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How Magic Works: New Zealand Feminist Witches' Theories of Ritual Action

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Abstract

The paper draws on three years' fieldwork and twelve years' familiarity with feminist witches in New Zealand. These women are thoughtful and articulate about their magical practice, and it is their theories about how magic works and the function of ritual-making which are the paper's central concern. Scholarly theories and debates about magic and ritual have frequently been dichotomously constructed: science versus magic, the symbolists versus the intellectualists, causality versus participation, ritual as action versus belief as thought, and so on. The witches who are the focus of this study do not explain their ritual practice in such dichotomized terms. Their spells, for example, incorporate expressive, dramatic and aesthetic components and values, along with an explicit instrumental purpose. For these witches, magic is not anti-science or pseudo-science: it sits alongside science as another way of addressing a problem. The paper discusses feminist witches' theories and practices in the light of anthropological theories about ritual and magic, explores the role of symbols and energy in magic, and demonstrates how these witches use ritual for empowerment and healing. *Key words: feminist witchcraft, ritual, magic, symbolism*

Introduction

In late November 2001 millions of fans swarmed to cinemas world-wide to greet Harry Potter's debut on the big screen. During its first weekend of screening in the United States the movie smashed box-office records, and by Christmas Pottermania had performed magic on toy retailers' turn-overs, new lines in Potter-inspired consumables proliferated in grocery stores, and opticians were reporting increased sales of black-rimmed spectacles. Two weeks after *The Sorcerer's Stone* premiered, the fabulously-budgeted and even more breathlessly-awaited film from Tolkien's first volume of *The Lord of the Rings* opened, similarly drawing huge audiences and giving the elixir of life to New Zealand's film industry.¹ The contemporary popular appetite for magic is being demonstrated in numerous other ways too: titles including "magic" spill from shelves in New Age and children's book-stores while Samantha, Sabrina and the sisters from *Charmed* enchant prime-time television audiences. "Fairy Shops" are enjoying a brisk trade and children in many parts of

the world are embarking vicariously on magical quests via computer games. Without question, magic is doing magic for business.

One of the first anthropological definitions of magic I heard as a student was the classic Victorian one: "Magic is primitive man's science". The social evolutionist, Edward Tylor, viewed any practice of the "magical arts" or "occult sciences" in Victorian society as a survival from a barbarous past, while James Frazer declared that "magic was in some ways a precursor of science, but it was its bastard sister" (Tambiah 1990:45, 52).² Similarly today, modes of experiencing and understanding which fall outside "ordinary" rationality and consciousness have been viewed by some in science and medicine as "ego regression to infantile states and as a befuddled way of thinking (Winkelman 2000: 3).³

Yet here at a time of unprecedented advances in scientific knowledge and accomplishment, magic's popularity is simultaneously flourishing. While no one is suggesting that Harry's fans are seriously interested in witchcraft as a religion, a fairly widespread popular fascination with magic seems indisputable. Moreover, the numbers of those in Western societies who *are* seriously interested in witchcraft as a religion have grown significantly in the last half century,⁴ and particularly in the last twenty years. Witches, practitioners of Goddess spirituality and other neo-pagans are reported to now number up to 500,000 in the United States, and between 110,000 and 120,000 in Britain (Griffin 2000:14). Popular literature on the many related traditions abounds, and there is a growing body of scholarship on the subject, including a number of ethnographies dealing with contemporary witchcraft in Britain, the United States, and Australia (for example, Luhrmann 1989, Eller 1993, Hume 1997, Berger 1999, Greenwood 2000c). On the whole, however, there has been relatively little recent discussion of witchcraft and magic in contemporary Western societies amongst anthropologists, which seems surprising given the rapid growth of the modern phenomenon and the high profile these topics have had for the discipline for one hundred and thirty years.

The fieldwork on which this paper draws was carried out over a number of years amongst feminist witches in New Zealand.⁵ Between 1990 and 1996 I joined and worked closely with three covens in different cities (I still meet with one of these), and also met with many other groups and individuals in other parts of the country, attended workshops, and interviewed women prominent in the movement. In contrast with Britain, feminist witches constitute the most numerous section of the neo-pagan movement in New Zealand and were the earliest established. Because of the diffuse and amorphous nature of the movement, the lack of any over-arching organizational framework, and the fact that small groups of women meet in each other's homes or outdoor spaces, it is difficult to estimate their numbers. There may be between 1000 and 2000 New Zealand women who self-identify as "feminist witches," however several thousand more have had some kind of contact with the movement, for example, through attending a workshop, reading books on the subject or participating in the occasional ritual.⁶

The first groups sprang up twenty years ago inspired by books such as Christ and Plaskow's *Womanspirit Rising* (1979), Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (1989[1979]), and Budapest's *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* (1989[1980]). The North American feminist witchcraft movement is the most obvious natural parent of the New Zealand variant, however some of the women I spoke with insisted that they began independently exploring witchcraft and the Goddess before or about the same time as their North American sisters. Women's points of entry into the movement vary considerably, from feminist art to lesbianism, from a childhood fascination with witches and magic to ecofeminism or Christian feminism.

A thorough account of feminist witches' beliefs and practices is beyond the scope of this paper

and would probably be redundant for most readers; in the following section I make only some brief summarizing comments to serve as background to my central concern here, which is practitioners' experience of and theories about how magic works and the world-view which informs their reasoning. These women are thoughtful and articulate about their magical practice, and working amongst them has provided a very useful context for understanding magicians' logic and for exploring magical consciousness and the functions of ritual-making. Obviously the idea that magic is a primitive substitute for science is particularly nonsensical in any analysis of these magicians, all of whom are thoroughly familiar with scientific modes of thinking and acting, and some of whom are scientists themselves.⁷

Feminist Witches' Beliefs and Practices

Feminist witches form a subgroup both within feminism and within witchcraft: they constitute the feminist wing of contemporary witchcraft and, along with Christian feminists (with whom they overlap), the spiritual wing of feminism. As feminists they have no interest in imaging or worshiping divinity as a singular, omnipotent male, and they espouse a political stance which deplores all forms of social inequity and oppression. Instead they emphasize the divine feminine and encourage all women to see and experience themselves as sacred, powerful, and beautiful. They make frequent reference to a plethora of goddesses from various cultures, past and present, who serve as archetypes, role-models and guides, and to "the Goddess," a metaphor for "all that there is", the entire system of matter and energy which constitutes, creates and sustains the cosmos. "The Goddess" is beyond gender and all such dualistic categories. Like other neo-pagans, feminist witches are intensely concerned with the welfare of the planet, they embrace kinship with nature as a spiritual idea and in their ritual practice. Central to their holistic worldview and their theories about magic's efficacy is the shamanistic belief that all things — plants, animals, people, rocks, the elements, and so on — are connected in dynamic relationship.

Feminist witches' ritual practices entail celebration of the eight seasonal festivals of the annual cycle: Samhain (Halloween), Winter Solstice, Brigid (Candlemas), Spring Equinox, Beltane, Summer Solstice, Lammas, and Autumn Equinox. Living in the Southern Hemisphere, New Zealand witches celebrate Winter Solstice on June 21-22, and Summer Solstice on December 21-22. All the dates of the other festivals are also different from those of the Northern Hemisphere by six months. Rituals are also held to mark important rites of passage in women's lives: menarche and menopause, birthdays and the birth of children, new partnerships, homes and jobs, divorce, retirement and death. Mini-rituals, or spells (discussed in more detail later in the article), are performed by women on their own or in groups, mainly for a specific instrumental purpose. They may be done for healing or to assist a woman to make a decision or to bring about a change in her life. New Zealand feminist witches almost never make spells on others' behalf, although they might rarely direct "healing energy" towards someone in need of it.⁸

In New Zealand, feminist witches' rituals are carried out more or less according to the structure set out in British and American Wicca manuals, although two books by a local author, Juliet Batten, are also widely consulted: *Power from Within: A Feminist Guide to Ritual-making* (1988) and *Celebrating the Southern Seasons: Rituals for Aotearoa* (1995).⁹ At the beginning of a ritual an altar is created (usually on a circular cloth laid on the floor), a circle is cast, there is a symbolic purification (when women "leave behind" any preoccupations which might interfere with their full concentration on the ritual), after which the four elements and their corresponding directions are invoked (water=West, fire=North, air=East, earth=South¹⁰). Next there is usually a guided visualization or meditation

which helps shift participants into an altered state of consciousness, followed by the heart of the ritual, which involves symbolic activity related to the ritual's theme and purpose, along with chanting, singing and sometimes drumming and dancing. At the conclusion of the ritual, the circle is "opened" with a blessing spoken or sung by all women in the group. While this structure is adhered to fairly strictly, the ways in which any part of the sequence is carried out vary greatly. The two or three women whose turn it is to organize the ritual are free to be as creative as they like in choosing the symbols to be used and in devising the symbolic activity. For example, the purification might involve passing round a bowl of sea water or perfumed fresh water for women to wash in, women might stroke one another's auras with a flowering branch or a smoldering sage wand, they might throw a stick of firewood symbolizing what they wish to leave behind on a fire, or bury a symbol of it in the earth (each of these examples employs one of the elements).

These witches' understanding of how magic and ritual work will be explored following, and in the light of, an overview, necessarily brief, of canonical anthropological explanations of magic and ritual.¹¹

Anthropological Theories of Ritual and Magic

Scholarly theories and debates about magic and ritual have typically been dichotomously constructed — science versus magic (or religion), the symbolists versus the intellectualists, structure versus anti-structure, ritual as *action* versus belief as *thought*.¹² What has come to be known in the anthropology of ritual as the "rationality debate" emerged in the wake of Evans-Pritchard's seminal work on Azande witchcraft (1937). Two broadly opposed camps were established: the intellectualists, who drew on the earlier ideas of Tylor and Frazer, and the symbolists, associated most prominently with Durkheim.¹³ The intellectualists claimed that belief in magic arose from a particular view of the way the world operates whereby magic was a substitute for science, while the symbolists (also known as the semiotic approach) saw magic and ritual primarily as symbolic systems which express important meanings, often about the social order, through metaphor and analogy.¹⁴ The intellectualists emphasized the instrumental, technical aspect of ritual. Frazer had claimed that magical thought relies upon an implicit faith in the order and uniformity of nature, and that magicians rationalize a causal connection between things which resemble each other or are contiguous in time and space — through magic an object can influence that with which it is symbolically associated. Thus he divided magic into two categories: homeopathic magic, based on the law of similarity between objects, and contagious magic, based on the law of contact between objects (Frazer 1994:26-37).

On the other side of the rationality debate, the symbolists stressed communication and the expressive function of ritual. Variations of this school of thought have come to dominate anthropological thinking, although the instrumental component of ritual has not been ignored altogether by, for example, scholars such as Firth, Beattie, and Leach (Luhrmann 1989: 348, Lewis 1980: 16-17). Leaning towards the symbolist or semiotic position, Tambiah (1985) saw rituals primarily as performances generated by a society to convey to itself messages about its social norms and structure. Victor Turner (1969, 1974) was also interested in rituals as social dramas or performances, but he saw them (rites of passage in particular) as being generated out of conditions of liminality, marginality and inferiority, and the bonds created between ritual participants as *anti-structural* in that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian and direct as a result of participants having signs of their social status stripped from them. A number of other anthropologists have also concentrated on the performative, dramatic aspect of ritual, notably Richard Schechner, who, with

Mady Schuman, edited *Ritual, Play and Performance: Readings in the Social Sciences / Theatre* (1976). Schechner showed how ritual shares with drama some key characteristics: both deal with crisis, schism, conflict and the resolution of these disruptions. The themes of drama, like those of ritual, center on sexuality, rebellion, generational conflict, and the rites of passage, while the techniques of both drama and ritual center on the transformation of people into other people.

Like the early theories, some more recent anthropological theories about magic and ritual have also been dichotomously constructed. Tambiah (1990: 105-110) has proposed that there are two orientations to the cosmos which people can experience: *causality* and *participation*. The orientation described as "causality" is associated, as Tambiah argues, with the following characteristics: atomistic individualism, the language of distancing and neutrality of action and reaction, and an emphasis on the causal efficacy of technical acts and the idea that instrumental action changes matter. The characteristics associated with "participation," on the other hand, include: the concept of the ego/person with the world and as a product of the world; the language of solidarity, unity, holism and continuity in space and time; and an emphasis on the performative efficacy of communicative acts. There are strong echoes here of the earlier ideas of the intellectualists (who stressed instrumentality) and the symbolists (who stressed expression), however Tambiah saw the two orientations as "simultaneously available to human beings as complementary cognitive and affective interests" (1990: 108). Greenwood (2000b: 142) suggests that these two orientations parallel Michael Harner's (1990[1980]) "Ordinary State of Consciousness" (corresponding to causality) and "Shamanic State of Consciousness" (corresponding to participation). Greenwood herself frequently refers to contemporary British witches' communication with an "otherworld," a "realm of deities, spirits or other beings experienced in an alternative state of consciousness" (2000c: 1) which "is distinct from the world of ordinary reality" (2000b: 142) but co-existent with it as part of a holistic totality. It will be shown below that the witches I studied do not see things in quite such dichotomized terms as these anthropologists propose; they make no distinction between "this world" and an "otherworld," or between an ordinary reality and a nonordinary reality with different "truth" values and rules of logic.

Winkelman has recently argued that the instrumental and symbolic functions of ritual are not always separate in practice or in their effects (2000: 233). He points out that symbols and rituals are incorporated within activities regarded as technical, while symbolic, expressive acts also have a technical component in the way that they transform experience and produce physiological consequences (such as healing). Thus, he would want to emphasize not only the psychological, social or symbolic functions of ritual, but also its physiological effects on the bodies of ritual actors. Ritual is instrumental even where its effect is on participants' emotional states and social relations if these are the *intended* technical effects of the ritual process.

Most anthropologists now regard as naive any attempt to discuss ritual and magic, especially other people's rituals, in terms of the truth canons of Western scientific rationality, and focus instead on understanding the ritual actors' own logic (Tambiah 1985: 135-136). Nonetheless much theorizing about ritual still tends to construct it as a homogeneous category with a coherent purpose, and has not often sought theories of ritual action generated by ritual-makers or magicians themselves. Of course, most ritual-makers are probably little concerned about theories of ritual action: its meaning and effectiveness in their lives is a given, theories about how it works are embedded in their cosmologies and worldviews and are not necessarily articulable, even if they are consciously held. Gilbert Lewis (1980: 117-119) rightly emphasizes that viewing ritual only in terms of its instrumental or expressive components is reductive and can never offer more than a partial explanation: the emotional and aesthetic responses of those performing the ritual are crucial

to its importance and meaning for them. Ritual, Lewis says (1980:118), "is primarily action — a way of doing, making, creating, showing, expressing, arousing — a complex form of stimulus to which people respond."¹⁵ In a similar vein, Luhrmann argued that amongst contemporary British witches, beliefs and thoughts sometimes developed as a result of magical activity (rather than the other way round);¹⁶ beliefs were not always consistent, coherent or clear-cut; witches' emotional and imaginative involvement in ritual work helped determine their beliefs.

The feminist witches' rituals I studied far from formed a homogeneous category: they incorporated diverse purposes and components including performance and play, aesthetic and semiotic (expressive) values, and norm-challenging as well as instrumental functions. At times witches articulated a highly intellectualized understanding of their magic; at other times they indicated that the meaning of their rituals could not be framed in language. Their emotional and imaginative involvement in magic and their embodied experience¹⁷ of a ritual was always important and was usually given priority over intellectual understanding or verbal explanation. It is to witches' experiences and ideas about magic that I now turn.

What is Magic?

Witches' definitions of magic show an unequivocal rejection of the magic versus science dichotomy. Aleister Crowley, whose works have been influential in modern magic, famously defined magic as "the Science and Art of causing change to occur in conformity with Will," and Isaac Bonewits, a high profile American witch, has described it as "an art and science designed to enable people to make effective use of their psychic talents" (both cited in Adler 1986:8). Starhawk, the most widely read American author on contemporary Western witchcraft, sees science and magic as "both quests for truth — they differ only in their methodology and the set of symbols they use to describe their findings. The field of enquiry is the same" (1989:202). (Tylor and Frazer would have added that magic also differs from science by being wrong — because magicians mistake association for causality — although they agreed about the field of enquiry being the same.) Religion and science are separated, Starhawk continues, when "God is felt to be separate from the physical world.... But the Goddess is manifest in the physical world, and the more we understand its workings, the better we know Her" (1989:202). For Starhawk, the pursuit of scientific knowledge is a spiritual endeavor. Berger says that during her study of American witches she was "told repeatedly by Witches that they became convinced of magic by seeing it work. They claim it is not a matter of faith but of empiricism" (1999:24). Echoing Bonewits, Berger says that amongst witches "magic is seen, at least in part, as a process of awakening one's own psychological mechanisms" (1999:34).

Clearly, the instrumental goal of magic is emphasized in these definitions. Working magic requires a mobilization of one's confidence, will, emotion, imagination and concentration. It involves an understanding of psychological and environmental processes (Adler 1986:8), and relies upon a theory which sees human nature and the external world of nature as interconnected. "The central tenet of magical practice," writes Greenwood (2000a:144), is "that the microcosm (the individual) is a part of the macrocosm, and that work on the microcosm will have an effect on the macrocosm". Similarly, changes in the macrocosm, which includes both the material world of nature and the larger social world, can come to influence the individual. One of the ways change can happen is through the use of magical techniques. This theory derives from witches' holistic perception that all matter, energy and consciousness are connected in a dynamic, interactive system. According to this way of thinking, scientific knowledge and techniques are not in opposition to magical knowledge and techniques; both fit under the capacious umbrella of witches' worldview.

The New Zealand witches I studied, like their American and British counterparts, also refer to "magic" in instrumental terms. All their rituals incorporate magic, but some have other primary or larger purposes, such as the celebration of a personal milestone or a part of the seasonal cycle. The stated purpose of these rituals is to acknowledge change rather than to cause it, and their function is primarily expressive: the ritual is a social performance of important shared values and beliefs using symbolic activity. However, embedded within any such ritual which has an obvious expressive function, there is also an instrumental magical component. Thus, for example, during a ritual to celebrate the Spring Equinox, the earth's greening following the dark, dormant phase of winter, the women will also perform "magic" in relation to something they want to grow in their own lives (for example, a particular creative project, a new job, material security, a more assertive attitude towards an employer or a partner, or a quality such as patience, boldness or wisdom). The magic might take the form of a guided visualization to focus intent, followed by the individual planting of a seed to symbolize what each woman wishes to grow in her life, chanting to "energize" the magical project, the sharing of personal stories and a group blessing on each woman's seed. After the ritual, each woman takes her seed home and tends it. Nurturing the seed, which serves both as a symbol and a mnemonic device, helps the woman continue to focus attention on her magical project, thereby "energizing" it further. Along with the ritual activity of watering the plant, the woman takes practical steps in her life to help realize her project. As the seed grows, her project moves towards actualization. If the seed or the project doesn't flourish, the woman thinks about the reasons and rationalizes the failure: the timing or the project might be wrong, her commitment to her goal might not be strong enough. Such magic could be seen as an extension of the power of positive thinking to the symbolic enactment of one's goal in a heightened state of consciousness in the company of a supportive group. Winkelman (2000:234) has pointed out that "calendrical rituals are often used as contexts for rites of social transition (passage)." Through symbols and symbolic activity personal transitions are placed within a cosmological framework. The use of analogy, metaphor and symbols and the extension of associative links to causative links is deemed rational in terms of witches' worldview.

The function of other feminist witches' rituals is primarily and explicitly instrumental: these rituals are called "spells." They may be performed by an individual alone, or in the company of her coven. Very early in my fieldwork, I attended a series of workshops as an enrolled participant; in one session the facilitator, Juliet, handed out some notes she had written about spells. I include the text here because it provides an excellent basis for understanding how these witches believe spells work.¹⁸

Spells

A spell is a mini-ritual — good practice for full-scale rituals. It is a "symbolic act done in an altered state of consciousness, in order to cause a desired change" (Starhawk 1989: 124).

How to cast a spell:

1. Get in touch with something you want to change in your life. Keep to *small things*. Don't tackle anything too big. Check out that you are ready to change this position or attitude, that you want to let go of it.
2. Get in touch with the *desired end*. See it clearly. See yourself achieving it.

3. Now choose a symbol or action that will encapsulate the change, remembering to keep the desired end clearly in view. Don't bother about how it will happen. Spells can work in unexpected ways!

Some examples:

* To gain clarity: pour murky water out of a vessel and pour clear water in. Believe that with the clear water, your mind will clear. You may wish to add words that will help too.

* Banishing anger and putting forgiveness in its place: hold a stone to your forehead. Let the anger pass into the stone. Then hurl it away (do this outside!), chanting suitable words. Then give yourself a gift to symbolize forgiveness/peace or whatever you desire to put in the place of anger. Breathe in the gift, chanting suitable words.

4. Add to the symbol or action ingredients that will help you to achieve an altered state of consciousness so that you will be more open to the suggestions contained in the spell. e.g. meditate first, use repetition, use chanting, use the presence of others to give energy, use darkness and candles for focussing, use water, use incense to change the atmosphere.

5. Believe, desire and expect that the spell will bring about the desired end. (Your preparation to achieve that state before enacting the spell is often as important as the spell itself).

6. Enact the spell in the presence of others. Give it your total attention and energy flow. The more you can enter a trance state and link up with the universal energy flow, the more effective your spell will be.

* See Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* for more ideas. Never do a spell to hex or damage another person. Whatever energy you give out will return to you threefold!

How Spells Work

The notes above make explicit the instrumental purpose of spells, although they could be seen as having an expressive function also: the woman casting the spell is telling herself and others present, both symbolically and verbally, about a decision she has reached, about what is important to her and her life at present, about her concerns and goals in a particular situation, and about what she regards as an effective way of dealing with her situation. As well as giving instruction on "how to cast a spell," the notes indicate how spells work. Points one, two and five emphasize the role of the spell-maker's will, desire, imagination, concentration and confidence. Points four, five and six emphasize the importance of conducting the spell in a heightened state of consciousness or trance state which enables the spell-maker to "link up with the universal energy flow". Point six stresses the social aspect of ritual, the importance of having like-minded and supportive witnesses present, and point three deals with the crucial importance of symbols and symbolic activity.

Working with symbols in a focussed and self-conscious way is usually the most important component of any ritual. Most invitations to rituals ask participants to bring a symbol of something related to the ritual's theme. I have been asked to bring symbols of, for example, a personal quality I have in abundance, my childhood, a personal goal or achievement, my sexuality, an old fear or chapter of my life to be sacrificed, a quality needed to sustain me through winter's dark, and so on. These symbols were woven into the ritual's fabric through story-telling, symbolic action, and art and craft work.

It is significant that the two women perhaps most responsible in New Zealand (certainly in Auckland, where the numbers of feminist witches are greatest) for the early growth of the movement are both psychotherapists inclined towards a Jungian approach. In a workshop I took with one of them, Lea, she explicitly talked about the transpersonal quality of symbols, their multivocality, their capacity to represent many levels of experience and meaning, and their ability to cope with or incorporate paradox. During my interview with her, Lea referred also to the therapeutic aspect of witches' work with symbols:

I think for a lot of women, learning to work with symbols is the first step to honoring the depth of their experience and the validity of it. The more women work with symbols, the more they can make sense of their own dreams and their own fantasies, and use those inner powers to develop their intuition.

And I think it empowers women then to face themselves at deeper levels. Often if they don't develop these tools, they're just too terrified to face their personal history and their personal woundedness. It's essential work because otherwise power remains "out there". Working with symbols helps women to find the power is actually within themselves. The symbols help them see it more clearly and work with it more effectively, focus it.

Lea emphasizes that the power to bring about change lies within, rather than outside, a person. She sees the symbolic enactment as "like making a vow in front of a group of people," saying yes to possibilities, and putting that commitment in motion. Similarly, in the workshop notes about spells, it is clear that the symbols used in spells are not *in themselves* thought to be responsible for causing the desired change; they have no inherent magical power. Symbols are chosen and used by a woman to represent what she wants to happen. Her expectant attitude, will and commitment to change, and belief in what she is doing are crucial if the spell is to "work." Winkelman, in his discussion of ritual healing, says that "symbolic acts elicit associations and beliefs that transform experience, as well as physiological responses, and enhance positive expectations and commitment," providing powerful stimulation of one's intentionality (2000:233, 246). By bridging the iconic and verbal domains, symbols (along with other ritual behaviors and myth) integrate previously unconscious material into the conscious network, which may bring about profound changes in the individual's experience of self and world, including her behavior and personality (Winkelman 2000:245). For Lea, symbols are tools — tangible, visible and "real" — which women can use as a focus in their efforts to understand their psychological processes, face their personal histories, and seek healing, insight, and power. Luhrmann makes the same point in relation to British witches:

Magicians use symbolism to capture, express or articulate their experience, and in its mixture of precision and evocation it becomes tremendously important to them. Ultimately it can become a means of therapy.

One way that symbolism forms a magician's hermeneutic is by providing an apparently objective medium in which to talk about one's quite subjective self. (Luhrmann 1989:245)

Feminist witches' spell-making, especially in New Zealand groups, is a highly creative enterprise. Feminist witches in New Zealand are, on the whole, more inventive, flexible and given

to improvisation than any of the feminist or other witchcraft traditions in Britain or the United States as they are described by researchers. New Zealand witches are not concerned about using any prescribed, hallowed or hereditary tools, ingredients or procedures. (For example, in a dozen years of attending hundreds of rituals I have never seen anyone use an *athame*, the ritual knife mentioned in most witchcraft manuals. I have only seen a cauldron used once or twice — usually an old cooking pot or wok or metal rubbish bin are used.) There are no prescribed word forms or formulas which are believed to possess special inherent power. In the example of a spell to banish anger given in the workshop notes above, it is suggested that the spell-maker hurl the stone while “chanting suitable words” which they devise themselves. This idea of hurling a stone is taken from Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance* (1989: 130), but Starhawk advises hurling the stone into water and sets out a rhyming chant to accompany the symbolic action.

It is impossible to make a dangerous mistake, or any mistake, while doing a spell. No ritual specialist or high priestess is believed to “know best” or is required to perform the spell or to guarantee its efficacy. Anyone may do a spell for any purpose she chooses (except to harm someone) and may invent the spell herself, choosing the symbolic objects, words and actions she wants to use. There are two reasons for this extreme creativity. One is that in its early days the movement in New Zealand attracted a number of feminist artists who helped determine the nature of witches’ rituals. The other has to do with New Zealand’s diasporic and extremely isolated geographic location and the national character. The modern witchcraft movement in New Zealand, being only two decades old, cannot claim deep indigenous roots, or links with ancient Wiccan covens, and New Zealand witches simply do not have access to a lot of the paraphernalia used in witches’ rituals described in many manuals.¹⁹ New Zealanders have always taken pride in their do-it-yourself genius which they claim derives from their pioneering roots.²⁰ New Zealand witches are mistresses of improvisation: when the British ritual manual requires “snow,” the witch who lives in Auckland (where it never snows) chips ice off the freezer and puts it in the food processor, or invents a new ritual altogether. The ingredients for love spells are gathered from the pantry and garden and symbolic associations are assigned on a personal basis: for example, salt for faithfulness, zesty good health or preservation; rose petals for romance, kindness, or beauty; dried chillies for excitement, exotic travel, or passionate sex.

Anthropological definitions of ritual have been as contested as their theories about how ritual works, but many definitions stress that rituals follow a prescribed sequence of events whose order is invariant and culturally recognized (for example, Kapferer 1983: 194, Rappaport 1999: 24). While the substance of New Zealand witches’ rituals is largely improvised or invented — no two rituals celebrating one of the seasonal festivals are ever the same — the form of the rituals is more or less invariant²¹ and follows the structure culturally recognized by most modern Western witches (described in the earlier section “Feminist Witches’ Beliefs and Practices”). Each element of this structure has a function considered essential for the working of magic. Witches say that casting the circle takes them “between the worlds,” creating a safe, sacred space which becomes “the container” for ritual-making. The purification enables women to clear mental clutter and distractions, the invocation of the elements and directions affirms women’s connection to the earth and its powers, and meditation, creative visualization and chanting assist movement to a heightened state of consciousness. Without this framing, the symbolic activity, no matter how inventive, would be deemed shallow and ineffective.

New Zealand feminist witches’ understandings about the working of magic conform in large part with canonical anthropological explanations of magic whereby a causal connection between things which resemble each other (homeopathic magic) or are contiguous in time and space

(contagious magic) is rationalized, and the fate of one object is believed to influence that of the object with which it is symbolically linked. Both of the spells given as examples in the workshop notes (above) are examples of homeopathic magic: the stone resembled cold, hard anger, and the clear water resembled a clear mind. An example of contagious magic would be where a woman wanting to address her concern about her child might incorporate a toy or article of clothing belonging to the child in her spell. The symbols used by the witches I studied always have homeopathic or contagious properties. The potency of the symbolic object or action, and the causal connection between symbol and referent depend upon the woman's conscious acknowledgement of these links: both kinds of symbols are regarded as potent not simply because of their resemblance to or contact with an associated object or person, but because they evoke a potent psychological connection for the woman doing the spell.

Like Frazer's magicians, feminist witches also rationalize the potency of the symbolic act as having to do with a natural energy or force which connects everything: people, objects, nature, the elements, human thought, speech, emotions, motivations, and the universe at large. In point six of the workshop facilitator's notes, this force is called "the universal energy flow." The manipulation of symbols and symbolic action alone do not produce change, it is believed to come about through a complex interaction between the psychological state of the woman doing the spell, her symbolic acts using symbolic objects, and the creative energy connecting all things in the world at large and beyond. A spell done within a circle of coven members is often stronger because it is assisted by the *communitas* generated within the group. The group gives its full concentration and support to the woman doing the spell and the psychic energy is intensified. This interaction of and flow between inner and outer worlds, physical and social worlds, emotion, imagination and intent, has some resonance with what Lévy-Bruhl (1985) termed "mystical participation" and with what Desjarlais (1992) called "an ecology of knowledge." It has been described by many ethnographers of indigenous peoples, from the Inupiat of the frozen North Slope of Alaska (E. Turner 1996) to the Yarralin of Northern Territory, Australia (Rose 1992). Contemporary feminist witches in New Zealand share this conception of the inter-relatedness of all, where all parts of the system can communicate with and influence all other parts.

Knowing they have invented the spell does not stop these witches from attributing to it a power which is greater than human artifact. While they consider themselves to be personally empowered through doing magic, they also believe that the ritual can in turn have a powerful impact upon them, and may produce unexpected outcomes. In interviews they spoke frequently of "channeling," "harnessing," and "working with" energy. Here are five women's comments from a coven discussion:

I get a sense that ritual concretizes spirit. The group energy focuses on a change we want to bring about, an energy we want to invoke, a time we want to honor. We call upon that spirit energy and bring it into the group and channel it into something that becomes almost concrete. It becomes a physical act. It's no longer something intangible that you're wanting or dreaming or fantasizing about, but something very concrete that you're doing.

It's a very symbolic act. It's also very creative. It's like harnessing that energy and creating with it, and bringing into being what it is that you're trying to do in a symbolic way.

Ritual begins with creative visualization. You see things in your head. After a while I come to know that they're real, and they're something that feels right for me. By doing the ritual I'm solidifying the visualization and I'm moving it from the unformed into an increasing level of form. That focuses my purpose even more, and it reaches my subconscious so I put myself in the way of opportunities that can lead me to getting my desire or need met.

If you do a ritual on your own, that's very powerful, but the whole idea of doing it in a group is that the energy is increased by more than the women in the group. The sense I get is that you've actually invited the Goddess to become part of the circle and her energy is there. You are calling upon that energy — the Goddess energy. Once when I had my eyes closed in the circle I actually saw four of my favourite Goddess images come to the circle, sit down in between us, and join our circle of linked hands. That gave me a sense of what happens when you invoke certain Goddesses. That energy does come and join you and become part of the ritual group. So you're working with energy rather than asking that energy to intervene to do it for you.

We're taking it from the intangible and giving it form.

For these witches, energy is present in embodied form in all of nature. It also exists in disembodied form: a house may have "good energy" and "healing energy" may be invoked during a ritual. There is energy which is disembodied but has strong links to the physical dimension, such as "woman energy," "male energy," and "earth energy." Energy is anthropomorphized: it can be gentle or angry. Energy can be invoked, generated, focussed, increased or altered either deliberately or unconsciously by people's thoughts or behavior. A personal goal can be "energized" by concentrated thought. The distinction between witches' personal energy and the energy outside themselves, between the seen and the unseen, the formed and the unformed, is not a well-drawn line. Witches believe that in ritual they can "tune in" or "tap in" to an energy greater than themselves, the creative force which brought and brings all things into being. The symbolic act performed during a ritual is a concretization of personal intention which helps hold a woman to that intention and activate her will, but this process is made more potent because the woman is aligning her energy with a greater universal energy and working with it. For feminist witches the feminist project of increasing women's agency in their lives needs to be contextualized in terms of this understanding. A woman's personal agency is enhanced and supported by being integrated with the greater energy system which has over-riding agency in bringing about transformation. Some examples of how witchcraft serves the feminist project of self-empowerment, as a first step towards social change, are given below.

Empowerment and Healing

When the witches I studied do spells, they are seldom looking for dramatic answers to crises in their lives or for miracles. Spells are mostly done to address the kinds of situations and problems that occur in most people's regular lives from time to time. By performing a spell, a woman gains a sense of being able to do something practical and useful about a problem, and of having greater agency in her life. As Starhawk (1989: 125) writes: "Spells... go one step further than most forms

of psychotherapy. They allow us not only to listen to and interpret the unconscious but also to speak to it in the language it understands [through symbols].... Through spells, we can attain the most important power — the power to change ourselves”.

The spell described below, which includes both imitative and contagious magic, was performed by a twenty year old woman who wanted to cast off her feeling that she occupied an inferior position in her family and to acknowledge herself as an adult equal to the other adults in her family. (She is the youngest in her family.) The group (of which I was a member) was seated in a circle on the floor. The circle had been cast, a purification carried out, and the directions invoked. Scarlett (her witch name) began by telling us how she felt she was the “ugliest and boringest” member of her family.²² She showed us a picture she had drawn of her family with herself as a little, dirty girl at the end of a family of five. She ripped up this picture and put it into a box through a slot in the top, symbolically destroying this image of her place in the family. She then produced a fragment of an old child’s garment, telling us that this was a symbol of her childhood; she had always worn dirty, paint-covered clothes (she later completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree). The clothing fragment was put into the box with the ripped-up picture.

Scarlett said she had a lot of childish habits which she wanted to leave behind; she did not detail these. She scattered dead leaves representing the habits in the center of the circle and trampled them. She then announced her new decision to wear clean, bright clothes and pulled a purple silk scarf out through the slot in the box. She produced some new patent leather shoes bought that day as a gift to herself, and put them on along with the scarf. Finally, she lit a very tall red candle to symbolize the bold adult status she was choosing to claim. The spell finished with all the women in the circle giving her three hearty cheers.

The second spell was done by an older woman, Jean, during a ritual workshop and was designed to help her “accept cronehood and aging.” It incorporated symbols which served a mnemonic function in the telling of her personal story and symbolic gift-giving by the other women in the circle. Jean set out a cloth and placed on it symbols representing different parts of her life. She spoke tearfully about the difficulty of giving up some sports altogether and accepting lower performance levels from herself in other sports as she got older. Jean talked about her fear of becoming less attractive according to society’s standards, and her frustration about her waning strength. She asked the women in the circle to give her gifts for her cronehood. Each of us spoke briefly, honoring her age and courage, wishing her well, and giving her a “gift”; these included wisdom, acceptance, expectation, and celebration of her inner beauty.

During the interviews I conducted with witches, they frequently made the point that performing rituals gave them a greater sense of being able to control or direct their own lives, to assimilate change as Jean was attempting to do, or to heal the past and assume greater agency in the future as Scarlett was working toward. Sybil said:

Ritual does give a sense of being really powerful and instrumental in your own path, rather than just waiting for things to happen or come your way, or accepting “What will be will be.” It’s more like: “Hey, I do believe in my destiny, but also I believe that I have the ability to bring about change and be instrumental in that”.

Joan said:

Ritual creates a feeling that you do have some sort of control, that you’re not a mere whim of fate, that you are actively going to take steps. Quite often after a ritual a woman will ring up and say, “Look, after that ritual I bloody well told so-and-so to stuff off!” or “I did

this" or "I made a decision" that she had been prevaricating about. The fact that she has consciously chosen to conduct this ritual makes it an *active* act.

Through ritual women become the catalysts for their own magical transformation, which begins as a result of "energy shifts" generated in the course of the ritual and felt in the body. One workshop facilitator, Juliet, told me:

In ritual the container of sacred space is made, energy is raised within it, and energy is moved. There's often something surrendered. I know people do say, "Something left me." People really experience something happening — they let go of something and open to something else. Sometimes they might need to do it several times. People experience an energy shift and then they go out in their life and they find spontaneously different things start to happen. Things really have changed and people come back and report change.

The use of witches' rituals for personal emotional and psychological healing has been reported by numerous scholars and practitioners, including all those who have conducted ethnographic studies of contemporary Western witchcraft. Greenwood (2000b:150) says that ritual may convert feelings of powerlessness into experiences of empowerment, and that "magical ritual may be a cathartic space of transformation of the social realm" where "social relationships of power from the ordinary world are negotiated and transgressed." This may be true, but the quotation from Juliet (above) and my observations suggest that the benefits of witches' rituals are not limited to catharsis: rituals may instigate a process of change which often continues long after the ritual.

In *The Ritual Process* Victor Turner (1969:4) argued for the "extreme importance of religious beliefs and practices for both the maintenance and radical transformation of human social and psychical structures," but his emphasis was on the latter — the way in which ritual represents an "anti-structure" in opposition to the institutionalized, norm-governed structure of society. For Turner, rituals are generated out of conditions of liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority (1969:116). Feminist witches' rituals are such. Through them women assert their right and claim the power to transform firstly their own psychical structures and ultimately their structural inferiority within patriarchal society. Lea told me:

I believe that how we perceive reality has an awful lot to do with how it happens. Many things are possible if you change your point of view. If you send out, "I believe this can change. I believe this can be different," I think there's a very good chance it *can* be different. We can see possibilities that we were unable to see before, and move into those very quickly, and work with those very quickly.

Conclusion

New Zealand feminist witches' theories of ritual action are based on a worldview which "sees things not as fixed objects, but as swirls of energy," and a belief that "if we cause a change in the energy patterns, they in turn will cause a change in the physical world" (Starhawk 1989:126). Witches believe that when their own energy is concentrated and channeled during a ritual, it can influence the broader energy currents in the world beyond. The cast circle is a liminal place alive with potentiality. Symbolic objects and visualized images become channels for witches' power, but they are simply props: they have no inherent power. "Props may be useful, but it is the mind that works magic," Starhawk says (1989:124). Similarly, Z. Budapest (1986:1) writes: "It isn't the tools which make the magic come to pass, it is our own brain". Symbols and images work through suggestion, implanting certain ideas in the unconscious mind which in turn influence the ritual-

maker to actualize those ideas. Causation and participation are both integral to the process of making magic; it is impossible to separate them analytically as "two orientations to our cosmos" as Tambiah does (1990: 105). Moreover, these witches do not distinguish between this world and an otherworld as Greenwood has proposed for the British witches she studied: indeed, I have never heard this term, or an equivalent one, used by New Zealand witches.

For these feminist witches, magic is not anti-science, primitive science or pseudo-science. It sits alongside science as another way of addressing a problem, and is often used in addition to the problem-solving strategies used by people in the rest of society. For example, a woman trying to come to terms with surviving incest might decide to have psychological counseling, to confront her abuser, to enroll in a workshop for incest survivors, and to do a healing ritual with supportive friends. A woman who is afraid of being in a house alone at night might take a self defense course and do a nightly self-protection spell.

Through their rituals these women experience themselves as accessing their inner power and connecting with a power beyond themselves. Even magic whose primary purpose is instrumental incorporates aesthetic, expressive and dramatic components which are integrated with and serve its instrumentality. Magic also serves a larger political goal of personal and social transformation. Stein, a well-known writer on feminist witchcraft, says that rituals create a microcosm, a "little universe," within which women try out what they want to be, and what they want the "big universe" to be (1990:2). This is very much in the same vein as Geertz, who said: "In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world" (1973: 112-113).

At the beginning of this paper I referred to the current fairly widespread popular fascination with magic in Western societies. Magic's continuing allure, not just for those who choose witchcraft as a spiritual path, but also for many in Western society more generally, may reflect a yearning to bring together the world as imagined and the world as lived, an attempt to get in touch with another side of human experience: the reality we are familiar with from dreams, fantasy and myths. Believing in magic and believing in science apparently presents neither a difficulty nor a contradiction for many people: if it requires switching between two worldviews, this switch is made. For feminist witches, however, magic and science do not implicate different worldviews: magic is simply science we do not yet know how to explain. Frazer (1994: 806) put it in similar terms: "The dreams of magic may one day be the waking realities of science."

Notes

¹ All three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* were filmed simultaneously in New Zealand by New Zealand director Peter Jackson.

² Sir James Frazer's famous thesis postulating an evolutionary progression from an Age of Magic through an Age of Religion to an Age of Science was developed in his multi-volume *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890, with a second edition in 1900, and a third (in twelve volumes) published 1906-1915. Frazer would have seen the contemporary Western interest in magic as a "relapse" which, while fit for scientific examination, was an anachronism which ought not to be indulged (see Introduction to the 1994 edition of *The Golden Bough* by Robert Frazer, p. xxiii). Frazer was influenced by Sir Edward Tylor, whose first volume of *Primitive Culture* (1871) included a discussion of magic. Tylor saw elementary religion as employing a "personalized causation theory", while science employs the concept of "impersonal causation" (Tambiah 1990:50).

³ Winkelman was referring to shamanic consciousness and related healing practices which employ altered states of consciousness. Contemporary witchcraft can be included in this category.

⁴ In June 1951 in Britain the Witchcraft Act, which declared witchcraft a crime, was repealed and witchcraft began to emerge into the open. Three years later Gerald Gardner published *Witchcraft Today* where he set out some of the beliefs and practices of witchcraft which, many would claim, he largely invented himself. Gardner claimed

that witchcraft was an ancient nature religion which had survived by going underground during the European witch-hunts, and that he acquired his knowledge following initiation into an ancient coven.

⁵ The initial fieldwork was done for my doctoral thesis *Remembering the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual-makers in New Zealand* (1993). Articles on aspects of this work include Rountree 1997, 1999, and 2001.

⁶ There are also women and men in New Zealand who belong to other witchcraft traditions and other varieties of neo-paganism such as traditional Wicca, Druidry and Western shamanism.

⁷ In her ethnography of British witches, Luhrmann (1989) found that many had jobs in some field of science, notably computer science.

⁸ As Berger (1999:19) points out, witches consider it "unethical to send healing magic to an ill person who has not given his or her permission."

⁹ Aotearoa is the indigenous Maori name for New Zealand. The book includes a lot of material on Maori knowledge of and myths about the local landscape, and Maori nature-based religious rituals for various seasons.

¹⁰ In the Northern Hemisphere, witches associate earth with North and fire with South.

¹¹ An excellent history of anthropological ideas on these subjects is Stanley Tambiah's *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (1990).

¹² Catherine Bell (1992) provides a comprehensive discussion of theoretical descriptions of ritual which have tended to dichotomize ritual and belief (as the major components of religion), conceptualizing their structural relationship as parallel to the relationship between action and thought.

¹³ See Skorupski (1976) for an account of the symbolist traditions.

¹⁴ See Luhrmann (1989:345-348) for a succinct summary of this debate.

¹⁵ Lewis acknowledges the difficulty of ritual actors articulating meaning in relation to his study of puberty rituals amongst the Gnao of the West Sepik (New Guinea), arguing that sometimes rituals are the best or only medium for expressing something important: "We must expect our informants to be at times inarticulate or silent about part of what ritual means to them, or does to them, or makes them feel" (1980:24). I would suggest, and I think Lewis implies, that silence or "not being able to say" is not the same as "not knowing."

¹⁶ Frazer had seen magic as schematized thought and ritual as thought-in-practice (See Fraser's Introduction to 1994 edition, p. xxxix).

¹⁷ Greenwood similarly commented that bodily experience is the "very essence" of British feminist witches' spirituality (1996:114).

¹⁸ These notes were reproduced in my doctoral thesis (Rountree 1993) with the author's permission.

¹⁹ Crystals, incense, oils and candles are easy to come by in retail stores and markets, but only one shop in Auckland is explicitly a witches' supply shop, and it has a very narrow range of stock. Its main business appears to come from the provision of various kinds of divinatory readings. Another shop selling many herbs and potions closed down recently. I was told this was because the owner "wanted a break," rather than because business was slow.

²⁰ The "Kiwi bloke" prides himself on being able to fix anything with "a bit of 4x2 and some no. 8 wire."

²¹ Sometimes the purification precedes the casting of the circle, and the components of chanting, dancing, drumming and singing are brought in at various different points during the heart of the ritual.

²² This was astonishing to hear, because Scarlett, to our eyes, appeared attractive and interesting.

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