

## How We Braid Our Lives Together with Our Ancestors

Anne Lafferty

Volume 20, numéro 1-2, 1998

Wicca

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087736ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087736ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Lafferty, A. (1998). How We Braid Our Lives Together with Our Ancestors. *Ethnologies*, 20(1-2), 129–149. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087736ar>

Résumé de l'article

Il existe toute une gamme de conceptions qui permettent d'intégrer les traditions anciennes et de les mélanger pour faire un nouvel ensemble de pratiques. Les femmes néopaiennes ont généralement été éduquées dans un autre système de croyances, mais elles ne se défont pas nécessairement des traditions et des schèmes spirituels de leur milieu d'origine. Chacune de mes informatrices a conservé différents éléments du système de croyances et des traditions qui prévalaient dans sa famille et les a intégrés à ses croyances et à ses pratiques néopaiennes. Toutefois, chacun des aspects qui fait l'objet d'un tel transfert est transformé ou modifié pour prendre un sens différent dans le nouveau culte.

# HOW WE BRAID OUR LIVES TOGETHER WITH OUR ANCESTORS<sup>1</sup>

Anne Lafferty

*Independent Study Degree program*

*Lesley College, Cambridge, Massachusetts*

Both researchers and Neo-Pagans have commented on creativity in the development of Neo-Pagan spiritual traditions. Margot Adler has noted the mix of “old and new fragments” by Neo-Pagans in the creation of their spiritual traditions (Adler, 1986[1979]: 253). In particular, Sabina Magliocco discusses the use by Neo-Pagans in their rituals of contemporary folk practices, including folk practices learned from their families of origin and notes that when this happens “the traditions are not invented, but adapted and reinterpreted as folklore has always been” (1996: 105). In this paper, I will look at two specific Neo-Pagan customs, as practiced by three Neo-Pagan women, in order to explore the relationship between the traditions and beliefs of these women’s families of origin and their present practices and beliefs<sup>2</sup>.

- 
1. I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Peggy Wright, for her insight and good advice. She and the other members of the Team supervising my academic program, Millie Rahn and Robin Mello, were enormously helpful with this project, as was Loretta Orion. I would also like to thank Bill Ellis who, as part of a tutorial I did with him on belief systems, gave me very good advice concerning another paper based on the same research. Some of that advice has also served to improve this paper. Discussions with him about belief systems and dumb suppers have been invaluable. I would also like to thank him for sharing with me his thorough chapter on dumb suppers and other adolescent rituals from his work-in-progress, *Raising the Devil*. The two anonymous readers also gave me good advice, which have resulted in this paper being much clearer than it would otherwise have been. I would particularly like to thank my informants, Twyla, Patricia and Iris, being so patient, as well as so generous with their time. Discussions with Twyla during the writing of this paper were also helpful
  2. Since one of my informants was adopted as an infant, “family of origin” should be

At least in regard to these particular customs, this relationship between the traditions of the past and the present is different for each of my informants. Judging by the information I obtained in the interviews, there is a range of different ways in which the practices one has grown up with can be incorporated into (or avoided during) what one does later. In fact, each of these women showed some desire to connect back to her family past (although not necessarily in the context of these specific customs). Each woman also significantly modified or moved away from the traditions of her family of origin.

This paper is based on interviews I did with three women in the fall of 1996 about the dumb supper or ancestor altar that each one creates at Samhain (Halloween). Since most Neo-Pagan adults (including all three of the women I interviewed) were raised in religions other than they ones they now practice, the Neo-Pagan community is a useful context for looking at how family traditions are (and are not) carried over by people who become involved in new religions. Further more, since dumb suppers and ancestor altars are traditions that serve to remind us of and to honor the dead, especially ancestors, these traditions point participants directly back towards their family of origin. This makes them especially interesting traditions for better, the interplay between current customs and those practiced by the family of origin.

Neo-Paganism<sup>3</sup> is not a homogenous religion. There are a number of different Pagan traditions (for instance, a number of traditions of Witchcraft

---

taken to mean the family in which each woman was raised, rather than the one into which she was born.

3. In order to understand the context for these practices, it is necessary to know something about Neo-Paganism, Samhain, and the specific traditions themselves. In her book *Never Again the Burning Times*, for instance, Loretta Orion credits Tim Zell with coining the term “Neopaganism” to describe “The revival of beliefs and customs associated with European paganism — including witchcraft...” Orion notes, however, that there are other influences, ranging from Native American to science fiction, on Paganism in this country (1995: 41-42). Isaac Bonewits (1979[1971]: 260-261), Sarah Pike (1996: 123) and Ceisiwr Serith (1994: 226) also discuss or define Neo-Paganism at least partly in terms of a revival of older religions. Perhaps the most central trait of this complex religion (and one widely commented on by researchers) is the Neo-Pagan emphasis on nature (Adler, 1986: 4; Carpenter, 1996: 42; Magliocco, 1996: 98; Orion, 1995: 148-151; Pike, 1996: 123). Although “Neo-Paganism” is a useful term for distinguishing this spiritual tradition from other forms of Paganism, it is cumbersome and not the term most often used by Neo-Pagans themselves. For these reasons, I will generally use the terms “Pagan(s)” and “Paganism” throughout the rest of this paper.

and several Druid traditions) as well as many small groups and individuals practicing independently. For this reason, it is difficult to say anything about Paganism that will apply to all people who consider themselves Pagans. In general, however, Pagans celebrate eight seasonal holidays or Sabbats, of which Samhain is one<sup>4</sup>. Samhain is associated with death, with harvest and, for many Pagans, with the beginning of a new year.

Samhain is a revival of the ancient Celtic holiday of that name. As many folklorists have noted, this Celtic holiday appears to be the origin of the modern Halloween. One of the major themes of this holiday was honoring or acknowledging the dead in various ways. The Catholic Church placed its own holidays for honoring the dead (All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day) on November 1 and 2, apparently in an attempt to assimilate the seasonal pre-Christian customs involving the dead. (See for example, Grider 1996; Hole 1986; Linton and Linton 1950; Santino 1994a, 1994b, 1983, 1982; Ward 1981; Winkler and Winkler 1970.)

Neo-Pagans observe a variety of Samhain customs and practices, some of which are based on Samhain and Halloween practices of earlier times. A number of these customs, including dumb suppers and ancestor altars, involve honoring or remembering the dead. An ancestor altar is an altar created specifically for those who have died. Some Pagans have their ancestor altars up continuously (see McCoy 1996: 115), but since the altars described in this paper were created specifically as a Samhain observance, this brief description will focus on altars of this type. Usually food and objects connected to the dead relatives and friends being honored are placed on the altar. Other things that might appear on the altar are reminders of death and seasonal decorations.

In a Neo-Pagan context, a dumb supper is a ritual meal for the dead. A table is set with places for the dead and, often, for the living as well. Sometimes the meal is eaten in silence.

Both customs seem to draw upon traditional European practices designed to provide food for the dead at this time. For instance, E. Estyn Evans describes an Irish custom involving leaving food and tobacco for the dead on Halloween (1957: 277). According to Kevin Danaher, Irish customs to honor the dead were usually practiced on All Souls' Day (1972: 209). He states that on that

---

4. The Sabbats are the Solstices, the Equinoxes, and the Cross-Quarter days [Imbolc (in early February), Beltane (May 1st), Lammas (at the beginning of August) and Samhain] which fall roughly halfway between them.

date “In parts of County Limerick a table was laid with a place for each of the dead...” (228)<sup>5</sup>. Ralph and Adelin Linton describe an All Souls’ Day custom in part of medieval Italy involving a meal for relatives who had died (1950: 18) and the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* mentions a similar modern custom in the Italian Tyrol (Leach, 1972: 38). The custom of putting food out for the dead on All Souls’ Day has also been reported among Italian-Americans (Malpezzi and Clements 1992: 110).

The Neo-Pagan dumb supper appears to also be related to the traditional dumb supper, which was a ritual practiced by young women attempting to identify the men they would eventually marry. In *Folklore from Adams County Illinois*, Harry Middleton Hyatt identifies several different types of dumb supper. The kind that most closely resembles the contemporary Pagan dumb supper is the type Hyatt calls the “Set-Table Variant.” Although there were many versions of this type of dumb supper, it generally involved cooking a meal and serving it on a table, in the hope that this would cause the apparitions of the men in question to appear. The preparation of the meal was done in silence (Addy 1973: 84; Day 1981: 179; Hand 1961: 581-582; Hyatt 1965: nos. 9549-9561; Rayburn 1941: 140-41).

There are some obvious similarities between the two forms of dumb supper. Both involve a ritual meal, silence and the presence of other beings (living or dead) in non-physical form. There are also some differences, with the most obvious being the focus of the event. In addition, in the traditional form of dumb supper, the ritual generally involved a period of waiting (usually for the apparition of the husbands-to-be) whereas the Pagan dumb supper does not. Despite the shared name and some similarities, the Pagan and traditional forms of dumb supper are not really the same custom.

Although ancestor altars and dumb suppers in the Pagan community are two different customs, they are not entirely distinct and some versions of one may have a strong resemblance to the other. For, example in discussing the altar she creates at Samhain, M. A. Bovis not only mentions placing food on this altar, but says, “... I erect the altar on my kitchen table so I can sit and have dinner with those I miss” (1997: 285). Similarly, Ceisiwr Serith, in his unusually

---

5. Alwyn and Brinley Rees also mention the tradition of leaving food out as one of several customs honoring the dead (1978[1961]: 302). Although they note that these customs were particularly important on Halloween, they present them as part of the typical evening routine in an Irish household.

long and complex three-ritual/three-night sequence for Samhain, recommends creating an altar on a table separate from, but adjacent to, the table at which the family normally eats (1994: 92). On the final night, the altar is devoted to the ancestors and food is placed on it when the family eats (98-100). In their focus on meals that in some sense are shared by the living and the dead, both of these customs strongly resemble dumb suppers.

Paganism, as a general rule, is extremely open to creativity in ritual construction<sup>6</sup>. Orion notes that creativity is important to Pagans (1995: 71, 77). Magliocco comments that “For Neo-Pagans, art and ritual are closely intertwined and virtually inseparable” (1996: 98). The importance accorded creativity in putting together rituals is such that it is not uncommon for books by and for Pagans to encourage the revision of the rituals published in the book (Serith 1994: 10; Starhawk 1989: 178). For instance, the authors of one recent work say “Everything we say here is a suggestion only. We know that your experience, your beliefs, and your approach to spirituality may differ from ours. All the rituals, invocations, chants, songs, and liturgy can be adapted so that they feel right to you... know that we encourage you to make use of this material in the way that best fits your own needs” (Starhawk, Nightmare and the Reclaiming Collective 1997: xxi).

One of the ways in which Neo-Pagan creativity expresses itself is through the bringing together of disparate elements to create ritual (Magliocco 1996: 104-105). My informants have, in particular, combined their family traditions and beliefs with other elements. Before looking in detail at this particular feature of their current dumb supper or ancestor altar practices, I will discuss their practices more generally, since this provides useful background to the discussion of the family traditions.

The three women I interviewed for this paper are Twyla, Patricia, and Iris<sup>7</sup>. All three have been Pagans for more than a decade. The year I interviewed

---

6. It should be noted, however, that particular Pagan groups or traditions may have rituals that are relatively set and formalized.

7. I interviewed each woman at least once. On Samhain itself I interviewed Patricia. During the first interview, Patricia and I and her two younger children, Elizabet and Julia, stood around her altar, while they talked about the objects on it. Later in the evening, I interviewed Patricia by herself. I returned in December to do another interview. I interviewed Twyla in early November, but was able to spend some time with her in the late evening on Samhain, sitting in the kitchen and taking notes, as she finished preparing the coffee and dessert for her dumb supper. I interviewed Iris

them, Twyla did a dumb supper on her own. Patricia did an ancestor altar with her family and Iris did one with her coven<sup>8</sup>. Patricia has been doing her altar for “probably ten years.” The year I interviewed her, she set the altar up on a kitchen counter, but noted that when she lived in another apartment, “downstairs somehow I thought it was appropriate right on the hearth, because the hearth is the center of the home.” Patricia’s altar commemorated both ancestors she knew personally and ancestors who had died before her birth. She also honored a pet dog who died several years ago and the man who was both her godfather and art teacher. Patricia and her family generally put their altar up a while before Samhain and leave it up for quite a while afterwards. When I did my final interview with her in December, the altar was still partially up. She indicated that her family does not take the altar down “Often right till Solstice, because it’s a way of thinking about our families... we don’t *feel* ready to take it down until we’re into the next ceremony.”

Iris’ ethnic background is Mexican-American and her cultural tradition has been a major influence on her group’s altar (which she refers to as a “Day of the Dead altar”). She has been doing an ancestor altar for about eight years. The year I interviewed her, Iris commented, her coven’s altar was on her vanity, as her group did not have “a ritual space together yet.” (Iris wanted me to make it clear that this was a temporary situation. Her group usually does their ancestor altar in a Temple Room<sup>9</sup>, but, due to a recent move, did not have such a space at the time I interviewed her.) Iris and her group honored dead friends, relatives of people she knew, her own ancestors and those of present and past coven members. She specifically said that “We do tend to honor those we don’t even know, all the ancestors that came before our ancestors, our bloodline or whatever.” She went on to say that those members of the coven who were adopted honor both their biological and non-biological ancestors. She also honors dead pets, including a dead crow. Iris said that “I do keep the altar up for a long time sometimes.”

---

once in her home in early November. Twyla preferred not to be anonymous and Iris chose to use a name other than her legal name. The identities of Patricia and her family are disguised in accordance with her request.

8. “Coven” is one of the words which Pagans (particularly Witches) use to refer to small groups that meet regularly to worship and/or practice magic.
9. I neglected to ask Iris to define “Temple Room,” but based on context and the way this term generally seems to be used, I assume she meant a room dedicated primarily or exclusively to ritual, meditation, and coven meetings.

Although Twyla has been a Pagan for many years, she did not start doing dumb suppers until the year before I interviewed her. She honored only her parents, but said she was “sure it will grow. I think it’s real important to do it for everyone...” Twyla, who shares her apartment with two roommates, said she put her dumb supper on the front porch “because I want it to be really theirs [her dead parents’] and there didn’t seem to be space inside the house to have it for them. And I think part of it was also, I felt like I needed to call out to them and that having it on the porch, it would be easier for them to find.”<sup>10</sup> Twyla did her dumb supper on Samhain evening, but left the table setting and the food out considerably longer. When I interviewed her on November 7, they were still on the front porch.

### What goes on the altar

Although each woman’s tradition was in some ways quite different from the traditions of the other women, they also had a number of things in common. As might be expected, given the nature of these particular customs, all three women’s traditions involved food.<sup>11</sup>

Since Twyla was doing a dumb supper, her primary focus was the food and place settings. She served her parents pasta, apple juice, cupcakes and coffee, served on two complete place settings, with an apéritif glass filled with M & Ms between the settings. Twyla said specifically that, since she had prepared the pasta herself, she believed her parents would like it, but that the

- 
10. Similarly, Evans, in his *Irish Folk Ways* notes that “It used to be thought unlucky not to make preparations for the return of the dead by leaving the door of the house open...” on Halloween (1966: 277). Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer say that in Mexico, as part of the preparations for the Day of the Dead, flower petals are used to mark out a route for the dead from the house door to the altar (1992[1991]: 18).
  11. Jack Santino notes that “Coming at the time of year it did, it [Samhain] associated the fruits of the harvest with ideas of the afterlife and the otherworld” (1983: 5). Ward makes a similar connection (1981:5). Sylvia Ann Grider says, in an article crediting “Santino and others” (1996:4) for identifying these two prevailing themes, that Halloween’s “dominant symbols... depict the creatures of the underworld and the celebration of the harvest, juxtaposing elements of life coming to death and death coming to life” (12). This association of the themes of the dead and of harvest may explain why the ancestors are honored with food and why items connected even more specifically with the harvest or with the general death of vegetation at this season are placed on the ancestor altars and put out during the dumb supper described here.



previous year she had served them beef stew, a dish that she thought they had enjoyed while alive.

Patricia put out chocolate and tea for one of her grandmothers, which she said was appropriate “because I’m of British and Irish ancestry and my grandmothers on both sides had quite a tea tradition; they really did afternoon tea.” She served the tea in a “Canton teacup” that had come down from her maternal grandmother and great-grandmother. Patricia also put a pomegranate on the altar and tried (unsuccessfully, I believe) to get one of her children to draw a picture of asparagus for a dog who had really liked asparagus. After the interview, while I was drawing the altar, she sprinkled pumpkin seeds on it. Iris was less specific about foods (although she did mention fruit), but told me that when her coven began doing the altar, “we started off by bringing things that they liked.” Specific examples were candy and beer.

Both ancestor altars included objects which were directly connected in some way to the specific ancestors of the people involved in their creation. In Patricia’s case, this included photographs, books by at least one of her ancestors and a book containing a photograph of one of her ancestors. It also included an ear of dried corn that reminded her of a story about a Thanksgiving tradition of one of her grandmothers.<sup>12</sup> Iris’ altar included ashes of dead friends,<sup>13</sup> things “that they [the dead] liked, like crayons or a familiar pen or music that they wrote or a birthday card that they made or sent...” and pictures or some other reminder (such as a gift) of those who had died.

Patricia’s altar included other objects whose connection to her ancestors or to ancestors generally was oblique, such as a Swedish troll, which the children and their father had recently found. Patricia explained to me that the ancestry of her partner and hence of the children was partially Swedish and that the children were generally interested in trolls at that moment. A braid of sweet grass was also on the altar, because it reminded Patricia of “how we braid our lives together in our spiritual life and how we braid our lives together with our ancestors.”

Some objects seemed to be connected to death, rather than to the ancestors. For instance, Iris’ altar in the past included *calaveras*.<sup>14</sup> Other objects, such as the dead leaves decorating Twyla’s dumb supper, were seasonal.

12. The corn, which is also a seasonal decoration, may be dually significant.

13. Iris told me that these ashes would “be disposed of, when we get to where we’re going to go to do it.”

14. In the glossary of their book on the Day of the Dead, Carmichael and Sayer give

## Ritual

Each woman had some degree of formal or informal ritual in connection with her ancestor altar or dumb supper. The night I was at Patricia's house, she asked one child to light two candles and the other child to light the incense. We spent considerable time discussing the various objects on the altar and why they were there. This involved a fair amount of talking about individual ancestors. I left with the impression that telling stories about the ancestors was a significant part of what this family does around its altar. Patricia told me that another thing they do is move the objects on the altar around: "I re-arrange things, the kids re-arrange things, just think about what the meaning is and make it more meaningful. Like, I would say this dried corn makes me think of Granny, so I'm going to put it over next to Granny.." She went on to recount a particular Thanksgiving custom of her grandmother's that involved dried corn. Since the presence of the corn is an occasion for telling the story, Patricia's altar refers back to her grandmother's tradition. Patricia told me, however, that they do not do a formal ritual around the altar.

Iris gave me a little information about what her coven does ritually, but preferred not to give me much detail. She noted that the group generally does "a big ritual around it," but that this year had been an exception. She also said that "this particular time we had a glass of wine on the altar. And at the third day, we did another little mini-ritual and said 'Hi' to everybody again and then we drank the wine together with the [dead]." Twyla spoke very generally about what she had done to create sacred space: "I was opening it up and making it a place for them to come and holding that energy, holding that space open for them... But I didn't do anything as formal as casting a circle, but I really felt like I really did open it up as a sacred space."<sup>15</sup> She said, however, that the previous year "I did cast a circle and hold it and open the energy up and formally invite them..."

## Beliefs

The information my informants gave me about their beliefs concerning Samhain, death and the ancestors was complex and detailed.<sup>16</sup> What follows is

---

several definitions of "*calavera*." The most relevant meaning is "skull" (1992[1991]: 152).

15. Pagan rituals often begin with some form of "casting" (typically tracing, physically and/or in imagination) a circle around the area where the ritual is to take place.

16. I have good reason to believe, however, that the information I was given by these

a brief summary of some of the points most relevant to ancestor altars and dumb suppers.

I will begin with beliefs about the nature of Samhain and why this is an appropriate time to remember one's ancestors. Iris told me: "Well, because it's the time of the year that it is, we both know that we call it 'the veil being thin.' And we call it a time of easy access between the worlds, meaning the plane of the living and the plane of the spirit world or those that have gone beyond or things that have never even lived or have just always been spirit." As a result, Samhain "is a time when we on this plane can experience something of the spirit plane and they can come back and experience the living again." Iris suggests that this phenomenon is related to seasonal changes and the onset of winter. She believes that the cross-quarter days and the equinoxes are also times when "the veil is thin." Twyla spoke about a "barrier" between the physical and the spiritual: "It's a matter of degrees. There's a barrier and a lot of people can't even really perceive that there's a spiritual element in all things... But there's a natural effect... for Halloween and Beltane on this natural boundary, that we call a veil."

All three women had a sense that there was ongoing connection and communication with the dead. Twyla (who has been practicing this sort of custom the least amount of time) was the most tentative about this, but even she expressed the hope that she would be able at some point to communicate with her mother and said that she "come[s] close sometimes" during dreams. She said that part of the purpose in giving food to the dead was that "it gives them a connection to what's going on" and noted that she went out on the porch to have dinner with her parents the night she did the dumb supper.

Both Patricia and Iris had a number of stories about communication with the dead or awareness of the presence of the dead. Most of these stories were not specifically connected to ancestor altars, dumb suppers or Samhain. However, they demonstrate belief in an ongoing relationship with the dead and that (to quote Iris) "they [the dead] make their presence known." For reasons of space, I have included only one story (which, appropriately, is about an ancestor altar):

---

three people does not cover the whole range of possible beliefs about these topics in the Pagan community.

We were getting our altar together, two or three years ago, and Crow [Iris' husband] was pretty new at what we were doing. And here we are frantically looking for stuff, Uncle Steve and this person and that person and can we find stuff or whatever. We finally had our act together and we had all our stuff together and he lifted up the cushion from the couch and looked down and underneath the cushion was a valentine. He looked at it and he said, "Damn, I haven't seen that in a long time." I asked, "What is it?" He goes, "Oh, God. It's a valentine from my grandmother for when I was eight years old." He had had a box of his stuff somewhere and he hadn't seen that valentine since he'd gone through that box, which was, oh, years before, doesn't know how it got there, but he picked it up and said, "Hi, Grandma," and put it on the altar. And it was so affirming, because where the hell did that valentine come from? Why all of a sudden did he pick up the cushion and find it? It wasn't like he was looking for anything.

Patricia and Iris both talked about asking the dead for help. Iris says that "I tend to reach out to the ancestor that I think would be the most understanding... if they were alive..." She also said that her group will request help from dead animals (especially a dead crow whose picture is on the altar) for help for animals that are sick. Patricia told me that she specifically wanted help that year from a great-grandmother who had lived in Maine, where Patricia was planning to move. Patricia thought, however, that helping the living was not necessarily the highest priority of the dead. She told a story about trying to ask her grandmother for advice through a medium: "she had a hard time getting the message through and ended up saying, 'She says she's busy...'"

There was considerable variation in belief about the ways in which the dead benefited from the ancestor altar or dumb supper. All three women felt that these customs created a connection with the dead, but there was a fair bit of disagreement about what exactly that meant to the dead. Patricia said that "... I feel like this is a way to let them know that they're a part of my life..." She thought that this was important, because "in this culture, without ancestor altars, and with so few people carrying with them the ability to see in the spirit way — it's something that I see, as we get to be older women, that you get to be kind of invisible? And I figure that they must feel that way, that here they are all around us and nobody sees them and nobody pays any attention... That's not so good an impression. Not too good for them and not too good for us..."

Twyla also felt that connecting with the dead was important, but seemed to think of it in a rather different way. She said that the dumb supper "gives them [the dead] a connection to what's going on. After they've changed, after

they've shifted from being alive to being dead, it gives them a way to connect back. And, from their end, help keep the channel open. It honors them. It's respectful." She was extremely clear that the dumb supper was something she was doing for the dead, rather than to address her own needs.

Iris, on the other hand, thought that the dead appreciated the connection, but that it was not necessary for them: "The dead I don't think need us. They don't really need us, at least I don't think they do, but I think they like to keep in touch. It's kind of like getting a card from someone you don't see for a long time and then you get a little card and you say, 'Oh, yeah, I remember them. Hi.'"

### **Family traditions**

Since all but a handful of Pagan adults were raised in other traditions, it would be easy to assume that the adoption of Pagan customs is in part a rejection of the customs of the family of origin. In fact, as I worked on this project, I became aware that that seemed to be the underlying assumption I had when I started this project. However, the material I collected during the interviews made it clear that something much more complex was going on. Different people's current practice was connected to the traditions of their birth in various ways. Twyla did reject the practices of her family that dealt with death, while Patricia seemed to be extending and ritualizing her family practice. Iris seemed to be reviving and adapting her family practice and negotiating it with other coven members and other traditions.

Twyla was probably the closest to the model of outright rejection of her family's customs. She said that her family had a Memorial Day tradition of putting flowers on graves, but otherwise did nothing to honor the dead. When asked to discuss attitudes towards honoring the dead in the larger culture, Twyla referred back to her family of origin to make some very strong points about the inadequacy of the larger culture's burial customs. She said from a young age her response to "going into the funeral parlor in a procession to look at the body in the casket" was that "This is not a wake. This is not having the dead laid out, in your home, in their home, where people come to visit them, send them on their way, to honor and relive and tell stories of the person's life..." She was not satisfied with her family's response to her objections: "And I remember when I was a kid and I would complain about this, I would be told by the adults around me, 'Oh, well, that's the old-fashioned way, people don't need to do that anymore; that was the old-fashioned way,' almost alluding

to how it was because of superstition that people had to do that and that we have cleaner, better ways of doing it now. Cleaner, better ways. That's this belief that death is an ugly, gruesome thing that you're better off dealing with as little as possible. I remember being told there was no sense in wearing yourself out and getting sick over grieving and feeling the loss. Repression seemed to be the encouraged response."

However, in informal conversation with Twyla while I was in the process of writing this paper, she made it very clear to me that, although she agrees that she did reject the traditions of her family of origin, she perceives that her adoption of Paganism was independent of that rejection. She stated that she was attracted to Paganism based on its own merits and pointed out that she had already rejected her family's practices (and was agnostic) before she became a Pagan.

Even for Twyla, the rejection of family traditions was not absolute. She told me that her mother had been very spiritual and that "she was a dissident in the Catholic church. She argued on points of consecrated ground. She didn't believe that ground consecrated by a priest was any more sacred than other ground." (Pagans almost invariably believe that the earth is inherently sacred.) When asked what her non-Pagan ancestors would think about being honored by a Pagan ritual, Twyla expressed concern about their reaction generally and identified specific aspects of Paganism with which her mother would have had difficulty, but also indicated that "if I could talk to her and actually explain to her why it was important to me, where I was coming from, she would probably be supportive. Because of how deeply spiritually satisfying it is and I think in a lot of ways it would have really fed her soul to know certain Pagan things..."

Patricia, on the other hand, seemed to be extending and ritualizing the customs of her family of origin. While talking about how she had started doing ancestor altars, she indicated uncertainty about the source of the idea, but remembered the resonance with her family traditions: "... I must have heard something somewhere or read it somewhere, but I [responded] immediately, because my family does really keep track of who our ancestors were... and people talk about them all the time and who's who and all of that, it just seemed like a good plan to me." Again, when asked whether her family of origin had honored the dead in any way, she said, "in our family it's not unusual behavior to regularly talk about your ancestors and what they did and... certainly their accomplishments, but also funny things they did..." In line with this, she indicated that one of the reasons for maintaining this custom was that her children were "learning family history."

Like Twyla, when Patricia was asked to comment on mainstream attitudes, she referred back to her family history, but, unlike Twyla, she used a family story to describe an alternative to mainstream attitudes towards death: “my grandfather was adamant. He said, ‘I worked all my life in a hospital. In my opinion, you go to the hospital when you need to get better.’ He said, ‘I’m doing my dying and don’t you dare send me to the hospital. I’m doing it at home.’ And I think that was a great lesson to us all.”

Patricia has, however, not simply continued to practice her family custom without change. She made it clear that it was important to her to pass her family stories along in a spiritual context: “... I like having them learn family history in the context of these folks are [sic.] hovering around. They are spirits... And I think for their [the children’s] future development that that’s really helpful for them to think of, which is that there is a life of the spirit and that their spirit is in them now and that it is a life that will continue.” In describing the evolution of her altar, she says that initially it was about remembering her ancestors and (in accordance with another family custom) honoring them “because in my family, the elders in the family were honored. You stood up when your elders came in the room and there’s quite a bit of respect offered them.” However, her tradition has changed over time: “And now it’s more deepened into a time to connect with their spirits and ask for help...” Her altar, to a large extent, is still about the simple family tradition of telling stories about the ancestors, but it is a major elaboration of this custom and has taken on new features. Patricia has taken a secular custom from her childhood and incorporated it into a Pagan ritual context.

Iris’ cultural tradition still includes altars for the dead at this time of year. In fact, she says, “In Mexico, the family still does that...” In this country, however, the tradition of a home altar had been dropped by her family: “we really never did that. By the time that I was growing up, our family was very Americanized and very, very, very Catholic.” For Iris, her altar is a revival, although one rooted in the recent past.

Her family did, however, do quite a bit of honor to the dead at this time of year: “My family was a mixture of very, very Catholic and very, very superstitious. So they did the Catholic thing. For them, All Souls’ Day was practically a holiday. They went to church and they did their offerings for the dead that way. They brought flowers to the church, they lit candles, they had special masses said for them... whatever the Catholic Church deemed was a good thing to do for your dead, that’s what they did.” In addition to the All

Souls' Day traditions, Iris' family celebrated Halloween and she perceived that the two holidays were connected: "My family really liked Halloween, they got very excited about it. You know, we dressed up and did the trick-or-treat thing and the next day was a day to go to church. So it kind of meshed in the two cultures..."<sup>17</sup>

Iris also feels that attitudes that she perceives as coming from her ethnic background pre-disposed her to create this sort of altar. Among those attitudes and cultural traits are finding death "intriguing," a tendency to "poke fun at death," and an inclination to see "the release in death as something positive." Iris believes these traits pre-dispose her and other Mexicans to commemorate the dead. Iris said specifically that she wants to "bring back my ethnic tradition that I never got to do as a kid." Since she is doing her ancestor altar in the context of a coven with people from different backgrounds, she also needs to modify, compromise and do her altar in a way that is not specifically Mexican: "When we were starting our ancestor workings we were not really concentrating on doing specifically a Mexican thing. I'm the only Mexican. And so we were really trying to combine all of our traditions or all of our origins into one and so we just stayed away from it."

She notes that, despite the non-Mexican ancestry of most of the coven, some of the other people were enthusiastic about doing an altar: "Ancestry altars were big. There were a lot of workshops being done on them... So a lot of the coven members were very interested in doing it, regardless of where it came from or what tradition it really had anything to do with. And the interesting thing about that is for the most part VenusEarth [Iris' coven] was at that time doing more Celtic work than anything else. But we managed to blend it in and I guess basically how we did it is we have always honored the ancestors and when we call in directions<sup>18</sup> we generally call in the ancestors and we did that from the get-go, before we even started doing this kind of ancestor working on Samhain."

---

17. Similarly, Jack Santino notes, "Many of the Mexican American celebrants [in Bowling Green, Ohio] told me that they specifically linked their Day of the Dead observances with the Anglo-American Halloween; that is, they recognized the connection, through the church calendar, of their observance of All Souls' and the popular observance of the eve of All Saints" (1994b: xxiii).

18. The four elements (which have very strong and specific connections to the four directions) are often invoked or acknowledged at the beginning of Pagan rituals, especially if the ritual is the least bit formal.

19. Carmichael and Sayer make references to *copal* as a standard feature of Day of the



Her coven did adopt some of the Mexican traditions. She told me that they burn copal, an incense traditionally used in Mexico for this purpose.<sup>19</sup> She also told me that at one point “there seemed to have been a resurgence of all the *calaveras* and the skeletons and the little figures from Mexico. And we seemed to start to collect them. People would find them and bring them over... And we started to collect these little items... And so we started to put those things on the altar...”

She noted, however, that there were other Mexican traditions that she and her coven had not adopted. She said that “I don’t think that Crow would get the same charge out of putting paper flowers on an altar that, say, my great-grandmother would have.” She gives practicality as an additional reason for not doing everything that might be done in Mexico.

Like Patricia, Iris feels a sense of connection with her family’s past. When I asked her how she thought her non-Pagan ancestors would feel about being honored by a Pagan ritual, she said: “seeing as my grandmother used to take me to *curanderas*... I don’t think that they’d mind too much. I think that the combination of folklore and legend and herbalism or medicine woman-type stuff that’s part of my ancestry was so meshed in with everyday life, I mean to this day, my mother will still use herbs for things and different types of healing things that she learned as a kid or from my grandmother and from her mother or whatever. And so I don’t really think that they’d mind too much. I don’t really feel in conflict at all.”

Iris made it really clear, however, that she felt that her family’s Halloween celebration, although enthusiastic, lacked something. She said that she had been a religious child: “But there was something missing. I kept going, ‘Church, communion, what? What else is there? What’s wrong? What’s wrong with this? It’s not enough; it doesn’t do it. It doesn’t make me feel complete.’ And then when I discovered Paganism and then searched into my own Pagan roots, I found the missing pieces. The missing pieces were my interaction with those things that I couldn’t see... I was actually looking for that fulfillment of understanding what Samhain really was and what that connection with the other side was.” Iris made it clear that it is important to her to connect her spirituality to her ethnic roots: “And Christ never exactly cut it, so this is my communion; the fact that I do have a relationship with the Virgin of Guadalupe. She’s one of my main squeezes. And why? Not because she’s the mother of

---

Dead celebrations (see 1992[1991]: 10, 14).

Christ, but because she's a goddess, the goddess Tonantsi that I have links with because of my Mayan and Aztec roots."

The relationship Iris has established with the practices of her family of origin is complex. She found the practices of her immediate family to be incomplete, and so revived a cultural practice which it had dropped. She wants to connect her practices both to her ethnicity and her family of origin, but, in recognition of the fact that the other members of her coven are from different backgrounds, does not feel she can do so too closely. Like Patricia, she has taken a tradition from another context and found ways to incorporate it into her current spiritual practice.

An interesting question raised by this material is what children raised in Pagan households will do with these traditions as they reach adulthood. Twyla has no children and Iris' child is still very young, but Patricia's children are old enough to have taken part in these traditions for some years. Patricia told me that her oldest child, Rachel, who was around eleven at the time Patricia was discovering Paganism, soon became "quite a traditionalist, going, 'Oh, but you had so-and-so on the altar last year; where's their picture this year?'" Patricia also told me that Julia, her youngest child, had added a new feature to what their family does at their altar: "she went and got the [bagpipe] chanter to play music for our ancestors." Already, both the desire to preserve a family tradition and the tendency to change it are present in her family.

Patricia also told me that after one of Rachel's cousins had died, Rachel had reacted very emotionally, but that when the worst of the immediate burst of grief was over, "I put out a cloth and said, 'Rachel, would you like to do this?' I put out an altar cloth in the middle of the floor and she didn't answer, I mean her answer was to just start going around the house and setting up the altar while she was crying." Rachel has integrated her family traditions into her life sufficiently to find putting up an altar an appropriate response to grief, or, in her mother's words, "it's really now a resource for her."

For Patricia and Iris, the traditions of their families of origin regarding death and the dead are resources they can draw on as they create traditions for their new spiritual context. Both value those traditions highly, but they see them not as sacrosanct customs to be passed down intact to the next generation, but as sources that can be shaped and altered to fit their new spiritual beliefs and practices. Twyla's family customs also seem to be a resource for her, in a different way. She can use her family's funeral and wake practices to point out the ways in which she perceives the burial customs of the larger culture to be

inadequate. Even though all of these women have chosen a religious path which is different from the one in which they were raised, their family traditions continue to be important to them. Although family customs may continue to be important, individuals react to them in different ways and choose (consciously or unconsciously) in what ways they will continue to use them.

## References

- Addy, Sidney Oldall. 1973[1895]. *Folk Tales and Superstitions*. Originally published as *Household Tales with Other Traditional Remains*. Reprint, with an introduction by J. D. A. Widdowson. East Ardsley, Wakefield, Yorkshire, England: EP Publishing.
- Adler, Margot. 1986[1979]. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and other Pagans in America Today*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bonewits, Philip Emmons Isaac. 1979[1971] *Real Magic: An Introductory Treatise on the Basic Principles of Yellow Magic*. Revised Edition. Berkeley, CA: Creative Arts Book Company.
- Bovis, M. A. 1997. An Altar for Death. In *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying: Practical Rituals, Prayers, Blessings, and Meditations on Crossing Over*, edited by Starhawk, M. Macha Nightmare and the Reclaiming Collective, pp. 282-286. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, HarperSanFrancisco.
- Carpenter, Denis D. 1996. Emergent Nature Spirituality. In *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, edited by James R. Lewis, pp. 35-72. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Carmichael, Elizabeth and Chloë Sayer. 1992[1991]. *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Danaher, Kevin. 1972. *The Year in Ireland*. Cork: Mercier Press.
- Day, John F. 1981[1941]. *Bloody Ground*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky.
- Evans, E. Estyn. 1957. *Irish Folk Ways*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Grider, Sylvia Ann. 1996. Conservatism and Dynamism in the Contemporary Celebration of Halloween: Institutionalization, Commercialization, Gentrification. *Southern Folklore* 53, no. 1: 3-15.
- Hand, Wayland D. (ed.). 1961. *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. Volume 6, *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from North Carolina*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Hole, Christina. 1986[1976]. *A Dictionary of British Folk Customs*. London: Collins Publishing Group, Paladin Grafton Books.
- Hyatt, Harry Middleton. 1965. *Folk-Lore from Adams County, Illinois*. 2nd and revised edition. Hannibal, Missouri: Memoirs of the Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation.
- Leach, Maria (ed.). 1972[1949]. *Standard Dictionary of Folklore and Mythology*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls.

- Linton, Ralph and Adelin Linton. 1950. *Halloween through Twenty Centuries*. New York: Henry Schuman.
- Magliocco, Sabina. 1996. Ritual is My Chosen Art Form: The Creation of Ritual as Folk Art among Contemporary Pagans. In *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, edited by James R. Lewis, pp. 93-119. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Malpezzi, Frances M. and William M. Clements. 1992. *Italian-American Folklore*. American Folklore Series. Little Rock, Arkansas: August House Publishers.
- McCoy, Edain. 1996. *Entering the Summer Land: Customs and Rituals of Transition into the Afterlife*. Llewellyn's World Religion & Magick Series. St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications.
- Orion, Loretta. 1995. *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived*. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press.
- Pike, Sarah. 1996. Forging Magical Selves: Gendered Bodies and Ritual Fires at Neo-Pagan Festivals. In *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, edited by James R. Lewis, pp. 121-140. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rayburn, Otto Ernest. 1941. *Ozark Country*. American Folkways. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce.
- Rees, Alwyn and Brinley Rees. 1978[1961]. *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*. N.p.: Thames and Hudson.
- Santino, Jack. 1994a. *All Around the Year: Holidays and Celebrations in American Life*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- . 1994b. Introduction to *Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life*, edited by Jack Santino: xi-xxviii. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.
- . 1983. Halloween in America: Contemporary Customs and Performances. *Western Folklore* 42, no. 1:1-20.
- . 1982. *Halloween: The Folklore and Fantasy of All Hallows*. Washington, DC: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.
- Serith, Ceisiwr. 1994. *The Pagan Family: Handing the Old Ways Down*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications.
- Starhawk. 1989[1979]. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. 10th Anniversary Edition. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, HarperSanFrancisco.
- Starhawk, M. Macha Nightmare and the Reclaiming Collective. 1997. *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying: Practical Rituals, Prayers, Blessings, and*

*Meditations on Crossing Over*. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, HarperSanFrancisco

Ward, Donald J. 1981. Halloween: An Ancient Feast of the Dead that will not Die. *Folklore & Mythology* 1, no. 2:1, 4-6.

Winkler, Louis and Carol Winkler. 1970. Thousands of Years of Halloween. *New York Quarterly* 26:204-15.