Cybercoven: Being a witch online[1]

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Summary: Through a case study of one email discussion group, *cybercoven,* along with an analysis of a selection of typical Witchcraft web sites, I show how a rethinking of the divide between "virtual" and "real" allows solitary Witches to practice their earth-based religion online. Included in the analysis is a discussion of how divination rites are affected by online practice.

Résumé : À travers une étude de cas à l'intérieur d'un groupe de discussion sur le site internet, *cybercoven,* et l'analyse de quelques sites web s'intéressant à la sorcellerie, je démontre ici comment une réévaluation de la division entre le « virtuel » et le « réel » permet à des sorcières solitaires de pratiquer leur religion « terrestre » en ligne. L'article aborde aussi l'influence que peuvent avoir les sites internet sur les différents rites de divination.

Witchcraft is a Pagan religious tradition which began gaining significant popularity in North America in the 1970s and has continued to grow both in numbers and visibility. Though some practitioners claim to be adhering to an ancient religious system, the modern day forms of Witchcraft most likely originated with British civil servant, Gerald Gardner, in the 1950s (see Hutton 1999 for an extensive history of modern pagan Witchcraft). As a Pagan tradition, Witchcraft is a nature religion which focusses worship around the Goddess(es) and God(s) as they are manifest in the natural world. There is a wide range of branches of Witchcraft from the hierarchical Gardnerian Wicca to the radical feminist Dianic Witchcraft. The focus of this essay is on Witches who follow an eclectic path, drawing from the various branches of Witchcraft, particularly popular texts such as Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance,* information floating through the Internet and other popular culture resources. Many mainstream bookstores now have shelves devoted to Witchcraft and Paganism. Television shows with Witch characters (such as *Charmed* and *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*) are becoming popular. If one were to do an Internet search of "Wicca" or "Witch" one would find enough hits to keep one occupied for weeks. *Egroups.com,* a discussion group hub, had over eight

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hundred email discussion groups related to Witchcraft when I began this research over a year ago. It has since been taken over by *Yahoo! Groups* and has over twelve hundred discussion groups under the heading of "Wicca and Witchcraft." Furthermore, there are thousands of websites: commercial sites for selling Witchcraft and/or Pagan products; personal home pages for explaining personal belief and practice; and organizational sites, such as *The Witches' Voice* <www.witchvox.com>, for providing community links or tradition specific information.

What is interesting about the large Witchcraft presence online is that, for the most part, Witches focus on participating in an earth-based religion which focusses on the immanence of the sacred, and a bringing together of the physical and the spiritual in belief and practice, yet the medium is virtual. Starhawk, perhaps one of the most famous and most widely read American Witches, argues that immanence is one of the core principles of Witchcraft (Starhawk 1999: 22). The term "immanence" refers to the idea that deity (usually the Goddess) is understood to be right here, in the natural world. The imagery often used is that the Earth, including everything from rocks and trees to animals and human beings, is the body of the Goddess. Starhawk writes, "Witchcraft can be seen as a religion of ecology. Its goal is harmony with nature, so that life may not just survive, but thrive" (Starhawk 1999: 35). This idea of the nature-focus of Witchcraft is corroborated by others within the movement. Practitioner Ed Fitch writes that

> Wicca is, by its very nature, a creed which honors the Earth. Rather than having a harsh Old Testament directive to dominate and be the terror of all other creatures and to view the world as evil, Wiccans instead view the earth as the very personification of humankind's original and still pre-eminent deity. As such, Wicca is precisely in line with today's most perceptive thinkers in caring for our planet and its variegated ecology. (Fitch quoted in Buckland 1995: 155)

It is difficult, however, to find one fixed definition of what "nature" or "earth-based" means within Witchcraft. As scholar Joanne Pearson points out, even though Witches claim nature to be sacred,

> their response to nature is often confused, revealing both intimacy and distance as they shape nature with the Wheel of the Year, sacred circles and ritual to suit their own needs for relationship with the earth. The nature/culture duality thus persists in nature religion, reflecting a turn to nature as a source of revitalisation, attempting to re-engage with a nature from which participants feel estranged, to re-enchant the natural world which has been exploited and dominated. (Pearson 2000: 5)

Even though there are inconsistencies and/or disagreements on the definition of, and relationship with nature, its importance is undisputed. Because of this importance it is significant to ask, What are so many nature-focused Witches doing in the intangible world of cyberspace?

Witchcraft may be growing but that does not mean it has full acceptance through all sectors of North American life as a valid religious tradition;

many people wrongly associate Witchcraft with Satanism and therefore treat Witches with contempt drawn from fear. Nor are the numbers as vast as those of the "traditional" religions such as Christianity or Judaism. The numbers are hard to pin down as many Witches practice in secret (often due to possible misunderstanding). Helen A. Berger reports Aiden Kelly's estimate of three hundred thousand in the United States, but believes this number to be high. She claims one hundred fifty thousand to two hundred thousand to be more accurate (Berger 1999: 8-11). Because of the association with Satanism and the relatively small number of practitioners, contemporary Witches often find that their family and friends misunderstand and fear their chosen religious tradition. They find it risky to come out of the broom closet, so to speak. Many are solitaries; that is, they are not members of a coven (a group of practitioners). They practice on their own, behind closed doors or in the safety of their own backyards. This practice can, of course, be very isolating. Therefore, many go online to access a spiritual community which they cannot, or sometimes dare not, find in "real life."

Online, these Witches can be somewhat anonymous, and thus safe, while encountering other people with similar beliefs and similar experiences of exclusion. The Internet, however, is not solely a community of friends or a place to share stories of hardship and pain. It is also a resource for ritual practice—Witches share spells, recipes for healing or blessing oils, sabbat rituals, all manner of practical information on how to *do* Witchcraft, along with theological information on deities or festivals. Through this sharing of ritual information the Internet becomes, for these Witches, more than a tool; it functions as a sacred space, envisioned as a web of energy which extends beyond the computer and the computer-mediated "virtual" reality to connect the "virtual" and the "physical" into a network of energy from which Witches claim to draw spiritual power.

This essay is an exploration into the world of Internet Witchcraft. With the help of *cybercoven*, a discussion group for solitary Witches, along with an examination of a selection of typical websites and an exploration of divination rites, I will show how a rethinking of the "virtual"/"real" divide allows Witches to practice their earth-based religion online.

To help me with my questions I started a discussion group through *egroups.com* in which I invited solitary Witches to participate in talking about the role of the Internet in their practice. I called the group *cybercoven*, and introduced myself as interested in Witchcraft both academically and personally. As individuals requested membership into the group they were asked to give permission for use of the discussion in my academic research. Those who replied in the affirmative (which was everyone who requested membership, some with obvious excitement about assisting the academic study of modern Witchcraft) were added to the discussion group. As the discussions developed, I began to see how the Internet is not just perceived as

a tool these Witches use to assist their practice. Rather they see the Internet as a sacred space wherein they find inspiration for their practice, validation as Witches and like-minded friends who understand the problems they face in the "real" (or physical) world.

At its peak *cybercoven* had twenty-three members. After a year and a half of existence it disbanded due to gradual lack of use (a common fate for email discussion groups). The group jointly decided to limit numbers so as to keep it relatively intimate. In some discussion groups numbers are in the hundreds and discussion inevitably loses intimacy (or remains within a core group of regular posters). As the numbers of *cybercoven* are small it is important to note that I do not intend this examination to be representative of all cyber-based Witchcraft. Rather the conclusions I draw are possible, but not exclusive, understandings of Witchcraft online.

To understand who the people of *cybercoven* are, it is important to consider that identity is a contentious issue on the Internet, where one is potentially able to represent oneself as a completely different person than one is in "real" life. Sherry Turkle, in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995) believes we have moved from a culture of calculation (modernity) to a culture of simulation (postmodernity). She writes

> In the story of constructing identity in the culture of simulation, experiences on the Internet figure prominently, but these experiences can only be understood as part of a larger cultural context. That context is the story of the eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self, which is occurring both in advanced scientific fields of research and in the patterns of everyday life. (Turkle 1995: 10)

An individual may construct a computer-based identity which does not obviously match her or his offline identity. However, postmodern thinkers suggest that offline identity is also continually being unsettled so that the idea of one authentic identity is harder and harder to maintain. Donna Haraway proposes an understanding of cyborg identity which calls us to acknowledge our "permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 1991: 154). Similarly Chris Weedon emphasizes how subjectivity is produced in socially specific discursive practices which are neither unified nor fixed. She writes

> Neither social reality nor the "natural" world has fixed intrinsic meanings which language reflects or expresses. Different languages and different discourses within the same language divide up the world and give it meaning in ways which cannot be reduced to one another through translation or by an appeal to universally shared concepts reflecting a fixed reality. (Weedon 1997: 22)

Subjectivity is not fixed. It is dependent on discourse, language, situation. It can be contradictory and fluctuating, regardless of whether it is found online or offline. Identity can be seen as authentic only in the moment, in the

context of specific situations. The situation of an online discussion group highlights that momentary authenticity because, as Turkle observes, the "computer is an evocative object that causes old boundaries to be renegotiated" (Turkle 1995: 22). The way someone represents her or himself online may be different than offline, but the online identity is not necessarily less authentic. Understanding this momentary authenticity is important to analyzing data from online discussion groups. On the one hand I recognize that I cannot know who is sitting at the keyboard behind the messages. On the other hand I am involved in an interaction with a person who "seems" real to me. In order for that interaction to make sense I have no choice but to accept the description members of *cybercoven* have given of themselves as authentic (in as much as any subjectivity is authentic in the moment) and draw my conclusions accordingly.

The vast majority of *cybercoven* members claim to be women. Only one member has identified himself as male, while a few have not identified themselves by gender. The members come from a number of countries: Canada, the United States, Australia, England and Sweden. Most are from the U.S. and speak English as their first language. Their ages range from 16 to 61. Due to their access to computers and email accounts, they are most likely middle-class, which fits with Berger's statistical information (Berger 1999). They have a variety of religious experience anywhere from being a fifth generation Witch or Pagan to just starting out. At least a third were raised Christian. The majority claim to follow an eclectic path of Witchcraft, drawing from a variety of traditions and practices.

In addition to my directed questions about Internet use, other issues have been introduced to the *cybercoven* discussion by various members. Members have raised theological questions about deities, reincarnation and interpretations of dreams and visions; practical questions about covens, rituals, spells, initiation, altars and Tarot; and relational questions about soul mates, dealing with family mistrust of Witchcraft as a religion and raising children in the tradition. It is clear that many members of *cybercoven* use the discussion list as a resource for their personal solitary practice. They also use the list as a way to find validation in their religious practice; through talking about their experiences with people who understand and have similar experiences these Witches confirm for themselves that Witchcraft is not a "fantasy" or an unreasonable religious choice.

Discussion lists, though, are not the only way that Witches engage in community building online. A couple of *cybercoven* members have their own websites, which are less interactive than discussion groups, but hold larger amounts of information. For example, Tranquil[2] has a site at <www.catscave.com>, which includes a comprehensive library of herbal information (including magical food and drink information, along with recipes for herbal health and beauty care), moon phases, correspondences, deities, craftwork (candles, charms and other items) along with links to other sig-

nificant sites including online Tarot reading. Some Witchcraft sites include spells; others provide guides to writing/creating one's own spells. Most are concerned with information which can assist ritual activity, if not actually provide space for the online ritual (as in the situation of online Tarot, which I will come back to below, and the increasing development of online shrines such as the Shrine of the Forgotten Goddesses at <http://inanna.vitualave.net>).

Ritual activity is an important component in community building. Anne M. Hornsby, in her Durkheimian analysis of online community, comments that ritual is significant in that it produces social ties and symbols (Hornsby 1998: 92). She writes

> Rituals make it possible to control and attach individuals to groups even when people are not in each other's presence. During moments of jointly repeating common gestures, ideas and emotions circulate among group members like a kind of mental current flowing through everyone. (Hornsby 1998: 82)

Hornsby is looking at the online practice of social ritual, such as mating and funeral rites. I would like to extend her questions to the performance of other types of rites online, particularly the religious rites of solitary Witchcraft. Because solitary Witches do their rites by themselves, they are not part of a coven and often do not subscribe to one set tradition (with a strict set of rules to follow). How can ritual, which is done in a solitary environment, produce social ties and common symbolism?

One of the most important roles of the Internet for Solitaries is as a place to find, share or describe spells. Whether it be on discussion lists, such as *cybercoven*, or larger websites, spells are travelling through cyberspace available to whomever might want them at a click of the mouse button. I will use a hypothetical example to illustrate this point. If a Witch were interested in divination spells (a common ritual among Witches), how might she proceed in her online search of information on divination?

First, if she were a member of a discussion group like *cybercoven*, she might ask for assistance from the group, as one member did when looking for information about using regular playing cards as divination tools. Other members may then give tips on books to read and sites to go to, along with their own experiences in the area.

One site this Witch may be directed to is *Branwen's Cauldron of Light* <www.branwenscauldron.com>, which is both an occult supplies store and an information library. There the seeker might click on the "Book of Shadows" icon, a symbol for a book in which individual Witches or covens keep records of ritual activity, spells and invocations, sometimes called a "Grimoire," and be provided with information for *doing* Witchcraft. Following subsequent links would bring her to a divination spell which outlines when, what with, and how to perform the rite. Along with such ritual and spell information, *Branwen's Cauldren of Light* also provides access to a

"Witchcraft Forum," which is a bulletin board service where Witches post ideas and responses and a variety of essays on Witchcraft.

Another place the seeking Witch may be advised to look is *The Witches' Voice* <www.witchvox.com>, a network commonly cited and praised by Witches and Pagans online which serves the larger Pagan community. Here one can find basics of Witchcraft and Paganism, archived articles on issues relevant to Witches and Pagans and links to other sites. One link this seeker may choose to follow is *The Avatars' Library* <www.geocities.com/Area51/Chamber/8066/index.html>. Here she might go into the "Grimoire" page where she finds a link to divination. Once on the divination page she can chose from a variety of styles: Tarot, Runes, Palmistry and Scrying. Clicking on "Tarot" leads to a brief guide on how to do Tarot readings. But at *The Avatars' Library* she is unlikely to find set spells because, as the siteowners write, "You may be looking for spells, but you won't find many (if any at all) because I believe that the most powerful spells are those that are created by the caster for a particular purpose."

The seeking Witch may in turn be sent to a fellow discussion member's website. For instance, if she were a member of *cybercoven*, Tranquil might let her know about her site and its link to free online Tarot readings. This link takes her to *Annikin Divination Systems* <www.annikin.com> where she is asked to concentrate on a question and then click the button. Her reading comes up with images and explanations and an offer for a weekly reading sent directly to her email address. Or perhaps a discussion group member will offer to do a reading for her and post the results on the list, as Elowen, a *cybercoven* member, has done.

In all of these processes the seeking Witch finds out what she needs to know through tapping into online networks. Her community guides her through the process, shares experiences, in some cases even participates in ritual processes "with" her, as in the case of Elowen's reading. She has not yet needed to do a blind search (if she did she would find that search engines such as *Altavista.com* have over ninety-eight thousand sites under "divination" and over one hundred ninety-five sites under "Wicca"—numbers which are up by about twenty to thirty thousand since I began this research in early 2000).

Once she has found her information and begun her practice (perhaps using a set spell or writing her own) this Witch, if she were a member of *cybercoven*, might share her divination experiences with others in the group—to make sure she is doing it right, or just to get feedback to which she has no other access. This feedback and sharing provides her with a feeling of validation in the form of a realization that just because she is the only Witch she knows does not mean she is "abnormal." There are other people who believe in the same things, practice the same sorts of rituals, celebrate the same holidays as she. She is not alone.

I will now move from the hypothetical to the actual. I asked the members of *cybercoven* why they go online and how they feel about the possibilities of the Internet. Here are some of their responses:

Amy: My family are devoted Christians and I can't really find support from them so I turned to the Internet.

Brook: I use the Internet to find everything from spells, crafts, and tools.

Joy: I mostly use it for learning of the God and Goddess, when looking for a specific kind of spell, or something to base one on, and for information on crystals and candles.

Sarah: I started using the web as a solitary to find some people that might be able to help me in my learning and to give me an idea of the religion....It is a good way to get in touch with other Witches like me and talk with some people that have about the same beliefs than you.

Nancy: I read a great deal but want contact with others who have the same feelings about Wicca as I.

Kethlenda: Mostly I use the Internet as a way of having some like-minded companionship, basically. I know very few people in the flesh who share my path.

These responses indicate how useful the Internet is as a tool for solitary Witches. They also point to the need for community, the desire for finding a place of belonging. As another member wrote, "although I have deliberately chosen to be an Eclectic Wiccan and enjoy worshipping in my own way it can be a little lonely/daunting" (Hecuba). It is clear that Internet-based communities provide a needed sense of belonging for online Witches. There are other questions, however, which need to be asked: How might Internet-based communities alter the practice of Witchcraft? Is online Witchcraft different than that which is practiced offline? Can an earth-based tradition be replicated or extended to cyberspace?

In a 1998 *New York Times* story by Marjorie Ingall, Kristin Spence, a Witch who uses the Internet, commented that Witchcraft and computers are somewhat similar. "It's almost like divination, a magical thing. You have a spell or computer program you want to create, so you find an elegant way to use a main routine and subroutines that refer back to themselves. You construct a system of elements that need to work together in harmony and balance to give the desired outcome" (Ingall 1998). Computers and Witchcraft may be compatible, but that does not mean adaptations are not needed. To explore these adaptations I will look again at the divination example.

Tarot has been a subject of considerable interest in *cybercoven*. How to do it, which cards members use, how to go about remembering the meanings are all hot topics for this group of Witches.

A significant key to Tarot is, in the words of one *cybercoven* member, "to build a relationship with [the cards]" (Merlin). How one goes about doing this, says another member, is to "handle them, get the feel of them"

(Elowen). Elowen gives further advice: "To make the cards your own you should sleep with one of them under you pillow at a time and connect with that card." This is consistent with literature on Tarot. For instance, Alfred Douglas maintains that the cards are to be imprinted with one's personal vibrations. He writes,

> Never allow your Tarot cards to be handled casually by the curious.... You yourself should handle the cards as frequently as possible... the cards must become imbued with what one might call your personal vibrations. A kind of rapport must be created between you and your personal pack of Tarot cards. (Douglas 1972: 202)

But how does one physically connect with the cards if these cards are in cyberspace?

The practice of doing Tarot online requires a rethinking of this ritual act. In online Tarot there are no physical cards to handle. The significance shifts from touching the cards to sending the energy, or to put it in Douglas' terms, to imprint personal vibrations. As Tranquil of *cybercoven* writes, "You don't send your energy into the cards, you send it into 'cyberspace' the same basic theory as sending energy in spells, if you send it with a purpose and you put the energy into it, the results usually work." There are a number of questions this theory raises: How is this energy sent? Is it a thought process unconnected to physical reality? Does this mean Tarot is all in the head; is it merely psychological? Is this not separating the physical and the spiritual, a process which counters the goals of Witchcraft?

To answer these questions we must return again to the question of the "real" versus the "virtual." We must consider the relationship cyberspace has to the physical realities of everyday life. Is cyberspace necessarily "unearthy"? Jodi O'Brien asks in her gender analysis of online communications,

> When we enter cyberspace do we really leave the physical behind and move into the realm of "words, thoughts and ideas" where the signs somehow float free from the signified?... How long will cyber users continue to differentiate between an IRL [in real life] in which the physical equals the real and a transcendent space in which the imagined/authored equals pseudo reality or fantasy? (O'Brien 1999: 83)

Cyberspace need not be in opposition to physical space, any more so than the mind need be in opposition to the body. It is a body which clicks the mouse button, physical eyes which read off the monitor. A computer is a physical thing with a history in physical reality. Messages to discussion groups follow physical phone lines and computer circuits. Users may not fully understand this process but that does not make it less real or less physical.

Also, the ideas and thoughts which people come up with and present online (in discussion groups or on webpages) are not separate from offline existence, which is not the same thing as saying one's online and offline identities are identical. For example, everything I send out to cyberspace is influenced by my physical and social realities of being a white, middle-class,

Canadian woman of Russian Mennonite heritage (and my list of identity categories could go on and on). Even in situations where my representation of myself is different online than offline, the various identities are not so easily separable. They influence each other and are influenced by social situations we find ourselves in. My online persona, the thoughts I send forth, and my reception of what I receive are all integrally connected to my physical being.

In *The Spiral Dance,* Witch and environmental activist Starhawk (who can be found online at <www.starhawk.org>) writes,

> things are swirls of energy, vortexes of moving forces, currents in an ever-changing sea. Underlying the appearance of separateness, of fixed objects within a linear stream of time, reality is a field of energies that congeal, temporarily, into forms. In time, all "fixed" things dissolve, only to coalesce again into new forms, new vehicles. (Starhawk 1999: 42)

She is attempting to describe the worldview of Witchcraft which counters the dualistic separation of body and spirit while at the same time shows how there is more to this world than meets the eye. An earth-based worldview need not conceive of the physical as solely that which is solid and touchable. The idea is not to ignore the spiritual, the mind, energy. Rather, according to Starhawk, Witchcraft is about trying to integrate all aspects of life so that the physical is understood as inseparable from the spiritual (and vice versa). In this sense, the energy which a Witch sends into spells, or into a Tarot reading online, is energy which she understands to be born from and connected to the physical self. The advice and/or vision a cyber-based Tarot reading can provide will therefore have a very real affect on the Witch's offline practice and understanding of her place within Witchcraft. The communities developed online are not *merely* cybercommunities; they are networks for accessing and sharing energy, knowledge and ritual.

It may seem that by turning to the Internet to practice Witchcraft perpetuates the nature/culture dichotomy which Pearson notes in some nature religion. After all, the Internet is a cultural tool *par excellence.* Pearson's concern, however, reflects a prior assumption about nature as something separate from humans and human creations (culture). For example, she observes that some Witches, "see nature as all-inclusive, regarding all that we do as "natural" for we, as humans, are also part of nature. However, it remains a fact that most Pagans live in urban areas" (Pearson 2000: 12). I am uncertain why living in an urban area negates the belief that humans are part of nature and thus all they do and create is also part of nature. Representing "urban areas" as already separate from nature assumes a nature/ culture dichotomy. Witches who use the Internet to further their nature religion may not make the same assumption. I agree with Pearson that more consideration must be given to what "nature" means to Witches. However, to begin this consideration with a maintenance of the nature/culture divide is

not useful. My conclusions, based on this study of *cybercoven*, are that the use of the Internet by Witches in ritual process and community building reflects an understanding that nature and culture, the physical and the spiritual, body and energy/mind are *not* separate, nor separable.

Cybercoven members may be solitary Witches in terms of offline practice, but their activity online shows their need and desire for a community with which to share ritual. The fact that they share the information they do (often of a very personal nature) and can do ritual, such as Tarot, online points to their belief in both the reality of cyberspace—a reality which is not just in their heads but flows through their bodies in a "swirl of energy"—and the integration of physical and spiritual worlds. These Witches are not merely using the Internet to find out about their Craft; they are being Witches online.

Notes

1 A version of this paper was presented at the American Academy of Religion Eastern-International Regional meeting March 31, 2001 at Ithaca College, NY.

2 All cybercoven names have been changed for the sake of anonymity, unless members requested their online or magical names be used.

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