

**Ritual, Liminality and Communitas in Wiccan Open Circles and Covens in  
Canada and the United States**

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I declare that

RITUAL, LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS IN WICCAN OPEN CIRCLES AND  
COVENS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

is my own work and that all the sources that have been used or quoted have been  
indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for  
examination at Unisa or another qualification or at any other higher education  
institution.

.....

SIGNATURE

.....

DATE

I dedicate this to my husband Arno de Klerk,

whose love, support and encouragement made this possible.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Wiccan Open Circles, have been in existence since the early 1960's, which developed from an Outer Court system of Wicca. Since the individual small coven groups could not accommodate the growing interest in the religion, Outer Courts were formed. The purpose of an outer court system was designed so that High Priesthood of an existing traditional coven could provide a space where new witches would be trained and exposed to Wiccan ritual. Open Circles are similar to the Outer Court system because members of the public are able to experience the rituals that are similar in style to coven rituals and are also able to learn more about the religion. This study focuses on the ritual, liminality and communitas as it occurs in both Open Circle type rituals as well as traditional initiatory covens. In this is a qualitative study, making use of the various techniques of participant observation to gather data.

## **KEYWORDS**

Open Circles, Outer Court, Ritual, Liminality, Liminoid Phenomenon, Communitas, Wiccan, Coven, Pagan, Paganism, Belonging, Witchcraft, Witches.

## DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

**British traditional Wicca:** refers to all the traditions who can trace their lineage to the New Forest Coven(s) specific to the New Forest area in Britain, these traditions have oathbound material and are considered Mystery Traditions (Carriker, 2011).

**Communitas:** I like Turner's later definition of Communitas (Turner, 1982:78-79), where he describes three forms of communitas, as a "deep rather intense style of personal interaction that has something magical about it", where there is a mutual understanding on an existential level, and a feeling of solidarity amongst the group that can also develop into a protective social structure and the "normative communitas" where individuals seek an enduring form of communitas where relationships are maintained and more or less permanent.

**Coven:** A working group of witches, and in Wicca specifically refers to a bonded group of Wiccan initiates, where membership is fixed and they work closely and are committed to their practice. Generally a coven is made up of between three and 13 people, although this is not a strict rule, and the number of a coven has more to do with the ability to properly manage the amount of people who make up the coven (Jordan, 1996: 44).

**Eclectic Wicca:** Can have a variety of meanings but usually colloquially refers to practitioners who do not belong to any specific tradition, but rather mix and match traditions and blend their beliefs and practices from a variety of traditions and sometimes even include various other cultural and religious practices.

**Esbat:** A coven meeting usually held on either the full or new moon, these meetings are usually reserved for spellcraft and magical workings (Jordan, 1996)

**Evoke(ing)** refers to the process of requesting the presence of a deity or being to join the ritual, it is an external involvement of a deity or being.

**Hermetic:** refers to ancient occult traditions that include alchemy, astrology and theosophy (Mirriam-Webster Dictionary, N.D.).

**Heathens (ry)** is often used as a pejorative term, but the practitioners of Heathenry prefer the term Germanic Neopagans, their practices generally belong to various sub-groups of people who practice a range of traditions, such as Ásatrú, Odinism and Theodism to mention a few, they fall under the umbrella of Pagan as opposed to Neopagan (Robinson, 2020).

**High Priesthood:** The High Priest and the High priestess make up the High Priesthood or multiple High Priests and High Priestesses of the Wicca.

**Invoke (ing)** is a form of voluntary possession. A being or deity is invited to manifest through the person. Drawing down the Sun or Moon are well known examples of invocation.

**Liminoid:** Described by Turner (1982: 85), has some of the characteristics of liminality, however, liminoid experiences generally do not involve religious ritual, but generally refers to a leisure activity, and these liminoid activities are separate, along the margins, plural and fragmented, sometimes even experimental in character.

**Liminality:** Is defined as a combination of the term as used by Van Gennep (1960: 1-2) where the author classifies liminality as the second of his three phases of ritual, as a transitional phase or a temporality suspended condition, and Turner's (1969:166) further development of the term as a condition or suspension of ordinary time and space, where participants are "betwixt and between" (Turner 1977a: 33). normal states

and in his later work (Turner, 1982: 78) where turner describes liminality as being more creative and destructive than the structural norm, but typically involves engagement in ritual.

**Occult:** commonly refers to things that are hidden or matters that involve the action or influence of supernatural powers or the secret knowledge of them.

**Open circle(s):** An Open circle is generally a group of people who practice Wiccan ritual together. It differs from a coven in that membership in an Open Circle is more fluid, and not necessarily initiatory, the level of commitment and attendance is also not mandatory.

**Pagan(ism):** Is often used as an umbrella term that includes Wiccans, people who practice Witchcraft and other Occult disciples that are not related to the Abrahamic faiths. Participants adopt a reverence for the natural world and mother earth, and subscribe to the idea that each person possess to some degree psychic powers.

**Ritual:** Although it is difficult to define ritual, for the purposes of this research I prefer to see ritual as an action or performance where ritual and belief co-exist and where “rituals cannot exist without beliefs” as defined by Bell (1992:19). Durkheim (1996:188), made the distinction of ritual as something that takes place in “sacred” world, he divided the world into two categories, namely the sacred and the profane, this is relevant in Neo-Pagan ritual specifically because it is consistent with the worldview/religious context in which ritual occurs, it is a sacred act that does not occur in the mundane world. Grimes (2000:261) amongst other definitions also describes ritual as actions and “performances by religious functionaries in sacred places”.



**Sabbat:** In Wicca and some forms of Paganism, a Sabbat refers to any of the eight seasonal festivals or Holy days in contemporary Wicca (Jordan, 1996:133).

**Theurgy:** refers to the practice of rituals that are magical in nature, where the aim is to specifically and intentionally invoke or evoke the presence of one or more deities, the aim is to unite the practitioner(s) with the divine. Practitioners and ritual leaders don't often use this academic term, they will more often refer to evoking or invoking (See definition)

**Tradition (Wiccan):** In this context tradition refers to the different spiritual belief systems that exist under the heading of Wicca. The most common traditions include; Alexandrian, Gardnerian, Horsa, Sacred Pentagraph.

**Traditional Initiatory Wicca,** may not necessarily refer to British Traditional Wicca, but does denote Wiccan traditions that are also initiatory in nature.

**Mystery religion:** A religion or its practices that are kept secret from all but the initiates of the religion.

**Wicca(n):** Wicca is a recognized religion, unlike Witchcraft which is not a religion. Wicca is generally considered a Neo-Pagan religion that became public in the 1940s, after the repeal of the Witchcraft Act of 1951 in England. The religion is generally attributed to Gerald Gardner, and Sybil Leek among others. Although there is little consensus as to what being Wiccan actually entails. There are a few general principles that 'connect' all Wiccans, that is, that Wicca is a Mystery religion, into which one is initiated. It is a syncretisation of ancestral religious practices, including the use of Witchcraft, and belief in the 'Old Religion', which acknowledges the cycles of nature and the lunar phases, it celebrates the seasons and worships the divine, with a belief

in the harmony and balance of all things. Most Wiccans believe that the religion is more than just a religion, they see it also as a *craft*, because many (but not all Wiccans hold this belief), practice magic and witchcraft usually applied for beneficial purposes. It is also a religion that emphasises self-responsibility, for actions, deeds and choices (Jordan, 1996: 18179-180).

**Witch:** In this dissertation I may use the terms witch and Wicca interchangeably, because the term 'Wicca' simply means witch. I will specify when I am using the term to denote a person who is not specifically Wiccan, but identifies as a witch.

**Witchcraft:** In terms of Neo-Pagan witchcraft, it generally includes: Divination, magic, spell-work, and generally includes a knowledge of herbs and medicines (Jordan, 1996: 183). Some also describe Witchcraft as a term that includes a host of different religio-magical, polytheistic and/or animistic systems that use divination, herbalism, sympathetic magic and religious ritual. This term does not refer to the type of witchcraft practiced by a *sangoma* or medicine person that is typical for countries like South Africa or any other Indigenous peoples' witchcraft. In this dissertation I will be using the term Witchcraft simply to denote divination, magic and spell work as it is used in the practice of Wicca.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Prelude

It is high summer and fairly late, close to midnight. At this time of year in Edmonton, the sun only sets close to 11pm, which is part of the reason the ritual was scheduled for so late in the evening, that and because the ritual organisers know that they are more likely to have privacy during their ritual after dark. Not all rituals can be performed outdoors in Edmonton, due to the long cold winters and the short summers, so the ritual participants are happy to be outside. Tonight is the full moon, the air is clear and the bright orb lights the night sky. In a woody area, just outside of suburbia, less than ten people are gathered around a fire at the pre-arranged spot, as only those participating in the ritual are privy to the location, time and date of the ritual. Some wait patiently for the others to arrive while others fidget with excitement. Those who arrive early, sit in a loosely formed circle engaging in idle chatter mostly about the weather, a Canadian opening for any conversation! Finally, the last member walks hurriedly up to the circle, apologises for being late: *"The traffic you know!"* All nod sagely, as if traffic, like the wooded surroundings they chose for this ritual, are just as predictable and Dame Nature herself. The High Priestess gets up off of her camping chair and the rest take this as a sign that the ritual is about to begin, and also get up. The High Priestess and High Priest are already robed, as are most of the other coven members, those who arrived later don their robes and cloaks and place their cords and athame's<sup>1</sup> around their waists.

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<sup>1</sup> An athame is a ritual dagger that is used during Wiccan ritual, it is used to direct energy and never used to cut or draw blood.



All the ritual gear has been carefully laid out and gleams dimly illuminated by the firelight and moon. The High Priestess and High Priest take their positions in the circle, ready for the ritual to begin. Before the rest of the coven enter the sacred space, the High Priest and Priestess cast the magical circle and consecrate the sacred space. The rest of the coveners are then permitted to enter the circle, and so the Esbat<sup>2</sup> ritual commences, this is all those outside of the coven can know...

The reason that those who are not initiated members of a specific Wiccan tradition cannot know more about the ritual's content, is because ritual practices are often secret and generally take place in coven setting, even membership of covens is often kept secret! Part of the reason ritual practice in Wicca is kept private, is because by its very nature these rituals are regarded as sacred, and intimate. Coven-specific rituals are often kept secret even from other Wiccans outside of the coven, and covens generally operate independently from other covens even within the same Tradition<sup>3</sup>.

Traditional covens are generally associated with Traditional Initiatory Witchcraft, which belongs to the religion of Wicca. However, covens can also be found amongst other Pagan groups. A coven, is in most cases still the "unit of organization for witches" Mooney (2018:27-28). A coven in the context of Traditional Wicca is a group of initiated witches who practice their craft together. However, in contemporary society it is not uncommon for individuals who have not been initiated to identify as witches to form covens. In Traditional Initiatory Witchcraft, rituals and techniques practiced in a coven are specific to a particular tradition, which is passed to new initiates through intense training and shared experiences (Mooney, 2018:27-28). Some branches of Wicca and

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<sup>2</sup> An Esbat is a coven meeting usually held on either the full or new moon, a day that is not a Sabbat.

<sup>3</sup> Wiccan tradition refers the various forms of Wicca, some of the most well-known traditions include: Gardnerian, Alexandrian, Horsa and the Sacred Pentagram tradition.

Paganism refer to these “units of organization” as Groves or Circles. Covens are most often hierarchically organised, in order of highest level of initiatory attainment with the High Priest and High Priestess at the top of the hierarchical structure, followed by other initiates who are ranked by degree system. Joining a coven is not like joining a club. Coven membership is dependent on various caveats including the specific tradition’s vetting procedures, how well the seeker will fit into the coven, space available for new members and other stipulations dictated by the specific tradition. Covens are generally rather small compared to Open Circles, typical membership is usually between 4-12 people, but this varies across covens and Traditions. Coven membership is by invitation only and not open to the public, usually all coven members are initiates of the religion.

Wiccan Open Circles, have been in existence since the early 1960’s, which developed from an Outer Court system of Wicca. Due to the fact that individual small coven groups could not accommodate the growing interest in the religion, Outer Courts were formed. The purpose of an Outer Court system was so that High Priesthood of existing traditional covens could provide a space where new witches would be trained and exposed to Wiccan ritual. The Priesthood would also use these Outer Courts as a type of probation period to see if any of those in training had the potential to eventually join the coven. Open Circles are similar to the Outer Court system however, Open Circles vary in their focus and composition. In most Open Circles, the rituals can be attended by members of the public at large, the only caveat for attendance is that ritual participants are respectful of the Circle’s principles and members. The rituals performed in an Open Circle are more generic, often less ceremonial in nature, and usually not based on a particular Wiccan Tradition’s teachings, ritual content is not secret or private. Open Circles members and participants are not initiated in an Open

Circle, although some of the facilitators and attendees may be initiates of other Wiccan or Pagan traditions. In some of the Open Circles I attended, the ritual facilitator(s) sometimes assume the title of High Priest or High Priestess, regardless of whether or not they have been initiated into a specific Wiccan Tradition. These individuals fulfil the roles of clergy members who perform the Open Circle rituals as well as other rites of passage outside the regular Open Circle rituals. Some of the Open Circles groups also belong to a National governing organisation. The Open Circle ritual facilitators in these organisations are supported by board members of the local branch's organisation. In one particular case the clergy members and board members are also supported by a team of people who form the ritual team who are responsible for assisting with ritual writing and organisation of related activities. Not all Open Circles where I performed my research belong to any specific governing organisation. The Open Circles rituals I attended, both in Canada and the United States are facilitated by individuals who may have no ties to either initiatory traditions or governing organisations.

In Traditional Initiatory Witchcraft, rituals are aimed at being transformative and also reflects the philosophical beliefs of the initiates. These rituals encourage personal growth, change, transformation and life-long learning (Bado-Fralick, 2002:45-65).

Originally the main impetus in providing Open Circles can be traced back to the creation of a concept that originated and was developed by Joe Wilson, Ed Fitch and John Hansen, called by The Pagan Way. This was a witchcraft Correspondence course that was based on Gardnerian Witchcraft, but omitted oath-bound materials, later these evolved to include Open Circle type rituals. The correspondence course and subsequent Open Circle rituals were never intended as an initiatory or training

tradition, but rather aimed at those who were new to witchcraft and people interested in attending Pagan rituals (Kelly, 2012).

Scholars such as Pearson (2001), Rabinovich (1992) and Magliocco (2015) and Bado-Fralick (2002) have contributed to our understanding of how initiations in a coven setting can be seen as rites of passage. These “rites of passage” as first described by Van Gennep (1960) [1909], and later expanded on by Turner (1969), include three distinct phases; separation, transition and incorporation. In the first phase, the separation phase, the participants are either removed or remove themselves from their usual environments, sometimes this is more of a symbolic action (Bado-Fralick, 2002). The next phase, the transitions phase, is where participants enter a type of intermediate stage, often referred to as the liminal phase or “threshold” phase. During this phase of ritual, participants are seen as ambiguous, as “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969: 359), as they are stripped of their “mundane” titles, status and positions in regular society. Ritual liminality can also be viewed as actions that are in opposition to dominant societal norms.

Linked to this liminal phase is Turner’s (1969:359-360) concept of *communitas*, where participants regardless of pre-ritual status and position, consider themselves to be equal. During *communitas*, participants usually experience a sense of community and community spirit, and they also experience a sense of solidarity and camaraderie after a shared ritual experience. Turner (1969:132) also distinguishes between different types of *communitas* namely: existential or spontaneous *communitas*, normative *communitas*, and ideological *communitas*. In existential or spontaneous *communitas*, participants experience a temporary personal experience of togetherness. In the case of normative *communitas*, this phase evolves from the existential state towards a state

that is more organised possibly becoming a permanent change in the social system. Ideological communitas, usually centers on shared utopian ideas, where participants envisage a type of perfect society that is achieved through co-operation and ensuring the happiness of all concerned.

## **1.2 My interest in Open Circle rituals**

After immigrating to Canada in 2009, I was a solitary practitioner for a few years until I was initiated into my current traditions. Initially after moving to Canada from South Africa, I practised as a solitary practitioner, partly because I was unsuccessful in finding a Wiccan tradition that closely resembled my previous Wiccan tradition. The other reason I remained a solitary practitioner for the first few years is because I had misunderstood the Canadian law against witchcraft in Canada's legal system. Incidentally, Section 365, of Canada's old criminal code (Canada Justice Laws Website, 1985) that deals with "pretending to practice witchcraft", was only recently abolished, mid December 2018: Section 365 of Canada's criminal code (repealed on 12 /12 /2018). This law stated that:

"Pretending to practise witchcraft, etc. 365 Every one who fraudulently, (a) pretends to exercise or to use any kind of witchcraft, sorcery, enchantment or conjuration, (b) undertakes, for a consideration, to tell fortunes, or (c) pretends from his skill in or knowledge of an occult or crafty science to discover where or in what manner anything that is supposed to have been stolen or lost may be found is guilty of an offence punishable on summary conviction."

During 2018, while commuting home on the bus, I happened to pick up a newspaper that was wedged between the seats, the page I was reading was entitled: "Stepping

up for Edmonton, Pride, Wiccans say they've long been the most LGBTQ<sup>4</sup> friendly religion" (Griwkowsky, 2018). This article also mentioned regular monthly, Open Circles ritual that are held at a Wiccan temple here in Edmonton. It took me by surprise as I had never heard of Open Circles prior to reading that article, as I had only ever experienced Traditional Witchcraft in a coven setting. At the time when I lived in South Africa, prior to 2009 I had never been involved in, or even heard of Wiccan Open Circle type rituals. In my experiences living in South Africa, there appeared to be a distinct lack of visibility of Pagans<sup>5</sup> and Wiccans. At the time and there certainly was never any option of practicing my religion openly, let alone getting together with others outside of my tradition for an Open Circle ritual.

After reading this newspaper article, my interest was well and truly piqued! I turned to the internet and Facebook as my primary search methods, and after reading some of the comments and questions on various websites, I realised that there are a few different local groups that host monthly Open Circle meetings. Out of curiosity I chose one of the Open Circle ritual groups and found their *Facebook* page, and I contacted the High Priest of the temple at the time, who invited me to attend my first Open Circle ritual, which I attended in January of 2019.

Initially I had no intention of turning my private religious practices into a topic for my Masters research, and had in fact submitted an altogether completely unrelated Masters proposal, prior to this. However, after attending my first Open Circle ritual, I

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4 LGBTQ is the acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.(it has since been updated in more recent usage to be: LGTBQIA2S+ which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit, and the countless affirmative ways in which people choose to self-identify.

5 Pagans are modern pagans also sometimes referred to as Neo-Pagans are polytheistic, and broadly speaking, aim to live in a way in which will enable them to locate the divine in the individual and in nature (Eilberg-Schwarz, 1989:77-95) further, Harrington (2007:436), views -Pagans as having reverence for the ancient Gods, as well as the divine Feminine, whose participation in a magical world view also includes stewardship and caring for the Earth.

was fascinated by this phenomena! I started thinking about how Paganism and Wicca had evolved to include Open Circles in contemporary society. I was captivated by how very different the types of rituals facilitated in Open Circle rituals are from Traditional Witchcraft Coven rituals. From my own experiences as a traditional Wiccan it was my opinion that liminality and communitas are present in coven settings. After attending my first Open Circle ritual, I was fascinated because these Open Circle rituals seemed to also have aspects of communitas and liminality in their rituals.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

The main objectives of this dissertation firstly, to uncover who and what contributes to a sense of communitas in the context of an Open Circle, and how participants experience both communitas and liminality in Open Circle rituals. The second is to find out what impact if any, liminality and communitas has on the lives of the participants.

In the third instance I intend to investigate the roles that clergy and group leaders play in the creation and execution of public ritual and the provision of opportunities for community activities and how, if at all, these serve to strengthen liminality and communitas.

Finally, I discuss how and why the rituals in an Open Circle differ from those in a coven, and what effect this has on the participants' experience of communitas and liminality during ritual.

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this Chapter, I discuss the methods I used during my research which also covers the various methodological aspects I made use of during my ethnographic fieldwork. I explain the rationale behind my choices with regards to the methods I employed while collecting data and I explain the way in which the gathered data was analysed. As ethical considerations also impacted my research I will explain the approach that I took with regards to ethical considerations and discuss the issues of positionality and reflexivity, as these have bearing on my research.

My orientation in the methodology which I follow is one which is embedded in post-modernism in which the nature of interaction between the researcher, research participants and the final text are equal.

#### 2.2 Ethnography

Ethnography as a research method usually falls under the category of qualitative research, which consists of a number of methods for collecting and analysing data. These methods include participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, discussions, analysis and interpretation of gathered data such as fieldnotes, ritual scripts, interview transcripts and historical documents as well as analysis of recorded rituals and other documents available online. Making use of what Geertz (1973, 314) termed “thick description”<sup>6</sup> provides a detailed narrative and

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Gilbert Ryle Originally coined the term “thick description” even though Geertz popularised the concept in anthropology (Ryle, [1968] 1996)



explanation of the events and experiences the anthropologist has during their fieldwork, in order to clearly detail the cultural, social relationships, patterns and behaviours of participants in the context in which they occur. The anthropologist's goal is to attempt to as closely as possible, interpret these from the perspective of the research participants themselves.

According to Nader (2011), ethnographies should be viewed as being holistic descriptions, as cultures and communities are whole and interrelated systems. Ethnographies aim to study the behaviour of humans or groups in their natural settings. Ethnographies emerge from fieldwork, which is the process whereby the researcher immerses herself in the activities of a specific community in order to collect data about the lives, beliefs, values, rituals customs and behaviour of a community (Hammersley, 2018). In general terms, the researcher places themselves in the world of their participants and then proceeds to make use of interpretive and naturalist approaches to research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Naturalist approaches refer to methods of social enquiry that attempt to come to an understanding of interactions and social process as they would naturally occur, i.e. research takes place in an environment that cannot be reproduced in a laboratory or elsewhere.

As a researcher, I immersed myself in the experiences of my participants in order to gain an understanding of the meaning they ascribe to their rituals and other related activities, by making use of participant observation as a research method. During my research I primarily used making fieldnotes as a data gathering technique. I also made use of other data gathering techniques, such as formal and informal discussions and interviewing, which allowed me to discover and interpret the importance of community, ritual and related activities as my participants themselves interpret these activities.

### **2.3 Research settings**

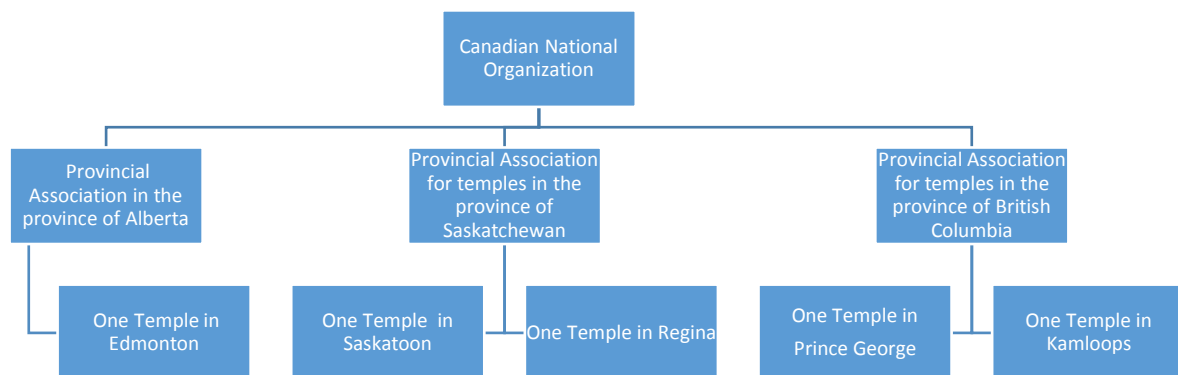
Before I actually entered the field, I had been doing some preliminary research online to try and ascertain when and where Open Circles were being held in Edmonton. My first contact was with the then High Priest of a Wiccan temple here in Edmonton. The Edmonton branch is affiliated with a National Governing Body, which is a fellowship of Wiccan temples that operate in Canada. Each temple is self-governing and autonomous. The role of the National Organisation is to:

“promote the Wiccan religion through assisting temples and groups to be established in various provinces and through supporting these temples by providing networking and sharing of knowledge and resources” (Encyclopedia.com).

This National Organisation is listed as a not-for-profit association that was officially incorporated as a not-for-profit provincial Society in 1991 in Canada, after having been a loosely formed association prior to this date. Members of the association abide by a common Wiccan statement of beliefs and ethics. Each province has its own set of Bylaws and provincial temples are locally controlled and run by their board members. The organisational chart in Figure 1, is a lists of all the functioning related to this National Organisation in Canada. Incidentally, it was the original temple in British Columbia in the Vancouver area that was responsible for the formation of the National Organisation however, the temple in British Columbia no longer appears to be a functioning temple. It should be noted that this Wiccan Organisation is not the only Wiccan or Pagan organisation in Canada.

After initial enquiries, I found a group on *Facebook* for this Wiccan organisation located in Edmonton, and sent a message using *Facebook Messenger* to the group’s *Facebook* page. I received a reply from the then High Priest, who replied to my

message and invited me to attend the temple's January 2019 Open Circle ritual in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.



**Figure: 1 Structure of one of the Wiccan organisations, where I performed some of my fieldwork in this Organization.**

From January 2019 to July 2022, I attended various Open Circle Rituals in both Canada and the USA. A large portion of my fieldwork took place in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I also attended a variety of workshops and social activities that were usually held at various member's homes throughout the city of Edmonton. I was also introduced to the group leader of a Pagan Woman's Group that also hold monthly Open Circle rituals and discussions in Edmonton, and I began attending these Open Circles in mid-2019.

Originally I intended to travel to the other Open Circle groups who are also part of the National Organisation, specifically the other two branches located in the provinces of Saskatchewan and British Columbia in Canada during 2020. However, these plans were thwarted by the COVID -19 pandemic that started in early 2020. In April 2020, as personal contact restrictions were advocated to limit spread of COVID-19, most

organisers of public open circles felt that it was best to take their offerings of rituals and workshops to cyberspace. In this dissertation I differentiate between ‘in-person rituals’ to indicate that the rituals and activities I attended were in person, versus the ‘online’ rituals where participation in rituals occurred in cyberspace on various virtual online meeting platforms, Like *Zoom*, *Facebook Rooms*, *Facebook Live*, *Google Meetings*, *Discord* and *Twitch*.



Figure: 2 Map of Canada, to indicate location of Canadian Fieldwork.





**Figure: 3** Map of the United States, and the State of Pennsylvania. This map is provided to illustrate where some of the Open Circles are located in the USA

These online virtual meetings, gave me the unique opportunity to attend events that I may otherwise have not been able to attend, some of these online rituals I 'attended' were as far flung as the United States. As a result, I was able to attend rituals, discussions, and *Livestreams*<sup>7</sup> and even workshops online. Most of the rituals and related activities that I attended online took place during 2020 and early 2021, and were presented in various parts of Canada and the United States.

Figure 4, illustrates the levels of participation in the various Open Circle rituals that I attended or interacted with. As can be seen from this Figure, the two main Open Circle groups that I had the opportunity to interact with both in-person and during online activities is the Temple in Edmonton and the Pagan Woman's Group also in Edmonton, Alberta. I also had the opportunity to attend online rituals and workshops presented by the Temple in Regina located in the province of Saskatchewan, as these rituals and workshops made use of *Zoom* meetings or Facebook rooms where active participation was possible. The Wiccan Temple located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, either pre-recorded or Livestreamed their rituals which did not make direct interaction and participation in the ritual possible. I was able to watch Livestreams of rituals presented by Circle Sanctuary, a Pagan organisation located near Mount Horeb Wisconsin, The Temple of Witchcraft which is located in Salem New Hampshire and also The Cabot-Kent Hermetic Temple, of Salem, Massachusetts, in the USA. These rituals were either pre-recorded or Livestreamed, with little opportunity to directly participate other than to leave comments in the livestream feed.

In late 2021 and 2022 when travel restrictions started to ease I was able to travel to Pennsylvania in the USA on several occasions and was able to attend various Open

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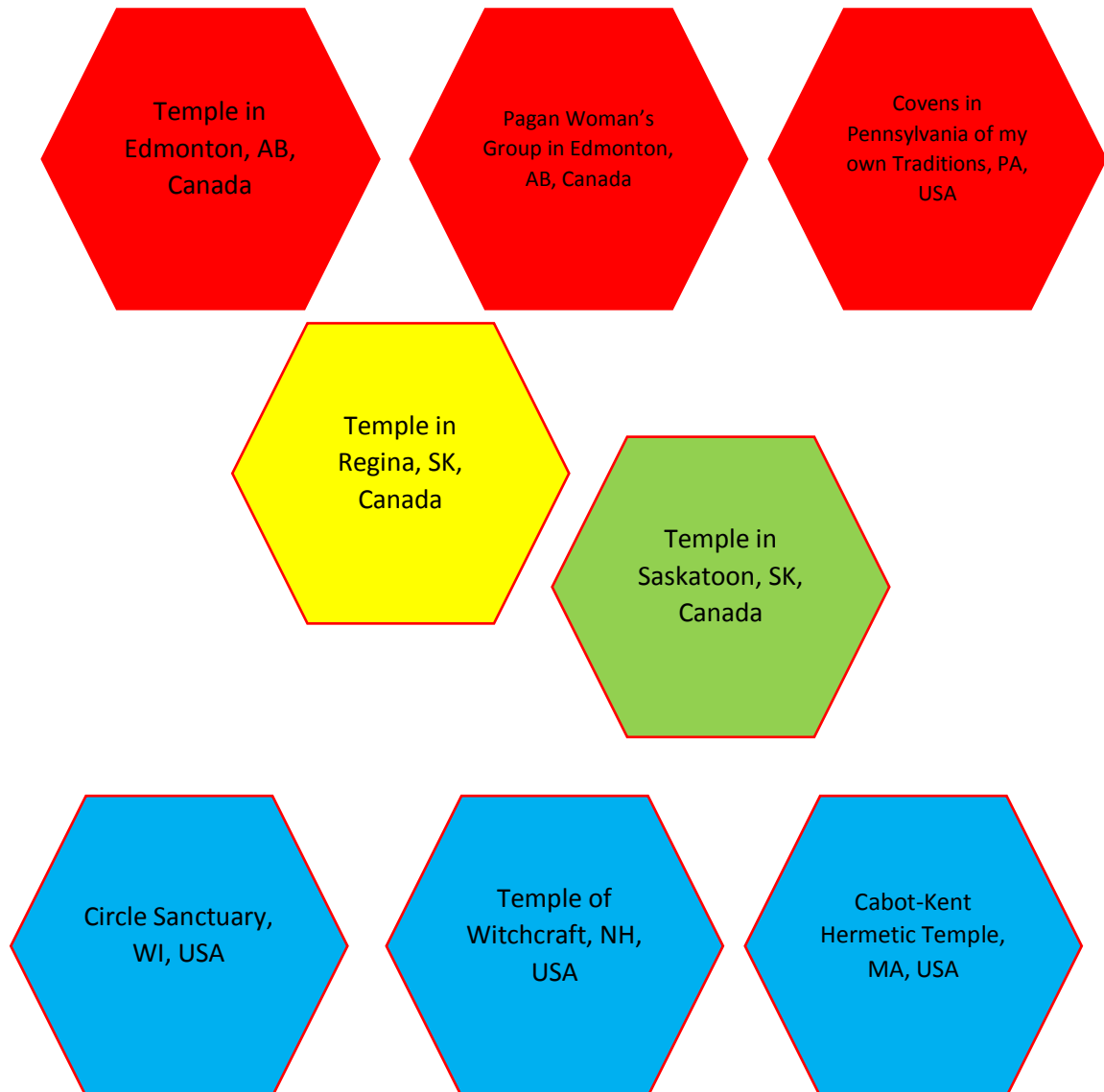
<sup>7</sup> Livestreaming is recorded media that is recorded and broadcast in real time over the internet.

Circle rituals and activities, I also had the opportunity to attend number of coven rituals in the Pennsylvania area, as an initiate in two Wiccan Traditions. I was also able to interview a number of coven leaders who have been involved in presenting and hosting Open Circles in the USA for many years as well.

Figure 4 is an illustration of the intensity of participation that I had with the various groups. The red hexagons indicate the highest levels of participation, while the yellow indicates a moderate level of participation due to the online nature of rituals and related activities. The green indicates a slightly lower level of participation as in the online rituals were not particularly participatory, although I did interview a few members of the Temple in Saskatoon. While the blue hexagon indicates a really low level of participation as was only able to I attended their online rituals which had little to no participation as these were often pre-recorded rituals that anyone could watch and “participate” in. The rituals I engaged that were Livestreamed online drew really large numbers of people from across the globe, who could watch these online rituals. Circle Sanctuary, The Temple of Witchcraft and the Kent Cabot Hermetic Temple are really well-known and respected organisations in the Pagan community in North America. It was interesting to see how they each presented their online rituals and I wanted to compare these organisations’ rituals to those presented by the groups I interacted with in Canada.

During the later stages of my fieldwork in 2020, between lockdowns and ‘social distancing’ measures here in Alberta, Canada, I was able to visit some of my participants in Edmonton usually on a porch, deck or somewhere outside of their homes, where I conducted some of my in-depth interviews. About a third of these interviews took place online via *Facebook Messenger* video-chat, a service available

on the *Facebook* social platform that allows you to use their Messenger application to make one-on-one video calls. I employed this video-chat service when I interviewed some of my local participants as well as those located in the province of Saskatchewan and also for some follow up questions when I returned from my visits to the USA.



**Figure: 4** Levels of participation in the various groups during my fieldwork



This service proved to be really useful specifically when the COVID-19 restrictions became more severe in Canada during 2020 and 2021. I found that although my participants were eager to be part of my research, even during the pandemic, some felt it was safer to meet online than in person. However, not all participants were equally comfortable in online meetings and interviews. There are various reasons for this, firstly conversation and small talk that is usually part of a natural conversation was limited, thus making it difficult to establish a personal connection, especially with people that I had never met in person. The quality and signal strength was sometimes poor (possibly due to the sheer volume of people forced to use the internet and video calls as a means of communication during this period), which hindered natural conversation. At times voice and picture were not properly synced which made it difficult to read body language, and hindered my ability to appropriately adjust to and respond their body language, this was frustrating for both parties. One or two of my participants were not used to seeing themselves onscreen and were not particularly comfortable and found it difficult to conduct natural conversation as they were preoccupied and fidgety. As many of my interviews took place during the early stages of the pandemic, some found the technology/software difficult to use which added to the discomfort and inconvenience.

I found online interviewing much more challenging, because I had to adopt various ways of trying to put my participants at ease that did not always feel natural to me. The most frustrating thing about interviewing online is that often the interview became more of a question and answer session rather than a discussion. Even though I tried to keep questions open ended, I ended up having to talk more than I actually wanted to as a way to guide the flow of conversation. I also felt that more information could have been forthcoming if communication was not hampered by the issues we faced.

## **2.4 Participant observation**

Participant observation is one of the main methods utilised in ethnographic research. Usually participant observation includes the researcher first entering the 'field', building rapport and getting to know the people involved. In most cases the researcher is not familiar with the group. During the next step in the initial fieldwork stages, the researcher proceeds to participate in the activities and routines of the participants, all the while observing and getting to know the people in the group (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995: 1). Building rapport and participating in the activities, is only part of what participant observation entails. As a method, participant observation can also be classified as a technique of inquiry. Participant observation includes concurrent document analysis, interviewing of participants and informants. It also includes an element of introspection (Denzin, 1989: 157-158) all the while the researcher should continuously engage in reflexivity.

As mentioned, prior to 2019, I had never interacted with Open Circle groups, however, being familiar with the general style and structure of Wiccan ritual as an initiate of Traditional Witchcraft, and having been a practicing Wiccan for about almost twenty years. Effectively made me an insider ethnographer. I had to be particularly aware of my positionality as an insider researcher. Kanuha (2000) is of the opinion that there are arguments for and against insider researchers. On the pro side, insider research enhances the depth and breadth of being able to understand your participants. Another aspect that is important to remember, is that outsider researchers may not be able to gain access to certain participants as a result of their outsider status. In the case of my own research in particular, gaining access to certain groups would not have been possible as an outsider researcher. However, this is not the only reason it may be valuable to be an insider researcher. Outsider researchers not familiar with Wicca,

may not necessarily have been able to probe as deeply as someone that is familiar with Wicca. Outsider researchers may also not have the same breadths of knowledge, as someone who is intimately familiar with Wicca and ritual.

The aspect of gaining access and maintaining trust from participants is particularly relevant in my fieldwork. I was able to gain access to rituals and participate in coven activities that outsiders would otherwise not have been permitted to do. Gaining access and being able to participate in coven rituals and activities was not without challenges. Even as an initiate, I had to walk a fine line between describing rituals and principles in general terms without divulging specifics or breaking oaths. It was imperative for me to maintain my standing in the tradition, as well as the trust relationships between myself and members of my traditions. As I had never attended Open Circle rituals prior to 2019, being an insider when attending Open Circle rituals was not as challenging. However, as an insider ethnographer, I still had to ensure that as a researcher I was entering the field with the intention of being explicitly aware. Not simply participating, but also seeing, hearing, but also examining how people interacted with each other and interpreting the how and why of the actions. Spradley (1980: 55) reminds us that participant observation as an ethnographic method also includes explicit awareness, that is, as a participant observer you become explicitly aware, so that the level of awareness is increased. Both Kanuha (2000) and Dwyer and Buckle (2009), caution insider researchers to be particularly mindful of reflexivity and objectivity, as they may be too familiar with their participants. An aspect that I had to be really mindful of during my research.

Interviewing in ethnographic fieldwork takes many forms, and ranges from completely unstructured interviews to more formal open-ended interviews (Fontana and Frey,

1994: 361). During my research, unstructured interviews, that is interviews, that are informal, unstructured, and probing, mainly took place during conversations either before Open Circle rituals or after these rituals, or during workshops and other informal gatherings. When I encountered an issue or situation that I found interesting or related to my research I would try to bring up the topic of interest into general conversations, and ask questions. Bernard (2006: 343-344) argues that participant observation is a type of strategic method that turns fieldworkers “into instruments of data collection and data analysis”. Pezalla, Pettigrew and Miller-Day (2012:166) believe that the researcher’s personal characteristics also have the ability to influence the collection of data, specifically because the researcher is the “instrument of data collection”. This is because the researcher’s personal characteristics enable the researcher to elicit information from participants. Among other characteristics that can influence the data collection, the researcher’s awareness of the sensitivity of information can impact the type of data collected. The researcher’s background knowledge also effects the nature of the questions asked. As mentioned, as an insider researcher it was possibly easier for me to be elicit information from participants, as I was already familiar with Wicca and ritual prior to entering the field as a researcher.

I found that conversations and informal visits as well as some of the other activities organised by the open circle groups or temples yielded as much data as the formal in-depth interviews. During these informal interactions I had the opportunity to ask questions to stimulate conversation in a group setting. By doing so, varying perspectives from those present emerged as we bounced ideas around. I soon learned that valuable data could be gathered before rituals and after formal rituals had been concluded when participants engage in conversations while sharing snacks and drinks. One such occasion occurred, after the formal Open Circle ritual and the social

component had ended. Seeing that the monthly rituals for this particular group are held in a public community hall, we had to pack up and take all the ritual supplies (such as candles, table cloths, decorative elements, incense burners and ritual specific items) with us after each ritual. I had stayed after the ritual, to help clean up and load ritual supplies into the vehicles. It was the middle of winter but despite the cold, a small group who had stayed after the ritual had ended stood semi-huddle together in the middle of the parking lot, on the freezing compressed snow, with the wind swirling around us. We discussed some aspects of the ritual that that we had participated in and chatted about how the deities could be given a 'modern face'. This conversation provided me with data and insight on how some members of this Open Circle group envisioned their Gods.

Informal discussions also provided me with the opportunity to meet with potential new participants, some of whom had previously belonged to the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group. Some of these individuals had either moved away from Edmonton or were currently only peripherally involved in the Open Circle rituals. While some of these individuals had stopped attending these Open Circle rituals for a variety of other reasons. I also got to meet people who were regular attendees of one of the other Open Circle groups where I eventually also did some of my fieldwork. The informal interactions in essence, granted me the opportunity to make use of the snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling occurs when the researcher's participants introduce them to other participants, a repetitive process where informants refer the researcher to other people who have may potentially become participants and so on (Noy, 2008: 330). Current Open Circle participants introduced me to past members, some of whom I contacted when I conducted more formal interviews.

Dewalt and Dewalt (2011: 30-31) discuss levels of participant observation that range from nonparticipation to complete participation. Those who are non-participants, have no membership role, while those who engage in complete participation observation have full membership. My level of participation varied from group to group. The level of participation was dependent on two factors, the geographical location, because some groups were geographically more convenient for me to access, and in other cases the level of participation was dependent on the group's dynamics.

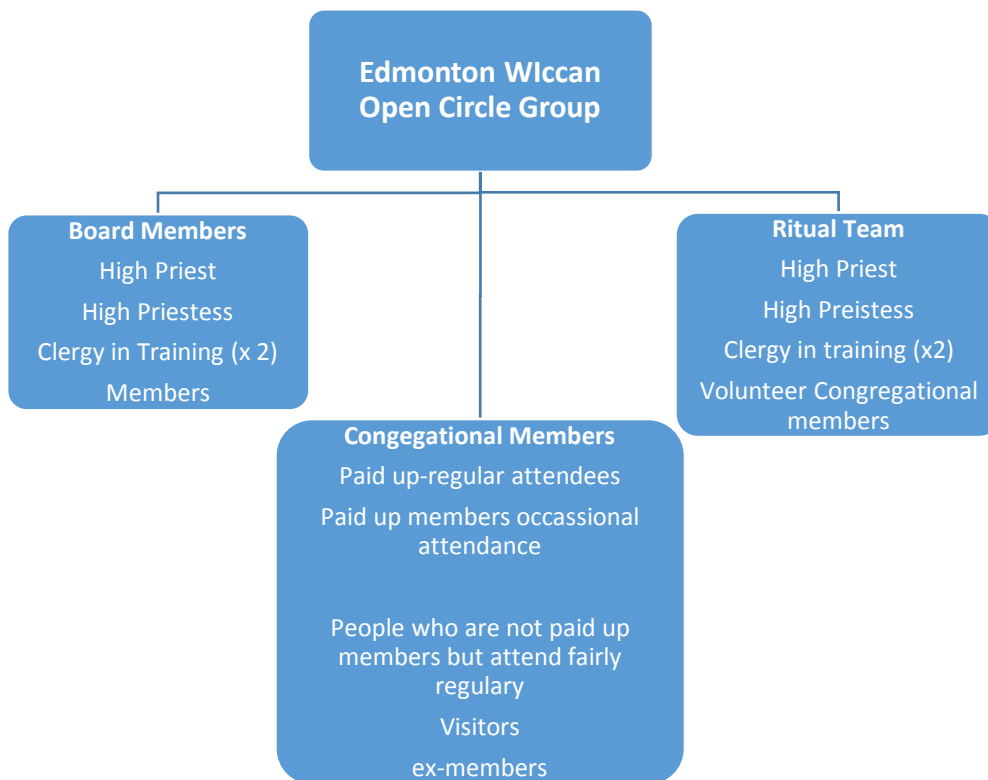
I spent a large majority of the time performing my fieldwork in at the Wiccan Open Circle group in Edmonton. I attended rituals, workshops, and social events, was a member of their ritual team and also attended their online events during the COVID pandemic when social gatherings were restricted.

In another group that is situated in Edmonton, the Amethyst Moon Group, is a group of woman who host Open Circles ritual every alternate month, and then have discussions in the month where no rituals are hosted. I attended both the rituals and discussion groups at Amethyst Moon Group.

I attended several Open Circle rituals in various groups in Pennsylvania and Maryland in the United States. I also participated as an initiate and a guest to numerous covens from my own Wiccan traditions in Pennsylvania.

Dewalt and Dewalt (2011:32) mention that the degree of participation is sometimes dictated by the researcher and sometimes by the community. Initially when I started attending rituals at the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group I took the role of an active participant and was able to choose my level of participation. However, later on in my research, I was invited by some of the core members of the group to take on the role

of being a ritual team member. I discovered that ritual team members generally form the core of this Open Circle group.



**Figure: 5 The structure of Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle Group**

Ritual team’s compositions vary from Open Circle group to Open Circle group within the National organisation as depicted in Figure 1. The Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group consists of clergy members, board members and very involved members who volunteer their time. This ritual team is responsible for assisting in writing ritual liturgies, organising the décor, costumes, food and other elements necessary to host an Open Circle ritual. They help to organise events and workshops, and sometimes

ritual team members are responsible for presenting workshops and hosting events. Initially when I was invited to join the ritual team, I was provided with a 'ritual team member' agreement to sign, which outlined the roles and responsibilities of a ritual team member. Later, however as ritual team members joined and left, the practice of signing this document seemed to have gone by the wayside, and there seemed to be little criteria for joining the ritual team other than the willingness to assist with rituals and related activities. Consequently, as a Ritual Team member, the community began to decide on my level of involvement. As time progressed, I was asked to participate more and more frequently in temple activities and rituals. Taking this active role allowed me to develop relationships with the core group as well as others who attended rituals and related activities, which further facilitated my roles as an insider (my insider status will be further discussed in the Section dealing with ethics).

## **2.5 Participant Profile**

Table 1 consists of a brief summary of participants. During my research I conducted thirty seven in depth interviews with participants from the various groups where I conducted my research. In total there were 25 female participants and 12 male participants. As can be seen in Table 1, participants had various occupations, no single segment or type of occupation seems to be predominant. The participants I interviewed range in ages from 19 to 64.



**Table 1: Summary of Participants who participated in depth interviews**

|    | <b>Code Name</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Occupation</b>                         | <b>How they Identify</b> |
|----|------------------|------------|---------------|---|--------------------------|
| 1  | Inara Connor     | 44         | F             | Volunteer Manager                         | F                        |
| 2  | Moon S           | 36         | F             | Bank Clerk                                | F                        |
| 3  | Snow S           | 37         | M             | Corrections Officer                       | M                        |
| 4  | Bella            | 27         | F             | Entrepreneur                              | F                        |
| 5  | Illian           | 52         | F             | Admin Support                             | F                        |
| 6  | Raven R          | 44         | F             | Cook                                      | F                        |
| 7  | Soares           | 28         | M             | MA Student Engineer                       | M                        |
| 8  | Geya             | 44         | F             | Executive Legal Assistant                 | F                        |
| 9  | Sarah Jane       | 42         | F             | Art Therapist                             | F Queer                  |
| 10 | Roseanne         | 62         | F             | Retired Dental assistant                  | F                        |
| 11 | Jaguar           | 56         | F             | Medical Accreditation specialist          | F                        |
| 12 | Jonas            | 64         | M             | Unemployed                                | M                        |
| 13 | Hakon            | 27         | F             | Manager, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion | M Queer                  |
| 14 | Helen Oscar      | 53         | F             | Aide                                      | F                        |
| 15 | Cass Olsen       | 19         | F             | Student                                   | F                        |
| 16 | Zecora           | 45         | F             | Home-schooling Mom of 2                   | F                        |
| 17 | Ivy              | 46         | F             | Accountant                                | F                        |
| 18 | Janice           | 34         | F             | Home maker                                | F                        |
| 19 | Elizabeth Reeves | 26         | F             | Mental Health support worker              | F                        |
| 20 | Mercia           | 57         | F             | Medical assistant                         | F                        |
| 21 | Erika            | 42         | F             | Communications officer                    | F                        |
| 22 | PurpleButterfly  | 47         | F             | Administrator                             | F                        |
| 23 | Ryan             | 26         | M             | Medical Administration Assistant          | M                        |
| 24 | Alice            | 34         | F             | Student                                   | F Bi-Sexual              |
| 25 | Mary             | 43         | F             | Music Therapist                           | F                        |
| 26 | Aum              | 45         | M             | Author                                    | M                        |
| 27 | Jennifer         | 40         | F             | Director of Health                        | F                        |
| 28 | Angelica         | 50         | F             | Proof writer                              | F                        |

|    |                 |    |   |  |   |
|----|-----------------|----|---|--|---|
| 29 | Shawn S         | 35 | M | Career Cook                              | M |
| 30 | Desiree         | 33 | F | Graphic Designer                         | F |
| 31 | Thorn Nightwind | 37 | M | Finance, Operations & Budgeting Director | M |
| 32 | Apollo          | 49 | M | Mental health and Wellness co-ordinator  | M |
| 33 | Tony            | 48 | M | Accountant                               | M |
| 34 | Guynor          | 47 | M | Teacher                                  | M |
| 35 | Lauren          | 56 | F | Herbalist                                | F |
| 36 | Paul            | 52 | M | Law enforcement officer                  | M |
| 37 | Sierra F        | 50 | F | Quality assurance officer                | F |

## 2.6 Sampling

Initially I made use of purposeful sampling in order to identify and select informants, those who I thought would be able to provide me with a great deal of information and insight (Patton, 2002: 230). I made a list of potential interview participants with the aim of representing people who participated in or facilitated Open Circle rituals, with a wide range of experience. Later I also interviewed coven members who had both coven leadership experience and who had also lead or been involved in Open Circle ritual facilitation. My participants ranged from ritual facilitators who had been leading or attending open circles for years, to people who had only attended one or two Open Circle rituals. It was my hope that participants who have varying levels of experience and levels of participations, would be able to provide their own unique insights with regards to Open Circle rituals.

When I was ready to conduct my more formal one-on-one interviews about ninety eight percent of the first group I approached regarding interviews agreed outright to

participate, many of whom were also very excited to chat to me and to contribute to my research efforts. Of those I approached initially, only one person choose not participate while another two simply did not respond to my messages. The second group of participants that I recruited for the more formal type interviews came from snowball sampling. The reason I used snowball sampling, is because this method allows the researcher to connect with potential participants who may be difficult to identify, this was particularly relevant in my research because not all witches, Wiccans and Pagans are easy to identify as often they do not openly practice their religion or tell others outside of groups about their practices. The snowball sampling technique allowed me to be introduced to this 'hidden' group of individuals by those who do practice more openly.

## **2.7 Interviews**

During the later stages of my fieldwork, I conducted more formal style interviews, where I utilised an interview schedule as a guide (see appendix A). The questions were open-ended and used as a guide, as I often found that it took only a few pre-determined questions to get my participants to talk about and elaborate on their experiences.

About half of the interviews were conducted in person, and the other half were conducted online via *Facebook Messenger* chat. I had purposefully scheduled most of the in-person interviews with the participants located in Edmonton during the late Summer and early Fall (Autumn) of 2020, while the weather was still warm. This is because it was easier to engage in 'porch style' interviews with local participants (as this was still during the time where COVID-19 restrictions prohibited indoor gatherings). I scheduled the rest of the interviews with Edmonton participants' online

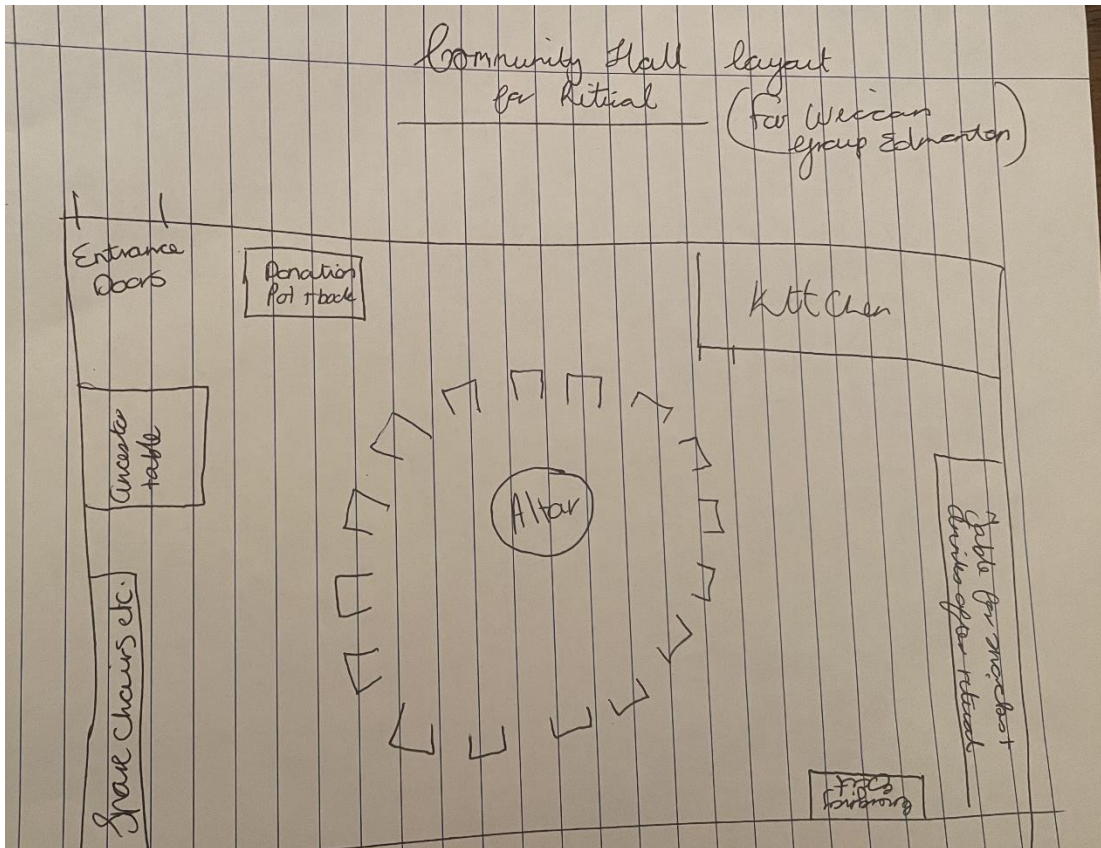
as the weather changed and the Canadian winter set in, where cold and unpleasant temperatures outdoors (where temperatures would often be below minus 18 degrees Celsius), made outdoor visits untenable. Four participants who had moved away from Alberta where I had first met them, and are now located elsewhere in the provinces Alberta and British Columbia were also interviewed online. The six interviews for the participants in Regina and Saskatoon in the province of Saskatchewan were also conducted online. The participants who took part in the in depth interviews who are from the United States of America, were all interviewed in person during 2021 and 2022.

I had already cultivated a relationship with most of the participants who agreed to participate in the more formal style interviews and as a result the interviews usually followed a similar pattern. The first part of our in person 'meeting' consisted of me making sure the participants had read and understood the 'Information sheet' I had provided them with (see Appendix A), and then I would allow some time for questions, after which the participants would sign the consent form. To begin with, the interview took the form of a question and answer type interview after which, many of the interviews became more organic in nature. These were recorded on either on my cell-phone or laptop. After the formal part of the interview had been completed, we would usually just visit, chat and catch up.

## **2.8 Field notes**

Field notes are invaluable for providing a record of details and information as well as providing contextual information. Thus, taking fieldnotes was one of the primary ways in which I recorded my observations after attending rituals, workshops and informal gatherings. After each ritual or social activity I would make notes pertaining to the

finer details of what I could remember of the event, ritual or conversation. Many of the rituals I attended also had formal ritual scripts that were available to me, these were invaluable, and often served as a way to jog my memory. I did not keep a separate



**Figure: 6** Example of a handwritten fieldnotes.

diary, but I did record my personal feelings/emotions and opinions bracketed in the fieldnotes I kept. I would for example make crude drawings of how the various rituals were set up, as well as document how the venue is laid out (see Figure 6 as an example) and would also take some photos where permitted as well as document and note any particular question I wanted to ask and also made notes of oddities or things that interested me.

## 2.9 Photos/Videos

None of the groups I attended were in favour of me recording the live in-person rituals or the discussion group activities<sup>8</sup>. At the time, the ritual facilitators were concerned that not all members would consent to the recordings specifically because not all attendees were “out of the broom closet”<sup>9</sup>. One group in particular thought that making a video recording of rituals would hamper participation of ritual attendees during rituals and would detract from the sacredness of the rituals. As a result I did not make any video recordings of in-person rituals.

Some groups, allowed me to take photographs before and after some of the rituals, specifically of the ritual ‘set-up’ and the altar (see Figure 7) and the ancestor table (see Figure 9). I was also permitted to take photos where participants could not be



**Figure 7: Example of the altar set up.**

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8 The Amethyst Moon group held a discussion group every alternate month, where those who attended their open circle rituals could have meaningful discussion on various topics.

9 “Out of the Broom Closet” is a term used to refer to people who practice Wicca openly and are not afraid of being identified as such.



identified (see Figure 8). Where other groups provided me with photos that they had taken, credit is provided in the photo description.



**Figure 8: Ritual participants waiting for ritual to begin with altar.**



**Figure 9: Ancestor altar set up.**

It should be noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person rituals were not an option, ritual facilitators turned to presenting rituals online, some of which are still available on their *Facebook* platforms. Different groups took different approaches to these online ritual presentations. Some groups preferred to *livestream* broadcast their online rituals, these were only available at a particular time. While other groups chose to encourage more participation by inviting participants to participate to some degree by making use of *Zoom* or by making use of the *Facebook rooms* function. Some facilitators pre-recorded rituals that could be watched at any time, and made them available on the groups' *Facebook* page.

As mentioned, the ritual scripts that I had access to, assisted me in recalling fine details of what has occurred during the ritual. They also served as a source of data that I used for analysis. During the COVID-19 pandemic when movement and social interactions were restricted, I also attended several online ritual presentations. As some groups made these ritual presentations available on the various groups' *Facebook* pages after they had been posted, this enabled me to analyse the ritual presentation as well as the comments people to the posts. Some presenters would post their workshop notes online as well, which would make it easy to download and add to my fieldnotes.

## **2.10 Ritual Scripts and other documents**

I obtained copies of some of the bylaws as well as some of the policies and procedures that are available on the some of the group's websites, which were also used as source of data. I was also given some historical documents by one of the founders of the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group, which provided contextual and historical information.



## 2.11 Analysis

The data analysis technique I applied was similar to that used by Miles and Huberman (1994: 10-11), where the first phase of data analysis consisted of: organising the data, then reducing the data to themes through coding and finally representing the data in a discussion. The analysis part of ethnographic research mainly revolves around the search for patterns; searching for common ideas or topics that come up frequently. After which, systematic examination and explanation and/or descriptions of these themes is undertaken. Inferences, interpretations and representations about the data gathered (Spradley, 1980: 85) are then made.

The first step in data analysis for my research entailed me making a decision on how I planned to prepare and organise my data. Initially in the early stages of my research, my data consisted of fieldnotes scribbles in journals and on bits of paper, photos, ritual scripts and printed workshop notes. All of these hand written notes had to be typed up and the electronic data filed. I was given access to retrieve the electronic copies of ritual scripts and often also given electronic copies of photos and workshop notes as well. Later, I also had voice recordings of the more formal open-ended interviews, which needed to be transformed into text. I used the program: *Dragon Naturally Speaking (version 15.30)* to transcribe the voice recordings to written text. This gave me another opportunity to listen to and re-read the interview text, while making notes on further questions or clarifications, possible themes and other relevant notes.

From the moment fieldwork notes and memos are captured to the final analysis phase at the end of the project, there is a constant stream of new questions, constant reflection and endless bouts of thinking and contemplation. As such, I found that I shifted between doing literature searches based on both existing ritual theories as well

as aspects of ritual and community that I had observed. I would also reflect and spend time thinking about my fieldwork interactions, usually while at home performing mundane activities, like cleaning my house for example. It was not unusual for me to stop mid task, to race to my study to make some notes and capture thoughts and connections.

I found that I had more opportunities to raise questions when I had one-on-one visits with participants, partly I think because it is easier to stay on topic when less people are present. A technique that I employed during this type of fieldwork, was to make notes of particular questions that had come up while doing literature work or transcribing or making notes. I would then, if opportunity arose during conversation, raise these questions. This would of course result in a flurry of other questions and more literature work and notes, and sometimes reworking the interim data coding I had started.

Initially, I made use of software program *Weft QDA*, which is a free open-source tool for qualitative data analysis, specifically for use in ethnographic type data. Later I made use of the software program, *NVivo*, in order to analyse and uncover themes and patterns (Patton, 2002: 38-42), both of these programs assisted in making connections and insights that I had not found when making use of manual coding.

## **2.12 Member checking**

Member checking is a technique that is generally used to determine credibility as well as method of data validation, where research data is returned to the participants/respondents so that they can check the accuracy with which the data was reported by the researcher (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell and Walter, 2016: 1802). I made use of member checking as a method to ensure that my informants' perspectives

are accurately represented in the text. Throughout my research process, I would send my participants messages (either via e-mail or *Facebook Messenger*) as these were their preferred methods of communication. If I needed clarification on a particular aspect, I would receive their replies and comments for correlations, verification and cross-triangulation of the data.

### **2.13 Ethics**

Ethnographies, like other types of research involving humans, are subject to ethical codes or ethical behaviour Silverman (2003:115). This is particularly poignant in anthropological research as researchers develop relationships with their participants which are based on the rapport between researcher and participants as well as mutual understanding and trust. At the most basic level ethical systems, aim to ensure that no harm or embarrassment comes to participants.

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) (2012), provides guidelines concerning ethics, professional responsibility and highlights several ethical issues that need to be taken into consideration when performing research. The AAA, principles also provide guidelines concerning ethics that allow the anthropologist room to also take into consideration the ethical stance of their participants. Some Wiccans follow a religious principle that is called the Wiccan Rede (White, 2015:143), which states: "*An harm ye none do what ye will*", this is an overarching axiom that many Wiccans and about two thirds of my participants purported they adhere to. Although I personally do not follow this axiom in my own religious tradition, I adhered to their system of ethics by also trying to as closely as possible follow this ethical guideline.

During my research I aimed to work collaboratively with my research participants as described by Low and Merry (2010, S203), which is consistent with both the University

of South Africa's Policy on Research Ethics (University of South Africa, 2016: 1-32), as well as the Government of Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Government of Canada, 2018: 133-136), which universities and other institutions adhere to in Canada.

### **2.13.1 Informed consent**

Participants in my study received an information about the research (see Appendix B), when I requested their participation in my research and they also received a copy when I asked them to participate in more formal in-depth interviews. Before I conducted any participant observation in the groups I interacted with, I consulted with and presented my proposal to the leaders of those communities, who in turn discussed it with some of the core members who granted me clearance to approach the other members and attendees directly when I wanted to conduct more in-depth interviews.

Later during the portion of my research when I conducted one-on-one research, I provided my potential participants with an information sheet outlining and explaining my research goals, methods, expected outcomes, possible impacts of the research as well as the rights and responsibilities of the participants (see Appendix B).

### **2.13.2 Sensitivity**

Sensitivity as an ethical consideration, entails awareness and understanding of specific cultural norms. Sensitivity also includes being sensitive to the needs of the participants and while also being respectful of them, their privacy and their religious and philosophical beliefs. Sensitivity during my research was a significant aspect to consider, as I needed to consider the needs for privacy in Open Circle rituals and secrecy when attending private coven rituals. Thus ensuring that certain information is not divulged. These issues were fairly easily resolved with the help of ritual

facilitators who helped me decide what was appropriate to divulge. This was a continuous process throughout my research and fieldwork. Sensitivity also included being mindful of the participants differing religious perspectives and ideas about Wicca and Paganism. Even though a few of the ritual facilitators had been contacted on multiple occasions for interviews by local newspapers and had been interviewed for online news articles, there were not used to having a researcher present at most of their rituals and activities. One ritual facilitator in Regina had even been the focus of a campaign highlighting religious diversity at her place of work. At least one of the covens in Pennsylvania had been approached on multiple occasions by television producers who wanted to make a documentary about the coven, but the coven voted to veto this suggestion as they felt that the broadcasters were trying to sensationalise the coven rather than accurately report on the activities of a coven and its rituals. Despite their exposure to media organisations, this was the first time that some of the groups as a whole had the experienced of the presence of a researcher in their rituals and related activities. Another reason that sensitivity is crucial in because many members of the Open Circle groups feel that Wiccans and Pagans are unfairly prejudiced by the rest of society, due to Wiccan and Paganism being a minority religion and largely misunderstood.

### **2.13.3 Confidentiality**

Another ethical issue needs to be specifically addressed is that of confidentiality, because, as Babbie (2007: 153) mentions, people can be identified by description of certain characteristics, and by association with space and places. This is particularly true of minority groups like Wiccans and Pagans in Canada because it is fairly easy for insiders to infer the identity of prominent leaders and members of the Pagan

community as the Pagan community tends to be fairly small in terms of relative numbers.

It is also important to note that some of my participants specifically wanted to be identified by their legal names. However in an attempt to provide some anonymity to those of my research participants who did not want to be specifically named in my research, I instead provided my participants with the opportunity to choose their own aliases. In the end all participants and Open Circle groups were provided with aliases. I hoped that this would accomplish two things: it would enable members of the community to be able to identify themselves in my research and would provide some degree of anonymity if they chose anonymity.

In a further attempt to respect my participants right to confidentiality, I did not tell any of my participants who I had approached for interviews. I also ensured that all participants were made aware that anonymity cannot always be guaranteed. Another reason I am specifically highlighting the issue of confidentiality, or rather the limits of confidentiality, is because in this particular context is that some of my participants were/are still in “the broom closet”<sup>10</sup>, or prefer not to be identified by either their legal or magical names.

## **2.14. Positionality and reflexivity**

### **2.14.1 Positionality**

Researchers can never be neutral observers, as they are part and parcel of the research process, and researchers develop relationships with participants during the process of data collection, thus making neutral observation and interactions untenable.

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<sup>10</sup> “Broom closet”, is a term used by members of the Neo-Pagan community who have not revealed their religion to others.

Which is why being cognisant of positionality and making sure reflection is a constant part of the whole process, is imperative. There are multiple aspects of positionality that need to be considered as a researcher's life experiences, status, roles, education and financial situation (Corlett and Mavin, 2018:377, Pearson, 2001:58-59) all have bearing on what a researcher has access to and also influences how the researcher frames the research, interprets, analyses and represents data (Lønsmann, 2015:13-14).

I found that reciprocity, sharing and support and friendships to be a balancing act. As a researcher it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between yourself as a researcher, as a member of a community and a friend (DeLyser, 2001). I often found myself in the position that Paul (1953:69) describes where: "Participation implies emotional involvement; observation requires detachment. It is a strain to try to sympathize with others and at the same time strive for scientific objectivity". This is typical of anthropological engagement, as anthropologists find themselves in situations where personal interactions include sharing and support and often result in friendships (Low and Merry, 2010: S207).

During my fieldwork as an example of this, when I was organising one-on-one interviews I asked my participants where they would like to get together for the interview, most often I would meet them at their homes, a coffee shop (when the pandemic restrictions were somewhat relaxed) or sometimes they would want to come over to my home. It was not uncommon for the interviews to have two distinct 'parts', the first part usually consisted of the interview and then the second part consisted of a 'visit', where I found myself constantly shifting between a friend and a researcher. As a researcher, my goals during interviews were to illicit information from my

participants, I tried not to talk too much and tried to keep my own comments at a minimum. On the other hand as a friend, there is an obligation and expectation of mutual interaction, conversation and sharing, I sometimes found this shift of mindset between “researcher” and “friend” a difficult balancing act.

During my research, I found that I had to constantly be aware of my positionality specifically in terms of economic ‘status’, even though I would classify myself as middle class. I found that I had to balance contributing my fair share versus contributing what I thought may have been more than the average member would contribute. For example in one group when making voluntary monetary donations or purchasing consumable ritual items like candles, wine, flowers and food for use in ritual or other social events. I felt that some members of one groups thought I was financially well-off, and able to contribute more than my fair share and would sometimes make comments to this effect that made me uncomfortable.

It is clear from the introduction I identify as Wiccan, and such I approached my research project from an emic perspective, but as Pearson (2001:58) explains, it is not easy to “come out” as a researcher in a so-called “mystery religion”. However, stating one’s positionality is important specifically in the case of Paganism and Wicca. It is my opinion, that it is all but impossible to have a deep understanding of the religion and a connection to the participants if you are not an initiate of the religion. My insider status, came from identifying as Wiccan and sharing some religious commonalities rather than familiarity with the Open Circle groups where I attended rituals as part of my research. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) discuss how for some, having access to a group would not be possible without being a member of the group. This may not necessarily be true of all parts of my research, as the Open Circles I attended are open to all who



are respectful of their religion. However this is definitely true in the case of attending coven rituals. I definitely think my insider status aided my investigations. I was, like Schütz,(1964:34) pointed out, able to question “nearly everything” as a “*stranger*” but at the same time able and willing to share in their experiences, all the while remaining vigilant regarding my own positionality so that I could be aware of possible pitfalls of being an “insider” (Stoking, 1992:13).

One of the disadvantages of insider-researcher, highlighted by Smyth and Holian (2008) relates to revealing sensitive information, a particularly challenging pitfall for me. This is because as a Wiccan, I am privy to some information that is not intended for general consumption, information that is generally only known to initiates of specific Wiccan Traditions. During my analysis phase I had to compare and contrast the differences between Coven rituals and Open Circle rituals. This is because it is very difficult to discuss Open Circle rituals as discrete entities as these rituals are heavily influenced by the format of Coven rituals and Wiccan principles. Participants themselves would also often discuss the similarities and differences of the format and content of Open Circle Rituals and Coven rituals. I also had to be particularly cautious not to divulge any sensitive information about traditional coven practices to participants outside of my own Traditions and also had to be careful that my participants themselves did not divulge sensitive or secret information in their interviews.

As Chavex (2008:475) mentions, the positioning of the researcher depends on their self-identity and how this aligns with their participants. I found being an ‘insider’ possibly easier than a complete ‘outsider’ to understand rituals and practices and philosophies, without having to spend a large amount of time first familiarising myself with the religion and philosophies. I feel that many of my participants had an easier

time talking to and relating to me because I am an insider. I, like, Brannick, and Coghlan (2007), are of the opinion that emic perspectives can be quite powerful but requires constant reflection and negotiation.

#### **2.14.2 Reflexivity**

Like positionality, reflexivity has multiple layers which includes critical thinking, considering diversity and power relations, critically analysing viewpoints, ideologies and self-reflexivity (Hibbert, 2013:803-827). Reflexivity is the conscious effort a researcher engages in order to examine roles, beliefs and values they hold, specifically as it relates to how these influence the knowledge gained during research, and what is done with this knowledge (Shacklock and Smyth, 1998).

Reflexivity is a continuous process, present throughout the research process and as such there were numerous instances where I had to reflect on my role and how my attitudes, beliefs and viewpoints would influence the community. In a few cases I had to take actions as a result of that reflective process. For example, on one occasion a few members had decided without consulting any of the other team members, to record the ritual team's virtual team meeting (as we were in the middle of the pandemic and had to rely on video conferencing to hold our meetings). Prior to this I had conversations with some of the other members who told me that they were not comfortable being recorded. So when this issue came up later, I knew that I had to mention this possible ethical issue to the board and the other ritual team members. I then approached the organising members and made them aware of the possible ethical consequences of these actions. I was told that they were not aware that this could be perceived as an ethical issue, and they asked me what procedures they should follow. My own ethics would dictate this to be an ethical issue and my role of

a participant observer required me to share that knowledge and inform the members of potential procedures that should be followed.

Positionality as mentioned is a process of acknowledging one's views, values and beliefs, as a concept it more of an awareness and acknowledgement. Whereas reflexivity is more active, it is what is done with the information. It requires a researcher to consider their own impact and influence on the research, and then to decide what needs to be done with the information. In this particular case, examining my own ethical standards, would have been fairly meaningless without the reflexivity part that is, taking my ethical standards into account and then taking action to ensure that something is actually done about the issue.

On another occasion reflexivity aided my decision making. As a member of the ritual team of the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group, the issue of updating the temple bylaws was brought up, and I offered to assist in setting up a template for the document. I was excited to help and be part of this process and got the process going by setting up the initial document and drawing on existing bylaws of other temples that we could work from. However, after reflection, I realised that I was walking a fine line between helping and directing the process. The decision to step away from this process occurred after consultation with some of the ritual team members.

## **2.15 Conclusion**

In this Chapter I outlined my primary research method as an ethnography, and discussed the primary methods as participant observation. I examined the approach I took in my fieldwork and also reviewed how I decided on particular research participants that I hoped to include as informants during my in-depth interviews. I also detailed how the impact of the Canadian response to COVID-19, influenced my

fieldwork. I also touched on the amount of time I spent in the field during my participant observation. The specific ethical considerations that I was particularly mindful of during my research specifically that of being an 'insider' and how reflection helped me make ethic decisions were also highlighted.

## Chapter 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this review I will first be discussing the various terms, definitions and defining facets of Pagans, Witches, and Wiccans, as most of my participants' self-identify as belonging to at least one of these groups.

There is some evidence to suggest that practicing, Wiccans, Pagans and Witches tend to experience prejudice, discrimination and misunderstanding, information from the literature is included to discuss the possible reasons for this (Greene, 2021, Hoadley, 2016).

A short discussion of history, evolution and development of Open Circles in Canada and the United States of America, to contextualise this phenomena is included. Traditional Initiatory Wicca and some forms of Pagan ritual takes place in a coven setting and the concept of Open Circle rituals are not the traditional mode of practice (Wagar, 2009:4). The interplay between Coven and Open Circle rituals is discussed in terms of how Open Circle ritual was born out of Coven ritual and the influence of Wiccan practices on Open Circles is also reviewed.

The topics of religion and ritual are discussed specifically in terms of how they are applied in the context of my research as well the role of ritual in facilitating liminality and *communitas*.

As one of the main objectives of this research is to discover how Open Circle rituals contribute to the creation of *communitas* and to determine how (if at all) participants

experience liminality during ritual and in their day to day lives within society, the concepts *communitas* and liminality are examined.

### **3.2 Defining Pagan (ism)**

It is challenging to categorise Paganism. The challenge arises because Pagans themselves often either don't specifically identify as being Pagan or cannot, in discourse, agree on what being Pagan specifically entails. As such, categorisation is often left to academics, to sort out who belongs in which category. In fact many Pagans do not use the word 'Pagan' to describe their beliefs and practices (York, 2003: vii).

Aside from the following discussion that explores the various definitions of Paganism, I use the terms Pagan and Neo-Pagan interchangeably throughout the dissertation, and will use the term Wiccan when I am specifically referring to the religion of Wicca.

O'Donnell (1977), wrote an excellent essay discussing the main interpretations and ideas surrounding the origins of word 'Pagan', he is of the opinion that the term Pagan was initially used to refer to a "civilian" as opposed to members of the "military", more specifically, the so called: *milites christi* (soldiers of Christ). However, the etymology of the term Pagan remains rather uncertain but that it was definitely used by Constantius II when the word was used with pejorative connotations.

Chuvin (1990) is also of the opinion that the word Pagan was used as far back as the fourth century in Rome during early stages of the development of Christianity, but believes that during the fifth century the meaning had evolved to include all non-Christians, and may have been used to specifically refer to practitioners of the "Old Religion", i.e. those who had not yet converted to Christianity. Chuvin, goes on to state that he believes that the origin of the word most likely meant "people of the place" who

continued their local traditions and religious practices. It is not clear whether the word “Pagan” necessarily denoted belonging to a specific religion, but that it most likely referred to a various spiritual practices and beliefs.

According to Hutton (1999) the etymology of the word ‘Pagan’ comes from the word ‘Paganus’ that generally referred to those who were non-Christians, as their religious practices pre-dated Christianity, it also referred to those who belonged to the local unit of government that was still based on the Old Religion. He also states that the word ‘Pagan’ was often used to refer to those who continued to practice the “Old Religion”, specifically those who dwelled in the countryside.

### **3.3 Who are Pagans and Wiccans, what do they believe?**

According to the American Religious Identification Survey taken in 2012, around 340 000 people identified as Pagan, while 342 000 identified as Wiccan, totalling 682 000. While in Canada according to the National Household Survey’s (Statistics Canada) data on religion for 2011, there are a total of 25 495 Pagans of which 10 225 are Wiccan. However, according to Pitzl-Walters (2013) this data may not be an accurate reflection of the number of Wiccans and Pagans, because this this was a sub sample rather than a full census, many commenters on this article also said that they had not been asked about their religious affiliation during this census. Generally the reported ratio of men to women is 29.6 percent men to 70.4 percent of women amongst Pagans (Lewis, 2013: 61-78). The Alberta Witches Association<sup>11</sup> as of April 2021 had over two thousand members, this number has steeply increased since 31 October 2020, when the reporter Collen Underwood, from CBC News interviewed some of the

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<sup>11</sup> The Alberta Witches Association started as a small group of people who identify as witches who then started a Facebook group, this group as of September 2022 has 3616 members who all live in Alberta, a province of Canada.

founders of the group, reported that the group had one thousand two hundred members. This seems to substantiate the assertion that the Canadian census data may not be entirely accurate. In an interview by CBC news a metaphysical local shop owner who identifies as a witch, says that Edmonton's witchcraft community has deep roots and that covens have been operating in the city for more than 30 years, although most are solitary practitioners (Snowdon, 2019).

Pagans and Wiccans generally have an above average education. In Canada for example the percentage of Pagans and Wiccans who have at least a BA degree or higher is about 24% versus the national average of 21% (Lewis, Currie, and Oman-Reagan, 2016:99, Rabinovitch, 1992: 34, Shufelt, 2007:30. Magliocco (2001) reports that many pagans are employed in the fields of health care and computer science while other are artists and artisans. However this data is not conclusive as Pagans have a variety of professions like ordinary citizens. Pagans and Wiccans also live in ordinary neighbourhoods and it is often difficult to tell on sight if a person is a practicing Pagan or Wiccan, they do not live in segregated housing or settlements.

In contemporary society it is generally easier to think of Pagan(ism) as an umbrella term (Harvey, 1997: vii). Although this may not be strictly true in terms of how adherents of Wicca and Witchcraft etc. would identify themselves. Often the term 'Pagan' is used to include Wiccans, contemporary Eclectic witches, Goddess Worshipers, Druids, and sometimes those who practice Heathenry, Animism, Shamanism and Earth Centered Spirituality, among others.

Paganism has been classified by religious scholars as a modern religious movement, but it cannot rightly be referred to a single religion as the different beliefs, practices and mythologies that exist within Paganism can vary greatly. Instead, White (2016: 6)



suggests that we view Paganism as a “collection of faiths” that are related to each other similar to how Abrahamic<sup>12</sup> religions are related to each other. Witchcraft is not in itself considered a religion but practitioners of Witchcraft are often also lumped into this category.

It is important to first clarify the distinguishing factors between the terms Pagan and Neo-Pagan, as these terms are often used interchangeably by academics and practitioners alike. Scholars often distinguish Pagan(ism) as a non-Abrahamic religion, while the term Neo-Pagan is applied to the modern ‘reconstructed’ version of this religion. Generally scholars agree that Paganism refers to a pre-Christian religion, which was polytheistic and involved some form of veneration of nature and in some cases the worship of deities. Some scholars use the term Neo-Pagan to refer to a revived form of Paganism in modern times<sup>13</sup> it is considered a new religious movement. Some followers believe that they are building on or reconstructing the “old religion” (Strmiska, 2005:1). One point that should be made is that Neo-Paganism is particularly challenging to define because as MacCath (2013) puts it: “it is extraordinarily difficult to define because it is both syncretic<sup>14</sup> and diverse”. Syncretism occurs when there is a mix or a blend of two or more aspects of different religions. An example of a syncretic religion would be the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) in Southern Africa, it is considered a syncretic religion because it is a mix between Christianity and indigenous religions (Mofokeng, 2021). Diversity amongst Pagans occurs across the

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<sup>12</sup> Abrahamic religions include: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

<sup>13</sup> It is generally accepted that Neo-Paganism as a movement spread from Britain and North America in the 1960's

<sup>14</sup> Syncretic as the religion is based on a blend of various religious aspects and influences from other organisations.

globe, as there are often significant differences in religious beliefs and practices even with in the same tradition.

It is also useful to differentiate what is meant by the term 'reviving' or 'reconstructing' and what the term 'reclaiming' means. 'Reviving or reconstructing' refers to the modern reconstruction of the "Old religion". 'Reclaiming' refers to a particular group(s) of people most notably, Starhawk (1979), who synthesised Pagan spirituality, sociopolitical and ecological activism into a tradition known as 'Reclaiming witchcraft' MacCath (2013). There have been claims by Gerald Gardner and some of the adherents to his tradition (known as Gardnerian Wicca) who have claimed that he discovered and revived an existing religion that is thousands of years old. There are still some Pagans refer to themselves as revivalists, or claim that their traditions based on pre-Christian religions (Pearson, 2007:5. Zwissler, 2011:326-342, Harvey and Hardman (eds.), 1996:3-15).

The myth or foundational story that is often still perpetuated even in some Pagan and Wiccan communities, despite academic and historical claims that dispel these claims is that Paganism was driven underground due to persecution of Christians. According to this myth, Paganism stretched back to pre-Christian times in an unbroken line, and Paganism only began to be openly practiced after the repeal of witchcraft laws. Examples of this mythology are present in numerous publications, most notably that of Margret Murry (1921). *The Book of Pagan rituals* also mentions this myth just to name a few sources (Slater, 1978:2). This pseudo history was fairly typical in earlier scholarly writing, often authors, even Gerald Gardner (1954), who is considered by some, to be one of the founders of Wicca. Gardner misrepresented or distorted the historical records to comply with this mythology. Even though these claims and myths

have been debunked by contemporary scholars like Hutton (1999:296-316). Hutton is a historian who challenged the many assumptions of the origins relating to Wicca, and addressed the pseudo-history and the highlights the improbability of the claims that Wiccan traditions are ancient and come from an unbroken hidden line. Hutton does, however, concede that Wicca is a genuine new religious movement (1999). The reason Wicca is considered a religion is because it has a theology, an ethical system, ritual practices and holy days (White, 2016:5).

Lewis (1999) is of the opinion that the magical systems used in Paganism, Wicca and witchcraft are rooted in a mixture of teachings and practices from various organisations, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Rosicrucian Society and the Theosophical society, and are also influenced by the Qabala<sup>15</sup> it is certainly not an ancient religion.

### **3.4 Brief history of Wicca and what Wiccans believe**

Wicca as it is practiced today, was popularized by among others Gerald Gardner who is often credited as being the father of modern witchcraft (Maxwell-Stuart: 2000: 200). Doreen Valiente (who initially worked with Gardner) and Sybil Leek (although not part of Gardner's branch of Wicca, but also hailed from New Forest) are all witches who helped to popularise Wicca. Prior to this, most Witches and Pagans had little contact with one another, they lived in the shadows as they feared for their safety, the stuck to their own small covens and rarely shared any information (Farrar and Bone,: 2016:xi). The historic Witch Trials that took place in about 1610-1692 and the consequent prosecutions and executions that occurred, were all good reasons for

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<sup>15</sup> Hermetic Qabalah (Hermetic) is a Western esoteric system involving mysticism and the occult used specifically in magical-religious societies like the Golden Dawn. Separate from the Kabbalah a Jewish school of mysticism, although they are pronounced the same way.

witches to remain in the proverbial broom closet<sup>16</sup>. These witch hunts took place all across Europe and resulted in thousands of deaths people, predominately women accused of witchcraft (*History.com*, 2017).

It was only after the Witchcraft Act was repealed in Britain in 1951 that witches started coming out of the proverbial broom closet. During the 1970's, some Priests and Priestesses of Wicca began offering rituals to outsiders that were interested, this practice became known as the 'Outer Court'.

Wicca is a religion that is typically duo-theistic, in that adherents worship both the God and the Goddess (in their various facets). The feminine Divine is seen as an equal to the masculine counterpart in Paganism and specifically in Wicca. It is also a theurgical<sup>17</sup> religion, and Wiccans (depending on their specific tradition) celebrate either the original four Sabbats (Holy days) of Candlemas, Beltane, Lammas and Samhain, or the eight Sabbats that also include the solstices and equinoxes, of Yule (Winter solstice), Spring Equinox, Summer Solstice and the Autumn Equinox (also known by some eclectic practitioners as Mabon). The four Great Sabbats correspond to the seasons of nature while the other four Sabbats correspond with the equinoxes and the solstices. The Witches New Year starts on Samhain (also known as Hallowe'en or All Hallows Eve) it is the beginning of winter and it is said to be the time of the year when the veil between the living and the dead is the thinnest. It is during this time of year where communication between the living and the dead takes place, and the living are able to celebrate with their family members who have passed on.

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<sup>16</sup> Broom Closet is a term widely used in Wiccan communities to indicate that their religious practices are hidden and not out in the open.

<sup>17</sup> Theurgy describes the practice of rituals that are seen as magical in nature which are performed in order to evoke the presence of deities and the goal is to achieve uniting with the divine and to perfect oneself.

Candlemas (also sometimes referred to as Imbolc) is celebrated for the purposes of honoring the feast of waxing light and to celebrate the purification of the Earth-Mother. It also focusses on readiness for the season of Spring and seeds are planted as symbolic representations of planting new ideas and wishes for the coming growing season. Beltane is one of the quarterly Fire Festivals, where participants are symbolically purified by jumping of the Beal fire, this Sabbat focusses on purification through life lessons and the progression towards wisdom. The Sabbat of Yule (or the Mid-Winter Solstice), revolves around the symbolism of the light or spark being alive and bright and the return of the light after a long and dark winter (specifically poignant in the Northern Hemisphere). This Sabbat is symbolically represented by lighting candles, decorating with winter greenery, thereby letting the nature spirits know that they are welcome to come in, out from the cold. The Summer Solstice (sometimes referred to by eclectic Wiccans as Litha) is the Sabbat that symbolically celebrates the power and strength of the summer season, at this time petitions<sup>18</sup> are burned to be consumed by the light and heat of the flames. The Sabbat of Lammas (or known as Lughnasdh by eclectic Wiccans as) is one of the harvest festivals, where the celebration of the symbolic harvest of the wishes planted at the Candlemas Sabbat are harvested, and thanks is given for the harvest.

Although most scholars classify Wicca as belonging to the Neo-Pagan category, Wicca is a separate religion. Wicca was first regarded as a legitimate religion in the US in 1985 (Carter, 2018). White (2016:4), is of the opinion that Wicca consists of numerous parts of different Witchcraft Traditions, including influences of other

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<sup>18</sup> A Petition is request or wish for something that is desired, usually written on a piece of paper and burned

religions, spiritual movements and also some ceremonial magic that has been synthesised into this modern religions.

It would be incorrect to say that all adherents to Wicca unequivocally accept that Wicca as a religion. Further not all adherents regard Wicca as not being a revival of an ancient pre-Christian religion. This notation can largely be attributed to oral folklore (Jencson, 1989:4). However, most agree that Wicca as a religion advocates self-responsibility, encourages learning and is often described as a nature-based religion. Although Wicca does not have a centralised belief system or dogma, some practitioners of the religion of Wicca believe that there is one central tenet to Wicca, that is: "Harm Ye None, do what Ye will", some even believe in the three fold law<sup>19</sup>, and accept this as a tenet, which is often referred to as the 'Wiccan Rede', which is also applied as an ethical guideline. Although it should be made clear that this ethical guideline is not shared or adhered to by all who identify as Wiccan, in fact many traditions who practice initiatory Wicca do not acknowledge that the 'Wiccan Rede' was ever intended to be a guiding principal for Wiccans. Practices and beliefs differ amongst Wiccans, most traditions<sup>20</sup> in Wicca although many have similar beliefs and practices and celebrate the same Holy days (Gagnon, 2008). In reality, however, there is no unified system of belief or practice.

Most Pagans and Wiccans do not have brick and mortar churches and temples, and tend to avoid organisational frameworks (Farrar and Farrar, 1984). Although this is true for many Pagans and Wiccans there are examples that challenge this assumption. Some Wiccans have formed organisations to which they are affiliated, although they

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<sup>19</sup> The Three fold law also known as the rule of three, or the Law of return, is a contested religious tenet that states, whatever a person puts out into the world be it positive or negative they will have the same returned to them three times.

<sup>20</sup> A Wiccan tradition can be viewed as similar to different denominations within a particular religion.

do not do not have permanent brick and mortar churches or temples, the Wiccan Church of Canada, The New Wiccan Church International and the Congregational Wiccan Association, are some examples of formalised organisations that exist without brick and mortar buildings.

As mentioned, it is problematic to pin-point what Pagans/Neo Pagans<sup>21</sup> believe and/or practice, as their beliefs are so diverse. There are many varieties and traditions within Paganism and there is always much debate concerning philosophical views, and what constitutes Neo-Paganism. Black (2012:1) also points out that, Neo-Pagan philosophical tenets can be “mutually contradictory”. If one were to generalise quite broadly, one could say that many Pagan traditions tend to be animistic (Jencson, 1989:2). Paganism is often, but not always seen as a polytheist and pantheist religion. Most adherents of Paganism believe in balance and harmony in all aspects of life, making use of ritual in order to draw closer to the divine (Adler, 1979:3). Pagans and many Wiccans are polytheist, having a reverence for the ancient Gods and Goddesses<sup>22</sup>, and aim to live in such a way that enables them to locate the divine in the individual and nature (Eilberg-Schwarz, 1989:77-95. Harvey, 1977: vii).

In contemporary discourse, some Wiccans and Pagan consider themselves to be orthopraxic, in that their traditions emphasise action over correct thought or belief (Mooney, 2018:88-89). Although not all Wiccans agree with this statement, as some traditions see their religions as being a synthesis of both orthopraxic and orthodoxic.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Here the term Pagan/Neo-Pagan are used to refer to people who do not belong to mainstream religions like Christianity, Islam or Judaism. Please refer to the section Definition of terms.

<sup>22</sup> This is a generic term that can refer to the worship of any number pre-Christian Gods and Goddesses of various Pantheons, including but amongst others; the Greek Pantheon, the Egyptian, Sumerian etc. Some even see the ancient God/Goddess in a henotheistic light, were all Gods/Goddesses are in fact facets of a single God/Goddess.

<sup>23</sup> Orthodoxy or orthodoxic refers to the adherence to correct or accepted creeds, especially in religion.

Ritual performance is an important form of religious expression for Pagans and Wiccans alike, and performing ritual is emphasised because it is considered as a human's relationship with the divine (which includes every living thing). Further, ritual not only serves to achieve communication with the divine the community and the self, it also serves as a transcendent experience (Magliocco, 2015:635-664). Ritual can also be seen as relationship between the physical world and the otherworld or the metaphysical world (Leach, 1976:82).

Driver (2006:132) is also of the opinion that ritual performance contributes to establishing social and even cosmic order and also has psychological dimensions. Ritual performance is also seen to preserve social order and serve as a force for transformation (Kralik, Visentin and Van Loon, 2006: 320-329). Transformation in ritual entails adaptation, personal development, it can also be in relation to specific situations or societal issues. York (2003) on the other hand argues that paganism is a religion, a behaviour and as well as a theology.

In the Pagan community, there is a commonly misconstrued maxim that states: "every Witch is a Pagan, but every Pagan is not necessarily a Witch" (Crandall, 2013:xi). Some contemporary authors still use this maxim, but Pearson (2007:5) states that this is no longer an adequate reflection of the Wiccan identity because not all Wiccans identify as Pagans. As noted previously, Paganism is a distinct umbrella term that is used to categorise various groups who have distinct practices and traditions. Witchcraft is related to some of the practices that some Wiccans participate in, but it is not a necessary component of being Pagan. Another differentiator between Wiccans and Pagans is that Wicca as it was originally conceived, is an initiatory



religion and has firm boundaries as to who is an 'insider' and who is an 'outsider', whereas this is not normally the case amongst other Pagans (Pearson, 2007:5).

It is fairly common for Wiccans to classify themselves as both Wiccan, (that is belonging to the Wiccan religion), as well a Witch i.e. making use of techniques and practices consistent with witchcraft (Adler, 1979). It is quite common for the term Witch and Wiccan to be used interchangeably (Sabin, 2006:3) early practitioners of Wicca referred to themselves as Witches, or called their practice "Witchcraft" (White, 2016:4). It is important to remember that Wicca is classified as religio-magical, in other words it includes religions practices as well as the use of magic. Whereas witchcraft as a separate practice usually does not include a religious component.

Practitioners of Witchcraft and Occultism alike, utilise skills and techniques that are for healing and other occult<sup>24</sup> practical arts and magical techniques (Carpenter, 1996:377). Occultism can be described as the belief in and use of supernatural forces, and usually includes astrology, alchemy and natural magic<sup>25</sup>. Occultism can also mean anything that is beyond the normal limits of "operative consciousness" that is hidden or concealed from others, these techniques are concealed from people outside of the specific traditions (Gray, 1969:18).

There is often a debate as to the origin of the word 'witch'. Russell (1972) explains that it is derived from the Old English word 'wicca' which translates to male witch (the female form of the word being 'wicce'). Some Wiccan witches refer to their

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<sup>24</sup> Occult (ism) usually refers to hidden or secret information that gives the person who studies the occult some sort of power

<sup>25</sup> Natural magic makes use of the magical powers of physical substances like herbs, stones, resins etc. the main principle governing natural magic is that every object in the material world is reflected in the higher levels of being.

practices as the 'craft of the wise'<sup>26</sup>, as some are of the opinion that the word 'wicca' means 'to know' or to have wisdom, and therefore the word witchcraft has been interpreted by some to mean the craft of the wise. However, as Russell (1972) has stated, the etymology of the word does in fact not relate to the Celtic derivation of the word 'witan' which means 'to know'. Although the etymology of the word has been clarified, some persist in making use of the concept of the "craft of the wise".

Grimes (2002:2-8) discusses resurgence of interest in the construction of ritual in contemporary society, as a means to reinvention, and to avoid social disorientation. Ritual involvement amongst Neo-Pagans is participatory, with participants fully engaged in the whole process. Rituals are held for various reasons, such as celebrating the Sabbats<sup>27</sup> or Esbats<sup>28</sup>, milestones, initiations, or other rites of passage (Grimes, 2002:2), ritual can even be performed in celebration of the God and Goddess or for a host of other reasons. Reinvention or construction of rituals is of specific interest here because most of the rituals that are performed at the Open Circles are new and specially written for Open Circles rituals. In Open Circles, ritual liturgies are newly written for each ritual, Sabbat or Esbat or other celebrations. This is where Open Circle rituals and Traditional Coven ritual liturgies differ significantly, as traditional liturgies are often repeated year after year, and even if they are altered slightly, the main components and form of the rituals remain the same. These Coven ritual liturgies are also passed down to initiates. Part of the reason that Open Circle rituals are written anew is because coven rituals cannot be used in the public context.

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<sup>26</sup> Craft of the Wise includes the skills and techniques that a trained witch engages in, this term is often a synonym for witchcraft, and can include: divination, spellwork, healing, herbology, astrology, talismanic magic etc. (it should be noted that different traditions teach different types of witchcraft and that each practitioner will develop their own set of skills.

<sup>27</sup> Sabbat(s) are the eight Holy days or seasonal festivals celebrated by Pagans and Wiccans.

<sup>28</sup> Esbat(s); Include all rituals related to Lunar moon phases specifically the New and Full Moons

Open Circle ritual writers often draw their inspiration from older texts, internet resources and some bits of traditional liturgies that may have become public (Wagar, 2012).

### **3.5 Prejudice, discrimination and misunderstanding**

Pagans, Wiccans and Witches are often misunderstood, and often these groups are lumped into one category, regardless of whether or not they actually belong to discrete categories. Harvey (1997:217) states that some Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations confuse Paganism with Satanism or some form of evil doing. He is of the opinion that this confusion is partly due to ignorance, but that others do it deliberately. During colonisation from as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Christian missionaries of all Christian denominations, were known to use the word 'Pagan' as a disparaging prejudicial term, to imply devil worship or atheism. They also used this term to refer to the belief systems of Indigenous Peoples in the territories being colonised, even though these Indigenous Peoples did not themselves identify as being Pagan (Wallace, 2015:30).

Unfortunately discrimination and prejudice are not relegated to early missionaries. Prejudice and discrimination against Pagans and Occultists<sup>29</sup>, Wiccans and Witches is still part of the mainstream contemporary narrative. Ellis (2000), documents how Christian Pentecostal movements, conspiracy theorists and unscrupulous media outlets framed Folk religions and Pagan traditions as Satanism during the 1980's and 1990's in what has today become known as "Satanic Panic"<sup>30</sup>. Many influential

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<sup>29</sup> Occultists/Occult :Is a category of supernatural beliefs and practices which generally fall outside the scope of religion and science for mainstream religions, and encompasses phenomena involving s mysticism, spirituality, and magic

<sup>30</sup> Satanic Panic Satanic panic is a term that was coined as a result of alleged widespread "Satanic ritual abuse" in the United States that was later debunked (Yuhas:2021). The phenomena also spread to South Africa and is still evident at times. South Africa was associated with "Satanic Panic" partly due to

“experts” in medicine and law enforcement perpetuated the idea that Satanic activities and Satanic cults were prevalent during the 1980’s and 1990’s, though it was later proven that these theories were baseless. Ken Lanning a former F.B.I agent was cited as saying that: “The evidence wasn’t there, but the allegations of Satanic ritual abuse never really went away” (Yuhas, 2021).

Harvey (1997:218) points out that evangelical Christians exaggerate claims about the prevalence of Satanism. The author (Harvey: 1995) also states that there very few self-identified Satanists in Britain, at the time the number was less than 100, the same can be said of many other countries around the world. Ironically Satanism as a religion does in fact not require the belief in Satan, who is part of the Christian pantheons. It is also important to note that most Pagans consider Satanism to be a branch of Christianity, completely unrelated to Paganism. Satanists do not count themselves as either Pagan or Christian. In fact Pagans and Wiccans do not even acknowledge the existence of Satan.

Emerson and Syron (1995) and Tairu (2010) also discuss how Wiccan and Neo-Pagans are persistently and inaccurately portrayed as being Satanists, which in turn leads to real-world discrimination and marginalisation (Jorgensen and Russel,1999). Most Neo-Pagans have faced some form of discrimination and even termination from workplaces when employers find out that they identify as Wiccans (Cookson, 1997) and some parents have even been denied custody of their children based on their identification with Paganism (Yardley, 2008).

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the creation of the ‘Occult Related Crimes Unit’ in 1992, linked to conservative Christians, rumours and political instability in the country just prior to the end of Apartheid (Dunbar, 2012).

One might be tempted to think that prejudice and discrimination on religious grounds, does not occur in countries where freedom of religion is protected by a country's legal system. However, there are many examples to choose from when citing issues of prejudice, discrimination and misunderstanding against Pagans. Here I will cite examples from Canada, seeing the majority of my fieldwork took place in Canada. Although it should be mentioned that discrimination and prejudice against Witches, Wiccans and Pagans is not limited to Canada, and I witnessed some of that prejudice and misunderstanding firsthand when I lived in South Africa as a practicing Wiccan.

The first example comes from Winnipeg, in the province of Manitoba in Canada, in 2017, a Pagan shop owner, had been the victim of systematic attacks by certain Christian groups. These attacks varied from having her property vandalised to harassment. At the time the Police department reported that they could do nothing about the situation as they could not classify the crimes against her as Hate Crimes as a Hate Crime involves "the mischief to be based on bias, prejudice or hate based on religion, race colour or national ethnic origin" (CBC News, 2017). According to this article, the shop owner is a Pagan and identifies as a witch. At the time (that is 2017) the Canadian witchcraft law was still in effect. Although Wicca is considered a religion in Canada, witchcraft or practicing witchcraft is not considered a religion in Canada.

Another recent example comes from closer to home, where a Pagan witch in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, (just outside of Edmonton), was almost fined as a neighbour filed a complaint against her for her religious artwork in her backyard. In June 2020, police officers arrived at the person's home after the neighbour's complaint which threatened her with a city bylaw violation. The Pagan homeowner cites religious intolerance and discrimination as motivators for the complaint (Jones, 2020).

### **3.6 Covens and Open circles (Outer Court)**

In Wicca, the term 'coven' describes the group of witches who practice their shared beliefs through rituals and magic. Traditional Wiccan covens belong to the category of the 'Inner-Court'<sup>31</sup>. In a coven, membership is private and by invitation only, prospective members are often vetted prior to being accepted into an existing coven. Coven rituals and membership is kept secret and only available to members of the coven. Covens usually consist of small groups of people, generally ranging from 4 to 12 members (although this number may vary from tradition to tradition). Coven members are committed to their religion and craft<sup>32</sup> and each initiate is trained and initiated in accordance with the specific requirements of the particular tradition (Pearson, 2007:4). There are specific expectations and duties that each coven member is expected to fulfil with the coven and participation in coven gathering at Esbats and Sabbats is often mandatory.

Some Neo-Pagans use the term "circle" to refer to a similar type group similar to the Traditional initiatory Wiccan coven (Yardley, 2008). Open Circles on the other hand are part of the 'Outer Court' category, the main differences between the 'Outer court' or what is often referred to as Open Circles, as they are sometimes known, is that these groups are open to the public. They do not require membership or special training, are not initiatory and attendance is not mandatory. Often Solitary practitioners that is people who identify as either Pagan or Wiccan, who are not affiliated with a coven or do not have access to a coven (Berger and Ezzy, 2009:501-514), attend these Open circles as a way to connect with other Pagans.

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<sup>31</sup> Inner court refers to the members who are initiated into a traditional coven

<sup>32</sup> "The craft" or simply "craft" is a term that refers to the practices of Wicca. Lewis (date) is of the opinion that Gerald Gardner adopted this term which is a term used in Freemasonry,

The Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group where a large portion of my fieldwork took place is an example of a group that belongs to an overarching organisation that several of these Open Circle groups throughout Canada are affiliated with. These Open Circle groups provide Open circle rituals that are open to the public. Numerous other groups like the Wiccan Church of Canada, and smaller groups like the Amethyst moon Group (another group where I did participant research) are examples of other Open Circle groups that provide Open Circle rituals for the public, but are not affiliated with any organisation. Providing Open Circle rituals means that many more people are able to attend rituals, these rituals are generally adapted to suit this type of practice (Wagar, 2014:122). Open Circles rituals have led to new rituals and practices being developed that are not the same as those practiced in a coven setting (Ravenswood, 2019:57). Whether or not Open Circles are religious organisations and whether or not they offer religious rituals appears to be largely dependent on the individual Open Circle groups. Some Open Circle groups tend to identify as Pagan Open Circles and may not see themselves as being affiliated with any religion. On the other hand, other Open Circles specifically identify as Wiccan or at the very least being related to witchcraft. Although this is rather ironic as many of the original Open Circles had originally been created as Outer courts of Wiccan covens.

### **3.7 Religion and Ritual**

Defining religion as a term, is in itself problematic, as there is no consensus as to what actually constitutes religion. Even the term 'ritual' is also challenging to define and is greatly dependent on the context in which it occurs. As Schechner (1993:228) intoned, the term 'ritual' *"means very little because it means too much"*. The closest one might come to deciding what belongs to the category of 'religion' and 'ritual' is by having a look at the various definitions and ideas around what constitutes religion and ritual.

Ritual theory commenced with Durkheim (1995)[1912] one of the first ritual scholars, organised religious phenomenon into the categories of belief and rites. Beliefs to Durkheim, are subjective opinions, which can be expressed in terms of concepts, objects and ideas. Rites on the other hand are activities based on action as opposed to thought. Amongst Wiccans orthodoxy and orthopraxy are similar concepts. Beyer (2019) defines religion as consisting of belief and practice that include the concepts of orthodoxy which entails the belief in a doctrine and orthopraxy which is generally interpreted as 'correct practice'. Durkheim (1995:39-44) also said religion is what separates the sacred and the profane, which constitutes the social reality of humans. In his conception, the 'sacred' is related to anything that is outside of the ordinary or the mundane life, while the 'profane' is related to ordinary mundane life and its related activities. He also, developed the idea that religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices, relative to sacred things". Like many academics after, he makes the distinction between religion as a belief system and rites/rituals are considered to be modes of action. Durkheim (1995:208) was also of the opinion that the entire purpose of religion is societal maintenance and moral cohesiveness.

Mircea Eliade (1996) a religious historian, writer and philosopher, also discussed the concepts of the sacred and the profane, and states that religion is tied to the sacred, while the profane is manifest in secular life. Eliade also argues that the sacred is a natural component of the human experience by virtue of the fact that the gods created man, and therefore humans are part of divinity. He makes use of the concept of the mythological development between the sacred and the profane as starting point to describing the purpose of ritual. He provides multiple examples of myths from across various cultures in order to illustrate the similar themes relating to his concept of the 'center'. In his discussion of his model, he says that creation by the gods should serve



as a symbolic archetype for humans. He also discusses how this model of the journey to the 'eternal return' is symbolically made use of in ritual. The myth of the 'Eternal Return' is symbolic of the idea of the journey to return to 'the center' also described as the world axis. This is representative of where heaven and earth meet and also seen as the origin of creation. He uses example of temples, palaces sacred cities and royal residences as example of 'centers' where he conceives the center to be, and describes this as the "zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality" Eliade (1996:165). These 'centers', the sacred mountains, the sacred cities and sacred temple are portals or pathways that lead to the center, in order to get to the 'center' the journey entails some hardships and ordeals that need to be endured on the journey. He believes that it is through ritual and enacted myth that humans are able to understand what is truly meaningful and real.

Van Gennep ([1909] 1960) was responsible for analysing the study of ritual, he developed a tripartite structure of ritual that includes the rites of separation, rites of incorporation, and rites of transition. He uses the concept of the territorial passage which is symbolic of some type of movement or journey to discuss his rites of passage. During this journey the participant(s) move through conceptual worlds where the boundaries or thresholds are symbolically demarcated by gates, walls and other markers to indicate the location of the boundary between "one world" and the other, a sacred space. It is through the journeying through these two conceptual worlds, that participant's progress or transition through the stages of ritual. During the pre-liminal stage or the rites of separation stage participants are separated from their previous worlds. In the rites of transition or the liminal phase, is the period of time where the participants are between states, they are in a transitional phase. The final phase or

the stage of reincorporation phase is where participants re-enter society after completion of the rite Van Gennep ([1909] 1960).

Goody (1961) considers how religious phenomena and ritual are discussed in sociological sciences in terms of their various parts of for the purposes of analytical analysis and how these classifications and definitions have led to a variety of problems. This is relevant specifically in terms of Paganism because it is difficult to define Paganism in narrow terms. Paganism constitutes both behaviour and religion and can more accurately be described as polymorphic, in that there is no separation between the individual, the community, the divine and nature (York, 2000). In essence it is difficult to separate out the individual 'categories' of religion, ritual or relationships to other people or beings and the divine, and may even be said to be a "spontaneous response to the world or an experiential religion" (York, 2007:11-18). Rountree (2012) also discusses how the Pagan worldview and religious beliefs differs greatly from Durkheim's views. This is because Pagans do not view the natural, supernatural and social worlds as separate or discrete entities, but instead view all of these as connected and mutually dependent. The Paganism is also focussed on the relationship between the natural world and humans, and the sacredness of the natural world as an integral part of the religion, not a separate impingement.

Taves (2009) on the other hand discusses religious experiences as specific experiences that could be characterised as religious, mystical or spiritual which are seen as core to religion in general. The author also discusses various approaches the social sciences have taken with regards to the study of religion and how those have impacted our view on what comprises religion. She specifically focusses on how the view that the component parts of religion would be a better way to study religion, rather

than focussing on defining religion as it is an abstract concept. What is particularly relevant in this book is that the author addresses the elements of religion in terms of the interaction of psychobiological, social and cultural-linguistic process that all form part of how we view and interpret religious experiences. She also discusses how the religious, spiritual, mystical and magical components are all part of a larger processes, aimed to be meaning making, something special and apart from ordinary everyday experiences.

Bell (1992:119-184) predominately discusses ritual theory, and examines academic interest in ritual, and discusses how theories about ritual shape the academic subject of ritual. What is particularly relevant is that she discusses how ritual theories themselves shape our conception of what constitutes ritual. The point is made that ritual is often distinguished from religion. Ritual is differently categorised because ritual is considered to be an action, versus other aspects of religion like; belief, mythology, symbols, that are placed in the category of thought. She classifies the main differences in the conception of ritual belonging to one of two groups: the theorists who make a distinction between ritual as an action and ritual as a mental construct (such as a belief system, or sets of symbols and myths) and the theorists who perceive ritual, religion and belief as intertwined concepts. She argues that even though many ritual theorists conceptualise ritual only in terms of its links between religion, society and culture, that ritual should in fact be studied “in and of itself” as a stand-alone topic, and that it probably no way to unequivocally decide if either religious actions such as ritual or religious beliefs are the most important.

Effective ritual includes both cultural and sociological aspects, but ritual is also a demonstration of belief, and can hold social power, enabling social change to occur.

Bell's idea that rituals can hold social power, substantiates Wagar's (2012:39) stance that Open Public (Wiccan) temples work at transforming all of life and society, so that it will benefit their members as well. Wagner himself has founded several Open Circle Groups.

Driver (2006:166-168) takes the stance that ritual's purpose is "social change through ritual process and transformation" and enhances community bonds and social order and helps deepen communal relationships. Driver, addresses one of the main focusses of most Pagan rituals, which could be summarised as, some form of *transformation*. He also discusses how definitions of magical acts and science overlap, and where magic specifically functions in within specific socio-cultural frameworks. What is interesting is that Driver is of the opinion that magic cannot be separated from ritual, and that all rituals employ magic which occurs in a socio-cultural framework of reality. This assertion that ritual and magic are interlinked is in line with the Pagan and Wiccan world view that all things are interconnected; magic, ritual and religion are all one.

Driver (2006) views ritual as a space in which individuals can transcend fixed social roles and often transformation is aimed at societal changes. Driver also investigates how ritual creativity and ritual performances enact religious beliefs and their potential in transformation of members of a community, which tends to echo the sentiments of other theorists, like Durkheim, Van Gennep and Turner.

Similarly, Paden (1992:28-35) holds the view that every aspect of religion is systematically shown to be an expression of collective social life, and that ritual itself is a social expression, encoded to express certain cultural values. Paden, also expresses his opinion that every society or community makes use of rituals in order to

consolidate group bonds. Like Durkheim (1995 [1912]:34-37), he tends to favour the idea that ritual activity represents the collective social lives of participants. This view is reflective of how Open Circle ritual leaders approach the creation of rituals, as rituals are often customised to suit the needs of the community and society it is also a continuously evolving religion and responds to sociological changes (Farrar and Bone, 2004). Van Gulik (2011:13-26) also argues that ritual is a way for Pagans to adjust socially and personally to both inner and outer worlds which includes the social world as well. This adaptability of religion and ritual performances was mentioned by Jennings (1982: 111-127) who is of the opinion that ritual is also a form of discovery and can help alter worldviews. In line with the sentiment that rituals and in fact the religion itself is mutable it should be noted that Pagan ritual is almost always dynamic, and does not always follow what Jennings called “a fixed sequence of symbolic actions”.

Grimes (1982) on the other hand has tried a different approach in his discussions on ritual, and in his earlier works, he divided ritual into several different modes, consisting of: ritualization, meaning, decorum, ceremony, liturgy, magic and celebration, of which multiple modes could be present in any given ritual (1982:41). In his later work, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (2014), he describes ritual as both a creative endeavour and also ritual criticism, where ritual is created and emerges often from inter-cultural conflict. Similar to Turner (1972, 1979) who viewed ritual as ‘work’ in order to solve a problem, and saw the potential of ritual as having the capacity to solve conflict.

Grimes (2014:185-191) admits that theories and ritual definitions are difficult to pin down, but nonetheless, provides various examples of definitions of other academics, to illustrate that ritual theories and conception of ritual is dependent on the perceptions

of the theorist. He does, however, finally settle on his own definition of ritual, and states that ritual to him is: “specific enactments located in concrete times and places”. Grimes seems to have coined the term “ritualising” to signify the invention of rites, or ritual construction that happens on the thresholds/margins of society. He goes on to discuss how this invention of ritual is not always sanctioned by the rest of society, and is often stigmatized. Grimes’ idea that ritual can be created out of the ordinary, to emerge as a special rite and enacted is specifically applicable to Neo-Pagan ritual, as most Neo-pagan rituals created as the need arises, and are aimed at effecting personal or communal changes in environment or community and are written by clergy/leaders of the group (Wagar, 2012:82-83).

Some Pagans (those who view Paganism as a religion) see Paganism as magical system, a philosophical system as well as an ethical system that also includes interactions with supernatural beings, it is also a psychic structure that consists of share beliefs and experiences (Bonewits, 2007). From this viewpoint, all aspects are seen as integral to religion, they are cannot be separated. Ritual is viewed simply part as of and parcel the religion, similar to the distinction that Turner (1969) makes where he views religion as a differentiator between ritual and ceremony, rites and ritual in this case are tied to religion. Wallace (2015) is of the states that: “Religion, magic and witchcraft are interrelated, conceptual categories, and what is included in, or excluded from, each is contingent on specific historical, cultural and religious contexts in which their meanings are constructed and reproduced. In changing contexts, meaning is imposed on, appropriated by and/or contested by diverse linguistic, ethnic, religious and cultural communities”. In my opinion, this is possibly the one of the most useful definitions in the context of examining the constructs of religion, magic and witchcraft.

In traditional initiatory Wicca specifically, rituals or rites are a sequence of events/actions or thoughts that are repeated in the same way, intended to create an altered state of consciousness, with the expectation that particular results will be achieved. Although some Neo-Pagans and some Eclectic Wiccans do not have a set liturgy, generally their rituals follow either a three or five part sequence of events (depending on how each part of the ritual is classified). The first phase consists of consecration time and space, in order to get participants into the right frame of mind, to set the stage. Next a ritual center, that is the sacred space is demarcated and defined, then usually consecrated. Divine entities like a God and Goddess are evoked. The third part consists of actions of worship or ritual workings, followed by the last part where the participants are reintegrated into the mundane world (Simon, 2020). Some forms Neo-Pagan liturgy are highly specialised and specific as ritual facilitators craft their rituals to suit the needs of the participants, the seasons and the circumstances, sometimes even taking societal circumstances into consideration, making Pagan liturgies adaptable and mutable (Pond, 2013:1-17).

Worship as a part of Pagan and Wiccan ritual is highly dependent on the tradition and is not always present in all Pagan and Wiccan spheres. This is because, amongst Pagans, and some Wiccans, worship is viewed as a show of honour and affection, of giving respect and honour rather than an act of subservience (Bonewits, 2007). However, worship generally only constitutes a small part of the ritual, and the attendance of rituals does not hinge on worship, as it does in some other Abrahamic religions.

### **3.8 Liminality, Liminoid phenomena and Communitas as they relate to Rites of Passage**

As mentioned in Section 3.7 of this Chapter, Van Gennep (1960 [1909]:1-2) in his seminal work, *Rites de Passage*, further developed and explored Durkheim's theoretical framework and discussed the idea that rites of passage/ritual could be classified into three distinct phases namely: separation, liminality and incorporation. This transitional phase, or the liminal phase is where participants in ritual are temporarily suspended from their regular social statuses. Turner (1969:166) also contends that rituals and rites of passage exist outside the existing social structure, or occur in Durkheim's (1960)[1912] "sacred" world outside of ordinary time and space, allowing new possibilities to unfold, where participants are able to experience/invent new social relations and come to new states of being, in response to rigid social orders.

Turner (1969:359) further developed the concepts of the rites of passage originally conceived by Van Gennep (1960 [1909]). These stages of ritual include the phases of separation, liminal and reintegration. The stage of *separation* as described by Turner, includes symbolic behavior, where individuals leave a group or withdraw from their current status or place in society in order to join another group. The next stage, the transition stage also known as the liminal phase, is the period between the separation stage and the reintegration stage. Turner (1969) is largely credited with popularising and developing this concept in the format that we now understand the liminal phase. This concept of liminality hinges on it taking place in relatively stable societies where liminality can be clearly differentiated from the other states. Turner's (1967:93) concept of liminality, refers to a time and space that can be seen as a transitional, or a threshold period. Liminality can also be described as being "betwixed and between" and can also serve as a threshold space between one stage of life and another. Turner



described liminality as a time where a person withdraws from normal social interactions and where the usual societal norms are deferred for a period of time. During the liminal phase participants have distinct characteristics which include: being ambiguous, and having equality in status and/or having no rank, status or title. The liminal phase also contains processes of growth and transformation (1967:95).

Turner (1979:238-239) also explained that during liminality the participant's experience a change in their "inmost nature" and they obtain "arcane knowledge or gnosis" during this process.

Turner (1969:102) sees the essence of liminality in what he terms "sacra" that are experienced during the liminal phase. These include: demonstrations (symbolic representations of gods, saints masks, pottery etc.), actions or deeds performed, instructions (words said) are the teachings that can include secret formulae and mythology. "Sacra" should also be seen in light of disproportion, monstrosity and mystery. Disproportion is related to some cultural aspects are represented as being disproportionately big or small, and are also object/concepts that require reflection. Monstrosity focusses on unusual though processes, where participants are encouraged to think in unconventional ways about their existence or the cosmos as well as understanding the "mystery" that is, ideas that are difficult to understand or explain. Sacra is used to encourage participants to think abstractly and also as a agent of transformation.

Turner discussed liminoid phenomenon as being "like or resembling" (Turner, 1979:26) liminality. In modern society, liminoid phenomenon tends to mimic the liminal phase. In the liminal phase, during this "betwixed and between" period, participants lose their old identity, but have not yet received their new identity. This phase is also

characterised by the status quo being disrupted, after which reintegration into community occurs and participants re-enter society with a changed status or their identity is changed. The liminal phase generally follows very traditional patterns as described by Van Gennep (1901). However, truly liminal phases are not achievable in modern society. The transformations that occur in traditional society and the drastic changes in status and identity are not usually as dramatic in contemporary society as those in traditional societies. Prior to the Industrial Revolution of the 1700's, the types of contractual relationships that were dominant before the Industrial Revolution are certainly not as prevalent in contemporary Western society (Turner, 1975:51-54). The understandings gained from the liminal phase are usually related to the whole of the societal structure, whereas liminoid phenomenon are more personal, individualistic and sometimes "experimental in character". Often the liminoid phenomena focusses on personal and psychological growth and development. Although it may be said that the liminal events that occur in modern societies may be similar to the ordeals or transformations that usually take place in liminal activities in traditional societies. The difference however, is that in the modern context these rituals are mostly new and invented driven by the individual. Turner conceived that these liminoid rituals are focussed on and usually driven by the individual rather than calendric, collective social requirements or biological changes, in for example adolescents.

Turner was also responsible for the creation of the concept of 'communitas'. During the liminal phase as experienced during a rite of passage, participants share a common experiences. It is as a result of sharing these intense liminal experiences together as group that participants ultimately experience communitas. Turner's construct of communitas include: social equality, solidarity, togetherness and a spirit of community which are the result of people having shared a liminal experience

(Turner, 1982). For Turner, ritual and social structure act through two opposing forces, where ritual or rites of passage are responses to societal structures or limitations that are imposed by societal norms.

The creation of the liminoid type space and the sharing of ritual proceedings, enables participants to relate to each other outside of formal societal rules and roles. An environment is created that allows participants to engage in a type of experiential sharing and allows for feelings of togetherness and a type of bonding (Turner, 1969:166).

Ritual is often part and parcel of *communitas*, amongst other functions, rituals allow participants to express their beliefs and values. For Wiccans ritual is integral to their religious practices, even if the rituals are not always as ceremonial or formal. As mentioned previously, it is difficult to separate other than for the sake of categorisation the “parts” that make up the whole of the Pagan worldview, as every part is interconnected and interwoven (Hume, 1998:311). George and Park (2013:1650-6151) see ritual as an extension of commitment to community relations and community cohesion, in fact many academics have also discussed the social functions of rituals to increase social cohesion. Durkheim 1995 [1912] Frazer (1922), Fustel de Coulanges (1980) are also of the opinion that ritual has social functions. For Durkheim 1995 [1912] ritual is considered the glue that binds members together which is reinforced by repetition.

*Communitas* is a result of that deep sense of connectedness that come from participation in ritual, where there is a heightened sense of connectedness a result of shared ideals, stories or sharing in a particular focus during ritual. Generally the hierarchy between ritual attendees and the ritual facilitator may be suspended during

the working part of the ritual as and participants are equal before the eyes of the Gods. After ritual, this feeling of connectedness is sustained through communal sharing of bread, or feasting, which is part of most Wiccan and Pagan ritual proceedings. It is a time to share ideas, beliefs and customs within the Neo-Pagan framework. Participants who perform ritual together, develop an “intense comradeship” and a sense of “egalitarianism” according during *communitas* according to Turner (1969:95). Edith Turner (2006:123) is of the opinion that *communitas* is a sense of connectedness that people have when they can relate to each other.

It is interesting to note that *communitas*, need not only apply to ritual and rites of passage. Magliocco (2004:58) asserts that in Pagan communities, the sense of *communitas* extends to a “socially imagined” community. In this sense, Pagans also differentiate themselves and their communities from the communities of non-Pagans.

Turner (1972) discusses the concept of Social dramas in “Schism and continuity in an African society”. Later in 1980 he elaborates on the characteristics of the members or participants in these social dramas and says that those who belong to these groups have shared values, interests and things in common, and just as importantly, group members are loyal to each other. The fate of group members in this context is of great personal importance. People in this group identify deeply with each other and their major social and personal desires are fulfilled within this group. There are four phases in a social drama, each having unique characteristics that arise from conflict situations (1974:37). In the first phase there is a breach in normal social relations between people or groups, then the next phase which he termed the “mounting crisis” a crisis develops that may be across a specific social group, village or chiefdom. This is followed by a phase where “redressive mechanisms” are put into place by leaders of

the community, they may be in the form of a ritual or an informal arbitration. Lastly, the final phase where reintegration occurs where there had been conflict between groups or persons or the recognitions of irreconcilable “schisms” is acknowledged. These phases of social drama are also linked to the concept of liminality, as they can be seen as phases that are also present in the larger social context. Rites of passage and social dramas are similar because rites of passage include separation, where in social dramas the first phase there is a breach of normal social relations similar to the pre-liminal phase where the initiates are removed from their “previous social state or status” and then enter the liminal phase where they undergo ordeals and transformations. In the final stage the reintegration stage, members are reintegrated into society with a new status or new relationship to society and to group members.

### **3.9 Wiccan Temples and Churches, making Wicca available to the masses**

Some authors like Sabin (2006) refer to the fact that Gerald Gardner who is responsible for popularising Wicca, did so because he did not want Wicca to die out, and took every opportunity to tell the press and media outlets about these teachings, that were supposedly passed down to him as part of a family tradition. Although most Wiccan leaders are of the opinion that Wicca is not a religion for the masses and that its teachings should remain private and that members should be initiated. Gerald Gardner, along with other famous witches like Sybil Leek used the media to raise awareness of Wicca. It should be noted that most Wiccans do not proselytise, that is, they do not attempt to convert others to their beliefs. In contemporary society, social media plays a large role in popularising Witchcraft and Wicca. In the decades before the rise of social media platforms like *TikTok*, *Facebook* and *Instagram* people interested in finding covens and training, would attend Pagan festivals and if possible

also attend Open Circle type rituals to meet up with covens and teachers who might be taking on new students (Lewis, 1996).

As mentioned previously, Open Circles related to Outer Courts are different from a coven or Inner Courts, as membership to an Open Circle is not private, but open to members of the public. Some Wiccan Open Circles also call themselves churches and temples provide both open rituals as well as basic training. Public temples and churches function quite differently from the Inner Court of covens. Public rituals are also different from coven rituals as coven rituals are often secret and cannot be made available for public consumption. Rituals tend to be more generic although some of the basic elements of the ritual format are taken from the more traditional coven format. Often these organisations will offer Pagan rites like handfastings<sup>33</sup>, infant naming ceremonies and rites of passing, and also provide a prison ministry. However there are also some Open Circles that provide these rituals as a way to attract new members to their already existing groups (McKay, 2016).

Within Canada there are a few examples of Wiccan organisations that host Open Circle rituals. The Wiccan Church of Canada is an example of a Wiccan Church that was founded in 1979 in Toronto (The Wiccan church of Canada: n/d), the church itself started as an “Outer Court”. Later the founders of the church created a new Wiccan tradition called the Odyssean tradition and then started a private coven. They have two temples, one in Hamilton and one in Windsor both situated in Ontario in Canada.

The Congregational Wiccan Association is another example of an organisation that runs “Open Circle” type rituals. It was founded in 1992 as a non-profit organisation,

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<sup>33</sup> Handfasting is a ritual similar to a wedding ceremony where the individuals who are to be handfasted have their hands symbolically tied together to symbolise the binding of two lives.

there are currently seven temples situated throughout Canada. Each temple is more or less independently run while attempts are made to stay within the general guidelines of the shared statement of beliefs and ethical standards of the National organisation. They also offer Open Circle rituals and rites of passage (Congregational Witchcraft Association, 2000), some temples also have marrying credentials that permits their clergy members to also preform legal marriages.

Canada and the United States (US) share a large geographical border and have similar interests, economic ties and personal connections (Government of Canada, 2021). Thus the Outer Court system of Wicca in the US were used as models for those created in Canada. Government organisations often look to the US for guidance in terms of the policies they adopt. In the US some Wiccan churches receive legal status by becoming non-Profit organisation. Similarly in Canada Wiccan organisations also apply for not-for-profit status in order to run their organisations. There are several Churches of Wicca in the US: The Church and School of Wicca was founded in 1968 and was the first federally recognised church of Wicca in the USA in 1972 and has had thousands of students throughout the years (Church and School of Wicca, N.D.) The Aquarian Tabernacle Church and Circle Sanctuary (a non-profit Nature Spirituality church) are just some organisations who have received non-profit status in the US. The Circle Sanctuary is notable, because they advocate for religious freedom and have military ministries. They also offer assistance to helping to counter harassment, custody issues, and other legal affairs including religious discrimination that could impact Pagans (Circle Sanctuary, N.D.).

Robert Campany (1992) discusses ritual theory in relation to the example of Xunzi (a Confucian, who lived in the 3rd century B.C.E). Although Xunzi lived thousands of

years ago, Company describes him as a ritual theorist, who attempted to discuss the origins and requirements of ritual, and proposed the idea that ritual was born out of desire to provide something that people sought. It is interesting to note that this conception of what Xunzi perceives as constituting ritual is very much in line with what some Neo-Pagans perceive the aim of ritual and specifically magic; that is to facilitate change “in conformity with will” (Crowley, 1994: 127).

### **3.10 Liminoid phenomena and casting the Circle**

In Section 3.8, I also discussed liminality and liminoid phenomena which are pertinent to this Section as well. Usually before any actual “working” is performed in ritual, an important part of specifically in Wiccan liturgy, includes casting a Circle. Casting a circle in very simple terms, is essentially a delineation of sacred space. Casting a circle is used as a boundary between the sacred and the mundane and this sets up the ritual ‘space’. Typically the circle created is an imaginary projection of at least a diameter of nine feet. The ritual facilitator usually a member of the High Priesthood will also project the circle into the astral plane, and can also be viewed as setting the “vibratory purpose for the devotional work to follow” (Tarostar, 2015:168). Tarostar (2015) also discusses how the ritual circle can be seen as the perfect shape of nature, it is symbolic of completion and is also symbolic of having no beginning and no ending. He also says that the ritual circle is representative of the cyclical nature of life, which symbolises the macrocosm within the microcosm.

The ritual circle may also be demarcated by other means such as a ring of salt, flowers, branches, herbs or even a simple chalk outline. Thus, in terms of creating space the circle is created both as a physical manifestation (i.e. the salt etc.) as well as an abstract unobservable manifestation that may be purely psychological in nature.



Wiccans also create 'space', the creation of a space in which rituals take place. It is this space that constitutes a liminoid space, the circle within which ritual occurs. Thomassen (2014) discusses how liminality can be viewed as being both a social and personal space. This is particularly relevant in Wiccan circles because liminoid spaces, these in-between spaces can be viewed as personal states or related to a mental state, but this 'space' can also be viewed as social 'space' in that the in-between space, and is also shared with other participants. This liminoid space is created in almost all of the rituals performed in the Wiccan context. Wiccan rituals are almost always transitional periods as the main aims of Wiccan ritual are transformational, that is, the practitioners 'transition' from one state to another. Their main focus may not always be a resolution of a personal crisis that is the hall mark of the liminal experience, but it is nonetheless a transformational experience. This cannot always be said of Open Circle rituals as these types of rituals tend more towards being liminoid spaces, they may mimic the liminal space, but more often than not they do not involve the participants engaging in any resolutions of personal crises.

Wiccan ritual takes place within this circle, which is perceived to be "between the worlds", casting a circle serves multiple purposes, including that of putting participants in a specific frame of mind, creating and demarcating a sacred space (Hume, 2008: 309-319, Bado-Fralick, 2005:56). This creation of sacred space can be viewed as a liminal space, (Turner, 1969:166-168), a time between "what is" and "what is next", where transformation that takes through ritual occurs.

Once the circle is cast, the circle itself becomes a specific place because as Tuan (1977:4-7) mentions 'place' is more than simply a site, it is a setting that is "created by human experiences". A ritual circle can thus fulfill the criteria of a 'place' because it

has the characteristics of a 'place'. Parsaee, Parva and Karimi (2015:368) state that the identity and sense of belonging are important aspects to consider in terms of 'place', as well, especially when for example, cities and region have a historical background. This is equally important in when we consider 'place' in a religious sense. Even though as mentioned previously, Wiccans do not usually have brick and mortar permanent buildings, the place created where the ritual is created is incredibly important. Just as churches, temples and other religious buildings are designed in very specific ways according to the requirements and ideals relating to the specific religion, so too the construction of the ritual circle is designed and structured in a very specific way in line with the religious beliefs and practices of Wiccan tradition. The articles and items, size of circle and position are also carefully considered and taken into account when the circle is cast. Even if a ritual takes place outdoors in the middle of a forest, the place is carefully chosen, the area is decorated, swept, consecrated and blessed before the ritual commences.

In the research of Lee, Klement, Ambler, Leowald, et al. (2016:1-22) it was revealed that during ritual, where altered states of consciousness were entered into during ritual and that participants experienced mostly positive, transformative physiological and psychological effects, which corresponds with the findings of Shelly Rabinovitch. In her Master's thesis entitled "An ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will" (1992), Rabinovitch discovered that a many Pagans were attracted to the Wiccan religion for the healing aspect of transformation that occurs in rituals. Liminality in essence is necessary for ritual workings as magic cannot be performed in a regular state of consciousness, as liminality facilitates an altered state of consciousness (Adler, 1986).

Casting the circle in Wiccan ritual is also intrinsically linked to the belief system. Some Wiccans perceive that casting the circle provides a protective circle, and they would cast the circle in a deocil (clockwise) direction. The reason is that some believe that if the circle is cast in this manner their circle will provide protection against evil or harmful supernatural forces, and is referred to as a banishing circle. While other traditions cast the circle Widdershins (anti-clockwise), believing that the widdershins casting will call and attract specific forces. Regardless of whether the circle is cast deocil or widdershins, the circle casting still demarcates sacred space, a space in which ritual workings are conducted.

As mentioned, Neo-Pagan 'liturgy', generally has three parts, similar to the phases of ritual described by Van Gennep (1960:1-2). Generally the parts of ritual can be described as setting the stage, performing the ritual and reintegrating participants (Shulman, 1997). Of specific significance to my research is the liminal space that is created in which ritual is performed. It is in this stage of the ritual where a special environment is created; a marginal, or liminal space outside of the mundane world; this is the circle that is cast. This liminal space facilitates separation from the mundane world and is where ritual workings take place, which could be anywhere from a practitioner's living room, to a clearing in a park as Park. It should be noted that even though a sacred space is constructed and can be viewed as distinctly separate or carved out of the mundane space, the natural and the supernatural or social worlds remain both interconnected and separate, thereby creating a space in-between.

Circle casting or carving out sacred space out of the mundane may be the most obvious type of liminality within Wicca, however, for Wiccans liminality is often not only experienced during ritual, but rather in the experience of everyday life. Some authors

like (Lindenschmidt, 2015) have argued that Pagans are also marginalised or found on the fringes of society. This is because often their rituals they do not adhere to all societal conventions, thus placing Pagans as being somewhere in between, a threshold people, somewhere in between not completely integrated into mainstream society but also not completely isolated and expelled from society, and therefore liminal. Both Ravinovitch (1992:39) and Charbonneau (2008:33) state that Neo-Paganism is a marginalised religious movement, and the Pagans are sometimes still viewed as marginalised, further extending the concept of marginalisation or liminality.

Teppo (2009: 21-28) discusses how Neo-Pagans are a marginal group who “create extraordinary spaces of otherness”, perhaps purposefully because they are often misunderstood and discriminated against, specifically in contexts where Christianity is the dominant religion. In Teppo’s (2009) fieldwork she found that creating sacred ‘space’ involved more than simply a temporary creations of a sacred space that is removed at the end of a ritual, but that “space” could also be extended to physical spaces in nature and the creation of sanctuaries. Hume (1998: 310) mentions, ordinary space can be converted to a “holy space through a symbolic process”. Wallace (2007:12) on the other hand discusses this ‘space’ not in terms of a specific location, but in terms of allowing for Pagans to simply practice their religion to exist without prejudice and discrimination. The very everyday existence of Pagans can be seen as liminal and the purposeful creation of actual physical space, can also be viewed as liminal spaces.

### **3.11 Belonging and religious activities**

Pike (2001) discusses how Pagans often separate themselves from their inherited religious faiths and choose new definition of family and kinship. The author discusses

how Neo-Pagans engage in self-creation, how they attempt to put their ideals into practice in everyday life, and how they try to build communities that will be supportive of them in times of persecution and also in times of celebration. She also discusses how Pagan personal experiences are connected to healing both the self and the community, the deities and the land. The philosophy/worldview/religious expression of interconnectedness of all things is also relevant in this Section on belonging, as the philosophy and ritual activities are always geared towards balance and harmony.

Block (2018:xv) discusses belongingness in terms of community relations, where a sense of belongingness is not only felt in terms of belonging to a group or community but also a sense of belongingness that comes from belonging to something greater than ourselves. Kalton (2000) is also of the opinion that environmentally aware spiritual movements, like Paganism, seek unity in terms of community life. This sense of unity extends beyond human civilisation, pointing to the fact that the Pagan view on belonging is entrenched in their worldview that all things are encompasses and interwoven.

### **3.12 Conclusion**

This literature review aimed to serve both as a background for those who are unfamiliar with Paganism and Wicca, as well as to reflect on the current state of literature related to ritual theories that are of specific interest to the research project. The interplay between ritual, liminality and communitas in Neo-Paganism was also discussed.

I have discussed the definitions of Paganism, Neo-Paganism and Wicca as a religion and have discussed briefly the beliefs of Pagans in general. I have also briefly summarised the history, demographics and belief system of modern Wiccans for contextual purposes. Prejudice, discrimination and misunderstanding of these groups

has also been examined as were the reasons why some members of these groups choose to keep their religions secret.

The background and history of Open Circles and how they relate to traditional Wiccan covens was considered, in order to understand how the relationship between Open Circles and traditional Wiccan Covens are intricately related and cannot be seen in isolation or completely unrelated.

From the literature we saw that religion and ritual as definitive terms are challenging to define, but that ultimately the definitions that are important to consider is the definitions that Pagans and Wiccans themselves ascribe to their belief system.

The concepts of liminality and communitas were discussed and it is clear from the literature that the fundamental ritual theories and key concepts have not changed much since Van Gennep and Turner's initial theoretical propositions. This indicates that making use of the theoretical concepts of ritual liminality and communitas as a framework are just as valid today as they were in the past.

Finally a discussion regarding how communitas and liminality can be applied to Open Circle rituals and traditional Wiccan ritual was examined.

## **Chapter 4**

### **OBSERVATIONS AND EXPLANATION OF MY PARTICIPATION IN A TYPICAL WICCAN RITUAL**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This Chapter will focus on ritual as performed in the Open Circles I attended with special attention given to the processes involved in the creation and execution of ritual performances by both facilitators and attendees. This Chapter will largely take the form of a dialogue, as I am including notes provided to me by clergy members as well as commentary from interviews and conversations with various participants from the different groups where my research took place.

My descriptions are based on observed phenomena and are based on various rituals and activities that took place during my fieldwork. The descriptions are based on observations as well as formal and informal interviews and questions posed to participants.

During my fieldwork I attended rituals that were predominately Sabbat celebrations but my participation also included other types of rituals, that had different focusses such as Esbats at the New and Full moon and rituals and celebrations like Mother's day that were not Sabbat related. Most of my in person fieldwork in Open Circles was conducted between early 2020 and mid 2022. While my fieldwork in covens took place over the course of 2021 and on an off during 2022. The remainder of my fieldwork took place online as the COVID-19 pandemic forced most religious groups to move their religious services and group activities online and most in person group activities were canceled.

In total I attended at least 45 in person rituals during this time and also attended about 30 in person events that included workshops, craft nights (arts and crafts related to hobbies), informal get together and meetings. I also attended approximately 38 online rituals and about 25 other activities related to these groups including tarot readings, craft nights, meetings, book clubs, workshops, witch's balls, discussions and online festival during the pandemic from the middle of 2020 until October 2021.

The two primary groups Open Circle groups where I was able to conduct in person participant observation were at an Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group and the Amethyst Moon Group, both are situated in Edmonton, Alberta. During the early portion of my fieldwork, I initially I also attended other Open Circle rituals presented by other groups in the Edmonton area as well as some Open Circles in Pennsylvania in the US and four Open Circles rituals in Maryland in the US. During the latter half of 2020 and during 2021 most events were hosted online. Aside from the monthly rituals I was also able to participate in Esbats and other related activities online, from two other Wiccan Open Circle groups in both Regina and Saskatoon who are affiliated with a Canadian National organisation. Additionally, I also watched a few online rituals presented by Circle Sanctuary, the Temple of Witchcraft and The Cabot Tradition who live-streamed some rituals, although I did not engage with these as a participant researcher, I wanted to get a feeling of how groups outside of my participants presented their online Open Circles.

During my fieldwork experience I had the opportunity to take on various roles within the fieldwork settings. Initially I participated simply as a regular attendee of the rituals. Later I was invited to participate as a member of the ritual team with the Wiccan Open Circle group in Edmonton. This included assisting with writing rituals, as well as



organisation of other Open Circle related activities. I also hosted and lead a 4 different rituals as well as gave eight different presentations, talks and workshops relating to witchcraft within the participant groups.

In total, I conducted 37 in depth interviews where I interview participants ranging from clergy members or group leaders to new first time attendees of open circle rituals. I also conducted at least the same number of informal interviews and asked many questions during the more informal gatherings that were related to the ritual and group activities. As a result, the deductions and generalisations in this dissertation are the outcome of proper observation and participation over at least three and a half years of participant observation and interviewing.

As mentioned previously, I am also an initiated member of the Sacred Pentagram and Horsa traditions, and as such also regularly attend those Sabbats and Esbats. Although my research is not primarily related to these coven activities, I had the opportunity to interview a few people in my tradition who have themselves hosted Open Circle events and have extensive experience hosting Open Circle rituals as well as leading and participating in coven rituals. These interviews give some context to how Open Circle rituals, as well as liminality and communitas differ from a coven experience to those of Open Circles.

My fieldwork highlighted that most Wiccan Open Circle rituals tend to follow a similar format, and once you have attended a few, you will be familiar with the order of the service and will know the order and structure of the liturgy. This is an important point partly because first time visitors and new participants are not provided with any ritual script or liturgy, they don't know what is going to happen to them and are not familiar with the ritual proceedings. This is obviously quite different from a coven setting, where

new initiates are guided through all the processes of the ritual prior to attending their first ritual, and are well versed in both the ritual structure as well as the intent and liturgy of the ritual. Learning ritual liturgy within an open circle takes place by repeated attendance and participation as well as repetition. It can be said that within a specific traditions, the ritual liturgies of at very least the Sabbats are repeated each cycle and their format if nothing else stays consistent. Esbats and other rituals are subject to more variation as these are need based, however the introductory part of each Esbat or general ritual usually follows the same procedures, it is the “working section” of the ritual that is variable in terms of what activities/magic is performed and is decided by the ritual facilitators.

I, like most of you, I have had many opportunities to attend weddings, funerals baptisms, worship services and rituals in various religions and denominations. However, I suspect that most have not had the opportunity to attend an Open Circle or any type of Pagan ritual. I first provide an illustrative example of the liturgical script of Open Circle ritual. The aim of this is to familiarise you with the format of a typical Wiccan Open Circle ritual, as well as using this ritual as springboard to help contextualise Open Circle rituals. This illustrative example will also help inform other discussions in later sections in this dissertation. Following this ritual I provide you with my fieldnotes that were taken after this ritual that will form a clearer and more complete picture of actually occurs during a typical Open Circle ritual.

#### **4.2 Illustrative example of an Open Circle ritual**

The following ritual liturgy was performed in January 2019 at the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group in Edmonton. This this ritual was also the very first Open Circle ritual I attended in Edmonton which incidentally, was one of my first fieldwork

experiences related to this dissertation. I have numbered the paragraphs and will use these as guides for discussion.

January 2019 Open Circle at the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group In Edmonton

- 1) *“Altar: Celtic theme with representations of the god, goddess, directions and spirit. As well as the oils for blessing, minimalist look with strong Celtic designs.*
- 2) *Focus: We will be decorating individual panels of fabric that will be sewn together to create a “Temple Quilt.” This quilt will be preserved as a beautiful work of art that represents our community and can be used for special events alongside our existing banners.*
- 3) *(start with lights very dim/ or turned off)*
- 4) *Grounding:*
- 5) *HP: “Stand tall, feet shoulder width apart. Feet firmly rooted to the earth, take a deep breath in...We are of one breath and one mind ready to enter sacred space.”*
- 6) *Circle Casting:*
- 7) *HPS: “We will cast our circle hand to hand as is our tradition. The circle is cast from hand to hand...”*
- 8) *Elemental Invocations:*
- 9) *East: Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the East, open the way for the power of Air, help us to focus our intent on our working tonight and may our final quilt carry a thousand words with in it. Hail and welcome!*
- 10) *South: Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the South, open the way for the power of Fire, inspire us with bright and glowing passion tonight and may the flame in our hearts burn as one. Hail and welcome!*
- 11) *West: Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the West, open the way for the power of Water, help us to work as one community in our working tonight, and may each of us express ourselves through our crafting. Hail and welcome!*
- 12) *North: Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the North, open the way for the power of Earth, guide our many hands through our working as we create many pieces of one whole work of art. Hail and welcome!*
- 13) *Spirit: Spirits above and below, between all things who connects all parts seen and unseen in the universe. Hail and welcome!*
- 14) *God and Goddess Invocations:*
- 15) *God: Lugh! the tool maker, master of all trades, God of every craft and every hobby, celebrated in the times of plenty when wheat and grain give way for bread. Tonight in*

*your honour we will combine all of our efforts into creating a beautiful mosaic like quilt that will embody the heart of our temple and all of the individuals who make it possible. We humbly ask that you join our circle tonight and witness these rights. Hail and welcome!*

- 16) *Goddess: Brigid! Triple flame goddess, crafter, healer, gentle and fierce maiden. Gracious goddess who gives the gift of joy unto the hearts of humanity upon earth she gives the knowledge of the spirit eternal and beyond death she gives freedom and reunion with those who have gone before. Tonight, in this time of darkness we ask that your flame warm our hands and guide our vision and we work together to craft in your honour. We humbly ask that you join our circle tonight and witness these rights. Hail and welcome!*
- 17) *Focus statement:*
- 18) *HPS: In this time of darkness, when spring and summer seem so far away, let us shine a light in our temple and may all who see it feel warm and loved.*
- 19) *HP: (Turn on the light in the room) Golden light that fills the room, that warms the heart and hugs the moon, in sacred places lit by many hands, in places near and in foreign lands. Blessed be.*
- 20) *Working:*
- 21) *HP: Tonight we have planned a very special activity, we would like to start the 2019 year off with a group art project that will become the temple quilt. Each of us will have our own square to decorate as we see fit, and these will later be sewn together into one beautiful piece as a symbol of our temple and our community.*
- 22) *HPS: In a moment we will gather around the tables and begin decorating our squares. We have provided all sorts of wonderful things to use in our crafting and we have setup stations for hot glue and other supplies. Please make use of the paper plates provided to select your materials and find a comfy place to sit and craft. Once we have finished our working we will process our squares toward the altar to bless each of them.*
- 23) *HP: We have here a few examples of squares we have prepared to give you an idea of what you can craft. Please remember to leave a boarder of empty space about 1 inch around the edges of your square as they will later be sewn together.*
- 24) *(We will play some music in the back ground which can also be used to keep track of the time if we make a brief playlist.)*
- 25) *(Decorating our squares with glue, paint, and more...etc)*
- 26) *Blessing the squares:*
- 27) *(Keegan will be standing at the altar already)*
- 28) *HPS: We are now going to reform our circle and while holding our squares process toward the altar to have each of them blessed. Please follow behind me as we move*

- rhythmically to the centre. (Someone can drum for us as we dance silently around the circle spiraling toward the altar and when we arrive one by one each is blessed and then they may return to their seat)*
- 29) *(Everyone will receive both blessings at the altar, one from Keegan and one from Kayleen)*
- 30) *HP: For Lugh!, (dab first oil on square) blessed be.*
- 31) *HPS: For Brigid!, (dab second oil on square) Blessed be.*
- 32) *Cakes and Ale:*
- 33) *(Homemade food Irish theme) HP/HPS: "It is not we who bless food and drink..."*
- 34) *Thank the gods:*
- 35) *God: Tonight in your honour we have worked as one to create a beautiful and coherent symbol of our temple. May this last and be shared with may who have yet to find us. Hail Lugh!*
- 36) *Goddess: Tonight, by the light and warmth of your fire we have worked as one to create our temple quilt. May all who gaze upon it feel your warmth and be enveloped with the love and creativity of our temple. Hail Brigid!*
- 37) *Elemental Releases:*
- 38) *Spirit: Spirits above and below, between all things who connects all parts seen and unseen in the universe. Thank you for joining our circle and witnessing these rites. Hail and farewell!*
- 39) *North: Guardians of the watchtowers of the North, powers of Earth release your hold. We give thanks for guiding our hands in our working tonight. Stay if you will go if you must, hail and farewell!*
- 40) *West: Guardians of the watchtowers of the West, powers of Water release your hold. We give thanks for helping us to work as a community and temple this night. Stay if you will go if you must. Hail and farewell!*
- 41) *South: Guardians of the watchtowers of the South, powers of Fire release your hold. We give thanks for inspiring us as we crafted tonight. Stay if you will, go if you must. Hail and farewell!*
- 42) *East: Guardians of the watchtowers of the East, powers of Air release your hold. We give thanks for helping us to focus our intentions in our working tonight. Stay if you will, go if you must. Hail and farewell!*
- 43) *Circle Opening*
- 44) *Everyone: (singing) "May the circle be open..." "*

### 4.3 Firsthand experience of my field notes

These fieldnotes are based on the ritual provided as an illustrative example from the Open Circle ritual I attended at the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group in January 2019. I made use of scribbled notes in my notepad that included shorthand keywords to jog my memory to be fleshed out later when I typed up my formal fieldnote diary.

- 1) *"I arrived at the Community hall at about 18:30, I purposefully left home a little earlier than necessary, as it was lightly snowing, which is typical for this time of year, the ground was quite frozen and I had the heating turned up high. The drive took me just over 20 minutes from my house as it was a bit icy. It had been dark for some time already as the sun had long since set. Generally I don't like driving around in the dark while it is snowing, but I made an exception, because tonight I attended my very first Open Circle at the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group!*
- 2) *I found the building and parked in the parking lot, I noticed that a car had pulled into the parking just ahead of me, and as I was parking I noticed two guys get out of a car and unload two large storage totes. The building itself was still in darkness and there were only two other vehicles in the parking lot, with their engines still running (probably to keep their heaters in their vehicles on), other than my own and that of the two people who were unloading their storage totes. As I parked one of the guys who were unloading the totes briefly looked in my direction and waved, and then disappeared into the building. Soon after the lights came on and more cars started to arrive. Then some people started trickling into the building I waited a minute or two and followed them because the entrance of the building turned out to be around the other side of the parking lot.*
- 3) *As I entered I saw a few people had kicked off their shoes in the foyer area. The setup of the community hall is typical of what I have seen in other community halls. There is a small office at the front entrance, a foyer, on the left what I supposed was a community room or hall, (the door was closed so it was an assumption at the time) in the middle the male and female washrooms (that is what Canadians call the toilets!) and on the right hand side, another hall. I also remove my muddy boots, and had to frog-leap over the puddles from now melting snow that was trekked in by the people who had arrive before me. The hall was brightly lit and a few people were unpacking chairs, while the two people I had seen in the parking lot were setting up a table in the middle of the room. As entered, one of the people greeted me with a smile and welcomed me, and told me that they were just setting up for the ritual as they had*

arrived a little later than anticipated. I was shown the coat racks, which was back near the foyer and outside of the hall, a few lonely coats had been hurriedly tossed or hung there already. I felt a little weird hanging my coat there, because I usually just keep my coat with me when I attend public events, but I hung it up next to the others and returned to the hall. The two guys who had been carrying the storage totes introduced themselves, one the High Priest of the temple and the other his partner. I sort of recognised the High Priest from his photo Facebook as that is how I had connected with the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle Group and he had answered my initial questions.

- 4) The High Priest busied himself setting up a table in the middle of the room, I assumed that would be the altar, and watched for a minute or so as various items like a table cloth candles, lighters, oils and incense were placed on the table.
- 5) One of the other people asked if I was new and if I wanted to help unpack the chairs, which I agreed to because I felt odd just standing to the side. I was told that we would be unpacking about 25 chairs and that they were to be arranged in a circle around the central table, someone else commented that we might want to space them apart a bit so that more chairs could be added if more people decided to come.
- 6) After we unpacked and placed the chairs in a circle I chose a chair to sit on closer to the door. Soon more people were drifting in, everyone seem to know each other as hugs and kisses were exchanged, and people stood in small clumps chatting and catching up.
- 7) I felt quite awkward just sitting there by myself, but tried to take it all in. I saw a woman, probably in her mid-twenties approach one of the guys who seemed to be in charge, and they soon disappeared in to the kitchen area which was at the front left of the hall. I think they were in there for about 10 minutes.
- 8) Another person was setting up a table outside of the circle of chairs close to the door, on it, were was a white table cloth about 30 odd unlit tea-light candles, a small statue and a few loosely placed flowers and a few barbeque type lighters.. I was not sure what the table was for. Another bright faced lady who had previously been engaged in chit chat, started setting up a podium type piece of furniture at the entrance door, with brightly coloured cloth, a plastic "pot o'gold" that looked like something from a leprechaun story, and a white book and pen.
- 9) In the far right hand corner of the room the High Priest and his partner set up some art supplies, acrylic paints, pencils, scissors, beads and feathers, markers and a pile of looked like sheets of canvas and an assortment of jars ( I could not see what was in them from where I sat)

- 10) *Shortly after people started taking their seats. The High Priest and the young woman, who at this point I was assuming is the High Priestess exited the kitchen and stood at the North eastern part of the circle (closest to the kitchen they had just been in). The High Priest and High Priestess were wearing stoles, over fairly neat street clothing.*
- 11) *The High Priest then handed a page of paper to a few of the people and quietly conferred with them. Each of these people then read through the piece of paper as the High Priest returned to his spot next to the High Priestess.*
- 12) *The High Priestess and the High Priest, waited a few seconds for everyone to stop chatting and then the High Priest said: "Hello everyone, welcome to tonight's ritual" in a few minutes we are going to lock the front door, we are just waiting a few more minutes to see if anyone else arrives, but first a bit of housekeeping" The High Priestess then said: "Hello everyone and welcome to the first ritual of the new year of 2019, we are so glad you could join us" As you know we have the ancestor table set up near the door at the back of the hall, and before we begin, if you would like to light a candle for either your ancestors or as a petition, please feel free to do that. We also have the donation box and sign-in book at the door.*
- 13) *The High Priestess, said: "As you know we run solely off of your donations, to pay for the rent of this hall and to pay for other supplies and things like that. If you have any beepers, pagers, buzzers or cell-phones that could go off during ritual we kindly ask you to put them away now and make sure they are on silent" (at which point one or two people tuned off their cell phones or seemed to check that they were off). "The emergency exit door is here on the right hand side, the washrooms are outside of the hall to your right and we will be locking the doors pretty soon before we start the circle. So if you need to go the washroom, I suggest you go now before we start I also wanted to announce that the community drive to gather mittens and scarves last Yule was a success, we managed to donate quite a lot to the Bissel centre for homeless people in the city. Oh and before I forget, remember to sign the attendance register, because it is important that in order for you remain a member of the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle Group, you attend at least three open circles in a year, and that book allows us to keep track of that. Also for you to become a member of the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle Group, you need to attend a certain amount of circles as well, so go sign the book"*
- 14) *Both the High Priest and Priestess, move to the back of the room and a short line-up at the podium area with the white book and pot o' gold donations box, while some meandered over to the table with the tea-lights. A short line-up ensues there too, I watched as a person approaches the table, they seem to deliberate which candle to pick (even though they are all the exactly same shape and colour, your standard tea-*



light candle) and then once they have chosen one they like they light them with the lighter and put them back, seemingly in the exact same spot, and then they stand there at the table, either silently or with their eyes closed seemingly in prayer. Then they simply take their seats again, it is a bit less rowdy now as people drift back from the table and podium. I decide that now is the time to get up and sign the book and also make a donation. I join the line, feeling really awkward because I am not really used to doing this, then I deliberate in my head as to whether or not I am going to sign my own given name or if I am going to use a pseudonym, I decide to use my own name after all and pen it underneath the growing list of names, I quickly scan-read the names above mine and noticed some weird names that I can only assume are either Pseudonyms or people's magical names as it not in my experience unusual for people to prefer to use their magical names in public settings.

- 15) I return to my seat as the High Priest and High Priestess stand up. The High Priest asks: "Can someone please go and lock the front door, it is now 10 after (that is 19:10, 10 minutes past the time the ritual was supposed to start)
- 16) At this point I could smell the incense, they were using joss stick type incense, which I found a bit unusual, as most covens burn loose herbs blended specifically for the purpose of the ritual, but the scent was pleasant enough.
- 17) The High Priest then moved to dim the lighting a bit.
- 18) The High Priest then said: "before we begin, I will ask those who are able to stand to now stand while we perform a short grounding: " Please stand with your feet shoulder width apart, close your eyes, relax your shoulders, and feel the earth beneath your feet. Now take a deep breath in, and out (while saying the words, he used exaggerated breathing so that we could hear it) and breath in and out, now take another deep breath in and exhale, we are of one breath and one mind ready to enter sacred space."
- 19) Everyone opened their eyes and stood fairly still, I stole glances around to see what the other people were doing, they were mostly just very quiet standing there with their arms resting at their sides. It felt like the whole room was bathed in silence, just for a few seconds.
- 20) Then the High Priestess said: "We will now cast our circle hand to hand as is our tradition". I had no idea what she was talking about. So I just watched, as she said: "The circle is cast from hand to hand" then she took up the hand of the person on her left and then that person took her hand and said the words as well, each time more and more voices joined in the chorus of "the circle is cast from hand to hand" once everyone was holding hands and chanting the words, we said it a few more times getting louder and louder until the High Priestess was almost screaming the words. (At this point I figured that this is how they cast their circle, most Wiccans cast their circle

*with an athame or sword depending on the degree rank of the practitioner. I also did not like the almost screaming tone of the circle casting, as it seemed a little too frenzied, I would have expected a controlled statement of intent said with power, but that is my personal experience talking). The High Priestess then said: "The circle is cast". And everyone stopped chanting.*

- 21) *It felt like the air had been sucked out of the room! Now everyone was super still.*
- 22) *The High Priest and Priestess moved from the circle to stand in the center of the circle very close to the altar table.*
- 45) *The High Priest then said: "we will now call the directions, if everyone can now face East which is in the direction of the widows in this direction" as he physically and rather dramatically turned to face what I presumed was east, everyone followed suit and turned to face East. One of the people with the page of paper stood up and read the words from the printed sheet: " Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the East, open the way for the power of Air, help us to focus our intent on our working tonight and may our final quilt carry a thousand words with in it. Hail and welcome!" Most people stood with their arms slightly away from their bodies hands out from their sides with their palms facing upwards, after the first person reading east had finished reading the piece, everyone else echoed with: "Hail and Welcome!"*
- 46) *Now the High Priest walked to the altar and lit the yellow candle that was placed in the eastern position on the altar.*
- 47) *Next the High Priest said: "Let us all now turn to face the South" which everyone did and the procedure was repeated with the next person with a piece of paper reading it off: "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the South, open the way for the power of Fire, inspire us with bright and glowing passion tonight and may the flame in our hearts burn as one. Hail and welcome!"*
- 48) *Everyone else then said again: "Hail and Welcome"*
- 49) *Now the High Priestess the yellow red candle that was placed in the Southern position on the altar.*
- 50) *The High Priest said: "Now let us turn to the West"*
- 51) *The third person with the piece of paper then said: "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the West, open the way for the power of Water, help us to work as one community in our working tonight, and may each of us express ourselves through our crafting. Hail and welcome!"*
- 52) *Now the High Priest lit the blue candle that was placed in the western position on the altar.*
- 53) *The High Priest then said: "Now finally let us all turn and face the North" at which point everyone once again followed suit and turned to face the North.*

- 54) *The person with the piece of paper read the words: "Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the North, open the way for the power of Earth, guide our many hands through our working as we create many pieces of one whole work of art. Hail and welcome!"*
- 55) *Now the High Priestess lit the green candle that was placed in the Northern position on the altar.*
- 56) *Everyone: "Hail and Welcome"*
- 57) *At this point I thought that that was the end as I had only ever evoked four directions, but then the High Priest turned to the center of the circle facing the altar and everyone else turned facing the center of the altar, as he said: and finally let us all face the center again as we call Spirit".*
- 58) *The last person read off the paper: Spirits above and below, between all things who connects all parts seen and unseen in the universe. Hail and welcome!"*
- 59) *The High Priestess lit the purple candle in the middle of the altar table."*
- 60) *The High priest now stood with his feet apart and shaped his hands to form the sign of the antlered God, (which is the two middle fingers folded down with the index and pinky fingers facing up). He then said: "Lugh! the tool maker, master of all trades, God of every craft and every hobby, celebrated in the times of plenty when wheat and grain give way for bread. Tonight in your honour we will combine all of our efforts into creating a beautiful mosaic like quilt that will embody the heart of our temple and all of the individuals who make it possible. We humbly ask that you join our circle tonight and witness these rights. Hail and welcome!"*
- 61) *Everyone else said: "Hail and Welcome!"*
- 62) *The High Priest now lit the white candle on the altar.*
- 63) *The High Priestess stood with her arms raised above her head in the shape of a "V" , with her palms facing inward, and her head tilted slightly backwards, the gesture or pose of the the Goddess, and said: "Brigid! Triple flame goddess, crafter, healer, gentle and fierce maiden. Gracious goddess who gives the gift of joy unto the hearts of humanity upon earth she gives the knowledge of the spirit eternal and beyond death she gives freedom and reunion with those who have gone before. Tonight, in this time of darkness we ask that your flame warm our hands and guide our vision and we work together to craft in your honour. We humbly ask that you join our circle tonight and witness these rights. Hail and welcome!"*
- 64) *Everyone else then repeated: "Hail and Welcome" as the High Priestess lit the black candle on the altar table.*

- 65) *The High Priestess then said (reading from what I assumed was the ritual script): "In this time of darkness, when spring and summer seem so far away, let us shine a light in our temple and may all who see it feel warm and loved.*
- 66) *The High Priest then moved to turn up the lighting (which seemed super bright after being bathed in dim light for while) moved back to the circle as said: "Golden light that fills the room, that warms the heart and hugs the moon, in sacred places lit by many hands, in places near and in foreign lands. Blessed be."*
- 67) *Everyone else echoed: "Blessed be!"*
- 68) *The High Priest then said: "Tonight we have planned a very special activity, we would like to start the 2019 year off with a group art project that will become the temple quilt. Each of us will have our own square to decorate as we see fit, and these will later be sewn together into one beautiful piece as a symbol of our temple and our community."*
- 69) *The High Priestess then said: "In a moment we will gather around the tables and begin decorating our squares. We have provided all sorts of wonderful things to use in our crafting and we have setup stations for hot glue and other supplies. Please make use of the paper plates provided to select your materials and find a comfy place to sit and craft. Once we have finished our working we will process our squares toward the altar to bless each of them.*
- 70) *High Priest: "We have here a few examples of squares we have prepared to give you an idea of what you can craft" holding up two squares of canvas that had already been decorated I could not really see what the pictures on the squares were of from where I was standing. "Please remember to leave a boarder of empty space about 1 inch around the edges of your square as they will later be sewn together"*
- 71) *The High Priest then turned on some music on his phone which seemed to be a playlist of typical Wiccan and Pagan chants, some were familiar to me while I did not recognise others. Typically Wiccans don't have a specific set of songs or chants written in a book like most churches. Depending on the group chants are either specifically written for the occasion or chants that are traditions specific are used. I found that the ones being played had a distinctive Celtic style of music them, which honestly actually made me feel like dancing a jig or something.*
- 72) *The High Priest then moved to the table and took the pile of squares and started handing them out as some of the people present sauntered over to the craft table. (Now I should mention that I already knew that we were going to do this craft as part of the ritual and as I had chatted to the High Priest prior to attending my first Open Circle on Facebook, he had explained his plan for the ritual. I had asked questions about what to wear because some groups have strict dress requirements, but this temple is fairly informal and most people wore regular street clothing) and I had come*

*prepared with some markers and premade flowers that I wanted to add to my canvas square. I drew a chalice in the centre of the square and the symbol of the horned God on one side and the symbol of the Goddess on the other side.*

- 73) *One guy seemed to take me under his wing and sat with me after I collected my canvas squares and I tried to chat and craft all the while feeling a little awkward, because everyone else was huddled in little groups chatting while they crafted. I could not help feeling like a charity case and this guy was trying his best to be friendly. Also I was trying to see how others interacted with each other, but it was difficult to observe the others while this guy kept chatting to me and asking questions. The atmosphere in the circle was very informal which I felt was unusual. I really noticed how people who seemed to know each other stuck together, the High Priest and High Priestess also seemed engrossed in their creations and did not move around much to see what others were doing or interact with the people present. At one point I needed to get some more glue so I returned to the craft table to get some, and one older guy asked me how I was doing and what I was doing and where I got the flowers. I explained that I had brought them with me as I had been told what we would be doing. I told him that he could have some but he declined and told me he was drawing his as he is an artist. I thought it was weird that he did not introduce himself or anything, and I was feeling a bit out so I went back to my spot to finish off my creation. Soon after the High Priest said that we had about five minutes left to finish our creations and that the rest of the ritual would then commence.*
- 74) *The High Priestess helped close up jars and neaten up the table while people started returning to their original seats.*
- 75) *The High Priest then turned off the music and moved to the altar.*
- 76) *The High Priestess joined him at the altar shortly after.*
- 77) *After everyone was settled then High Priestess said: We are now going to reform our circle and while holding our squares process toward the altar to have each of them blessed. Please follow behind me as we move rhythmically to the centre. The High Priest then said, "Hakon, can you please give us a beat? .As we danced silently around the circle spiraling toward the altar". A guy with a drum stepped in behind the High Priestess and started drumming out a beat, while everyone followed sort of walking some with a light bounce in their step, but no real dancing occurred. We all walked in a spiral formation towards the Altar and sort of stood in a semi spiral formation line up. The High Priest and High Priestess who were first in line stopped at the altar and took up small amber bottles. As each person arrived at the altar, first the High priest would dab some oil in his hand and then dab some on the square with the words:*

- 78) *For Lugh!, dab and then said: “blessed be”, then the person moved on to the High Priestess who then said: “For Brigid!, dabbed the oils she was holding on the square and then said, Blessed be! Once everyone had their squares blessed they returned to their seats. The High Priest and High Priestess stayed standing at the altar.*
- 79) *The High Priest then said: “It is now take for cakes and ale.” He asked two other people to come up and help to bless the food and drink. (on the plate there were squares of some or the other cake, and there was also a bottle of wine and a jug of juice) The all held their hands over the cake and wine and said: “It is not we who bless food and drink, but it which blesses us for in its nature, it nourishes our bodies and by sharing food and drink we create community”.*
- 80) *The High Priest then turned back to those present and said: “Today we have this lovely bottle of mead and we also have some juice for those who choose not to indulge in alcohol, and we have these lovely cakes that Sally baked for us” We will come round and offer you the cakes and ale, but if for some reason you cannot or choose not to partake, just nod and we will bless you anyway.” The High Priest took the cakes and divided them into another plate and handed it to one of the people he had called up, the High Priestess took the other plate of cake the High priest then poured some wine into a pottery type goblet and then poured the juice into a different glass and handed the glass to the other volunteer.*
- 81) *The four of them then started at the center of the circle and offered each person cakes and ale, afterwards they would say, I offer you these cakes, so you may never hunger” once you took one they would reply, “Blessed be”, and the person receiving the cakes or ale would say “Blessed be!” in return. When the wine came around they would say: “I offer you this wine so that you may never thirst” once you had a sip, they would say “Blessed be!” and the person receiving the cakes would reply, “Blessed be!” (The only thing I did not enjoy very much is that everyone drank from the same goblet....this is fine in a coven setting, but difficult for me in group of people who I don’t know... I also found it their cakes and ale blessing interesting because it is different to any of the “Cakes and ale” blessings. In the past the more British Tradition cakes and ale has a very different blessing, which I believe is the basis of this temple is based on).*
- 82) *After everyone had been served “cakes and Ale” the volunteers who had helped hand out cakes and ale returned to their seats and the High Priest and High Priestess offered each other cakes and ale, repeating the same lines as they did for the rest of those present.*
- 83) *After they finished chewing, the High Priest announce that we are at the end of the ritual,*

- 84) *The High Priest raised his hands again in the same gesture of the horned god and said: "Tonight in your honour we have worked as one to create a beautiful and coherent symbol of our temple. May this last and be shared with may who have yet to find us. Hail Lugh!, Hail and Farewell!"*
- 85) *Everyone else repeated: "Hail and Farewell!"*
- 86) *The High Priestess raised her arms high in the symbolic gesture of the Goddess and said: "Tonight, by the light and warmth of your fire we have worked as one to create our temple quilt. May all who gaze upon it feel your warmth and be enveloped with the love and creativity of our temple. Hail Brigid!, Hail and Farewell!"*
- 87) *Everyone else repeated: "Hail and Farewell!"*
- 88) *The same person who had read out the script for the element of Spirit stepped forward in to the centred and said: "Spirits above and below, between all things who connects all parts seen and unseen in the universe. Thank you for joining our circle and witnessing these rites. Hail and farewell!"*
- 89) *Everyone else repeated: "Hail and Farewell!"*
- 90) *The High Priestess then doused the flame of the purple candle.*
- 91) *The High Priest then said "let us all turn towards the North", at which point everyone tuned to face the North.*
- 92) *Again the same person who had previously read out the script for the elemental direction of North read out: "Guardians of the watchtowers of the North, powers of Earth release your hold. We give thanks for guiding our hands in our working tonight. Stay if you will go if you must, hail and farewell!"*
- 93) *Everyone else repeated: "Hail and Farewell!"*
- 94) *The High Priest then doused the flame of the green candle and said: "let us all turn towards the West", at which point everyone tuned to face the West.*
- 95) *The person who had previously called the Western direction then dismissed the direction: "Guardians of the watchtowers of the West, powers of Water release your hold. We give thanks for helping us to work as a community and temple this night. Stay if you will go if you must. Hail and farewell!"*
- 96) *Everyone else repeated: "Hail and Farewell!"*
- 97) *The High Priestess then doused the flame of the blue candle,*
- 98) *The High Priest then said: "let us all face the South"*
- 99) *Then the person who evoked South dismissed the direction: "Guardians of the watchtowers of the South, powers of Fire release your hold. We give thanks for inspiring us as we crafted tonight. Stay if you will, go if you must. Hail and farewell!"*
- 100) *Everyone else repeated: "Hail and Farewell!"*

- 101) *The High priest then doused the Red candle and said: :Now, we end where we began, let us turn towards the East”*
- 102) *Then the person who had evoked East now dismissed the direction: “Guardians of the watchtowers of the East, powers of Air release your hold. We give thanks for helping us to focus our intentions in our working tonight. Stay if you will, go if you must. Hail and farewell!”*
- 103) *Everyone else repeated: “Hail and Farewell!”*
- 104) *The High Priestess then doused the yellow candle.*
- 105) *Everyone remained standing, the High Priest then said we have reached the end of our formal ritual, let us now sing the circle open.*
- 106) *Everyone joined hands and sang” “May the circle be open but unbroken, Merry Meet and Merry Part and Merry meet again” this was repeated three times, and then at the end of the last sentence every clapped in unison.*
- 107) *The High Priestess then said: “I would like to welcome all our new faces to our temple tonight! I would also like to invite you stay and have some snacks with us, everyone has brought some snacks to share”.*
- 108) *At this point everyone moved to people that they obviously know or are friends with and started chatting and laughing, the High Priest busied himself with packing up the craft supplies, and piling up all the canvas squares that had been blessed and piled up. The High priestess took of the cling wrap off of the snacks. The snack table was set up at the back of the hall and had anything from finely cut vegetables and dip to Timbits<sup>34</sup> and bags of chips. I stayed for a while and had a quick snack and was introduced to one or two people, but I started to feel a bit awkward because everyone seemed to know each other so I decided that I needed to go home. By then it was around 9:30pm.*

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<sup>34</sup> Timbits are a type of donut snack that is bought from a popular coffee shop in Canada called Tim Hortons. Everyone in Canada is familiar with these snacks and often when there are informal gatherings, someone is likely to bring some along to share.



#### **4.4.1 Overview - Open Circle ritual explained**

Now that you have seen an example of a typical Open Circle ritual along with my fieldnotes you should have clearer image of what a typical Open Circle ritual entails. In Open Circles it is generally expected that all attendees participate in at very least, the 'working' section of the ritual, which is the part of the ritual that usually takes the bulk of time and effort. Even though in general participation by all in attendance is usually central to any Open Circle ritual, I should mention that there are occasions where pageant-like performances have constituted the entire ritual, and participation was only engaged in by a few members, although this tends to be the exception rather than the rule.

One thing that should be emphasised is that the speaking parts of ritual facilitators of Open Circle rituals are not dictated by the gender of the facilitator/clergy member, as is often the case in other religions. Generally Open Circle ritual groups have both a High Priest and a High Priestess, these are usually the ritual facilitators and in some Open Circle groups these facilitators are considered clergy members. The roles are shared equally by both genders. This is usually also the case in many Wiccan coven settings, where both genders are represented in the Priesthood, and facilitation or leading of religious rituals are not relegated to only one gender. Of course, in the case of Women's only or Men only groups, the facilitator will be either female or male.

In the following Section I will discuss the different parts of Open Circle ritual and where applicable provide examples and references to the illustrative example and my field notes provided.

Wiccan liturgies typically follow a more or less a similar structure although the liturgical<sup>35</sup> style differs depending on the context and whether the ritual is an Open Circle ritual or a Coven ritual. Most rituals will include the following:

1. a call to order which may or may not include centering and grounding
2. casting the circle
3. directional calls/ or elemental calls, also known as calling the quarters
4. evoking deity(s)
5. stating focus of ritual
6. ritual working or body of the ritual
7. sharing food and drink also known as Cakes and Ale or Cakes and Wine
8. dismissing or releasing the elements
9. thanking deity(s)
10. opening the circle
11. usually followed by feasting or sharing food, conversation and community

#### **4.4.2 Call to order**

The Call to order usually consists of an informal call to order and a few announcements are made, these would include mundane issues like the location of the emergency

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<sup>35</sup> , I am using a loose definition of the term liturgy to mean a standardised order of events during a ritual observed by Wiccans and Pagans.

exits and washrooms<sup>36</sup> are. This is sometimes followed by a centering and grounding lead by the ritual facilitator. Refer to paragraph 11 and 13 of my fieldnotes.

#### **4.4.3 Centering**

Centering is the process that brings attention to the state of mind and how we are feeling emotionally, this process is designed to bring some calm. Grounding on the other hand, refers to making a connection to the earth's energies. Generally participants are barefoot during indoor rituals, which aids this process. This can be seen in paragraph 5 of the illustrative example I provided, as well as paragraphs 18 and 19 of my field notes.

#### **4.4.4 Casting the circle**

Casting the circle is the process of declaring sacred space within a Wiccan ritual. As mentioned earlier, Wiccans do not have permanent churches or temples and as such are able to construct or set aside sacred space in almost any setting as long as the setting is private. In my fieldwork I attended rituals where the sacred circle was created in various physical spaces such as: a person's living room, basement, sunroom, a quiet open spot in the woods or park, a community hall or a library's private function room. Casting a circle in Wiccan practice is generally reserved for formal rituals, and one of the reasons a circle is cast includes as Bado- Fralick (2002:49) constructing a circle creates a place "between the world of humans and the realms of the Gods". There are a multitude of ways in which a circle is cast, sometimes the term cutting a circle is also used. Cutting a circle is sometimes more descriptive of how Open Circle rituals approach circle casting. This is because a sacred space is cut out away from the mundane world. Generally speaking casing a circle consists of demarcating the

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<sup>36</sup> In Canada toilet facilities are referred to as washrooms

space in which a ritual will be performed, the actual size of the circle as well as the direction in which a circle is cast varies from tradition to tradition as well as from Open Circle to Open Circle. The size of the circle will be at least as big as the circumference of people attending the circle while they are holding hands, but this depends on the tradition or group, as well as the purpose of the circle. Casting a circle can even include demarcating space by inscribing a circle on the floor/ground with chalk, salt or cords. Circle casting is a combination of speaking words, physical actions and imagination. I am going to provide two examples of circle casting both from Open Circle groups.

From the illustrative example you will notes that the circle was cast starting with the High Priestess who chants the words: "*The circle is cast from hand to hand*" (see paragraph 7 of the illustrative example). She then takes the hand of the person standing next to her, then next person will also take the hand of the person standing next to them and each person will take up the chant until all participants are holding hands. The participants are simultaneously also imagine a sphere forming around the circle of people, like a protective bubble. You can see this in paragraph 7 of the illustrative liturgy and paragraph 20 of my fieldnotes. Here everyone in attendance is involved in casting the circle. It should be noted that this procedure is not used in the case of coven rituals, the circle casting is usually performed by either the High Priest or Priestess or both.

The Regina Wiccan Open Circle group follows a style of circle casting similar to what is performed in some covens. In the Regina Wiccan Open Circle group, the High Priestess casts the circle and not everyone is involved in casting the circle. While everyone is standing in the circle the High Priestess will take up her athame, and then circumambulate the circle deocil, from North to North repeating this phrase:

*“This is a time that is not a time, in a day that is not a day, in a place that is not a place, in the world that is between the worlds, thus is sacred space decreed, and no act goes unnoticed, so mote it be”.*



**Figure: 10** Open Circle group gather outdoors in a public space.  
**Photo Courtesy of Raven RL**

Angelica, who is a regular attendee of the Regina Wiccan Open Circles described the process of how the circles were cast and her reaction to the circle casting:

*“Erika started the ritual, she was wearing a cloak and using her athame, and when she walked around the circle with her athame, when she walked around behind me every hair on my body stood up, I could feel this zinging energy right behind me, I could not even believe it, I felt that if I had turned around and looked there would be this sphere wrapping itself around us, and once the circle was cast she began the ritual the way*

*she always does,: "This is a time that is not a time, in a place that is not a place, on a day that is not a day, between the worlds..."*(June 2021)

As you might have noticed, even though the manner in which the circles are cast are significantly differently, however the reason a circle is cast is to demarcate sacred space and to signify the beginning of the ritual.

It should be noted that not all Wiccans in all traditions cast the circle in the same manner, for example some traditions may not cast the circle deocil, that is clockwise, and not all may start their circle casting in the North. Most Open circles though tend to cast their circles deocil, as a protective mechanism, as one facilitator said: *"we cast our circles this way to serve as a protection for us"*, but even the direction in which a circle is cast, can be a contentious issue. Lauren mentioned that one of the issues with writing ritual for Open Circles is that most of the content including the circle casting and elemental invocations needs to be kept as generic as possible, partly because there is very little agreement in the Pagan/Wiccan community as to how a circle should be cast and there is seldom if ever any agreement as to the words used during this part of the ritual.

#### **4.4.5 Evoking the Elements**

Next, the evocation of the elements is performed, which is often considered part of the circle casting. These evocations involve calling on the guardians who are unseen beings of the cardinal directions, or the classical elements in Wicca namely: earth, air, fire and water, they are viewed as the guardians of the magic circle (Farrar & Farrar, 1984:328). However in some groups like the Edmonton Open Circle Group, include a fifth element namely "Spirit" also known as ether, which is also evoked. Wiccans hold the opinion that these classical elements are the building blocks of the universe and

are thus revered. More than that, the elemental directions are also seen to have specific spiritual energies. These elemental evocations and the action performed during the evocation can be seen in paragraphs 45 to 58 of my fieldnotes. You will notice that some volunteers from those attending the ritual are asked to perform these evocations.

**East** - I call to the East, the direction of Air. Air is Sacred! The breeze that rustles the leaves and the wind that blows across my face and plays gently through the grass touches me as it touches my Sisters. Air connects us. Air is Sacred, I am Sacred, We are all Sacred!

Air - join us and be Welcome!

**South** - I call to the South, the direction of Fire. Fire is Sacred! The sun that warms the earth and the fire of creativity that burns in every human heart touches me as it touches my Sisters. Fire connects us. Fire is Sacred, I am Sacred, We are all Sacred!

Fire - join us and be Welcome!

**West** - I call to the West, the direction of Water. Water is Sacred! The laughing brook rushing across the rocks and powerful ocean crashing on the shore touches me as it touches my Sisters. Water connects us. Water is Sacred, I am Sacred, We are all Sacred!

Water - join us and be Welcome!

**North** - I call to the North, the direction of Earth. Earth is Sacred! The ground beneath us and the majestic mountains touch me as they touch my Sisters. Earth is Sacred, I am Sacred, We are Sacred!

Earth - join us and be Welcome!

**Invocation** - I call to the Goddess, the Great Mother, the Joyful Maiden, and the Wise Crone. Goddess with a thousand faces and names, I see you. You nurture, laugh, and teach with us and through us. Goddess you connect us. We see you everywhere and we feel you in our hearts. You are within all of us and we are a part of you.

Goddess you are Sacred, I am Sacred, We are Sacred.

Goddess - join with us and be Welcome!

**Figure: 11** Example of printed evocations.

Copy included with permission from the Amethyst Circle Open Circle Group

#### **4.4.6 Evoking deity/deities**

After the elements have been evoked the ritual facilitator will call upon the deities also known as; evoking the God and Goddess. When deities are evoked, they are called to join the circle and their help is requested for the workings that take place within the ritual circle. This can be seen in paragraph 60-64 of my fieldnotes. Figure 11 is an example of the printed script for the evocation of the elements, given to participants of the Amethyst Moon Group, which I included with permission. Unlike invoking a deity, evoking a deity simply means asking one to join, it is an external involvement of a deity. Whereas invoking a deity is a form of voluntary possession, where a deity is requested to come into a person, and the deity will then manifest through that person.

I am making this point as often ritual facilitators and participants alike confuse the terms, invoking and evoking, they are almost always actually referring to evoking rather than invoking as invoking a deity is usually reserved for coven practices and should be practiced by experienced practitioners.

#### **4.4.7 Ritual working or body of the ritual**

After the deities have been evoked the circle is considered erected and the participants are now ready to participate in the ritual working. Prior to this the ritual facilitator will discuss the focus of the ritual. This could be as simple as stating the purpose of the ritual. As per the illustrative example, the focus statement is contained in paragraphs 18-21. A focus statement may also be as simple as declaring that the ritual is going to be focussed on the celebration of a particular Sabbat, like Beltane, often some information about the Sabbat is shared and the working section will also be explained in more detail.



The ritual working section of the ritual typically includes elements of movement and dance to raise energy, and almost always includes some form of sympathetic magic. Sympathetic magic is based on the principle that “like attracts like”, and the law of similarity, where the person performing the spell “infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it” Frazer (1990:11-48). What follows is an example of sympathetic magic that occurred at a ritual working I attended at the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle Group. The occasion was the season of Spring, and this was the ritual working section of the ritual where all participants had the opportunity to plant seeds and focus their intentions on goals or new journeys that they wished to engage in during the coming year.

As you will see in paragraph 18-21, the High Priestess explains that the working section will include planting seeds as a physical representation of the goals that the participants will set for the rest of the year. You will note that in this example the sympathetic action of planting the seed is used to plant the seeds, these are the goals or a new journey and the metaphor of tending to the seeds as participants should also focus on and tend to the goals that they set during this ritual.

As noted previously, the working section of a ritual also includes raising energy for ritual magic. There are various methods of accomplishing this, but possibly the easiest methods of achieving this are some type of movement or dance. There have been some rituals that I attended at the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle Group that included ‘raising the cone of power’ as a method of raising energy. This may not be an effective way to raise energy in an open circle, as this method relies on visualisation and experience, which can be problematic in an Open Circle where often there are people in attendance who have never attended an Open Circle before. However, generally in

the Open Circles I attended the methods used to raise energy would include some form of movement, chanting or singing. This can be seen in paragraph 77 of my field notes, where we danced in a spiral formation to raise energy. Many of the online rituals presented by the Regina Open Circle group that I attended also included an element of dance to raise energy. In these cases, each person attending the ritual would turn off the video function for this section of ritual, as many participants felt rather self-conscious dancing on their own in a virtual ritual.

#### **4.4.8 Cakes and Ale**

The concept and focus and when participating in 'Cakes and Ale' that usually occurs within a ritual differs from tradition to tradition as it did in the Open Circles I attended. The celebration of Cakes and Ale tended to be focussed on the communal sharing of food and drink in the Open Circle rituals. When I questioned ritual facilitators as to why they included Cakes and Ale in Open Circle ritual, they generally reported that this part of the ritual is made use of to facilitate grounding after energy has been raised during the ritual working section. Typically though, Cakes and Ale does not always consist of actual cake or ale, more often than not, the 'cakes' are some other form of food that can include anything from strawberries to chocolate. Generally the 'ale' was wine or mead, but the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group always also provided a non-alcoholic option like juice in addition to the wine or mead.

Sharing food and drink also known as 'Cakes and Ale' may or may not take place within the circle that has been cast. As you can see from the fieldnotes 'cakes and ale' is performed at the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle Group inside the circle at each Sabbat as can be seen in paragraph 78-82. Cakes and Ale is also celebrated as part of the ritual right after the 'working section' of the ritual in the Amethyst moon

group. Both the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle Group and the Amethyst moon group have a specific ritual scripts that they use for the celebration of cakes and ale. The Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group tend to use the same script regardless of the



**Figure: 12 Celebration of Cakes and Ale**

**This picture depicts the High Priestess pouring wine into a quaiche cup, during the Cakes and ale Portion of a Wiccan coven ritual – Photo Courtesy of the Coven of the Northern Lights**

occasion, and I have witnessed this script being used during all occasions hosted by them where cakes and ale have been celebrated. This ritual script:

*“It is not we who bless food and drink, but it which blesses us for in its nature, it nourishes out bodies and by sharing food and drink we create community”*

was invented by the original founder of the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group. He told me that he had come up with this blessing during an event that was also attended by gay, lesbian and transgender folk He told me that he made up the blessing on the spot, as he did not feel that using a typical blessing of cakes and ale would suffice in that circumstance, as the celebration of cakes and ale tends to be heteronormative. This is because in some traditional Wiccan covens, the blessing of Cakes and Ale is symbolically represented as a version of the Great Rite<sup>37</sup>, this rite also has its own script to accompany the symbolic actions, and differs from tradition to tradition, but generally blessing of the cakes and ale is performed by the High Priestess and High Priest. The High Priestess will take hold of her athame (a ritual dagger) in her palms and will then lower the athame in to the goblet of wine with the words: “As the athame is the male, so is the goblet, the female, and conjoined they bring happiness.” The Priestess will usually take a sip of the wine at this point and offer a sip to the Priest, and then the goblet of wine is passed around to the rest of the coven to have a sip. Next the Priestess will take her athame and dip the tip into the wine and then touch each cake in turn, as she does this the Priest will say: “O Queen most secret, bless this food unto our bodies, bestowing health wealth and a fulfillment of love which is perpetual happiness”. Again the Priestess will eat some of the cakes and then the

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<sup>37</sup> The Great Rite is a separate ritual that is symbolically re-enacted to represent the union of the God and Goddess Who produce all new life.

Priest will partake, next the rest of the coven will be given cakes (The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft, Wicca and Neo-Paganism).

Some Wiccan traditions and Open Circles don't celebrate Cakes and Ale at every Sabbat. The Sage Wind temple for example does not often celebrate cakes and ale at each ritual, but do host a potluck after the ritual. They also do not have a set script for the Cakes and Ale unlike many other traditions. The High Priestess of the temple told me that:

*"We generally found that distributing food and or drink in a large circle of people took a fair amount of time and logistics, and often broke up the flow of the ritual. People would get chatty and lose focus while that was all going on. So we generally found it better to have the ritual a bit shorter and then have food after." – Erika, High Priestess of the Regina Wiccan Open Circle group. (November 2020)*

Although it is not noted in the illustrative example or the provided related field notes (as the example was taken from the first Open Circle I attended), the ritual facilitators of the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group, would usually leave a small portion of the food and drink and offer that to the deities as libation after the completion of the ritual. A specific tree behind the community hall (where rituals were held) often served as the same spot where libation were offered, at every ritual, regardless of the temperature outside which could sometimes be as low as minus 36 degrees Celsius in the winter. Some Open Circles may celebrate Cakes and Ale right after the deities have been evoked, as a way of celebration communion with them, although I only ever attended one ritual where this libation was performed as part of the ritual and not left until the end of the ritual proceedings.

#### **4.4.9 Dismissing or releasing the elements**

After the completion of the ritual the created sacred space is taken down, and part of this process involves dismissing or releasing the elements. In this part of the ritual, the facilitators or volunteers will address the cardinal directions or elemental energies and thank them for their presence and assistance during the magical working, as you can see in paragraphs: 37-42 of the Illustrative example.

#### **4.4.10 Thanking deity(s)**

After the elements have been released the deities that had been called on to attend and witness the ritual are thanked for their attendance. Most of the time the thanks consisted of a few simple lines acknowledging and thanking the deities, however there were times when this thanks was based on an orphic hymn or some form of flowery poetry, the style and tone or decision to be more elaborate depended on the decisions made by the liturgical writer(s).

#### **4.4.11 Opening the circle**

At the end of a ritual if a circle was cast, the circle is always taken down, or opened. Once a circle has been cast and the purpose of the ritual has been concluded the sacred space or working space is returned to the mundane. The circle opening in the Open Circles tended to be rather simplistic in that the circle was symbolically taken in a similar fashion to how it was originally cast. When the participants cast the circle they started by joining hands, and when they take down the circle the participants start the song by holding hands, and then as the song is concluded they loosened their hands and clap in unison at the end of the last refrain, to signal the circle is open. As you can see in paragraph 106 of my fieldnotes, the words of the song or what is often referred to as the 'Circle Open Song' also include some concluding words:

*“The circle is open but unbroken, may the love of the God and the Goddess be forever in your heart, merry meet and merry part and merry meet again”.*

This is usually the last part of the ritual liturgy and is equally important as all the other parts of the ritual liturgy.

#### **4.4.12 Feasting or sharing food, conversation and community**

After the conclusion of the ritual snacks and drinks that are provided by willing volunteers are enjoyed. Even if new people did not bring any snacks themselves they are encouraged to have a snack or drink and enjoy some conversation. This portion of the evening has no formal structure, but is probably the part that most first time participants look forward to! This is the time for social conversation, meeting people and building networks. This is often also a time where participants and new people can ask questions, or potentially be introduced to members who teach Wicca or have connections to working covens.



**Figure: 13 Sharing of food and drink at the Samhain Open Circle**

It is during these food sharing and conversational times, where did much of my informal interviews and asked questions. I noticed that new members would spend their time asking questions of those who appeared to know what they are doing, or spend some time talking to the ritual facilitators. Those who are regular attendees enjoy catching up with their friends from circle who they probably have not seen since the previous month's ritual, and the more socially adept members would also take the time to specifically spend some time with new attendees, and try to make them feel welcome.

#### **4.5 Ritual participation**

Durkheim (1995)[1912], was of the opinion that ritual is a type of display that is enacted and collectively perceived and experienced. Paden (1992:34) echoes this sentiment and said that: "Ritual is meaningful because it involves the collective participation that creates a state of consciousness that transcends the bounds of the individual's private experience.", thus ritual is a collective effort and participation in the ritual is what makes it meaningful to participants. Participation is generally highly valued by members and encouraged by ritual facilitators. In most Open Circle groups, ritual participants are encouraged to participate in the ritual, thus their liminoid participation is by option, it is not considered mandatory. In Open Circle rituals, usually just prior to the opening part of the ritual, as members or those attending the rituals are asked if they would like to volunteer for various roles or parts of the ritual proceedings that is ritual parts outside of the "working section" of the ritual. Ritual facilitators specifically ask for volunteers as a way to foster inclusivity and participation.

Open Circle rituals always have new and different people attending rituals along with the core group of members who attend more regularly. Ritual facilitators who are more



experienced realise that new people will not necessarily know what to do and what actions to perform during ritual and as such make provision for the fact that not all in attendance will know what to do at any given point in the ritual proceedings. The ritual facilitators will often exaggerate their motions, or use verbal cues and physical gestures to instruct new people as to what is expected of them, thereby making participation a bit easier on new attendees.

Even new people attending an Open Circle ritual who belong to a coven and have experience with ritual, may not know what actions are required of them in an Open Circle. Open Circles rituals are specifically written to be more generic as they often do not have a specific Wiccan tradition that they follow, will be discussed later in Chapter 5. Covens on the other hand each tradition has its own specific sets of performative actions that accompany ritual liturgies, and all attendees are well aware of what is expected of them.

#### **4.6 Crafting ritual**

Ritual liturgies vary according to the reason and season in Open Circles. Rituals liturgies are rarely ever repeated, and each ritual is crafted according to need or circumstance. Most often though these rituals are performed in celebration of a specific Sabbat or a Seasonal celebration. In Open Circle rituals, ritual liturgies are often creative endeavours that borrow from and are inspired by other practices and even other spiritualities, as discussed by Cheal and Leverick (1999:7). Bado-Fralick (2002) also concurs with this analysis, and says that Wiccan ritual “is not a religion of the book” but does draw from a variety of oral and written materials, although she is referring to Wicca specifically but this is also true of Open Circle rituals.

Every aspect of an Open Circle ritual is designed to enhance the experience of the participants, each aspect of the ritual is carefully considered and planned. The actions, gestures, symbols, enactments, lighting, scents and costumes, décor all aim to produce an ambience in line with the ritual intention. All of these aspects alongside the ritual are aimed at enhancing a particular state of mind and, transporting participants out of the mundane.

When I interviewed the High Priestess of the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group, she told me that there are certain elements or parts of the ritual that are cornerstones of every open circle ritual, that always need to be included in every ritual. She listed the following as what called the foundational aspects of the ritual: casting the circle as a group, recognizing the divine as both masculine and feminine, and recognising and inviting in the elemental energies, as well as sharing of food and drink (also known as cakes and ale) and then closing the circle. She also mentioned that the other important aspects that need to be considered when constructing a ritual for an Open Circle is that the ritual needs to be accessible to the general public as there are often new comers or first time attendees who have no knowledge of Wiccan ritual. In order to for new attendees to benefit from the ritual the rituals needs to have the same structure time after time. She also felt that Open Circle rituals need to be inclusive and ensure that participants feel connected and want to participate but also leave space for those participants who choose not to participate.

During my fieldwork I had the unique experience of being involved in assisting with the preparations involved in writing ritual and I was also tasked the execution of some aspects of rituals, like setting up the altar and ancestor tables, helping with décor and so on. In the latter part of 2019, I was asked to join the ritual team of the Edmonton

Wiccan Open Circle group, prior to and during 2019, the majority of the rituals were written by the clergy members. The ritual team members were seen as supportive members and who might be asked to comment on the written rituals, but their role was predominantly relegated to contributing to the décor, more theatrical components of the ritual and providing supplies that would be used in the ritual. Later during 2020, it was decided that the ritual team members should be more involved in crafting and participating in facilitating rituals along with the clergy members. At any given time the ritual team consisted of approximately eight people, who had varying levels of experience at writing ritual, performance and participation. Within the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group's ritual team it was typical of the entire ritual team to meet once a month to discuss the month's upcoming events and to plan for the month's ritual. They only met once a month as the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group only presented a ritual once a month on the second Sunday every of month of the year except the month of August. During the Pandemic when all in-person rituals were canceled or presented virtually, the ritual team would meet to discuss what Facebook posts or virtual activates would be planned for the coming month instead. It would then be decided who would participate in the writing of the ritual script (as not all members of the ritual team were involved in writing all the rituals) for the upcoming ritual performance.

The ritual team members would then meet outside of the regular ritual team meeting and discuss the theme, topic and what message if any, they wanted to achieve with the ritual. The first thing that ritual team would do is discuss the upcoming ritual in terms of what type of ritual would be presented. The majority of the rituals tended revolve around the Sabbats or Seasonal celebrations. The way the ritual team approached Sabbats, was to first discuss the general theme of the Sabbat. The team

would then brain-storm ideas that would fit with the decided upon theme and a broad outline would then be captured. Sometimes the entire ritual would be written at the meeting, but generally only the 'working' section of the ritual would be decided on and then the rest of the ritual parts would be divided amongst those working on the ritual including the more theatrical elements required for the ritual.

The Wiccan Open Circle group in Regina's approach to ritual writing appears to be similar to that of the Edmonton Open Circle group. The main difference seemed to be that the High Priestess ensures the cohesiveness of the ritual and is responsible for performing the ritual. There also appears to be more focus on cohesiveness and team work. When I asked Erika, the High Priestess her about her approach to writing ritual, she told me that ritual writing is considered more of a teamwork activity in the Regina Wiccan Open Circle group. She also told me that the ritual writing team had already developed an outline for each of the Seasonal rituals, which usually serves as the starting point for writing the rituals. Each of these seasonal ritual comprises specific themes and symbolisms. For in-person ritual liturgies that were written prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the board members would get together to discuss what they wanted to do for the ritual. The various roles would then be assigned in terms of who would do the costumes, décor, and who would bring the various items that would be needed for the ritual, then the persons in charge of ritual direction and co-ordination would be appointed. Erika emphasised the importance of multiple people being involved in the ritual planning and execution of all the different parts that are required to put together a successful ritual. She also highlighted that the collaborative approach yielded the best ideas for rituals. Ultimately though she thought it was also important to have one person who is ultimately responsible for ensuring ritual cohesion and maintaining the ritual energy and integrity of the ritual.

The Amethyst moon Group's founder and ritual facilitator Helen Oscar (53) told me that the ritual liturgies are generally written by and performed by herself and her daughter. During my participant observations, I noticed that she often encouraged members of the group to step up and write and perform rituals. On one occasion I even volunteered to present a ritual. I also asked her how she went about planning rituals and how rituals for the group are written. Her approach to ritual writing is similar to the other Open Circle groups, in that they the focus of the ritual is also centred on the Seasons celebrations and Sabbats. She told me that one thing she would really focus on is making sure that whatever was being performed for the ritual made sense in terms of the specific season being celebrated. This would include ensuring that the topic of the ritual is in line with the theme of the celebration, so for example, she would not talk about ice and cold in the middle of summer celebrations. She also tries to ensure that the events in the community and larger world are also represented in the rituals. For example if there is a need for healing in the community she would be sure to try and make the focus of the ritual on healing. She would also ensure that she always had a backup plan for rituals or discussion. She explained that sometimes walk in to the ritual venue and "read the room", only to decided that what she had planned to do for the ritual would not work for the participants present. Elsewise she would determine that the ritual participants actually needed something other than she had first planned, so having a backup plan is imperative for her.

Jaguar (56), used to host Shamanic journeys (a form of Open Circle ritual with the focus on a Shamanic form of ritual). I asked her how she would go about developing the material for the rituals she presented, she told me that most ceremonies have structured standard parts, and that the development of each ritual relied on making use of those structured parts. She focus on the structured parts of the ritual as a basis

from which to build and then to develop the ritual depending based on the theme of the seasons. She also said that sometimes she would rely on what she was inspired to do based on “*what spirit told me to do*”. So if she would get a spiritual inspiration she would work with that and then develop the ritual accordingly.

Another ritual facilitator, Jenifer used to run an Open Circle in Edmonton prior to 2019, incidentally Jennifer (40) also has some training in traditional Wicca. When I chatted to her about Open Circle ritual planning, she told me that Open Circle rituals are not the place or space where advanced magic can be performed. She said that Open Circle rituals tend to be generic, as these spaces often had attendees that had no prior experience with Wiccan or Pagan ritual. One method that she uses to guide the focus of her rituals is to take cues from the Seasons and Sabbats, as well as from the community at large and ritual attendees. Jennifer would make an effort to specifically chat to the members after ritual while enjoying snacks and some community time, so that she could determine what their needs were. She told me that attendees would discuss the struggles or successes as well as their experiences outside of the Open Circle in their mundane lives. She would then design the ritual based on community need. In one example she provided, she said that one of the regular attendees was struggling with self-esteem and had been feeling a low level of personal value. Jennifer then took this issue as inspiration to build a ritual that would focus on the concept of confidence. As she felt that all members of the Open Circle group could also benefit from that. Jennifer would also involve as many members from the group of attendees as possible as she is of the opinion that participation is incredibly important in ritual performances.

Jennifer's approach to ritual writing also confirms what Van Gulik (2012) said about contemporary Paganism that is; Pagans adapt their practices and evolve over time, and that creativity is central to their rituals. As is clear from the examples provided, ritual facilitators in Open Circles tend to have similar approaches in terms of how rituals are planned, written and performed. Most facilitators or ritual writing teams use the generic or standard ritual liturgy as described by the illustrative example as a foundation for all the rituals. The content of the ritual would then be based on the Seasonal celebrations or Sabbats or focus on a theme that the ritual team or facilitator had identified as important. Other issues including environmental pollution and what is happening in the natural environment were also themes that ritual facilitators felt were important to include in ritual liturgies.

Cheal and Leverick (1999:7) explain that rituals and traditions can be creative responses to cultural developments. Ritual writing is a creative process, a response not only to what is happening seasonally but also a response to events happening within the group and the community. However, rituals are not solely based on what is happening in their immediate location, sometimes rituals and activities are also based on what happening in the rest of the world. For example, in early February of 2020, just prior the World Health Organisation declaring the COVID-19 a pandemic, Australia in the province of New South Wales, experienced dozens of bush fires that prompted the declaration of a state of emergency. The ritual facilitators of one group decided to customise a ritual to focus on healing for those that were affected by the wild fires in Australia. The ritual was structured so that prayers and petitions could be offered to those in need.

In another example, this one relating to the response to environmental issues, the ritual team of the Edmonton Wiccan Open Circle group decided to offer a free in-depth Tarot reading to members who participated in cleanup operations and showed activities or steps they took to reducing impacts on the environment on Earth Day of 2021.

When I questioned the High Priestess of the temple about the underlying reasons for promoting Earth day amongst the group members, she said that she thought it was important to encourage people to participate and do their part for the environment. She feels that it is the responsibility of Pagans to care for the environment and live in harmony with it.



**Figure: 14** Facebook page announcing the Earth day Challenge



Even though this event took place during the COVID-19 Pandemic and all in-person rituals and activities had been ceased, members of the temple took up the earth day challenge and posted pictures on the Facebook group depicting what they had done to contribute to cleaning up the environment.

#### **4.7 The translation of ritual liturgies into active participation.**

If you compare the illustrative example of an Open Circle ritual to the fieldnotes I took, you will notice that the written ritual liturgy included some basic instructions. However, many parts were implied. Every step is not overtly described in great detail, and not all of the components of the ritual are explicitly laid out in the ritual text.

Other ritual liturgies published in Pagan books follow a similar liturgical structure. Polson's (2004) book entitled: "*Pagan Rituals*" is an example of a book containing liturgical scripts for various rituals. This book provides ritual scripts along with some basic information, but leaves much up to the ritual facilitator. This can better be explained by analogy; cooking recipe books assume that you have at least some experience cooking, and generally only provide overall instructions and ingredients. They do not for example, tell you how to select the appropriate cookware or go into detail explain what the term simmer till tender means, or explain how to measure out ingredients, and don't usually provide measurement conversions. Similarly, ritual liturgies whether they are provided by Open Circle facilitators or found in printed books, the assumption is that those facilitating the ritual have at least some level of experience and competence. The written ritual scripts are intended serve as reminders or cue cards rather than providing a step by step 'playbook' detailing each step that needs to be included in the ritual. Written liturgies do not include components like gestures, the

exact process of anointing, the music for rhythm for the chants is not provided, and the movements as well as whole sections of spoken word are sometimes omitted.

Ritual scripts assume that ritual performers have an understanding of what the shorthand entails, and are familiar enough with ritual performance to know what gestures, motions etc. are performed at specific points during the ritual proceedings. Many of the rituals I attended were led by experienced facilitators, however there were some rituals facilitated by clergy-in-training or less experienced ritual facilitators, which did have an effect on how rituals are experienced by ritual participants.

From the illustrative example, during the elemental invocations (paragraphs 8-13). You will notice that ritual participants are standing for the elemental invocations. Typically the ritual participants will be standing facing the center of the circle, but when the evocations are performed, participants will turn and face the specific direction of each quarter that is being evoked. Usually there are other physical gestures that accompany this action; arms are held up, slightly away from their bodies, palms facing up. When experienced clergy lead the rituals, they will narrate some of the unspoken gestures, in addition they will more expressively than what is actually required, perform the required action. In this example, the ritual script simply states:

*“Elemental Invocations:*

*East: Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the East, open the way for the power of Air, help us to focus our intent on our working tonight and may our final quilt carry a thousand words with in it. Hail and welcome”*

Whereas, in my fieldnotes you will notice that in paragraph 45, the set of actions to go along with the scripted words was narrated by the ritual facilitator as follows:

*“...we will now call the directions, if everyone can now face East which is in the direction of the widows, in this direction” as he (The High Priest) physically and rather dramatically turned to face what I presumed was East, everyone followed suit and turned to face East.*

In this example you will notice that the facilitators use narration of actions to instruct participants as to the actions that need to be performed in the ritual. As I attended more Open Circle rituals, I observed that newer or less experienced facilitators would omit narration of actions. They would for example when evoking the elements, just turn and face the direction without narrating the necessary actions during the evocations.

I found that the narration of actions was experienced in unique ways by various participants. On more than one occasion, new participants would look around rather bewilderedly and try to copy the actions of the other participants who appeared to be familiar with the required actions. I asked various participants how they experienced the narration of the required actions, and what they expected during the ritual. Their responses varied regardless of their level of experience with Open Circle ritual. For example when I asked Bella (27), a participant who had never attended a Pagan Open circle, how she experience the ritual and directions. She told me that she felt a little embarrassed because she did not know exactly what to do, and that the ritual facilitators did not always provide clear verbal instructions. She said that she would just try and follow along by watching and mimicking the actions of the other ritual participants. In contrast, Mary (43), a seasoned ritual facilitator, did not enjoy having everything narrated and mentioned that narration can have the opposite effect for her. Instead of being a guide, she felt that narration can distract from the experience of the ritual. She cited an example of a ritual that she attended where the ritual facilitator

would narrate every little movement or action that was about to take place. Mary told me that she felt that in that case the narration detracted from the experience. She thought that for her the narrations and explanations appealed more to her intellectual cognitive side, which took her out of the more spiritual headspace. She also said that the way you learn to do the ritual is by attending and performing the ritual with the same people on multiple occasions. She also said that one just followed the actions of the facilitator, the ritual performance would have a better energetic flow so that participants do not engage their analytical side as much, making the ritual more experiential or spiritual.

During most of the rituals I attended very little time was allocated for volunteers to read through and rehearse their parts. Volunteers are often just provided with their written scripts minutes before the commencement of the ritual. I found that those assigned speaking parts would more often than not, read their speaking parts in a deadpan tone, often stumbling over the words. This always seemed to be in stark contrast with the either the narration or the other parts that the ritual facilitators were responsible for. For some participants, like Bella for example, volunteer participation can also be distracting and does little to enhance the feeling and energy of the ritual. Bell is of the opinion that the spiritual feeling gained from the spoken words allow you to connect to the power and intent of the ritual. In one Open Circle, I noticed that regular attendees as opposed to those who were either infrequent attendees or those who had never attended ritual before, were more often than not given the ritual scripts for the invocation of the elements or for more participatory roles in the ritual. When I asked the High Priest why this was the case I was told that they:

*“wanted the ritual to be particularly powerful and I don’t want an inexperienced member just mumbling through the words”.* (November 2019)

Some participants also described instances where facilitators “*messed up the ritual*”, because they had little to no experience, and did not always take the time to narrate or explain what actions needed to be performed by the attendees. In one ritual one of the Goddess Persephone was discussed, (Persephone is both queen of the underworld, as well as the Goddess of spring growth). During the entire ritual, the facilitator repeatedly mispronounced the Goddess’s name and instead of pronouncing it as: “pr·seh·fuh·nee”, she pronounced it as “per se fone”. Many months later, in social situations, some members who attended this ritual would reflect on this particular ritual performance, which would result in either hysterical laughter, or they would just express their disgust. Those that had attended, also commented on how embarrassed they were by the mispronunciation. Ryan (26), told me that it was embarrassing, because he felt that new members were likely to think that all the ritual facilitators were amateurs and that this would give the Open Circle group a bad reputation.

Sierra F (50), has been attending open circle rituals about 22 years believes that the rituals are about the shared experience regardless of the proficiency with which the ritual is presented, or if the ritual is narrated by the facilitator. She recounted an example where a person who had never attended an Open Circle ritual before, volunteered to participate in portions of the ritual, and that the mere act of participation enable the rest of the group to connect with that person, and that involvement is key engaging in the rituals as well as forming bonds with other group members. Jennifer also concurred with Sierra, as she believes that Open Circle rituals are about bringing people together, and not necessarily about performing a powerful ritual, she said that finding a space for togetherness and a place to be with likeminded people is the primary aim of Open Circle rituals.

As can be seen from these examples, participation in Open circle ritual, is very often a double edged sword. On one hand, while all participants and most facilitators see the value in participation, some participants also desire a more polished execution, and there is not as much consensus in what exactly is the “right” amount of narration of actions. Although from what I experienced, the most successful ritual facilitators took their cues from the attendees and based the amount of narration and their request for volunteers based on the attendees themselves. If, for example, the ritual was attended by members or those who attended regularly, the ritual leader would specifically ask for volunteers from this group if the activity or actions required was complex, and would only require others to participate in activities that did not require much knowledge of the ritual actions. These facilitators would also take cues on how much narration was needed based on the responsiveness of the attendees, so if for example the facilitator noticed that the new people were struggling to know understand what was expected of them, the facilitator would make sure to add narration of even the most basic steps or actions required.

#### **4.8 Participation versus Pageant like performances**

In one of my participant groups, a pageant-like performance was performed by the ritual facilitator and a few members of the group. Generally speaking, pageant like performances are fairly infrequent occurrences in Open Circles. However, they are not especially rare, and are also sometimes performed within Wiccan covens. In this specific example a few experienced members and the clergy, enacted the epic of Pandora’s jar<sup>38</sup>. Just prior to the commencement of the ritual, those participating in the ritual performance were taken aside to the kitchen area and provided with ritual

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<sup>38</sup> The popular tale “Pandora’s box” was actually a mistranslated from the original Greek by Erasmus, originally the vessel was a jar not a box.

scripts. They were given basic instructions as to what their part entailed and provided with props for the performance. The High Priest took the role of the narrator and a few of the other members took on some of the more prominent roles. The entire rehearsal took less than fifteen minutes. During the rehearsal, the participants were enthusiastic and animated, however, when the actual ritual was performed the participants were much less animated. One of the clergy in training had the role of Pandora and was supposed to be very animate during the execution of the actions, while the narrator read through the story. However during the ritual she laughed nervously and forgot to perform many of her actions.

On this occasion ritual attendees were asked to watch the performance and contemplate the various ills and remember the message of the performance regarding 'hope'. Overall I don't think this particular performance was very successful and did not achieve the anticipated effect. During the performance, I could see some of the attendees, those not participating in the ritual getting fidgety and bored. Even after the ritual, while we were chatting socially, the only thing that attendees took away from the ritual was that they had learned that the Epic of Pandora's box, had been mistranslated. As a result, the intended message and intent of the ritual had been lost.

Jennings (1987:44) echoes my sentiments as he mentions that liturgical actions must be intelligible to those who do not participate ritual itself, and must also contain actionable meanings. I doubt that the participants took any wisdom from the performance, and as such the ritual failed in its attempt at creating an actionable meaning. My suspicions were confirmed during a conversation that I had with Jasper who could only recall the ineptitude of the ritual performance and felt like he got nothing

from the pageant other than the “good snacks during the social time at the end of the ritual”.

Blaire who had also attended the ritual pageant, told me that the problem with ritual Pageants is that even if a ritual pageant is really well preformed, as an attendee you are still observing it from the outside, and relying on that experience of the performer, you are not having that experience yourself.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

The Observations and explanation of my participation in a both Open Circle rituals and Coven rituals are based on extensive fieldwork experience. The descriptions are from rituals and activities I attended both in person and while watching online presentation.

Most Open Circle rituals have a similar liturgical format and sequence of events. While not all attendees of Open Circles will be familiar with the ritual liturgy, those who belong to a coven will be intimately familiar with both the contents and sequence of the ritual liturgies. In Open Circles, rituals are generally only used once and are not repeated. Often the rituals are written by members of a ritual team for a specific ritual. The rituals are not based on any specific Wiccan tradition, and often many sources and inspirations from various spiritual paths are drawn on to create the ritual. Coven rituals are rituals that have been passed down through the lineage of the tradition, and these rituals, specifically those for Sabbats and sometimes Esbats are repeated year after year.

It should be emphasised that there is so much more that goes into translating a ritual into action than just the ritual liturgy. The performance of the ritual itself, is also very important, possibly more so for Open Circle rituals than in coven settings. As Open Circles tend to be more theatrical in performance style and typically include a whole



host of theatrical production parts. These include: specific décor, costumes, lighting, props and seasonally appropriate altar decorations. Other requirements like the wine and food items for the Cakes and Ale section of the ritual also need to be organised and provided.

Written liturgies do not always contain all the steps or gestures, and in some cases even acronyms are used as a form of shorthand for a longer ritual procedures. It is generally assumed that ritual facilitators have some experience and understanding of ritual proceedings. Seasoned ritual facilitators tend to fare better at interpreting and narrating these actions and gestures as they are able to translate the acronyms during ritual performances. Whereas less experienced ritual facilitators tend to be less successful in translating ritual liturgies during the performance of ritual. The experience of ritual participants can be enhanced by the ritual facilitators' prowess at presenting rituals but can also detract from their ritual experiences.

## Chapter 5

### RITUAL IN OPEN CIRCLES AND COVENS

#### 5.1. Introduction

When one reads literature that focusses on ritual, the first aspect that authors address is the definition of ritual. Often this definition is followed by a discussion on what other ritual theorists have had to say on the matter. It was really very tempting to write this Chapter in a similar fashion, but ultimately I had to abandon that notion. I realised that if I were to unpack this topic, I would instead be writing an entire treatise on ritual in general, rather than writing an ethnographic account of the rituals I attended. Instead, in this Chapter I decided to focus on the different types of ritual that are typically performed within Open Circles and also discuss how these tie into traditional Wiccan practices. I also discuss the reasons why ritual participants attend these rituals.

#### 5.2. Ritual in the context of both Open Circles and Covens

Grimes (2000) had a valid point, when he said that the literature on ritual has no comprehensive system of classification and that ritual theories often do not distinguish between the ideas contained in the ritual and how they are enacted. Catherine Bell (1997) stated that those interested in ritual, quickly discover that there is little shared explanation of what ritual actually entails, or how to understand or define it. This is by in large one of the biggest problems authors and even practitioners of Pagan and Wiccan ritual face when trying to define terms related to Wiccan and Pagan religious rites. There is very little consensus amongst the Wiccan and Pagan communities themselves of what ritual is supposed to constitute, and there is also barely any agreement with regards to how terminologies related to ritual are defined within these communities. This point also correlates with Bado-Fralick's (2005) observation, that

amongst Wiccans and most Pagans, there is no unifying doctrine or a singular holy book of unified liturgy. Although there are shared liturgies and practices that are used within specific traditions, these are not universal and are in some cases closely guarded secrets. This makes definitions and classifications even more elusive within this context. A useful definition that could help explain ritual in the Wiccan context, was provided to me by an elder who practices a traditional branch of Wicca he defines ritual as:

*"...ritual in terms of Witchcraft is a repeated formula, typically handed down from witch to witch or teacher to pupil. Ritual is a formula, because it used standardised words, gestures and action, repeatedly." - Thorn Nightwind- (January 2022)*

Incidentally this elder uses the terms Wicca, Wiccan, Witchcraft interchangeably, as he explained that for him, Wicca and Witchcraft are the same thing, because for him the religion of Wicca cannot be reduced or removed from the Witchcraft.

Rountree (2006:191) explained that for him the definition of ritual is: "action which is distinguished from belief as thought". Durkheim (1996:188-193), states that rites can be differentiated from other forms of ritualised activity, because rites involve a religious phenomenon. As we already know from the literature chapter, the rituals practiced by Wiccans specifically, are based on religious beliefs. However, not all Pagans and Witches who engage in Open Circle or private ritual, necessarily adhere to a religious conviction. If we were to make use of Durkheim's definition of rites and ritual activity, rituals performed by some Pagans and Witches, would then meet not meet this criteria as a differentiator.

Where Durkheim and Wicca have conflicting ideas and diverge in opinion, is related to Durkheim's ideas about the demarcation between magic and religion. Durkheim (1996:192) states, that the rites performed by magicians are "thoroughly anti-religions". Wiccans would argue that this is a false assumption, because Wicca is a religion, and Wiccan magicians do just that; practice magic as part of their religion. Durkheim is also of the opinion that 'religion' refers to a group of people who have a common religious belief who adhere to practice rites that are connected to them. This statement would hold true for Wiccans who belong to a particular tradition. It might not hold true for people who identify as Wiccans or those who practice a more eclectic type of Wicca, and don't belong to a specific tradition. It should be obvious at this point, that Wicca specifically and for many Pagans, magic and religion are interrelated, the distinction proposed by Durkheim simply does not hold in this case.

Ronald Grimes (2000:259) also discusses his own frustration at the lack of agreement of the terms "ritual, rite, ritualizing and ritualization", as well as how terms like "ceremony, magic and liturgy" are defined. He also questions the definition of magic and asks whether it is a kind of religion in and of itself. Grimes also mentions that there is also some debate as to definition of the term "liturgy" and explains that both he and Roy Rappaport uses the term "liturgy" to denote a "religious ritual" regardless, of whether or not its origin is Christian. In this dissertation the term liturgy is used to denote a ritual even though in the context of some Open Circle rituals, the liturgy may not be strictly defined as being religious.

Just as Grimes questions whether or not 'magic' can be deemed a religion by itself, some participants stated that they did not feel that all 'magic' in witchcraft, includes the religious aspect. For them, acts of "witchcraft" include the use of spells, divination

and enchantments and do not contain a religious quality. Some felt that they could perform acts of magic without subscribing to the religion of Wicca. Thorn Nightwind for example, mentioned that magic can be described as almost anything that science has not yet been able to explain. He explained that magic is very broad, is ineffable and “creates a sense of wonder” which makes a false dichotomy of concept the idea of a separation between religion and witchcraft. This is because he views Witchcraft as just one of many religious expressions present in Wicca, and inseparable from Wicca as a religion. Another elder, Guynor, told me that he thinks religion and witchcraft cannot be separated because:

*“..if someone considers themselves to be an atheist and identifies with having no accepted religion, then all religious observances, fortune telling, magical rituals and spells would have no meaning and would be pointless without a belief in something greater than ourselves. With a concept or belief in any form of religion, even an unaffiliated or non-denomination religion, an act of witchcraft is given meaning and purpose. Even someone who visits a witch for a psychic reading or for spell-work, if the client doesn’t have a belief in something greater than themselves, there would be no need to seek the counsel of a witch. Even a simple belief even in a Supreme Being or some form of Universal Power is necessary, even if it is not a religion or forms part of a formal religious association... (January 2021)*

As mentioned in the research methodology in Chapter 2, some participants feel that witchcraft as a practice may or may not include a religious aspect, contrary to Wallace’s (102: 2006) assertion that ritual is in fact “*religion in action*”. Not all witches purport to be religious or cite the need for deity or invoking a higher power to enable their workings. Grimes (2000:259) uses the term ‘magic’ to denote the “manipulation of supernatural powers”. If we unpack the term “supernatural powers”, according to

the Collins English Dictionary (Online) it is defined as: “Of, coming from, or relating to forces or beings that exist outside the natural world” this definition is not very helpful in itself as it could of course be argued both ways, that the “magic” (as in the manipulation of supernatural powers) can come from a Supreme being or the “magic” simply from some other yet unidentified source or that the magical power comes from within the witch themselves. Mooney (2021:89-93) says that “*magic and ritual are deeply intertwined*” and that it would be very difficult to separate out the ritual from the magic. She is of the opinion that ritual: is something that is used repeatedly and consistently and does not necessarily have to have a religious connotation. She does, however concedes that in the context of witchcraft, ritual is at the heart of what witches do, and that one of the important aspects of ritual has to do with meaning making. Magic in her opinion is often related to the use of spells and the symbolic uses of tools to “direct one’s intention into reality”, often spells included the use of gods, ancestors etc. However, she states that in her understanding, spellcasting does not necessarily rely on a particular religious or cultural affiliation.

Ritualists, (in other words those who participate and engage in these rituals) within the context of Open Circles and Wiccan covens do not themselves tend to categorise their ritual practices in the same way as the above mentioned academic scholars. As Grimes (1992:21) mentions, there are some assumptions made about ritual that ritual theorists do not address. Grimes specifically discusses “*ritualizing*”; a phenomena where ritual is self-created, and discusses how ritual theorists fail to take into account changes in cultural practices. When attempting to unpack the taxonomy of ritual within the participant groups, I had to draw on my fieldwork experiences and the opinions of participants themselves to decide which category the various rituals could potentially be classified. I was also able to consult some of my own teachers and other

experienced Wiccan ritual facilitators to assist with this task. We ultimately decided the various categories as defined in literature by for example: Turner, 1973, Bell, 1997, Firth, 1967 were not in the strictest sense perfectly aligned with what is considered to be ritual in the context of Wicca, and that on the whole, rituals did not fit discretely into popular ritual theories. The reason for this is that most of the rituals/rites commonly performed in Wicca, will to some degree overlap or include aspects of types of rituals or could fall into two or more categories. The main categories of ritual identified that are practiced in Wiccan covens and Open Circle groups are: Rituals of transformation, Rituals of celebration, Rites of passage and Magical-religious rituals. Before I discuss these individual types of ritual, we need to first need to understand what constitutes ritual in the Wiccan context.

### **5.3. The Purpose of ritual**

The purpose of ritual in the Wiccan context, is central to the beliefs and ideals of the religion. The underlying religious belief in Wicca is that the entire universe is interconnected. Participants are able to perform magic by aligning themselves with cycles of nature and by working with the Gods to effect change and transformation. In Paganism in general, the belief that the Divine is immanent in Nature and all beings; thus enabling each individual to be capable of interacting with the Divine without intervention or mediation by from anyone else. At the heart of Wiccan ritual is transformation, change is effected through magical acts performed during ritual. Wiccan religious identity is expressed through the performance of rituals (Harrington, 2006).

I asked various participants what they thought the purpose of ritual is, one of the most comprehensive responses to this question came from Thorn Nightwind, who expressed that he thinks ritual is:

*“...a set of consistent steps and instructions, a formula to follow, each with its own particular and specific purposes. Ritual can be viewed a consistent pattern, when repeated over and over at various occasions builds a stronger imprint within the Astral Light<sup>39</sup> - making it more and more powerful and impactful each time it is performed. You see this in other religions too – some still say the Catholic Mass lost a lot of mystery and power when they stopped doing it in Latin... because now it is a whole new formula”. The reason for having a formula (a consistent and good ritual) is so that you achieve the intended result of why you are doing the ritual. “We don’t do rituals for the sake of doing them, but we engage in rituals for a specific reason. The successful outcome of what the ritual is designed to do is the purpose of ritual.” (January 2021)*

He also said that the purpose of ritual is almost always aimed at some type of transformation. This perspective of ritual is also consistent with Magliocco’s (2004: 147-149) findings, she found that participants felt that the successful ritual includes an emotional response and that at the heart of magic and ritual is transformation. Thorn Nightwind’s (37) opinion that ritual is a “*consistent pattern*” repeated over and over, is in agreement with Mooney’s (2021:89-93) opinion that what constitutes ritual is something that is “*performed repeatedly and consistently*”. Mooney sees ritual as something that needs to have meaning, and for Thorn, rituals are not performed merely for the sake of performing a ritual, it has a specific purpose and design. The purpose of ritual in Wiccan contexts is not merely ceremony or formality but aimed at a specific

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<sup>39</sup> Astral light, is a term that refers to a concept which Éliphas Lévi used in Wicca which refers to a fluidic like life force that fills all time and space. Éliphas Lévi, was an esotericist, poet, and author of many books on magic, the Kabbalah, alchemical studies, and occultism. Levi (1855).



outcome or needs to have a deeper meaning. Although in this example there is no specific agreement as to whether external entities are/are not required for the performance of ritual. ". I asked Thorn his opinion on whether or not he thought that spellcasting could come from the innate power of the witch themselves, without the interjection of a deity or a Supreme Being he told me that his opinion is that:

*"Even if you believe in the ability of your own mind to create the mental gymnastics of the mind - you believe in the power of your mind being greater than our own understanding, thereby, in that sense, your Mind is God"* (July 2022)

Lauren (56) is a High Priestess in a coven and has facilitated and attended Open Circle rituals for almost thirty years. She said that she thinks the purpose of ritual is to connect to the divine, whether you are performing spellwork or acknowledging the seasonal changes and celebrating the Sabbats, the main reason we perform ritual is to connect to the divine in order to achieve what we require.

Elizabeth (26) is a High Priestess of an Open Circle with limited exposure to any traditional Wiccan coven practice. She provided the following definition of ritual:

*"as a certain series of actions that can be performed regularly for a specific period, like getting ready for bed or drinking tea and reading tarot at a specific time each day, they can be spiritually significant or mundane in nature, but both have a specific purpose. The difference between a ritual of a religious nature and a mundane ritual is that a ritual of a religious nature, many of the actions are symbolic, many forms of ritual have specific steps, with the aim of getting tangible results".* (January 2022)

Her opinion is similar to Turner's (1974:62) differentiation between liminal and liminoid, where he says that the liminal relates to the concept of a threshold and involves a resolution of crisis or a transformation, whereas liminoid, has some of the

characteristics of liminal experiences but does not involve a transformation. Elizabeth provides an explanation for the differentiation between ritual and mundane ritual:

*“someone may dress in a specific costume or garb during a religious ritual in order to evoke the spirit of a certain deity, the garb does not physically transform the person into said deity, however, the connection can be strengthened by performing the symbolic act, alternatively when getting ready for a mundane activity, like getting ready for work, brushing your teeth and brushing your hair, all very real actions with obvious reasons and results”* (January 2022)

Elisabeth further explained that in her opinion the purpose of ritual in the context of a community ritual, is to provide individuals with the opportunity to connect with deity and their spiritually in a community setting in a way that is individually meaningful to them, also to share the “mysteries of the wheel of the life”. Elisabeth also said that she feels that public community ritual is only different from private ritual, in that it involves other people’s energies. So in her opinion, whether ritual is practiced as a solitary practitioner, or whether it is a group ritual, the participation in ritual is about working with and connecting with the energies that are innate in each person, and utilising those energies for our intended purposes. She also said that working with other people simply gives one the benefit of being able to tap into more energy. Elisabeth’s statement is very much in agreement with Turner’s (1967:19) conception of ritual, as Turner ties ritual to a belief in supernatural beings, and views ritual as essential to religious belief. Further, Turner (1969) also sees religion as involving social experiences within ritual activities. Durkheim (1915:225-226) also viewed ritual as important in its function by where individuals can get together as a group to: “strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member”.

Paul (52), who has been involved in both coven and Open Circles for more than two decades, said that people ritualise almost everything in life, from having coffee in the morning to brushing teeth. He told me that for him the difference between everyday ritualised activities and those we do as a religious ritual have to do with the fact that we usually call on Deity, whether we call that Deity, a God from a specific pantheon or if we call on other agencies like Angels or Elementals. Paul's opinion is that the main difference between a ritualised activity and a religious ritual is the religious aspect. He said that having coffee as a ritualised activity is not a religious act, because we do not call on Deity, so even if we follow the exact ritual steps that are part of traditional practices, the thing that usually separates mundane ritual from a religious one is the agency of Deity and the transformation that takes place after ritual. He also said that even though Deity is not always called upon in ritual; because a Witch can do magic without the assistance of supernatural forces, transformation always happens as a result of ritual. Dulaney and Fiske (1994) compare ritual activities and nonritual activities, and conclude that most the salient feature that differentiates between ritual and "ritualisation" is the ability of ritual to transform. Whether the transformation is in terms of personal relationships, status, healing or to prevent harm; where ritualisation has some of the same characteristics of ritual but the ultimate outcome does not involve transformation. Dulaney and Fiske's conception of ritual activities and the "ritualization" of activities does however, not include any element related specifically to religion.

Tony (47), who is a coven leader and has lead countless Open Circle rituals, mentions that for rituals in a coven setting, the formula or steps of the ritual must create a space where all participants can create "one-mind" where the desired end goal or effect where all present can concentrate on the same thought or end-goal. The physical

actions and steps involved in ritual are repeated over and over, time and time again, so much so that in effect the coven members are familiar with the physical actions that need to be taken for each ritual. These physical actions become almost automatic, which then *“allows your mind to travel to places of consciousness that you can only do when you feel totally safe and secure”*. This description is consistent with how Turner (1977:55) defined ritual: “... stereotyped sequences of activities involving gestures, words and objects performed in a sequestered place and designed to influence pre-natural entities or focus on behalf of the actor's goals and interests”. (October 2020)

Thorn Nightwind (37) a High Priest who also runs Open Circles with decades of experience, is of the opinion that when it comes to coven rituals, ritual ecstasy, and transcendence the:

*“...ability to extend the limits of your mind further and further becomes a possibility only because at a covenstead, or place where witches meet, gather not as strangers but very close companions that know each other closely”*.(January 2022)

In terms of the transcendence, Thorn's observations are also consistent with Edith and Victor Turner's (1982:205) commentary, that ritual urges participants to think “...anew about persons, objects, relationships, social roles .Previous patterns of thought feeling and action are disrupted”. Thorn Nightwind also notes that covens, by their nature, are secret societies and you get to know each other in ways that even our own families don't. This allows both trust and love to be earned and formed over time.

*“Witches who work in a coven can reach the ecstatic levels very quickly and easily, sometimes with just a word or simple mantram or even by social cues, or even like the theory of Pavlov's dogs, when convenors smell that same incense burning and the*

*same ritual, tools present at night, or even when around a ritual bonfire, their mind is immediately triggered without a word spoken, and then the process begins of inducing those transcendent states of consciousness. It allows me to transmute reality into what I picture in my mind with intense concentration". (September 2021)*

This sentiment is echoed in a section in the Encyclopedia of Religion (2005:7834), where the discussion revolves around ritual in terms of how ritual is centred on the human body, as a "vehicle for religious experience". Here the body is highlighted as being important for religious experiences as the physical actions employed in ritual "engage consciousness" that ultimately endow those practicing with a strong sense of reality, not relegated only to the realm of mentality. This description in the Encyclopedia of Religion parallels Thorn's description of ritual, specifically where he places emphasis on the importance of the physical body as medium required in ritual to access and obtain deeper and more profound states of consciousness.

Thorn Nightwind (37) also acknowledged that he has not found transcendence or exaltation at many Open Circles because it takes training to do this (to reach states of ecstasy and transcendence). He said that he has not found that these states can be reached in Open Circle settings, even those that he himself has facilitated. He believes that the reason for this is that Open Circles, are open to all who choose to participate and attend, and one never knows who will attend the rituals, so it becomes a revolving door of people. He also said that:

*"...ritual ecstasy and even trance isn't always safe for everyone to partake in, and don't know who will attend, some of the people who attend Open Circle rituals are essentially strangers, and you certainly don't know what if any training they have had". (September 2021)*

In Thorn's experience, in order to have a meaningful event for all people involved at an Open Circle event, he has had to take his current practices and change them into a simplified format so that everyone present can have a meaningful experience, even if that experience is not deeply meaningful or profound.

Jennifer (40) also a seasoned ritual facilitator and a coven leader, is of a similar opinion to Thorn Nightwind. She is also of the opinion that Open Circle rituals are not appropriate spaces for serious or advanced practices. She said that this is partly because those who attend Open Circle rituals may not attend rituals specifically to have those "deeper experiences of magic". She said that she is of this opinion because more often people attend Open Circle rituals for the community aspect. Secondly, because the majority of those who attend Open Circle rituals have little understanding of the underlying fundamentals of magic and ritual practices. On the other hand, Hakon (27), who has lead a few Open Circle rituals and was involved in a coven for a period of time, sees Open Circle rituals as a way to afford people the opportunity and potential to do more complex rituals. They said that one can achieve things in an Open Circle group ritual that you cannot necessarily do on your own as a solitary practitioner. They also mentioned that:

*"it (Open Circle group rituals) can bring "something to the magic", specifically when one is trying to do something "unexpected" as opposed to the standard generic rituals presented at Open Circles. You are more likely to succeed in a larger group than on your own". – Harkon (September 2020)*

In their opinion the "unexpected" can be positive or negative, but either way, they believe that both of those polarities are beneficial to working magic, as they create and foster environments where people can really learn from one another.

*“So I have always felt that Open Circle group ritual, opens a door that that can't be opened when you practice alone, I think it provides folks with an opportunity to try something new”. (January 2022)*

Although at first glance Harkon's opinion appears to resonate with Turner (1969) when he argued that rituals can be antithetical, and have the ability to offer new opportunities for participants to experiment with “alternative social relations”. Turner was, referring specifically to the social structure of rituals/rites of passage within a specific context. The difference, lies in that the rituals that Turner was describing, took place within existing tribes, where relations and relationships were already established as participants were members of a specific tribe. Contrary to Open Circle rituals where most of those attending are not part of same tribe or an established group, and may only ever attend a single Open Circle.

Jonas (64), used to facilitate Open Circle rituals and purports to run a small coven. He said that in his opinion Open Circles rituals should imitate theater. His opinion is that ritual facilitators should:

*“... take the participants outside of themselves and bring them into a connection with something deeper and more profound. Often facilitators are not willing to take people to an uncomfortable provocative place where they may have to confront their own limitations. Rituals should be an opportunity to look at the mysteries, even public Open Circle rituals should have some connection to those deep profound experience”.*  
(September 2020)

It was interesting to hear Jonas' perspective that rituals in Open Circles should facilitate a more profound experiences, because many other facilitators disagreed with the idea of structuring Open Circle rituals to be specifically “profound”. This is because

the other ritual facilitators felt that participants of Open Circles may not be able to fully embrace the more “profound states” as many attendees lack training. The other aspects that are missing in an Open Circle have to do with tenets of “perfect love and trust” that are not present amongst Open Circle attendees, but are usually present in a coven or a closed group. Besides the lack of training in terms of reaching “*transcendent states of consciousness*”, most new attendees at Open Circles lack the basic understanding of the symbolic associations and actions that are used in ritual. Turner (1969:7) pointed out there is a difference between observing and understanding the performances and what the actions and words actually mean to ritual participants.

Likewise, in the case of Open Circle rituals, even if new attendees follow along with ritual gestures and sing the chants, during an Open Circle ritual performance, they may not understand the underlying meaning or intent behind these gestures and actions. With little to no training or background information, it may not be possible for new attendees to have those “*deeper and more profound*” experiences.

The statements made by first time attendees when I asked how they experienced attending an Open Circle ritual for the first time, appear to corroborate the assertion that newer or infrequent attendees may not be able to have “profound or deeper experiences” in Open Circle rituals. Bronwyn for example, told me that:

*“I felt entirely confused by the whole episode, it was not what I expected at all! I was told that the ritual would go a certain way and that the ritual would follow a specific format, it’s not what I had read about at all, and I found it outside of my comfort zone”.*

(August 2019)



Bronwyn had contacted Jennifer who used to be the High Priestess of a different Wiccan Open Circle temple, and asked for more information on the format and what to expect at the Open Circle ritual. Jennifer had even gone the extra mile and had offered to attend the Open Circle ritual along with Bronwyn, even though Jennifer did not normally attend this particular Group's Open Circle rituals. After I spoke to Bronwyn, I chatted again with Jennifer who told me that she was surprised that the Open Circle ritual had deviated from the usual ritual format. Jennifer said that she had spent almost the entire ritual "*translating and explaining*" the different ritual actions to Bronwyn during the ritual. It dismayed Jennifer that Bronwyn had declared that she was no longer interested in attending any other Open Circle rituals.

I was interested to see how Turner (1972) specifically defined ritual, as this research also investigates how some of Turner's theories could potentially fit into the concept of Open Circles. Turner defined ritual as "... a stereotyped sequence of activities...performed in a sequestered place and designed to influence pre-natural entities or forces on behalf of the actor's goals and interests". As can be seen from some of the responses from the various participants like Paul, Lauren and Thorn Nightwind, at least from the majority of those participants involved in covens, who view the main purpose of ritual as specific actions or steps that are followed. With each according to a specific tradition or formula, with a very specific purpose(s). These participants also emphasised the importance of religious beliefs and the transformative nature of ritual. Like Turner (1969:4) who emphasised the importance of ritual's ability to facilitate "radical transformation of human social and psychical structures".

Even though the majority of ritual facilitators expressed the importance of keeping ritual liturgies similar or the same from ritual to ritual. Other ritual participants who are

mainly involved Open Circle ritual facilitation, like Hakon and Jonas tended to see ritual liturgies as more fluid and adapted rituals as they saw fit. From my fieldwork experience I noticed that Open Circle rituals are tended to be 'standardised', in that they followed a similar sequence of events as discussed in Chapter four. However, the content of the ritual differed with each ritual, even the Deities evoked differed from ritual to ritual, and the decision as to which Deity(s) to evoke was decided by the person who wrote the ritual liturgy. Even if the same person composing a different ritual liturgy, they would often evoke entirely different Deities than they did the previous ritual they had written. Even the Sabbat rituals in the Open Circle groups were not consistent from year to year. Whereas in other participants who also belong to covens told me that the same deities are evoked in each ritual, and that these rituals follow are the same year after year.

#### **5.4 Magic**

In Wicca there are various forms of magic that are used in ritual. Magic is used in almost every type of ritual and Sabbat<sup>40</sup> celebration. It is not within the scope of this research to fully explore the concept of magic as used in Wiccan ritual, however, seeing that magical actions are part and parcel of almost every type Open Circle ritual, it is important to discuss this phenomena. In both Traditional Initiatory Wicca and Open Circle rituals, magic is almost always practiced by making use of symbolic representations depicted by physical artifacts, including specific tools, decorations and magical objects.

In Durkheim's (1960)[1912] classic distinction between magic and religion he states that even though magic and ritual have similarities, like; rites, traditions and dogma.

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<sup>40</sup> A Sabbat is a Wiccan Holy Day, also referred to as the "Wheel of the Year. See Figure 19 in section 5.6. These are annual seasonal festivals, also see section 5.3.1 of this chapter.

The essential difference between magic and religion in his conception, is that practitioners of magic do not have any formal or social ties and magic is seen to be the opposite of religion. In Durkheim's conception, magic is practiced primarily by individuals for their own gain, whereas religious acts/religion is aimed at communal benefit. Durkheim further states that he believed there is no cooperation between individuals who practice magic, with each practitioner performing magic in isolation. He did, however, conceded that practitioners of magic may form temporary relationship bonds to perform magic. According Benussi (2019) the practice of magic enables the nurture of communities, thus nullifying Durkheim's (1912) that magic is only used to ally anxiety in the community. Magic and ritual are employed for a multitude of reasons, including; celebration of Holy days, transformation, healing and addressing specific needs. It is not accurate to say that magic is only used to nullify anxiety, it is not a last ditched effort that people resort to when they cannot solve problems by technological or conventional means. In fact magic in Wicca is practiced in groups as well as by individuals. Magic practiced in Open Circles as well as covens is often specifically related to issues of communal importance.

In contrast to Durkheim (1960), Malinowski (1935) focussed on the sociological functions of magic. He is of the opinion that people resort to magic when they have a problem that cannot be solved by conventional means. He also believed that magic was employed as to reduce anxiety and a therapeutic expression of emotion and aimed at achieving specific and immediate goals. Whereas he saw religious rituals as aimed at devotion and worship. Bailey (2006:5) suggests that academics instead focus on "historically and culturally specific understandings of magic" also urging scholars to pay attention to specific contexts. Bailey concludes his argument by saying that "There is and probably can be no simple methodological solution to the definition

or study of magic. A clear understanding of the terminology employed to designate magical acts in any particular context is critical". Bailey has a valid point, because the subject of magic and ritual, as will be seen in the next Sections tends to be very context specific. Other anthropologists like Child and Child (1993), are also of the opinion that magic should be included in the category of religion, and are of the opinion that definitions of magic and religious are outdated. They also say that magic should not be excluded from the definition of religion.

Moro (2018) describes magic in Witchcraft as relating to people's attempt to control the supernatural, and says that at its foundation magic is an idea or belief that is enacted through rituals, spells as well as imbued in amulets and talismans. In this definition the concept of magic hinges on controlling the supernatural. However, as can be seen in section 5.3, not all participants agree that Supernatural forces need to be evoked during spellcasting and ritual for them to be effective. As Paul put it:

*"Most spells rely on the power of the mind and being able to imagine what you desire, concentrate on it, and have faith that it will be completed to the end. This process does not necessarily rely on the intervention of God, but the will-power and work of the witch performing it". (October 2021)*

Although for other practitioners, rituals and spells hinge on the assistance of Supernatural beings or assistance from a Supreme Being. Within Wicca and Paganism there does not seem to be an agreement as to whether or not magic is reliant on the intervention of the Supernatural as described by Moro (2018).

Marion Weinstein (2003:164-165) an occultist, defines magic as "the work of transformation" and relates transformation to the classic metaphor that is often used describe an alchemist who has the ability to transform base metals into gold. This

metaphor actually describes the ability of the magician to transform themselves, which is the ultimate personal goal of the Witch. She says that the Magician or Witch is in fact the medium of transformation, and says that magic and transformation are one and the same thing. Furthermore, Weinstein says that the specific kind of transformation that a Witch uses, is manifestation.

If we consider the opinions of scholars in the Chapter as a whole, you will notice that both of these definitions by Moro and Weinstein are more closely linked to how participants describe ritual and magic. Some participants considered the impetus for magic to lie with the Witch/Magician themselves and others are of the opinion that magic is only made possible through the assistance of a Supreme Being or Supernatural forces. It does seem however, that the definition of what constitutes magic depends on the practitioner.

Spellwork can be described as the specific actions taken to achieve the desired outcome, spell work is type of magic. Rountree (2006) says that the terms 'magic' and 'spell' refer to the means by which the goals of a ritual is performed. Spellcasting can be described as employing the use of willpower to manifest a change or have an effect on someone or something. When I asked participants where they thought constitutes magic or the impetus behind spellcasting for example comes from, there was no real consensus. Some argued that without the Witch/Magician, magic of any kind is not possible. So whether magic is enacted directly as a result of the skills of the magician or by the magician with the assistance of supernatural forces, is largely dependent on the individual practitioner or the specific Tradition to which the Witch or Magician belongs. Two participants, Harkon and Elizabeth as well as the majority of Open Circle participants had the opinion that the most important element involved in spellcasting

and ritual relates to “the intent” of the spell or ritual, rather than “who/what” specifically “makes the spell work”. In other words they are more concerned with the reason for performing the spell (the intent) and the specifics of what the spell is intended to achieve, rather than being concerned with “who/what” specifically enables the outcome of the spell or magic. Interestingly when I probed further and asked for a clarification from some Open Circle participants and questioned what they meant by “intent”, some commented that “intent” is connected to the “Witch’s Will”<sup>41</sup> and deciding in advance what results are expected as an outcome of the spell or ritual.

During the course of my fieldwork it became clear, that as mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, not all participants identified as Pagan or even Wiccan or Witches. This is relevant here because not all Pagans practice magic, whereas almost all traditions in Wicca practice magic. As we know from the introductory chapter, Paganism is often used as an umbrella term to encompasses many types of spirituality, and is in itself not necessarily a religion or reliant on magical practices. Paganism, is instead viewed as a way of life or type of philosophy rather than a specific religion. As noted in the literature Chapter 3, Paganism and Wiccan are only similar in that for the most part in that they both have a connection to the natural environment.

One of my participants Paul mentioned that he is of the opinion that magic is what separates some Pagans from Wiccans and that Paganism is not always viewed as a religion in and of itself. This point is being made because in this Section I refer specifically to Wiccan practices, this is because the majority of the groups where I performed my participant observation were based on Wiccan ritual structures. Even though not all participants and members identified themselves as Wiccans but instead

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<sup>41</sup> The ‘Witch’s Will’ refers to the oft used dictum in Wicca which refers to the determination and perseverance of a Witch

preferred the generic term of a Pagan. What is interesting to note is that although they were not opposed to participating in group activities that included spellwork or magic as is typically the case in Open Circles, most did not actually practice magic or spells in their private practices.

There are a multitude of types of magic that are used within Wiccan covens and Witchcraft, often magic is divided into two main categories: 'High magic', which is also referred to as Ceremonial magic, which includes complicated and detailed rituals.



**Figure: 15 Altar set up for magic involving a wax poppet**

Here you see an altar set up involving a wax poppet also known as a wax image candle, in the shape of a person. Contagin magic was also used during this spell which was for healing purposes.

Secondly there is 'Low magic', also referred to as natural magic, which usually includes the following types of magic: sympathetic magic, contagin magic among others. There are other types of magic that are sometimes also used in covens, these include: Theurgy, is a type of ritual magic where the intention is to either evoke or invoke the presence of a Divine or Supernatural Being, usually with the aim of achieving a state of perfection but also sometimes with the aim of asking the Divine Being to assist with something. Thaumaturgy is the practice where miracles are performed or wonderworking, and can sometimes include feats of healing. Goety, is often thought of as the opposite of Theurgy, where the supernatural powers invoked or evoked are generally thought to be of demonic origin.

Sympathetic magic is one of the main types of magical working used in Open Circles, and can be seen in the illustrative example in Chapter 4. This is also the type of magic that is used in many rites and rituals within a coven setting. Both sympathetic and contagin magic are the more commonly used types of magic in magical rites. Thorn Nightwind explains the different types of magic:

*"..sympathetic magic or the 'law of sympathy' in simple terms, this means we perform an act that is 'in sympathy' with the outcome we desire, such as dipping the bristles of broomsticks in a stream of water and shaking it all around to make it rain, or if you use a boiling cauldron of water to make it storm. The rationale is that we are showing the elemental spirits, the spirits of nature, what we want them to do. Sympathetic magic it made use of when you use dolls or poppets. To use a very stereotypical concept of the use of poppets that you may be familiar with: is the use of what some refer to as a voodoo doll. A voodoo doll is essentially a poppet, which is an effigy used to represent a person. If, for example the magician baths the poppet in healing herbs, thus simulating the healing waters flowing over the person to be healed, supernaturally*



*affecting the person through the actions you are affecting on the poppet.* (January 2022)

Sympathetic magic is based on Frazer's (1990:11) law of sympathetic magic that states: "...like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause"

The subject of using a doll or poppet<sup>42</sup> brings us to another principle and that is contagion magic. This is typically through the use of hair, fingernails, a worn piece of clothing or another personal item connected to the person to be spelled. The theory is that an item that was owned or connected deeply to the person still remains connected for a time after it has been separated from its original owner, thereby, what



**Figure: 16** Corn dolly also a type of poppet used in sympathetic magic

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<sup>42</sup> A poppet is a small figure usually made of wax, fabric or even corn (maize) leaves that is made to resemble a human being

we do to that item, is said to have an affect back to the person it came from. Poppets have multiple uses, they can harm, heal or even just affect the way a person feels, the intent of use, is dependent on the magician's desired outcome. The Law of Similarity



**Figure: 17 Fabric poppets, cut out and ready to be sewed up**

is another classic example as well. If for example a person wants to be more successful, they would surround themselves with items that represent success.

Soares told me that the law of similarity is also unconscious: he said that:

*".. when you hear the old statement when going to a job interview; Dress for the job you want, not the job you have By wearing clothing for the job you want, you are not only weaving an aura about yourself that you are the right person for the job, but also showing the nature spirits that you have the job already by the law of similarity" (August 2020)*

The majority of the time, the witch relies on the principles of sympathetic magic, contagion magic and the law of similarity.

Spells and magic in Open Circles are often heavily reliant on tangible representations, and these artifacts involved in magic and spellwork are indispensable in Open Circle contexts. As you can see in Figures: 15, 16 and 17, tangible representations of sympathetic magic are utilised during spellwork. Paul, one of the participants who has experience in both Open Circles and is part of a traditional Wiccan coven, shared with me that he thought that most people who have little training or even those with some training, still need the physical objects and symbolic representations to maintain focus or to perform the ritual effectively. Lauren also agreed and said that initially when you train you use tools as way to focus your workings, but that the tools can also be a distractor. She said that there is a time and place for tools and props amongst even the most experienced occultists but that ultimately experienced occultists don't always need all the ritual tools and trappings as they have been adequately trained and can do the work in the astral, easily without all of those things. She said that although it is easy for those who know what they are doing to do the work without tools, it is most imperative to use those thing for Open Circles, because they allow for creative visualisation.

It is incredibly necessary to make use of various artifacts, tools, props and décor in Open Circle rituals. This is because the individuals who attend these rituals still require the visual representations and reminders to be able to work together and focus on the magical working or ritual that is being performed. For any practitioners whether the practice in together in an Open Circle ritual or on Coven setting, members of the group

need to be able to come together in some type of synchronise state in order to accomplish the goal of the ritual or spell.

There is great value in using physical objects or artifacts during ritual in general, as many artifacts are used as mental cues that assist participants in getting into a specific mindset as the ritual commences. For example, the use of incense in ritual, stimulates the olfactory a powerful sense has been linked to being a strong trigger for memory recall (De Bruijn and Bender, 2018). The incense, candles and other symbolic artifacts used in Wiccan rituals are similar to Turner's (1967:102) concept of Sacra. The Sacra are the cultural components that are present in ritual, they are "what is shown", the artifacts. The Sacra in Turner's (1967:50) descriptions were effigies or monstrosity type objects, and the aim was to encourage participants to: "distinguish clearly between the different factors of reality, and it is conceived in their culture", which also reflects the cosmology, mythology and history of the people involved in the ritual. Similarly the artifacts in Wiccan ritual encourage participants to reflect and draw on the symbolic religious connotations that these artifacts represent. These artifacts also have multiple levels of symbology, and like Tuner (1967:50) discussed: "... a single symbol my stand for many things". For example, in a traditional initiatory Wiccan ritual, each component or symbol used, is carefully and specifically chosen for each type of ritual. If a ritual is being performed for example for protection, the incense blend would typically include: pine, dragon's blood resin, frankincense and marjoram. On the mundane level, in folk medicine, marjoram for example has antiseptic properties and helps prevent sepsis, on a psychological level when burned it is used for its calmative properties, while magically marjoram represents the Aristotelian element of fire and the planetary influence of Mars. The colour and type of candles are also carefully chosen, and typically white and red candles would be used, sometimes the shape of

the candles would also be indicative of the type of ritual, for example, the shape of the candle may be in the shape of a black cat, which is used to banish bad luck (Dey, 1982). As can be deduced from these examples there cosmological aspects related to these artifacts.

The artifacts also have other valuable in ritual because as Thorn Nightwind mentioned earlier, when practitioners: “smell the incense or see the lit candles we are automatically able to enter into the Alpha state which is important for the performance of ritual and magic”. Lauren also said that we sometimes need help in Open Circle to get into “that specific mindset for ritual, and that our physical senses can be engaged like our sense of smell, visual cues and even tactile senses when we wear our ritual with this”.

Jennifer, a facilitator in a one of the Open Circle ritual groups, shared with me that she felt that the majority of Open Circle participants have very little exposure to witchcraft, magic or spellwork, and that it would be impossible for them to make the mental leaps required to perform spellwork without all the “trappings of décor and ritual objects the gear, and even using lots of props and ritual tools also helps. This is because unlike skilled and trained practitioners they simply do not have the understanding and knowledge of how to apply the concepts on a purely mental/spiritual level. In other words they would not be able to do the magic/spellwork mentally, a skill that many advanced initiates of traditional witchcraft have.

### **5.5 Magic and religious ritual**

Hammond (1970), Geertz (1975) and Bailey (2006) explain that magic should not be seen as entirely distinct from religion, but should instead be viewed as a type of ritual behaviour, a part of religion. This holds true in the context of Wicca. Magic is practiced

as part of a religious ritual, it is part of the religious ideology and is practiced as part of the rituals within Wicca. Magic is fundamental to Wiccan practices, as mentioned in Section three of this Chapter, Wiccans believe that the Divine is immanent in Nature and all things. The belief and concept that an all-encompassing life force is present in people all objects and in nature, allows each individual to commune with the divine and effect changes in their lives, by making use of magic. Magic can be described as both a belief and a behaviour; the acts are magic practices and the effects are the outcomes or effects of those acts. Magic can be described as an attempts to control the supernatural (Moro, 2018). This statement is in line with how some Wiccans believe that Wicca is both orthopraxic as well as orthodoxic.

Often within Open Circles and Coven settings, practitioners will use the terms 'magic', 'spells' 'workings' and ritual interchangeably. The topics of magic was addressed in Section 4 of this Chapter but I will provide an explanation of the term 'spell or working' for further clarification. I found an article published online published by the Sacred Pentagraph Tradition one their *Facebook* page (Sacred Pentagraph) that explains the term 'spell'<sup>43</sup> which is also often used interchangeably with the term 'working': "this is the process whereby you purposefully impress upon the Astral Plane the thought-form of that which you wish to affect and bring about, usually with some type of sympathetic action. This is done by using Imagination, Will, Faith and Silence in an active fashion – while at the same time performing a dramatized ritual act. For a period of time, concentration occurs for one thing only".

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<sup>43</sup> Spells are words that are usually a specific formula that is uttered with magical intent and can accompany various gestures and actions. Spells themselves are inherently not categorized as either good or bad, but in the context of Witchcraft usually when a spell is used for negative proposes it is referred to as a Hex or a curse.





**Figure: 18 Ostara celebration**

**Here you can see the use of costumes, décor and spell casting items. Courtesy of the Regina Open Circle Group.**

In the context of my fieldwork in Open Circle rituals specifically, the help of supernatural beings<sup>44</sup> was called on for assistance during spellwork, for the purpose

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<sup>44</sup> Supernatural beings: some use refer to divinity as the God and Goddess and others still use the terminology “the energies” to assist in producing a specific result, magic is made use of as part of the ritual.

of assisting in producing a specific result, or means to accomplish the intended outcome of ritual.

I asked a few of the facilitators who had many years of experience to explain how they viewed magic as part of religious ritual. Elizabeth is of the opinion that ritual can be divided into two types of ritual; mundane ritualistic actions and religious ritual. She sees magic in religious ritual as a blend between mundane and ritual steps as well as symbolic more esoteric actions that align with the physical acts themselves.

*“Magic is the act of connecting to an utilising the energies around us to create tangible change on the physical plane”. – Elizabeth (September 2021)*

However, magic also requires physical steps to be taken in the physical plane in order to align oneself with the intended outcome. Rituals where magic is practiced requires both physical actions and symbolic actions to be used in tandem in order to achieve the desired.

Both Thorn and Paul agree that most of rituals include some or the other form of magic. Paul mentions that Wiccan rituals are aimed at improving ourselves and to celebrate what is going on the seasons and in our natural world, but that ritualists almost always use magic in any type of ritual. There is hardly a ritual in Wicca that does not include some or the other form of magic, even within personal practices, Wiccans engage in some or the other form of magic. The only times when magic is not used is when prayer is entered into, but a prayer by itself is not really considered a ritual in itself, it may be part of a ritual, but does in itself not necessarily constitute a ritual on its own. It could instead be considered a devotional act for those Wiccans who include the element of Deity worship in their practices. Tony said that he would generally only consider “devotion” to be a ritual if it is an act or a series of acts that are repeatedly



engaged in. A ritual in terms of Witchcraft is a repeated formula, typically handed down from Witch to Witch or teacher to pupil. Spontaneous acts of devotion would not necessarily be a ritual, but would be an act of spontaneous religious worship.

I have never actually witnessed any devotional acts of prayer or any other types of devotional acts performed within the context of Open Circles. However, participants would often discuss their devotional acts to their Patron and Matron Gods. The concept of a Patron and Matron, is related to a Wiccan theology that is Polytheist, in other words, that there are multiple gods and deities. Wiccans who hold Polytheist beliefs, usually have very specific relationships with at least one God and one Goddess, the God being the Patron and the Matron being the Goddess. These represent the male and female principle that constitute the Supreme Being. Participants would often talk about putting aside time for devotional practices, and also talk about how much time it sometimes takes to enact works of devotion for their Patrons and Matrons. One Participant related a story about how one of her Patrons was so demanding that she would be attending a party or doing something enjoyable, but would get a “message” that she needed to perform some or the other act of devotional service, and then had to cut short her activities in order to go and see to those devotional needs. Related to this observation is that one of the first ‘ice-breakers’ that participants in Open Circles specifically use as a way to open up conversation. They would generally ask a new attendee who their Matron and Patron Gods are, and then a lengthy discussion on the particulars of the Pantheon and worship would be engaged in.

## **5.6 Rituals of transformation**

One could argue that most rituals are related to some form of change or transcendence, whether these are physical, mental or spiritual changes being sought. Turner (1969:6-16) and Mircea Eliade (1996) discuss two main categories of rites and rituals. The two main types discussed by Turner are: life crisis rituals and rituals of afflictions. Life crisis rituals are related to the physical and social development of the individuals, these include initiations and rites of passage, and these are rituals of transformation. Rituals of afflictions include rituals that are designed to heal, protect, purify and also to relate to other societal issues like Global Warming.

In the previous Section I briefly discussed Marion Weinstein's conception that transformation and magic are the same thing. In another of her books, "Positive Magic", the author continues the discussion of transformation and says that transformation can manifest in numerous ways. She is of the opinion that transformation can come in the form of physical transformation, as well as psychological and spiritual transformation. Examples of physical change include healing rituals; where the ritual's aim is to bring about a change, from being ill to being healed and healthy. In coven rituals, often time is scheduled within a ritual for any healing that needs to be performed for convenors or family. Many facilitators also leave space available for healing to be sent to those in need outside of the coven.

Spiritual transformation can include an initiation, where a person is admitted into a secret group in a specific ritual. In traditional Wicca, a person who enters the craft is first initiated before they are permitted to participate in the coven rituals. Initiation in Wicca is seen as a new beginning, and can also be viewed a Life Crisis ritual if we consider Turner's classification of rituals. Initiation relates to the development an

individual. These rituals also signify a change in relationship, where the initiate goes from a position of being an outsider to an insider and part of the group. The individual who seeks initiation, is seen to gain an elevated spiritual status after initiation. Ordination into the High priesthood is another example of spiritual transformation, again there is a change in the status or the relationship within the group, and here their status may be further elevated.

Transformation is not only limited to the changes in status as it relates to relationships. Emotional transformation can come from ritual too, in the example I related earlier where Jennifer, an Open Circle facilitator used the concept of empowerment in a ritual to aid the members of her temple that were not feeling very confident. In this case the transformation came from the transformation from one emotional state to another.

When attempting to categorise rituals into distinct categories I asked Thorn Nightwind and some of the other experienced ritual facilitators if they thought that Sabbats, that is, the eight Holy days as discussed previously, could also be viewed as transformative. These rituals are typically rituals of celebration, might be considered as a separate class of ritual. However, Thorn Nightwind told me that Sabbats are definitely meant to be transformative, they mark a seasonal change, either celestially or a change in the physical environment, when for example the seasons change from winter to spring.

*“The aim of the seasonal Sabbats is to align ourselves with these changes in the natural environment, so that we are putting ourselves in step with nature or in harmonious accord, rather than working against nature. A modern aphorism swimming with the current or swimming upstream best describes the attempt to be in harmony with nature. As humans our lives are ruled agriculturally and seasonally, as the seasonal changes still effect our lives, for example we cannot plant crops or gardens in the middle of winter. There is a time for everything, acknowledging and participating*

*in the Sabbat reminds us to be in harmonious accord with the environment we live in. It is a time where we reflect on our relationships with ourselves, the environment and others. By being in step and in harmony with the environment also provides a change in our consciousness as it begets harmony rather than strife. This concept is also found secularly in every town or village, who have their own types of spring or harvest festival, although these are not religious festivals, the focus of the village festival may be a pumpkin festival or an apple festival depending on the agricultural focus of the area and what grows abundantly in that geographical area.” – Thorn Nightwind (July 2021)*

Although the main focus of the Sabbat rituals may not be as obvious as Esbats where the focus is on magical workings, spells are usually still included in a Sabbat as there is always a time during the ritual where a healing ritual might be performed for those who need it.

In traditional witchcraft the first initiation is preferably conducted at the springtime Sabbat, as it is symbolic of a rebirth into life, thus also keeping with the concept of harmonious accord with the seasons. In the Sacred Pentagram tradition the vernal equinox is the suggested date for the first-degree initiation. The vernal equinox even corresponds to a time in the year when the sun enters the first degree of the zodiac sign of Aries, the New Year begins in the sign of Aries, the astrological correspondences also reflect seasonal cycles.

**Yule/Winter Solstice:**

Northern Hemisphere:

20-23 December

Southern Hemisphere:

20-22 June

**Imbolc /Candlemas**

Northern Hemisphere:

1-2 February

Southern Hemisphere:

1-2 August

**Hallowmas/ All Hallows**

**Eve/Samhain**

Northern Hemisphere:

31 October-1 November

Southern Hemisphere:

1 May

**Ostara/Spring Equinox**

Northern Hemisphere:

19-22 March

Southern Hemisphere:

21 -24 September

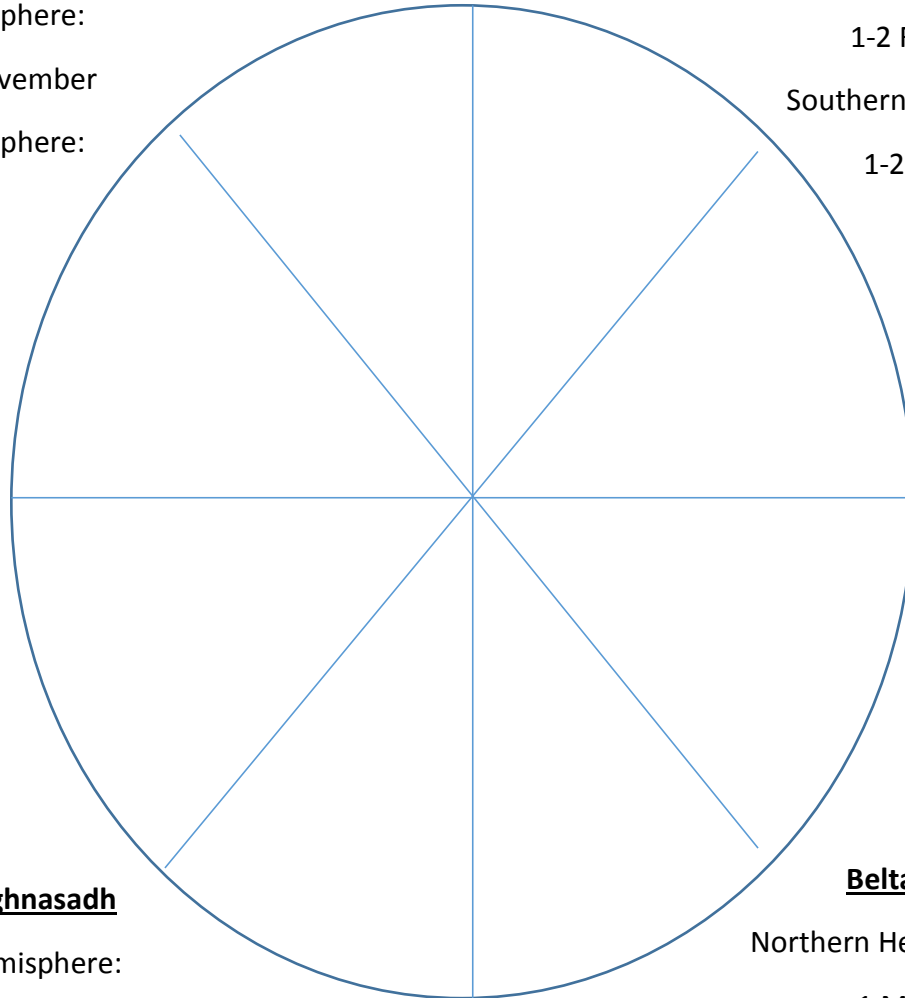
**Autumn Equinox /Mabon**

Northern Hemisphere:

21-24 September

Southern Hemisphere:

19-21 March



**Lammas/Lughnasadh**

Northern Hemisphere:

1 August

Southern Hemisphere:

2 February

**Litha/Summer Solstice**

Northern Hemisphere:

19-23 June

Southern Hemisphere:

20-23 December

**Beltane**

Northern Hemisphere:

1 May

Southern Hemisphere:

31 October

**Figure: 19 Wiccan Wheel of the Year, the eight Sabbats or eight Holy days of Wicca**

In Wicca the Esbats, are rituals that are held in accordance with the lunar observances that take place at the different phases of the moon. Typically the New Moon and the Full moon, are reserved for coven specific magic and spells. It is also during Esbats that training for initiates continues, (as lifelong learning is often a goal of Wiccan initiates). The spells utilised during Esbats are usually more practical in nature, as they are generally aimed at achieving specific goals like increasing luck and love to mention a few. Here the transformation is present in outcome of the goals that the spells are aimed at, as well as transformation in terms of having learned more through training. Based on the preceding Section we can make the assumption that all rituals that all rituals within a Wiccan context are transformational in one way or another.

## **5.7 Rituals of celebration**

### **5.7.1 Sabbats**

One of the most common and arguably one of the most prevalent types of ritual performed in Open Circle rituals are the Sabbats rituals. Some Open Circles where I performed some fieldwork, only held Open Circles to celebrate the Sabbats, and would seldom perform any other types of rituals in public Open Circles.

In Wicca and Paganism the main aim of life is considered to be; to live in harmony with all things, this includes nature and the natural cycles. Sabbats are celebrated as part of the Wiccan wheel of the year. The Wheel of the year is a descriptor for the eight Holy days which are seasonal cycles, an essential part of Wiccan practice. Wiccans who belong to a traditional path are expected to attend all eight Sabbats with their coven. Sabbats are arguably one of the most important rituals that witches engage in. As part of my fieldwork experiences I attended two full years or two cycles of Sabbats in Open Circles.

I asked one participant to discuss the Sabbats and to explain to me why Sabbats are important in the Wiccan calendar. Aum told me that the best way to understand the impact on how we see them in our religion is to start with the original four Sabbats.

*“February Eve or Candlemas, May Eve or Beltane, August Eve or Lammass Harvest Sabbat and then lastly, Hallowe’en or the Hallowmas Sabbat (also known as Samhain). Originally, there were only four Sabbats even though today there are eight festivals (4 Solar and 4 Terrestrial). These original four Sabbats were and still are related to the agricultural changes, and they are meant to be reflective in our lives. The goal in doing these Sabbats is to harmonize all parts of ourselves: Mind, Body and Spirit, to be in harmony with the changes going on around us. This is symbolic too in nature, for example when Harvest season is coming to an end, we know that winter is coming soon and we will perform different activities during the winter than in the summer, for example in the winter we tend to mimic nature’s response to the changing temperatures and as witches this is a time when we will typically take stock, rest and reorganise, it is not a time for us to begin new activities or “plant” new things”. Typically witches will symbolically also organize their lives to be reflective of what is happening in nature and the associated agricultural changes” – Aum (October 2021)*

As mentioned, in traditional Wicca, originally only the four main Sabbats were celebrated in Wicca, in contemporary practices however, the Solstices and Equinoxes were added to the Wiccan Wheel of the year. In contemporary Wiccan, there are typically eight Holy days or seasonal celebrations.



**Figure: 20 Planting seeds at the Imbolc Sabbat Ritual  
Courtesy of the Edmonton Open Circle Group**

The Solstice and Equinox festivals acknowledge an exact point in time, the moment that the celestial changes occur, which indicate the Sun's position in relation to that of the earth. The original four Sabbats of Hallowmas, Candlemas, Beltane and Lammas, are known as the terrestrial times, related to the agricultural cycle, these acknowledge the Earth's response to the celestial changes. Whereas at the Solstices of Winter and Summer and the Equinoxes of Spring and Fall (Autumn) are seen as the "celestial times" and are related to the celestial changes, (the relative position of the sun to the earth in the heavens).



At Candlemas/Imbolc<sup>45</sup>, it is the start of the planting season, where typically this seasonal ritual revolves around planting new seeds. Seeds will typically be planted symbolically as "seed-thoughts" (see Figure 20). The idea behind this ritual is that participants will plant these "seeds" of what they wish to see "grow" in their lives. This could be in the form of new ideas they wish to enact, setting new goals or intentions for the coming year.



**Figure: 21 The fire or Baalfire is always the central focus of any ritual  
The Baalfire is always the central focus of any ritual held  
outdoors in Traditional Initiatory Wicca. - Courtesy of the  
Edmonton Open Circle Group**

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<sup>45</sup> Imbolc: is a Gaelic word for the festival that marks the beginning of spring, some Wiccans prefer to use this word, while other traditions prefer to refer to this festival as Candlemas.

At May Eve or Beltane Wiccans leap the Baalfire or Central Fire for Purification (see Figure 21) which allows them the participants to shake off the old and nurture those "seed-thoughts" with warmth that were symbolically planted during the Candlemas/Imbolc ritual. In agriculture it is also typically warm enough for plants or seeds that were started indoors to be transplanted outdoors. At the Lammas Sabbat, this is the first harvest, both in actuality and figuratively. Symbolically this Sabbat relates to reaping of just rewards for what has been 'planted' magically and physically. Lastly, the Hallowe'en/Samhain Sabbat's intentions are to honor those that have gone before (i.e. ancestors), it is also a time where past faults, hurts and slights and failures are released.

One of the Open Circle groups in Saskatchewan had a unique approach to Sabbat celebrations. When I interviewed the High Priestess of the Regina Open Circle, she told me that together with the input from the board members for Sabbats is put together a booklet that outlined the Wheel of the Year. Instead of documenting the standard Wiccan Wheel of year, they adapted the Wheel of Year and looked at the symbology and symbolism that is typical of the Sabbats and adjusted them to be more specific to the province of Saskatchewan in Canada. She went on to explain how for example at Imbolc, typically the symbolism of this Sabbat is centered on the coming of Spring, the snow that is melting and the new flowers like snowdrops that pop up in Britain at that time of year. In Saskatchewan, there are no snowdrops as the snow is still on the ground. She explained that in Saskatchewan at that time of year in nature those traditional Wiccans symbols are not applicable in that part of Canada. Her group decided to adapt the Sabbat rituals and symbology to reflect what is happening in nature in Saskatchewan at that time of year. They decided on an imagined version the Sabbats of what was happening to plants and animals in the natural world that is

specific to Saskatchewan for all the seasons and Sabbats. The group felt that doing this made the Sabbats more specific to those living in Saskatchewan and so that they could feel a stronger connection with the Sabbat celebrations. As the group felt that what was going on in the British Isles seasonally did not apply to the group who live in Saskatchewan.



**Figure: 22 An indoor Beltane celebration**

**Here the Participants dance around the Maypole. Beltane is one of the eight Sabbats of Wicca-Courtesy of the Edmonton Open Circle Group.**

As part of my research I also attended many social gatherings and coffees, and this topic, of the disconnect of how the seasons manifest in specific locals in North America and how they are depicted in the United Kingdom had been discussed on numerous occasions. However, the group in Saskatchewan are one of the only groups I am aware of that have actually implemented changes to reflect the symbology of their own province in their Sabbat celebrations. This point also touches on the idea of adaptability within Wicca. It is also interesting to note that Turner (1969) found that rituals in certain groups are highly organised and cyclical, and also with a dominant set of ritual symbols, which could be part of the reason that most Wiccans tend to adhere to traditional ideas, symbols and ways of celebrations specifically for the Sabbats.

I asked my participants why it is important to them to attend Sabbat celebrations. Jonas commented that that one of the reasons celebrating Sabbats in an Open Circle is important, is because it reinforces spiritual connection and identification. He also said that if you don't get together as a group frequently and repetitively you lose that connection to your community.

Shawn said that he had been a solitary practitioner for most of his life, and that the sense of community is not felt when practicing as a solitary practitioner, and that a person might not feel celebratory at the Sabbats if you are not celebrating the Sabbats with other like-minded individuals. He said that: "a party for one person does not constitute a party", which is why he feels it is important to celebrate the Sabbats in a group.

### **5.8.1 Rites of Passage - Orientation**

Rites of passage according to Van Gennep (1960)[1909], have three distinct phases, namely: separation, liminality and incorporation. Turner (1969) as we know, built on Durkheim (1995)[1912] and Van Gennep's conceptions of social change facilitated through ritual. The more in-depth aspects of liminality and *communitas* as applied to Open Circle and Coven rituals will be discussed a greater length in Chapter six. Turner (1969) was specifically intrigued by the functions of rites of passage that facilitate social change. In this Section I will be discussing the types of ritual in Open Circles that can be viewed as Rites of passage. Rites of passage in general terms marks a transition from one state to another, or marks the transition of a person from one category to another. Rites of passage are also important for community relations as they help participants build bonds with each other, promote a sense of belonging and often convey and reinforce common beliefs and values (Campbell and Ponzetti: 2007). As this dissertation is related to ritual within a religious/spiritual community I will be focussing specifically on the rites of passage that take place an Open Circle and coven rituals.

Most of us have had opportunities to attend the most common types of rites of passage in both secular and spiritual/religious activities, these typically include baptisms, weddings, funerals and dedications or confirmations and ordinations. Within Open Circles, and covens for that matter, the following can be classified as rites of passage: Weddings or Handfastings, Initiations, Clergy ordinations, and Funerary rites.

### **5.8.2 Weddings or Handfasting**

Weddings are possibly one of the most common rites of passage that most of us have had opportunities to attend. As a rite of passage, a wedding or specifically a Handfasting in the context of Wiccan and Pagan rites, like most rites of passage are aimed at marking and celebrating the change that allows a person to change their status in society, or their community. A Handfasting is a ritual that is used in Wiccan and Paganism to symbolise the binding together of two lives, and may or may not be a legally binding ceremony. The legality of the ceremony is contingent whether or not the clergy member or Wedding Officiant is legally licenced and authorised to legally wed the couple (each country and province has its own particular requirements for wedding Officiants). Handfastings could be considered rites of transition. Turner (1969) classifies rituals that have a bearing on the changes in relationships between people as a Life Crisis rituals. During a Handfasting the couple transitions from the state of being single to being married, and their relationship changes from that of being single to that of being married. A handfasting itself is usually a religious ceremony or celebration, not all handfastings and especially those in traditional Wicca, are legally binding.

In the strictest sense Handfastings are usually not meant to be permanent in the same way a legal marriage is. Traditionally a handfasting was seen as a more temporary arrangement, where the couple would be bound together for a year and a day. There is also a provision in Wicca for the binding to be dissolved, should the couple decide after the period of a year and a day that they no longer wish to be bound together in a relationship. Whereas in the context of Open Circles the couple generally are bound together symbolically for as long as the couple desires to remain legally married.

However, most of the Handfastings I attended, included the legal proceedings according to the requirements for a legal marriage. The ritual facilitators/clergy also held credentials granted by the government to be able to legally marry the couples. The clergy members of one of the groups in Edmonton, where I performed participant observation, hold legal marriage credentials. This means that they were legally able to marry couples. One of this particular Open Circle's requirements, is that in order for the clergy members to marry the couple, is that the couple or at least one of the two, had to be members in good standing of the group and had to have been attending Open Circles regularly. One of the other Open Circle groups is Saskatoon also have a High Priestess who performs both handfastings and funerals.

During one of the Handfastings I attended, I tried to determine if there were definite points prior to, during and after the ceremony that could be classified as the various parts of the typical rites of passage, namely: separation, liminality/transition and reintegration.

For Handfastings I think it is difficult to draw distinct lines between each of the phases and depends on the individuals who are entering the ceremony. If I were to apply the concept of 'separation', this would occur when the bride and groom ready themselves for the ceremony separately in two different locations. The bride is surrounded by her bridal party and close friends and assisted in getting ready for the ceremony. The groom also surrounded with his groomsmen, gets dressed and prepared for the ceremony, each separated for a few hours before they arrive at the wedding venue. This could also have occurred when the bride and groom had their separate bachelor and bachelorette parties, where their bridal parties planned special activities for them

to celebrate their final days of being single. The bride and groom also walked towards the altar separately.

Following this, the bride and groom met at the altar (see Figure 23), at this point it could be said, that they entered the transition phase of the rite. Even though their “trials” were simply to make the commitment to each other and to make proclamations of their love for each other this could be seen as a “trial” during the ceremony itself. However, I think that the “trials” couples face are prolonged and exist during the entire courtship or time they live together prior to being married. It is here that they have to navigate the trials of coming together as a couple, and if they successfully navigate these it may lead to a marriage.

The ceremony itself can be viewed as the reincorporation section of the rite, as the couple’s status changes officially from being single to married. After the official ceremony, a reception/or party is held in their honour. During a Wiccan handfasting ceremony, the couple’s hands are symbolically tied together with ribbons or cords, with each cord representing a specific aspect of their union.

I have included in Appendix C, which is a copy of a liturgy typical of a Handfasting in an Open Circle. As you can see it is rather different from the religious text used in many other religious weddings. If you refer to the last paragraph in Appendix C you will notice an important distinction that is prevalent in Wiccan and Paganism, which is that men and woman are considered equal. Even in the union of marriage or a handfasting, each member of the couple is deemed to be equal and neither or subordinate or need to “obedient” to the other. During 2021 I was asked to assist the clergy person in writing and coordinating a handfasting ritual for one of the members of the Open Circle group in Edmonton. One of the main considerations was that the

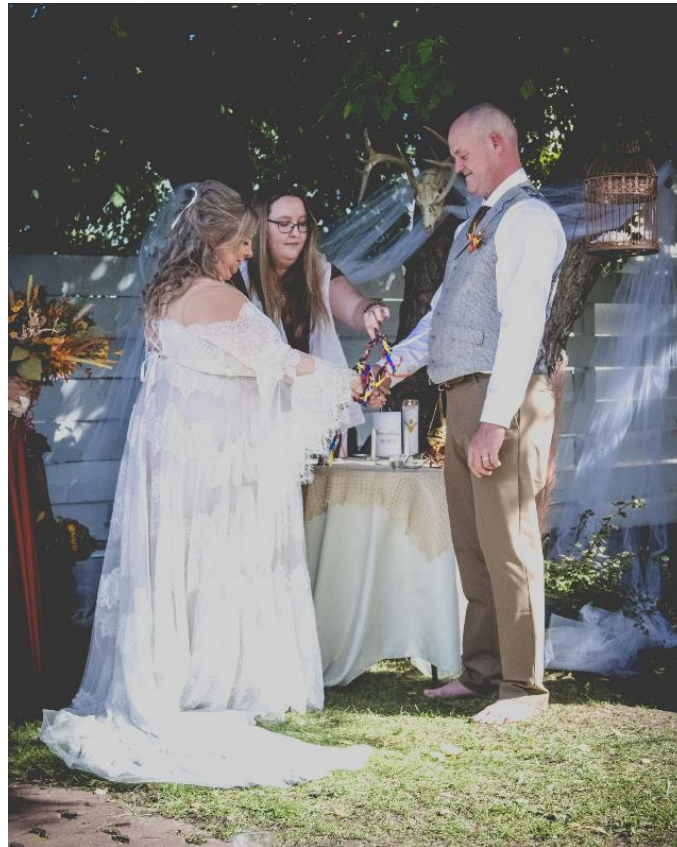


ceremony would also be attended by people who were not Wiccan and had never attended a Handfasting before. This required that the ritual to be adapted to include a whole section at the beginning of the ritual where the High Priestess of the Open Circle group who was the Officiant of the handfasting, explained that the wedding would be a Wiccan handfasting and briefly outlined what would take place during the ceremony. I asked the bride, Illian why she specifically chose to get married by the High Priestess of the Open Circle, and she told me that when she got married to her first husband they got married in the Catholic Church, and she was not able to practice her religion openly. She had always wanted to get married in her own religion within her own beliefs and had told now second husband that if they got married she wanted that for her wedding. She explained that she had found that in most Christian denominations, in order to get married you have to fulfil a multitude of qualifications,



**Figure: 24** Cords binding the bride and grooms hands

like going on a course pre-marriage courses etc. She also said that one of the things she found really strange was that specifically in the Catholic Church she had had to attend a course presented by a priest who had themselves never been married or had a marriage to another person, which she thought was strange and bit hypocritical. One



**Figure: 23** Tying the cords or handfasting the couple

thing that she specifically did not agree with was that the Catholic faith was very strict and women in that religion are viewed as nothing more than a vessel for a man's children, and she disliked the idea that women have to be subordinate to men. She also mentioned that for her, before she could get married in the Catholic Church, the day before the wedding, she had to go for confession to be absolved of her sins. She thought this was silly because in her mind in marriage her husband needs to accept all of her, the "good and the bad".

She said that when she got married the second time it was a very spiritual experience for her, because she was tying yourself and her heart to another person without the expectations and demands put on her by the Catholic Church. It was something she entered into as an equal. Another aspect of the handfasting that was important to her was to be able to have the handfasting outdoors under a tree, because Nature plays a large role in her spirituality. She also said that she felt very fortunate to have the connections in the Open Circle group. It meant the world to her to have her friends from the Open Circle group also participate in the ceremony, and to have that connection to her own spiritual community.

I also asked the groom, Jason, about his decision to get married in Wiccan ceremony, and he told me that it was important to his bride, that he did not have any particular religious persuasion and wanted to make sure that his bride's religious beliefs were upheld. He also mentioned that he had respect for the Wiccan religion, even though he is not Wiccan.

Alicia and her husband, Finn also had a handfasting in the same Open Circle group. She said that she had always known that having a "traditional" wedding wasn't something she wanted. She told me that she had never felt called to stand in a church and have a wedding blessed by a priest. Even though that option was also off of the table for her regardless, due to the fact that she identifies as Wiccan. Alicia also said that she had never followed through with getting her first communion, etc. as a child in the Catholic Church. She said that when she got engaged, the engagement took place in Ireland where her now husband is from. She explained that:

*"It wouldn't have been possible to have a wedding at the scale I wanted in Ireland as the Wiccan community isn't very prominent there, so coming back to Canada was the*

*best choice for us. Having Wiccan ceremony (handfasting) is important to me because I always wanted to be married with the God and Goddess present. In a ceremony where I feel like I am on equal footing with my soon-to-be husband. Being able to have our handfasting performed in her Wiccan community with all my friends and family present was an amazing experience! We did have a predominantly Wiccan ceremony, but had to add in some the more “traditional” elements to the ceremony, such as walking down the aisle with my brother, so that I could be accommodating to my husband and his family who are not Wiccan. The ceremony was “a lovely blend of the wedding traditions”, and I am so thankful that the Priestess was able to accommodate these adaptations.” – Alicia (January 2022)*

One participant, Helen Oscar (53), who is very involved in the Pagan community in Edmonton, said that she thinks it is important to be able to have representation in Pagan communities and for Pagans to have their own wedding Officiants. She felt it equally important to have Officiants who can perform funeral rites and all other rites of passage. She told me that what makes this challenging is the Pagan community in Edmonton, is that so few people within the community can legally perform these rituals. She said that part of the problem is that there is very little willingness from different groups to join an organisation so that this would be possible. She proposed an organisation that could form an overarching association, which would serve all Pagans. She said that this would provide the community with legitimacy and recourse for seeking legally acknowledged Officiants. Although she is of the opinion that this is almost impossible *because “everyone (in the Pagan community) is of the opinion that their own “brand” or tradition is more valid than any of the others”*. Helen also thinks that there is no cohesiveness or even agreement within the local Pagan community that would facilitate this kind of organisation. Yet she thinks that participants who are

able to be married in their own community in their own religion, would find value and joy in having this opportunity.

Helen's commentary is important to note, because the implication is that there is little cohesiveness or group identity within the Wiccan and Pagan community in Edmonton, and other parts of Canada. There are numerous examples that would indicate that Helen has a point. Many Pagans and Wiccans are aware of the so called "witch wars" that flare up from time to time. The term "witch wars", in broad terms involves intergroup and interpersonal conflict, between various groups and individuals of Pagans/Wiccans and Witches. The reasons for conflict are a numerous as the "witch wars" themselves, as Blanton (2017) points out the main reasons for the discord are as a result of different viewpoints, diverse practices and disputes over leadership. Bado-Fralick (1998:3) states that: "The description of Wiccan ceremonies performed by my own coven and others well known to me is meant to be typical of Wicca, but it is by no means universal because of the extremely localized and decentralized nature of Wiccan practice". This illustrates the point of how little cohesiveness there is in Wicca in terms of ritual, liturgy and practice. Bado-Fralick (1998:6) goes on to say that Wicca has no "central group of church elders" and there is no central "religious dogma" or standard ritual practices.

In my own fieldwork experience I have seen multiple examples of discord, most notably they involve individuals in leadership positions. In one of the groups where I performed my fieldwork, some of the participants told me that the previous High Priest and Priestess of the group had a falling out. Which reverberated throughout the whole group and ended up having negative effects on the parties involved as well as those members who were part of the core group. The other incidents that I personally

witnessed can also be ascribed to leadership disagreements, especially in terms of how the group should be run and organised. In these cases the groups simply broke up and membership dwindled because leaders of the groups could not come to an agreement. Within traditional initiatory Wicca there are also often rumours about how specific traditions will now acknowledge the legitimacy of the group based on technicalities surrounding initiatory practices.

### **5.8.3. Initiation**

Initiation is often used in anthropology as a classic example of ritual liminality. Turner (1969) specifically used the concept of ritual initiations amongst the Ndembu tribe, to discuss his concepts of rites of passage, including the specific aspects of liminality and *communitas* (Turner, 1967). Since then, many other academics like Johnson (2011), Biernoff & Martin-McDonald (2002) and most notably Bado-Fralick who discuss the Wiccan initiation ritual in a coven in terms of van Gennep's tripartite model (1908) of separation, liminality and incorporation.

In most, but not all Wiccan traditions that have specific lineages, you do need to be initiated in order to belong to a coven in that tradition. As discussed previously, Wicca in some traditions is still considered a mystery tradition. A mystery tradition is a term that applies to Traditional initiatory Wicca and means that the rituals, liturgies and other aspects of their specific tradition are oathbound, in other words they are secret, and you will not be given that information until you are initiated and have sworn oaths of secrecy. During my fieldwork I often heard conversations where ritual participants would discuss the concept of initiation. Those who did not belong to a specific initiatory tradition tended to agree with the opinions of authors Farrar and Farrar (1984) who are in favour of self-dedication and self-initiation. Not all Wiccans are in favour or self-

initiation. Those who tend to be involved in initiatory paths also feel that they would not want to be initiated into a group that does not have a verifiable Wiccan lineage. When this topic occurs in Open Circle groups, it often results in hot debates. I did notice that the more vocal in this regard seemed to be those who had not been initiated into a traditional lineage.

Not all Open Circles have any form of initiation for their members or participants. However, there are some Open Circles who perform initiation as for new members who have decided to become permanent members of the temple or group. One group in particular, located in Regina does perform initiations for new members.

I chatted with two of the High Priestesses about ordination and initiation in their Open Circle groups. One Open Circle group led by Erika, who herself had some formal traditional training, has been running Open Circles and small group gatherings since the late 1990's in Saskatchewan. Her Open Circle group is part of the National Organisation that abides by a common statement of Wiccan beliefs, ethical standards and follows the bylaws of the Association. From previous discussions with Erika, I know that her group initiates new clergy members as well as new members who have decided to become permanent members of the Open Circle group. Erika told me that the use of the title 'of clergy' is used in the bylaws of the National Organisation, but that the position actually entails the role of a "volunteer ritual leader". She also said that she wanted to highlight one point specifically:

*"..during the initiation rituals when I initiate members, I initiate them as priests/priestesses and witches, in her mind this IS a clergy initiation, even if they are not initiated Wiccans clergy specifically, ...there isn't a separate class per se. (January 2022)*

The concept of “priest/priestess and witch” comes from traditional witchcraft practices where all initiates are conferred the title of Priest/Priestess and witch upon initiation as they are seen to be in the priest/priests of the Gods. The difference between a High Priestess/Priest depending on the tradition, is usually the power to initiate new members and are leaders and ritual leaders of the coven. Erika provided me with the entire process and procedure for the ritual used in the initiation process, which I will be drawing on for this discussion.

The initiation ritual for new members in Erika’s group consists of the following order of service:

- Casting the Circle
- Invocation to the Goddess Diana
- Quarter Calls (i.e evocation of the directional quarters)
- The 5-fold blessing
- An Oath that includes agreement of the group’s statements of beliefs and ethics.
- Anointing
- Presentation of Cords (these cords are green and worn around the waist like a belt)
- Oath of Office
- Reading of the Witch’s Creed



- Circle opening/ closing the rite

One of the other Open Circle groups in Edmonton where Elizabeth is the High Priestess told me that group currently have no formal clergy ordination processes in place. In other words if a new clergy person is appointed there are currently no formal procedures to guide the process either in terms of the liturgy or the formal appointment process. She informed me that no new clergy members have been ordained since the past leadership had left the group. She also told me that she had *“inherited the position, without any formal initiation or ordination”*. When I discussed this point with other members who had been leaders in this group, I was told that the group used to have formal written procedures in place, and managed to acquire a copy of a booklet that one had been compiled for the purpose of clergy initiations, detailing the process and procedures. This document also provides a sample liturgy for the purpose of clergy ordination. In the Edmonton Open Circle group the ritual facilitators refer to themselves as clergy as well, in line with the bylaws of the National Organisation that they are also members of. This is as mentioned previously, not the case with all Open Circle facilitators. One difference between the Edmonton Open Circle group and the Saskatchewan Open Circle group is that the Edmonton group does not initiate members who wish to become permanent members of the group.

Both the Edmonton and Saskatchewan Open Circle groups are members of the same National Organisation, which requires each group belonging to the Organisation to follow and adhere to the shared statements of beliefs and ethical standards. This National Organisation allows for each group to customise their bylaws, training policies etc. As a result the rituals and initiations do not follow the same liturgical structure.

The ordination ritual provided in the booklet by one of the past ritual facilitators of the Edmonton group detailed the procedures and process of initiation suggesting the following:

- Casting Circle
- Calling Directions
- Asking for the presence of the God and the Goddess
- Statement of purpose of ritual
- Sweating of Oath
- Stole is placed around neck of new clergy member
- Blessing
- Congregation chants and dances around the new clergy person
- Blessing of food and drink by new clergy person and food and drink offered to those present
- Circle is closed

There are some differences in terms of order of service for the initiations based on the procedures and processes provided to me. Other than the Casting of the Circle and the Closing of the Circle that are two fundamental practices in Wicca, the order of service is of no real consequence other than preference. These are both Open Circles and do not need to adhere to passed down traditional ritual liturgies or structures. Since I have not had the opportunity to attend any of these ordination or initiation rituals

in any of the Open Circle groups where I performed my fieldwork, I can only draw from my own experiences of initiation in coven settings. In my interpretation, both Orders of Service for the ordination/initiation ritual have a similar liturgical structure. They follow the standard structure of any of the Groups rituals: the circle is cast, the God and Goddess are evoked and the quarters are called and after the “working” section the Circle is closed. Both rituals contained oaths and also contained accepting the statement of ethics and bylaws, the fundamental differences in these are present in the body of the ritual.

The Regina group’s ritual contains elements of more traditional witchcraft, the anointing and the five-fold blessing, which is a standard blessing in some Wiccan traditions, and involves blessing parts of a person’s physical body, and either anointing those parts with oil or sealing the blessed part with a kiss. Although the way in which the blessing has been used in the Open Circle ordination process is not typical, as this blessing is typically one bestowed on a High Priestess by a High Priest in some Initiatory Wiccan Traditions. Interestingly, the five-fold blessing actually originated from Free Masonry and is based on the Five Pointes of Fellowship ceremony, and was incorporated into Gardnerian Wicca by Gerald Gardner. The body of the liturgy for the ordination ritual, as documented in the booklet, originally intended for the Edmonton Open Circle group has less elements of traditional witchcraft and draws on a combination of more Eclectic Witchcraft practices blended with some Ecclesiastical elements.

As is evident from the order of service, in the provided ordination rituals provided that in both of these ritual liturgies, there is little evidence of a physical ‘separation’ stage that is typical of van Gennep(1960) and Turner’s (1969) theories on ritual. The “rites

of separation,” “rites of transition,” and “rites of incorporation are indistinct in these ritual liturgies. However, it could be argued that the ‘separation’ could include leaving behind their old way of being where they disassociate themselves from their former lives of being non-clergy members. Bado-Fralick (2005) goes into great detail on this topic, where she is of the opinion that the processes of separation, liminality and reincorporation do not occur in separate phases as detailed by van Gennep and Turner, but rather that these phases are present during the entire initiation ritual. Bado-Fralick (2005), believes that initiates move through these phases not only in the initiation ritual itself but even prior to the ritual during training. This can also be said of these clergy initiation rituals, as can be seen by the ordination procedures, at no point were the clergy or initiates separated from the rest of the group. In Traditional Witchcraft often the initiate is separated from the rest of the group, even if this is for a brief time in order to mediate or contemplate the upcoming initiation.

In general, Wiccan liturgies differ considerably across traditions. This is also the case in Eclectic Wicca and other Pagan practices. Wicca does not have the same ritual procedures or liturgies across Traditions, unlike some Christian denominations that have a set liturgical structure that is the same year after year, across all branches of the specific demonian. Within specific Initiatory Wiccan Traditions, like one of the initiatory traditions I belong to, the ritual structure and the liturgies for the different Sabbats remain fairly constant across the different covens. Even within an Initiatory Tradition, where tradition, custom and convention are key, rituals are not necessarily static and there is room for dynamism. Bell (2009) assertion that: “Tradition, of course, is not created once and then left to its own momentum...tradition exists because it is constantly produced and reproduced...” is reflective of how some Wiccans view the idea of traditional liturgies.

Since the topic of liminality will be covered in much greater detail in Chapter six, I will only be touching on the liminal stage of this ritual. Technically the liminal stage of the ritual, starts when the circle is cast, and lasts until the circle is opened again.

Reintegration in both these instances can be seen to take place during the ritual, in the Regina group's ritual takes place when the new member is presented with the green cord. While in the Edmonton group reintegration takes place when the stole is placed around the new clergy person's neck. In both these cases the person has officially transitioned into a new role. While it also be argued that the "oath" portion of these rituals could be considered the transitional moment in the ritual as this is the point where the initiate then takes on a sense of responsibility and new responsibility in the community in their new role. In these cases the liminal stage of ritual according to the Turner and van Gennep's models overlaps with reintegration stage, and there is not easy to see a clear demarcation of where boundaries within the ritual are drawn.

#### **5.8.4 Rituals of Separation – Funerals and Funerary Rites**

Wiccan Funeral or Funerary rites are unique and rather different to the majority of typical Western funerals. The funerary rites reflect the beliefs and religious understandings of the Wiccan religion. As discussed in Section 5.7, the Seasonal Festivals or Holy days in Wicca are part in the Wiccan Wheel of the Year. The cycles of life, death and rebirth that are echoed in nature are also reflected in the Funerary rites of Wiccans.

In many Wiccan traditions, reincarnation is a key belief, the understanding that death is not the end of the cycle, but simply the beginning of a new cycle is also reflected in funerary rites. This view is also expressed in the Holy day of Hallowe'en or the

Hallowmas, where the Sabbat focuses on the ability of adherents to commune with those who have passed on<sup>46</sup>.

Most Wiccans will opt for cremation or a natural burial where the body can decompose quickly. Some Wiccans interpret this as allowing the person's physical body to become part of the cycle of nature in faster than would be the case in a regular burial that involves embalming. Cremation in the United States is actually relatively new concept, as one of the first cremations took place in 1876, and was undertaken by the Theosophical Society. Some Wiccan traditions are heavily influenced by the Theosophy which encourages cremation as it is believed that burials and embalming may prolong the person's stay on the astral plane, thus delaying their progress/evolution (*Theosophy World.com*, N/D).

In Ed Fitch's (1994: 139-140) "*The Magical Rites from the Crystal Well*" a book that was widely used in Open Circles across America he provides a "Rite for the Dead" where he details a process whereby this type of ritual can be performed. What is of particular importance here is in instructions for after the ritual: "All shall, sing, joke and generally make merry". Similarly in Tarotstar's (2019:169-170) published works that detail the tradition of the Sacred Pentagram Tradition, the In Memoriam rites states: "We know that persons pass on to bigger and better things...nor do we expect to put on the public show of sorrow or mourning as seen in most other faiths... we prefer to send love and good will following death". Both of these are illustrations of how in Wicca death is not a time for mourning and sadness but rather a time for celebration and joy.

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<sup>46</sup> Most Wiccans prefer the term 'passed on' to died, as this term also reflects the belief that death is not final or the end, but that souls pass on to a different state of being or enter a new cycle.

I have only attended a few funerary rites during my involvement in Open Circles and Coven while I was doing my fieldwork. In one of the Open Circle groups, I am only aware of one celebration of life that was hosted in a member of one of the Open Circle groups. This rite was performed at the private residence of a member of the Open Circle group, by a clergy member of the Edmonton group. The rite took the form of a memorial for the member whose parent had passed. I had only heard conversation on this topic during social events, where the member had expressed their appreciation for the efforts of the ritual facilitators for performing the memorial despite the fact that the parent was not Wiccan or Pagan and had no affiliation with the group. In this celebration of the deceased person's life was focussed on recalling and reminiscing all the good things that had been part of that person's life.



**Figure: 25 Altar set-up for a Funerary rite of a covener  
Image courtesy of Raven SL**

I had the opportunity to attend a few funerary rites in coven settings. One of which took place in a friend's coven. Due to complications and lack of clear direction from family members of the coven member who passed, the convenors performed a requiem rite of passage, where only the coven members were present. As this rite of passage took place in a coven setting, I am unable to divulge the details of the ritual but wanted to mention it here because the ritual was also not a mournful occasion, but rather celebrated the life of the covener and included some merry-making and celebration.



**Figure: 26 In memoriam for a craft Elder.  
Image courtesy of Coven of the Northern Wolfa**

I have also had the opportunity to attend several In-memorial rites as part of coven, these are rites that take place after the covener has been cremated. The in memoriam rites are celebrated after thirty, sixty and ninety days after the transition of the deceased, they are considered equally as important as the Funerary rites. The rites



actual funerary rites are celebrated by sharing fond memories, remembering only the best of the Covener and wishing the deceased person blessings and joy in their onward progression in their evolution after their passing. I wanted to include a passage from these particular rites as presented in the Sacred Pentagraph<sup>47</sup> (2019) published book, which further illustrates the Wiccan ideas around reincarnation and their attitudes towards death: “Upward and onward to spiritual progression...as is the plan, mayest thou once more find a loving Wiccan hearthfire as thou returnest in a more perfected state of being....” This statement echoes their beliefs regarding reincarnation, this rite of separation is only a temporary one, because the belief is that all will eventually be united.

### **5.9. The essential characteristics in Open Circle ritual**

In Chapter 4, the illustrative example I provided of a typical Open Circle ritual. In this Section I will expand on that example and discuss the various essential characteristics of Open Circle rituals.

Rituals are said to have certain shared qualities regardless of the tradition or religion to which they belong, these are: gestures, repeated actions, symbolic celebrations, connectedness to important events, significant words spoken, link to the past, community activity and whole-hearted participation (Turner, 1973).

Although both Covens and Open Circle rituals like any other type of religious ritual contain the broad category of characteristics of as listed above, there are many differences in terms of the expression of the characteristics when comparing Coven

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<sup>47</sup> The Sacred Pentagraph, is a initiatory Wiccan tradition, who has chosen to publish most of their teachings so that the information is accessible to the public, something that most Wiccan traditions do not do.

ritual to Open Circle ritual. In the various characteristics will be discussed and compared.

### **5.10 Gestures**

Gestures are physical movements that have the purpose of expressing an idea or meaning, they are extra-linguistic types of behaviour (Bartelt, 2010:47). Ritual Gestures are ubiquitous in any type of ritual, and are not only used by ritual facilitators, but also by ritual participants. Ritual gestures are symbolic patterns used in rituals and often occur in specific patterns. Symbolism is a very important part of Wiccan practices, and gestures are also types of symbols.



**Figure: 27** Ritual gesture that is used during an evocation Open Circle  
Image courtesy of Raven R

Calabro (2020) states that like language, gestures also have symbolic, and iconic properties, and that symbolic gestures are referential. In other words, gestures refer

to abstract ideas or a concepts that are representative of the meaning that is ascribed to the gesture, they are often loaded with religious or cultural meaning.

An example of simple and easy to understand ritual gesture; is the folding of hands in a prayer position. If the ritual facilitator places their hands in the prayer position, this gesture signals extra-linguistically, (without the use of spoken word) that the facilitator/clergy person is about to pray. In all likelihood, the participants will quieten down and follow suit by also folding their hands in prayer and perhaps closing their eyes, as the facilitator commences prayers. There are a multitude of ritual gestures in traditional Wicca, some of which have also been adapted or utilised in Open Circles. The main difference in ritual gestures in Open Circles and Wiccan initiatory traditions is that by the time initiates are able to attend rituals they have been thoroughly trained in all the ritual gestures required in ritual. There is a common belief in Wicca that advocates "To keep Silent" which has a multitude of interpretations, but can also be interpreted as the less you say about your actions, the more powerful they are. There are many symbolic gestures use in Wicca and Paganism that are not widely known, some could be considered open secrets. For example there are specific gestures used when one Witch meets another Witch, these hand gestures are also often accompanied by a specific phrase or verbal greeting. Other examples include the gestures required when entering a ritual at coven, initiates have to provide gestures that indicate their initiatory degree or rank. This is obviously not the case in Open Circle rituals, as there are always many new participants attending Open Circle rituals. In Open Circle rituals the clergy/ritual facilitators purposefully accompany their ritual gestures with some explanation, this is one way in which ritual participants learn the ritual gestures. If you look at point 18 from Chapter 4: *"Please stand with your feet shoulder width apart, close your eyes, relax your shoulders, and feel the earth beneath*

*your feet. Now take a deep breath in, and out...*” You will notice that ritual gestures are not always extra-linguistic, these gestures are often accompanied by instructions or deliberately exaggerated. I noticed during my fieldwork that after a few times new participants attended an Open Circle ritual, they would know which ritual gestures were required during the different parts of the ritual and would assume the ritual position even prior to the ritual facilitator, as they were then familiar with what is required as a ritual gesture.

### **5.11 Repeated actions**

It is generally accepted that rituals include at least to some degree, repeated actions, these include liturgy, gestures and symbolic elements that are used time after time in rituals. The repeated ritual actions also set the ritual text for the future through the ages.

As discussed in Section 2 of this chapter, most Wiccan traditions have no unified doctrine and liturgies and these are not shared across traditions. However, repetition of ritual liturgies does occur within specific traditions. A good example of this is that in a specific tradition, the ritual liturgies for any of the eight Holy days in the Wiccan Wheel of the Year, are repeated each year. Generally each of these Sabbats have the same liturgy, experienced members of the High Priesthood who have been performing these for many years will have them memorised because they have repeated them year after year. As mentioned, even though ritual liturgies in Open Circles are not always the same, the structure of the ritual remains fairly stable, and the accompanying gestures and symbols are also the same, and are used repeatedly, which allows participants a sense of familiarity.



form of the God, while the statue in the back center represents the Goddess, the skulls are representative of the dead/ancestors who have passed over into the next life. The pumpkins are typical symbols of harvest time in North America and are associated with Samhain<sup>48</sup>. There are also candles and incense typical of any Wiccan ritual, as well as small cauldron. The witch's cauldron is a symbol of the witch and in some traditions the cauldron with a candle burning in it, is now used to symbolise the outdoor fire that was always made at the center of the circle when rituals were held outdoors. Historically witches used to practice predominately outdoors, and would have a bonfire at the middle of their sacred circle, they would also place a cauldron or cooking pot over the fire, where they would heat soup or stew while conducting the ritual so that they could feast after the ritual. The fire was also symbolic of the creative aspect of the God.

Specific dress, décor and tools are also used as symbolic reminders of the idea behind the ritual celebration. An example of this how the ritual team in the Open Circle in Edmonton decorate at set up the ancestral/prayer altar to reflect the changing seasons. During my fieldwork I noticed that although the rituals themselves differed from each other in some aspects, the main ritual structure remained constant and even some of the activities that were performed during the "working" section of the ritual were similar, for example at the Sabbat of Ostara/Candlemas, the activity almost always included some or the other activity relating to planting seeds.

Symbolism of the seasons are also reflected in other areas within the ritual context, for example, in some robed covens in traditional Wicca, the High Priesthood are

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<sup>48</sup> Originally vegetables of any kind were carved and used to scare malignant spirits away, but when Europeans moved to North America and discovered that pumpkins are harvested at fall, which coincides with the time of Samhain.

required to wear specific coloured robes according to the season. The High Priestess might wear an orange or brown robe during the Lammas festival, representative of the colour of the harvest and may wear a circlet of wheat on her head.

### **5.13 Connectedness to important events**

In Wiccan and Paganism, rituals usually revolve around important events, these are generally the Sabbats, Esbats and the various rites of passage as discussed in this Chapter.

Messenger (1999) is of the opinion that rituals and ceremonies forge a bond between individuals as well allow us to feel a sense of connection to our ancestors, which allows participants to be connected to important events within their particular communities.

### **5.14 Significant words spoken**

Rituals even those in Open Circles tend contain specific words spoken or recited. In traditional Wicca as mentioned, these significant words may be similar or the same each time a specific ritual is performed.

In Open Circle the significant word spoken are often the invocations to invite the various deities, elementals and guardians to the circle. In the illustrative example, in line 9, "*Hail to the guardians of the watchtowers of the East, open the way for the power of Air, help us to focus our intent on our working tonight and may our final quilt carry a thousand words with in it. Hail and welcome!*" These words are part of the significant words spoken each time a circle is cast or a ritual is performed, they are a crucial part of how the sacred space is demarcated for the purpose of ritual proceedings.

Other significant words spoken during rites of passage for example may include blessings, prayers or invocations.

### **5.15 Link to the past**

Usually rituals in traditional Wicca are linked to the past in that the rituals are passed down from previous generations of witches. However in Open Circles this is not always the case, the link to the past portion of these rituals may simply be related to the fact that the structure of the rituals is linked to the recent past, or that some mythology and legend is incorporated into the ritual as a way to link it to the past. In chapter 4, I cited an example of a particular ritual that was based on the mythology around the goddess Persephone, where the myth was used as a moral reminder to participants.

### **5.16 Community activity**

Wiccan rituals are usually community activities, even if the community is a small coven or a small group of people attending an Open Circle ritual. These rituals are participatory in nature as all attendees are either required to or encouraged to participate in the ritual.

Within the Open Circles, there are also other community activities that are related to the Open Circle group which do not necessarily include the ritual portion. The illustrative example mentions that group members had made donations of food and clothing to a local charity, where members had cooperated in gathering and transporting these goods to the charity. There were also other activities organised members to participate in outside of the formal ritual that also promoted group cohesion. For example, one member hosted an arts and crafts activity where those interested could get together to paint some rocks. The activity was used as a form of community building but incorporated an element of Wiccan belief, so it also served as



an exercises in reinforcing the belief system. The rocks that were painted were supposed to be representative of the elements of earth, air, fire, water and spirit. Not all Wiccan traditions make use of the 'spirit' element as this was not part of Aristotle's four original elemental concepts. These elements are important symbolically in many Wiccan practices.



**Figure: 29** This is a picture of one the group activities.

**This activity was not related to any ritual, but provided an opportunity for participants to get together to do some arts and crafts**

The four main elements of earth, air fire and water are believed to be essential to life on our planet, but the elements are have other symbolic associations and correspondences that are linked to Wiccan cosmology and practices. The element of earth for example is seen as a feminine element, the earth is symbolic of stability,

solidity and nurturing. The four elements are also associated with the four compass points on a compass, and are each direction is associated with an element. Earth for example would be placed at the Northern compass point, while, water at the West, air at the East and Fire at the Southern point.

### **5.17 Whole hearted participation**

As mentioned in the Chapter 4, the illustrative example, whole hearted participation is generally dependent on the individual participants. Most people in Open Circle rituals were willing to participate in the majority of the activities if they were physically able to. Although whole-hearted participation may be a stretch, to describe all attendees willingness and levels of participation. I don't think that participation levels should be determined by willingness to participate but instead should be ascribed to the individual participant's levels of comfort performing in front of other people in an Open Circle ritual situation. I noticed that one area that most participants regardless of whether or not they were regular attendees, tended to be very reserved, is during the portion of a ritual that required any type of dancing. I remember Jennifer commenting that that is one area that Canadian Pagans really fall flat, "*they don't know how to or don't like to dance*". I thought that this was a really astute comment as this had not typically been my experience in attending other rituals in the USA or in South Africa. Even in the online rituals that was hosted in the Facebook Rooms function, where I attended specifically the Esbat<sup>49</sup> rituals, the ritual facilitator encouraged participants to turn off their cameras when it came to the dancing portion of the ritual. The facilitator empathised with participants and said that she understood that not all were comfortable dancing, let alone dancing on camera. In my observation, it appeared that

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<sup>49</sup> Esbats are lunar observances, that occur at the different phases of the moon, usually the New Moon or the Full Moon, these rituals are usually less formal than Sabbats, and include spells and workings that are often required for the coven or individuals of the coven.

members who attended regularly though, were more inclined to participate wholeheartedly.

### **5.18 Why participants in Open Circle rituals attend these rituals**

As you can imagine, there are about as many reasons why people attend Open Circle rituals as the people who responded to my questions! But the most oft cited reason that specifically new attendees cited for attending Open Circle ritual, were related to learning and community.

For those who are new to Wicca and Paganism, one of the main challenges is that ritual magic as well as well the methods for performing ritual within Wiccan traditions are generally learned by initiates through a combination of oral transmission, experiential learning and by attending and participating in rituals. In this context, those new to the practice are guided through the learning process and also given access to some written materials of the tradition or coven under the guidance of experienced occultists and teachers. There are, however, simply not enough teachers or experienced occultists to meet the demand of the rising interest in Wicca and Witchcraft, specifically in established functioning traditional covens. In every online social media group I have joined, there are numerous requests from people asking about joining a coven or suggesting that a few locals get together to form a coven and to learn together. Open Circle address the need for community, but do not address the need for training in the occult arts or teaching a specific tradition. Some Outer Court traditions, however do, to some degree fulfil part of the training needs of participants.

A really big challenge is, as Gray (1971) writes, that the “what’s’ of ritual magic are scattered amongst many books and published literature, and the various components

are often available but the “vital whys and how’s” of ritual magic are not as easily accessible. This is particularly true of Wiccan traditional practice. Even though there are literally hundreds of books on witchcraft and Wicca, one has to do but a cursory search on the internet that will produce page after page of listings of books written authors who practice Wicca and Paganism.

From the perspective of an insider research who is an initiate of Traditional Wicca, I can say that most of these only scrape the surface of what Wiccan practice actually entails in the context of coven practices. I also asked some of my participants who also belong to traditional covens what they thought about all the popular books available on the market on Wicca. Paul told me:

*“Sometimes we as traditionalists, don’t really pay that much attention to the more popular type books, because they are not written for us, they are general, vague and don’t represent what we actually do...”* (November 2021)

It is my opinion that that this is partly because many traditional covens are still bound by secrecy and will not share oath-bound information even if the authors are themselves well known authors and members of the High Priesthood themselves within the Wiccan and Pagan communities. There are also very few traditions like the Sacred Pentagraph tradition for example, which is an initiatory Wiccan tradition, who have published books that are open to the public. The idea behind them openly publishing the books is expressly for the purpose of making some information public and describing their system of traditional Wicca.

Geya (44), an Open Circle participant for example, said that one of the main reasons she attends Open Circle rituals for gathering knowledge and learning more about Wicca and Paganism in order to further her personal learning and growth. As Wicca

is usually taught in closed covens, and then only typically to adults who are 18 years of age and over. The religion is not usually one where children are raised in a particular faith and thus familiar with the religion, or are taught about the religion in Sunday school, or an equivalent. This is why people like Geya and other solitary practitioners rely on books and other sources of information as resources for learning the religion, because simply attending an Open Circle ritual is not going to fulfil the need for training.

Bella (27), cites the main reason she attends Open Circle rituals as being that she wanted to associate with people who have the same religious interests as her, and she too hoped to learn more about the religion. She told me that she really does not know too much about Wiccan ritual practice. She shared with me that has not performed any rituals on her own yet and wanted to see how rituals are done in person in an Open Circle before she tried some herself. It should be noted that although the majority of Wiccan and Pagan ritual is performed in groups, most Wiccans also have their own individual practices, and also perform magical rituals and spell on their own outside of a coven.

Kieran (28) and Joel (32) told me the reason they wanted to attend the ritual in an Open Circle group is because they had only ever been solitary practitioners and wondered if they were *“doing it right”*, because they had only ever *“followed the instructions from the books”*. When I asked them what types of books they were using they told me that that had referenced many different books from various sources. They also said that they found some of the books confusing because each author has a different idea as to what a typical ritual entails.

Other more experienced individuals have been practicing for many years, tend to attend Open Circle ritual for more ultraistic reasons. Paul, Thorn, Jenifer and Guynor are a few research participants who either members of the High Priesthood within established traditions or are initiates of traditional covens and also run public Open Circle rituals. I asked them why they would attend or run these Open Circle rituals, when clearly they had no real need to attend them as they had their own coven rituals to attend. They told me that they facilitated these Open Circle rituals for two main reasons: firstly so that they could make themselves and their traditions known in the local community. Secondly so that they could present an alternative type of Open Circle ritual, as they felt that there were too many facilitators who run Open Circle rituals who have, as Paul put it: “...rather large egos with no training or understanding to back it up”.

Motivations for attending Open Circles appear to be as diverse as the participants themselves, ultimately the main reasons for attending Open Circles appears to be related to wanting a sense of community, exposure and the wish to learn about Wicca and Paganism.

### **5.19 Conclusion**

As mentioned in the Literature Chapter, Chapter three of this dissertation, Public Open Circles and their associated rituals, originally developed out of Wiccan practices and “Outer Court” ritual that were similar to the closed practices of initiatory Wiccan. As a result this Chapter addressed ritual specifically in terms of the rituals that are performed in Open Circles and parallels were also drawn between the types of ritual performed in Traditional initiatory Wicca, specifically because Traditional initiatory Wiccan rituals still influence the form and style of many of the Open Circle rituals.

As a result, one might have expected the rituals in contemporary Open Circles to more closely resemble those of traditional initiatory Wicca, and that interpretations of and definitions of ritual might be more closely matched. It was however, apparent that there is no agreement in terms of what defines a seemingly simple concept like 'ritual'. It became apparent that different practitioners define ritual in unique ways and that there is no consensus on what constitutes, ritual, magic and witchcraft. It is important to understand the context and the definitions that the practitioners themselves ascribe to these terms.

The purposes of ritual also differ significantly depending on the group. In traditional Wicca the purposes of ritual are much more focussed and codified, the main focus tends to be on the unified objectives of the coveners. In an Open Circle ritual, the ritual purpose is predominantly to provide an opportunity for participants to get together for ritual and provide a space for like-minded individuals to perform ritual together, but the emphasis is on the creation a sense of belonging and creating a community of like-minded individuals.

Various types of magic as practiced in both Open Circles and in initiatory Wicca were discussed, as magic is a fundamental cornerstone of ritual practices in Open Circles and closed practices. One of the main conclusions in this Section relates to the artifacts and tangible representations used in the performance of spellwork and magic. The importance of the physical representations/artifacts that are utilised in spellwork and magic should not be overlooked as they form important mental and physical cues to practitioners. These objects can also be considered important material artifacts and representative of the religious aspect of Wicca, because magic is an important and central Wiccan practice.

The different types of ritual performed in Open Circles and closed Wiccan practices were discussed. The reasons for these rituals as examined in terms of their importance to both practitioners, as well as in terms of how the ritual shape and influence their lives. It is apparent that Open Circle participants as well as practitioners of initiatory Wiccan rituals share some similarities. In both cases, practitioners cited similar reasons that ritual is important to them, these reasons included: community building/community relations, personal enlightenment, identity, spiritual and emotional relief.

The essential characteristics of ritual were examined and the differences as well as shared qualities between the public Open Circle rituals and closed initiatory Wiccan practices were highlighted.

Lastly, the reasons various participants attend and participate in Open Circle ritual were investigated. The reasons people attend these rituals tends to be linked to their personal motivations. In many mainstream religions the main purpose of attending a ritual is predominantly for the purpose of worship and fellowship. This is unlike the motivations for those attending Open Circle rituals, who do so, to further their own individual motivations, which include the need for fellowship, training, exposure and for altruistic impetuses.



## Chapter 6

### LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS IN WICCAN RITUAL

#### 6.1 Introduction

Despite the fact that the concepts relating to *communitas* and liminality have been discussed in relation to Paganism and Wicca by scholars amongst others, Bado-Fralick (2005) and, Magliocco (2004), not much attention has been given to the phenomenon of liminality and hence *communitas* in terms of the rituals performed specifically in Open Circle groups. Bado-Fralick (2005) for example described the initiation rites in a specific Wiccan initiatory tradition, as a rite of passage and discusses the aspect of liminality that occurs in this type of ritual in the context of initiation in traditional Wicca.

In this Chapter I will engage with Victor Turner's ideas on liminality and *communitas* within the context of my understanding of transitions that occur in an Open Circle ritual. Turner (1969) building on ideas from among others, Van Gennep's (1960)[1908] theories, and explored the various stages of ritual which included; separation, liminality and reintegration. These topics were also discussed in Chapter three of this dissertation. Open Circle rituals fall within the domain of what Turner termed liminoid phenomenon (Turner, 1979). Liminoid phenomenon has liminal qualities and may fulfil some of the characteristics of liminality.

Open Circle Rituals can be considered liminoid phenomenon because as Turner (1979:26) explained, liminoid phenomenon does not involve the status quo of the participants social status being disrupted. The identities of participants are also unlikely to change as dramatically after participation in an Open Circle ritual as would be the case in traditional societies who engage in rites of passage. This is what Turner

referred to as 'Life Crisis rituals' have a truly liminal phase. In truly liminal phenomenon, the understanding gained in the transition phase of a ritual, generally affects the entire societal structure of the community. Whereas in Open Circle rituals, any understandings gained by attending these rituals are of a more personal and individualistic nature. The liminoid nature of the Open Circle rituals can be related to transformation and growth of the individual more so than transformation that occurs for the entire social group, as is characteristic of liminal phenomenon amongst traditional societies. Another reason that these Open Circle rituals can be seen as a liminoid phenomenon is because the rituals presented in Open Circle rituals are new and invented, and do not revolve around the collective social requirements of a traditional society. As noted in Chapter five of this dissertation, ritual facilitators usually create new rituals each time a ritual is performed. Grimes (2002:4-5) also discusses how ritual is invented, "embodied and social", and explains that inventing ritual cannot come out of nothing, rather ritual is created out of existing cultures and traditions.

In this Chapter I will examine how, if at all, the various components of liminality and as identified by Turner (1969, 1969, 1979, 1985) are present in the Wiccan ritual. The experience of the participants who have experience in both Open Circle groups as well as traditional initiatory Wicca, will be used as a basis for this examination.

### **6.2.1 How liminality manifests in Wiccan ritual**

Liminoid phenomenon is liminal-like, in that it also shares the common characteristics of liminality as defined by Turner (1969), these include: The sense of being in-between-ness, the feeling of invincibility, the feeling of isolation, a sense of being in place of transition, the feeling of being way from society (or not classified within

society), unified among fellow participants and having nor rank or being outside of the sociostructural positions within the community.

Turner (1969) sees the liminal phase specifically as a transformational phase, where participants withdraw from normal social interactions, the normal social interactions and usual societal norms are deferred for a period of time during rituals of transition. During the liminal phase specifically in tribal societies, the social structures may be inverted, but they do not undermine or challenge the group's overall status quo. Later Victor and Edith Turner (1982:205) elaborate on how these rituals are transformative they assert that: "...previous patterns of thought, feeling and action are disrupted".

In Chapter five Section 5.6, where the concept of transformation in ritual was discussed in detail, it was noted that the expected outcome of any Wiccan ritual is transformation. Whether the transformation will affect the whole group or only effect the individual on a psychological or personal level, seems to depend on the type of group that performs the ritual. In one traditional coven, that has been in existence since the mid 1960's where I participated, the magic performed was aimed at the whole coven group. So it affected each person who took part in the ritual aimed to affect their personal and psychological development. On another occasion, multiple covens joined together to perform a ritual that would affect the entire membership of the tradition. In Open Circles rituals the types of transformation that occur are generally only felt on personal and psychological level, they are not intended to affect the entire group.

Turner (1974:72-74) says that the liminal phase including all the ordeals that take place in this phase are, "...all the acts and symbols are of obligation", where participants with the traditional society are obliged to participate in the ritual. Thus one of the main

differences between liminal phenomenon and liminoid phenomenon, is in regards to the obligation versus “option” of ritual attendance. For Van Gennep (1908) the rites of passage are transformational in the sense that the participants after participation in the rituals assume new rights and obligations in the society. The main difference between traditional tribal societies that experience true liminality during rites of passage, is that the attendance is often mandatory or obligatory. In Open Circle rituals, participants are free to participate in the ritual, attendance is not mandatory and there is no obligation to attend rituals or to participate in the ritual and it is unlikely that participants will assume new rights or obligations within mainstream society. However, in traditional initiatory covens, this is not the case, as attendance is usually mandatory, obligatory and part of their religious practices. Some rituals, specifically initiation rituals will alter the obligations of the coveners although these obligations may not extend to a societal level, but are rather more specific to the tradition and coven.

Participants of Open Circle ritual may engage in types of ritual that are not necessarily in line with the usual societal norms, this is however dependent on the specific group and context of what is considered the norm. The dress code in coven practice is regulated, but there is always some differentiation between the ritual facilitators and the rest of the coven, each member may also have different symbols that signify their rank. In Open Circle rituals the dress code is not regulated, and one would anticipate then that the dress in Open Circles would be typical of the average population, but it is not. Examples of styles of dress that seemed typical of participants in Open Circle rituals were varied, but typically dress styles included people dressing up in fairy

costumes, emo<sup>50</sup> style clothing, Hippie-style clothing and free-flowing dresses. In the Open Circle rituals the facilitators wore robes or regalia that also set them apart from the rest of the participants. Thus the criteria of homogenisation in terms of dress and equal status within the group is not always met in either Open Circle or Covens. However the mere fact that both tend to have some form of dress that is different from the average population, may at very least signal that they are set aside or apart from the rest of society. Similarly, monks or nuns who wear specific regalia are also set apart from other segments of society.

In some rituals participants would engage in a mild form Bacchic ecstasy<sup>51</sup>, which in Open Circle context more often than not, simply involves dancing around a bon fire ecstatically. This mode of ritual may be viewed as unusual if judged in comparison to many mainstream religious observances. This may be in line with Turner's (1982:26) assertion that liminality is "...a complex series of episodes in sacred space-time, and may also include subversive and ludic events".

Unlike the behaviour that Turner (1989) describes, where ritual participants are normally passive and humble and submissive, this is definitely not the case in Open Circles. I have often observed participants behaving argumentatively with ritual facilitators or refusing to perform a specific ritual action. For example during one ritual one ritual participant loudly announced in the middle of the ritual that they did not agree with the ritual gesture of physically turning to face a particular direction, and proceeded to lecture the facilitator as to why they disagreed. On other occasions, parents with

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<sup>50</sup> Emo refers to particular style of clothing that is characteristically dark, studded belts, dark heavy make-up, with dyed hair that hangs in the eyes. The Emo genre emphasizes emotional broody posturing.

<sup>51</sup> Baccic ecstasy: Is a form of ecstasy specifically in honour of the God Dionysus or Bacchus, that may involve heavy drinking and wild behavior

children would allow their children to run rampant and disrupt the proceedings, and did not heed the facilitator's requests to bring the children under control. In Wiccan covens, however, coveners will usually follow the ritual facilitator's instructions without question.

A fundamental part of Wiccan practice is found in the liminal spaces, the in-between spaces. Liminality in Wicca can refer to both the demarcation of the ritual circle (or sacred space) as well as the mental states that accompany ritual and spell work. Wiccans do not usually have permanent temples or church buildings, they are able to create a sacred space in just about any place (Hume, 1998). Sacred space is carved out of the normal, mundane space. Many traditional covens have what is known as a covenstead, this is usually the home of one of the members of the High Priesthood, and in most cases the ritual is held in the same physical location. However, the physical geographical location is irrelevant for traditional Wiccans, as long as the place chosen is private and separate from prying eyes. Just like in many other societies, the sacred space or the ritual space is created and then banished after use. The creation of a new circle each time a ritual is performed is also symbolic of the circle being created afresh each time, and the "old" is obliterated at the end of the ritual, thus the circle or ritual space is rejuvenated each time it is recreated. One participant Apollo (49), explains that there are very few Wiccans who have actual buildings or temples specifically in North America, and often those that have physical buildings, do so because of tax reasons, so that they like any other mainstream church can have a space that is tax-exempt. Helen Berger (2021), an expert on modern witchcraft, also substantiates this claim and said that Wiccans lack "...formal institutional structure such as a church"

It is also important to mention that in contemporary discourse the concept of liminality is not limited only to time and space, but can also refer to a mental space, or a temporal space that occurs in the mind. In Wiccan and some Pagan rituals, liminality is often a psychic space. Turner (1979) stated that: "The subject of passage ritual, is in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically "invisible". The liminal period specifically in Wiccan ritual is not always an artifact that is necessarily an observable manifestation. In other words, the circle that is created can simply be temporal in nature or seen in the 'mind's eye' of the participants, it may be something that can be described, albeit rather ineffable. This ties into Van Gennep's (1909) concept of liminality, where participants move between the mundane and the symbolic worlds, and the portals or boundaries used in rites of passage are invisible, but enhance the concept of the unknown.

Although the procedure for creating the sacred circle differs somewhat from tradition to tradition and group to group, there are a few fundamental ritual actions that take place when creating sacred space. These preparations include; demarcating the sacred space, cleansing and consecrating the sacred space. Sometimes the physical space that is demarcated as the sacred circle is not only a temporal space but can also be laid out with salt, flowers, chalk markings or even cords, the use of physical markings to demarcate the circle depending on the tradition requirements, the purpose of the ritual and sometimes even the season. It is within this sacred circle that participants are "betwixt and between". Even though often the ritual circle is usually only a temporal construct, once the circle has been cast participants move around within the defined boundaries of the circle but do not leave the circle, they treat the imagined boundaries as if they were solid boundaries. If a participant needs to leave the circle for whatever reason, the ritual facilitators will 'cut a door', which entails the

ritual facilitator taking their ritual knife, called an athame, and a door is 'cut' into the ethereal, it is only through this door that participants can leave the circle, once they return the 'door' is closed again by the ritual facilitator. The ritual circle is also seen as a central hub of power, the way the circle is cast is determines whether the circle is cast in such a way as to create a magical vortex to draw power from the astral towards the participants, or whether the circle is meant to protect, contain or banish. Either way, the participants may experience the feeling of invincibility within the circle as a result of the build-up of power, or the protective force that is contained in the circle. Here the participants effectively take leave of the body of the mundane society, and become engulfed in the body of communitas or the liminal persona. The circle also separates the participants from the rest of the world, the rituals performed in the circle are considered sacred and not part of the mundane activities.



**Figure: 30** Ritual circle that has been demarcated with salt



There is often a feeling of unification and often in Wiccan initiatory traditions, the participants do feel unified, and come together “of one mind” in order to perform magic, in some traditions, rank is not important, but this is largely dependent on the specific tradition.

Angelica K (50), a regular attendee and board member of Open Circle rituals in Regina, provided a really vivid description of how she experienced a circle being cast. Angelika’s description, paints a picture of how the physical and the temporal aspects of circle casting as seen through the eyes of participants:

*“The High Priestess of the Open Circle group, started the ritual, she was wearing a cloak and using her athame, the altar was set at the center of the circle. She walked around the circle with her athame, when she walked around the outer perimeter of the circle, when she passed behind me, every hair on my body stood up, I could feel this zinging energy right behind me. I could not even believe it, I felt that if I had turned around and looked there would be this sphere wrapping itself around us, and once the circle was closed she began the ritual the way she always does,: “This is a time that is not a time, in a place that is not a place, on a day that is not a day, between the worlds...but the part that really struck me was the part the time that is not a time, the day that is not a day that really struck me was this thin blurry line between awake and asleep, that line between thinking a thought and saying it out loud...” (June 2021)*

This experience described by Angelica K, is typical of way in which many participants experience the circle being cast and the sense of something different, outside of the mundane or normal that occurs once the ritual begins. Angelica describes the profound feelings she experienced and also how the circle casting produced a space in which the sacred “in betweenness” could be experienced.



**Figure: 31 Ritual circle that has been demarcated with leaves and flowers  
Image courtesy of Wolfa Coven of the Horsa Tradition**

Sonnex, Roe & Roxburgh (2020) make reference to a physical space demarcation when a sacred circle is cast, and this what they mean when they refer to the “*physical representations of the demarcated sacred space*”. It is this physical ritual space that has been purposefully separated from the mundane world, but that is still visible within the mundane world. In Figure 30, the circle has been demarcated using salt, salt has many different functions in Wicca, one of them is to dispel or banish and to purify. In this specific example, the salt circle was used as part of a banishing ritual. Every physical representation or artifact used in Wicca is connected to a spiritual concept. More often than not, and in fact in most of the Open Circles I attended, the sacred space that is demarcated is a mental projection. This mental projection usually means

that the ritual facilitator will cast a circle that is nine feet in diameter. That is not to say that the Open Circles never made use of salt, chalk or even painters tape to map out the circumference of the circle, but most of the time, the assumption was that those attending would understand that the sacred space created, is created on the astral plane<sup>52</sup>. Hume (1998) also states that when this sacred space is set up, the witch creates a sacred space at two levels, the physical and the imaginary. In traditional initiatory spaces this is intrinsically understood, the physical aspects or artifacts of the sacred circle, the altar and the decorative elements are often set up and prepared ahead of time and then once the ritual begins the sacred space is demarcated temporally or psychically, while the witch is in an altered state of consciousness.

Guynor N, explains that another way Wiccans separate themselves, is by having secret coven meetings, the fact that the meeting is secret also suggests the separation from the mundane. He said that as the witch casts the magical circle, and no one else other than the initiated witches are permitted to enter that circle is how the coveners set themselves apart from other people in the world during a ritual, which relates to the separation phase in terms of how van Gennerp describes liminality. Hume (1998) explains that this liminal world, is a world that is normally hidden, “one that is beyond the veil” is part and parcel of the procedure for creating sacred space.

The casting of the circle in Wicca, serves as a space that is carved out of the mundane world within which ritual is performed, similar to how adherents of other religions would go to a church, temple or synagogue to attend a ritual service. The space itself is considered holy and sacred, in Wicca this space is the circle. Although on the physical

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<sup>52</sup> The Astral plane or astral realm, in Wicca specifically, refers to a plane of existence that is believed to be populated by immaterial beings like angels, spirits and thought forms. This plane of existence can be visited consciously through meditation, trance states and other altered states of consciousness.

plane of existence, the circle is the demarcated space within which ritual occurs. For witches, there is more than one plane of existence and the performance of ritual is also acted out on the astral plane. In order to be able to work effectively in the astral plane, witches enter at very least a hypnagogic state of consciousness, this is also known as the alpha state of consciousness. More often though, expertly trained witches are also able to enter the state of consciousness known as the theta state of consciousness. These states of consciousness can be scientifically measured by making use of scientific equipment like an electroencephalogram<sup>53</sup> (EEG) and also a Functional magnetic resonance imaging or functional MRI<sup>54</sup> (fMRI) that measures brain activity by detecting changes associated with blood flow. The Alpha state of consciousness is the state of consciousness most frequently entered into during meditation (Lomas and Ivtzan, 2015). The theta state of consciousness is the state where participants feel or experience a sense of 'oneness'. Highly trained individuals can enter this theta state during a waking state (Fell, Azmacher and Haupt, 2015). Witches who are traditionally trained are able to enter these states of consciousness almost on cue and will enter this state as they enter the ritual circle. This altered state of consciousness, is also reminiscent of the concept of in-betweenness that is characteristic of liminal states. Hume (1998: 309-319) very eloquently states that "Ritual is the outer form whose purpose is to act as a catalyst to the inner process. Ritual paraphernalia are merely outward visible symbols of an inward and psychological process". The sense of 'oneness' that is experienced by practitioners is

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53 EEG: "An electroencephalogram (EEG) is a test that measures electrical activity in the brain using small, metal discs (electrodes) attached to the scalp. Brain cells communicate via electrical impulses and are active all the time, even during asleep. This activity shows up as wavy lines on an EEG recording" (<https://www.epilepsy.com/learn/diagnosis/eeg>.)

54 An "MRI-based technique for measuring brain activity. It works by detecting the changes in blood oxygenation and flow that occur in response to neural activity – when a brain area is more active it consumes more oxygen and to meet this increased demand blood flow increases to the active area. fMRI can be used to produce activation maps showing which parts of the brain are involved in a particular mental process"(National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering: N/D)

collective process, where a coven of witches enter the state of consciousness and 'travel' together to the astral temple<sup>55</sup>. It should however be mentioned that not all witches are adept at this practice, and that most participants in Open Circle rituals are not trained to enter these states of consciousness. However the original ways of casting the circle both in the mundane and the astral originated from Wiccan inner court, the aim of an Outer Court which has since morphed into Open Circles as discussed in Chapter three, was to train new witches to eventually also be able to accomplish this.

Aum Y (45), who is a well-known author in Traditional Witchcraft circles who has also attended countless Open Circle rituals and runs a Traditional initiatory coven. He told me that a witch is supposed to maintain these altered states of consciousness throughout the entire ritual, and that he sees this state itself is a liminal state. Another participant Apollo, also highlighted how psychic states play a large part in Wiccan ritual. He said that the ritual ecstasy, transcendence and the ability to extend the limits of your mind further and further and the ability to allow your mind to travel to other places of consciousness, is part and parcel of Wiccan training and practice, and that is enacted in spellwork and ritual. The altered states of consciousness are related to the concepts of betwixt and between as describe by Turner (1969, 1974). Entering the altered state of consciousness that involves transcendence as well as ritual ecstasy can be related to the feeling of being away from society even though this is purely temporal also a characteristic of liminality. Liminality in this sense is a space of

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<sup>55</sup> Astal Temple: this refers to a place on the astral plane created by the force of will of magicians. The astral temple is a sacred place in the astral plane similar to the physical circle created and located in the mundane physical plane. In Wiccan most covens have a collective or coven Astral temple.

transition between two phases, the fully conscious and the unconscious (Mijares, 2016).

Often symbolic representations are used as cues or triggers that act as reminders of previous times the witch entered a trance state/altered state of consciousness. These symbolic representations can be anything from a specific piece of music, chanting, the simple act of lighting candles or the fragrances from the burning of incense. Thorn Nightwind, said that witches who work in a coven can reach the ecstatic levels very quickly and easily, sometimes with just a word or simple mantram or even by social cues. He said that entering the alpha or theta states is almost like Pavlovian<sup>56</sup> conditioning, in that, just like Pavlov's dogs, when one smells the incense burning as you are about to enter ritual, or see the ritual tools laid out, your mind is immediately triggered without even a word being spoken. These symbolic representations that aid the process of attaining altered states of consciousness can also be related to liminality discussed by Turner (1979:234) where he describes how symbolism provides an "...outward and visible form to an inward and conceptual process"

### **6.2.2 Observations of Liminoid experiences**

As mentioned in Section 3.6 and Section 3.8, covens are traditionally a group of witches who practice together, they consist of small groups of witches who originally practiced Traditional Initiatory Witchcraft, whereas Open Circles developed from the Outer Court. The Outer Court type groups, which are still made use of by Traditional Wicca, were originally formed by the High Priesthood of an existing Traditional coven. Their purpose is to provide a space where new witches to be trained and exposed to

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<sup>56</sup> "Classical conditioning is the process in which an automatic, conditioned response is paired with specific stimuli..." this type of conditioning is also referred to as Pavlovian conditioning as it was first discussed by Ivan Pavlov (National Library of Medicine:2022).

Wiccan ritual. However, the witches in training never actually experience the Traditional, secret aspects of the Tradition, instead the rituals performed are similar in style but not the authentic rituals as practiced in the coven of initiated witches, and the content of these rituals is usually oathbound. Further, the aim of an Outer Court is to provide both the new Witches and the High Priesthood with the opportunity to get to know each other and for the Priesthood to be able to determine whether the new Witches had potential to be able to eventually join the existing coven. However, in recent times some Open Circles have been established by facilitators who are not necessarily traditionally trained and often also don't run private covens. Instead these facilitators saw a need to provide Open Circle rituals in their communities and decided to facilitate Open Circle rituals. Anybody who wants to attend an Open Circle ritual is welcome to, the whole concept of an Open Circle is to serve as a beacon to invite people to experience a Wiccan ritual. However, in Traditional initiatory Wiccan covens, the opposite is true, only those who are trained and initiated in the specific coven's tradition are permitted to enter the ritual sacred space.

Thorn Nightwind (37), as mentioned earlier, has more than a decade's worth of experience of both Coven and Open Circle ritual, said that in an Open Circle ritual you participate in the ritual with people that you don't have a close relationship with, and as a result you may be guarded. He also feels that as an Open Circle ritual facilitator, one is more concerned about the participants' experiences, whereas, in a private coven space, the people you are performing ritual with are people who have had exactly the same experience or at least similar occult experiences and you don't have to be too concerned about those in your coven.

*".. you don't have to worry as much about what they are going through, their safety, and you don't have to explain the ritual steps, process or order in which the ritual is*

*conducted as coven members automatically know what to do and understand and follow the correct sequence of events”. – Thorn Nightwind (February 2022)*

He relayed how it is not uncommon for Open Circle rituals to be hosted in public spaces like a public park or community area, and that the Open Circles he hosted also often had huge central fire-pits, and sometimes bystanders who were not attending the ritual or people just wondering by. He also said that he is very safety conscious and as a result has to constantly make sure that the participants are not doing anything dangerous like getting too close to the fire, or dancing so ecstatically that they fell over. On some occasions he also had one or two people become overly emotional during the ritual, and that had to always be on the lookout for the psychological and spiritual well-being of participants as well. He also said that the familiarity and training are part and parcel of belonging to a coven is what enables each person in the coven to let go and be free of worry about other participants, as there is no concern for them either psychically and also spiritually.

*“...I can go into that place and have an experience because we (as a coven) have a shared practice, we know what we are doing because everyone has been through those rituals umpteen times, repeating the rituals year after a year”. Thorn Nightwind, further explains that is a very different situation in an Open Circle, because you never know what you are getting into what ritual has been written, and certainly the other people do not know what to expect, and that takes away from that liminality or that place in between because it’s not always a space that you can freely go into. Rituals in private spaces have been drilled into your head, and you probably have all the words and actions memorised, you don’t have to think about it as you can go into auto pilot. it’s that same feeling when you are driving a car, when I am driving, I don’t have to think about pressing the gas or break, and I am on auto pilot, in a private coven in ritual we call it the alpha state, we maintain that state for almost the entire time because we*



*are in that place of being on almost autopilot, where the hands are doing the ritual work but the mind can wonder free that allows us to be in what you might call the liminal space". (February 2022)*

Here Thorn Nightwind expresses a few salient aspects that related to the characteristics of liminality as defined by Turner (1969). Firstly that as a facilitator of ritual, there is always a concern for the participants' physical and spiritual well-being and as such full participation in the ritual is made difficult hindering the process or feeling of unity and solidarity. In Open Circle rituals there is very little or no separation of participants from other people who also make use of public spaces. Although it might not be overtly stated or obvious, the facilitator who leads the ritual as well as their assistants are set apart from the rest of the participants. They are obviously more skilled and are in charge of the ritual proceedings as well as ensuring the safety of participants; thus a differentiation in terms of 'rank' occurs, which means that participants in an Open Circle do not have the same ranking or equal status.

Open Circle facilitators tend to write new rituals for each ritual that is performed, thus inventing new rituals, another characteristic that differentiates liminoid phenomenon from true liminality. Thorn Nightwind articulated that in the case of private coven rituals, almost the opposite is true, in that in coven rituals there is a sense of unity, participants are considered equal as they have all received the same training and are responsible for themselves. There is a sense of separation and separateness, because coven members perform their rituals in private away from the rest of the world, usually also in a room that is dedicated to the practice of witchcraft. Generally seasonal rituals and even some Esbats are repeated rituals that are passed down through the tradition, thus rituals are not usually newly written.

Another example of a type of “*oneness*” or unity can be found in the experience that Guynor, relayed. He told me that he had a special affinity with a few of his coven mates because they had gone through the initiation process together and had experienced similar experiences, had gone through similar trials and had shared many personal details, which made him feel closer to these people. In a coven situation it is not uncommon for new initiates or those learning the craft to submit to the instruction of the High Priest or High Priestess who are the teachers, students are unlikely to question their teachers, and although students are not particularly submissive, they tend to have great respect for their teachers, and will obey their instructions.

Jennifer (40) who was a ritual facilitator of an Open Circle group and coven leader, explains that she also does not think that one can enter a liminal state during and Open Circle ritual. She draws from her various coven and Open Circle experiences and explained that she is of the opinion that in Open Circle ritual, the concept of creating a specific space separate is a hypothetical concept, one that as a facilitator you always hope will eventually become a reality like in a coven. She explains that in her experience there are too many people in attendance in Open Circle rituals that don't know what they're doing. Her statement indicates that the lack of experience of participants can actually hinders any processes related to liminality. She also said that in an Open Circle ritual, part of the problem with allowing yourself to enter an altered state of mind which is often utilised in Wiccan ritual, requires trust and you need to have formed relationships with those with whom you are participating. For her a certain level of trust needs to have been established over time with those who participate in ritual together. This she says is impossible in an Open Circle ritual situation because each month there are some new people who attend the ritual and others who never return to attend another ritual. The constant coming and going of

new people is a hindrance to forming and establishing trust and comfort. Jennifer also said that for her, even the core members (those that attended regularly) in the Open Circle groups that she was involved with, had little to no training in initiatory traditional witchcraft. This also indicated to me that together with the reluctance of some ritual facilitators to receive training complicated matters and made it that much more difficult to even get to a place where liminality becomes a possibility. Jennifer expressed a common theme that I encountered in my fieldwork, where her perceptions of 'oneness' and of unity are not present in an Open Circle ritual. For Jennifer, this is because participants are not well versed in the ritual and not well trained which makes cohesiveness unattainable. This is also why the Open Circle rituals can be classified as liminoid experiences, unlike in Life Crisis rituals, or truly liminal rituals, where the ritual only occurs once; for example in circumcision rituals.

Helen Oscar (52), who is one of the facilitators of the Amethyst moon group in Edmonton believes that any Open Circle experience is only as good as the energy that you put into it, and that it "*creating a sacred space for ritual*" is not something that is happening to you, but something that you are doing. She is of the opinion that creating a sacred space has more to do with acting in the world, and accepting other people's energy and sharing your energy with them within the space. She describes the feeling of creating an Open Circle as one of peacefulness, one where all those in attendance feel a sense of camaraderie, where:

*"you are all in this thing together you're all concentrating on something or focus on something"*  
- Helen Oscar.(September 2020)

This is indicative of the feeling 'oneness' when she shares ritual space with others which is characteristic of liminality. She presents a unique perspective here, as none

of the other facilitators felt this type of camaraderie or ‘oneness’. Although Helen does say, that she experiences ‘oneness’ differently in the Open Circle group than how she experiences it in her private closed group<sup>57</sup>. She said that she feels that the people she has been working with in her private closed group are people she has been working with for years, so they feel like family to her, she likens them to her sisters. She also says that when she circles with them she feels: “*warm and so close and so safe*”, and that she when she gets to be simply be a participant [rather than a facilitator] in her private closed group, she is able to

*“do my own thing, even though I don’t feel necessarily disconnected from them, I know them so I can go do my own thing in that space”.* (September 2020)

It is interesting to note that for Helen, the feeling of ‘oneness’ is present for her in both the Open Circle rituals as well as in her private group, there is a difference in terms of the intensity that this is felt between the Open Circle rituals and the private rituals.

Raven R (44) is the High Priestess of an Open Circle group in Saskatoon. She describes her experiences in private circle<sup>58</sup> as:

*“being like you can almost feel like there isn’t anything beyond the circle from the moment that you enter together”* – Raven R (November 2020)

She explains that for a private group it is less likely that your group will be interrupted with outside distractions and this feeling can definitely be experienced in a private group. Raven often hosts Open Circle rituals in public spaces, like parks, the local

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<sup>57</sup> This group is referred to as a private closed group as it is not technically either a traditional initiatory coven and the facilitator does not refer to the group as a coven but rather a group of people who have similar beliefs and practice ritual together.

<sup>58</sup> This group is also referred to as a private circle by the participant/facilitator, it is a closed circle that is a group who practice ritual together, but not technically a traditional initiatory coven, and the participant does not describe the group as a coven.

library and community grounds, but this makes intense concentration and privacy difficult. She explained that in her experience, in Open Circle rituals a you are always more aware of your surroundings, because other people who also make use of the public parks and spaces those not attending the ritual are potentially distracting. She relayed how sometimes there would be onlookers who would stand near the circle and crack open a beer and open a packet of chips and chat loudly while she was performing the ritual. She also said that another problem which would occur often when she is performing ritual in a park, is that dog owners using the park would allow their dogs to run around off leash, and the dogs would disrupt the proceedings, and cross the boundaries of the circle. Raven R told me that this is very different from a coven's private practice because most likely you are meeting at a private home that allows a *"bubble to be created, that doesn't allow any distraction in"*. She is also of the opinion that in a private group, the participants work together and form special connections that allows everyone in the private group to be more in tune with each other and to connect easier because they have worked together so often. Raven R's point of view is similar to that of other participants, and she too points to the lack of unity or "oneness" in an Open Circle type ritual. Raven R also indicates that the concept of separation is not always achievable simply due to the disruptions and interruptions of bystanders and onlookers in public spaces.

In this Chapter, as well as in Chapter five, several participants mentioned that in Open Circle rituals there are always new people attending the rituals, and that facilitators often have no idea how many people will attend the ritual or who will attend the ritual. This is because as mentioned in Chapter three, Open Circles ritual attendance is not mandatory, there is no expectation that even those few members who attend regularly will in fact attend ritual. This is of course largely dependent on the type of Open

Circle/group. For the Open Circles that are attached to a specific tradition that function as an Outer Court, there is some expectation that participants will attend regularly. This is because the participants are sometimes also probationers<sup>59</sup>. Of course the opposite is true in the case of traditional initiatory Wicca. Initiates are expected to attend every ritual, attendance is often not optional. Just as members of other religious organisations are expected to attend services at the church, temple or mosque, on a regular basis. Wiccans who belong to a coven are also expected to attend the rituals that have been scheduled for the coven. The majority of Open Circles do not necessarily demand that participants have any permanent group membership. Some Open Circle groups that also belong to National organizations do have optional memberships, but in my fieldwork experiences the number of people who actually claimed membership was less than five percent of those that attended rituals more regularly. Many of the Open Circles where I performed my fieldwork did not have any association with an established Wiccan Coven or a specific tradition and as a result no cohesive tradition is practiced, which possibly also has an effect on the level of devotion of participants. There is a very different set of expectations with regards to attendance between the Open Circle rituals and the Wiccan coven rituals, for covens participation is mandatory and for Open Circles, participation is optional. The question of devotion and also group membership is relevant here as Wiccan covens practice and adhere to specific religious tenets and principles, they are devoted to their religion. Whereas in Open Circles, participants often don't even practice Wicca, or even the same form of Paganism that is represented by the various Open Circle type groups.

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<sup>59</sup> Probationers in Wicca usually refers to pre-initiates who are learning the craft and are not yet initiated, but in general attendance is an obligation.

### **6.3 Communitas**

As discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.8, communitas is resultant from a group that experiences a common experience, more specifically in the case of my research, a ritual or rite of passage together. For Turner (1974:202) the concept of communitas is the result of participants first having experienced a period of liminality together. During the liminal state, the status quo is turned upside down and participants are required to see the world, cosmos and social structures in new and unique ways. The theoretical structure of liminality described by Turner (1969, 1974, 1979, 1982) out of which communitas is born is where the 'anti-structure' is present. It is here that the usual societal structures and ways of being are put aside for a time while the participants "scrutinize, portray, understand and then act on itself" (Turner 1982:75). The normal social structures are often upended and participants experience a sense of "lowliness and sacredness of homogeneity and comradeship" (Turner 1969:96-98). During liminal periods, ritual participants are unified and usually feel a deep sense of camaraderie because they participated in the ritual together. In the liminal period, participants are often stripped of their previous identities, ranks and social status. Turner (1969: 93) explains that positions are changed, where: "the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low", highlighting how normal social structures and societal norms are put aside during the liminal experiences and how participants are set on an equal footing in terms of hierarchical structure.

When Turner (1969:95-98) initially described communitas he described it as an "intense comradeship" between participants who as "equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders". Communitas at its very core has to do with the social bonds formed as a result of ritual interactions (Turner, 1969).

Communitas may last long after the ritual and liminal experience have been completed, but it may also be fleeting in duration but often results in strong bonds between participants, who experience a sense of camaraderie (Turner, 1969:95). Turner (1982) also said that people who experienced liminality together held long-term ties with each other after experiences of liminality and communitas and would be open to offering help and understanding to their fellow participants. The most distinctive feature of communitas still tends to be a heightened concept of connectedness that comes from a common agenda, or shared experience of coming together in ritual.

According to Turner (1969:128) those experiencing communitas are: "... stripped of rank, they appear anonymous, outcast, sexless, and on the interstices of culture". The other characteristics of communitas include: a sort of humiliation, equality of status amongst members, obedience to ritual elders, statelessness, binary oppositions, namelessness, submissiveness, the existential quality of communitas and freedom from structural impositions (Turner, 1966, 1974, 1977). In the Sections that follow, by making use of my fieldwork and interviews, I will discuss how these characteristics of communitas are present in Open Circles and in Coven contexts respectively.

Open Circles typically also host activities that are not directly related to ritual or ritual activities as way to foster a sense of community. I will also be taking a look at what effect if any these activities have on communitas.

Some participants mentioned that there is are also unanticipated effects that result from communitas, these will also be explored.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, Open Circle ritual facilitators ceased all in-person<sup>60</sup> rituals. Some groups eventually decided to move their rituals to an online format, where they used social media platforms to record and present rituals for people to watch. I will also be discussing the effect of the move of rituals to cyberspace.

### **6.3.1 Belonging, camaraderie and how it relates to communitas**

The desire for belonging and finding like-minded individuals to share their values are one of the primary reasons participants cited for wanting to attend Open Circle rituals. As mentioned in Chapter three, those that attend Open Circle rituals do not come from a singular religious philosophy or style of spiritual/religious practice. In other words, those who attend Open Circle rituals identify within a range of spiritual and religious practices, which include: Pagans, Wiccans, Shamans, Eclectic witches, Pagan curious<sup>61</sup> or people who simply identify as being 'Spiritual'. Each of these have their own unique style and mode of spiritual or religious practice.

Paganism as a broad category that usually includes all of the aforementioned are considered to be minority religions within the border religious/spiritual societal context (Barney-Barry, 2005). About 80 percent of my research participants who only attended Open Circles also said that they felt that they were in the minority and really wanted to be able to engage in practices that also reflected their own values, meanings and life purposes. Participants expressed their need for belonging as well as their need for meaning or as Victor Turner (1969:95-97) said: "...a common sense of purpose or communion". The desire for belonging as well as to the longing to engage with *"like-minded people who have similar values and understand our place in the*

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<sup>60</sup> In person here refers to meeting someone as opposed to talking with them on the phone, or meeting with them on virtual cyberspace platforms.

<sup>61</sup> Pagan Curious, refers to people who are interested in or curious about how Pagans practices, but do not themselves identify as Pagan.

*greater universe*”, as Jaguar (54), described the need for belonging. This sentiment relates to the existential quality of *communitas* that Turner (1969:127) described as: “... an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men”. Inara Connor [44], a participant in the Amethyst moon group in Edmonton, also mentioned on multiple occasions, that the belonging she and others feel when attending Open Circle groups is related very much to a basic human need to have a group of people who you can be yourself around. The need for belonging and how it relates to *communitas* is discussed by McConnell (2017) who discusses how Turner’s concepts of liminality and *communitas* entails a sense of belonging shared experiences. Inara, also said that many of the people who attend Open Circle rituals have told her that they had the desire to feel a sense of belonging, their prime motive for attending Open Circles.

Shawn, S [35] who identifies as a Druid and takes online classes from The Order of Bards Ovates & Druids (OBOD)<sup>62</sup>, shared the reason he likes to attend Open Circles. He said that his aim is to promote Open Circle rituals, because he feels that the Pagan population in his geographical location are dispersed, leaving ritual participants feeling alienated, because they are not part of mainstream religious organisations. Shawn’s feelings of isolation can be seen as a type of liminal phenomena. Banfield (2022) described liminality in terms of geographical spaces and explains how liminality can be seen in the context of spatially and socially marginal places, which is characteristic of ambiguous and threshold experiences in the liminal phase. Shawn, is also of the opinion that many forms of Paganism and Wicca are minority groups in Canada in general he rarely gets to see or meet with many people identify as Pagans or Druids.

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<sup>62</sup> The OBOD, are a mystery school who follow a magical and profess to love nature and follow a magical and spiritual path that respects and protects the natural world .

Shawn is one of the board members of that Open Circle group and in that capacity, he explained that his main drive is to make sure that the Open Circle rituals are generic because he wants to make sure the largest amount of people feel welcome, so that participants can see at least a little bit of their own practice reflected in the Open Circles rituals. He thinks it is important to emphasise this because he wants people attending to not feel like they are the only ones practicing Paganism or that they entirely cut off from the rest of the people who have similar practices.

Apollo [49], shared his opinion on why he thinks that people attend Open circle rituals. He said that initially most people who practice witchcraft, first practice as solitary practitioners. Being a solitary practitioner actually means that you only practice witchcraft by yourself. This is also an example of one of the characteristics of *communitas*, as it relates to the isolation and having no status in the community. Apollo said that once you step outside of that solitary practice into that sphere of an Open Circle,

*“you are obviously looking for a sense of belonging, otherwise you would just continue to practice on your own”.* (March 2022)

He explained that the whole process of searching and trying out different groups until you find one that fits, is part of the quest to finding that place of belonging.

As discussed earlier in this Chapter as well as in Chapter three, *communitas* results in a sense of belonging and community and is a consequence of transformation as a result of shared liminal experiences in ritual participation. Apollo explained that once he became an initiate of the coven into which he was initiated, he found a deep sense of belonging, because he had practiced ritual with his mentors and fellow convenors

for many years. For him, that sense of belonging only really came about when he joined traditional coven,

*“...it was not something I felt when I was part of an Open Circle group it was something more permanent, looking for that sense of belonging is what took me from being a solitary practitioner to dipping my toe in the water of Open Circles, and then taking it to the next step of becoming an initiate” – Apollo (March 2022)*

He is told me that some people never leave the Open Circle spaces, and maybe that is because that is all they can handle because of life circumstances, but that they still want that sense of belonging. He said that he always looks at belonging through the lens of how he experiences it in a coven setting, because this is where he thinks true belonging exists.

Apollo considers his fellow coveners as his close friends and even by extension, his *chosen* family. He said that for him, belonging does not just relate to blood family but that his chosen family (his fellow coveners) they are just as important to him as his blood family are. Apollo places his “*chosen family*” and his “*blood family*” into a binary positions<sup>63</sup>, similar to how Turner (1969: 360) describes *communitas*: “...there are two major ‘models’ for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating”. Here, Turner (1969:360) is contrasting ‘structure’ and anti-structure, he describes *communitas* “...an essential and generic human bond without which there could be no society”. Apollo also mentions that he thinks that Open Circles are a great place to start to find a chose family, but the Open Circles don’t last forever and the people who attend the Open Circles come and go. Which means that there is never any sense of permanence

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<sup>63</sup> Levi-Strauss developed the term binary oppositions in his theory on structuralism. Binary systems are to be found in the human vocabularies and in behaviour. Hence the notions of left-right, raw-cooked, man-woman and so on.

so that sense of belonging is often short-lived, pointing once again to the short lived nature of existential *communitas*.

Sierra F, (50) is an initiate of Traditional Wicca and also runs a more Eclectic style Wiccan coven as a High Priestess. She expressed that she thought that Open Circle leaders and coven leaders need to be more invested in creating opportunities for participants to have that sense of belonging. She too felt that the need for belonging is a basic human need:

*“everyone needs that sense of belonging, and for us that practice Wicca, the need is greater than possibly elsewhere, because we are such a minority group in the grand scheme of things, so finding a place where you feel that you belong is really very necessary, and we those who are of the High Priesthood should try to at least make those opportunities available to others who are starting out or to those who don’t belong to a coven and have not committed to a particular tradition, because they should also have a chance to belong” – Seirra F. (May 2022)*

A sense of belonging is part of *communitas*, at its heart *communitas* is a sense of connectedness. These Open Circle rituals allow ritual participants access to attaining that sense of belonging even though it may be short lived. Just as Turner (1969,1974) described how members of communities, even non-conventional groups of people who occupy various ranks and hierarchical positions within society come together in ritual activities and leave with feelings of connection and hopefulness. Open Circle participants, regardless of the status and hierarchy they hold within society as individuals, come together to engage in rituals as participants, where their status outside of the ritual is irrelevant. They willingly “... submit together to the general authority of ritual elders” (Turner, 1969:360), regardless of their sociostructural

positions in mainstream society, in order to achieve that sense of *communitas* and belonging.

Moon S [36], said that when he first started attending the Open Circles, these rituals made him feel like his practice was a little more legitimate and real. Prior to attending Open Circle rituals the only exposure to the practice of Pagan rituals had been through reading books, articles and watching videos on the topic. He said that by attending the Open Circle rituals, it gave him that sense of legitimacy, he said: “*are so many other people also doing the same types of practices*”, even though there are so many different traditions and paths to choose from within an Open Circle group, he felt that at least he belonged somewhere.

Snow S [34], is Moon’s spouse and she said that for her Open Circles provided the opportunity to experience the legitimacy of the practice as well as the opportunity to invite her family along, because they were rather nervous about her new found religious beliefs. She told me that it was a relief for her parents as well that the religions had been legitimised in a sense because it was not just her practicing the religion, others were also practicing similarly. She stated that her parents had expressed their relief when they “*found out we were not sacrificing babies or doing bad things*” but rather that our practices are centered on being helpful in the world and living in harmony with the world. So for her the sense of belonging and community had the added bonus of also legitimising her practices not only for herself, but for her family as well. This is an example of one of the characteristics of *communitas*, namely that that *communitas* is also a ‘condition’ or a state of being. The social bonds and the mutual support that results from ritual participation, contributes to creating this ‘condition’.

Guynor (47) said that Open Circles provide an opportunity for people to come together, in a way that is not possible in a private coven. He explained that when you are in a traditional coven of initiates, you obviously can't have people attending who are not initiates. Open Circles provide opportunities for witches of various traditions to get together where they can celebrate a ritual together without breaking any vows or oaths that they made for their own specific Wiccan traditions. This point is indicative of a juxtaposition between the Open Circles and the traditional covens, though not completely binary, the decision to belong to one or the other or both is not mutually exclusive. Guynor sees Open Circles as a type of communal space, but not a place that he would go to do very serious magical workings, the rituals themselves may be very solemn or they might even be very playful it's not where he would do any serious magic. In these more communal spaces it provides people an opportunity to practice their religion out in the open, obviously very different than in a private coven. It provides a space for community interaction with people of other practices and other traditions, and sometimes even people of other religions, who are curious. It allows interested people to decide if they may want to more seriously pursue the religion or a private tradition more seriously. Although he concedes that those attending may equally just enjoy the company of the people attending or may simply enjoy the company of the witches running the Open Circle rituals.

Inara Connor (44), a participant in Open Circle rituals, told me that in her view community represented a group of like-minded people who get together to support each other and to *"do good in the world"*. The way that community is created in a ritual group is by shared experience. She also said that the way more established group members create community is by making sure that newer people have the opportunity

to feel involved and participate in as many parts of the ritual that they feel comfortable doing.

Helen Oscar (53) who is a ritual facilitator not connected to any specific Wiccan tradition, echoed this sentiment, she said that when she first ventured out to seek out a group it was very gratifying to see that they were all kinds of other people who sought like she did and worshipped like she did and felt the same way about stuff that she. Helen also experienced the desire to simply experience the rituals and have interactions with like-minded people.

*“.. so I think probably the same time it’s nice going to a group of people where you don’t have to watch what you say, we have our own language we don’t have to stop and explain it because people just know about it” – Helen Oscar (September 2020)*

Here both Inara and Helen highlight the existential quality of *communitas* that includes an intense feeling of togetherness, the collective human bond and communion as discussed by Turner (1969:95-97).

From my observations, the core members<sup>64</sup> of the various Open Circle groups where I performed my fieldwork, tended to form close friendships and genuinely hope to exude and allow that feeling of community to be experienced by newer members of the group. The time spent together does not only occur in ritual but also refers to the time participants spend together engaged in activities related in some way to the Open Circle groups. Usually, the core members volunteer to present workshops, seminars, book clubs and other get-togethers, that are aimed at encouraging a sense of community and shared experiences based on their particular religious or philosophical

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<sup>64</sup> It should be noted that the core member group usually consisted of between 4 to 8 people, out of the total number of Open Circle attendees.



outlook. The core members also serve on the various boards and organisationally related committees. As a result they spend a lot of time together focussed on that particular aspect of their lives. However, that sense of community and camaraderie is not limited to the core group of participants, as even new members or first time attendees have reported that they felt emotional connections to those who they attended ritual with.

The desire to belong to a group is not equally important for all participants. Some like Guynor N (47) for example, who is an initiate of a Traditional coven and also attends Open Circles told me that he is of the opinion that there are many people who are just as passionate about the religion [Wicca] as he is, but for one reason or the other they are either not ready to make that commitment to a coven or a group and there those that only want to practice as solitaires, and have no desire to belong to a group. Sarah Jane (42) expressed the reasons that she does not like belonging to a group which are similar, often cited reasons other solitary practitioners have given for not wanting to belong to a coven or group:

*"I simply don't want to belong to or join either traditional groups or Open Circle type groups, because I don't need that kind of structure. Those that usually belong to those groups haven't got the psychic maturation yet... they have not developed their moral compasses or ethics...but not everybody needs to be funnelled into a group... another thing is that those groups tend to Gatekeep<sup>65</sup> and be exclusionary, and I am not a fan of Gatekeeping or exclusion" – Sarah Jane (November 2020)*

Here Sarah Jane highlights an interesting point that she *"does not need that kind of structure"* implying that the Open Circle groups tend to end up moving towards being

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<sup>65</sup> Gatekeeping in this context refers to controlling, and usually limiting, general access to private coven materials/information.

more structured. Turner (1969:132) said that: "...communitas itself soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae". Turner predicted, eventually communitas would transform from existential communitas to normative communitas. The anti-structure that comes from the liminal phase, where participants are free to experience temporary detachment from the usual societal structures, and the freedom from norms that govern society and "correct" behaviour, the freedom to have unique and new experiences cannot last indefinitely. Related to this is that Open Circles have shorter life-spans. From my fieldwork interviews my research participants said that even those groups that are well organised, do not tend to last longer than five years, whereas many covens tend to span at least a decade or more. Open Circles with a shorter life-span can be seen as groups where existential or spontaneous communitas is present, the experiences of communitas tend to be transient. This is due to the large turnover of attendees and participants, who may experience communitas as a result of ritual participation, but then never attend another ritual.

However, those Open Circles who have a core group of members who attend more regularly, may eventually experience normative communitas. Turner (1969:132) describes it as: "...under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these goals the existential communitas is organized into a perduring social system". Similarly, coven groups can also usually be classified as normative communitas, as these groups are more stable in terms of participants and organisation.

Thorn Nightwind (37) who as mentioned previously is a Wiccan High Priest and has also hosted over a decade's worth of Open Circle rituals, said that if you were to examine the differences between Open Circle groups and traditional covens you might see that in Open Circles, there is not a heightened state of emotional connection. Whereas in a coven situation, there is always a heightened sense of emotional connection. Here the *"heightened state of emotion"* can be seen as a result of being freed from structure, which is another characteristic of *communitas*. Thorn said that he thinks the connection and sense of community that people experience in Open Circles comes from sharing ritual with witches who all fall under the umbrella of identifying as witches, and might have some similarities in common, but that the community aspect does not go further than that, it is more of temporary feeling.

Angelica (50), who is a board member of one of the Open Circle ritual groups, summed it up really well, she said that as a board member from the Regina group, they (the board members of the Regina group) wanted new people to find the group and join them in ritual. The group are always excited to share that feeling of joy and camaraderie with new attendees. Her opinion is that the camaraderie formed in the group comes from shared experiences, regardless of how many times you attend rituals together.

*"When you are a new to the craft or Open Circles, you've probably only ever read instructions in a book, and have been practicing as a solitary for ages prior to joining a group. But when you get to see that there are other ways of doing thing, when you see that three different people could cast the circle a very basic thing, in three different ways, you are excited to talk to others about it, you are so excited to have had that shared experience, but also excited to learn that casting a circle can also be an individual thing, that all of these shared experiences make allow you to feel closer to*

*each other, but also that other people also have different contributions to make. But ultimately the part that is so important, is, that you experience something that is really intense, it's a magical time, and you almost don't want to leave at the end of it, that level of emotional intensity...because it gets into your heart and you are automatically part of that community, you just shared that sacred place with these people" – Angelica. (June 2021)*

These shared experiences that Angelica references, relate to normative *communitas*<sup>66</sup>, because Angelica is referring specifically to attending rituals with the same core members of the Open Circle group to which she belongs. The sense of camaraderie she experiences is so strong that she also wants to share it with new people who attend. Although the new people will most likely only experience spontaneous *communitas*, as the experience will probably be short lived, because, most new participants only ever attend a single ritual.

Based on the discussions with participants, Open Circle rituals lead to a sense of belonging and/ or at the very least can potentially lead to other opportunities for participants to feel that their practices are legitimised through group participation. The core sense of belonging has been discussed by numerous authors including: Van Gennep (1909), Grimes (2002) Mahdi, Christopher and Meade (1996) among others.

### **6.3.2 Change as related to *communitas***

Some of the other ideas contained in Turner's (1969:96) concept of *communitas* are related to a permanent societal change that develops out of spontaneous *communitas*. Initially when *communitas* is experienced it is a temporary experience of being

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<sup>66</sup>Normative *Communitas* evolves out of existential *communitas*, and becomes a more permanent system that is more organised as the community needs more social control. . Turner (1969:132) defined three types of *communitas*, namely: existential or spontaneous *communitas*, normative *communitas* and ideological *communitas*.

together. This phenomenon usually occurs after ritual liminality, where participants purposefully extricate themselves from the normal societal structures and norms for the express purpose of ritual. Ritual is usually designed to facilitate transformation. For Turner (1969, 1974, 1982), the main role of rituals and rites of is to effect social change<sup>67</sup>. In both covens and Open Circles transformative rituals are also collective, in that individuals work together collectively to achieve a specific goal. Although the individual people participating in the ritual are likely to benefit on a personal level, often the goal of group ritual is to combine the 'magical resources' of individuals to achieve a collective goal. *Communitas* in this sense could be described as a type of communitarianism, at the heart of the concept of communitarianism is a philosophy based on the connection between an individual and a community. It could be argued that in this sense, the fact that individuals are coming together as a community to work together demonstrates a type of communitarianism.

As mentioned previously, spontaneous *communitas* (Turner, 1969:132) is usually experienced after the joint participation in ritual. Normative *communitas*, however, follows the original format of spontaneous *communitas*, where *communitas* is then organised as a more permanent social system/change. Some participants in particular, (four of the Open Circle groups where I performed my fieldwork), had decided to join a National organisation that would provide legal and organisational guidelines. When I interviewed the leaders of these groups, they told me that they had decided to join this National non-profit organisation because it would serve the legal and governance needs of the various branches in the provinces in Canada. One

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<sup>67</sup> Here the term 'societal change' is used as Turner used it, of course the term Societal Change as used in contemporary Anthropology has a much broader discourse associated with it and relates to people interactions and how their relationships transform both societal institutions as well as culture over time.

group leader told me that they wanted *“to make it more permanent”*. Some group facilitators stated that they felt that there was a need to create opportunities outside of existing covens and other mainstream religious organisations would allow for a greater number of participants to be accommodated and allowed to have something akin to a coven experience without first having to spend years in training before initiation, and then finally being permitted to join a coven and become a fully-fledged member of a coven group. Sierra F explained:

*“...it is important to keep hosting Open Circles, because it gives people exposure, and opens possibilities as to what is available in a coven and helps to educate people. It also allows people to have that sense of belonging and togetherness on a regular basis”* – Sierra F (May 2022)

Shawn also told me that the idea of belonging to a more established organisation not only provided an opportunity for belonging and community, but also offered the added benefit of gaining some legitimacy.

Many of the Open Circle leaders or facilitators mentioned that they had prior to joining the National organisation, held infrequent gatherings or hosted ad hoc events, that did foster the sense of *communitas*. When they decided to join the National Organisation they were obliged to host a certain number of rituals on a yearly basis. This is an example of *communitas* lead to a permanent societal change.

Erika [38] who is a ritual facilitator and also the chair of the National Organisation had this to say about the National organisation:

*“I think the Organisation is a step forward for the community, I don't know if there was any other bigger organization that is open for gatherings and offering services for pagans, in this way. If the organisation were to cease to exist, like right now, I think*

*things would just go back to the way they were, with smaller groups of friends would meet all people would go and get the tarot done, or go for instructional courses, like at the local metaphysical stores and fairs but it would be a step back, they were created I think to get people together more regularly, and most of the time there are the same people that come together and can share each other's company, so it's really valuable for us to have that" – Erika (November 2020)*

One thing that should be made clear is that the idea of a permanent social change that is born out of the initial spontaneous *communitas* could be seen as manifested in a variety of ways within Open Circles. Based on the aforementioned discussion, a few of the Open Circle group facilitators who had started the groups eventually decided to join a National organisation as a way to make the groups more permanent and to achieve some degree of legitimacy and legal protection. It could be argued that as a result of these decisions and perhaps the desire to continue to have a more enduring community, a more permanent societal change occurred.

One of the groups I participated in, also formed a private eclectic type coven whose members come from the more regular members of the Amethyst Moon group. From my discussions with the Amethyst moon group's leadership, I understand that this private coven that was formed long after the Open Circle group had been in existence. This is particularly interesting because initially in the early 1970's and 1980's when Open Circles were first introduced as discussed earlier in the background Chapter of this dissertation., they were specifically developed to accommodate the growing interest in Wicca who could not easily be accommodated in existing covens. This is because the numbers of growing interest and the sheer number of people wanting to join covens was simply too large. So in this instance the reverse of that occurred, first

the Open Circle was formed and out of that the coven was born. This in itself could be interpreted as a type of societal change and also speaks to the idea of growth.

As a matter of interest I wanted to note that I found it interesting that as I began to be exposed to more Open Circle groups, that more and more Open Circle groups are not born out of covens, but rather that the reverse is occurring, where an a new eclectic coven will be born from an existing Open Circle group instead. One of the groups that I attended regularly in Edmonton as part of my fieldwork, had spurred at least three different covens, although to my knowledge the existence of these covens has been rather short lived. Although from some social media posts on one the group's Facebook site I noted that one of these covens was trying to attract new members and had posted an advertisement on the Open Circle groups' page to advertise that they were open to accepting new members.

### **6.3.3 Communitas as a panacea for the marginalised?**

Turner (1966:128), Daozhi (2018) Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardly (2020) have all written about how marginalisation exists in anti-structure and communitas, liminal space allows for structure to be ignored, and to be apart or separate from the norms inherent in social structure. It is in this marginalisation where the remedy or panacea is found, as Turner (1966) explained, it leaves participants feeling a heightened sense of intimacy, sharing and intense camaraderie that is experienced by participating in the sacred rites together.

As can be seen in the previous Sections, many of the participants cited the need for belonging and community as reasons that they decided to attend Open Circle rituals. One of the reasons I specifically wanted to look at the aspect of marginalisation is because this topic became thematic when talking to participants, specifically when I



asked them about how open they were about their religious affiliation or practices. A large majority of the participants admitted to being more private about their religion/practices and many said that they might not be specifically secretive about it, but that due to potential family and societal prejudices they would rather not “*advertise it*”. Wicca and Paganism can be viewed as liminal religious movements, because they are minority religions. Turner (1966:130) discusses the distinction between *communitas* and structure, and explains how *communitas* becomes manifest as marginality and inferiority. Marginalisation is by no means only present in Wiccan and Pagan communities, marginality is present in all spheres of society even in areas of society where it may not be so obvious, for example: Non Commission officers of the military, these officers are always seen as a lower rank than any other officer. Marginalisation of Wicca and Paganism in mainstream society is perhaps more apparent because the marginalisation against these groups makes apparent the ‘anti-structure’ nature of these religious movements. In contrast Turner (1966:129) relays how Benedictine monks, members of millenarian movements, hippies and other groups who live together in a community outside of mainstream society, at some point also need an “absolute authority or a divinely inspired leader” because *communitas* cannot forever exist outside of the organisational and material needs of people. The *communitas* marked by anti-structure is juxtaposed by social structure, but once the organisational needs are met, the normative structure may take hold again, albeit in a different form, resulting in normative *communitas* that began as ideological *communitas* for these groups (Turner, 1969:133).

Some participants are of the opinion that non-witches view them as a marginalised group, but they do not see themselves as being marginalised, and were not convinced that the religion is marginalised in any way. About a third of my research participants

felt that they were relegated to the fringes of by mainstream society. Marginalisation or rather the aspect of being found on the fringes of society is also a characteristic aspect of *communitas* (Turner, 1966:132). It is interesting to consider that Turner (1966:133) attributed liminality and the resulting *communitas* to the need for “radical social transition”. Richardson (2021:12) discusses how people who join new religious movements, seek “...a more meaningful belief system, ethic and lifestyle”, and how mainstream society tend to vilify and marginalise these groups because they are opposed to unconventional religions or movements. This substantiates Turner’s assertion that liminality and *communitas* are born out of the need or desire for social change.

Open Circle participants like Janice (34) who views herself as a Wiccan reports that she thinks that being Wiccan relegates you to the fringes of society. Her comment below also highlights how marginalised people are not offered the same treatment as other mainstream religions, and that Paganism and Wicca are how this manifest in mainstream society. She said:

*“...you know, I think that some of us are at the fringe and marginalised, we are not offered the same protection or respect that other religions are given. You can even see it in the National census, where the government will ask what your religions is, there are never options to state that you are Wiccan. There was once this box that you could tick “other” but that was it, not even Pagan was listed as an option, even though we are not all Pagan, it would have been better than nothing (the tick box with Pagan as an option) than no option to state what our religion is. Even when you go to the hospital and you have to mark your religious affiliation, there is never a box to tick to say that you are Wiccan... and then even when you mark “other” you will get some Christian pastor or minister that insists on seeing you and praying for you, which is*

*irritating, they are not even respectful if you tell them you are Wiccan. . . So even in the most basic things we are not considered, we are actually marginalised in many ways. So that is another reason I think it is important to belong to some organisation that is recognised at the government level and why it is important for the organisation to continue existing, otherwise we are left out in the cold” – Janice (September 2020)*

Janice statement draws attention to how marginalisation also brings to the fore the binary opposition aspect of *communitas*; the non-recognised nature of the religion of Wicca, versus the mainstream religions that are recognised by government organisations.

Marginalised peoples like Hippies and Benedictine monks are often associated counter-culture, or oppositional culture. It may be worth while noting that from what I have witnessed in Open Circle and Wiccan groups, Wiccans and Open Circle groups do not purposefully engage in counter-culture as did the Hippies and the Benedictine monks for example. Research participant Sarah Jane (42), presents some Open Circle type rituals, said that she definitely thinks as a religion Wiccans are marginalised. Even though she does not necessarily view herself to be part of the Wiccan community and does not always feel the need to be part of or identify as part of the community she does admit that it is beneficial to many others who seek community to belong to and participant in the Wiccan and Pagan community, and that participation in that community helps to alleviate marginalisation.

*“I think we are one hundred percent marginalised because we not part of the dominant culture, and we are a minority faith group...we are definitely at the margins which in itself is oppression there and that’s very valid and very real and we have to fight to be seen as legitimate. We have to often stand up for ourselves and our belief systems or practices. I often feel that being queer and being pagan is very similar. There is so*

*much misinformation out there, so you have to say, well okay, this is actually what it is, and explain it. So there is definite victimization, I've been threatened to be burned at the stake etc. As far as how that relates to community, well I get that for some people they need the structure... there are benefits to being a church recognized in the system so Wicca was able to be recognized because it is a recognized religious group in Canada. The National organisation for example is able to be recognized as a church so there working within a system that they have and I get the benefits of that. As I have already said I am not big on exclusion and gatekeeping. I hold that Open Circles are generally just welcoming to everyone because there welcoming and can belong" – Sarah Jane (November 2020)*

One point that Sarah Jane mentioned regarding how it is important that Wicca is a recognised religion in Canada is important in my opinion, because being recognised as a religion provides a certain amount of legitimisation, and allows clergy members the rights to apply for marriage credential, visit the sick in hospital as chaplains, and conduct prison visits to Pagan inmates. It also allows some groups who have a large enough following to register as a church organisation, which comes with the benefits of running the affairs of the group as a non-profit organisation, which in itself provides some tax benefits. Otherwise without the acknowledgement of Wiccan being a religion, it makes the job of clergy members almost impossible to fulfil the above mentioned roles.

Being on the edges of society, as well as the attribute of being stateless, to which Turner (1969:96) refers as being part of the attributes of *communitas*, is reflected in the above statement by Sarah Jane, where she refers to being "*queer and pagan is very similar*". They are similar because both queer (or gender-based) and Pagans are

often systematically oppressed by both social systems and governments, essentially leaving them stateless.

Many witches especially those who are vocal on Social Media also discuss how witches and Pagans are marginalised within society, and some are even of the opinion the witches tend towards “self-marginalization”. A popular author and teacher Dr. Brannan, who identifies as a witch noted that: “...as a witch is another act of self-marginalization. When we do this, most of us are stepping away from acceptance by our families, dominant groups and culture. Witches have been marginalized in many cultures for centuries. By accepting that we are witches, we are accepting this long history of marginalization” (Brannen, 2020). In terms of *communitas* this is of course a voluntary action where those who become marginalised purposefully move towards or take actions to become unified in the “interstices” of life (Turner, 1969:128) and is also connected to Turner’s (1979) discussion on “opation” and liminoid phenomenon. In other words, they purposefully accept marginalisation and become unified in a state of *communitas*. In this example, marginalisation is viewed from the perspective of self-marginalisation, rather than being marginalised by societal structures. What is interesting here is that in my fieldwork experiences, participants would sometimes voice that part of the reason they are still in the proverbial “broom closet”, is because they are still fearful of persecution. They would also cite the historic witch trials in that took place in about 1610-1692 and the consequent prosecutions and executions as discussed in Section: 3.4 of Chapter three, as reasons to be fearful of publically declaring their religious affiliation. Some participants provided contemporary examples of how Pagans have been targeted and prejudiced both socially and legally, as mentioned earlier in the literature Chapter 3. As a result of this viewpoint, as well as the fact that some witches are in fact prejudiced by some social and cultural groups,

there are pockets within the Wiccan and Pagan communities that feel that they are marginalised. This points once more to Turner (1969) concepts of anti-structure that exist in *communitas*, where structure is akin to the church, state and society in general.

Not all participants share the view that Wiccans and Pagans are purposefully marginalised. Leslie for example did not see Wiccans and Pagans as being purposefully marginalised, her opinion is that:

*“Wiccans and Pagans can be found in all walks of life, we carry on like normal regular people, if you don’t specifically know someone is Wiccan, Pagan or a witch, there is hardly any way to know for sure, so in that way I don’t think we are specifically marginalised. I think most that people say we are marginalised simply because there are not that many of us. We are a small group comparatively to the other larger religions. So maybe if we were more open about educating the public and standing up for our own rights and getting out there and having our say, then we can’t complain about not being acknowledged. I think though that some people just like the idea of being out there and dressing Goth-like and being specifically weird. That is not part of the religion, most of those that are Wiccan, you can’t really tell at all, they are Doctors, lawyers, professionals of all kinds, even your local hairdresser. So if we are marginalised it’s usually to do with the fact that people like to be purposefully transgressive and put themselves apart from the rest. What also helps is that we actually have a “family” a group where we can belong, and I don’t know if many marginalised groups have this” (October 2020)*

It is important to note that Wiccans and Pagans, are not recognisable as a distinct group based on the types of clothing they wear on a daily basis. It is pertinent here to point out that what Leslie is describing is in fact liminoid phenomena where group

membership of Open Circles is to an extent related to choice or “option” as Turner (1979) argues.

Thorn Nightwind (37), who lives in the USA, has the outlook that Wiccans tend to be more so in the fringes in society as a whole, because so many are secretive and private, especially those of who are initiates and are used to being secretive about their religious affiliation. This points to self-marginalisation, and once more refers to Turner’s (1979) idea of “option” as discussed previously in this Chapter. Thorn qualifies this statement and says that he is more private through choice as there is no real reason for most people to be secretive and private considering that many of us live in first world countries that guarantee freedom of religion, although he acknowledges that this is not the case for all people across the globe. The reason he cites for being private about his beliefs and religions is that he sees himself as a civil servant in his career, as he is a public servant and feels that he needs to be more neutral and non-partisan.

He also said that this is not something that Christians, Jews and some Buddhists necessarily think about, they sometimes wear the crosses and express their faith a lot more openly and don’t necessarily even consider neutrality. He also said that he chooses to remain neutral and not express his religion openly in his workplace because his religion is special to him and he considers it a private affair, and that he feels that if he were to bring it to his workplace he would feel that it would be profaning his faith. He also feels that it would not do anybody any good and he is not being paid to talk about his religion in his workplace. He also said that he thinks that as a religion we are not marginalised, despite the fact that we still have relatively small numbers. He said that this is evidenced by the fact that many regular mainstream malls, stores

and shops now stock items like books, jewellery or something related witchcraft, and that you don't necessarily see the same representation for other religions in mainstream stores.

Illian H (52), said that many people simply don't know what it means if you say you are Wiccan, and that she would often spend much of her time educating people on the topic, she said that she is often surprised that in general people are actually really interested in the religion and want to be educated and contrary to what some might say, not all non-witches are ready to "*burn you at the stake*". She said she sometimes finds it frustrating because if she were to say that she was "*Catholic or Jewish or whatever*", most people will at least have an idea of what that actually entails. She is of the opinion that Pagans and Wiccans have integrated themselves into society in every level and that it is not easy to know if your neighbour, colleague physician or any civil servant is Pagan. As a result she does not think that Pagans can see themselves as marginalised. For her marginalisation is a result of the fact that not many people know what Paganism or Wiccan entails and as a result those who are of that religious persuasion are marginalised simply due to size and the general public's lack of knowledge regarding the religion. Illian's frustration at the public's lack of understanding is similar to how the rest of society viewed the Hippie movements in the 1960's and 1970's. Hippies purposefully lived in separate communities at the fringes of society. Their behaviours of smoking dope and begging as well as their dress, hairstyles and even their lingo were all in opposition to the societal norms of the time. Even the prescription imposed by society that regulated sex were transgressed by the hippies. Both the hippie movement as well as Woodstock Music and Art Fair, that is typically just referred to as Woodstock is a good example of an event that is often referred to as a counter culture event, that can be classified as *communitas* event



(Poon: 2016, Braunstein & Doyle:2001) . Turner (1969) also refers to among others the hippie movement as an example of a type of normative communitas. As noted previously Helen mentioned that:

*“..a group of people where you don't have to watch what you say, we have our own language we don't have to stop and explain it because people just know about it”.*

(September 2020)

Like the hippie movement, Open circles also developed their own lingo. This aspect of normative communitas, resulted in a linguistic development, where eventually 'structure' takes hold once more, and the anti-structure of even Open Circles eventually leads to some permanent societal changes, even if these changes occur in a smaller percentage of the population.

What is interesting is that participants tended to be split in their opinions on whether the religion is viewed as marginalised, or rather how marginalisation takes place in mainstream society. There does however, seem to be a consensus among participants that the public are not educated as to Wiccan practices and that this may be because globally there are comparatively a small number of adherents, which may be why marginalisation occurs for Wiccans and Pagans. Whereas other participants are convinced that Pagans and Wiccans are a purposefully marginalised group due to prejudice and historical reasons. Most participants were of the opinion though that the Open Circles do seem to serve a function of facilitating a sense belonging. In some cases combating that sense of marginalisation because individuals who come together to practice are harder to ignore.

#### **6.3.4 Transgression**

Liminality and the anti-structure component of liminality specifically, is often seen as a binary opposition to the normative or social norms of society. Turner (1969:1979) often focussed on the interaction between social structure and anti-structure in his discussions on *communitas* and liminality. Similarly, Durkheim ([1912] 1991) discusses the sacred versus the profane in religion as binary oppositions where he equates religion to “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (Durkheim, 1912:39-44). It can be argued that transgression is also part of the anti-structure referred to by Turner. The binary opposition of Durkheim is less evident in the context of Wicca because what is viewed as “sacred” in Wicca would probably be viewed as transgressive or “profane” if viewed from the perspective of the mainstream religious perspectives of Abrahamic religions. In this Section I will be discussing transgression and how this concept also extends to *communitas*.

If we are to assume that what we mean by “transgressive” involves disrupting the social norms deemed acceptable in society, then Wicca specifically can be seen as being a transgressive religious practice. An article by John Beckett (2015) entitled: “Must Paganism Be Transgressive?” discusses Witchcraft and Paganism and how Wiccans tend to be transgressive, specifically in terms of how the religion/practices provide alternatives to mainstream culture and ideology. The article also touches on how some Wiccan traditions practice sex magic, and how they transgress sexual mores in mainstream society. This along with the discussions I had with my participants indicates how Wiccan specifically can be viewed as transgressive. Pravin Prasad, an author of a popular blog also said that: “...these alternative spiritualities are therefore inherently subversive; they have always been against the status quo” (Prasad, 2019).

When I asked participants why they thought Wicca specifically is transgressive, most pointed to some of the aspects of Wiccan that could be seen as transgressive. Some branches of Wicca practice skyclad (in the nude), make use of certain techniques including the use of a scourge, sex magic and the use of certainentheogens as a means to achieve or enhance their magical powers, all of which can be considered contrary to mainstream religious behaviour. It should be emphasised here that not all traditions of Wiccan engage in these practices. The traditions to which I belong, for example are generally opposed to these practices. These codes of conduct that steer away from structure and societal norms enable communitas, participants are released have the freedom to pursue new and unusual modes of behaviour and thus engage with anti- structure. As mentioned previously these transgressive behaviours can be equated with the hippie movement that Turner (1969) also discussed, where even the lingo used by hippies was indicative of the push against mainstream society. For example, the phrase: “far out” also meant to far away from the ordinary, thus to free of society and thus societal norms. Most of the participants I interviewed generally did not have firsthand accounts of most of these practices, although many had experienced practicing ritual skyclad. Many participants however, seemed to have formed their ideas based on books they had read or relied on hearsay. Some participants even cited *TikTok*<sup>68</sup> and other social platforms as spaces where they had gained this information, but none few had had firsthand experiences of using sex magic,entheogens etc. to enhance their magical practices. However, most participants tended to agree that Wicca is transgressive because its philosophies are different to mainstream religions.

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<sup>68</sup> TikTok is a form of social media available as an application on either a computer or a cellular phone. This application allows users to create short videos on any topic and share them to the world.

Other participants also pointed out that in some ways the way in which Wicca as a religion is organised and the existence of Open Circles (as an off-shoot of Wiccan Traditional Initiatory covens) can be seen as transgressive because Wicca does not conform to mainstream norms in terms of how religious organisations are typically organised. Wicca and Paganism are considered new religious movements, and to my knowledge there are no central governing organisations for Wicca as a religion. This may be the case because in Turner's (1969:1979) conception of *communitas* and structure versus anti-structure, once an organisation becomes centralised, it once more becomes part of society and structure thereby losing its capacity to be 'constructed'. There are a few that offer membership for traditional Wiccans, for example, the New Wiccan Church International (NWC), which offers membership to initiates of British Traditional Wicca branches, but as an organisation they do not claim to speak for autonomous covens or traditions. The fact that most Wiccan and Pagan groups run autonomously, without the oversight of any centralised governing body, can also be considered transgressive. Even those groups that do belong to a centralised National organisation run autonomously without the interference of the National organisation. Conversely, most mainstream religions in contemporary society have been in existence for many years and many have centralised governing and training organisations.

This is also true when it comes to the training and ordination of clergy or group facilitators in both Open Circles as well as in initiatory Wiccan covens. As a societal norm, mainstream clergy members are expected to undergo years of training and education in order to take up a ministerial position is prevalent in most religions. Although extensive training is more prevalent within traditional initiatory Wiccan covens, where the members of the Priesthood undergo extensive training in the

performance of ritual, occult studies, pastoral care and other modalities related to the practice of witchcraft. In general, members of the High Priesthood in established Initiatory Traditions generally do not enter their positions without being thoroughly trained and vetted by elder councils and peers within their tradition. This is not the case in Open Circle contexts, as only a few of the ritual leaders whom I interviewed had any formal or informal training, often they were self-appointed group leaders or facilitators, few are actually ever vetted by community members or peers. This could point to the more spontaneous nature of the type of *communitas* that exists in most Open Circles.

Wiccan and Pagan groups often do not have the same social acumen as their counterparts in other religious organisations. In mainstream religions, the clergy members are often highly regarded by members of society even if those individuals do not belong to their own preferred religion. Think for example about the Dalai Lama or the Pope, or any other clergy member of a mainstream religion. They command respect based on their socially established position of authority, regardless of whether others in society may or may not be follower of that particular religion, these people are given respect even from those members of society who are not Buddhist or Roman Catholic. Whereas Pagan and Wiccan clergy or Priesthood members are not offered the same respect or acknowledgement of their clerical positions. This perhaps highlights how liminality and *communitas* together call attention to the arbitrariness and artificiality of social structure and social norms.

I asked Apollo (49), his opinion on how Wicca does not conform to the normal societal norms specifically how clergy members are viewed. He told me that the main reason for this has to do with the differences in the religious structure and the sheer number

of adherents. He said that in many mainstream religions like Catholicism, and the fact that there are millions of adherents and the Pope in this example is a single leader of the religion, also forms a political function as well.

*“...whereas in Traditional Wicca every single person who is an initiate is a priest or priestess of the religion. We don’t have a Pope or an ultimate authority, each person is an authority unto themselves in initiatory Wicca. There may be cases in our religion where some people may be acknowledged as elders in the religion and may be called upon to help, and to pass down traditional lore as well as to also give wisdom an insight to others should they need it” - Apollo. (June 2022)*

Ultimately though he concluded that we are all initiates are priests and priestesses without a congregation. The only difference between elders of a tradition and the other members is that the elders and High Priesthood have more mileage and wisdom than someone who is newer to the tradition, as a priest or priestess may not have.

*“The Catholic Church has a leader and a hierarchy, but the majority of those who belong to that religion are not priests or priestesses. I don’t have anybody who I am looking to or whose authority I need to follow, I might ask for guidance or might ask a mentor and my teacher in the coven for assistance. But after you are initiated you become their equal. So anybody who I have initiated in our coven to the level of a HPS or HP, they are now my equal, so I have no authority over them other than the fact that I have been doing it longer, but at the same time even though we are a small religion, we don’t necessarily get involved in political things out in the public like other religious leaders do. We don’t do that in our spaces because the only person you are responsible for is you because we are our own autonomous units” – Apollo (June 2022)*

Here Apollo, highlights an important aspect of *communitas*, that of equality, in some Wiccan Traditional initiatory covens all members are seen and treated as equals.

Thorn Nightwind's (37) opinion on this topic is that there is a difference between the function of an initiated member of the High Priesthood within initiatory Wicca, and the function of someone who facilitates an Open Circle. He said that if an Open Circle is run by an initiated member of traditional Wicca as a member of High Priesthood, in that role they would serve as the Priest or Priestess and minister to the congregation because the members of the Open Circle group will not usually be initiated priests and priestesses. Even if that person is not a federally recognised and ordained minister their role is the same, that person ministers to a congregation. Whereas in the case of a member of the High Priesthood, in a coven situation, the High Priesthood does not minister to the members of the coven, they are simply authorised to lead the ritual based on their skill levels. He quipped and said that there is a running joke in his tradition that states that the authority of the High Priesthood only extends 9 feet in diameter, that is because the sacred circle is usually cast to be nine feet in diameter, and the high Priesthood generally has no authority outside of that circle as each person is autonomous and answers to themselves. This point is an essential characteristic of *communitas*.

Sierra F, is an initiate of a branch of Traditional Wicca and also runs an Open Circle group, highlighted what many other participants had highlighted as being problematic when it comes to some Open Circle facilitators. She said that it is not uncommon in public groups for someone to *“read two books and decide that they are going to start a coven and become a High Priestess”*. Sierra also said she shared with me that closed covens have their own hierarchy and degree system, and training. However someone who practices as a solitary Wiccan or Pagan does not have access to that knowledge or understanding. She also said that when she first started out, she did not have access to any mentor or training and that only came later when she joined an

established tradition. She said that there is definitely a benefit to belonging to an established tradition because as she put it:

*“Sometimes there are situations that come up that you may not be equipped to deal with, so that is one of the benefits of having mentors and established groups, perhaps even the concept of an established central organisational group, but we don’t have that so we rely heavily on our traditional elder council and leaders, which does not exist in Open Circles”. She also mentioned that one problem with Open Circle groups is that leaders often get “big heads and egos” and there are often political internal power struggles and sometimes abuse as a result of leadership thinking that they should have power over, versus power from within – Sierra F (May 2022)*

A prime example of this occurred in one of the groups in which I did my fieldwork, two of the previous leaders of a particular group had been expelled from the group because they had contravened the bylaws of the group, one had been misappropriating funds, and the other was publicly accused of being a sexual predator. Quite a few participants pointed to these incidents as example of how Open Circle facilitators that are not properly vetted and where there is little organisational recourse, can have negative effects on a spiritual community. Some were also quick to point out that similar occurrences are not limited to any particular spiritual community/religion as many different religions have had predators amongst their ministers. Although the participants who relayed this story to me were pointing to a lack of organisational recourse, they actually functioned as an organisation to dismiss the facilitators. Richardson (2021) described a similar situation where members of a movement identified group leaders who had become corrupt and then forced those leaders out by means of organised resistance, and changed the culture and governance of the group. This example could be pointing towards the normative type of *communitas* that



eventually returns to structure and normative society, because the participants crave governance.

Samantha G (55) who is a High Priestess and also provides Wiccan 101<sup>69</sup> training to anyone interested outside of her tradition, commented:

*“...I think that in general those who have trained and done the work to get to a high level of proficiency, need to be more involved in Open Circle activities partly because there are many religions and spiritual groups that do not have any accreditation, so it’s almost on those who have been traditionally trained to educate and make sure that those in positions of power don’t overstep, and the only way to that sometimes is to get accreditation of some type because that allows some form of recourse for those that overstep..”* (December 2020)

As can be seen in the above discussions, the main reasons aspects of transgressiveness that participants pointed out relate to the philosophical ideas inherent in Wicca relating to: sex, nudity, the use of entheogens, organisational structure and training. These are rather different from norms within mainstream religions. As discussed earlier, Pagan/Wiccan Open circles were developed as a way to accommodate the growing interest in Wicca and a way to provide for more people to have a taste of what Wicca as a religion entails without first joining a coven. In some sense, even the creation of these Open Circle groups can be seen as a response to/against existing structures, and could also point to the aspect of anti-structure. This too speaks the part of *communitas* that is related to the creation of new social structures and alternative forms of social relationships that do not conform to the usual

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<sup>69</sup> Wicca 101 is a generic term that is used for the teaching materials to instruct a Beginner Wiccan

### 6.3.5 Equality

Turner (1969: 1974) in his example of the Ndembu tribe of Zambia, those undergoing the rites of passage are seen to own nothing, and even go naked to demonstrate that they are liminal beings, they have no status or property and don't wear any clothing to signify their rank in society. Turner (1969:106) compiled a whole list of the properties of liminality, in his discussion of the differences between the properties of liminality and the status system by using these as binary oppositions to illustrate the differences. He specifically lists: equality versus inequality, nakedness or uniform clothing versus distinction of clothing and absence of rank versus distinction of rank as properties of liminality that also relate to the concept of equality. It should be noted that the concept of equality as expressed by Turner (1969:96) is only the equality among those who participate in the ritual together, this equality does not necessarily apply to the ritual facilitators or ritual "elders", the elders guide the process and are not equal to those undergoing the rite of passage. As Turner explained: "... a communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders". In the case of Wiccan rituals, the "elders" would be the ritual facilitators and the members of the High Priesthood.

As can be seen in popular Wiccan text, *The Grimoire of Lady Sheba* (1975: 150), the very first Law states: "In the Magic Circle, the words, commands, and every wish of the High Priestess are law...All male coveners must bend the knee and give her a kiss on the right cheek ...", in general, in a coven context, the rest of the coven will adhere to the direction of the ritual facilitators, but to what degree they rest of the coven are all equal is debateable. In most covens the clothing or accessories worn by the High Priesthood signify their rank, and in many traditions, you can distinguish between the different ranks of the other coveners by the colour of the cingulum they wear. A

cingulum is a coloured cord worn around the waist of a covener. One of the uses of this cord is to indicate the degree obtained, similar in a way to how there are different belts in Karate. Even in traditions where the High Priesthood have 'authority' over the coveners, there are also multiple other levels of rank below the High Priesthood, those that hold higher degrees<sup>70</sup>, and will have various levels of authority over those of a lower rank.

In some Open Circles, specifically those who have been in existence for some time, are distinct examples that are contrary to the idea of equality, where participants are not always content with "submitting to the authority of the elders" as Turner (1969) put it. In one Open Circle in Edmonton, for example, some participants complained that previous High Priest and Priestess ran the Open Circle in an authoritarian manner and did not take any of the suggestions or opinions of the rest of the group into consideration. Here participants were obviously not content with submitting to and obedience to the ritual facilitators, instead they expected to be equal and have an equal say in all the affairs of the Open Circle rituals.

Sierra told me that when she first started running her eclectic coven, and later when she got involved in *Pagan Pride*, which is essentially an Open Circle type group. She tried to run the groups in a more democratic way because that is what of the group members had said this is what they wanted. However, the outcome of this is that nothing ever got accomplished because participants could very rarely agree on the best course of action or did not want to specifically volunteer to complete tasks. She said that allowing some form of democracy tended to be counterproductive, so even if

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<sup>70</sup> In British Traditional Wicca, a degree structure is in place that indicates the level of spiritual attainment, training, skill and experience of those who have obtained a specific rank.

participants wanted to be equal on all accounts, some form of leadership was important in order to get things done.

In the Open Circle group in Regina for example, full members (that is those who have passed a probationary period and have paid their dues) wear a green cord to signify that they are full members of the group, thus setting themselves apart from those who are not full members. The High Priestess of this group tends to wear distinctive robes and cloaks and sometimes even wears a tiara as a signifier of her ranking as a High Priestess. The High Priestess in this group is also the only one who is permitted to carry a ritual athame. Similarly in the Edmonton Open Circle for example the High Priestess and High Priest wear stoles to signify their ranks and the clergy in training members wear shorter stoles to signify their roles. Thus even in Open Circle groups, ranking is codified and appears as artifacts of dress, robes and ritual tools. However the type of rank that is referred to here is related to the ritual rank, that similar to Turner's (1969: 93-111) conception of how rank applies in liminality, where the rank only applies to the "initiate" and the "instructor".

Some forms of traditional Wiccan hold the opinion that all are equal in the sight of the Gods. For example as Thorn Nightwind, mentioned earlier that in his tradition all coveners are considered autonomous individuals and not subject to the law of the High Priestess/Priest. In Turner's ideas (1969, 1979) of *communitas*, individuals describe themselves as equals, both during ritual and after ritual liminality where they put aside their societal status of their regular or mundane lives. Turner's conception also includes participants creating alternative social relations or the ability to invent new social relations outside of the normal functioning of societal norms and hierarchies.

In my observations some facilitators of Open Circle groups also attempt to embody the ideal of equality amongst participants. As Helen told me:

*“No one is above anyone else in the group we are all divine and who am I to tell anyone how to worship or experience anything”.*(September 2020)

One participant in particular said that they are of the opinion that, ritual nudity removes the social ranks and enforces equality, which in their opinion is why some British Traditional Wiccans specifically practice ritual nudity. This example is similar to how Turner’s (1969) neophytes were naked and painted white which signified their liminality and their lack of status, property or position. Another aspect that is relevant here, is that by stripping the body of clothing, it also removes the constraints of society. What is interesting here, is that some participants who belong to a coven that does practice ritual nudity, mentioned that one of the reasons they enjoy skyclad practice, is because this practice involves a level of trust and vulnerability, which may enhance the aspect of camaraderie as it exists in *communitas*. Although the concept of ritual nudity might seem to be a compelling way to substantiate the concept of equality in Turner’s scheme, this point is debateable, because ritual nudity is not universally present in all Wiccan covens. Regardless of whether or not a coven practices skyclad there is always some ranking system in place within the traditional degree system itself. So even if rank and social standing outside of the ritual as these relate to mainstream society are removed, rank still exists. As an example that exemplifies why equality does not exist in these contexts, I draw on the example related to the Harley Davidson club. This club is a typical example of liminoid phenomenon, where the insignia and colours worn on the jackets by the members, is respected and shared by all. However should the members misbehave while wearing these jackets, that behaviour may evoke a sanction and could lead to them being expelled from the group.

As you can see from the examples and discussions above, equality as a component or artifact of *communitas* does not appear to exist universally in Open Circle rituals or Coven contexts.

### **6.3.6 Utopian Ideas**

One feature of *communitas* that really stood out in Open Circle settings is the aspect related to the beginning of Utopian ideas that Turner (1969:132) describes as “ideological *communitas*”. A characteristic feature of ideological *communitas*, is that participants express “the ideal conditions under which such experiences may be expected to flourish and multiply”. The ideas expressed are often philosophical in nature, and generally only expressions of thought rather than concrete actions. These are often visionary ideas of something that could be done or worked towards collectively as a group and often also includes a large amount of emotional excitement. This is also a heightened experience that is present in many different religions.

One theme related to the Utopian ideas that exists in nearly all the Open Circles I attended, and is specifically talked about by participants, especially those who have been regular attendees, is the vision of being able to communally purchase property. Participants dream of being able to club together and purchase land as a type of co-operative effort where they can live together and express and experience their world views on a constant and daily basis. They often dream of communal style living arrangement, specifically where each household has its own tiny homes with other communal buildings and a permanent place of worship. Usually, the discussions include living in harmony with nature in a forest or wooded area and being able to honour and take care of the land they will inhabit. Initially I thought this was a purely Canadian phenomenon, partly I assumed because Canadians in my opinion tend to

be more socialist in outlook. However, when I visited covens and group leaders in Pennsylvania, one of the organisers of Pagan Pride told me that this phenomenon is very common in the USA as well. She said that she thinks that participants are so enthralled with the ritual and related activities that they get caught up in the ideal of living together permanently, but doubts the realistic benefits of this ideal.

What is very interesting here is that various groups express very similar ideas related to a type of communal living. During conversations around these topics, most who are included in the conversation seem to be really vested in the ideas as they describe the ideas in great detail and with great enthusiasm.

### **6.3.7 The effect of the move cyberspace rituals during the Covid 19 Pandemic**

No one could have anticipated the societal changes that COVID-19 would have on our lives. As with other parts of society, most religious organisations were forced to adapt and take their offerings and services to a predominantly online platform. Group leaders of Open Circles and covens alike expressed that they never anticipated that they would have to perform rituals online especially at the beginning of the pandemic when restrictions were imposed, most people assumed they would be of a short duration, and initially many group leaders decided to simply go into hiatus and to put group gatherings on hold until the pandemic was over. After a few months when it became obvious that the length of the pandemic was not certain, many groups decided to present their rituals and related activities online, but as Shawn S (35) from Saskatoon pointed out, some groups were more successful at online presentations than others. He said that part of the reason for this is that the dynamics of online ritual

are vastly different to in-person ritual, and that the technicalities involved in online ritual took some time to master.

The Pandemic had a huge impact on my own fieldwork experiences as a researcher. It took me some time to navigate the dynamics of interviewing people online through online platforms like *Zoom and Facebook Messenger*. Watching online rituals was incredibly time-consuming and often down right exhausting. No precedent had been set for this type of fieldwork experience, which continued for well over two years.

Part of the reason some ritual facilitators struggled with online facilitation is that not all had the technical know-how or computer and related equipment to present online rituals. Secondly, online rituals had to take a vastly different format to in-person rituals, ritual facilitators were left to re-invent or invent new ways of presenting on-line rituals, which took ingenuity as well as trial and error on the part of the ritual facilitators. Raven R (44) who used to run the Saskatoon Open Circle told me that she does not feel comfortable online that initially she tried to present some things online, but that eventually she decided to abandon presenting online rituals as they caused her too much anxiety and no longer brought the joy that she experienced when she had presented in person rituals. Other facilitators like Erika from the Regina Open Circle flourished and held incredibly successful rituals and other related activities. Her prowess at presenting online rituals became known amongst other related groups and soon people from all over the country were also attending her online presentations. Shawn S mentioned that Erika has the technical know-how and the training to actually accomplish this feat as she is a communication specialist by training and her career is based in communication.



During the two-year period where most groups all over Canada and the USA had moved their meetings and online during the pandemic. What I found interesting is that each ritual facilitator had a different approach to presenting their online. The rituals that appeared to have the most attendance were those that took place in online forums like *Facebook Rooms* and *Zoom*, where participants were able to actively engage in ritual proceedings. Jonas who runs a very small Wiccan coven also presented his monthly Esbats and Sabbats online for almost the entire length of the Covid-Pandemic. During this time, he presented his rituals in the form of *Facebook live* event, where there was no opportunity for interaction, this may have been why there was limited attendance for these rituals.

Later when the pandemic restrictions in Canada had been dragging on for almost two years, attendance of any of the rituals I attended seemed to drop off significantly. When I asked participants why they no longer attended online events they told me that they were suffering from what was starting to be referred to as “Zoom fatigue” and mental exhaustion. This type of mental exhaustion refers to the exhaustion people experience after a video call, also sometimes referred to as virtual fatigue according to Tomprou, Young, Chikersal, Woolley and Dabbisch (2021) who explains that virtual fatigue place increased demands on our cognitive capacities during online conferencing. Tomprou, Young, Chikersal, Woolley and Dabbisch (2021) also explains that online conference requires us to have to work harder to read people’s facial expressions and vocal tones making conversations and interactions much harder than in real life. The verbal delay in responses also makes it more difficult for us to interpret what people are saying.

One facilitator told me that the biggest challenge in online rituals revolved around the feeling you build during ritual, where energy is raised amongst those present, and that it is difficult to achieve for inexperienced ritual participants. This is indicative of the fact that online and virtual participation is completely isolated from the idea of shared participation that occurs during liminality and then leads to *communitas*.

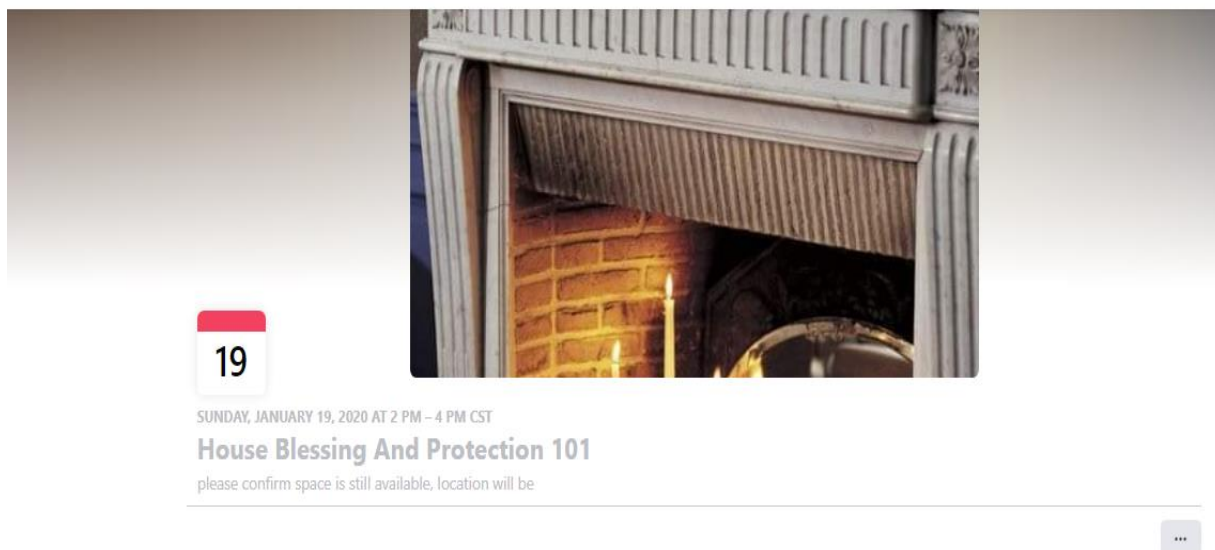
I interviewed some participants in early 2022 about the online rituals. Some facilitators like Helen who runs the Amethyst moon group told me that she is going to continue to present at least some of the rituals online as she has noticed that they help to connect people who otherwise would have no access to rituals as they live in remote areas. Even some traditional coven leaders told me that the pandemic allowed them to explore alternative ways of presenting rituals and training to people all over the continent in ways that they could not have foreseen. Online interactions also have the added bonus of allowing group members who are not in the same geographical location to feel more connected and less isolated.

When I asked participants themselves what they thought of the online rituals most told me that they were glad they were available during the pandemic and that they “*were better than nothing*”, and that the ritual presentations helped people to stay connected to each other and also to keep that sense of belonging.

### **6.3.8 Open Circle non-ritual activities and their effect on *Communitas***

Many of the Open Circles also provide other opportunities for participants to get together and have interactions outside of ritual activities.

Most of the Open Circle ritual groups included a time after ritual that provided participants with the opportunity to enjoy snacks or potluck meals, where they could share their experiences, ask questions or socialise. Facilitators encouraged



**Figure: 32 Invitation to a workshop for an Open Circle Group**

participants to engage with other participants, and to ask questions or simply to just get to know each other outside of the ritual experience. Brianna told me that this was her favourite part of attending the events because she is really new to Paganism and has many questions that she can ask others who attended the ritual. It also provides a time for those who attend ritual more frequently to catch up as they may not have seen each other outside of the previous ritual.

As mentioned earlier, many of the groups also hosted other activities, like book clubs, workshops, seminars and volunteer opportunities to assist with the various parts needed to facilitate a successful ritual. These activities although not part of the ritual performance, also formed part of community building and provided more opportunities for participants to get to know each other.

Those participants who were regularly engaged in other activities organised by Open Circles, tended to report a greater sense of belonging to the community and would attend the actual rituals more frequently as they were actively engaged in the community activities allowing for a greater sense of community and belonging.

Roseanne mentioned that the sharing of food is just as important for a sense of connection as the ritual itself. She said:

*“during the ritual you feel this intense sense of connection to deity and those you are engaging in ritual with, but if you don’t have the opportunity to bond after ritual, you lose part of it, you lose the opportunity for expression of those feelings” – Roseanne (November 2020).*

Overall I noted that only about 30 percent of Open Circle participants tended to participate in activities related to the Open Circles that were not specifically rituals. Most of the participants seemed to be happy just attending rituals. As one participant told me:

*“I don’t really need to attend those group activities because I can attend those in my mundane life as well. I think that maybe it creates opportunities for people who need that but mostly I can get that somewhere else”- Able (December 2019)*

Here it is evident that the core members who are involved in these activities are engaged in normative *communitas* which results in lasting social bonds, and related to the “common sense of purpose or communion” (Turner, 1969:95-97) that is resultant from *communitas*.

### **6.3.9 The unanticipated effects of *Communitas***

Some ritual leaders like Jennifer and Helen highlighted an interesting observation in terms of the unanticipated potential detrimental effects of *communitas* in Open Circle rituals. These group leaders expressed their concern with the how participants viewed that sense of belonging and community. They also explained that the use of familial type language can paint an unrealistic picture of the true nature of the groups’ objectives.

Jennifer told me that Wiccan communities in its purest sense is usually seen as a positive thing, and that in coven groups it may well be positive, but that is because the dynamics of covens are vastly different from how the dynamics of Open circles function. Many participants like Jane for example expressed that she felt a sense of belonging to the Open Circle group and also felt that the participants were like an extended family to her. Many other participants also expressed a similar sentiment and told me that when they found the Open Circle group, they felt like they experienced a sense of home-coming, and family. Jennifer told me that this can be seen as positive but that she had experienced situations where participants and ritual facilitators had been expelled from the group. This had led to those people feeling a great loss, depression and disappointment. Jennifer also mentioned that:

*“..family language is dangerous, chucking someone out of a group because they are not a good fit for the group, is not how family works in real life, you don't just chuck a family member out, they are always family”. (January 2021)*

She said that in traditional covens, members adhere to the tenet of “perfect love and perfect trust” and once you are initiated into a coven, you essentially are adopted in to the family, with ties that are sometimes stronger than normative family ties. The purpose of initiation of a Neophyte in traditional Wicca usually marks the completion of training, it is also the ceremony where Neophytes swear an oath to keep the secrets of the tradition. Open Circles do not adhere to this same practice, and in fact it would be all but impossible to impose this practice on Open Circle participants, and would create false expectations. Open Circles are by nature fairly transient and participants don't always have the opportunities to get to intimately know, connect and exercise long term bonds with fellow participants.

Helen Oscar also mentioned that she thinks that the idea of connection and belonging is an important part of our religion, but that it can also sometimes *be “a double-edged sword or downright dangerous”*. She explained that when people experience ritual together, they feel an intense connection with each other as a result of that experience. Participants may feel like they know each other better than you really do. Sometimes participants can get caught in that feeling of connection had come to believe that those people are better friends and they really are. Participants definitely do feel a connection with others and may even feel like they are part of you, but in reality, is that sense of belonging and connection may be misleading and in some cases detrimental when participants realise that others are not really as close to them as they think they are.

Another interesting take on how a false sense of the familial bonds comes from Thorn who discussed how Wicca originally developed in England. He shared that the religion of Wicca was only really solidified in the 1950's in the New Forrest area in England, and that it largely came about as a result of the blending of witchcraft as a folk practice and some ideas that came from the practitioners of witchcraft who were also practitioners of lodge-based and other occult systems. For example some witches also belonged to Theosophist societies, the fraternal orders, like the Free Masons, the Odd Fellows, The Rebekah's and other fraternal orders including some of the Hermetic and the Druid revival groups. These groups tended to use familial language, and would use terms, like companions, brothers, sisters, brethren etc. Wicca as it exists today, specifically traditional Wicca still has a secret society model, and the concept of fraternal orders, (by the very nature them being called fraternal orders) implies a familiar bond even if in that fraternal bond there were people not related to each other by blood relations. Thorn said that he could see how in a traditional Wiccan coven

setting within initiatory spaces this type of language may still be used, because fellow initiates underwent similar if not the same types of ritual initiation, and in some sense you could consider your fellow initiates as brothers and sisters of the art and also a brother or sister in the religion. He feels that using this type of familial language in open spaces or eclectic type spaces might not be the best idea, because it can be misleading, because it does not accurately portray the goal of the Open Circle groups, and that the reason people in Open circle groups possibly use this terminology is because they take initiatory Wiccan terminology and pieces of our rituals and apply that their eclectic practices.

Ultimately the desire for *communitas* and the potential problems relating to how participants view the groups and their place and belonging in the group is rather a delicate balance. Most group leaders aim to make their groups accessible warm friendly and welcoming spaces where attendees are given the opportunity to experience at least some sense of belonging. However, as Thorn points out, it does not make sense to use familial language in an Open Circle because of the lack of permanence as attendees of Open Circles and eclectic groups, as the attendees tend to come and go all the time. Making use of this type of familial language also creates a false impression of familial ties simply do not exist in reality in most Open Circle groups. This is because Open Circle participants are not tied to each other in the same way that traditional coven members are, and they do not share the same responsibilities and commitments.

## 6.4 Conclusion

The themes related to liminality and the liminoid phenomenon that are present in Open Circles and Wiccan private covens include: transformation, separation/separateness, oneness or a feeling of unity, status, obligation and optional attendance.

The type of transformation that occurs as a result of ritual is largely dependent on the type of group in question. In Open Circles, transformation tends to be limited to the level of personal and psychological development of the individual. Whereas, in traditional initiatory Wiccan covens, the transformation that results from ritual, may extend beyond the individual and can effect both the group as well as the tradition as a whole.

The transitional period or the space 'betwixed and between', is present in both Open Circles and Wiccan covens, specifically because both make use of a magic circle in order to carve out a sacred space physically and/or temporally. Even though both Open Circles and Covens purposefully carve a space for ritual that is intended to set them apart from the mundane, how successful they are at creating this separation or separateness seems to depend on a number of factors. These factors include the physical location in which their rituals are held and are also related to the skill-sets of the practitioners. It was found that in Wiccan covens specifically, temporal spaces created in the astral plane are just as important as the physical space that is carved out of the mundane world, these are also part of the 'betwixed and between' that is part and parcel of liminality.

The type of 'oneness' or unity describe by participant was in relation to a type of spiritual 'oneness'. The feeling of unity and 'oneness' is definitely part of the Wiccan coven experience, but appears to be less prevalent in Open Circle groups, although



as noted is not completely absent in these types of groups. The feeling of unity does not appear to correlate with the unity as a result of participants being reduced to homogeneity and after the participation in ritual that is supposed to lead to the changing of position in society as described by Turner (1984).

Obligation and Opatation are usually one of the differentiating characteristics that determine whether the phenomenon is truly liminality or is simply liminoid phenomenon. It was found that Open Circle rituals do not require mandatory attendance, but sometimes those who are members of an Open Circle associated with a specific organisation tend to attend rituals more regularly than those who are not members. In Wiccan traditional initiatory covens attendance is obligatory and in some cases the Open Circles run by the High Priesthood do require mandatory attendance.

Another characteristic of liminality revolves around the status and rank of individuals involved in rites of passage. No solid conclusion could be reached as to whether or not this is prevalent in Open Circles or Coven rituals. Some participants reported that they felt that the ritual facilitators did appear to have a different rank than the participants, and even in some covens the High Priesthood definitely hold different ranks, although this really does depend on the specific tradition of initiatory Wicca. Although it did appear that in some Wiccan covens, at least on a temporal level, that hierarchies are irrelevant in temporal spaces as all convenors work together without rank in the astral planes. The other factor that is an indicator of status/rank, that of clothing style, is definitely not homogenous in Open Circle groups, which does not support the egalitarian requirement of liminality.

Both Open Circles and Covens have characteristics of liminoid phenomenon but there is a tendency for Wiccan Covens to lean more toward liminality as the transformation that occurs in a coven often also effects a larger group.

In the Section 6.2, I engaged with Turner's ideas on *communitas*, and explored which of the characteristics that he outlined are present in Open Circles and Wiccan covens. I discussed how these were manifest in these groups by making reference to both my fieldwork observations as well as drawing on my participant interviews.

The desire for belonging and finding like-minded individuals to share their values are one of the primary reasons participants cited for wanting to attend Open Circle rituals, which relates to the aspect of *communitas* Turner described as having a sense of communion or camaraderie with fellow ritual participants. There is no doubt that participants regardless of whether they are associated with an Open Circle or whether they belong to traditional coven, desire to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to others that practice similar beliefs as they do, what was found is that those participants who belong to Open Circle type groups tend to experience that sense of belonging, but that it may be short-lived and be in line with Turner's spontaneous or existential *communitas*. The groups could be described as having characteristics of Turner's normative *communitas*, because they tended to become more organised and develop affiliation with other groups or legal entities. For those who are involved in traditional covens, the sense of belonging tends to be of a longer duration, be more intense and tends to fall into the category normative *communitas*, due to the longevity of these types of groups. However, not all participants feel that they need to belong to a group permanently, and specifically highlighted how it is

essentially normative *communitas* and the development of organisational structure that deters them from joining a group.

Some Open Circles eventually decided to join National Organisation, which resulted in permanent societal changes, firstly it afforded the groups some form of legitimacy and legal protection, secondly it serves to give the groups a bit more permanency. Here the existential or spontaneous *communitas* developed as predicted by Turner into normative *communitas* and “structure” and organisation resulted.

Marginalisation amongst Pagans and Wiccans may be contested by some, but in general marginalisation is evident and manifests in various ways in both Open Circles and covens. Turner lists inferiority, being unseen and outcast as some of characteristics that are typical of *communitas*. The way that this is manifest in mainstream society is that non-witches tend to be prejudice and discriminatory towards Wiccans and Pagans. Another aspect of *communitas* that is characteristic of being on the edges of society and being stateless is marginalisation. Wiccans and Pagans tend to be systematically oppressed as their religion is not always recognised by governments and social systems. Self-marginalisation was also present, where some witches purposefully embraces being on the fringe of society. For some the decision related to wanting to be secretive about their practices, specifically those in covens. For others, self-marginalisation was optional and related to how Turner contended that “opation” is part of liminoid phenomenon. Just like the hippie movement, can be seen as a type counter-culture, where freedom from structural impositions is present in the normative *communitas*, some Open Circle groups also tended towards counter-culture, highlighting the anti-structure nature of *communitas*.

Binary oppositions between mainstream recognised religions and Wiccans and Paganism was discussed in terms of how some Wiccan traditions tend to be transgressive, and go against the standard societal norms and ideologies. It was also found that even the way in which the Wiccan religion is structured (here I am referring to structuralism as opposed to the antithesis of anti-structure), does not conform to the usual ways that mainstream religions are structured. The fact that some Wiccan traditions practice skyclad also drew attention to the characteristic of equality that is often present in liminality and communitas. However, it was found that other than the concept of removing of the constraints of society, by the practice of skyclad by some traditions, relates to Turners idea of anti-structure, as this practice goes against the mainstream society norms. However, the concept of equality as a general concept could not be substantiated in either Open Circles or Coven contexts. Another aspect relating to the concept of Turner's 'anti-structure' is that coven members are all considered members of the priesthood and do not require being ministered to, they may take direction and accept the wisdom of the High Priesthood, but the High Priesthood do not serve as intermediaries and each covener is also considered autonomous and capable of ministering to themselves. This aspect does not conform to the standard concept present in many religions where a minister will minister to a congregation, who is often an intermediary between the congregants and God.

Many Open Circle participants expressed utopian ideas of purchasing land and the ideal of living communally, these utopian ideas are indicative of ideological communitas as described by Turner. Although to my knowledge, these remain in the realm of ideas and dreams, as no participants have yet actually purchased any land communally.

During the COVID -19 pandemic all in-person rituals were suspended, and many groups instead decided to present online type rituals. In order for liminality and the consequential *communitas*, to be experienced, shared participation is necessary. Virtual rituals make participation incredibly difficult, and defeats the object of mutual participation which is the hall mark of liminality and *communitas*.

Some Open Circles groups, specifically those who were also associated with a National organisation and tended towards normative *communitas*, also hosted activities not specifically related to rituals. Participants who also engaged in these activities reported feeling a greater sense of connection to other participants as a result of *communitas*.

A few ritual facilitators in the Open Circle groups were concerned that the type of familial language that Open Circle participants tend to use even after attending a single ritual is concerning, and may lead to potential problems and disappointment. This is because the sense of belonging and the experiences of closeness that they feel as a result of ritual participation and the *communitas* they share, may lead some participants to think that others in the group have closer bonds than they actually do. Due to the transience many Open Circle groups, facilitators need to find a delicate balance between facilitating *communitas* and unrealistic expectations.

## Chapter 7

### CONCLUSION

In this study I focused on discussing, interpreting and contextualising the various themes related to ritual, liminality and *communitas* as they occur in Wiccan Open Circles and Traditional Initiatory covens situated in Canada and the United States of America, based on my extensive fieldwork experiences in both Open Circles and Covens.

Open Circles are not new phenomena, but it appears that not much research has been done that focuses specifically on ritual, liminality and *communitas* as in occurs in Open Circles and how these phenomena are also present in Wiccan Covens. One way of addressing this apparent deficit in the literature, was for me to perform an anthropological study by making use of ethnographic fieldwork. By engaging in participant observation during my fieldwork along with informal, and semi-structured interviews I aimed to provide an understanding of these phenomena. I made use of relevant literature, with a specific focus on Victor Turner's theories of liminality and *communitas*, to gain an understanding of how these phenomena are present and manifest in both Open Circles and Covens.

After the initial fieldwork it was found that Open Circle rituals are inevitably tied to Wiccan Coven ritual. I discovered that Open Circle rituals developed from a Wiccan Outer Court system. Initially in the early 1960's and 1970's Traditional initiatory Wicca continued as it does today, to grow in popularity, making it untenable for Wiccan members of the High Priesthood in covens to accommodate the sheer amount of new people in their covens. Part of the reason for this is that each coven generally consists of only thirteen people. Some of the other reasons it is difficult to accommodate a large

number of people in a coven is that in Traditional Initiatory Wicca, it takes many years for pre-initiates to reach a level of competency where they can join a functioning coven and even longer for those who have reached proficiency to reach the level of the High Priesthood, where they can hive off and start a new coven. One way in which members of the High Priesthood found to try and accommodate the influx of new people was to create an Outer Court system. In the Outer Court system, new people could learn the religion and participate in rituals that are similar to those practiced in the particular tradition. The Outer Court system has two main functions; it allows for new people to decide if Wicca is indeed a religion they wanted to pursue, and it allows for a period where the High Priesthood can determine whether or not individuals have the potential to eventually join the coven. Prior to the Outer Court system, individuals received one on one training, but the Outer Court system allows for a great number of people to be taught at the same time. Sometimes the Outer Court is also referred to as Open Circle ritual. Many contemporary Open Circles developed independently of a specific Wiccan Tradition. Although many of the Open Circle rituals that I attended were facilitated by the High Priesthood of Wiccan Traditions, even though their aim was not to specifically to instruct participants in their particular Wiccan tradition. Regardless of whether the Open Circles were run by members of Traditional Wiccan Priesthood or if facilitators were self-appointed facilitators, the form of ritual and general beliefs are in line with the Wiccan beliefs system.

Traditional initiatory Wicca is considered a mystery tradition, the rituals are secret, and oathbound, only available to those who are initiates of the specific Wiccan Tradition. Prior to being initiated into a coven, pre-initiates are trained in the practices and rituals of the specific tradition, in some traditions, pre-initiates are also trained to become competent occultists. Coven rituals are facilitated by both a High Priest and a High

Priestess. Coven memberships is kept secret and rituals are not open for attendance for others outside of the particular tradition. Usually attendance of rituals is mandatory and the expectation is that coven members will make every effort to attend the rituals that have been planned for the coven. This is not the case in Open Circles, the meetings and rituals themselves are not secret, membership is not usually by initiation and attendance is not mandatory.

In my literature review the aim was for it to serve both as a background for those who are unfamiliar with Paganism and Wicca as well as a way to reflect on the ritual theories that are of specific significance in this research project. I discussed the definitions of Paganism, Neo-Paganism and Wicca as a religion and explained why it is challenging to make use of an overarching identifier when it comes to Open Circle participants specifically. The main reason is because in some of the Open Circle rituals where I performed my research, participants practiced a wide range of spiritual practices, ironically not specifically related to Wicca as a religion. This is because some of the Open Circles were not related to a specific Wiccan tradition as in the case of most Wiccan Outer Courts. Participants themselves may not identify as either belonging to the category of Pagan or Wiccan even though they attend Open Circle rituals that are based on Wiccan ritual.

There is a growing interest in Wicca and Witchcraft but due to incomplete and inaccurate census statistics, the exact number of people who identify as Wiccan or Pagan is uncertain. Pagans and Wiccans can be found in all walks of life and have a variety of vocations and do not live in segregated communities, but instead are integrated into mainstream society.



A brief history highlighted that Wicca is considered a religion and also a new religious movement. While on the other hand, Paganism is not necessarily classified as a religion. The term Paganism is often used as a catch all, umbrella-term to classify anyone who has some similarities to what is believed to encompass Pagan beliefs. Although it would not be true to say that all Pagans hold even similar beliefs and practices although they may be seen to be related to each other.

Generally Wicca is seen as a duo-theistic system that worships both a male God and a Female Goddess, who are seen as co-creators and co-equals. Wicca is a theurgical, in that its ritual practices are magical in nature and evoke the presence of deities with the ultimate goal of being able to unite with the divine and to perfect oneself. Wiccans have eight holy days or Sabbats per year the exact names of these differ from tradition to tradition they are: Hallowmas/Samhain, Winter Solstice/Yule, Candlemas/Imbolc, Spring equinox/Ostara, Beltane, Lammas/Lughnasadh, Summer Solstice/Litha and the Autumn equinox/Mabon. Wicca does not have a centralised belief system or dogma. The religion does encourage self-responsibility, learning, and is sometimes considered a nature-based religion, but in reality this simply means that most Wiccans try to live in harmony with their physical environments and try not to cause environmental damage.

Wiccans and Pagans are often victims of prejudice, discrimination and misunderstanding which is why many choose to keep their religious practices secret or private. The reasons for this were discussed and it was found that the main reasons that prejudice, discrimination and misunderstanding is present in mainstream society is due to ignorance, the role of the media as well as some Christian denominations

who appear to purposefully misrepresent Pagans and Wiccans and label them as Satanists.

During my engagement with the relevant literature for this study, when the concepts of ritual, liminality and *communitas* were discussed, it became clear that the fundamental ritual theories and key concepts have not changed much since Van Gennep and Turner's initial theoretical propositions. This indicated that these theoretical concepts are valid concepts to use as measures of analysis in this research project. As the project progressed, the theories related to liminoid phenomena as well as aspects of *communitas* that are present in Open Circle and Wiccan Coven ritual, are still appropriate ways of conceptualising transformation that occurs during these liminal-like rituals.

The observations and explanations of my participation in a both Open Circle rituals and Coven rituals are based on extensive fieldwork experience, over a four year period. The descriptions are based on participant interviews as well as activities I attended both in person and while watching virtual rituals presentations that were made available by Open Circles during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when in-person ritual participation was not permitted.

Most Open Circle rituals tend to follow a similar format in terms of liturgy as well as structure. Regardless of how many times participants attend an Open Circle ritual, they may not always be familiar with the format and content of said liturgies. This is because it was found that ritual facilitators and in some cases, as documented, whole ritual teams are responsible for writing ritual liturgies, which may not be consistent in terms of format and content. While on the contrary, in Traditional Initiatory Wiccan covens, members are well versed in tradition specific ritual liturgy, even before they

are permitted to attend coven rituals. In general, ritual liturgies in Open Circles are seldom ever repeated, rituals are written by the ritual facilitators for a specific occasion but are not intended to be performed repeatedly and rarely do these rituals form part of a specific tradition. However, this depends on the type of Open Circle, for some Open Circles that function as a type of Outer court, the rituals may be repeated as they form part of the Outer court ritual cycle. Covens who belong to a specific initiatory type Wicca, on the other hand, tend to have set liturgies for at least each Sabbat and sometimes even have a cycle of Esbats ritual liturgies that are followed year after year.

In Open Circles, rituals tend to follow a similar order of events and style although the liturgical content differs from Open Circle group to Open Circle group. In some cases the liturgical style differed from ritual to ritual, even within the same Open Circle. This is due to the fact that the same ritual facilitator may not always write all the rituals. Ritual liturgies in Wiccan Traditions generally have the same order of events, content and the liturgical style is the same. In most cases the tone of the ritual is also the same, because the ritual is always lead by the same High Priesthood of the coven. Coven rituals are always Tradition specific, the ritual liturgies are passed down through tradition lineages and these liturgies are always used in coven rituals. On the other hand, the Open Circle liturgies of the Open Circle rituals I attended were generally created by ritual facilitators who drew on, and borrowed from a range of spiritual practices that are not always based on Wiccan practices. Open Circles tend to be more theatrical in performance style and typically include a whole host of theatrical production like elements. Open Circle ritual facilitators tend to craft their rituals to enhance the experience of the participants and spend quite a lot of time and effort on the décor, costumes and symbolic artifacts. While coven ritual facilitators don't usually spend as much time invested in the décor and do not wear costumes, at least in the

covens where I conducted fieldwork. The focus in a coven ritual is usually on the ritual itself, the added layers of décor, costumery and so on are not necessary as participants are already well versed in the purpose and practice and reason for the ritual.

Written liturgies regardless of whether they are Open Circle rituals or Wiccan coven tradition specific, rituals are often written in a type of shorthand. The written liturgies do not always fully explain all the steps and gestures that are required to be performed in the ritual. In some cases even acronyms are used as a form of shorthand for a longer ritual procedures. It is generally assumed that ritual facilitators have some experience and understanding of ritual proceedings. Seasoned ritual facilitators tend to fare better at interpreting and narrating these actions and gestures as they are able to translate the acronyms during ritual performances. Whereas less experienced ritual facilitators tend to be less successful in translating ritual liturgies during the performance of ritual. The experience of ritual participants can be enhanced by the ritual facilitators' prowess at presenting rituals, on the contrary the lack of experience of a ritual facilitator can also detract from their ritual experiences.

It was noted that there is very little consensus amongst the Wiccan and Pagan communities themselves of what ritual is supposed to constitute, and there is also barely any agreement with regards to how terminologies related to ritual are defined within these communities.

The purposes of ritual also differ significantly depending on whether the ritual occurs in a coven or an Open Circle. In traditional Wicca the purposes of coven ritual are related to transformation. Each ritual has a specific design and expected outcome, which are more focussed and codified by the unified objectives of the coven. In Open

Circle rituals, the ritual purpose is predominantly to provide an opportunity for participants to be able to experience participating in a ritual together, with the emphasis on the creation a sense of belonging and creating a community of like-minded individuals.

Parallels can be drawn between rituals that are performed in Open Circles and those performed in Traditional Initiatory Wicca, although the exact content of the rituals are not the same. One might have expected the rituals in contemporary Open Circles more closely resemble those of traditional initiatory Wicca simply because Open Circle rituals developed from Outer Courts. However, it was found that the ritual content in Wiccan covens and Open Circles tend to have little in common in terms of content. Even though participants engage in ritual, magic and witchcraft, there is no agreement in terms of what actually defines these the terms relating to ritual, magic and witchcraft amongst participants of Open circles. Ritual participants themselves tend to define these terms as they see fit. However, magic is a fundamental cornerstone of ritual practices in Traditional initiatory Wicca and Open Circles sometimes also perform spells and make use of some types of magic. It was found that artifacts and tangible objects that are used as symbolic representations in the performance of spellwork and magic are a necessary in the performance of ritual. The importance of the physical representations and artifacts that are utilised, form important mental and physical cues to practitioners and make it easier for them to make the mental leaps between the physical representation and the mental constructs that the symbols represent. These objects can also be considered important material artifacts, as they are the outer symbols of the religion.

In both Wiccan Coven ritual as well as Open Circle rituals, when the ritual begins, a circle is cast, which effectively creates a liminal space, and allows participants to engage in liminal experience. It is in this liminal phase that transformation through ritual is facilitated. Victor Turner's ideas of liminality and *communitas* in the context of Wiccan coven ritual and Open Circle were examined and it was found that Open Circle rituals fall solidly in the category of liminoid experiences. Turner described liminal phenomenon in terms of an intermediate phase where participants are seen to be "betwixed and between". The liminal phase is the middle phase of Van Gennep, tripartite ritual theory, later expounded upon by Turner, where participants find themselves between two states. Participants are no longer in the separation phase and have not yet entered the reintegration phase. Liminality has several common characteristics, these include; a sense of in-between-ness, the feeling of invincibility, the feeling of isolation, a sense of being in place of transition, the feeling of being way from society (or not classified within society), unified among fellow participants and having no rank or being outside of the sociostructural positions within the community. These liminal characteristics were examined in the context of both Open Circles and Wiccan coven ritual. It was found that the creation of the ritual circle provided a sacred space where participants feel that sense of in-between-ness and isolation or the sense of being away from society. Liminality necessarily involves isolation and separateness, but the degree to which these are experienced, appeared to be dependent on the group in question. Participants who belong to covens reported intensely feeling separate and isolated or outside of the mundane when they engage in ritual participation. Further, in coven rituals, mental states or temporal states are part and parcel of the in-betweenness, and can also be considered to be liminal states. This is because the circle that is created in which ritual is performed is usually temporal

in nature and is seen in the mind's eye of the participants, it is not always a physically demarcated circle. Open Circle ritual participants may experience the sense of being betwixt and between, but the degree to which they experience this depends on the physical location in which the ritual takes place. Participants and facilitators of Open Circle rituals reported that the sense of a separation is difficult to achieve in a more public space like a public parks. Participants were also of the opinion that the degree to which they experienced the feeling of separation from the rest of the world also depended on the experience and prowess of the ritual facilitator, to be able to create that space and feeling of in-betweenness.

During the liminal state, participants, withdraw from normal societal interactions and their usual societal norms are deferred for a period of time. To some degree this is also true of some forms of Wiccan ritual. Some groups purported to engage in behaviour during ritual that may not be considered as a mainstream norm. In some Open Circles, participants tended to dress in clothing that is not generally regarded as mainstream clothing options, some for example dressed in costumes and emo style clothing. While some participants also reported that they are aware of some groups that practice rituals in the nude, otherwise termed skyclad. Other behaviours that tended to be outside of the norm included wild ecstatic dancing around bonfire, all of which confirmed Turner's assertion that during liminal phases, the usual societal norms are deferred for a period of time.

The main difference between liminality and liminoid phenomena is that liminality includes drastic changes in social identity and changes in status within the larger societal context after ritual participation. Liminoid phenomena is more personal and related to the individual growth. Development and changes for Open Circle ritual

participants are also more individualistic and not related to the entire social group. It was found that coven ritual participants also experience liminoid phenomena, because the entire society is not affected by the changes that occur in ritual. One difference was noted though, and that is that in coven ritual often the changes that occur effect the whole coven group. In some cases initiation does effect the status of the individual in the coven and in some cases, when a person is elevated to the status of the High Priesthood, the person's status may also change outside of the ritual space as they often become more public figures and become representatives of their particular tradition.

In Turner's original conception of liminality is specifically relevant to pre-industrial societies. In the liminal phase, the participants are obliged to take part in the ritual which is another defining characteristic of liminal phenomenon. In liminoid phenomenon, on the other hand, participants are not obliged to attend ritual but instead are free to attend if they choose to, this is the case in Open Circle ritual, as participants opt to participate in the rituals as participation is not mandatory. This is not necessarily the case in Coven contexts, as there is an obligation and expectation that members will attend the planned rituals, so ritual participation is not optional.

When the magic circle is created within which ritual takes place, it has defined boundaries. Ritual participants experience the sacred circle as a space that is separate from the mundane world. Some participants feel that the ritual circle functions as a hub of power, that draws power from the astral towards the circle, while other experience the circle as a protective bubble. Either way, participants experienced feeling like they were separate from rest of the world when they were within the boundaries of the ritual circle.



Coven ritual participants specifically, reported that they also felt a sense of union to divinity and the 'All'<sup>71</sup>, and likened their experiences to a being in unity of mind, which also emphasised one of the characteristics of liminality.

Communitas is the result of ritual participants who engage in ritual together and experience a sense of liminality during ritual. This study also engaged in Turner's ideas of communitas, and the characteristics of communitas were explored as they apply Wiccan ritual.

In Open Circles, participants expressed the desire to find like-minded individuals with whom they could share their values. They also expressed the desire to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness as one of their main reasons for attending Open Circle rituals. Turner described communitas as being in communion with or having camaraderie with fellow ritual participants. Both coven ritual participants as well as Open Circle ritual participants stated that they felt a sense of belonging and connectedness to their fellow ritual attendees. This camaraderie provides for a sense of structure inside the ritual experience way from everyday structured life”

Turner described communitas as belonging to three distinct types of communitas, namely; spontaneous or existential communitas, normative communitas and ideological communitas. I found this three-tier schema to be particularly relevant to my observations during my fieldwork. It was found that participants who attend Open Circle rituals experience existential communitas, specifically if the Open Circle group only has a limited life-span, many of the Open Circle rituals I attended did not have a particularly long life span. Interestingly, in some Open Circles, specifically those who

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<sup>71</sup> Sometimes ritual participants refer to the concept of the Supreme being and all of creation in the universe as the All.

had been in existence for some time, participants expressed desires for ideological *communitas*, although this did not actually manifest into reality. In those Open Circle groups who have a longer life-span, normative *communitas* did develop over time, this was evident in the fact that some of these groups eventually joined National Organisation, resulting in a return to Turner's concept of "structure" and organisation, and are became more permanent . Covens who have been in existence for a longer time tend to fall into the category of normative *communitas* because their structure is more organised and is not a transient experience of participating in ritual together, as covens in Traditional Wicca are long lasting and permanent.

Turner's conception of the "anti-structure" within the context of ritual, juxtaposes the normative social structure that is present in mainstream society. It is in this "anti-structure" that marginalisation occurs in the context of *communitas*. The aspect of marginalisation as in occurs in this context was investigated and it became evident that marginalisation does exist in Wiccan and Paganism, however not all participants agreed on the degree to which marginalisation occurs. The marginalisation that does occur in Wicca and Paganism is predominately related to the fact that Wicca is a minority religion and outside of the norm in terms of religious practices. This is specifically obvious when we consider the aspect of being "stateless" that is part of the attributes of *communitas* that Turner developed. Examples of this type of marginalisation included; not been treated the same way as other religious majorities, simply because Wicca is a minority religion and most people have little understanding of what Wicca entails, which appear to lead to prejudice and discrimination. Other examples of marginalisation were noted, more specifically examples of self-marginalisation, where this is a voluntary action, here participants accept marginalisation and become unified in *communitas*. Other participants also pointed to

marginalisation as being a choice because they choose to remain private and quiet about their religious practices. This potentially results in a type of recursive cycle, where fear spurs participants to be private and not talk about their practices, which in turn keeps the religion out of the mainstream, and the majority of mainstream society remain ignorant and uneducated about the practices of Wiccans and Pagans.

Transgressiveness as a part of the “anti-structure”, or the opposite of structured everyday life, the binary opposition to normative societal structure was investigated and it was found that Wiccan and Paganism tend to lean towards transgressiveness. Some Wiccan practices, in some Wiccan traditions are outside of the mainstream religious practices, these include: ritual nudity, the use in some traditions of sex magic and the use of entheogens. These codes of conduct are in line with what Turner would consider a push against mainstream societal norms. Most Wiccans do not belong to a centralised organisational body that governs them, most run autonomously. Although there are some organisational bodies that have been created as Associations, provide a space for people who have similar beliefs and ideas to share ideas engage with each other for support. Another aspect that may be considered transgressive is that Wiccan members of the High Priesthood who run covens do not minister to a congregation, as each person within a coven situation is expected to be an authority to themselves, quite contrary to mainstream religious organisations. However, in an Open Circle situation context, the facilitator does tend to ‘minister’ to a congregation, because Open Circle members are not initiated into the priesthood, where initiates in a coven are immediately considered priests and priestesses themselves and minister to themselves upon initiation. Another aspect that is outside of the norm specifically in an Open Circle context is that some ritual facilitators, specifically those not associated with a specific tradition are not trained by a central

organisation that governs their training. Even though members of the High Priesthood and other initiates are trained they do not attend a centralised training facility like a seminary or mainstream recognized learning institution for specific Wiccan training.

For those who belong to Open Circle type groups that had been in existence for some time, the aspect of “equality” as it applies to liminality tends to be fairly complex. These participants felt they all, including the ritual facilitators needed to be equal and all members should be consulted in terms of how things are run in the Open Circle. These participants tended to desire a more democratic system and see equality in terms of a democratic system rather than homogeneity, as was intended by Turner’s concept of equality in liminality. Those that belong to covens, are of the opinion that all are equal in the sight of the Gods, and all members are autonomous individuals. Members of covens fall under the leadership of the High Priesthood, and will take direction from their elders, and will to some degree exercise obedience and accept the advice and teachings of the High Priesthood.

Ritual nudity in some Wiccan traditions, appeared at first glance to enforce the concept of equality and homogeneity, but this practice was not universal across traditional Wiccan covens and was not practiced in Open Circle contexts. No standard attire is worn by participants Open Circle rituals, rather their manner of dress differs greatly even within the same Open Circle group. However in some Open Circle groups the manner of dress did tend to be outside of what could be considered mainstream attire, some cases participants tended to purposefully dress outside the so-called norms for example; some would wear costumes like dressing like elves or the stereotypical representation of how the media assume witches dress. Some participants would also wear clothing more associated with the Hippie movement. In some Open Circles the

facilitators or members of the High Priesthood would wear specific clothing signifying their rank.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Open Circle facilitators and Coven leaders decided to host online ritual presentations as a substitute for in-person ritual gatherings. Although initially these online presentations were well attended, attendance soon dropped off. This is indicative of the fact that online and virtual participation is completely isolated from the idea of shared participation that occurs during liminality and then leads to *communitas*. Those who 'attended' the online presentations did not experience the same camaraderie, but still appreciated the online ritual presentations even if they did not fulfil the same role as in-person ritual participation. One of the positive aspects that came from the online presentations, is that online rituals provided alternative ways of keeping in contact, which is valuable when participants are separated by great geographical distance.

Many of the Open Circle groups also hosted other activities, like book clubs, workshops, seminars and volunteer opportunities to assist with the various parts needed to facilitate a successful ritual. These activities although not part of the ritual performance, also formed part of community building and provided more opportunities for participants to get to know each other. These activities created the opportunity for participants to form more enduring social bonds.

A few ritual leaders drew attention to what they described as the unanticipated outcomes of *communitas*. They expressed the concern that in some cases when participants experienced a sense of belonging it created an unrealistic view of the relationship between the ritual attendees. The ritual leaders, highlighted how participants would then view fellow ritual attendees as family and use familial language

when referring to other members of the group, indicating that they felt an intense bond with their fellow ritual attendees. Even though this feeling of closeness and may not be reciprocated by all attendees. Although in general participants expressed these bonds as positive, some ritual leaders were concerned that these intense feelings may therefore be misleading. Existential *communitas* in itself is a short-lived phenomenon. Although *communitas* was experienced during some Open Circles, it was an existential type *communitas* that did not necessarily lead to long term permanent relationships that resemble family-type relationships.

The main objectives in this study have been to uncover who and what contributes to the sense of *communitas* in the context of Open Circles. During my fieldwork and research I found that Open Circles groups cannot be viewed in isolation without also taking into consideration their historical development as well as how they are tied in one way or the other to the Wiccan religion and also in many cases to Traditional Initiatory covens. This was discussed in Chapters one and three, where I explained how this lead to me to also investigate and conduct fieldwork in Traditional Initiatory covens.

Through my fieldwork I found that in general the members of the High Priesthood and other facilitators play a major in the functioning of the groups, and facilitators continue to be the proverbial heart and soul of the group. Often they write all the rituals liturgies, plan, organise and execute all the actions required to enable the ritual to take place. In Chapter four I discussed and explained the format of a typical Wiccan ritual. In some groups especially where the Open Circle group has been in existence for some time, the duties of planning and organising are divided among a few core group members who volunteer their time. One of the groups where I performed my fieldwork

had a ritual team who assisted in organising all the aspects related to the ritual like the décor, set up, food, location, invitations and also sometimes had a hand in writing the ritual that would be performed. In another groups, the members of the board together with the High Priestess of the group would do all of the organisation and ritual preparation, but the majority of the writing of would be prepared by the High Priestess who would also mostly be the ritual facilitator, along with others who were also in training to take up ritual facilitation roles. In the coven situations, the rituals are always performed by the coven's High Priest and High Priestess. The rituals are generally already in existence and have been performed many times before. The roles of the High Priesthood are quite different from those who run Open Circles, because the members of the High Priesthood also serve as spiritual counsellors for their coveners as well as teachers for those who are in training.

The ritual facilitators and those involved in planning the ritual tend to play a major role in the creation of the ritual. However, in both the coven context as well as the Open Circle context, it was found that *communitas* itself cannot be created without the participation of the rest of the ritual attendees. Both liminality and *communitas* are intricately linked to the participation of both the ritual facilitators and the attendees. The sense of ritual and liminal experience cannot be created by the ritual facilitators alone, but require the attendance of ritual participants as well. The boundaries and the actual ritual circles or sacred space is created by the ritual facilitators who prepare the space, perform the ritual, and guide participants in the working section, but all participants usually participate in the ritual and together liminality and the resulting *communitas* is experienced.

In Chapter five, I also discussed how liminality in Wiccan covens is experienced by participants. When participants feel that they have achieved a high level of trust and comfort they feel that they are able to fully immerse themselves in the liminal experience. Further, training seemed to play a large role in terms of the levels of comfort participants felt specifically because familiarity with the rituals and knowing what to expect and how to behave also enhanced their experiences of liminality, specifically temporal liminality. Similarly, the magic that is performed in Wiccan Coven ritual requires an intense focus and group cohesion, it also requires the practitioners to be in a synchronised state and to work together in harmony.

In Chapter six I explained how the experience of being “betwixt and between” is fundamental to any Wiccan ritual. The sacred circle that is created for the specific purpose of ritual, is transitional and is created explicitly for the purpose of transformation. It is created to be outside of mundane time and space and designed to be separate, apart from societal norms. It is this separation and the participation in the same ritual that creates the sense of liminality.

The different types of ritual performed in Open Circles and closed Wiccan practices and the reasons for these rituals was examined in terms of their importance to practitioners. It was found that ritual participation in these contexts impacts various spheres of practitioners’ lives including; community building, community relations, personal enlightenment, personal identity, spiritual identity, personal growth as well as emotional relief. The main impact that ritual has on participants in Open Circles is that it provides an opportunity for participants who have similar spiritual perspectives to be able to experience and participate in ritual together. In Chapter six, I discussed the various aspects of liminality and explored how and to what degree the various aspects



of liminality as described by Turner are present in Open Circles as well as Wiccan Covens.

In traditional Wiccan covens the impact of ritual participation is closely linked to the expression of the beliefs and ideals of the Wiccan religion, among others includes transcendence. Transformation and transcendence are central aspects of Wicca, and transformation occurs at an individual level, as well as coven level and sometimes even for the whole Tradition is impacted by the transformation, which was discussed in Chapter five, in where I discussed Wiccan ritual.

Communitas in Wiccan covens is intensely felt by participants, coveners become like family members to each other and often coven members feel that their fellow coveners are just as important to them as their own blood relations. The bond is long lasting and members will offer assistance and help to their fellow coveners whenever it is asked for. In Chapter six I expounded on the components of Turner's conception of communitas and also discussed these aspects of communitas in terms of how they manifest in both Wiccan Covens and Open Circle groups. In Open Circle groups the sense of camaraderie was often mentioned by participants, as well as the bonds of friendship that form amongst some of the more regular attendees.

Rituals in Open Circles and Wiccan Covens tend to differ in content and in some cases style. In Chapter four, I provided an illustrative example of an Open Circle ritual, which was easy to accomplish based on the fact that these rituals are not secret. The same could not be said for Traditional Wiccan coven rituals as these are private and secret. I could only comment on these types of ritual in generalities as a Wiccan initiate. As a participant observer in this context I had to rely on the interviews of Traditional Wiccan initiates to explain how these rituals differ from Open Circle rituals. However, what

can be said about these rituals and how they are different to Open Circle rituals is that Coven rituals are passed down through initiation to initiates of the specific tradition. Not all Wiccan traditions share or have the same ritual content, but they do tend to be similar in some ways, specifically in terms of form and style. Ritual content is usually the same across a specific tradition, even when there are many different covens who belong to the same tradition, style, tone and content will be the same. Whereas Open Circle rituals as mentioned in Section 4.6 in Chapter four, are specifically created for each ritual that is performed in an Open Circle context, their content differs from ritual to ritual, and although the order of events is similar across Open Circles the style and form may differ along with the content.

Some of the main differences between Coven ritual and Open Circle ritual aside from the actual written text, relates to the use of décor, enactments, costumes and ambiance that is created for the ritual. In Traditional Wiccan ritual, costumes are rarely used, although some elements of décor and lighting are taken in to consideration the main aim is not to specifically enhance the ambience and reinforce to such a large degree the symbolic aspects of the ritual, as is the case in Open Circle rituals.

Throughout Chapters three to six it became evident that some Open Circles are run by members of the High Priesthood of Initiatory Wiccan traditions, who provide opportunities for those who are interested to attend Wiccan rituals. Some ritual facilitators hosted rituals at Pagan Pride<sup>72</sup> as a way to engage local communities. Some of the more permanent Open Circle groups also hosted a range of other

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<sup>72</sup> Pagan Pride is a movement that is aimed at creating a more positive view of and image of Paganism, many Pagan organisations take place in Pagan Pride events that are hosted across the world.

activities and workshops outside of rituals in the hope to strengthen a sense of community.

Perhaps one weakness of this anthropological study had to do with one of the main difficulties I faced in this research project, which was trying to generalise and find agreement across Open Circle rituals and Outer Court rituals. As discussed in Chapter three and touched on in Chapters four to six, it is incredibly challenging to generalise the practices and experiences of different Open Circle groups. This is because Open Circles vary greatly in their composition, aims and affiliations, and attendees come from many different spiritual perspectives. Wiccan Open Circles are essentially liminoid phenomenon, where attendance is optional. Deep ritual is often associated with mandatory attendance. One aspect that was brought to the fore in this study is that optional attendance brings appears to highlight the loose aggregate of share interests, which makes generalisation really challenging. It is difficult to speculate as to whether or not Open Circles might in future function more like a church or a coven where attendance is more mandatory. Perhaps one way of approaching this would have been to only select Outer Courts that are specifically related to a Wiccan Tradition, because here attendance would not be so optional.

Another really challenging aspect of the research has to do with the fact that Traditional Wiccan covens are private and secret. Most Traditional covens are unlikely to open their doors to researchers. As a result I had to perform fieldwork in the traditions to which I belong. Fortunately there are many covens in my traditions and I was able to travel to the United States on several occasions so that I could attend their rituals. Sadly, I cannot think of a solution to this issue as there have been other researchers

who have conducted their research in Traditional Wiccan covens, but who themselves are also initiates of the specific Tradition where they performed their research.

Related to this, is the inherent bias that comes from being an initiate of Traditional initiatory Wicca, and therefore an insider researcher. For Open Circles specifically it may have been easier for an outside researcher, because they may not have any commitments to the research groups. Whereas I found myself experiencing some conflict in terms of my role, as mentioned, there were some examples of where more was expected for me as an insider. Being an insider researcher does however, have some positive advantages because I was easily able to understand and integrate into the various Open Circle groups with a greater amount of ease than perhaps someone who is not Wiccan. I was also able to attend various rituals in different covens in my own traditions, but with this came a great responsibility to those research participants to ensure that I only divulged what was permitted, and I had to spend a great deal of time dealing with sensitive information.

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## **Appendix: A**

### **Communitas and Liminality in Ritual Questionnaire/Interview Guide for semi-structured interviews**

#### **Questions for ritual Participants**

- Tell me about yourself
- How long have you been Pagan/Wiccan?
- How do you view Paganism
- What is the difference between being a witch and a pagan, and Wiccan?
- Do you also belong to a private Coven/Gove, Circle? If so how long have you belonged to the group?
- Why do you attend Open circle rituals?
- In your opinion, what/how does/do the Open circle rituals you attend contribute to creating community amongst Pagans?
- What is the value of these Open circle ritual for you personally?
- Do you feel that Pagans are found at the fringes of society in everyday life within the boarder society, please explain your answer?
- How does public ritual influence your life?
- Have you attended any online rituals/events
- How did you experience them?
- What does community mean to you?

## **Questions for ritual Facilitators and clergy**

- What are the main differences between coven ritual and Open Circle rituals?
- What is the main reason that you decided to take on the role to facilitate public Open circle rituals?
- How do you go about developing ritual for open circles?
- How do you go about developing ritual and other content for online events, is it different?
- How does this differ from in-person ritual?
- What are the pros and cons of hosting online rituals?
- Are there specific considerations that you need to keep in mind when writing and performing ritual?
- Are there any special accommodations you need to make for Open circle ritual?
- How do you decide what community/temple activities should be planned?
- How do you go about planning these activities?
- Who is involved in the execution of these activities?
- How do you think community ritual and community/temple activities influences your life, and secondly how do you think it affects the lives of the ritual participants?
- Why do you think it is important to continue to provide/facilitate Open circle rituals?



## **Appendix B**

### **Information sheet provided to Participants in-depth interviews**

#### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

**Title:** Ritual, Liminality and Communitas in Wiccan Open Circles and Covens

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Cherie de Klerk and I am currently doing research towards my MA (Anthropology) at the University of South Africa (UNISA), under the supervision of Professor CJ van Vuuren at the College of Human Sciences, I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. The title of my study is “Liminality, Communitas and Ritual in open circles amongst Neo-Pagans in Canada”

Very broadly speaking, Communitas refers to comradeship, the personal experience of togetherness where members of a specific community share a common experience, usually through a rite of passage or ritual, which forms a collective bond to connect individuals who deemed similar.

Liminality refers to transitional moments in time (usually in ritual or rites of passage) where the usual societal order of things has been suspended.

Victor Turner defined liminal individuals as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention” (Turner 1967:98)

Creating a ritual space, and casting a circle are good examples of liminality, for a time we are neither here nor there, we are in essence separate from the rest of the mundane world.

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of what drives Neo-Pagans in Canada to attend Open Circle events, how participants experience community during ritual and community and open circle related activities. I also want to find out how participants experience liminality both during ritual and in their everyday lives within society.

For clergy members and open circle facilitators, I want to find out how ritual is created and developed for public ritual and how opportunities for community activities are devised.

#### **WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?**

You are being asked to participate in my study either because you are member of the Open circle groups, have had extensive involvement in the group(s) and/or a clergy member or facilitator for these groups.

#### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?**

You have been invited to an in-depth interview/discussion on my research topic, your opinions, views and question responses will be used in my research to help me understand how communitas and liminality are facilitated and created through open circle rituals, and what their importance is within the Pagan community.

### **CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, you are under no obligation to participate, and are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. However, once interviews have been concluded and recorded, it will not be possible to withdraw them, if you decide to take part, please keep this information sheet and sign the attached consent form. No one, apart from my supervisor and myself will know about your involvement in this research. Any conversations, interview notes, comments etc. will be given a code name, and your pseudonym to help ensure confidentiality and anonymity. You will be referred to by pseudonym in any resulting publications, data, as well as the final thesis.

Your name and signature on the consent form are for research verification purposes only and the Research Ethics Review Committee responsible for validating my research may review this.

### **ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?**

There are no major foreseen negative consequences for you should you choose to participate in this research project. Should participants bring any potential concerns to my attention, these will be addressed by the researcher and her supervisor.

### **WILL THE INFORMATION I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL**

Your name will not be recorded anywhere (apart from this consent form) and your answers may only be reviewed by people making sure the research is done properly, including the members of the Research Ethics Review Committee. Although a report of the study may be submitted for publication, your actual identity will never be revealed in any published works resulting from the research.

### **HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?**

Any hardcopy notes will be kept in my locked filing cabinet, at my home for possible future research or academic purposes, electronic information will be stored on my personal computer, which is password protected. Any future use of data will be subject to completely separate, new Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. Ultimately, hard copies will be shredded and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the hard drive of my computer.

### **WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

As this research project is self-funded no financial or other incentives can be offered.

## **HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL**

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the College of Human Sciences, at UNISA. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained, should you wish to see it.

## **HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?**

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, or need any other information please feel free to contact me, Cherie de Klerk, at [43594735@mylife.unisa.ac.za](mailto:43594735@mylife.unisa.ac.za) or you can contact me on my mobile: 780 695 2875.

Should you have any concerns about the way in which the research is conducted, you may contact Prof CJ van Vuuren at [vvvuurej@unisa.ac.za](mailto:vvvuurej@unisa.ac.za) or you can contact the research ethics chairperson of the Ethics Research committee, Prof MA Antwi, Email: [antwima@unisa.ac.za](mailto:antwima@unisa.ac.za), if you have any ethical concerns.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for being willing to participate in my research.

## Appendix C

### Example of a Handfasting Ceremony

September 4, 2021

Priestess presiding: Elizabeth

#### The Preparation

Elemental candles at each quarter on a small table along with items to represent each quarter. Altar table facing North, center of circle with Goddess, God and Spirit candles, smudge and burning dish, thurible, pentacle, bell, cakes and ale, handfasting cord and Flame of love candle and anointing oil, and votive for lighting the candles. Bessom and sword under the table or resting against the table. (Note: for the purposes of this ceremony document 'PS' refers to the Priestess.)

#### Explanation of the Rite and Welcoming

*The Priestess will explain what the guests will be experiencing with a Wiccan marriage ritual:*

**PS:** "Welcome everyone and thank you for joining us on this blessed day. For those of you who have never experienced a Wiccan wedding ritual here are some things that we would like you to know before we get started.

Before we start the ritual we will perform a grounding to provide everyone with the opportunity to center yourselves and quieten your minds before bearing witness to this special ceremony. The circle will then be swept and the Circle cut with a ceremonial sword, creating a sacred space. In Wicca we cast or cut a circle to sanctify the space we are in, as "holy ground"; in other words, we are creating a sacred space or temple to perform the ceremony in. The elements will be evoked, and then the Goddess and God will be evoked.

As part of this ceremony, you will witness a number of special traditions that the couple will perform, some will be familiar to you while other traditions may be an entirely new experience. In addition to the couple exchanging rings and vows there will also be the traditional Wiccan Handfasting of the couple. This involves the couples' hands being bound together with a special cord to signify the unity of the two and to represent their separate lives now becoming one.

Without further ado we will now begin the procession of the wedding party and couple to begin this ceremony."

#### Procession

*(Priestess stands at the altar. Those calling the quarters are also standing at the four quarters and will remain standing in that position for the entire ceremony. The wedding party begins their procession)*

Ladies in Waiting and Merry Men make their way up to the altar in couples and stand to their respective sides of the altar, Ladies will be standing on the left hand side and the Merry men on the right hand side.

Maid of Honor and Best Man will make their way up to the altar together, after the rest of the Wedding party. The male flower bearers will walk ahead of the Groom sprinkling flowers as they go, they will approach the altar from the western edge of the garden, the children will

then be asked to sit with a chaperone for the ceremony, but the ring bearer will be asked to approach the altar to hand over the rings during the ring exchange, but will return to be seated again after the rings have been delivered.

Simultaneously, the flower girl will walk ahead of the Bride sprinkling flowers as she goes, the Bride will approach the altar from the eastern part of the garden.

Bride (Laura) makes her way up to the altar, gives her bouquet to her Maid of Honor or other Lady in Waiting and then stands to her side of the altar.

### **Grounding and Centering**

*The Priestess will lead the guests and wedding party in a grounding*

**PS:** "Stand tall, feet comfortably shoulder width apart. Quiet your mind, take a deep breath in and hold it for a moment...

As you exhale let all of the stress of the day, and the mundane thoughts leave your mind.

Take another breath in... out

And one final cleansing breath in... And out...

We are of one breath, and one mind

Ready to bear witness to this joyous ceremony.

Blessed be."

### **Casting the Circle**

*(Circle cast and sacred space created )*

*A representative from the Metis' will begin the ceremony by making an offering to the ancestors and to the spirits of this land on which we hold this sacred rite. After the offering the representative will smudge and cleanse the space with smoke. (Reagan may assist), she will also smoke cleanse the bridal party. After Sage has made an offering, and begins the smoke cleanse, One of the bride's daughters will take up the thurible and walk around the outside of the circle cleansing as she goes.*

*Jennifer will then sweep the circle with the ceremonial besom in the way of the Bride's tradition.*

*Selena will follow with cutting the circle using the ceremonial sword in the way of Bride's tradition.*

*Once the circle has been cast the evocations will begin.*

### **Evoking the Elements**

**East:**

I call upon the watchtowers of the east, we ask you to come and guard our circle.

Let through the power of air.

May it bless us with intelligent and clear communication as we perform this rite today.

Hail and welcome!

**South:**

I call upon the watchtowers of the south, we ask you to come and guard our circle.

Let through the power of fire.

May it grant us passion and flames of friendship and love as we perform this rite today

Hail and welcome!

**West:**

I call upon the watchtowers of the west, we ask you to come and guard our circle.

Let through the power of water.

May love and sensitivity flow freely from us this day, as we perform this rite.

Hail and welcome!

**North:**

I call upon the watchtowers of the north, we ask you to come and guard our circle.

Let through the power of earth.

May the marriage be built on a strong foundation of endurance and strength as we perform this rite today.

Hail and welcome!

**Spirit:**

Guardians of above and below

We ask you to come and guard our circle

Let through the power of spirit.

May it help us remember the connection between ourselves and all that is.

Hail and welcome.

**Evoking the God and Goddess**

**(Deities called by Priestess)**

**Goddess: Aine** (*pronounced: awn-yah*)

You who have a love of beauty, you who are the bearer of the truest heart, our lady Aine

Let the sun's rays warm you.

The grass tickles your feet. Faerie laughter chimes in the distance, greeting your soul.

And the time has come to move..to shift...to change...to take action...

The time has come to be bold and strong. For you are Aine, sweet and fickle and proud.

For you are the land and the sun that warms us.

For you are love..desire...fear...anger

You are emotion and for these reasons we request your presence in our rite this day, great lady.

Hail and welcome! -

- (sisters of the burning branch)

**God: Aengus Og** (*pronounced: eng + iss*)

We call to you Aengus, fair faced son of the Dagda, son of the deep hearted Boann.

Aengus the young, Aengus the clever, full hearted, child of love.

Well you know the might of words. You who grant the sweetest speech to the lovers and poets. Well you know the worth of love, the seeker of the swan maiden.

Well you know the need of battle, the bearer of great fury; Aengus Og where you called for the bloom of youth is ever upon you.

Dreamer of dreams, holder of hearts, mender of bones Aengus we honor you and ask you to join in the rite today.

Hail and welcome! -  
unknown)

(Author

### **Exchange of Vows**

*(Vows to be written and read by the bride and groom; bride going first, groom second.)*

**PS:** "The Bride and Groom will now perform their personal exchanging of vows to one another. They have prepared the vows themselves from the depths of their hearts and will now share their love and promises to one another in the eyes of those present and the Gods."

### **Blessing of the Rings**

*(The rings are brought forward and given to the couple to place on one another's fingers)*

**PS:** "May these rings remind you that your love, like the sun, warms all that it touches, like the moon, brightens up the night, like the eye, is a gateway to your innermost soul."

**(Bride places ring on Grooms finger.)**

**PS:** "May the vows and promises you have made today be as ever-present in your hearts as these rings are on your fingers."

**(Groom places ring on Brides finger.)**

**PS:** "And your love, like the arms that embrace you, make everything right with the world."

### **The Oath**

**PS:** "Today we come together as a community to witness a pledge. This infers an obligation not only on Bride and Groom's part but on all of us."

**PS:** "To love someone is not a public act, but a private feeling. To exchange words of love is an equally private act. But to Handfast, to take vows before your kin and friends is an act that places all of us under obligation."

**PS:** "Bride and Groom, the promises you will offer each other now involve all of us. When you live up to those promises, you have not only each other but also those of us who came here today to witness."

**PS:** "Equally from this day on, we have an obligation, not to you Bride, nor you Groom as individuals, but to the family you create with your words and your love. No one here can honorably take the side of any one of you singly but must take the side of that which preserves the oath you have made here today."

**PS:** "In choosing to exchange oaths before witnesses, you have made a profound statement of your commitment both to each other and to us as a community. In witnessing your oaths, we offer you both our loyalty and our trust."

**Priestess to Bride:** "Bride, do you come here of your own free will? To be united in love and trust before the God and Goddess and in the presence of your friends and family? Do you make this heartfelt commitment to this man Bruce, for today and all days to follow?"

(The Bride affirms the Oath)

**Priestess to Groom:** "Groom, do you come here of your own free will? To be united in love and trust before the God and Goddess and in the presence of your friends and family? Do you make this heartfelt commitment to this woman Laura, for today and all days to follow?"

(The Groom affirms the Oath)

### **Legal Part of Ceremony**

*(Marriage document will be on a second small table to the side)*

**PR:** "The couple will now sign the legal marriage documents along with the witnesses. May we please have those people mentioned step around the altar to perform the deed."

*(Documents signed; opportunity for a couple pictures of that. Witnesses and couple return to their places.)*



## **The Handfasting**

*The couple gathers before the Priest and Priestess; they will hold hands (left of groom w/ right of bride, or vice versa)*

**\*\*7 strands in the handfasting cord\*\***

**\*The pledge\***

**PR:** "Will you both help each other to grow in understanding and wisdom?"

**Couple:** "We will."

**PR:** "The first pledge is thus made with Yellow, symbolic of Air, that your union may be a treasure of happiness and joy to you always."

**PS:** "Will you strive to keep your romance alive through daily actions and words of encouragement?"

**Couple:** "We will"

**PS:** "The second pledge is thus made with Red, symbolic of Fire, that you may always have more to discover about one another."

**PR:** "Will you each seek to ease the other's pain and suffering, sharing laughter and joy?"

**Couple:** "We will"

**PR:** "The third pledge is thus made with Blue, symbolic of Water, that your union may weather every storm in life."

**PS:** "Will you share yourselves freely and generously with each other, making time to be together?"

**Couple:** "We will."

**PS:** "The fourth pledge is thus made with Brown, symbolic of Earth, that your love may be dependable and grounded in reality."

**PR:** "Will you go forward in life together to walk the path of your truth and support one another as you discover yourselves?"

**Couple:** "We will."

**PR:** "The fifth pledge is thus made with white, symbolic of Spirit, that you may have no limits to your happiness."

**PS:** "Will you both come before the Goddess and proclaim your commitment to sustain each other as Mother Earth commits to sustaining our lives?"

**Couple:** "We will."

**PS:** "The sixth pledge is thus made with Silver, symbolic of the Goddess Aine, that you may have her blessing of love in your union to one another."

**PR:** "Will you both come before the God and vow to protect and shelter each other through the trials and tribulations of life?"

**Couple:** "We will."

**PR:** "The seventh pledge is thus made with Orange, symbolic of the God Aengus, that you may have his blessing of protection in your union to one another."

**PS:** "Your pledges have been made and you both commit yourselves to the other. We will now fast your hands together with your cord of pledges in symbolism of the oaths that you have made here today in front of your friends, family, and the God and Goddess."

*Priestess handfasts the couple.*

**PS:** "You are now bound together, your two lives joined by love and trust into one life."

### **Flame of love candle blessing**

**PS:** "Light is the essence of our existence. Each one of us possesses an inner glow that represents our hopes, our dreams and aspirations in life. In Wicca candles are often used in magical rites, as conduits. It is easy for candles to absorb our thoughts when we concentrate on them, while anointing them. The process of burning the candle releases those thoughts through the fire elemental which responds by combustion, when we burn the candle."

**PS:** "As friends and family of the Bride and Groom, we ask you to direct your happy thoughts towards the candle and sway as Jennifer sings the chant and Selena anoints the candle."

*(Jennifer and Selena step up to the altar, Jennifer will sing as Selena anoints the candle, everybody directs their happy thoughts towards the candle and sway to the rhythm of the song, once the energy is has reached intensity Selena will light the candle and step away)*

**PS:** "As this candle burns, it gathers and intensifies the light and harmony, the dancing flame symbolizes the beauty and vitality of the love that has brought Bride and Groom here today, Remember that love and all of the love we wish for your marriage as you light this candle at each anniversary."

### **Offerings to the God and Goddess/ Closing of the Circle**

**PS:** "Instead of our usual sharing of food and drink at the end of ritual we will offer only the Bride and Groom these; at the reception we can do a Blessing of food and drink for everyone before the dinner starts. After the ceremony the Priestess can make an offering to the God and Goddess with the Bride and Groom privately outside of the rest of the wedding company."

**Priestess raises chalice to Bride then Groom:** "May you never thirst" (Bride and Groom drink from chalice.)

**Priestess raises the food offering to Bride and Groom:** "May you never hunger." (Bride and Groom partake in offering.)

### **Pronouncement of Couple**

**Pronouncement spoken by the Priestess:**

"Before I pronounce you married partners, I have just one more thing I want you to do."

**(Have the couple face each other as the Priestess speaks on.)**

"Your wedding day is filled with emotion, friends, promises, hope, rings and dances. Many people here will remember their own wedding day, and how fleeting it was. So, we are going to slow down a bit now, and take pause to soak up the moment, right here and now."

"Look now into each other's eyes: gently, easily, and softly. Think about the happiness that you're feeling in this place, in this moment. Really let that feeling register in your heart, your mind, and in every cell of your body."

"Now, promise yourselves that you will remember this feeling. During your marriage, draw strength from it during tough times, and let it nourish you even more in times of joy."

**(Pause for a moment to allow the couple to eye-gaze with each other)**

"From today your family, friends, community, and the whole world, will know you as co-travelers through life, adventurers and soul-mates."

"I now present to you the newly married couple! You may kiss the bride!"

**Jumping the Besom**

**PS:** "The final tradition to be observed is the couples jumping of the Besom. This is a fairly simple tradition in which the bride and groom jump the broom together symbolizing their crossing the threshold into a new life together."

**(Couple jumps Besom, people cheer, a new life begins.)**

**Thanking the God and Goddess:**

**PS**

**God:**

We thank you great one Aengus, for joining us today as we perform this rite, may the blessings you bring today follow this couple for many years to come.

Stay if you will, Go if you must.

Hail and farewell!

**Goddess:**

Our great lady Aine, we thank you for joining us today as we perform this rite. May the love you bring today follow this couple for many years to come.

Stay if you will, Go if you must.

Hail and farewell.

### **Releasing of the Elements:**

#### **Spirit:**

Spirit up above and below,

We thank you for joining us in our rite this day, and reminding us of our connections to each other and the rest of creation.

Hail and farewell!

#### **North:**

Farewell, watchtowers of the north.

We thank you for joining our rite this day, we thank you for providing us with a solid foundation and keeping us grounded during our rites.

Hail and farewell!

#### **West:**

Farewell, watchtowers of the west

We thank you for joining our rite this day, we thank you for providing us with love and emotional well-being, as vast as the oceans.

Hail and farewell!

#### **South:**

Farewell, watchtowers of the south.

We thank you for joining our rite this day, we thank you for the flames of passion and friendship as they burn bright.

Hail and farewell!

#### **East:**

Farewell, watchtowers of the south.

We thank you for joining our rite this day, we thank you for the gift of communication and new beginnings.

Hail and farewell!

#### **Circle Opening**

**PS:** The circle will now be undone as we sing the Circle Open song, please join in as we sing.

“May the circle be open but unbroken, may the God and goddess be forever in your heart, merry meet and merry part and merry meet again” (Sing this multiple times, until Selena has laid down the sword)

(Selena now rings the bell 13 x to clear the air, after returning to the altar with the sword).

**PS:** The ceremony is now completed