has adopted her mother's views into her practice, is an example of Berger and Luckmann's theory of primary socialization, where children have their worldviews crafted by their parents (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Claire also notes her negative experiences with evangelical Christians as another reason for adopting atheistic views and not wanting to be associated with theism:

"I've also just had a lot, lot, lot of negative experiences with, like, Christians and people who do believe in God. A lot of the time they kind of just try to force it down my throat and say it as a fact when no one really knows what's going on here. We're all just making our own interpretations of them. Like, I don't know that I'm 100% right, but I'm just going to continue believing in what I believe in. And, like, anyone can do the same, but I don't agree with how some people go about sharing their religions with other people. It's a touchy subject for me because I just don't… I don't, I don't get it. I don't know. It's just like when someone's like, 'are you a Christian?' or like 'oh, you're a WIIITCH?? Oh, you must be evil or satanic.' I've never claimed to know the truth. You can't claim that God is real, or God isn't real. I know I don't know."

Since Claire is an atheist, she doesn't view the divine masculine and feminine as deities. Instead, she views them as energies, the same kind that she believes exist throughout the natural world. Just like how the seasonal energies impacted so do gendered energies. "I can hone into the divine masculine and feminine," she said to me. "I definitely have my days, though, where it's like, like yesterday for example, I was just feeling a little more masculine that day, it was my vibe. I don't know what it was. It was a new moon two days ago, so it probably had something to do with that. You know, the sun is masculine, and the moon is feminine. If I feel like if one is out of balance or if I need to get in touch with another I can do a ritual to get in touch with one." When I heard her say this, I was interested in her understandings of how the moon and sun can be gendered, since I wasn't aware of the roles the God and Goddess at this point. I asked her for clarification, especially about how the moon made her feel masculine, despite the moon being feminine in her eyes. "Well, it's not a full moon. It's starting over the cycles so it's just starting over," she says. "I know a lot of women have their cycle around the full moon, as well, and I do, too. So that 100% plays a part in it as well."

Listening closely to the rhetoric of many of my contacts, I began to notice the idea of gender-balance coming up again and again. I heard it with Claire and Meghan, but also with other informants. This is the predominant view of the Wiccans I interviewed. Although the emergence of feminist Wicca placed an important role on the goddess, the traditional duality of gender is still strong in contemporary Wicca. Shawn and Jefferey, another Wiccan priest I interviewed, believes that a balance of gender is important for him because male and female species exist throughout nature. "I mean, for me, what I believe in is duality," he said. "So, I believe in the God and Goddess concept, just because I see that reflected in people, animals, plants, and all aspects of the world. For me that's how I view it, as equality." Jefferey then tells me about how many women are drawn to Wicca because of the Goddess representing a

potential alternative to patriarchal religions, even though Wicca was, essentially, created by two men. “But I don’t approach the religion with a patriarchal, male concept being dominant,” he says. “You need equality, one and the other, to get to the point. You know?” Shawn explains his perspective, “It’s fine if someone else wants to do that. I have no problem with it. But, for me, I need a balance between the God and Goddess.”

The use of gender among individuals is complicated. Some connect it to how they see nature, others connect it to how they see themselves. For Jefferey and Shawn, it is about equality and representation in nature. For Meghan, it is about reflecting her gender identity, be it feminine or neutral. With Lisa, having a strong matriarchal figure at the head of her religion is important, since it was the example she was given from her mother and dedicates part of her life to feminist activism. This all depends, of course, on the experiences of each individual, making each of these Wiccans’ views uniquely theirs.

## 3.4 Heritage

Heritage and ethnicity are one of the many ways people may identify themselves. Sociologist Andrew Greeley defines ethnicity in an American context as being based on nationality and/or race and provide a way to sustain relationships within society. Often, the focus of ethnicity is on a common ancestor. Additionally, he argues that ethnic religious denominations allow the practitioner to define who they are in a broader social context from a religious perspective (Greeley 1972, 108 - 113). Sabina Magliocco, in her study of ethnicity among North American neopagans, notes that she recognizes ethnicity as a construct that changes as each generation passes, but that this claim is not often common among neopagan practices (Magliocco 2004, 209 – 210).

Chava was probably the best example of this that I found. Raised by a Jewish father and Cherokee mother, she incorporates her ethnic traditions as a central part of her beliefs, specifically her Jewish identity. In fact, when we would speak about her spirituality, we would often spend more time talking about Jewish traditions than Wiccan traditions. This was because Jewish and Wiccan traditions fit perfectly together in Chava’s mind, creating an inseparable blend of witchcraft and heritage.

Chava’s view of the Goddess, for instance, was informed directly from her Jewish beliefs. Chava told me that she learned in a book by Silvia Brown that there was once a Mother Goddess in Judaism, named Azna, that accompanied the God. This perspective shows a similarity between Chava’s perspectives on Judaism and Wicca. Both of these traditions, Brown’s theory of the Mother Goddess and Wicca, incorporate a belief in theistic dualism, the belief in one god and one goddess. One can see a direct connection can between Chava’s Jewish and Wiccan beliefs since they both reflect the same worldview of one another.

Chava also finds connections between Wicca’s magical practice and her heritage. “I’m of Romani Jewish heritage. Romani Jews had been accused of being witches for a long time. I think this was because of their magical practices,” she said. “Magic was very important to Jewish people early on. Herbs were used during medieval times to keep ourselves healthy. That’s why people always thought we were witches. While everyone else was getting sick, we stayed healthy. It’s because of our magic.” Her use of herbal magic is directly inspired by these Romani Jewish traditions, and she credits her belief in a Jewish witchcraft practice to be based on the accusations faced against them as well as the success of their traditional herbal medicines, a practice I have seen is fairly common among modern witchcraft practitioners.

Although her Jewish identity is what we focused on most, Chava also touched upon her Cherokee heritage and the role it plays in her spirituality. This connection is made not just through her belief in the Little People, but also through her connection to living in Appalachia. Her mom would often accompany her grandmother to North Georgia (where they used to live), close to Cherokee, in order to get herbs. Chava feels more connected to the mountain range, a connection that grew as she explored Cherokee legends. “I see cougars a lot in my dreams. And that was a Cherokee totem,” she told me. “When my grandma was alive she would tell me about that. I kind of realized, ‘oh, well, this is my blood.’ I didn’t even know that she had explored any of her heritage or that she collected herbs any summer. I wasn’t even sure if there were Cherokee in this area, since I know they had to be removed.”

Although Chava spoke to me the most about their identity, she was not alone in bringing her heritage into her practice. One of my informants Jefferey made similar statements. Jefferey is of Irish and German descent, with some Welsh, Scandinavian, and Native American lineage, as well. His heritage can be divided into two main cultural groups: Celtic (Irish and Welsh) and Germanic (German and Scandinavian). Additionally, Jefferey was raised to be Irish Catholic, but tells me he had some influences related to folk beliefs. “I was raised Irish Catholic, but there were some sort of pagan influences mixed in,” he says. “You know, I was raised to believe in fairies, spirits, and mystical things. I think this had more to do with folk beliefs than actual pagan practice, though. But, you know, I kind of always believed in the occult.”

For Jefferey, heritage is not a central focus to his religious beliefs, but it is still relevant. He invokes his heritage through his views of the God and Goddess. "My personal deity is Cernunnos as God and I believe in the Goddess in the form of Cerridwyn. So that's how I'd interpret deity in my form of practice. But that's not to say that's the only idea," he says. Cernunnos and Cerridwyn are two Celtic deities. I asked him if he chose them because of his Celtic heritage to which he responded, "Yeah, I think it does… I think it kind of goes back to my Irish Catholic upbringing and so forth and that's how I was able to make that association."

Wiccan notions of heritage are not as simple as we might expect. An interesting aspect of how Chava views her heritage, for instance, is through her belief in reincarnation. Chava spoke to me quite a bit about her belief in her past lives. Chava told me that she has lived throughout different periods of time. Some of these include Ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, and the Wild West. "I've lived all over the place in past lives. Once in Ancient Egypt, that was my first life and where I have most of my memories, another time in Ancient Greece, and another time in the Old West." She is aware of these because she is able to use ritual to access memories from these past lives. In our conversations, she would tell me some of the memories she has of running across the Egyptian desert as a priestess and even being hung in the Old West. Having these memories allows Chava to gain a deeper understanding of who she is in the present. "My mom and I were hung in the Wild West. That's why I have neck problems now," she told me.

This belief in past lives is important to understanding how Chava views heritage. For Chava, her "past life heritage" is just as important as her "documented heritage" (heritage that can be traced through documents like birth certificates). Her life as a priestess in Ancient Egypt is just as important to her as the Cherokee ancestry she got from her mother. She expresses her past life heritage predominantly through her use of ritual symbols. Notably she uses statues of Egyptian goddesses as centerpieces of her altar.

Chava told me that her and her mom have often shared the same lives together when they get reincarnated. Interestingly, she also tells me that her mother have been a part of what she calls "reverse lineage." This means that there were times in their past lives where Chava was her mother's mother. "This explains why I have this instinct to protect my mother, cause she was once my daughter," Chava said. "I know a lot of people like that. They say, 'well, I'm not done with you and if you're going down again then I wanna go down with you, just to make sure you get through it.'"

For Chava, her belief in reincarnation and past lives is just as real as the heritage she can prove through documents. Although not a belief that would likely be shared by western science, it is very real to Chava. She believes she can prove this lineage with the memories she's gained through ritual. Clearly, Wiccan notions of heritage are more complicated than our typical notions in Western societies. However, for Chava, they are just as real.

## 4. Experience in the Collective

Not everyone that joins Wicca belongs practices it in solitude, like those mentioned earlier. Groups have been a staple of Wiccan organization since its founding. Gardner claimed to have discovered a Wiccan coven and also trained his followers based around these coven-based practices (Luhrmann 1989, 47 – 50). At the heart of Wicca's history lies the idea of working together in a group and, although this practice has been called into question by some, it is still very much alive.

Throughout my research, the most common term that I encountered to describe a group of Wiccans is a coven. Covens are a Gardnerian invention, making them one of the earliest structural means of practicing Wicca. Usually, covens have a membership of around thirteen people. This was based on Margaret Murray's theories of what pre-Christian witch cults looked like in Europe. Wiccan covens each hold their autonomy from one another, with only central Wiccan tenets binding them together. Covens can vary over the strictness of their hierarchy. However, most covens are led by a High Priestess and High Priest and were also based on what are called degrees. First degrees are "initiates," second degrees are given more influence, and third degrees are the highest rank one can achieve (Hutton 1999, 195; Lewis 1999, 63 – 64; Luhrmann 1989, 47 – 48; Vance 2015, 101).

As stated, most of the Wiccans that I spoke to were solitaries. However, there were some notable exceptions. Some of my informants were people that were actively involved in Wiccan groups, with Jeff being one of them. Like so many others I spoke to, I met Jeff over Facebook. He made a post in one of the Facebook groups I belong to, describing himself as a Wiccan priest. "Wow! I have to talk to him!" I thought to myself. Not only had I not spoken to any Wiccans working in groups, but I also hadn't spoken to any priests. I was sure he could give me insights that would be unique from the experiences of the others. I reached out to him and told him a bit about my project and asked if he would be interested in helping me out. He agreed and I scheduled a meeting with him over Zoom.

When we met, Jeff's camera was off, but I could hear the world around him. He was outside with his dog, who I could hear running around. I heard the birds, bugs, cars, and any other sounds one might expect from your typical,

middle-class, residential area. He was friendly and engaged throughout our conversation. He was clearly passionate about his beliefs, as one could likely expect from a Wiccan priest.

We began our conversation with basic questions about his upbringing, discovering Wicca, what was most important to his practice, etc. What I wanted to focus on most, though, was what drew him to getting involved with Wiccan priesthood and a collective practice. "The reason I began looking for other people to practice with is that I wanted to learn more. I wanted to learn more than what I learned in a book. I wanted to actually be out there and practicing with other people. I wanted that community and comradery and so forth. I wanted to participate in ritual and not just watch the ritual. You know, to move out of the Outer Court and into the Inner Court. I wanted to have a role in it and be a part of it," Jefferey told me. He goes on to explain more about the Inner and Outer Courts of Wicca, terms that explain people who have been initiated into the practice or coven (Inner) and those that are not (Outer) (Lewis 1999, 63; Treleven 2008, 28). "That's what made me decide to be an outer court member and be an inner court member. I wanted to know the mysteries of the god and goddess," he said. "If you're only in the outer court of a group than its kind of like being part of a church. You're just sitting on the outside of the pews, just sitting there and watching. But when you're in the inner court you're just… just… it's just more. More of an experience, more information. And that's what I wanted. I wanted to have more. So that's where I decided I would join a group, study, do more."

Jefferey feels a strong desire to learn about the mysteries of Wicca. His desires for evolving his practice from being solitary to collectivist was based largely out of a desire for deepening his knowledge of the magical world. His desire to continuously learn more is what drove him to diving further into priesthood. He tells me, "Most people that.. most people becoming a priest or priestess is pretty normal. Most people join an Outer Court, and your next step is to move towards your first degree. And that's so you're learning about the tradition that you're in, or the beliefs of the groups, or so forth. So, it's kind of like a training thing and to get everyone up to speed on the different Sabbaths and what they mean and to be able to start doing some minor energy work and learning to meditate and doing things like that. So, it's kind of like a natural progression like that and once you get your first degree it's kind of your choice to decide to continue on with that. And I just decided I want to continue on with it."

Jefferey was not alone with this claim. Charlie, a self-identified "traditional witch" I met at a Wiccan ritual, feels similarly to why Wiccans might be interested in joining a group. "There's a lot that you can learn from not being solitary," he tells me. "You know, being able to learn from someone else, someone of a higher degree, can really teach you so much more about the mysteries of magic." Charlie elaborates that he can't tell me any of these mysteries since I'm an outsider, but he assures me that they're nothing "Earth shattering." "It's more like secrets that my wife and I would have in the bedroom. They're not for you, they're only for us," he explains. Charlie was always able to get his points across through easy to understand metaphors, making it easy for an outsider like me to understand the world that he lives in.

Based on the testimonies by Charlie and Jefferey, I would argue that the collectivist perspective in Wicca is also one rooted in individualism. These two both made statements that point to groups, teachers, and hierarchies as having the possibility to enhance the individuals experiences. By becoming initiated in a group and rising through the ranks, one can learn so much more about the divine. By knowing more, they are able to have much more enlightened experiences with divinity. These experiences are not ones that can be obtained through working alone and reading books. They come from active participation in groups and having other people guide one's knowledge and practice.

## 4.1 Individual Experience in Ritual

As I previously said, working in a group can be an individualistic practice in Wicca. I was curious, however, as to how this is maintained when a group comes together to practice their rituals together. How would individualism be maintained when everyone has to follow the same page? Can it still be called individualism when, as Charlie described it, the musicians have to play along with one another? I got the opportunity to see this first hand in the last months of my research.

In early November, I had gotten in contact with the Piedmont Church of Wicca and was invited to join their Samhain ceremony. Samhain (pronounced sah-when) is an important holiday for Wiccans, as I've heard from several informants and seen in witchcraft and pagan Facebook groups. Samhain occurs on October 31$^{st}$, although, according to my informant Claire, the holiday lasts three days. The holiday was viewed as the "end of the old year" for the pagan Irish and the last harvest before the arrival of winter was important (Beveridge 2014, 127; MacCulloch 1948, 58 – 59; Mullally 2016, 35). Additionally, this time was when the world of the living and the world of the dead were closest to one another, allowing ancestors and other spirits to come to Earth (Cunliffe 1999, 197; MacCulloch 1948, 84). Based on what I've seen, these associations are still common for Wiccans today. Because of the focus on ancestors, winter, and the end of the year, there is a focus on death during this holiday, since the old year has metaphorically died, and

dead ancestors are returning to our world. This holiday shouldn't be interpreted as a negative holiday, however. Among my participants, it was viewed as a way to reconnect with ancestors and a celebration of the year's rebirth.

I arrived at the gathering in the late evening, sometime around 5:30. It was in Rutherford County and was roughly an hour and a half drive. When I arrived, I didn't see any buildings like a typical church. I saw two open grass fields to my left and right, with forests all around me. I also only saw one other car parked behind me on the side of the road. I looked around for any signs of a Wiccan ritual when I began hearing music coming from the forest nearby. Specifically, I heard the distinct bass line to Old Crow Medicine Show's "Wagon Wheel," a favorite of mine. I looked over and saw through the grove of trees that there were people running around. "That must be where I go," I thought to myself. I began following the road, hoping to find a way over, when I saw two people on a gravel path pointing towards the direction of the music and people. I asked them if this was the Wiccan ritual and they assured me I was in the right place.

When I made it to the area I looked around. People were with families, talking to one another, and kids were running around. There were also several tables set up throughout the festival grounds, each serving a specific function. Most were for the ceremony, but one was for the pot luck dinner that was going to happen before the ritual. I looked around at all the altars, each were covered with specific objects unique to the others. Some had candles, another had tarot cards, and all but one were draped with a unique type of covering, like a tapestry or table cloth. The imagery was dark, both literally and metaphorically. Skulls, as well as black and red cloth covered the area, perfectly fitting the imagery of a holiday focusing on death and rebirth. There was also a firepit going since we were supposed to be in for a cold night ahead.

As I looked around and took notes of the altars, I also kept my eyes out for Tony. Tony is the High Priest Emeritus of the PCoW and the one who invited me to the evening. I only saw one picture of him on their website, so I couldn't really pick him out of the crowd. After looking at the altars, I sat down on a nearby wooden bench and began writing down what I was seeing. Eventually, a man approached me and said, "You must be our anthropologist!" I knew right away that this was Tony. We introduced ourselves and had some small talk, I told him I was excited to be there and thanked him for the invitation. Tony came off very friendly and polite. He was one of the leaders and founders of the church, but he didn't come off as if he was expecting high respect for his social position. It was more like if he was the one hosting a gathering of friends at his home. This was the impression I got from our conversation and later observations of watching him interact with other participants. "If you have any questions, I'd be happy to answer them," Tony said. "But I'll also tell you that man over there (points) is our High Priest, Sean. He can help answer any questions that you have." Tony then walked back into the crowd to attend to guests and his various duties.

I finished writing down observations and notes, then went back to one of the altars to see if there is anything I was missing. When I made it to the altar, Tony was there, as well, so I asked him about the pictures that were placed throughout. Most were of people, but one was a picture of a cat inside a picture frame. "Are these of loved ones that people put here?" I asked. "Yeah, probably. This is our ancestral altar we have set up tonight," he responded. He then holds up a picture of a woman who he says was one of his family members that passed away last year. After giving him my condolences, he holds up another photo, "This was one of our priestesses," he says. "She passed away from covid last month."

After my conversation with Tony, I walked around to the different altars again taking pictures, since I was given permission. Then, I introduced myself to Shawn, who was standing not too far away. I talked to him about the purpose of my research and how thankful and excited I was to be there. "Can I ask you some questions?" I asked. "Sure!" he responded enthusiastically. One of the questions that I asked him was about why he was drawn towards a collective practice instead of solitary practice, since most people I had spoken to were solitaries. "I used to be solitary," he told me. "But it wasn't fulfilling my spiritual needs. I needed something more and to work with people. I knew I had to join a group and that's why I founded the Church." "So, that's why you started a coven?" I asked him. "Well, we're not a coven," he responded. I was instantly afraid that I had offended him, so I apologized and asked for clarification. Shawn, unoffended by my mistake, responded, "Covens are a bit different from churches. Typically, they're smaller, and are often more hierarchical, they're pretty top-down. Covens can often just be focused on one or two members because of this. That's not what we wanted. We wanted to create something that was more congregational. I wanted my group to be one where the congregation has a say, not just the priests, more of a bottom-up structure."

These desires for creating a community for Wiccans were echoed by Tony when I asked him the same question. "You know," he begins, "when you go to a church for the first time you leave with a contractor, a repair man, and a best friend. That's because churches are spaces for creating community. That's what I wanted people to have with us. A place for Wiccans to connect with other Wiccans, where they can have a say in how they want to practice with each other. Not where they're told what to do." The goals of the PCoW High Priests are pretty clear, create an environment for Wiccans to experience the divine with one another in a way that doesn't go against the autonomy of individuals

and the community. Being able to work with others, but in a way that doesn't infringe individual desires is important to the Church, as I would see later on during the ritual.

As the day went on, I went around and talked to some people. I had another conversation with Tony more and spoke to Charlie and his family during dinner for quite a long time (I watched the sun go down behind them as we talked). I watched preparations be made for the ritual and children playing. I remember watching two young girls walk up to Tony and telling him jokes, like, "what's black and white and red/read all over?" to which he played along, even though he obviously had heard them before, making everyone laugh. The atmosphere was peaceful, friendly, and pleasant. Everyone was relaxed and seemed to be enjoying each other's company.

Eventually, as night was beginning to set in, it was time to start the ritual. We gathered around and formed a circle, which we maintained throughout most of the ritual. To begin we were all given a cup of liquid, which Shawn told us all that it was pomegranate tea, and it was meant to represent the Goddess' descent into the underworld, a reference to the Greek myth of Persephone (Cashford 2003, 21). It just so happens, however, that I hate tea. But I drank it, since it was important for the ritual, and it was only a very small cup. I have to admit, it was probably the best tea I've ever had, even if I wasn't much of a fan for its taste.

We then "called the quarters," which required us to face each cardinal direction as a group and say a prayer to the elements represented by those directions. We did each "quarter" individually, starting with east, then to south, west, and ending in north. After the prayers for east and west, we said "so mode it be," which Shawn told me later was their equivalent of "amen." After saying our northern and southern prayers we said, "hail and welcome," because we were welcoming the gods into our ritual. After this, Shawn instructed us to call out to whichever god or goddess that we pray to. Shawn told me later that they normally call the God and Goddess separately, but he chose to call to the "one unknowable divine" that night so everyone could call their individual Gods and Goddesses together. He called to Osiris and other Egyptian deities. Another woman shouted out Cernunnos' name, while one of their priests loudly called to Santa Muerte. Most people, however, whispered their invocations to themselves. Following this, a priest called to the psychopomps, those who guide the dead souls to the underworld, which was done at the ancestral altar, and a member of the Church read a poem they had been reciting at Samhain rites for over a decade.

The calling out to individualized perceptions of the divine is important for understanding how individual experience plays a role in collective rituals in Wicca. Each practitioner there has their own perception of how to picture the divine masculine and feminine. It's likely that each person would have a different personification of the God and Goddess. Additionally, as has been explored earlier in the paper, each person may differ based on which deity they view as most important, their God or their Goddess. By being able to call upon any deity of choice, the practitioners are able to bring more of themselves into the ritual space without having to conform to the ideas of the church higher ups.

After calling the quarters and invoking the gods, we began our symbolic descent into the world of the dead. I would argue that this period was a liminal one, because we were leaving the world of the living to enter the world of the dead (Turner 1967, 93 – 110). We sang a song dedicated to the Goddess to begin this phase of the ritual. It seemed most if not all people knew the lyrics to the song except for me. I probably spared them the pain of having to hear me sing, though. As we continued our symbolic descent, Tony guided us in a meditation, where he told a story about us following our personal Goddess into the underworld. At the end of the story, it was revealed that the Goddess had used this as a test of inner strength and dedication. This story is another reference to the importance of having individual traits incorporated in the ritual. Tony was accompanied by a drummer during this, who played simple beats on a hand drum that would change in intensity as the story changed. I wasn't sure who was drumming, because I had my eyes closed during this portion of the ritual, doing my best to focus on the meditation.

I've never been good at meditating, probably because of my anxiety and ADHD. But that was the most in-tune I have ever been to a meditation. When we began the ritual, the sun had set, and the cold was setting in. I was shivering more and more as the ritual progressed. But during the meditation, however, I stopped noticing the cold and my body had stopped shaking so much. Although, as an observer, I won't endorse this as proof of magical practice, since I hold no strong bias towards the subject, I will say there was certainly a "magic" to the moment. Perhaps it was simply the first time that meditation properly worked for me, but it was an incredibly interesting experience.

After this, our period of liminality had ended as we had entered the world of the dead. It was now believed that the dead and our ancestors were walking among us. During this part, we were told to break away from our circle and to communicate with our ancestors as we saw most fitting. This was why there were so many altars scattered throughout the church. People were encouraged to light candles at the ancestral altar, use tarot cards to practice divination, tie a bow around a wreath that was prepared before the ceremony, float flowers down the creek right next to us (to symbolically let go of any negative energies so they could be carried down the stream).

During this part of the ritual, music was turned back on their speaker. An extended version of Elton John's "Rocket Man" and an acoustic version of Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" were both played. There was a third song, but I don't remember what it was. I watched what everyone was doing during this part. I wanted to walk up and ask people

questions, but I didn't want to interrupt the ritual. I wasn't sure if it would be out of place to do so, although I wish I had asked beforehand. This part of the ritual probably took around 15 – 20 minutes, although I wasn't keeping track. Enough time for me to start shivering again and wish I had packed warmer clothes. There was a big group of people that eventually gathered around the firepit trying to keep warm, so I know I wasn't the only one cold.

Based on what I saw, most people went to each altar at least once. Most people were fairly quiet when doing so, but one of their priests said prayers at the nearby altars. The moment was clearly powerful for some. I overheard one person talking about how they kept seeing visions of their grandma throughout the night. This caused them to break down into tears for quite some time afterward. I remember sitting there amazed at the power that the ritual was having over this person. It must have felt incredible for them to experience this and to be able to communicate with their grandmother again.

Eventually a bell was rung, which we had been told was our signal to come back together. We reformed our circle like we did before, then began our symbolic ascent back to the land of the living and, again, entering another phase of liminality (Turner 1967, 93 – 110). Just as we did at the beginning of our descent, we sang a song to begin our ascent. As the song was being sung, Shawn and the High Priest walked around with a vase of water. They walked around and said something to each person and then poured the water onto the ground. When it was my turn, they both looked at me for a second and I said, "To be honest, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do here." It was pretty embarrassing to admit in front of all these Wiccans, but Shawn and the High Priestess were polite about it. "You can either say a prayer spoken or leave it unspoken," Shawn said with a polite smile. I thought for a second about what I should do, but the pressure to come up with a prayer on the spot was too much for me in that moment. "I'll leave it unspoken," I responded. They then lowered the vase and poured out water at my feet.

Then we had what was called "cakes and ale," where Shawn and the High Priestess passed out small, bite-sized cakes and wine. As this was going on, Tony stated that this part of the ritual was left open for announcements. Conversations were focused on where their next ritual will take place, but there was a lively, humorous discussion of what good movies and tv shows were out. First Shawn passed out the cakes and said, "may you never be hungry" to each person as he came to them. Honestly, they tasted really good. Then they came around with the wine. I heard him offer it to each person and always checked with the parents first before offering it to any underaged children. When he came around to me, I had to admit to him that I don't drink. "That's ok," he responded. "You can just libate it to the ground." So, I took my cup and poured it into the ground. I respected that they had an alternative to accommodate people like me that might struggle with this section of the ritual. Again, a moment where the individual makes its way into this collective practice, where each person can share this experience in a different way. I'm not sure how much of this was spiritual, or just a recognition of personal differences. Some people who come may have been in rehab or, like me, have philosophical reasons to not drink alcohol. Either way, it was yet another way that the PCoW allowed for each practitioner to be able to join the celebration in ways that made the most sense to them.

After this, we called the quarters once again. A sign that our liminality had ended once again, and we had returned to the land of the living. Just like before, Shawn said a prayer with each quarter. We all followed the prayer by saying, "hail and farewell," to bid the God, Goddess, and spirits farewell. This ended our ceremony. As soon as the ritual was over, Tony, Shawn, and the High Priestess came right up to me and asked me if I enjoyed myself and got everything I was looking for. I told them that I did and thanked them for inviting me. I said my goodbyes, then got into my car, cranked up the heat, and began my hour and a half drive home.

## 5. Collectivist Wiccans vs. Solitary Wiccans

Although there is general acceptance among Wiccans that there is no right or wrong way to practice the religion, tensions between practitioners still exist. This is particularly true among collectivists and solitaries. Throughout my research, I often heard both sides argue that there was something missing from joining the other side.

Claire was one of the more outspoken solitaries in her disinterest in collectivist practice. "I tried to get with a group on campus to do like a full moon practice or something like that, but I just really didn't like it," she said. "I just think that everyone has such different ways of doing this that I don't really want to change how I usually do stuff, so I kind of just, I like to do it by myself just for that reason because.. not everyone is the same and different stuff doesn't work as well for me. I'm like, they were trying to do like a five minute meditation or something and I can't do that. It takes me a little while to get into that zone. So, I have to do like at least 10 minutes for me to actually be able to meditate or else I just won't. Yeah, so it's like that kind of stuff that's why I usually practice by myself."

Claire's personal distaste from collectivist practice is based on a sort of hyper-individualized practice. Claire has told me before that her rituals require her to be in a specific headspace which can sometimes take a while to create.

This is even harder when being forced to work with the routines of others. I once asked if I could observe one of her rituals, but she never got back to me. Based on her reaction, I imagine that the idea of working around others would have likely interfered with creating this headspace or the possibility of sustaining that energy. Claire prefers solitude to her practice and needs to feel comfortable. Her practices are based around the ideas of personal comfort: long meditation, self-care, and working at night (since she feels more spiritual energy at this time). Working with others could likely interfere with the processes required to start ritual work.

On the other side of the spectrum, Jefferey expressed his own disinterest for solitary practice. "Individuality is important in Wicca, but there's also a belief in having a teacher or a high priestess or so forth that passes information down and shares that with you," he told me. "With Wicca, and with other pagan beliefs, or witchcraft, initiation is a big part of it, too. So, you can say, 'oh, I'm a witch and I practice witchcraft now,' but there's something more when you are part of a group and go through the same process that you have. That's what's more important to me in my practice."

Jefferey's perspective was backed up by Charlie. "Eclectic and solitary practice seems to be the growing trend nowadays," he tells me. "There's something missing from that, though. There's so much more than what you can learn from a book. Having a teacher can be so important." Charlie also talks about common misconceptions solitaries have towards collectivist practice. "Solitaries think that us traditionals do everything by the book, but that's not true," he says. He continues by channeling his metaphoric skills, "It's like being a musician. When you're alone, you play whatever you want. You have no one telling you what you need to do. But when you come together in a band, then everyone has to follow the same beat. We're not required to follow the books all the time, but it gives us a framework to stand on when we come together. It's something that keeps us all on the same page."

Despite these clear tensions, all of the people mentioned above, Claire, Jefferey, and Charlie, all agree that people should be able to practice however they feel, even if they might not personally agree with it. What I heard most often regarding this issue was something along the lines of, "it's great that they choose to practice that way, and they have every right to, but it's not how I do things." There is a recognition of a need to uphold the core Wiccan value of "do what ye will." There are tensions between collectivists and solitaries, but they shouldn't be viewed as coming from a place of hate. More of disagreement with how things should be done. Both sides feel that the other is missing something that can be found in the essence of the other, but no side looks down on the other in a necessarily hateful way.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on my observations, and with support from the ethnographic materials that I read, I have found that individualism does play an important role in shaping Wiccan worldviews and contributes to people bringing their personal identities into their practices. This is accepted because of Wicca's non-dogmatic approach to their religious structure, best exemplified through the Wiccan Rede which promotes the idea that anyone should be able to do whatever they want, so long as no one is harmed. This lack of dogma means that there are cracks within Wicca's system that need to be filled, which is where identities come into play. From here, Wiccans will bring in their own identities into their beliefs. This causes their beliefs to be more personable, since they reflect themselves, create a liberating feeling, since they have the freedom to practice as they please, and creates a wide variety of diversity among their belief systems.

These identities I observed being brought into Wiccan practices were diverse and varied greatly between practitioners. Some practitioners were very interested in nature, which caused them to put it as the focus of their practice. Others were very interested in their heritage and past lives, so they incorporated aspects of the traditional religions of their heritage into their Wiccan practice. Others were interested in gender and how they relate to gender identity. Their beliefs, in turn, were very influenced by these gender identities and reflected them through goddess worship and non-binary fluidity.

Additionally, individualism can be observed through both solitary and collective practices. Solitaries will take individualism to an extreme, where they rely primarily on their own experiences in order to practice Wicca. Meanwhile, collectivists will maintain an important view of the self, but also incorporate others in helping them learn about the religion and in ritual practice. Even when practicing together, there are ways that individualism can present itself. As exemplified with the participant observation I had with the Piedmont Church of Wicca during Samhain, the structure of the ritual was set up intentionally so individuals could experience the divine as they desired and so everyone's needs would be met.

Based on the observations I made among Wiccan practitioners in Western North Carolina, it is common for Wiccans to embrace a philosophy of individualism, no matter how they choose to practice. It's clear that for the people I interacted with, individualism is at the heart of what they do, even when it may not seem like it at surface level.

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