

'I just like thinking about the moon and lighting candles': 21st Century Witches on Instagram

By Ellie Orrell

Thank you to every witch, Wiccan, herbalist and amazing woman I spoke to in the process of gathering material for this paper, I hope that you feel this brief exploration of witch practice amongst Instagram users in 2018 is fair and well-formed.

All informants are referred to using their Instagram handles and all extended direct quotes will be displayed in direct message format in order that my anthropological writing may echo the process by which I gathered the ethnographic material.

Introduction

Last summer, sitting amongst new friends in the small, damp bedroom of a farmhouse in Devon, our clothes soaked with wood smoke and chamomile tea being passed around, I discovered that magic was not something left behind in children's books, fairytales and Hollywood movies. Nor was it, as nineteenth century anthropologists would suggest, confined to the 'rudest savages' of far-off lands as part of an evolutionary framework (Frazer 1922: 55). Contrarily, the contemporary, Western world which I had inhabited for 21 years was steeped in magic and witchcraft: I learnt about the esoteric bookshops which were scattered across London, of spells which could be bought online from Romania, about candle magick and #witchesofinstagram. In this paper, I will explore the eclectic nature of contemporary witch practice amongst young women in order to examine the role of social media in the creation of kinship



@witchpdx, protest against the deportation of immigrants in the US, 2017

and community across a cosmopolitical world. Furthermore, I will emphasise the modernisation of witch practice by comparing my ethnographic encounters to those of Greenwood in 1990s London (2000) concluding that the advent of social media allows coven-like kinship groups to form online whilst ultimately encouraging highly individualised forms of witchcraft.

Standing outside of a house in south London, awkwardly topping up my phone before ringing the doorbell in case I needed to make an SOS call to my cousin who had just dropped me off, I prepared myself to meet @rubystreek, a witch I had contacted through Instagram a few days prior. As I looked through the broken pane of glass in the doorframe, I suddenly began to regret agreeing to meet people from Instagram for this ethnography. I stood there, challenging the rhetoric of every school assembly any millennial was ever given: "Never agree to meet anyone you have met online!". A man opened the door, I asked if Ruby lived here, and waited outside—incase this man's online persona was @rubystreek—whilst he

knocked on a door to the left. A wave of relief poured over me as messy-haired and pyjama-clad Ruby emerged from the room and welcomed me into the house: here begins my ethnographic encounter.

Girls, Girls, Girls

As the kettle boils, and as she collects teabags, cups and milk from various points around the kitchen, @rubystreak talks about the roast dinner she'd had the day before; being drunk and crying because her friends wouldn't go to karaoke with her; cracking eggshells before binning them and taking homeopathy before nights out. I am struck by the casual nature of her witchcraft, and also by the openness with which she shares it with not only me, as an anthropologist, but with her friends and family. I had assumed witchcraft would be 'imbued with secrecy' (Greenwood 2000: 135), however what I found was a practice which openly existed alongside everyday life. The 'aura of mystery – a setting apart from the ordinary world' (*ibid.*) which Greenwood comes to associate with Western witchcraft is dissolved by the young witches whom I spoke to: who use witchcraft as a part of everyday existence as opposed to setting it apart from 'the ordinary world'.

My mum always said that egg shells were boats for evil witches, so I crack them before putting them in the bin [so that they can't be used] ... it's a bit crazy but I do it and my mum does it

'It's more just cracking eggshells and stuff [rather than anything intensely ritualistic]', @rubystreak remarks as she stirs the tea bag around her cup before scooping it out. Witchcraft was something

passed down within her family through the maternal line- something which was atypical among the women I spoke to, many of whom had found witchcraft through internet sources such as Tumblr and Instagram, or had learnt about it through friends. Consequently, her use of social media in relation to her practice is less about learning about witchcraft, as it is for others, and more about following witches whom she admires.

We drink lady grey and as we talk, she twists a necklace between her fingers whilst assuring me that she's really 'the worst witch ever' in between anecdotes of curses she's heard of and tarot readings she has done for friends. The necklace is a locket which holds a portrait of the Virgin Mary; exemplifying the eclectic nature of contemporary witchcraft, which borrows saint figures from Catholicism as readily as it draws on Buddhist meditation techniques for grounding and clearing energy.

i really love religious iconography - my room at home is one big shrine - and i'm a big fan of Mary etc, but it's probably mostly to do with how it was mums and it's really pretty and it kind of reminds me of the affinity of mothers and women etc idk

The importance of the connections and 'affinities' between women and witchcraft reoccurred throughout conversations that I had. @rubystreak described witchcraft as 'a women's craft', before reflecting on how 'women died for this and it's really important [to acknowledge that women are a huge part of its history]'. Furthermore, @brunette.dilemma, whom I exchanged direct messages with over Instagram expressed how:

the character of the witch
made me think of power,
control and
independence ...
[teachings] that my mom
[imparted me with]

Here, direct connections are formed between witchcraft and empowerment. Consequently, perhaps it is no coincidence that witchcraft is finding its voice on social media at the same time as women's equality campaigns such as #HeForShe and #TimesUp. Witchcraft in anthropological study has often been analysed as a form of social control or leveling (Moro 2017: 1), however studies of witchcraft have classically been restricted to societies outside of the West: for example, Evan-Pritchard's writings on the Azande and the Nuer (1939, 1956). These classical anthropological theorizations (Evans-Pritchard, Lévy-Bruhl 1926, Durkheim 1912) tend to emphasise the 'primitive' and irrational nature of witchcraft. Contrastingly, in contemporary Western society, this 'women's craft' becomes a symbol not of 'the primitive' but of feminist rebellion against patriarchal rule; a point reiterated by @xenialucie when we discussed the links between feminism and witchcraft:

It's a way of being in charge
of your own path and
finding your inner power
outside patriarchy and
capitalism.

The symbol of 'the witch' and witchcraft as a facilitator of 'power outside [of] patriarchy and capitalism' been embraced explicitly by the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, W.I.T.C.H., (fig.1), a collective of independent feminist protest

groups active in the US (Brownmiller 2000: 49). W.I.T.C.H use Instagram to showcase and publicize protests, reach new potential members and communicate with other feminist groups. The use of classical witch iconography—black hats and broomsticks—conveys a movement of witch figures from literary, historical and mythological status into contemporary Western protest-culture. From this, one could perceive contemporary witchcraft as 'rituals of rebellion' (Gluckman 1959: 109): practices in which the social imbalances of power can be redressed. This can be supported to a certain extent, however it is important to recognise that witchcraft is not only concerned with 'rituals of rebellion' (*ibid.*), but that posts shared by witches on social media express a wider experience of magic and their craft: one which extends to all aspects of life and not only in moments of ritual.

Back in South London, having finished our tea, I sit on Ruby's bed leafing through spell books as she shows me her tarot and angel cards and we talk about Azelia Banks' infamous Instagram story in which Banks shared a post-ritual video of herself preparing to clean the room where she had ritually sacrificed chickens in 2016. On the windowsill, an altar is set up: a bouquet of dried flowers stand in yellowing water, there are candles stuck into empty wine bottles and a bunch of partially-burnt sage (fig.2). Amongst these tools of witchcraft are scattered other, everyday tools possessed by any average twenty-something: a mascara wand, hairbrush, a pot of lip balm. The casual presence of the altar within her bedroom suggests a lack of division between moments of witchcraft and everyday life; defying Horton's theory that practitioners experience a 'jump from common sense to mystical thinking' (1967: 60). Instead the two ways of thinking appear inseparable, and witchcraft is not often thought about as being anything

other than ‘just something I do’. She shows me the account of rapper, Princess Nokia, a *bruja* [Spanish: witch] whose music videos use imagery of women holding hands, leaning against one another, sitting in circles and holding each other up (fig. 3); conveying how witchcraft connects and strengthens bonds between women. I will now move on to discussing these relationships between practitioners in order to examine the role of social media in the formation of ‘coven-like’ kinship groups between witches on Instagram.

Sisterly Support

By following witches like @princessnokia on Instagram, @rubystreek forms a virtual relationship between herself and those she follows; and I would suggest that the connections formed by following individuals on Instagram become a kind of contemporary replacement for covens (Greenwood 2000: 161). Few of the women I spoke to knew other practitioners offline, instead relationships with other witches were built through the exchange of direct messages, liking and commenting on posts, and watching the stories of other witches around the world. Sharing experiences and ideas of witchcraft through social media both directly [via direct messages] and indirectly [watching a story] appear to facilitate the creation of relational ties between users. These relationships are similar to those found within covens: where practices are shared, rituals discussed and support offered to new witches (Greenwood 2000). Furthermore, groups of witches can come together online to cast ‘mass-spells’ at times of social contention, such as the presidential election of Donald Trump in 2017, where individuals used social media websites to organize a mass-spell casting against the newly elected president. This new form of coven-building, in which no initiation must be undergone and where anyone

is free to join and leave as they wish—by following or unfollowing—contrasts with the circles of secrecy in which Greenwood’s coven-members ‘had a responsibility not to divulge practices at the workplace, or where they would be misunderstood’ (2000: 89). Conversely, contemporary witchcraft is highly visible, and by sharing images of their craft online, witches readily leave themselves open to ‘misunderstandings’ and build communities through these online platforms.

Currently, Western pop-culture is experiencing a growing interest in ‘witchcraft aesthetics’; with H&M bringing out ‘With my Witches’ sweatshirts and Preen and Dior’s SS17 occult-themed collections where garments were adorned with pentagrams and zodiac symbols (fig. 4). Many practitioners agreed that they felt comfortable sharing pictures of “witchy things” such as crystals or tarot cards on Instagram, or carrying crystals with them during the day, because these items have two potential meanings: the first being that they are symbols or tools of witchcraft, the second being that they are simply purporting a ‘witchcraft aesthetic’. Ergo, perhaps it is aesthetic nature of Instagram—being composed primarily of photographs and secondarily of text in the form of captions—that encourages witches to share their practice online with reduced anxiety that they will attract negative responses from those who see it. By sharing images on Instagram, an aesthetic-based platform, witches consciously leave themselves open to ‘misunderstandings’ in the knowledge that sometimes a ‘misunderstanding’ of their posts about witchcraft can be beneficial to their social position offline amongst users— including friends—who may consider witchcraft as ‘weird’ or ‘unreal’.

Throughout my ethnographic encounters, I found that bonds of kinship formed

between practitioners were often referred to using familial terminology. The above title— ‘Sisterly Support’—is a screenshot from a post by @covengirlgang, a business support system for women who run independent businesses. The use of the word ‘coven’ explicitly creates a sense of online community whilst strengthening the idea of ‘the witch’ as a symbol for female power and independence. Ideas of ‘sisterhood’ were reiterated by those I spoke to:

I am always working with new things and trying to be connected and learn more about myself and my sisters.

@xenialucie, an artist from Switzerland, uses imagery and the figure of ‘the witch’ within her work in order to form connections between the heritage of witchcraft and her contemporary practice. In this way, her work becomes an extension of her practice and the two nourish one another. She reflects on listening, reading and watching ‘A LOT’ of materials telling stories about women and witches as being ‘[a] way of feeling like part of a big sorority’; evoking ideas of how individual practice ultimately connects the practitioner to a wider network of individuals without the need to ever physically meet one another. I found that there was freedom to practice witchcraft in individualised ways—such as through creative practice—as opposed to a standardised form of witchcraft amongst the women I spoke to. Although there are degrees of methodology, and everyone I met stressed the importance of study before commencing practical witchcraft; there also appears to be room for improvisation and creativity. This is supported by witches’ use of social, media where individual practices can be both shared with an gathered from others:

279 likes

plants_witch Beltane is tomorrow and I'm still not finished with my preparations. 😊
If you're celebrating today, I wish you a very happy evening 🌿❤️
How are you celebrating Beltane? .

Beltane, a festival which takes place on the first of May in order to mark the beginning of the summer is an example of a ‘celestial rite of passage’ (Van Gennep 1960: 4), wherein rituals are performed to mark the movement from one season into another. By asking how others are celebrating Beltane, @plants_witch, acknowledges the eclectic and highly individualised practice of contemporary witchcraft. The responses she received in the comments attest to this: one respondent ‘made Beltane fried honey cakes ... and did some tarot readings’, another ‘made banana and honey cake, [had] a honey bath and [did] a tarot spread’. By publicly sharing different ways of celebrating the sabbat [a gathering of witches to mark a specific event, in this case the beginning of Summer] on social media, witches share aspects of their personalised practice with others within a virtual, coven-like setting. This bears similarity to the ‘bun fight’ meeting’s that Greenwood’s covens would partake in before any ritual in order to discuss how the ritual should be performed (2000: 89). Instagram appears to provide a space in which there is freedom to share individual practices which others may then incorporate into their own practice or they can reject it; without it losing any value for the individual who shares it.

Alongside the use of specific tools such as tarot cards; everyday objects become vehicles for magical potential. This can be exemplified by contrasting uses of coffee in daily practice:

I incorporate spices with intent, like as part of my morning "ritual" I make my coffee a certain way, use cinnamon or nutmeg or star anise depending on what I feel I'll need for the day stir anti [-clockwise or] clockwise to banish/ summon certain things.

I usually put milk in my coffee, not spices, but something I do is charge it with positive vibrations

I found the similarity between these practices intriguing: in that both witches drank the coffee with the understanding that doing so would bring an energy which they desired for the day. However, the practical element of how this energy could be imbued within the coffee produced contrast; for @xan6ua [left] the addition of particular spices and the direction of their incorporation can either bring or banish certain things, whereas for @brunette.dilemma [right], the positive charging of the coffee allows positive vibrations to be absorbed by the drinker without the addition of material ingredients. Consequently, both witches' practices are rooted in the same belief: that consuming certain foods or drinks with intent can impact upon one's mood and energy for the day. However, although the way in which this is done varies between individuals, neither is considered the 'right or wrong' practice. This example of two varied consumption-based practices conveys the existence of individualised practice despite the ease with which witchcraft techniques can now be freely accessed online, both through Instagram and through blogs such as TheHoodWitch.com; which offers 'everyday magic for the modern mystic'. Instead of practices becoming uniform, individualized practices can be shared and allowed to flourish online.

Conclusion

Standing outside of the house with the broken window pane in South London, breathing steadily and clearing my mind of worry: I was practicing witchcraft. I

was grounding myself in preparation for the encounter. This pre-encounter self was expecting something quite different from the encounter I actually had; I had expected our meeting to be awkward and intense, but what I found was quite different. Instead, the encounter was like spending the morning with a friend. We chatted, drank tea, went for a walk in the park and then at the end we rushed to the station so that I could catch my train. Our conversations wound in and out of the topic of witchcraft: and it struck me that witchcraft was not something out-of-the-ordinary, but rather it was, on a basic level, about forming connections with the world and with those around you. 'I just like thinking about the moon and lighting candles' @rubystreek informed me when I asked her explicitly about her practice. Witchcraft is about observing and engaging with the universe and all that it encompasses, but this engagement arises in the everyday: in making your morning coffee or in an artist making her work. Ritualized aspects of practice are important, but they are not the only location of witchcraft in people's lives. Contrarily, most of the witches I spoke to were at university, and expressed that they didn't have as much time as they'd like to perform specific rituals. Whereas Greenwood's ethnography (2000) attended to the importance of collective ritual and gatherings of witches, I have highlighted the personal and intimate aspects of practice and have suggested that social media functions as a coven-like aspect of contemporary witch practice; simultaneously encouraging more eclectic forms of practice amongst 21st century Western witches.

NOTES



Figure 1. @witchlouisville defending the last remaining abortion clinic in Kentucky (September 2017)



Figure 2. @rubystreek's Spring altar shared on Instagram a week before I arrived [left] photo taken of the altar when I was there [right]



Figure 3. Screenshots from Princess Nokia's Brujas music video (2016)



Figure 4. Left to right: H&M, Preen [detail], Preen, Dior [2017]

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