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RE-MEMBERING THE WITCH AND THE GODDESS: FEMINIST RITUAL-MAKERS IN NEW ZEALAND

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Abstract

In the mythologies of Western societies, the witch and the goddess constitute polarized images of female power, power which is both beyond the domain of male control and designated illegitimate (in the case of the goddess) or undesirable (in the case of the witch) for ordinary women. This thesis is a product of research amongst women in New Zealand who, by claiming that the witch is a diabolized version of one aspect of the goddess, challenge the dichotomization of these two images. The women belong to a movement called alternatively "feminist witchcraft" or "Goddess spirituality" which was begun by feminist activists in the United States during the late 1960s, grew and spread in the twenty five or so years since, and today forms a sub-group within feminism in a number of Western countries.

The women with whom I worked self-identify both as "witch" and "goddess". In their everyday lives, and especially through their ritual practices, they aim to discover, embody and explore the power which the symbols "witch" and "goddess" represent. I argue that women's self-identification in these ways is aimed at collapsing the dualistic symbolic system which polarizes the witch and the goddess as images of womanhood. I see such self-identification as a symbolic act of self-empowerment through which women begin to see and experience themselves as strong and autonomous. By re-membering the witch and the goddess, women re-member parts of themselves to which they have been denied legitimate access under patriarchy.

The thesis is based on three years' anthropological fieldwork amongst feminist witches in Auckland, where the movement is strongest, and Hamilton, where I lived over the period. I also had some limited contact with witches in Christchurch. As background to the ethnography, I trace the movement's origins, development and connections in the United States and New Zealand. I compare expressions of the movement in New Zealand, the United States and England, focussing on the special character of the movement in New Zealand. The ethnography is primarily an examination of the attraction of witchcraft for the women with whom I worked, their world views, and their ritual practices. I emphasize the subjective meanings which witches give to their beliefs, values and practices.

I conclude that the movement is a phenomenon constructed deliberately out of a variety of ancient and contemporary elements by women determined to bring a spiritual dimension to feminism. I see feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality as one expression of a much broader contemporary movement, what witches call a "new consciousness", which emerged out of the 1960s counter-culture. This broader movement, whose various expressions include, along with feminism, the ecology movement, civil rights and gay rights movements, the anti-nuclear movement and holistic healing movements, challenges social and political institutions founded on dominance and oppression: the emphasis is on partnership in social relations, care for the planet, and a holistic world view. For witches, the symbol of holism, balance and connection is the Goddess.

for Her

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> I always associated the witch with magic. I was always very curious about how the gingerbread castle got there. What skill, expertise, or mastery did she have to work things like that? I read Lord of the Rings quite young, and I really identified with the Elven women there. That was my image of "witch" -- woman of power, prestige, and magic.
>
> From my interview with Galadriel, 15 May 1992, Auckland.

> You say "witch" and there's an image that comes to mind. Until that image is dis-spelled, it's going to be a constant dilemma for women.... Identifying as "witch"... I feel more fulfilled in this time of my life than I have in any other.
>
> From my inteview with Sybil, 15 May 1992, Auckland.

> We must learn to dis-spell the language of phallocracy which keeps us under the spell of brokenness. This spell splits our perceptions of our Selves and of the cosmos, overtly and subliminally.
>
> From Gyn/Ecology by Mary Daly (1979:4).

I met my first witch at the age of three in a children's fairy story. She was a warty, black-clad old hag who lived alone in the depths of a forest, snared and dined on juicy children, and turned those who displeased her into toads. She presented an image of menace, cunning, pure evil. My story books were full of mothers who turned out to be step-mothers who made children's lives hell, grandmothers who were wolves in disguise, and godmothers who cursed the infant in rage when not invited to the party.[1] Witches could seem attractive and enticing in these stories, but would turn out to be cannibals. What the story books

did not tell, but what the European witch-hunters of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries claimed, was that this wicked witch also had sexual intercourse with the Devil, suckled demons and her familiars, stole and ate penises as well as babies, and participated in orgies with fellow witches. The image of "witch" incorporated both the hideous hag and the irresistible seductress.

I met my first goddess at primary school during a study of Greek mythology. She glows in the memory as an image of marvellous beauty and power. She had long golden hair and wore flowing white robes; she combined sexual desirability with moral goodness, superhuman strength with supernatural power. As an image, she represented the polar opposite of the wicked witch.

But both images -- the witch and the goddess -- produced a kind of awe. Both were female, but they existed outside the range of images acceptable or even imaginable for "normal" women -- the goddess so far above ordinary women that she inhabited the realm of the supernatural, the witch a terrifying inhabitant of the margins of the social world. Both were images of independent female power which was designated off-limits for "normal" women.

This thesis focusses on women in New Zealand, who form a component of a much larger movement which is growing in contemporary Western societies, who are re-examining the witch and the goddess as images of womanhood. They make two claims. First, they claim that, far from being polar opposites, the witch and the goddess are one. Second, they claim that "ordinary" women can self-identify both as witch and as goddess. Their rationale for these claims is explored in the thesis.

The implications of such claims are dramatic. I argue that they are aimed at collapsing the dualistic symbolic system which polarizes the witch and the goddess[2] as images of womanhood in order to give women access to the independent female power which the two images represent. The importance of the witch and the goddess lies in their symbolic value. The reason for the traditional designation of the witch and the goddess as illegitimate models of "normal" womanhood is that both constitute images of female power outside male control -- hence their appeal to the feminist women who belong to the movement on which this thesis focusses. By self-identifying as "witch" and as "goddess" these women symbolically lay claim to the independent female power which the symbols represent: they image themselves as strong and autonomous, as having the right to choose and direct their own lives. Self-identification in these ways is a symbolic act of self-empowerment by which women permit themselves to acknowledge, legitimate and connect with both the sacred, strong and the dark, dangerous aspects of themselves. In doing so they are re-membering themselves,[3] reclaiming aspects of themselves to which they have been denied legitimate access. By re-membering the witch and the goddess, women are re-membering themselves.

By invoking the symbol of "goddess", women are recalling the pre-patriarchal, goddess-worshipping societies of Europe from the Paleolithic through until approximately four thousand years ago in which, they claim, women were valued as highly as men and social relations were based on the full participation in society of both sexes.[4] They trace a direct connection between the demise of the Goddess and the demise of women's position in society. The shift to patriarchy and

patriarchal religions, with the eventual dominance of Judaeo-Christian monotheism, they argue, meant that women were alienated not only from social and political power but from the powerful aspects of themselves. Gadon writes (1990:xiv):

> When the balance changed, the dark side of the feminine was also suppressed. The Goddess had been a model of women's nature in all its fullness. The irrational, the chaotic and the destructive, which had been acknowledged when the Goddess reigned supreme, were split off from divinity and became feared. Women could no longer express their complete psychic reality.

It was this "dark side of the feminine" which, they claim, eventually came to be imaged as the witch (Walker 1985). The historical development of the witch stereotype is outlined in chapter two.

While women in the movement see the early goddess-worshipping societies of Europe in a utopian light with respect to gender relations, utopianism is not mixed with nostalgia. The purpose of invoking such societies is to make the points that patriarchy and god-worship are not normative, that the past provides models of different kinds of gender arrangements, and that "goddess" can be a useful symbol for women today. They are clear that they are not wanting to return to or recreate the past but are constructing a new spirituality which they believe "has the potential of doing extremely deep healing work for the culture" (Lea Holford, my interview with her, 21 March 1992).[5]

Contemporary Western societies have their religious bases in Judeao-Christian beliefs in which divinity has been imaged exclusively as masculine.[6] By constructing a spirituality in which the primary image of divinity is a goddess, feminist witches are not only reconceptualizing the nature of the divine, they are also reconceptualizing the nature of the feminine. The image of the feminine

as being inferior, weak and passive is rejected as an oppressive legacy of Christianity: the symbol of "goddess" is seen as opening up a great range of images of the feminine: virginal maiden, enchanting seductress, nurturing mother, death-dealing crone, warrior, home-maker, protector, creator, and so on. The Goddess, feminist witches say, has a thousand faces.

Collapsing the witch/goddess dichotomy is only part of a broader challenge these women are making to the world view dominant in Western societies which is based on binary oppositions: man/woman, high/low, light/dark, active/passive, good/evil, white/black, spirit/body, sky/earth, culture/nature, self/other, positive/negative, and so on. According to this world view, two opposed sets of symbolic connections are made: man/high/active/spirit/culture/self/positive is contrasted with woman/low/passive/body/nature/other/negative. The women who have been the focus of my research reject a world view founded on dualism -- one in which women come off worse than men, Blacks come off worse than Whites, the body is subordinate to and in conflict with the spirit, and the natural world's value is measured in terms of exploitable resources -- in favour of a holistic world view which emphasizes connection, balance and cyclic processes. This alternative world view is explored in detail in the thesis.

Feminist witches are not the only ones who are challenging the world view dominant in Western societies. In the past two to three decades, feminists, of which feminist witches are a sub-group,[7] have been challenging the hegemony of Western patriarchy; non-Western peoples have been challenging the hegemony of Western colonialism; the civil rights, gay rights, environmental and peace movements have

become increasingly vociferous, active and effective. The call for a more holistic world view is coming from many and diverse quarters: from psychotherapy, ecofeminism, the human potential movement, women (especially) artists, new scientific theories such as Lovelock's "Gaia hypothesis", alternative healing, and others.[8] The women who belong to the movement on which this thesis focusses see themselves as part of this larger, broader, amorphous "movement", or "mood", abroad in contemporary societies which is challenging dualistic paradigms and the "dominator model"[9] which has framed social relations with regard to gender, race, class and other such social distinctions, as well as human relationships with the rest of the natural world. Lea Holford said in my interview with her:

> I'm not terribly attached per se to the Goddess spirituality movement. I don't care whether people are in the anti-nuclear movement or the environmental movement or the women's movement or whatever. I find them all very inter-related. They are all part of the same force and energy -- it's about rebelling against hierarchies that don't honour the inter-relatedness of everything.

The women with whom I worked are involved in a movement which is known alternatively as "feminist witchcraft" or "Goddess spirituality". People outside the movement, I have found, frequently baulk at the idea that these two names refer to one phenomenon. The idea that witches and goddesses could be one and the same is unsettling when we are used to thinking of the hideous hag and the divinely beautiful goddess as opposites. One of my tasks in this thesis is to demonstrate how women in the movement deconstruct the stereotypical images of the witch and the goddess, assign them new meanings and values, reveal the connections between the two images, and learn to embody both images through ritual.

The question of how best to label the movement I have been studying has been difficult to resolve. While the women with whom I have worked belong to a clearly identifiable movement, it is not possible, as I indicated above, to give it one name. The women define themselves and the movement in a variety of ways: as witches, feminist witches, followers of the Goddess, feminist ritual-makers, pagans and neopagans. Not only do different women define themselves differently from one another, but one particular woman will define herself differently at different times and in different contexts for reasons which I discuss in chapters three and seven. Some do not self-identify as, for example, "witch" or "pagan", but say that they are "involved in Women's Spirituality" or "belong to a feminist ritual group". Another woman who belongs to the same ritual group and shares the same beliefs, values and practices may call herself a witch and call the ritual group a coven.

In the literature written by and for women in the movement, the label "Women's Spirituality" is frequently used to refer to the movement. This term is problematic, at least in relation to my research and this thesis, because of its vagueness and broadness. The term is sometimes used to include Christian feminists as well as neopagan women.[10] It may also be taken to refer generally to an ill-defined "spirituality" which all women possess. I use the terms "feminist witchcraft" and "Goddess spirituality" synonymously to refer to the movement I have been studying because of their precision and because they are the names with which most women in the movement are familiar and comfortable. I did not focus in my research on Christian feminism and had little to do with Christian feminists: my experience was limited to two rituals

with two groups of Christian feminists and to informal contact with several Christian feminist women.

I also use "neopaganism" synonymously with "feminist witchcraft" and "Goddess spirituality" but less frequently, because while women in the movement do not disassociate themselves from this term, it is not one they frequently use themselves. I use "neopagan" rather than "pagan" to emphasize the movement's newness -- no more than several decades old -- and constructedness.

In the thesis I frequently abbreviate "feminist witch" to "witch" for the sake of economy where it is clear that I am talking about feminist witchcraft. The women themselves make the same abbreviation.

I also had to decide whether to write "goddess" with a capital or lower case initial letter. I follow the practice of using a lower case "g" where I am referring to specific goddesses from particular cultures, for example, the goddess Demeter or the goddess Kali. I use a capital "G" where I am referring to "the Goddess", an overarching term which embraces all goddesses and is also used by women in the movement as an equivalent to the Sacred Feminine, the Life Source, Ultimate Reality, the Great Mother, the Divine Being of Woman, the Creative Energy, the earth, and all of nature. This "Goddess", as I discuss in chapters three and seven, is not the feminine counterpart of the Judaeo-Christian God.

I go on now to discuss my choice of topic and the process by which I began my research. The idea of doing my doctoral research on witches and witchcraft in New Zealand came as I was listening to a lecture on cross-cultural ideas and practices related to illness and healing, medicine and magic. I had, by this stage, extended my acquaintance with witches beyond the evil-doing hags of childhood fairy stories -- I

knew of the victims of the European witch-craze and the Salem witch-hunts and of the witches of anthropologists' ethnographies. I had heard vaguely about people who met in graveyards at midnight to perform unsavoury rites. I knew no witches personally and had no idea of how I might come to meet some. I imagined that gaining access to covens to do fieldwork would be difficult and possibly dangerous. I had never heard of "feminist witchcraft" or "Goddess spirituality".

When I told people what I hoped to study, most responded with smirks, serious doubt about whether the topic was substantial or serious enough for doctoral research, or genuine alarm about what might become of me. Witchcraft, it seemed, was a legitimate topic for study so long as it was witchcraft in an "other culture". One woman, however, a student in one of my anthropology tutorials, responded by telling me that she was a witch herself, and that I should read Starhawk, an American writer, if I wanted to find out more about contemporary witchcraft. I borrowed Starhawk's first book, The Spiral Dance, from the university library and read it. Another friend passed on a newspaper clipping she had saved about Juliet Batten[11] which described her as a "modern day witch". In the clipping I learnt that a number of ritual groups met in Auckland and that Batten had written a book called Power from Within: A Feminist Guide to Ritual-making. From this book I learnt that Batten taught courses in ritual-making through the Department of Continuing Education at the University of Auckland. I checked out the 1990 brochure and found offered a weekend course taught by Batten and another called "Rites of Passage for Women" led by Elaine Dyer which was due to start in a few days time. There was one place left in Dyer's course so I enrolled and

attended the course from Friday 6 April to Sunday 8 April 1990. Two weeks later I attended the first of many workshops on ritual with Juliet Batten.

As I learnt more about what I came to know as "feminist witchcraft" or "Goddess spirituality", the topic became more appealing for several reasons. First, I had a strong interest in aspects of anthropology dealing with ritual, religion, myth and magic, and, in particular, in the way that religious beliefs transmit, legitimate and perpetuate cultural values and practices. Second, I was concerned about the invisibility of women, women's issues, and women's perspectives in much ethnographic literature and wanted to work with women research participants. Third, the topic offered the opportunity to do fieldwork amongst people with whom I share, on the whole, characteristics of race, gender, class and educational background, and with whom I could look forward to an on-going dialogue about my research. Fourth, I developed a personal interest, as well as an academic interest, in exploring a movement which claims to add a spiritual dimension to feminism and which expounds a world view I find attractive.

My broad goal from the beginning of the research was to discover and understand witches' beliefs, values and ritual practices and the reasons why women find them attractive and compelling. I wanted to understand how women come to self-identify as "witches", a label which epitomizes the misogyny of patriarchal cultures. I was interested in how women saw the relationship between their feminist spirituality movement and the political goals of feminism. I wanted to find out how women thought their rituals "worked". These questions remained important to me throughout the research, and this thesis is largely

preoccupied with what I discovered in the course of my pursuit of their answers.

In the remainder of this introduction I summarize the contents of the thesis. In chapter two, "Approaches to Witchcraft", I review the kinds of approaches anthropologists and historians have taken towards the study of witchcraft. There has been a strong tradition of studying witchcraft within both disciplines, and a high and productive level of cross-disciplinary discussion. I argue that, with few exceptions, academic studies of witchcraft have typically dealt with the witch as "other" by focussing on how societies think about and act towards witches rather than on how witches themselves think and act. I contrast this approach with my own which focusses on self-identified witches and the subjective meanings they attach to their beliefs and practices. I discuss the historical image of the witch and the various sources which contributed to its construction. It is important to consider this image and its role in the European witch-craze because contemporary witches make an explicit connection with the women labelled "witches" and murdered as such between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The fact that contemporary witches choose to name themselves "witches", despite their knowledge that the witch of the witch-craze was a cultural construction, derives from their perceived connection with these women.

In chapter three, "Feminists, Witches and the Goddess", I discuss feminist approaches to the study of historical witchcraft and to the study of the Goddess, and give an outline of the history of feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality in Western societies. The two are connected because feminist scholars who have addressed the witch-

craze have, in rejecting the designation of the historical witch as "other" in relation either to themselves or to the witches' own societies, either adopted the label "witch" themselves or at least fuelled the contemporary movement by their writings. What has been missing from most scholarship on witchcraft in the past, Daly (1979:216) claims, is a "Hag-identified vision".

As a result of the feminist re-evaluation of the victims of the European witch-craze, the witch has become for feminist witches a potent symbol of woman as possessor of power and knowledge which is not sourced in nor controlled by patriarchal institutions and not dependent upon patriarchal legitimation or approval. By self-identifying with the women persecuted during the witch-craze, these women aim to challenge conventional interpretations of the witch-craze, to draw attention to a feminist re-evaluation of the women labelled "witches", and to focus attention on the ways in which institutions in contemporary societies continue to oppress, victimise, devalue or deny opportunities to women. In sketching the historical development of feminist witchcraft, I conclude that it represents both a product of specific social, political, spiritual and intellectual conditions and influences of the past two decades and a construction deliberately created by women in response to these conditions. The constructedness of feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality is an continuous theme in the thesis.

In chapter four I consider the feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement alongside a range of religious movements which have attracted the attention of sociologists, anthropologists, and specialists in the comparative study of religion. I discuss how usefully

academic approaches to understanding these movements can be applied to feminist witchcraft. In particular, I consider the new religious movements which arose during the 1960s and 1970s in the same cultural context as feminist witchcraft.

In chapter five, "Methodology: Becoming Enchanted", I deal with the current debate amongst anthropologists about the positionality of the researcher in relation to the society being studied, about the location of the self and the other, and relate this to my own position as a researcher amongst the feminist witches I was studying. I describe the practical aspects of my research and discuss the ethical and methodological problems and issues which accompanied my experience of doing research. I make it clear that I see my ethnography as one particular representation of the phenomenon of feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality in New Zealand based on my particular interests, concerns, goals, experiences, understandings, methods of working, and feminist political stance.

Chapter six, the first of my ethnographic chapters, gives a profile of the movement in New Zealand. I discuss the movement's origins and development, and the demographic characteristics of those who are involved. I compare the movement in New Zealand with witches and witchcraft in England and the United States.

Chapter seven, "The Attraction of Witchcraft", explores the reasons why and the processes by which the New Zealand women I interviewed came to be involved in feminist witchcraft. I also discuss the issues which surround women's self-identification as "witch". I point to the paradox that while women are determined ultimately to transform the dominant culture's image of the witch in line with a feminist re-

evaluation of the witch, and while they believe that personally reclaiming the name "witch" is an effective means of assisting this transformation, they are also frightened of the possible repercussions of openly and unreservedly identifying as "witch". Re-inventing the witch is a major, risky and difficult task.

In chapter eight, "Witches' World Views/The Attraction of the Goddess", I outline a world view based on holism and balance and emphasize the constructedness of feminist witchcraft as a contemporary spiritual movement. I conclude that the Goddess is attractive to women because she sanctions women's strength and independence, opens up a great range of images of the feminine, affirms not only their procreative and nurturing qualities,[12] but also helps them to reconnect with the "dark feminine", the aspect of the Goddess which in Judaeo-Christian societies became diabolized and transformed into the witch.

Chapters nine, ten and eleven deal with feminist witches' rituals. Chapter nine describes the different types of rituals and ritual structure. In chapter ten, "Ritual as Artefact", I show that feminist witches' rituals, like their belief system or systems, are collages constructed deliberately of borrowed, adapted, and newly created elements. Chapter eleven introduces some of the general approaches anthropologists have used in their attempts to understand the function of rituals, and considers how witches themselves make sense of their ritual activity -- how they believe ritual "works".

In chapter twelve, "Re-membering the Witch and the Goddess", I show how women in the movement play with, deconstruct and transform the traditional images of the witch and the Goddess. I explore the ways in which women, through ritual, self-identify as witch

and as Goddess in their attempts to deconstruct the witch/Goddess dichotomy and reclaim the power these symbols offer.

In the conclusion of the thesis I review my argument and the aims of my research, contextualize the feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement within New Zealand society and in relation to the movement in Britain and in the United States, and discuss the academic contributions of this study. Finally, I suggest potential areas for future study.

Notes

1. In her review of Tanya Luhrmann's Persuasions of the Witch's Craft, Rosemary Dinnage (1989:3) discusses the "tremendous charge" carried by the word "witch" as a result of these particular associations.
2. Carol Christ (1982, 1987, 1992), a feminist theologian, has explored in depth the meaning of the symbol of Goddess for women, and argues that the recent re-emergence of this symbol has significant political and psychological ramifications for the feminist movement (1982:72). Christ's argument is dealt with in greater detail in chapter three.
3. In the introduction to her essay "Finitude, Death, and Reverence for Life" (1987:210), Christ sees the symbol of "Goddess" as having the potential to counteract and heal the effects that Platonism and Christianity, as the dominant symbol systems of Western culture, have had in terms of alienating people from parts of themselves and from the natural world, the potential to "help us to re-member ourselves, to re-member this earth, which is our home".
4. For discussions of the archaeological evidence of this period and of the religious and social aspects of culture based on this evidence, see, for example, Gimbutas (1982,1991), Baring and Cashford (1991), Gadon (1990), Eisler (1988), and Goodison (1990).
5. Lea Holford is a psychotherapist. She was involved with the Goddess movement in the United States during the late 1970s and, since coming to New Zealand ten years ago, has taught many courses on Goddess spirituality through Continuing Education at the University of Auckland.
6. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is not accorded full divine status.
7. I discuss the relationship between feminist witches and the feminist movement as a whole in chapter three.
8. It has been claimed that postmodernism and poststructuralism have emerged as a response of traditionally dominant groups to their "loss of mastery" (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989:14): "In the postmodern period, theorists [notably white, academic, Western males] 'stave off' their anxiety by questioning the basis of the truths that they are losing the privilege to define".
9. Eisler (1988) coined this term. She proposes (1988:xvii) that "underlying the great surface diversity of human culture are two basic

models of society": the "dominator model" and the "partnership model". Her The Chalice and the Blade is widely read and quoted by feminist witches.

10. See Note 6 following chapter six.

11. Juliet Batten is an artist, writer, psychotherapist, and teacher of courses on feminist ritual-making. Like Lea Holford, she has been very influential in the development of the movement in New Zealand and is referred to frequently in the thesis.

12. Some feminist scholars, such as di Leonardo (1991:26) and Lefkowitz (1992:33), have criticized the Goddess movement on the grounds that, they claim, it invokes the essentialist connections between woman, nature, and the body. I discuss this in chapter three.

Chapter 2

Approaches to Witchcraft

> One mustn't be silent about certain wicked women who become followers of Satan (I Tim. 5, 15), seduced by the fantastic illusion of the demons, and insist that they ride at night on certain beasts together with Diana, goddess of the pagans, and a great multitude of women; that they cover great distances in the silence of the deepest night; that they obey the orders of the goddess as though she were their mistress; that on particular nights they are called to wait on her.
>
> The Canon episcopi, included in A.D.906 by Regino of Prüm, abbot of Treves, in a collection of instructions for bishops. Quoted in Ginzburg (1990a:90) and Henningsen (1990:214). This text allows us, says Henningsen, to "look through the theological veil and capture a popular cult in its undiabolized form".

> And of the fact that women are the Devil's Gateway it is observed that sin and afterwards death came into the world because Eve consorted with the devil in the body of a serpent.
> That the power of the devil lies in the privy parts of men.
> That women act as the devil's agent and use flesh as bait.
> That women under the power of the devil meet with him secretly, in the woods (in the wilderness), at night.
> That they kiss him on the anus. That they offer him pitch-black candles, which he lights with a fart. That they anoint themselves with his urine. That they dance back to back together and feast on food that would nauseate "the most ravenously hungry stomach." That a mass is held, with a naked woman's body as an altar, feces, urine and menstrual blood upon her ass. That the devil copulates with all the women in this orgy, in this ritual.
> That these women are witches.
>
> From Woman and Nature by Susan Griffin (1980:9).

When I first told people that I had chosen witches as the subject of my doctoral research, a friend suggested that I might ingratiate myself by taking along "a nice plate of bats' wings or a dish of jellied newt". My

mother fretted that I would "discover too much" and that "they" would retaliate by kidnapping my baby. Other people joked about midnight orgies in graveyards and New Age spiritual masturbation. I received impassioned lectures on the irrationality of witchcraft, requests for spells to despatch a troublesome lover and an employer, and a generous offer of some old Black Sabbath records. When I was away from my university department attending rituals, I was said to be "off on my broomstick".

From these responses we could construct the contemporary popular concept of a witch: a malevolent or ridiculous hag inclined towards Satanism, cannibalism, illicit sex, levitation and lunacy. This image parallels remarkably closely the image of the witch popular in sixteenth century Europe at the height of the witch-craze.[1] Drawing from writers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jeffrey Russell, in his History of Witchcraft (1980:37), describes what was almost universally believed about witches at that time. Each Sabbat,[2] witches, who were mostly women, sneaked out of bed, rubbed themselves with an ointment which enabled them to levitate, and flew off on animals, fenceposts, pitchforks, bread paddles or broomsticks to meet with fellow witches in caves, cellars or on deserted heaths. Novices were required to kill a young child and bring its body to a subsequent meeting. Each witch had to renounce Christianity and worship the Devil or his representative at the Sabbat by offering him the obscene kiss on the buttocks. After the ritual was completed, the feasting and orgy began. Children's bodies, stolen from good Christian families, were boiled up and consumed in a parody of the eucharistic feast. At the conclusion of

the Sabbat, the witches flew home and slipped back into bed beside their sleeping spouses.

I begin this chapter by drawing attention to the strength and resilience of the historical image of the witch, because I think it significant that western academics of any discipline who study witchcraft have also, unavoidably, grown up with this image. The fact that these academics now claim, via scholarly explanations of the structure and function of witch beliefs, that "real" witches -- that is, women who conform or conformed to the popular image of the witch -- do not and never did exist supports rather than undermines this view. What is "real" for these academics is the image: the glinty-eyed, warty-nosed hag jabbing pins into wax images or cackling evilly over a cauldron brimming full of plump children. We all met and came to know her well during childhood, in numerous fairy tales. The wicked witch is a well-established, highly consistent and evocative image in literature from Shakespeare to Jakob Grimm to Roald Dahl. There are a few exceptions, such as Glinda the Good in The Wizard of Oz, but in Oz, of course, there is the thoroughly Wicked Witch of the West as well. The great majority of academics from all disciplines dismiss as fantasy the idea that this image of the witch was ever anything more than an image -- she did not become carnate during the witch-craze, nor had she ever been. For these academics the witch is only as real as the witch belief.

Despite the potency of the image, there is the paradox that the image of the witch is at once real and not real. On one hand we "know" that witches are ugly, wicked and cruel and that they live in stories; on the other we know that the stories are not true. I argue that most

western academics' beliefs about witches, or one might equally say their disbelief concerning witches, have had an important role in framing their theoretical approaches to the study of witchcraft. Because it is believed that witches, who are by definition wicked, live only in stories and in our minds (but not amongst us), it is believed that we must therefore look for social and often political and economic reasons to explain why societies, including our own, construct witch beliefs and witch stories, why they label people witches, and why they hate and persecute the objects of such labelling. Thus, the academic study of witch beliefs has not been the study of witches' beliefs, but rather the study of beliefs about witches. The history of witchcraft is the history of what it has been thought to be (Russell 1980:15).

In her introduction to Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations, a collection of papers by anthropologists and historians from a conference to mark thirty years since the publication of Evans-Pritchard's Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande, Mary Douglas (1970:xxxiv) is explicit about this tendency of academics to focus on the society which holds witchcraft beliefs, rather than on the witches themselves:

> Anthropologists have usually approached witchcraft from the point of view of the accuser, always assuming that the accusation is false. This has made it hard for us to interpret witchcraft confessions. Threats to practise witchcraft against an enemy, these we can interpret as empty boasting. But the idea that a person may sincerely believe himself a witch and go to a diviner to be cured of his state is difficult to understand within the terms of our analysis.

Again, in Natural Symbols, Douglas writes (1973:165): "The ethnography of the world seen from the eyes of the accused sorcerer has not been recorded as yet".

The problem of what anthropologists and historians should make of the self-identified witch, or the witch "confession", is also discussed in Douglas's 1970 volume by Keith Thomas, a specialist in English witchcraft. He says (1970:64):

> The veracity of such confessions has been the subject of much historical controversy, and anthropologists have found them equally embarrassing, choosing to put them down to "malnutrition", or "depression"..., just as seventeenth-century intellectuals attributed them to "melancholy".

Thomas himself concludes (1970:65) that while not all people accused of witchcraft in England had malicious thoughts about their neighbours or practised magic against them, some undoubtedly did resort to curses and black magic out of frustration:

> She [the "witch"] was too weak to avenge herself against the community by physical force; and she could not take her persecutors to law. Magic was a substitute for impotence.

Thomas's reasoning here seems to be post hoc. He indicates that a woman accused of witchcraft might resort to sorcery as a form of retaliation against her persecutors; he does not suggest that acts of sorcery, or imagined sorcery, caused the accusation in the first place.

Alan Macfarlane, in his comparative study of anthropological witchcraft and witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England, concludes that individuals who make witchcraft "confessions" do so from spite, delusion or societal pressure (1970a:222).

Brian Levack, in the introduction to his recent book on the European witch-hunts (1987:11-18), discusses "the reality of witchcraft". He distrusts confessions of witchcraft because, he claims, they were frequently the product of judicial coercion and torture.

Levack suggests that those "confessions" which are reported to have been unforced were made because the accused wanted to get the execution over and done with, rather than endure the torture they would surely have been subjected to if they remained silent. He says some "confessions" were also "almost certainly the result of senescence" and that the old women prosecuted for witchcraft produced fantasies which the interrogators then shaped into diabolical activity (1987:15).

Historians on the whole have interpreted the study of witchcraft as a history of repression and inhumanity directed against rather pitiful members of communities (Russell 1980:40). Since they have taken it as given that self-identifying witches never existed, they see "witches" as the objects of labelling by the dominant societies in which they lived. Studies of Salem witchcraft have also pursued an understanding of this labelling process (Karlsen 1987; Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974; Demos 1982). They have focussed on the social relationships between accuser and accused and on the demographic characteristics of the accused in order to discover what kinds of people were picked out and defined as witches, and why it was that these characteristics should have made them vulnerable to accusation.

Carol Karlsen (1987) sees the study of Salem witchcraft as the study of systematic violence against women. She found that accused witches tended to be women who lived alone, especially middle-aged and old women. They were vulnerable because they lacked a male "protector", and because they had failed to or were no longer fulfilling women's prescribed roles as child-bearers and helpmeets to men. Often they were women who had no brothers or sons, thereby thwarting primogeniture. They were frequently accused of "discontent" for which,

Karlsen says, we might read "refusal to be submissive". She concludes that, like their European counterparts, accused witches in Salem were women living outside patriarchal control, at least with respect to their domestic lives, and were therefore seen by their community as posing a serious threat to the social order.

It is clear from this discussion that on the whole people accused of witchcraft have been interpreted by historians as victims -- as scapegoats for community hostilities and tensions, as victims of misogyny and, most importantly, as victims of labelling. People who "confess" themselves to be witches are likely either to have been not taken seriously by scholars or to have been viewed in an unflattering light as weak, sad, impotent and, significantly, female members of their societies.

Several writers, however, have challenged their colleagues' concentration on the persecution of witchcraft and on the function of witch beliefs in societies which have/had them. Carlo Ginzburg, in his compelling new work Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath (1990a), is perhaps the strongest critic of the approaches taken by historians of the last twenty years. Ginzburg, who is heralded by one reviewer (Anderson 1990:6) as having "many claims to be considered the outstanding European historian of the generation which came of age in the late Sixties", charges his colleagues with concentrating almost exclusively on the persecution of witches while giving little or no attention to the beliefs and behaviour of the persecuted. He says (1990a:10):

> On witchcraft... we possess only hostile testimonies, originating from or filtered by the demonologists, inquisitors and judges. The voices of the accused reach us strangled, altered, distorted; in many cases, they haven't reached us at all.

Ginzburg criticizes historians such as Trevor-Roper, Thomas and Macfarlane for providing interpretations of witchcraft which are reductionist and functionalist. Macfarlane, for instance, influenced by anthropological functionalism, examined the age and sex of accused witches in England, the motives for the accusations, the relationships between witches, neighbours and community in general, but did not examine what women and men accused of witchcraft believed or claimed to believe. Trevor-Roper (1969) focussed on the problem of how the witch-craze could have happened in Europe at the same time as the "so-called scientific revolution": how could a body of popular superstition built on by clerics' fantasies turn into an obsession which gripped Europe for three hundred years? Trevor-Roper dismissed popular beliefs about witches as "fantasies of mountain peasants" and "absurd ideas, born from peasant credulity and female hysteria" (quoted in Ginzburg 1990a:3). Thomas's examination of English witchcraft in Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971) sought psychological, sociological and intellectual explanations for witchcraft accusations but failed, says Ginzburg, to examine what witchcraft meant for the accused.

Ginzburg himself favours a structuralist approach to the study of witchcraft. He analyses systematically the elements of beliefs about the witches' Sabbat and their symbolic significance, tracing these back to a core of folkloric beliefs and practices rooted in Eurasian shamanism. I return to Ginzburg below when discussing the origins of the Sabbat.

In an article published in 1975, "Some Observations on European Witchcraft", Mircea Eliade (quoted in Henningsen 1990:191-2) points

out that European witchcraft cannot be satisfactorily explained "as a creation of religious and political persecution" and suggests that historians need to look at the history of religions to understand the phenomenon better. He goes on to discuss examples of popular European belief-complexes, such as the benandanti of Friuli (discovered by Ginzburg), North Italian shamans who claimed before the inquisitors that they were "good" wizards, and the calusari, cathartic dancers and healers of Romania who claimed that their secret society was patronized by the "Queen of the Fairies", Doamna Zinelor -- the Romanian form of Diana.

Gustav Henningsen (1990) has examined the records of the Spanish Inquisition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While fully aware of the problems of using sources such as inquisitors' interrogations to illuminate popular beliefs, he concludes that in Sicily there was a flourishing fairy cult. In Sicily, fairies and witches were virtually one and the same; the single term used was donna di fuora. Henningsen describes the cult thus (1990:195-6):

> The fairies are participants in a group of seven (six or five) women, and one of them is "The Queen of the Fairies" (Reina de las Hadas). She is also known as "La Matrona", "La Maestra", "The Greek Lady" (La Senora Griega), "Senora Gracia", "Dona Inguanta", "Mandatta", "Dona Zabella", or "The Wise Sybil" (La Sabia Sibila). They are described as beautiful women dressed in black or white, but their supernatural origin is revealed by their feet: cat's paws, horse's hooves, or "round feet".... Sometimes one of the group is a male fairy, who plays the lute or guitar to the others when they dance with linked hands.
>
> Fairies and human beings are organized in "companies", which have different names according to their district.... A wise woman, Vicencia Rosa from Noto on the south-east coast... described how "in the month of March they assembled with many other [companies] from various regions in a wood full of trees, and that their prince did not wish them to do evil things, but to heal [people]".

Henningsen notes that in the main both the women who made "witch confessions" and those who recorded them believed the stories about participation in the cult. After examining the financial status of accused witches and finding that in every case the person was poor, Henningsen concludes (1990:200) that "the Sicilian fairy-cult was a daydream religion that allowed poor people to experience in dreams and visions all the splendours denied them in real life". The cult was a "decidedly feminine phenomenon" -- of the sixty five people accused of witchcraft between 1579 and 1651, eight were men. Most of the women who confessed participation in the fairy cult in the course of their witch trials were practising wise women who were skilled in various forms of sorcery and magic healing rituals. Many stated under interrogation that they had not known there was anything wrong with the fairy cult until it was explained to them by the inquisitors.

Women who belonged to the cult were popularly called "the Ladies from Outside". In Sicily there were no notions of wicked witches: fairies/witches were capable of both good and ill, although any harm they caused could usually be repaired by an expiation ritual. Because the Sicilian witch never became diabolized, as happened to witches in most other parts of Europe, Henningsen concludes that the Sicilian form of witch belief is particularly archaic. Along with Ginzburg, Henningsen (1990:207) believes that witch beliefs derive from

> a widely extended and therefore presumably old and deep-rooted Mediterranean and east European complex of shamanistic beliefs. In the folklore of these areas we find a fairy cult very similar to that reflected in the records of the Inquisition of Sicily with special gifted individuals serving as intermediaries between the world of the fairies and the human world, with elaborate rituals for curing people and animals ...

Drawing on the work of anthropologists, Henningsen finds parallels between the Sicilian cult and contemporary cults in the Mediterranean and eastern Europe. He gives examples from Greece, northern Morocco (recorded by Vincent Crapanzano), Romania (recorded by Gail Kligman) and Tunis (recorded by Kacem Ben Hamza). He claims that because these places are in the European periphery and never experienced witch-hunts, the ancient folk religion remained largely undiabolized.

By taking seriously and examining the substance of witch "confessions", and by providing sophisticated analyses of the witches' Sabbat and its debt to ancient popular beliefs and practices, these writers represent a significant departure from their colleagues. They are not the first, however, to propose the existence of a real pagan cult of witches in Europe which became diabolized by the inquisitors. In 1921 Margaret Murray argued that this witch-cult represented the survival of a pagan fertility cult which Christianity was determined to stamp out. Murray's book The Witch-Cult in Western Europe was widely rejected by historians on the grounds that her witch-cult was a "composite artificially created ... out of the characteristics of discrete and divergent religions from Asia Minor to Wales" (Russell 1980:41). Russell insists that "[i]f witches did exist in the 1300-1700 period, all the evidence shows them as heretical diabolists not pagans". Ginzburg agrees: "Today almost all historians of witchcraft concur in considering Murray's book (as had its first critics) amateurish, absurd, bereft of any scientific merit" (1990a:8). Yet Ginzburg says that while Murray's thesis was "formulated in a totally uncritical manner", it contained "a core of truth" (1983:xix-xx). This core of truth, however, almost certainly existed at the level of belief and not practice. Ginzburg more or less

discounts the possibility that people dedicated to magical practices actually met together to celebrate rituals that included, for example, sexual orgies. But, he says, "This does not mean that they are lacking in documentary value: they simply document myths and not rituals" (1990a:9). Writing in Ankarloo and Henningsen's Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries (1990b), however, Ginzburg seems to contradict the above quotation, preferring to keep his options open. Discussing the distinction between myths and rites in relation to the ecstatic trances of the followers of Diana, he says (1990b:135): "All this does not exclude the possibility of proving the existence of ritual practices linked to the mythic complex of which we have spoken".

Both Ginzburg and Henningsen agree that Murray's fault lay in failing to distinguish between the archaic popular belief-complex and the beliefs about witches which were superimposed upon this complex by judges, inquisitors and demonologists. The fault of historians such as Cohn (1975) was to explain the Sabbat as a projection of the fears and obsessions of the demonologists and inquisitors, without giving sufficient recognition to the role played by ancient popular beliefs in the formation of the witches' Sabbat.

For anthropologists, the classic work on witchcraft is Evans-Pritchard's Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande published in 1937. Evans-Pritchard first made the distinction between sorcerers, who "may do [people] ill by performing magic rites with bad medicines" (p.1 in 1976 edition), and witches, who "can injure [people] by virtue of an inherent quality". As I.M. Lewis (1971:13) says, "Witchcraft exists only in the mind; it is known by its effects, whereas sorcery (like justice)

must be seen to be done". In other words, witches are said to possess powers to harm others while sorcerers are seen to use magic objects and ritual to cause harm. This definition allows no room for a self-identifying witch -- a witch is a witch because members of her/his society say so. Thus, for over half a century, anthropologists in the wake of Evans-Pritchard, like the majority of historians, have tended to interpret witchcraft beliefs as the construction of a society which may be projected onto a member of that society (or someone outside it) who is perceived as threatening for any of numerous reasons. In some societies, for example the Effutu, the Banyang and the Ashanti of West Africa, this projection on to an individual is powerful enough to induce the "witch" to confess (Jackson 1989:93). It might be argued that while academics have interpreted the witch as "other" in relation to her/his society, as a marginalized or deviant individual, they have themselves also treated the witch as "other" by choosing to focus on witch accusers or on social relationships between witches and their accusers, rather than on witches themselves.

Thomas (1970:51) points out that the relevance of Evans-Pritchard's witchcraft/sorcery distinction to many African societies other than the Azande has been questioned by scholars such as Middleton and Winter (1963:2-3), Turner (1964:318-324), Douglas (1967) and Crawford (1967:95). Jackson (1989:93) says that in Africa "one can make a rough-and-ready distinction between accusation-oriented and confession-oriented societies". Whereas Evans-Pritchard reported only one case of confession amongst the Azande, in other African societies, most notably in West Africa, confession, not accusation, is the norm. Thomas also doubts that the

sorcery/witchcraft distinction is valid in the English context (1970:52): "The supposed Devil-worshipping witch frequently employed curses and imprecations, and sometimes even image-magic" -- that is, she was considered a sorceress as well as the possessor of an inherent psychic power.

Thomas notes that in Tudor and Stuart England the term "witchcraft" was used to apply to virtually every kind of magical activity or ritual operation that worked "by occult methods". He says (1970:48):

> Village diviners who foretold the future or who tracked down lost property were often called "witches"; so were the "wise women" who healed the sick by charms or prayers. Contemporary scientists whose operations baffled the ignorant were sometimes suspected of witchcraft, while the label was readily attached by Protestant polemicists to the ritual operations of the Catholic Church.

Yet Thomas's own definition of witchcraft is (1970:48):

> the employment (or presumed employment) of some supernatural means of doing harm to other people in a way that was generally disapproved of by the mass of society.... A witch was thus a person of either sex (but in belief and practice more often female) who could mysteriously injure or kill other people. She could also molest farm animals and frustrate such domestic operations as making butter, cheese and beer.... It was very rare for her to be accused of interfering with the weather or of frustrating sexual relations between man and wife, as was said to happen on the European Continent.

While Thomas makes it clear in the first of these two quotations that people in Tudor and Stuart England included village diviners, wise women who healed the sick, scientists and Catholics within the category "witches", he himself chooses to restrict the term to those accused of acting out of malevolence towards others. This narrowing of the term clearly distorts its meaning from how the people of the day, by Thomas's own admission, defined it.

Why does he do this? In order to deal with the "subject" of witchcraft in an academic context, Thomas, like most scholars, has felt compelled to fit it into the contemporary academic discourse. In this discourse, at least for anthropologists, the definition which has been considered most authoritative, and has therefore been most influential, is Evans-Pritchard's. Thomas is an historian, but he is writing in Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations in a field of anthropologists and historians.

T.O. Beidelman, the final contributor to this volume, warns his colleagues against "taxonomic preoccupation" because of the temptation to "feel we have explained matters away through having imposed some nominal category" (1970:351). He also warns against functionalist interpretations of witchcraft, asking (1970:354): "How many anthropologists have interviewed the confessed witch... ?". He points out (1970:355) that academics' "[i]nterest in witches and sorcerers, by definition, has tended to stress the negative antisocial aspects of such behaviour" and challenges them to take a fresh look at all the available data.

Like most historians, anthropologists have tended to be concerned with understanding the nature of beliefs about witches and with the relationship between accuser and accused (Marwick 1970). They have asked people in non-Western societies about the appearance, character and behaviour of witches; the age, sex, wealth, social status and occupation of witches; and kinship relationships between accuser and accused. Interpretations have been mostly functionalist: witchcraft has been examined as part of a total cultural system in relation to social, political, economic and legal factors. Witchcraft beliefs have been

interpreted as providing groups of people with a means of defining and sanctioning what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Mary Douglas writes (1973:138): "[The witch] is associated symbolically with the reverse of the way that a normal human lives, with night instead of day. His powers are abnormal, he can fly, be in two places at once, change his shape". "These popular stereotypes of witches and witchcraft," says Jackson (1989:91, 96), "are logically derived through a systematic inversion of what is regarded as ideal social behaviour.... The stereotype of the witch... encapsulates what Monica Wilson so aptly called 'the standardized nightmares of the group'".

The belief that witches are not "real" is part of the baggage from their own cultures that anthropologists have carried with them into the field. This belief has been privileged as a given when they have attempted to make sense of witchcraft in "other cultures". Stories about witches eating babies, flying on animals and causing deaths are simply too bizarre and ridiculous to the anthropologist to be "real". The implicit logic is that if beliefs about witches are not real, witches are not real -- this despite the fact that, as Jackson (1989:96) points out, "general beliefs about witchcraft and particular experiences of self-confessed witches are seldom congruent".

Even where a witch confesses to having been instrumental in causing some misfortune, the anthropological interpretation has tended to be functionalist, focussing on the interpersonal relationships between the confessor and members of her society in order to explain why an individual would make such a claim. Jackson (1989:98) suggests that amongst the Kuranko of northern Sierra Leone, where witchcraft confessions are almost always made by women, "the resentments that

nurture witchcraft" stem from a loss of balance between a woman's autonomy as sister or mother and her lack of autonomy as a wife. The loss of balance may come as a result of "gross unfairness on the part of a husband or senior co-wife or neglect on the part of a brother". Jackson's explanation of why it is that "[m]en apportion blame, women take the blame; men accuse, women confess" centres on the inferior status of women in Kuranko society; a witchcraft confession is "a desperate strategem for reclaiming autonomy in a hopeless situation" (1989:100). A woman who makes a witchcraft confession is not simply capitulating in the face of men's accusation; she is using the witch stereotype "to give voice to long-suppressed grievances and to cope with her suffering by declaring herself the author of it" (Jackson 1989:101).

In his attempt to understand the phenomenon of witchcraft amongst the Kuranko, Jackson found it was "very difficult to gain direct knowledge of the experiences of the Kuranko women who own to being witches" because of "the rare and elusive character of these confessions, coupled with the fact that women usually confess during terminal illness or are killed on account of what they confess" (1989:94). He continues:

> To understand the witch as a subject (pour-soi), to rehabilitate her as a person in a society which reduces her to a negative category, is not unlike the task contemporary historians face writing about the consciousness of the colonized -- their "culture of silence" (Freire 1972).

Jackson acknowledges the importance yet considerable difficulty of giving the witch subject-status and the problems of having to rely on the hearsay accounts of strongly-prejudiced Kuranko men. Jackson's explanation reflects an insightful analysis of gender relationships

amongst the Kuranko, but crucial questions are left unanswered: Do women who make confessions actually believe they are witches? What subjective meanings do they attach to their confessions?

I began this chapter by pointing out the consistency between the historical and contemporary images of the witch. There is also apparently a strong consistency in witch beliefs held by different societies, Western and non-Western, throughout the world. Historians and anthropologists have frequently pointed to these common features (Russell 1980; Hoch-Smith 1978; Cohn 1970; Thomas 1970; Marwick 1970; Parrinder 1970; Douglas 1973; Karlsen 1987; Hughes 1965; Ginzburg 1990a, Jackson 1989). Russell (1980:22) lists the following similarities: witches are usually female and elderly; they meet together at night, leaving their bodies or changing shape to fly, naked, to the meeting-place; they suck the blood of their victims and eat children; they ride on brooms; they perform circular dances, possess familiar spirits and indulge in orgies.[3]

There are various explanations for the phenomenon of these similarities -- what Russell calls "the most curious and important dilemma in the study of witchcraft". Some writers (Marwick 1970:14; Hughes 1965:35) have favoured a diffusionist explanation, saying that the common beliefs had a common origin in paleolithic times and were dispersed when groups of people moved to inhabit new areas. Cohn (1970:11) says that in Europe beliefs about witches belonged to the body of traditional folk-belief, that they were familiar in Graeco-Roman times and to the Germanic and Celtic peoples of pre-Christian times. These ideas continued through to the Middle Ages; it was the inquisitors who interpreted the ancient beliefs in terms of Satan worship. Cohn

states that the inquisitors created the "fantasy" of the witches' Sabbat, imputing to witches activities that had previously been imputed to heretics -- that they met secretly at night to roast and eat babies, have sexual orgies and worship the Devil. Thus, Cohn makes it clear that the traditional folk-beliefs about witches during pre-Christian times did not include these elements. As noted above in this chapter, however, Cohn does not fully examine the origins of the traditional core of folk-beliefs about witches or acknowledge how these contributed to the construction of the witches' Sabbat in the way that Ginzburg, Henningsen and Hans Duerr have recently done. Duerr (1985:3,143) strongly resists Cohn's claim that the inquisitors created the witches' Sabbat, claiming that their role was to diabolize archaic pagan beliefs and rituals.

Mary Douglas gives a functionalist explanation for cross-cultural similarites in witch beliefs. She writes (1973:148):

> By and large witchcraft beliefs are likely to flourish in small enclosed groups, where movement in and out is restricted, when interaction is unavoidably close, and where roles are undefined or so defined that they are impossible to perform.

These small enclosed communities, Douglas concludes (1973:144), have a "similarity in philosophical outlook" which "can be described as a form of metaphysical dualism" whose "doctrine of two kinds of humanity, one good, the other bad, and the association of the badness of some humans with cosmic powers of evil is basically similar to some of the so-called dualist religions [which have a God and a Devil or equivalents] which are discussed by historians". Douglas classifies witch beliefs into those where the witch is an outsider and those where she/he is the internal enemy (1970:xxvi). Where the witch is an outsider, she/he

sends "long-range missiles" to afflict a victim. The witch is often not identified or punished and the social group concentrates instead on curing the victim. The function of the belief, says Douglas, is "to reaffirm group boundaries and solidarity". Where the witch is an enemy within the community, the group's form of social organisation is more complex. The witch may be a member of a rival faction, a dangerous deviant or an internal enemy with outside liaisons. In the first case, the function of the accusation is "to redefine faction boundaries or realign faction hierarchy or split [the] community". Where the witch is a deviant, the function of the accusation is "to control deviants in the name of community values". In the case of the internal witch with outside liaisons, the function of the accusation is "to promote factional rivalry, split [the] community, and redefine hierarchy". To Beidelman's (1970) warning about the dangers of functionalist interpretations of witchcraft, Douglas replies that while she resists a "too rigid social determinism" and "criticizes blatant errors in functionalist assumptions, [she] also feel[s] that the possibilities of functional analysis have not been exhausted" (1970:xxv).

In her discussion of Yoruba female sexuality, Judith Hoch-Smith (1978) traces the widespread consistency of witch beliefs to cultural ideas about feminine reproductive processes. Woman is attributed universally with both mystical and carnal aspects. Hoch-Smith says (1978:245):

> In her mystical aspect, woman is represented as an active medium or vehicle of creative energy who transforms that energy into life-forms; in her carnal aspect she is represented as being capable of transforming life-forms into malevolent energy directed toward the destruction, rather than creation, of the universe.

It is in this carnal image that beliefs surrounding the witch are focussed, whether in medieval Europe or in contemporary non-Western societies such as the Yoruba of Nigeria. In what is one of the earliest feminist explanations of witchcraft, Hoch-Smith claims (1978:246):

> The image of the witch depicted in many male-dominated societies [as one who steals male genitals and indulges in cannibalism in order to increase her malevolent power] is a blatant condemnation of female sexuality. Such condemnation is related to the threat to male-dominated society posed by the independence and authority of women.

In Europe this obsession with, and condemnation of, female sexuality is luridly evident throughout The Malleus Maleficarum (The Witches' Hammer), the witch-hunters' manual written by the two German Dominican friars, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, and published in 1486 by the inquisitor Heinrich Institoris after a papal bull issued by Innocent VIII. According to the Malleus, woman's evil was rooted in her sexuality: witchcraft was claimed to stem from "carnal lust which is in women insatiable" and which led them to copulate with the Devil from whom they derived their powers. Because of women's "defect of inordinate affections and passions," Kramer and Sprenger concluded, "they search for, brood over, and inflict various vengeances" (Bridenthal et al. 1987:213).

Hoch-Smith criticizes writers such as Marvin Harris (1974) and Julio Baroja (1965) who reduce European witchcraft to a "fantasy" phenomenon experienced solely as the result of the use of hallucinatory herbal ointments which took women into an imaginary world of night flight, sexual orgies and cannibalism. She points out (1978:247) that while witches may have used hallucinogens, it does not follow that witchcraft was nothing more than fantasy. Rather, hallucinogens may

have been used to induce altered states of consciousness in ritual practices as they have been by shamans, healers and sorcerers throughout the world. Duerr (1985:1-11) makes the point strongly that there were people, mainly women, during the Renaissance and later, who rubbed themselves with hallucinogenic salves which induced a stupor during which night flights, orgies and meetings with female characters such as the queen of fairies and the goddess Diana were imagined. He says that this behaviour "apparently goes back to the women who travelled about by night and actually used salves which were in part 'hallucinogenic'" (1985:11). When such events were described to the inquisitors, says Duerr, they were transformed in the court records into meetings with the Devil.

Defending her claim that it was female sexuality which was the real terror of the witch-hunters, Hoch-Smith points to the work of Ehrenreich and English (1973). These writers have established that until the Middle Ages healing was in the hands of wise women (or occasionally men) who used herbal remedies and practised dentistry, surgery, bonesetting, hypnosis, massage and midwifery. When, during the Middle Ages, these women were forbidden to heal and medicine was institutionalized as an exclusively male profession, it was claimed that the wise woman's power derived from her sexuality (Ehrenreich and English 1973:9). It was these women who were the witch-hunters' primary targets.

In Africa, too, says Hoch-Smith, women are accused of "female sexuality" by men. In Nigeria witches are believed to fly to meetings, practise cannibalism, cause illness and make men impotent and physically weak. Hoch-Smith analyses a number of Yoruba plays

depicting male-female relationships in which women are imputed with powers to bring about men's physical, social and financial destruction. In particular, by failing to produce children women thwart the extension of their husbands' patrilineage, and by becoming successful in business women demonstrate social and economic independence of men. Hoch-Smith argues (1978:266) that the witch is an image

> of the scapegoated woman, whose guilt is symbolized less by her actual crimes than by the way she is made to embody the types of transgressions of prohibitions which endanger the social order of patrilineal society and its survival. As such, the Yoruba witch has much in common with her counterparts in many African societies, and with her sisters in both medieval Europe and contemporary Europe and America, where the image of the "castrating bitch" ["she's trying to cut off his balls"] is still often applied to women who are seen as threatening men with their aggressive and "malelike" behaviour.

Hoch-Smith's analysis of witchcraft is similar to Karlsen's in the argument that a woman perceived as a threat to her male-controlled society was/is vulnerable to an accusation of witchcraft. Her explanation for witch beliefs in Yoruba society seems convincing, but there is a problem with her comparison of African and European witchcraft. While she seems to believe that there were "real" witches in Europe (criticizing those who view witchcraft as a fantasy phenomenon), she does not make an equivalent claim in relation to Africa. Amongst the Yoruba, certain women are constructed as witches because of the threat they are considered to pose, but there is no suggestion by Hoch-Smith that there are women who practise the "craft" as she suggests for Europe. It seems that Hoch-Smith believes that male fear of female sexuality and women's independence and authority caused witch-<u>hating</u> in Europe while in Africa the same fear leads to the construction of the witch image.

In his exploration of pagan beliefs and rituals in order to trace the origins of "those who flew by night", Duerr also heavily emphasises the aspect of women's sexuality and the abhorrence and condemnation it aroused in early Christians. About the rituals he says (1985:32):

> During women's festivals, as we have seen, men were sometimes handled quite roughly, while the women tore off their caps, a symbol of their submission, danced half-naked, with their hair loose, and the ecstatic dancers of Artemis Corythalia tied on artificial phalli.

Duerr cites examples of wild women's festivals in honour of various forms of Artemis throughout Europe to Africa. It is not at all surprising that Diana of Ephesus, goddess amongst other things of "perverted" sexual behaviour (Duerr 1985:13), and the most venerated of all the deities of Galatia, was singled out for particularly ferocious attacks by the Christians.

Jeffrey Russell offers a structuralist explanation for the worldwide similarities in witch beliefs. He says (1980:46) that in folk-tales

> she represents an elemental natural force possessing enormous and unexpected powers against which a natural person is unable to prepare or defend himself, a force not necessarily evil, but so alien and remote from the world of mankind as to constitute a threat to the social, ethical, and even physical order of the cosmos. This manner of portraying the witch is very ancient and probably archetypal. This witch is neither a simple sorceress, nor a demonolater, nor a pagan. She is a hostile presence from another world.

Russell says that the witch is close to the "wild women" of folklore who represent the wildness of nature in contrast to the world of civilized humanity.

This view of the witch as being "other", one from "outside" or one who inhabits the margins of the social world, discussed by Henningsen, Douglas and Russell, is the theme of Duerr's book Dreamtime:

Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization (1985). This work, together with Ginzburg's Ecstasies, provides perhaps the most rigorous and detailed investigation so far of the origins of the witch and the witches' Sabbat. Duerr, an anthropologist, and Ginzburg, an historian, produce interpretations which manage to combine the synchronic and diachronic elements of witchcraft and come up with an over-arching explanation plausible in the contexts of both historical European and American witchcraft and contemporary non-Western witchcraft.

Duerr begins Dreamtime with a discussion of "flying ointment" (or "broom-grease") -- apparently a salve made from herbs and the fat of various animals which was rubbed on the body and produced hallucinations of flight. Duerr claims that it was popular knowledge that there were people who used this salve during the period of the witch-hunts and that at least some of those accused and tried for witchcraft were users. The descriptions of the Sabbat given during their "confessions" were descriptions of hallucinations produced by the ointment. As noted above, however, these "confessions" were transformed in the court records with, for example, "frau Holt" or the "Quene of Elphen" being identified as the Devil.

Duerr goes on to ask: "[W]hat kind of being was Diana, in whose retinue these women supposedly roamed through the nocturnal forests?". Diana is the Roman form of the Greek Artemis, an ancient goddess of wild animals and wild places and a women's goddess. Traces of the prototype of Artemis, says Duerr (1985:16), go back to the last Ice Age, and are seen in the well known and widespread "Venus figurines" with their enormous breasts, bellies, buttocks and thighs.

Duerr discovers beliefs and ritual practices connected with this fertile earth goddess or Great Mother in numerous past and present societies around the world -- there are examples from England, Japan, Siberia, Africa, Austria, Bulgaria and Columbia, as well as from ancient and relatively modern Greece. Duerr argues that the supernatural guides of the night travellers can be traced back to universal "earth mothers".

The early Christians, understandably, saw the powerful, ubiquitous Artemis-Diana as a threat to Christianity. Duerr says (1985:15):

> Diana was not exactly robbed of her existence, but what existence she was allowed was a pitifully meagre one. Once a deity, she was now driven from her shrines and banished to a spectral realm, accessible only to a few wretched women who could participate in its rites merely in fantasy or illusion.

Eventually the "old pagan culture paled in dead space" and the widespread "cult of the Great Mother ceased to exist". The crime of those persecuted and killed during the witch-hunts was not that they were pagans, but that they were heretics of the Christian faith. Duerr explains (1985:15):

> The "new sect" of witches did not come from out there, from remote villages or forests. It arose from the inside, or as Lévi-Strauss might want to say, from the outside of the inside. Precisely because the face of the witch, more than the face of the night traveller, was the countenance of the guardians of the social order -- its night side, as it were -- it was considered to be real, even though the reality of someone else.

The sub-title of Duerr's book is Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization. The subjugation of Diana, goddess of the wilderness, is interpreted as symbolizing the growth and dominance of the increasingly complex civilization of Renaissance Europe. Since pre-Christian times, there had been those situated metaphorically on the

boundary between civilization and the wilderness who "had specifically developed their ability to cross over that line at one time or another" (Duerr 1985:45). As late as the Middle Ages, the witch was called the hagazussa, a being who sat on the hag, the fence which separated the village from the wilderness. She moved between and participated in both worlds. In Renaissance Europe, with the increasing complexity of society and greater institutionalization of patriarchal control, this state of affairs was no longer acceptable. Women were no longer permitted the freedom of living on the boundary between wilderness and civilization, "in some uncontrollable way open to the other world". The proper state of all women was to be "civilized" and under male control. Hence the displacement of "the Ladies from Outside" to the inside, or, more specifically, to the outside of the inside, where they were transformed into diabolical witches.

Duerr's depiction of the followers of the Goddess as those who existed on the boundary of society, not subject to the same controls as its other members, is reminiscent of Turner's and van Gennep's discussions of liminality, the phase which follows the separation phase of a rite of passage. Turner writes (1969:80):

> The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both.... The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.... Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness...

Duerr distances himself from Margaret Murray claiming that the "witches" of the witch-craze were not members of a cult which had survived from pre-Christian times. He seems to agree with Ginzburg that Murray's error lay in taking accused witches' descriptions of the Sabbat as descriptions of actual current ritual practices rather than evidence of a system of beliefs enlivened by the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Duerr differs from Ginzburg, however, by arguing that these beliefs derive ultimately from actual practices of real women in the period before Christianity established dominance over paganism in Europe.

Ginzburg's explanation for the origins of the witch rests on his contention that it is possible to demonstrate, using "retrospective comparativism", that beyond the synchronic similarities between witch beliefs documented by anthropologists (and by historians who care to look) and the diachronic similarities between these beliefs and witch beliefs rife in sixteenth century Europe, there is a core of common belief. This consists in the belief in the ecstatic journey of the living into the world of the dead (Ginzburg 1990a:23). "To this mythical nucleus," says Ginzburg, "are also linked folkloric themes such as night flying and animal metamorphoses". Some individual variants of this myth are observed in relation to the Lap and Siberian shamans, the Baltic werewolves, the armiers of the Pyrenean Ariège, the benandanti of Friuli, the Dalmatian kersniki, the Balkan zduhaci, the Corsican mazzeri, the Romanian calusari, the Hungarian táltos and the Causcasian burkudzäutä. What all have in common is their role as intermediaries between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Ginzburg examines evidence spanning one thousand years (ending in the period of the witch-craze) from one end of Europe to the other, and identifies "the features of a primarily female ecstatic religion, dominated by a nocturnal goddess with many names" including the Matron, the Teacher, the Greek Mistress, the Wise Sibilla and the Queen of the Fairies (1990a:122). In some places she was accompanied by a king or consort. Like Duerr, Ginzburg says that in more ancient times this goddess was a prototype of the "virgin huntress Artemis, on the border between the city and the formless wilderness, the human and the bestial..." (1990a:128). She was worshipped as the nurse of children and the protector of young girls and pregnant women. And, prior to Artemis, there were the Eurasian divinities of hunting and the forest (1990a:136). According to Ginzburg, the ecstatic experiences of the followers of the Goddess recall those of the shamans of Siberia or Lapland. Both include the same essential elements: the flight of the soul to the realm of the dead, in the shape of an animal, on the back of animals or other magical vehicles.

The wicked witch was a cultural invention gradually formed by the fusion of two main elements: the inquisitors' and demonologists' fantasy of a hostile, heretical sect, projected in turn onto lepers, Jews and then witches, superimposed onto the widespread "mythical nucleus" of popular belief described above. The dwarves, fairies and trolls of north European folklore were transformed into demons and witches' familiars. The worship of pagan goddesses and gods was redefined as demonolatry. Sorcerers were imagined to be in business with the Devil and were legally regarded as heretics. This fusion of myths created the stereotype of the wicked witch in the second half of the fourteenth

century in the Western Alpine arc, and subsequently diffused to other parts of Europe. A century later, fear of the witch had become a craze which obsessed Europeans on the Continent, in Scandinavia and in the British Isles for three hundred years. In the holocaust it produced, between several hundred thousand and nine million people were hanged or burnt at the stake. Generally, the lower estimates are given by historians, the higher ones by feminist scholars. Eighty five per cent or more of those killed were women (Ben-Yehuda 1989:233).[4] In 1585, in the Bishopric of Trier, Germany, two villages were left with one female inhabitant each (Ehrenreich and English 1973:5). Girls who were too young to be executed, according to an edict of 1612, were imprisoned until they were twelve years old. In France, for example, seven year old Anne Hauldecoeur was sentenced to five years imprisonment in 1614 until she could be legally put to death (Muchembled 1990:143). As well as being vulnerable to accusation themselves, children were used to inform against their mothers and neighbouring women: in 1670 in the parishes around Siljan in Sweden several thousand children informed against three hundred accused witches (Ankarloo 1990:295).

With the end of the witch-killings around two hundred years ago, it seems that belief in the reality of witches and their Sabbat also dissolved (Ginzburg 1990a:23). The wicked witch, however, survived as myth and became a powerful and evocative image in folklore, literature and art. The much older myths about "the Ladies from Outside" which provided the foundation of the witch stereotype have been lost from popular belief.

We come back to the point I made at the beginning of this chapter. I suggested that one reason historians and anthropologists have approached the study of witchcraft in the ways that they have is that they do not believe "real" witches exist or have ever existed. We can see now that this is because of the ultimate survival of the wicked witch myth over the Goddess-following, night-traveller myth. We know that the witch stereotype was a cultural formation and that there were never real women who conformed to the stereotype. Until the recent work of writers like Ginzburg, Duerr and Henningsen, however, the older myths, although glimpsed in the distance, have not been the focus of exploration.

The big question in the wake of the recent work is whether the older myth was simply a system of popular beliefs, or whether there were real women in pre-Christian Europe who met together to practise rituals, the precise nature of which we cannot now know, which they claimed enabled them to contact the Goddess or individual goddesses. The three writers above are clear that there was no such sect operating in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. (Some scholars would disagree -- see chapter three.) But it is much less clear what these writers believe about the relationship between belief and practice, myth and ritual, in earlier times. In his discussion of the Sicilian fairy cult, which apparently survived through to the Inquisition, Henningsen claims (1990:206):

> [T]he Sicilian documentation shows that we must look for the sabbath and most of the rituals in quite another place [from the real, material world]: in an immaterial world of dream and vision.

Ginzburg seems to agree that we are dealing with beliefs and not practices. Duerr, on the other hand, cites examples of women's festivals in Europe and Africa which seem to derive ultimately from ancient pre-Christian or non-Christian rituals.

My inference is that Henningsen believes it would be pushing credibility too far to accept that members of the Sicilian cult were doing anything more than dreaming. In fact, I think it is Henningsen's position which strains credibility. If you are prepared to go as far as taking seriously the substance of witch "confessions" and devoting considerable effort to understanding the core of folk belief underlying them, and you also claim, as Henningsen does, that many of the accused witches were village wise women, it does not seem unreasonable to go further and accept that if the Sicilian women said they met in "companies" to perform various rituals as part of a "fairy cult", then that is what they did. The women's interpretations of what happened at such gatherings may be open to question in the same way that one might question Christians' interpretations of what happens at Holy Communion or any other religious group's understanding of its rituals. What people are observed by outsiders to do in ritual and what the participants themselves believe they are doing may be quite different. But it seems to me that if Sicilian women esteemed as wise women in their communities were prepared to claim in the face of the inquisitors that they participated in a "fairy cult", then that is what they did. Henningsen makes it clear (1990:194) that in Sicily torture "was applied only to a limited extent, and never at the start of the trial to force a confession from the accused". To claim that women were

deluded, dreaming or muddled over the difference between belief and practice is a greater strain on credibility.

It is not possible at present, and it may never be possible, to know with certainty much about the beliefs and rituals of the followers of the Goddess two or more thousand years ago. It is still very likely that the majority of academics would deny that such a "women's cult" ever existed, even in pre-Christian times. Ginzburg and Henningsen's contributions to the study of witchcraft are, however, beginning to be recognized. In the concluding chapter of Early Modern European Witchcraft, Peter Burke summarises the approaches different historians have used to explain witchcraft in different parts of Europe. He says shamanistic elements in witch-beliefs can be found in Finland, Iceland, Sicily, Romania, Hungary and Croatia -- that is, on the geographical peripheries of the witch-craze. Burke concludes (1990:441):

> The analogy noted by Carlo Ginzburg between shamans and benandanti now seems to fit into a much larger pattern. It is as if we are looking at the tip of an iceberg, the shape and size of which is still unknown.
>
> Behind the diabolical witchcraft of the witch-hunters has been discovered a more traditional, neighbourly witchcraft. Behind this in turn we are seeing glimpses of a still more archaic, shamanistic witchcraft.

It is not my purpose here, nor is it essential to this thesis, to argue the point about the existence of an ancient women's cult in pre-Christian Europe. It would, in any case, be premature: there is still a great deal more research to be done in this area. The work of scholars such as Duerr, Ginzburg and Henningsen published in the last few years, as well as the work of feminist scholars over the past fifteen years, has provided a critical challenge to the traditional functionalist

interpretations of witchcraft and has launched the study in new directions.

I have devoted a large portion of this chapter to discussion about the historical image of the witch and the various sources which contributed to its construction for two reasons. First, any study of contemporary feminist witchcraft needs to begin with the witches of the European witch-craze and what has been subsequently said about them, because contemporary witches make explicit and important connections with the women accused of (and murdered for) witchcraft between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The fact that contemporary women have chosen to name themselves "witches", despite their knowledge that the "witch" of the witch-craze was a cultural creation, derives from their perceived connection with these women. They also make important connections with the women of pre-Christian times who, they claim, belonged to groups similar to the "companies" of the Sicilian fairy cult described above and who were known in their villages as wise women and healers. I discuss the connections with both groups of women in more detail in chapter three.

The second reason for my approach in this chapter is that I wanted to point to the strong tradition of studying witchcraft within the disciplines of anthropology and history, and to the high and very productive level of cross-disciplinary discussion. The anthropological and historical literature on witchcraft is enormous, and it would be impossible to review it with justice in a chapter of this length. My aim has been to point to the kinds of approaches scholars have taken in order to background and situate my own.

I have argued in this chapter that academic studies of witchcraft have dealt with the witch as "other" by focussing on how societies think about and act towards witches, rather than on how witches themselves think and act. I have also suggested why they have taken this approach. Ginzburg admits in his introduction (1990a:22) to Ecstasies that a "cause for regret" in his work

> has been the necessary exclusion (save for a few exceptions) of a dimension often neglected either because it is difficult to document or because it is, mistakenly, considered irrelevant: the subjective dimension. The great majority of testimonies that I have found are fragmentary and, above all, indirect -- often third -- or fourth -- hand. The meanings attributed by the actors to the myths they relived in ecstasy, as well as to the rituals in which they participated, generally escape us.

It is this subjective dimension which has been at the centre of several recent studies which have examined the phenomenon of witchcraft in contemporary western societies. These studies focus on self-identified witches and give an insider's perspective of beliefs and ritual practices. They are concerned primarily with the meanings attributed by the actors to the rituals in which they participate.

In 1989 Tanya Luhrmann published Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England, a book resulting from her doctoral thesis. Her aim was to discover how and why "ordinary, well-educated, usually middle-class people" came "to accept outlandish, apparently irrational beliefs" (1989a:7). On the basis of her intimate involvement with modern English witches, Luhrmann challenges both the intellectualist and the symbolist approaches to the study of ritual magic used by most ethnographers (discussed in chapter eleven of this thesis) on the grounds that they both wrongly assume that individuals, as members of social groups, have clear cut, coherent systems of belief.

Luhrmann found that people's belief systems are much messier than anthropologists usually allow. She noted that as a result of their involvement with magic, witches shifted their perceptions and analyses of events, their emotional and psychological moods, their language and symbolism, and their ways of experiencing. She calls this process "interpretive drift". Luhrmann concluded (1989a:353) that her witches found magic persuasive because they

> rationalize an imaginative, emotional involvement. Their beliefs are not fixed or consistent, for they are often presented to justify some action. Beliefs do a job; they are not always disinterestedly asserted because they are felt to be true in themselves. Ideas and beliefs drift, in a complex interdependency of concept and experience.

I have found Luhrmann's description and analysis of "interpretive drift" -- the idea that behaviour and feelings influence belief as much as or more than belief influences behaviour -- illuminating and relevant in the context of my research amongst New Zealand witches. I return to a comparison of her findings with mine in chapters six, seven and eight.

Luhrmann describes her work as psychological anthropology whereas I define mine as feminist anthropology. Her research was more narrowly focussed than mine in that she was interested specifically in why people "practise magic when, according to observers, the magic doesn't work" (1989:4). I began with broader objectives. I was interested in what attracted women to ritual-making in the first place and in understanding their world view, especially the relationship between spiritual and political beliefs, as well as women's ideas about how magic or ritual works.

The fact of our different emphases has meant the collection (and omission) of different sorts of data, different theoretical interests and,

ultimately, different kinds of ethnographies. From reading Luhrmann's book I gain a picture of contemporary witchcraft in England which is rather different from the one I have drawn for New Zealand. Witchcraft in England is more institutionalized, formal and secretive; considerable numbers of men are involved along with the women; there is a diversity of witchcraft traditions, each with its own history, code of beliefs and practices; and more explicit historical connections are made with earlier British witches and the traditions or orders to which they were affiliated. In New Zealand the importance of a feminist perspective is greater, groups are more loosely structured, and rituals are often more creative. But I think these differences disguise important similarities between the two countries. English witches read and consult many of the same books as New Zealand witches, and use many of the same practices.

Another academic study of contemporary witchcraft has been made by Wendy Lozano and Tanice Folz in the United States. Their paper, "Into the Darkness: An Ethnographic Study of Witchcraft and Death" published in Qualitative Sociology (vol.13, no.3, 1990), is part of a larger study, as yet unpublished, of a coven of witches based in Los Angeles. Having gained the permission of the coven to conduct the research, Lozano and Folz participated in rituals in order "to experience the subjective meanings that are integral to witchcraft rather than simply to document what we saw from an 'objective' point of view" (1990:216). The North American witches they describe differ from those Luhrmann describes in that they are "Dianics", or radical feminist witches, rather than "traditional" witches. "[M]ost Dianics," say Lozano and Folz, "celebrate an autonomous female principle as divine,

excluding both the male principle and men" (1990:219). For Dianics, spirituality and politics are closely connected.

Again, there are similarities and differences between Californian witches and those with whom I have worked in New Zealand. Like the English groups, the Californian coven also seems more formal, with members carrying titles such as Priestess, Initiate or Apprentice, but the coven is closer to New Zealand groups in respect of its strong feminist perspective.

Margot Adler has made a detailed study of witches in the United States which includes a history of the modern neopagan movement and the results of extensive interviews with self-identified witches, pagans and followers of the Goddess -- "somewhere between one hundred and two hundred hours of taped interviews" (Adler 1986:xii). The result of this study is Drawing Down the Moon, published first in 1979 with a second edition in 1986. Adler is trained as a radio reporter, but many of her research methods would pass for those of a social scientist. Her book is an excellent introduction to modern witchcraft.

In 1980 Gini Scott published a comparative ethnography of two American movements, the Inner Peace Movement and the Aquarian Age Order. The "Order", Scott says (1980:98), "is part of the larger Witchcraft or Craft movement in America and draws on its ideas". Scott conducted her research amongst witches in San Francisco during 1975 and 1976 and her descriptions give an interesting picture of traditional Gardnerian witchcraft (discussed in chapter three) heavily overlaid with hippie philosophies and practices. Scott's witches spread their spare time between discussions of horoscopes and anarchy and indulging their insatiable appetites for sex, marijuana and carrot cake. The main

value of Scott's study in relation to my research is that it provides an interesting snapshot of witchcraft at a particular stage of its historical development. Scott is mainly concerned with comparing the Inner Peace Movement with witchcraft, particularly with respect to differences in group structure, differences in values and beliefs, differences in reasons for joining and dropping out, leadership and authority, attitudes of participants towards the dominant culture, and differences in life styles. To study witchcraft Scott joined a "coven study group": she never became a fully initiated member of a coven and was therefore barred from participating fully in the movement.

The studies I have described above are the only published ethnographic studies of self-identified witches in contemporary Western societies that I have been able to find. Jeanne Favret-Saada's study of contemporary witchcraft in the Bocage, the countryside of Western France, Deadly Words (1980), is not comparable in that her study dealt with witchcraft from the point of view of the witch's victim and his or her interactions with an "unwitcher", the person consulted to reflect the afflicting magic back on to the witch. To the people of the Bocage, the witch is always maleficient, causing cattle to die, people to become ill, milk to curdle, and so on. Favret-Saada's study is essentially a study of witchcraft beliefs rather than a study of witches themselves, although she strongly resists the scepticism of folklorists, reporters and her own colleagues which reduces the country people's beliefs and activities in relation to witchcraft to the delusions of simple-minded and backward peasants.

Yolanda Wisewitch's study of self-identified witches in Christchurch, New Zealand, undertaken for her Master's thesis in 1987,

has not been published. I refer to her work in subsequent chapters in the context of discussing my own research.

In 1992 Gerrard Carter completed an MA thesis at the University of Auckland titled Other Pasts: Subjectivity and the Experience of the Past in which he includes a fairly brief examination of the way women in the Women's Spirituality movement (he interviewed Lea Holford and Juliet Batten) make "connection to the past,... experience and utilise the past" (1992:81). Essentially, Carter is concerned with comparing the way these women relate to their local landscape, especially those parts of it which contain archaeological sites, with the way archaeologists treat the landscape.

The paucity of published accounts is interesting in view of the fact that witchcraft has always been a popular topic for anthropologists. It is also interesting in light of the fact that the current revival of witchcraft in western countries has coincided with the trend for anthropologists to turn inwards and study aspects of their own societies. The areas of witchcraft, spirituality and ritual have clearly been less attractive to academics studying their own cultures than they were or are to academics studying other cultures. I have argued in this chapter that the academic study of witchcraft has typically dealt with the witch as "other". Anthropologists now have the opportunity to study witchcraft in new ways -- focussing on self-identified witches and the subjective meanings they attach to their activities. Given their reticence to take up this opportunity, one might also suggest that most academics are not interested in or comfortable studying the witch as anything other than "other".

It is also notable that, with few exceptions, feminist anthropologists, dedicated as they are to reversing the tendency to see and study woman as "other", have not been attracted to research feminist witchcraft or women's ritual lives. I discuss the antipathy of some feminists to "spiritual feminists" in chapter three.

Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1989) has recently made a comparison between the European witch-craze and contemporary witchcraft using a functionalist analysis. In the light of the large literature written by contemporary witches in the United States, Ben-Yehuda's description of modern witchcraft is intriguingly naive. Under the heading "Modern Occult", he describes a social movement "typically represented by America's urban middle classes and by persons in their mid-twenties to late thirties" whose members have revived the "black arts" through participation in Satanic groups, cults and covens. Satanic groups and neopagans are both discussed under the umbrella of the occult.

It is very difficult to understand how Ben-Yehuda could be ignorant of the fact that the approximately eighty thousand neopagan witches in America disavow any connection whatever with Satanism and the "black arts", claiming that Satanism is much closer to Christianity since it was Christians who invented Satan. Undoubtedly, there are Satanists who also call themselves "witches", but neopagan witches are quite a separate group, as we shall see in the next chapter. It is quite unreasonable for Ben-Yehuda to pursue his argument disregarding this distinction.

Ben-Yehuda summarises the results of his comparison thus (1989:254):

> I argue that both the European witchcraze and modern occultism may be conceptualized in sociological terms as deviant belief systems in the functional sense -- that is,

> as major constituents in processes of change and stability in the moral boundaries of societies. In this particular sense the European witchcraze was an attempt to revitalize and redefine the crumbling boundaries of the medieval socio-moral order. Modern occultism acts to recenter moral boundaries and provide a universe of meaning in a period of increasing privatization of belief characterizing decentralized personalities.

While this conclusion has the appearance of being intellectually neat and tidy, Ben-Yehuda makes an invalid comparison between the European witch-craze and modern witchcraft. The European witch-craze, whether or not it was "an attempt to revitalize and redefine the crumbling boundaries of the medieval socio-moral order", constituted a terror of witches and a desire to rid society of them. Modern witchcraft is a phenomenon whereby individuals personally embrace witchcraft. Ben-Yehuda is comparing historical witch-haters with present day witches, a belief complex held by a dominant society which designates witches as "others" with a personal system of beliefs and practices held by individuals who self-identify as witches. Following Ben-Yehuda's query "Why were women the main victims of the craze?", to which he gives a familiar functionalist explanation, we might have expected him to also ask why it is that women, in particular, are attracted to witchcraft today.

There is some value in his suggestion that "[m]odern occultism constitutes an elective center and offers adherents the possibility of recentralizing and changing the moral boundaries of their worlds" (1989:247). It would have been useful to indicate the substance of this alternative world view in order that the motivations for embracing it might become clearer. We learn only that "the occult reintroduces enchantment, mysticism, and romanticism into one's worldview".

I have been dealing in this chapter with academics who are historians and anthropologists. Feminist scholars, especially those of the last fifteen years or so, have also been re-examining the phenomenon of the witch, the European witch-craze, and the academic interpretations made in respect to both.

Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology, published in 1979, has been a central text. While agreeing with historians that the "witches" of the witch-craze were victims of misogyny, Daly, a theologian, deplores the functionalist interpretations of historians such as Midelfort who, while expounding on the social function of witchcraft, failed to notice, or perhaps failed to see it as important, that he was dealing only with the function of witchcraft for the dominant society -- a society from which, in his analysis, witches were necessarily excluded. In his conclusion, Midelfort (1972:195) says:

> [T]he small trials may indeed have served a function, delineating the social thresholds of eccentricity tolerable to society, and registering fear of a socially indigestible group, unmarried women.... Until single women found a more comfortable place in the concepts and communities of Western men, one could argue that they were a socially disruptive element, at least when they lived without family and without patriarchal control. In this restricted sense the small witch trial may have even been therapeutic, or functional.

Had Midelfort's perspective been centred on witches instead of on the dominant society, he could hardly have claimed that the small witch trial was "therapeutic". Daly (1979:185) notes that scholars do not describe the Jewish pogroms or the lynchings of Blacks as "therapeutic".

In the literature on witchcraft one frequently comes across interpretations similarly centred on the perspective of the dominant

culture which, if viewed from the perspective of the accused witches, seem unutterably callous. Discussing the importance of social integration in the state-building process in early modern Europe, Ankarloo and Henningsen (1990:15) say that in areas where acculturation had been successful, the civil administration, including the courts, was used for conflict-resolution, whereas in other villages people continued to settle differences by direct violence or "a kind of mob justice". They state:

> That the witch was brought to official trial can be seen as an expression, as it were, of integration and progress, and this is probably the greatest paradox of the European witch persecution.

In the same way that we might ask of Midelfort, "Therapeutic for whom?", we might ask of Ankarloo and Henningsen, "Whose progress?".

In another example Thomas (quoted in Burke 1990:436) suggests that the fear of witches had a positive effect in communities in that it made people less stingy:

> [W]itch-beliefs helped to uphold the traditional obligations of charity and neighbourliness at a time when other social and economic forces were conspiring to weaken them.

Daly points out, as a number of historians have done, that women accused as witches tended to be widows and spinsters, that is, women who had rejected marriage or who had survived it. The reason these women were "indigestible", as Midelfort would have it, is that they were "women whose physical, intellectual, economic, moral and spiritual independence and activity profoundly threatened the male monopoly in every sphere". By killing these women the inquisitors claimed to be "appeasing the wrath of God". Daly writes (1979:183):

> [C]learly, the intent was to break down and destroy strong

> women, to dis-member and kill the Goddess, the divine spark of be-ing in women.

The writings of feminist scholars on the subject of witchcraft are important in this thesis for two reasons: first, they provide a new approach to the study of witchcraft and challenge other academic approaches; second, they play an important role at the popular level for women who choose to self-identify as feminist witches. In the next chapter I outline the development of the contemporary feminist witchcraft movement and discuss more fully the feminist approach to the study of witchcraft. It is an approach which places the witch at the centre of its focus, not as a pathetic victim, but as a symbol of woman's independent knowledge and power.

Notes

1. Burke (1990) and Hester (1992) suggest that the use of the term "witch-craze" is problematic because it implies that the witch-hunts were "carried out by crazed individuals in an exhibition of momentary madness" (Hester 1992:107). I would agree that the inquisitors and demonologists who launched the witch-craze were operating within the "sanity" of their own world view, in particular, their view of women, but I favour the continued use of the term "witch-craze" because it shifts the associations of deviance and madness from the witches to their accusers. In academic treatments of witchcraft it has been the witches who have been traditionally regarded as suffering from delusions and mental instability.
2. Some authors use "Sabbat" and some use "Sabbath". Russell uses "Sabbat". Ginzburg, who is quoted frequently in this chapter, uses "Sabbath". I follow the practice of feminist witches who use the term "Sabbat" to refer to the eight pagan seasonal festivals: Winter Solstice, Brigid (Candlemas), Spring Equinox (Eoster), Beltane, Summer Solstice, Lammas (Lugnasad), Autumn Equinox (Mabon) and Halloween (Samhain). These are discussed in chapter nine.
3. Despite the strong consistency in witch beliefs world wide, Alan Macfarlane (1970:6) emphasizes that "English witchcraft appears to be very different from that on the Continent and in Scotland". He says that in the county of Essex witches were not believed to fly or meet for Sabbats which incorporated orgies, perverted sexual practices, dancing and feasting.

Hallen and Sodipo (1986:107-8) caution against treating the witch as a cultural universal in the light of a discussion of the Yoruba aje. They find that aje do not fit the stereotype of the Western witch in several

respects: many are men; many use medicine to achieve their ends (that is, they do not rely exclusively on psychic powers); some aje are consulted for advice and medicine as witch-doctors are; an aje may be a good person -- they are not quintessentially evil. Hallen and Sodipo conclude (1986:117) that "if scholars still wish to insist that witchcraft is some kind of conceptual and cultural universal, and that the Yoruba conform to it, we would suggest that they reflect upon the lessons to be learnt from [our work]. For it may well be that many people who considered themselves to be witches in the West were also intentionally benevolent, exceptionally talented women and men who, because they constituted an implicit challenge to established ecclesiastical and judicial authorities, and to the established socio-economic order..., either successfully concealed themselves or were unfortunate enough to be reported, hunted down and exterminated".

4. For England this percentage is even higher. Hester (1992:108) says that there "more than 90 per cent of those formally accused of witchcraft were women, and the few men who were also formally accused tended to be married to an accused witch or to appear jointly with a woman".

Chapter 3

Feminists, Witches and the Goddess

At the very dawn of religion, God was a woman. Do you remember?

From The Paradise Papers: The Suppression of Women's Rites by Merlin Stone (1976:17).

There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember... You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.

From The Guérillères by Monique Wittig (1972:95).

It's a very ancient thing being revived. It doesn't necessarily have to tune in to any sort of truth. That doesn't matter. It's a re-invention of tradition for modern purposes. I reckon that's what most religion damn well is anyway -- the Christian religion is obviously that. I see this as part of the postmodern age; it's part of a whole cultural context. It's quite different because it's very contextual. It is not an external set of things imposed upon you where you have to have faith to believe it. It's something you are constantly reconstructing for yourself.

It would be wonderful to come back on earth in 500 years... maybe the feminist church will have replaced Rome. Who knows? Goddess forbid! But who knows what could happen? It's exciting, isn't it? And women love it. They take to it like ducks to water. They really, really love it.

From my interview with Joan, 16 February 1992, Hamilton.

When the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago fired a radical feminist professor in 1969, the Department was showered with hair cuttings and nail-clippings by local Chicago witches (Spretnak 1982:428). On Halloween, the year before, a coven of wand-waving,

masked and costumed New York witches converged on Wall Street on the stroke of noon "to pit their ancient magic against the evil powers of the Financial District -- the center of the Imperialist Phallic Society" (Morgan 1978:75). They danced first to the Federal Reserve Treasury Bank led by a High Priestess carrying the papier-maché head of a pig on a golden platter. On the steps of the building they surrounded the statue of George Washington and got told off for defacing the "Father of our country" with WITCH stickers by Nixon campaigners who did not understand "that this was a necessary ritual against a symbol of patriarchal, slave-holding power" (Morgan 1978:75).

They proceeded to the New York Stock Exchange where they told the guards that they had an appointment with the "Chief Executor of Wall Street himself -- the Boss, Satan". Failing to gain entry (though managing to cause the guards' phone to go unaccountably dead), the witches formed a sacred circle, closed their eyes and, before hundreds of fascinated onlookers, began a chant proclaiming the coming demise of various stocks. The witches then moved on to One Chase Manhattan Plaza and circled the "glass erection" mumbling a curse containing references to Jericho and a future insurrection involving buglers. And so the day went on. As the witches moved about the city WITCH stickers appeared in subways plastered over "Virginia Slim" and "Diet Jello" advertisements.

At dusk, the witches began with a siege at a men-only bar, moved on "to exorcise two girlie burlesque houses", put a hex on Max (Factor) at a beauty clinic, and invaded a discotheque where four bouncers rushed and hit the women but were repelled by several of the witches who were trained in judo and karate. Moving on to "Max's Kansas City",

a restaurant patronised by the Beautiful People of the late 1960s, the coven distributed garlic cloves and cards reading: "We Are Witch We Are Women We Are Liberation We Are We" and chanted "Nine million women burned as witches" (Morgan 1978:77).

The day concluded with a call on the Theatre of Ideas where a group of liberals was discussing the subject of the media. The witches fairly easily took over the meeting and passed around a small cauldron for contributions to the Women's Liberation Legal Defense Fund. Contributors were encouraged by prods with a broom and a toy machine gun. A vigorous discussion on the subjects of theatre, the media, women and "the revolution" followed. In the conclusion to her article written in November 1968 describing these activities, Robin Morgan, a founder of WITCH, warned (1978:75): "In the Holiest Names of Hecate, Isis, Astarte, Hester Prinn and Bonnie Parker, we shall return!".

Halloween 1968 marked the beginning of WITCH, an acronym for Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell. Morgan (1978:71) says that WITCH comprised "women who were self-styled 'politicos' -- women's liberationists who still strongly affirmed a Marxist analysis and a hip Left style" . WITCH was chosen as the group's name for its symbolic value: it grabbed people's attention and offered theatrical opportunities for protest activities. According to Morgan, the women who started WITCH identified with the witches of the European witch-craze, but were not at that time interested in witchcraft for any religious reasons and performed rituals only as public performances. In their rituals, the women did not imagine they were channelling energy in order to bring about change; they enacted such rituals because of the

crowd-drawing theatricality they brought to the women's political protests. Morgan says (1978:72):

> We in WITCH always meant to do the real research, to read the anthropological, religious, and mythographic studies on the subject -- but we never got around to it. We were too busy doing actions. We also meant to have more consciousness-raising meetings -- but we were too busy doing actions. We meant to write some papers of theory and analysis -- but we were too busy doing actions.

Writing eight years later about Halloween 1968 in Going Too Far, Morgan is mortified that the New York coven she belonged to had sought an audience with Satan at the Stock Exchange, saying (1978:72):

> [T]he members of the Old Religion never worshipped Satan. They were followers of a tripartite Goddess; it was the Christian church who invented Satan and then claimed that witches were Satanists.

Within a few weeks after Halloween 1968, covens had sprung up in Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, North Carolina, Portland (Oregon) and Austin (Texas) (Spretnak 1982:427). The anagram WITCH meant different things to different covens or changed its meaning for a particular political action. It became Women Incensed at Telephone Company Harassment, Women Inspired To Commit Herstory, Women Intent on Toppling Consumer Holidays, and, on Mothers' Day, Women Infuriated at Taking Care of Hoodlums.

The WITCH covens which sprang up in the United States in the late 1960s represent an important strand in the origins of feminist witchcraft. These witches were clearly not given to secret trysts and arcane rituals, nor to New Age navel-gazing by candlelight as skeptics often claim of 1990s witches. The witch image served the women's political purposes, but little more.

One of the effects of WITCH was to draw women's attention to the atrocities of the witch-craze and the Church's role in the witch-killings, and to spark discussions about the Goddess and the possibility of pre-Christian matriarchies. The witch came to be seen not purely as "a political revolutionary", but as the priestess of a pre-Christian religion centred on a great goddess (Stein 1990:247). This appealed to women who were rejecting patriarchal religions along with patriarchal social/political systems.

At Winter Solstice 1971, Zsuzsanna Budapest, a hereditary witch from Hungary, taught by her mother, founded the Susan B. Anthony Coven No.1, named after a famous American suffragist leader. Budapest had decided to make women's spiritual liberation her focus within the feminist movement. She started the first book and magic shop for feminist witches, the "Feminist Wicca". Her Holy Book of Women's Mysteries, first published in 1980, has become one of the most influential guides to feminist witchcraft.

A second important strand of feminist witchcraft is what is known both as "traditional" and as "modern" witchcraft, "Wicca".[1] The essential difference between Wicca and feminist witchcraft is that in Wicca practitioners invoke both the Goddess and the God, her son and consort, often referred to as "The Horned One" after Dionysus, Pan or Cernunnos, whereas most feminist witch covens invoke only the Goddess. In the United States there are some groups, such as Starhawk's covens, whose women members call themselves feminist witches but which include male members and invoke the God as well as the Goddess. However, the God has secondary status in relation to the Goddess. These groups have a tie with Wicca, but are more open about

their practices, less hierarchical and rigid in their organization, and more creative and spontaneous in their rituals than Wicca covens.

In her chapter on the God in The Spiral Dance, Starhawk emphasizes that the witches' God is very different from the Christian God and "is radically different from any other image of masculinity in our culture" (1989:108). He is the Hunter, the Dying God, the God of love, Lord of the Dance, the Sun Child, untamed yet sacred sexuality, wild, free, gentle and tender. He is invoked not as God the Father Almighty, but sometimes as God the father or, says Starhawk, as He Who Changes the Dirty Diapers or He Who Makes Up Silly Games (1989:233).

I have never heard any mention of the God amongst feminist witches in New Zealand, and all the groups I know of except one have only women members. I have been told that there are ritual groups comprised only of men in New Zealand and that some call themselves "God groups". There are also groups calling themselves "Druids". I have not met any members of such groups and know very little about their practices. I know of women whose brothers and partners belong to men's groups, but such groups are few compared with women's groups and do not, to my knowledge, share rituals with women's groups.

Feminist witchcraft began in the United States. When news of it reached Britain, some members of traditional covens were horrified. Doreen Valiente, a famous British witch and member of the coven run by the more famous (and infamous) Gerald Gardner, says (1989:182-3):

> [I]n spite of the fact that modern witchcraft [what is now referred to as "Gardnerian witchcraft"] has priestesses, in fact they started off playing the role that men such as Gerald Gardner designed for them. We were allowed to call ourselves High Priestesses,

> Witch Queens and similar fancy titles; but we were still in the position of having men running things and women doing as the men directed. As soon as the women started seeking real power, trouble was brewing.
>
> We were told that, "You may not be a witch alone", in Gardnerian witchcraft at any rate. If you were a woman, you had to find a man to initiate you before you could become a witch; and then you had to find a man to work with before you could practise. So when stories of all women covens started to filter through from the USA, the reaction of male witches in Britain was (and I quote one of them), "We don't want to have anything to do with them. They're a load of lesbians."
>
> Of course, the converse was also true. If you were a man, you were told that you had to find a woman of sufficient rank to initiate you and then have a female partner to make "the perfect couple". Homosexuality, we were told, was abhorrent to the Goddess, and Her curse would fall upon people of the same sex who tried to work together.

This dismissal of women who conduct their spiritual practices independently of men as a "load of lesbians" points up not only the homophobia of Gardnerian witchcraft but also the fact that fear of women's independent power was as entrenched in this witchcraft tradition as it is in other religions.

Feminist witchcraft is now established in Britain, but it is very much the late-comer on the scene. Gerald Gardner is credited with being the founder of modern witchcraft. In June 1951 the Witchcraft Act was repealed and witchcraft began to come into the open. Three years later, in 1954, Gardner published Witchcraft Today where he set out some of the beliefs and practices of witchcraft which, many would claim, he largely invented himself. Gardner claimed that witchcraft was a pre-Christian nature religion which was driven underground during "The Burning Times" of the witch-craze but which managed to survive through to the present. He claimed to have discovered an ancient coven in the area of the New Forest into which he was initiated in 1939 by one

of its members, Dorothy Clutterbuck. There has been a great deal of skepticism over Gardner's claims and many writers say he made up the whole story (Luhrmann 1989a:43). Valiente's research showed that "Old Dorothy" at least existed and that she corresponded to the details given about her by Gardner (1989:39). Valiente admits, however, that Gardner was given to fabricating facts to support his cause and bolster his own image. For example, he did not, contrary to his claim, have a doctorate and was an unrepentant plagiarist who became indignant when accused.

While Gardner's name is the one associated with the founding of modern witchcraft, its origins go back to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, formed in 1887 by three dissident freemasons (Luhrmann 1989a:38). Luhrmann writes of this order (1989a:40):

> [It] appealed to romanticism, to the interest in comparative religion, and to those who demanded a scientific framework for their spirituality. Its Masonic founders claimed to find an old, encoded Rosicrucian document which led them to a long-hidden society of secret rites and power. They pored over medieval and kabbalistic magical texts in the British Library for arcane symbols. They invested elaborate ceremonial with Greek and Egyptian imagery and chivalric myth.... And they claimed to use the imagination scientifically, to contact the spiritual world and work with it as a sort of technology to produce physical effects.

The Golden Dawn spawned a number of groups, the most important of which was the Society of the Inner Light. This order was formed in 1922 by Dion Fortune, "a woman considered by many magicians as the finest occultist of this century" (Luhrmann 1989a:41), and one who is often quoted by contemporary feminist witches. The Western Mysteries groups, included in Luhrmann's study of

contemporary witchcraft in Britain, have been strongly influenced by this order.[2]

We have seen that the first two strands which contributed to feminist witchcraft were the Wicca tradition and the "covens" of feminist political activists of the late 1960s. The third main strand is the Goddess movement which began in the United States in the 1970s. It should be noted that many of the women who participated in rituals designed to explore aspects of the Goddess did not and do not self-identify as "witches". Nevertheless, the emphasis on the Goddess is very strong in contemporary feminist witchcraft, much stronger than in traditional Wicca, and this can be attributed to the growth of research and literature on the Goddess and to women's experiences of rituals focussed on the Goddess over the past fifteen years or so.

In New Zealand a number of women run ritual workshops on the Goddess, most in Auckland but also in Whangarei, Hamilton, Wellington, Christchurch and several other centres, and many of the women who belong to ritual groups in New Zealand have attended one or more workshops. The workshops also spawn on-going ritual groups. The first woman to teach workshops on the Goddess in New Zealand, beginning in 1984, was Lea Holford, an American psychologist with experience of Goddess ritual groups in San Francisco during the 1970s. Lea described her experience with one of these earliest groups in the United States to me thus:

> Two of my best friends started a Goddess group. At that time I was a very devout Buddhist and very, very fulfilled in my practice. I had a woman teacher which was very important to me -- I knew I had to have a woman to embody spirituality for me, I knew that much. My friends absolutely could not relate to Eastern religion and they'd given up Christianity ages ago. There might have been others who started groups earlier, but they were amongst the first in the Bay area to do anything like that. It

> must have been about 1977. I didn't know Starhawk then but I met her within a couple of years of their work.
>
> They basically invited a bunch of friends who were interested in exploring it and they were just working with very simple archetypes like the Mother and the Sister and the Amazon. They would do the four directions and set up very simple rituals -- it was really their idea -- and that's what I've copied in my classes -- inviting everybody to bring a symbol, to share their stories, and to have a celebration. The earlier ones were quite simple because there wasn't actually much literature out. They had a really hard time finding information.... I know at that point Esther Harding, Toni Wolfe and some of those Jungian women had talked about some of those archetypes like the medial woman. They [Lea's friends] would use goddesses' names if they knew some, but it was more like exploring different aspects of the feminine was the basis of their model.
>
> It was extraordinarily powerful. It was just amazing, I suppose because it was so fresh. Most of us had no idea of the power of those symbols. We would come with these symbols and then, after casting the circle, or creating the sacred circle, it was amazing what would come out. All of us were absolutely overwhelmed with the power of it.

Lea emphasized that most of the women who joined the first Goddess groups were not motivated by feminist political goals. As a result of their experiences in the rituals, however, women developed a new view of gender relations, became politically motivated and found a power in themselves which enabled them to become politically active. Lea said:

> In the States most of the women I knew, including myself, had never been in a women's group, had never been in the whole Women's Lib. thing, and most simply were not into that "us" and "them" thing -- they weren't into getting into a big fight. As they got exposed to this different way of seeing themselves as women, it helped them access a much deeper power in themselves they didn't know was there. So instead of just feeling powerless and angry and fighting back trying to get power somewhere else, I think what was really different was they found power inside themselves. They actually realized the problem isn't "them" having all the power, the problem is they're actually scared of us, which was a completely different place to come from... and so coming out with, "Don't be

> scared of us. We'll share what we have. We want this to work for everybody because that's what the Goddess is all about -- the empowering and inter-relatedness of all beings".
>
> It's a whole different approach to politics than had been taken by the Women's Liberation movement which was very much coming from the place of "We don't have it and you do, so give it back!". The biggest difference was that women came from a sense of fullness instead of depletion, and found a source to keep drawing on that was actually within them, not somewhere out there. For me that's been the most profound difference.

Thus, it was during the 1970s that the political and spiritual strands of feminism came together with traditional Wicca to form feminist witchcraft. Other contemporary preoccupations -- the peace and ecology movements, a rising interest in alternative healing and in exploring alternative religions -- have also influenced the development of the core beliefs of feminist witchcraft.

Another important movement which needs to be considered when discussing the origins of feminist witchcraft is Christian feminism. It was Mary Daly in Beyond God the Father (1974) who first concluded "in a way that received wide attention... that feminism and Christianity were never going to be reconcilable" (Hampson 1990:108). During the past two decades this contention has been debated at length by feminist theologians and amongst church members, and there is now a sizable literature which "challenges the customary understanding of Bible and tradition in Christianity and calls for a radical re-examination of the presuppositions and expressions of Christian faith (King 1989:175).[3] There have been re-examinations of the experiences of women within the Church; the gender of God; the imaging of the divine; the relationship between God and nature; the use of male-centred language and symbols; the nature, purpose and message of Christ; issues of race

and class as well as sex; the meanings of sin and grace; and the historical accuracy of the Bible. It is no exaggeration to say that the faith has been radically challenged from its foundations upward.

Some feminist theologians have remained within the Church, some have moved out, some seem to be in the process of moving out, and some have embraced Goddess spirituality as well as or instead of Christianity. The writings of some who have broken with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, such as Naomi Goldenberg, Mary Daly and Carol Christ, have become widely known and influential in feminist witchcraft. These writers now refer to their work as thealogy, from the Greek thea, meaning Goddess.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, probably the theologian best known to Christian feminists, is one who has "increasingly moved outside the Christian tradition, finding it to be inadequate" (Hampson 1990:109). According to Hampson, it is when theologians such as Ruether begin to pay attention to issues of imagery and symbolism -- recognizing that "the core symbolism of Christianity is masculine" -- that they realize the irreconcilability of Christianity and feminism. Hampson herself has concluded that Christianity is "neither true nor moral"; it is a religious myth which is "simply the creation of one particular group of people" (1990:1-3). Nonetheless, she believes, because people are shaped by history (as well as vice versa), people in Western societies today cannot simply discard their Christian past. What is needed is "a paradigm shift in religion". Men need to "abandon a religion which reflects a patriarchal past, which gives them so much advantage and which in its symbol system is weighted against women" (1990:5). While some feminist women have continued to struggle for equality within the

Church, and believe they can point to considerable achievements, others, like Hampson, have decided that Christianity is beyond redemption. She says (1990:4):

> While men (and some women) consider whether women can be full insiders within the church, women debate whether or not they want to be. Eleven years ago it was I who wrote the statement in favour of the ordination of women to the priesthood circulated to all members of the General Synod of the Church of England before the vote. Today finds me no longer Christian.

In the course of my fieldwork I met a number of women who had left the Church to become witches; three of their stories, those of Megwyn, Noreen and Galadriel, are presented in chapter seven. I met others who are still active in their churches, engaged in activities such as rewriting liturgies to make them gender-inclusive, but who also participate in witches' rituals. Some women manage to self-identify both as Christian and as witch. I met many more, however, who felt Christianity was unsalvageable and who were worn out with the conflict both within themselves and within their churches. These women have opted to embrace Goddess spirituality completely and exclusively for reasons I discuss in chapters six, seven and eight.

Some women, especially feminists within the Church, see the term "Women's Spirituality" as an umbrella covering both Christian feminists and feminist witches (Benland 1990). Christian feminists read many of the same writers as feminist witches and appear to be very open to both the beliefs and the practices of feminist witchcraft. Indeed, as one woman told me, they often feel they have more in common with witches than with their fellow church members. Those who have left the Church, however, often after long soul-searching and in painful circumstances, see their old faith as diametrically opposed to their new

beliefs. They use "Women's Spirituality" exclusively as a synonym for Goddess spirituality and feminist witchcraft, wanting no further association with Christianity. Thus, while Christian feminism cannot be regarded as a strand which has been woven into feminist witchcraft, the two movements have strong connections and, for some women, overlap. I discuss the relationship between feminist witchcraft and Christian feminism in New Zealand in chapter six.

In this discussion of the origins of feminist witchcraft, I want to emphasize, echoing Tanya Luhrmann (1989a:81) who worked with English witches, that I never encountered anything remotely resembling Satanism in the feminist witchcraft movement in New Zealand. Satanism, feminist witches claim, is a development in response to Judaeo-Christianity, since Satan was invented by these faiths. Feminist witches stress that their spirituality, centred on the Goddess, pre-dates patriarchal religions and any notion of Satan by many millenia. The God/Satan, good/evil duality is meaningless in feminist witchcraft: the world view stresses holism in place of a symbolic system comprised of binary oppositions. I discuss this holistic view below in this chapter and in subsequent chapters.

I have been told from time to time by people outside the feminist witchcraft movement about groups of people calling themselves "witches" who lurk in graveyards and perform sacrifices using cats or foetuses and other unsavoury rituals. Feminist witches are as appalled -- probably more appalled given that many are vegetarian and great animal-lovers -- as most people in New Zealand society are by these accounts. They are considerably more appalled that anyone should think that feminist witches engage in such practices. If it is not already

clear, it will become so in subsequent chapters that the beliefs and practices of feminist witches have nothing whatever in common with those of Satanists.

I return now to the development of the feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement over the past twenty to twenty five years. During the 1970s feminist scholars began doing the work that Robin Morgan and her WITCH co-coveners had not had time to do, and a steady stream of articles and books on feminist witchcraft and pre-Christian goddesses was published.[4] During the 1980s the number of books being published on these subjects grew enormously, ranging from theoretical academic works to glossy encyclopedic tomes and do-it-yourself ritual manuals. Anne Carson has compiled two annotated bibliographies of books, papers, periodicals and audio-visual materials on the subject. The first, Feminist Spirituality and the Feminine Divine: An Annotated Bibliography, published in 1986, covers works published from 1833 to 1985. The second volume, Goddesses and Wise Women: The Literature of Feminist Spirituality 1980-1992 An Annotated Bibliography, published in 1992, contains 1190 items. In the introduction to her second volume, Carson gives a valuable summary of trends in Goddess spirituality during the six years between the publication of the two volumes. These trends include a growing interest in healing of all kinds, especially in "healing the female self", in "the sacred aspects of menstruation", in archaeological research, and in shamanism. Carson (1992:4) says that the "most important theme to come out of feminist spirituality in the past decade has been eco-feminism, which has become a political philosophy in its own right" and has "contributed significantly to Green Party platforms, uniting feminist

principles and women's concerns with activism on behalf of environmental protection, sustainable development, anti-nuclear protest, the promotion of vegetarianism and animal rights".

Obviously, this literature is a valuable resource for anyone wanting to understand the world view of women involved in feminist witchcraft, their beliefs, values and ritual practices. The literature is read and discussed by women in the movement. It influences, but does not dictate, the ways their own world views are formed. It puts women in touch with new research, lets them see the directions the movement is taking, gives them ideas for rituals, is shared amongst women in ritual groups and is referred to when explaining feminist witchcraft to those outside the movement. For many women, including myself, first contact with feminist witchcraft comes through reading these kinds of books. The day after I first drafted this paragraph I received a call from a woman who asked how she could learn more about Goddess spirituality and was desperately keen to join a ritual group. She had read a number of books on the subject, her interest and desire to join a group had grown, but she knew no one involved in the movement. A Continuing Education officer had suggested she call me. This woman pursued her interest, attended workshops, and developed her experience with ritual to the point where she felt sufficiently confident to undertake the organization of a wonderful Summer Solstice ritual in Hamilton in 1992.

The majority of books read by New Zealand women come from the United States from a variety of large and small presses: Harper & Row, HarperCollins, Doubleday, Pergamon Press, Beacon Press, Wingbow Press, Celestial Arts, The Crossing Press, Phoenix and others. Many

also come from England, from The Women's Press, Thames and Hudson, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Arkana, The Aquarian Press and others. Books are bought from women's bookshops, university and New Age bookshops. Depending on the shop, they are shelved in sections containing books on feminism and "women's issues", exploring human potential, alternative health and self healing, religion and spirituality, mythology, theology, the New Age and, occasionally, archaeology or psychology. Alongside their Goddess spirituality books, many bookshops also stock Tarot cards, rune stones, wands, crystals and incense. It is a paradox that while feminist witches frequently claim that they have no "sacred book" (like the Bible) which sets out their doctrine and provides a guide for living, they probably read more on the subject of their spirituality than the members of any other religious group. They are also freer than the participants in any other religion to take or leave anything they read.

In this chapter I combine a history of feminist witchcraft and Goddess spirituality in Western countries with a discussion of feminist approaches to historical witchcraft and to the study of the Goddess.[5] The two are necessarily connected because so many of the feminist scholars who have addressed the witch-craze -- all those who have become well-known names in the modern movement -- have either adopted the label "witch" themselves or at least fuelled the modern movement by their writings (for example, Adler 1986; Daly 1979; Starhawk 1989; Morgan 1978; Goldenberg 1982; Walker 1985; Crowley 1989; Budapest 1989; Valiente 1989; Stein 1990).

This self-identification as "witch" has come about for two inter-related reasons. First, these scholars have rejected the designation of

the historical witch as "other" in relation either to themselves or to the witches' own societies. As Daly (1979:216) writes: "In all of the male-authored scholarship, ... from the worst to the best, there is something lacking: specifically, a Hag-identified vision".[6] Second, as noted in the previous chapter, they have concluded that the women labelled "witches" became the targets of the inquisitors and demonologists because they were outside of and/or threatened patriarchal control, particularly in respect to the exclusively male medical profession and to the Church.

In chapter two I discussed the common argument of academics that the women burnt as witches were not "real" witches but simply poor, harmless and defenseless old women. This comes close to arguing that the persecution of witches was unjustified because the women were not "real" witches. The corollary of this is that if the women had been "real" witches, they might have deserved the treatment they got. While the accused "witches" were not given to eating babies and penises or to worshipping the devil, the activities the women were involved in -- illicit healing, sorcery, incorporating magical charms in their healing -- as well as their connection with the pagan past were at least as distressing to the inquisitors. Russell (1980:46) foreshadowed a feminist interpretation of the witch in his analysis of the witch figure in folklore:

> [S]he represents an elemental natural force possessing enormous and unexpected powers against which a natural person is unable to prepare or defend himself, a force not necessarily evil, but so alien and remote from the world of mankind as to constitute a threat to the social, ethical, and even physical order of the cosmos.

From a feminist viewpoint, Russell's generic use of "himself" and "mankind" is significant. If witches represented an alien and

threatening force, they did so in relation to the patriarchal institutions of the Church and the medical profession which were determined to destroy them.

From a feminist perspective, witches were not the pitiable victims of senescence Levack (1987:15) describes, nor were they "wretched women" duped by fantasy or illusion (Duerr 1985:15). To interpret witches purely as victims, as many historians (including feminist historians such as Karlsen) have done, is to ignore or deny the challenge these women represented to the dominant institutions within their societies. "Witch" has been redefined by feminist scholars to mean a woman -- a sixteenth century village wise woman or a 1990s feminist -- who challenges patriarchal control and claims independent knowledge and power. The WITCH covens formed in the United States in the late 1960s quoted, provocatively and I suspect with a good deal of relish, I Samuel 15:23: "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft" (Spretnak 1982:428).

In chapter two we saw that a number of historians, from Keith Thomas to Gustav Henningsen, have made a strong connection between witches and wise women, women who were healers, midwives, counsellors, diviners and sorcerers within their communities. The primary targets of the witch-hunters were these village wise women. Feminist writers have explored the roles of wise women and their relationships to the male-dominated institutions of the Church and medical profession. In many cases this research has refuelled feminist political activity or strengthened feminists' political positions. In Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers (1973), one of the earliest books published to look at witches from a feminist

perspective, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English say (1973:3): "To know our history is to begin to see how to take up the struggle again".

Barbara Walker's The Crone (1985) traces the process by which the inquisitors came to focus on wise women and transform them into wicked witches. The Holy Inquisition was founded in the twelfth century to exterminate a great variety of heretics whose joint broad crime "was to expose and to mock the clergy as frauds" (Dworkin 1974:123). Because the property of a heretic could be seized, even before the trial, the Inquisition was an extremely profitable institution for the Church. When the numbers of heretics -- Albigenses, Bogomils, Manicheans, Waldenses, Jews, Cathari, Knights Templars, Paulicians, Fraticelli, Spiritual Franciscans and others -- began to thin, with a consequent thinning of profits for the Church, the Inquisition began to seek another group to target. The new heresy was centred on women who, says Walker (1985:126), were "always suspected of a less than total commitment to the patriarchal God who had declared them accursed".

By the fourteenth century, Walker claims (1985:127), Christianity had failed to eliminate paganism in peasant communities. Seasonal rituals continued to be carried out, many elements of which still persist in the customs of Christmas, Easter, May Day, Midsummer, All Hallows, and many saints' days. Since the pre-Christian religion centred on a Mother Goddess, versions of Artemis, and it was women who had been the priestesses or the main followers of this Goddess, Walker proposes that in the fourteenth century many women still practised parts of the "Old Religion". Walker cites the women called "fairies" in medieval Brittany who continued to worship the Mother in

sacred groves and the Korrigen, elder priestesses who lived on off-shore islands, especially the "sacred isle" Sein, or Isle of the Saints, and danced at full moon around holy fountains wearing white woollen robes. Dworkin (1974:139) points out that it was

> [n]o wonder that women remained faithful adherents of the older totemic cults of Western Europe which honoured female sexuality, deified the sexual organs and reproductive capacity, and recognized women as embodying the regenerative power of nature.

Christianity, with its single, jealous, male God, could not tolerate other religions, especially woman-centred ones.

In pre-Christian times and up until the fourteenth century, European villagers with social, psychological or physical problems had sought help from female elders, or wise women (Ehrenreich and English 1973; Walker 1985; Starhawk 1988; Daly 1979). The reason medicine was almost exclusively in the hands of old women, Walker suggests (1985:127), was that these women experienced "innate communion with the Goddess of life and death, until churchmen began to claim that disease could be cured only by holy water, exorcisms, and prayers to God, and by the laying on of priestly hands". Kramer and Sprenger declared in the Malleus Maleficarum (1971:66) that "No one does more harm to the Catholic Faith than midwives". Midwives were known to use herbal preparations to ease pain during childbirth -- pain which had been imposed on women by God as punishment for Eve's original sin. Midwives were believed to possess knowledge about contraception and abortion, the effect of which helped women resist male control of their reproductive functions and thwarted the growth of the Church (Walker 1985:128). Even the "good witch" was an anathema to the Church, and in the latter part of the sixteenth century the legal

distinction between the "good" and "bad" witch was dropped. William Perkins, a Cambridge preacher, declared that the "good witch [was] a more horrible and detestable monster than the bad [and that] ... a thousand deaths of right belong to the good witch" (Daly 1979:193). The Church had decided that the healing "magic" of the wise woman must come from the Devil, since it did not come from God. Thus wise women, charged with having made a pact with the Devil, were cast amongst the worst heretics.

During the Middle Ages, the practice of healing was taken away from women and institutionalised as an exclusively male profession. No one was permitted to practise healing who had not studied medicine at a university, and women were not permitted into universities. The Church legitimated male doctors' exclusive right to heal, equating non-professional healing with heresy: "If a woman dare to cure without having studied, she is a witch and must die" (Ehrenreich and English 1973:17). In turn, the medical profession legitimated the Church's persecution of witches: the Malleus said that if there was any doubt about whether or not an illness had been caused by witchcraft, a doctor's judgement should be called for. Thus, the professional male doctor was placed symbolically on the side of God and the Law, while the wise woman was discredited and placed on the side of evil and heresy. Women healers did, however, hold on to midwifery for several more centuries, until the seventeenth century. Despite the outlawing of the wise women, many villagers, especially the poor, continued to consult them, shunning the new professional doctors because they were expensive and often inaccessible.

Witches were accused of two other crimes in addition to the crime of healing: they were accused of sexual crimes against men and of being organized (Ehrenreich and English 1973:8). In chapter two I discussed Judith Hoch-Smith's claim that fear of female sexuality is a feature of witchcraft beliefs world-wide. In her chapter on witches in Woman Hating (1974), Andrea Dworkin sees males' fear of female sexuality as a projection of their fears about their own sexual prowess. She says (1974:134):

> [W]e are dealing with an existential terror of women... stemming from a primal anxiety about male potency.... These terrors form the sub-strata of a myth of feminine evil which in turn justified several centuries of gynocide.

The Malleus was quite clear that women's insatiable lust was at the root of witchcraft. Ehrenreich and English say (1973:9):

> In the eyes of the Church, all the witch's power was ultimately derived from her sexuality. Her career began with sexual intercourse with the devil. Each witch was confirmed at a general meeting (the witches' Sabbath) at which the devil presided, often in the form of a goat, and had intercourse with the neophytes.

The fact that witches were believed to be organized into a secret society, the "Devil's party", made witches more threatening. The inquisitors spent much of the trials questioning women about what happened at their meetings, pressing for details about orgies, bestialism and baby-eating.

It is clear from examining the crimes witches were accused of that hatred of wise women on the part of the Church and male medical profession stemmed from the fact that wise women threatened these patriarchal institutions' exclusive control of power and knowledge. Wise women possessed healing knowledge and were thought to have access

to power independently of God and men; they passed this knowledge on to other women; and, most ominously, they met regularly together to share knowledge, participate in rituals and, feared the inquisitors, plot who knew what. Daly writes (1979:194):

> I suggest, then, that just as the "elite" caste who perpetuated the witchburnings was in large measure an aspiring "intellectual" elite of professional men, so the hated targets were primarily a spiritual/moral/know-ing elite cross-section of the female population of Europe. This primal battle of principalities and powers was at heart concerned with the process of know-ing, which the professionals wanted to possess and control as their "body of knowledge".

For some contemporary women, beginning with the political activists of the late 1960s and moving through to those involved in feminist witchcraft today, the witch has become a potent symbol of woman as possessor of power and knowledge which is not sourced in nor controlled by patriarchal institutions, and not dependent upon patriarchal legitimation or approval. It is the witch's independence rather than her insubordination which makes her an anathema to patriarchy. According to Starhawk (1989:11), the witch persecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries "can be viewed as a mass brainwashing, a conversion through terror to the idea that women's power, and any power not approved of by the authorities, is dangerous, dirty, and sinful". In her introduction to The Politics of Women's Spirituality Charlene Spretnak says (1982:xii-xiv): "The objective of patriarchy was and is to prevent women from achieving, or even supposing, our potential: that we are powerful in both mind and body and that the totality of those powers is a potent force". She describes some of the ways that this has happened during three thousand years or so of patriarchal rule, ranging from the slaughter of Goddess-

worshipping pagans boasted of in Biblical accounts, to the European witch-burnings, to the denial of educational, political and legal rights for women, to the portrayal of women's bodies as pornographic toys. By self-identifying with the women persecuted during the witch-craze, contemporary witches make the point that patriarchal institutions continue to be destructive of women's independent knowledge and power.

The wise women, as we saw in the last chapter, were "The Ladies from Outside": they acted as intermediaries between the human and supernatural worlds. In a sense they stood outside the system of social control to which other members of society were subject: they lived "between the worlds". Thus, in feminist witchcraft, the witch has become a symbol of the woman outside patriarchal control. At the beginning of contemporary rituals, women sometimes speak of "going between the worlds", thus making explicit their awareness that they are entering what van Gennep and Turner refer to as the liminal state. "Going between the worlds" can mean a number of things: a movement from the mundane world to the realm of the sacred/spiritual; separation and freedom from personal limitations, the constraints of one's normal daily life and the cultural norms of one's society so that possibilities for change may be contemplated; exploring other levels of consciousness; and, occasionally, such as at Halloween, an imaginary movement between the world of the living and the world of the dead and/or supernatural beings or entities. Halloween, celebrated at the beginning of winter, in New Zealand on 30 April (six months earlier than in the Northern Hemisphere), is the witches' New Year and the time when, it is said, the veil between the worlds is thinnest.

The witch is also a symbol of woman as a target of misogyny. In her account of the witch-craze and its origins in Dreaming the Dark, Starhawk says (1988:212): "The Witch persecutions were, above all, attacks on women. The propaganda that supported the Witchhunts stressed women's inferiority and defined their nature as inherently evil". Andrea Dworkin agrees that the Malleus Maleficarum, "with its frenzied and psychotic woman-hating", made it clear that witchcraft was a woman's crime (1974:136). Mary Daly believes that the period of the witch-craze should be taken to refer not only to the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries but to "the perpetual witchcraze which is the entire period of patriarchal control" (1979:16). She states (1979:221):

> Feminists who identify their deep centering Selves with the term witch are not being merely metaphorical, or cute, or popularizing, or "trivializing". I suggest, rather, that the reverse is true: that to limit the term to apply only to those who have esoteric knowledge of and participate formally in "the Craft" is the real reductionism.

My aim in exploring the symbolic value of the witch is to explain why contemporary women choose to self-identify as "witches". Those who adopt the label for political reasons perceive their connection with the women labelled "witches" during the witch-hunts as a symbolic one. Their intention is to challenge historians' conventional interpretations of the witch-craze, to draw attention to a feminist re-evaluation of the women labelled "witches", and to focus attention on the ways in which institutions in contemporary societies continue to oppress, victimise, devalue or deny opportunities to women. They are quite well aware of the fact that the witch image was constructed by the witch-hunters and that the women killed were victims of labelling and were not self-identified witches (Adler 1982:129). Nevertheless, contemporary

women, in their determination to force a re-evaluation of the historical "witches" and as a sign of their identification with these women, adopt or reclaim the label "witch" as a potent symbolic gesture.

But for many women the main purpose in becoming a witch is not political but has to do with a perceived spiritual connection with the witches of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries and with their "foresisters" stretching back to the Neolithic and possibly to the Upper Paleolithic. For these women the term "witch" is synonymous with "wise woman" and with "follower of the Goddess": becoming a witch is an affirmation of a woman-centred spirituality. They see the wise women of five hundred years ago as practitioners of the pre-Christian religions of Europe for all of whom the primary symbol of divinity was a fertility goddess. In feminist witchcraft this goddess is known as the Great Mother, the Divine Mother, the Triple Goddess, She of Ten Thousand Names, or simply The Goddess.

This Goddess has appeared and appears throughout the world's cultures in numerous forms and under different names. In feminist witchcraft women invoke specific goddesses from the religious traditions of many cultures depending on the appropriateness of a goddess for a particular ritual. Thus, at Winter Solstice, women invoke the Greek Hecate, the Indian Kali, and the Maori Hine-nui-te-po because they have to do with darkness and death. The numerous forms of the Goddess can be categorized broadly into what are referred to as "the three aspects of the Goddess" which correspond to three phases of women's lives: the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone. Hecate, Kali and Hine-nui-te-po, for example, are Crone goddesses.

The first two aspects of the Goddess trinity, the sexually attractive Maiden and the nurturing Mother, appeal to patriarchy and have been built into Christianity in the figure of Mary, the virgin Mother of God. The Crone, the old woman past child-bearing who speaks her mind without fear of losing male approval (Walker 1985), offers nothing attractive to patriarchy. "The wise old woman knows too much. She knows about death, illness, decay, change," Lea Holford said in a Women's Spirituality workshop. Men's fear of losing sexual potency, which happens as a "little death" during intercourse, is exceeded by a fear of physical death. The Crone symbolizes death. The witch is Christianity's diabolized Crone.

By self-identifying as "witch", women are reclaiming the Crone, re-instating her as the third aspect of the Goddess and, most importantly, identifying themselves as Goddess. In chapters seven and eight I look at the meaning of this for women I worked with in New Zealand. In this chapter I review the meanings of the Goddess as presented in the large and growing literature on the subject.

Before turning to the Goddess, it needs to be pointed out that some women in the movement in New Zealand, roughly one third of those I met while doing fieldwork, choose not to call themselves witches or are ambivalent about doing so, especially in contexts outside their ritual activities. I discuss the issues surrounding women's self-identification in chapter seven. Briefly, the reasons they give for not calling themselves witches are that:

- It is not safe to tell people outside the movement for fear of a fundamentalist Christian backlash;
- People outside the movement do not understand and may not be

prepared to listen or accept an explanation of who witches "really" were;

- There may be no opportunity to explain anyway;
- Women do not feel personally good enough, sufficiently knowledgeable or ready to take on such an esteemed label;
- "Witch" is loaded so heavily with negative associations that it is preferable to direct energy instead to reclaiming the Goddess.

Over the course of two and a half years fieldwork I observed several women whom I came to know well begin to refer to themselves as witches as their involvement in ritual work increased, their self images changed, and they became more familiar and comfortable with the term. There is no dichotomization between those who do and those who do not self-identify as witches, and all participate in similar ritual activities. Any one ritual group may include women who identify as witches and those who do not.

However, while women in the movement may change their self-identification over time, at any given point of time there are those who do not, at least openly, self-identify as witches because they are frightened of what people will think, and there are those who do self-identify as witches because they are determined to make people change what they think about witches. Those in the latter group tend to be those with a political motivation for involvement in the movement, although this is not to say that they do not have other, possibly more important, motivations too. Women who begin with a political motivation may develop other motivations over time and vice versa, as

Lea Holford, quoted above in this chapter, pointed out. The issues of women's motivations and ritual's attraction are discussed in chapters seven and eight.

It should also be pointed out that women's political motivations, even within one ritual group, may be quite different from one another. One woman may be explicitly concerned with reassessing and drawing attention to women's place in history, another may be a midwife, another a Green Party campaigner, a writer, a social worker, or an artist. Each may be politically active to a greater or lesser extent in her own field, and may or may not find it relevant and useful to self-identify publicly as a witch. For some women, involvement in ritual is a private part of life which gives structure and meaning to their world view and provides a spiritual base or resource which assists them in their daily lives and political activity. Their feminist political activity operates in many spheres, from joining a "Reclaim the night" march to restructuring the content of a university course to working in a Rape Crisis centre to raising one's children to honour the Goddess. The intellectual rejection of a view of society which designates woman as "other", and the rejection of a belief system in which divinity is imaged exclusively as an omnipotent, omniscient male "up there" in favour of a belief system which locates sacredness, knowledge and power within each individual, are themselves political acts.

Nevertheless, a very obvious difference between the movement in the United States and the movement in New Zealand is that women in the States have been much more active in organized, often large scale, public political work relating to social justice, peace and enviromental

issues. This activity has not taken the place of private "inner work"; the two have gone hand in hand.

There are historical reasons and personal reasons given by New Zealand witches for this difference. The political climate has changed since the early days of feminist witchcraft and so have the types of political activities in which feminists choose to become involved. Large protest marches, demonstrations and sit-ins are much less common tools of protest today both in the United States and in New Zealand. Feminists are working towards their political goals through new channels, often from positions of power within the institutions and career fields from which they were largely excluded twenty five years ago. By the time the movement spread to New Zealand in the early 1980s, this shift had begun.

Even so, in her introduction to the second edition of The Spiral Dance written in 1989, Starhawk says that her life "has become much more politically focused in the past ten years" (1989:6). She writes (1989:7):

> So our commitment to the Goddess led me and others in our community to take part in nonviolent direct actions to protest nuclear power, to interfere with the production and testing of nuclear weapons, to counter military interference in Central America, and to preserve the environment. It led me down to Nicaragua and into ongoing work to build alliances with people of color and the native peoples whose own earth-based religions and traditional lands are being threatened or destroyed....
>
> Over the last ten years, I've worked to build alliances between women of color and white women and have worked in groups with women and men of differing sexual preferences, class backgrounds, and life choices.

Many women in the movement in New Zealand, especially in the early years, have expressed a reticence to become involved in public

political activity saying they felt a need to concentrate most of their efforts on "inner work" before taking on the responsibility of public, politically-oriented ritual work. For these women, ritual groups provide a secure context in which to address difficult issues in their lives and a place to experience the solidarity of sisterhood. Women in groups provide moral support and practical assistance for one another.

For almost all the women I have met who do self-identify as "witch", public self-identification is still context-based. The choice of whether or not to self-identify as a witch is not made once and for all, it is made over and over as an individual woman judges each social or political context. A choice not to self-identify publicly as a witch does not mean, however, that a woman does not think of herself as a witch. It means she is aware that the meaning of "witch" is multiple and contestable, and that this has implications for how others will construct and treat her on the basis of her self-identification.

Thus, feminist witches walk a fine line. The historical witch was a hideous image of womanhood invented by misogynists of quite breathtaking cruelty in order to label, damn and burn women. The point of contemporary women publicly adopting the name "witch" is to expose the historical witch as an invention and to explicate the link between the wise woman and the witch and the process by which the former became anathematized -- in short, to re-invent the witch. If, however, women claim publicly to be "witches" but fail to re-invent the witch for the dominant culture, they may turn out to be unwitting participants in a potentially sado-masochistic perpetuation of the most misogynistic fantasy the world has known.

While there has been a strong political component in feminist witchcraft from its origins, at least in the United States, there have also been from the beginning numbers of politically active feminist women, in New Zealand as well as overseas, who are skeptical about and dismissive of the movement. This group includes especially, but not all, Marxist feminists. Many are anti-spirituality per se, and see Goddess spirituality, like all religions or spiritualities, as another opiate of the masses, "an apolitical 'cop-out' from feminist struggles" (Spretnak 1982:xxii), a self-indulgent diversion from "real" political work.[7] Even Mary Daly, in her introduction to the 1985 edition of Beyond God the Father, warns that the Goddess image can inspire passivity and self-absorption in women and that as a "tokenized derivative of the christian god, [she] serves the cockocratic establishment, perpetuating the status quo" (1985:xviii). According to Daly, the Goddess is useful when "she calls for action, ... evokes a shock, a clash with the 'going logic', introducing a new logic" (1985:xix).

In an appendix to The Politics of Women's Spirituality (1982), Charlene Spretnak documents a spat between some who do and some who do not see spirituality as having relevance for feminists' political struggles. In the May 1979 issue of Human Behaviour, Sally Binford, a feminist anthropologist, attacks "the myth of Former Matriarchal Greatness and the Overthrow of the Mother Goddess" as counter-productive feminist utopianism, saying: "The powerless dream of and long for a mythic past and waste precious time attempting to document its reality" (Spretnak, 1982:559). She quotes Angela Carter in The Sadeian Woman:

> If women allow themselves to be consoled ... by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique

> often used on them by men).... Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place.

Binford is one of a number of feminist anthropologists, including Joan Bamberger, Sherry Ortner, Michelle Rosaldo and Gayle Rubin, who have rejected the idea that matriarchies were ever predominant. Some of the points Binford raises in an attempt to discredit "the Mother Goddess/Matriarchy madness" have continued to be debated within and outside the movement; others are no longer relevant. Specifically, Binford criticizes the idea that a golden age of matriarchy preceded patriarchy on the grounds of lack of evidence and what she regards as an improper use of myth. "Myths," she says, "are not appropriate primary data for reconstructing the past". Even if a body of evidence could be assembled to support the argument that matrilineal systems pre-dated the predominance of patrilineal systems, Binford rightly points out that matrilineality should not be confused with matriarchy, and that in most matrilineal systems authority is, in any case, vested in males, specifically in the mother's brother.

Binford further argues that the overwhelming predominance of female forms depicted in Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic art does not prove the existence of a former period of Goddess worship, let alone implicate the existence of former matriarchal societies. Invoking comparisons with Playboy magazine, she says the "Venus figurines" (after the Roman goddess of fertility) of the Upper Paleolithic simply "appear to be the earliest example of a common human fascination with the female form".

Merlin Stone, author of When God was a Woman, responded to Binford in Womanspirit magazine (vol.6, no.2, Winter 1979) with astonishment that Binford could doubt the reality of a former period of Goddess worship given the weight of archaeological and historical evidence spanning thousands of years. Spretnak also replied to Binford in the same volume of Womanspirit, being unable to reply in Human Behaviour itself since, she reported with unrepressed smugness, the magazine went out of business after the issue containing Binford's article.

Spretnak deals specifically with each of Binford's points. She says Binford is wrong to blur the distinction between two separate areas of research, one involving archaeologists, classicists and historians of religion in an investigation of evidence for pre-patriarchal Goddess religions, and another centring on the question of whether societies which seem to have revered a Goddess were, in fact, matriarchies. Like Stone, Spretnak finds the evidence for systems of religious belief focussed on a form of Mother Goddess irrefutable. However, she says, a belief in a "Golden Age of Matriarchy" exasperates most Goddess-researchers as much as it does feminists like Binford (Spretnak 1982:553). While acknowledging that proof of Goddess worship is not proof of matriarchies, Spretnak points out that neither does the absence of matriarchies mean an absence of the Goddess.

It is true that in the early days of the Goddess spirituality movement women, inspired by books such as Elizabeth Gould Davis's The First Sex (1972), used to fantasize about glorious matriarchies in the past and future. They were not the only feminists who did so at the time. Over twenty years, however, the movement and the women in it

have matured, there has been time for research, and women have begun to break out of what Spretnak and Starhawk call patriarchal modes of thinking. Many women have moved beyond wanting to "pay men back" and are conceiving alternative systems of social relations. In recent years writers such as Adler (1982), Starhawk (1989), Goodison (1990) and Eisler (1988) have stated strongly that the political aim of Goddess spirituality is not to invert patriarchal rule by establishing or re-establishing matriarchies, but to work to create a society in which what Eisler calls the "dominator model" of social relations is replaced by a "partnership model". This model extends Goddess spirituality's holistic view of the natural world to the social world, where the ideal society is not split and ranked according to gender, race or any other form of classification. Writing in the second edition of The Spiral Dance ten years after the book's first publication, Starhawk says (1989:249):

> The decision to separate from men and devote one's time, energy, creativity, and emotional support to women is certainly a valid one. But at times the impulse toward separatism also generated an ideology that I saw and still see as false -- the analysis that men are inherently violent and prone to domination, while women are inherently nurturing and cooperative. I would say that the patriarchal system is rooted in domination, that under it we all become dominators and dominated, with men ruling women but also men of other races and classes, and that that system must be transformed in order to change the power dynamics between women and men (and, for that matter, between women and women, men and men).

Prehistoric Crete has often been held up as an example of a matriarchal society. In her doctoral thesis Lucy Goodison examined the evidence for this and concluded that "none of it proves that we are looking at a society which is matriarchal in the sense of a society run by women" (1990:118). She continues:

> While the matrix of the universe was apparently seen as female, and women figured predominantly in religion

> (whether as personified deities or as priestesses), we simply do not know how this religious pre-eminence related to other kinds of political or social power. That women predominated as the symbols and administrants of divine cult at a time when religion was integral to the rest of social life is not itself certain proof that women held overall social power.... It is clear that women in Crete at this early time held more power than in our society, but we remain uncertain about what sort of power it was.

Goodison, who is personally deeply involved in Goddess spirituality, echoes Binford (who is equally deeply opposed to the movement), saying that the fantasy about a golden age of matriarchy, while providing women with a unifying and reassuring vision, has more to do with "our needs and struggles today than with life in Crete in the third millenium BC" (1990:120). During a Goddess spirituality workshop in Auckland (June 1993), Lea Holford said: "The Goddess cultures in Europe were not 'Golden Ages' -- this is narrow-minded thinking. We don't want to bring them back again".

In her reply to Binford, Spretnak says that while she does not believe that the societies which venerated a Goddess were matriarchal, she does think there is good evidence they were matrifocal, and that they had a quite different concept of woman from that of patriarchal societies of the last two to three thousand years. Goodison's recent work amply supports this view. Spretnak disagrees with Bamberger, Ortner and Rosaldo (in Woman, Culture and Society) that motherhood and mothering are central in explaining the universal secondary status of women, arguing (1982:129):

> If childbearing is always considered limiting and degrading, why did our Paleolithic ancestors from Spain to Siberia carve myriad statues of powerful female figures whose vulvas, large breasts and bellies cyclically yielded the very mysteries of life?

Spretnak claims that feminist academics who see women's reproductive functions as debilitating and therefore related to women's oppression by men are locked into a "patriarchal mode of viewing motherhood". She quotes Derrida: "We cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest". One might argue that "spirituality feminists", as Spretnak calls them, are no less susceptible to the Derridian paradox seen, for example, in the strong association made between women and nature. As Spretnak argues, however, this association is made in the context of a re-evaluation of the relationship between "man" and nature which rejects the degradation of nature and sees a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature as essential to continued human existence.

To Binford's comparison between representations of the female form in Upper Paleolithic art and those in Playboy magazine, Spretnak says (1982:557): "It is truly pathetic when a woman cannot perceive the difference between the powerful Paleolithic figures and current pornographic portrayals of women as coy, vulnerable toys".

The Goddess movement continues to come under attack from some feminists on the grounds that it seems to re-invoke the essentialist[8] connection between woman and nature elaborated in Sherry Ortner's now famous paper "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (1974). Ortner explained the universal devaluation of women in terms of their symbolic association with nature -- "something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself" (1974:72). Explaining why woman is seen as closer to nature, Ortner wrote: "It all begins of course with the body and

the natural procreative functions specific to women alone" (1974:73). The solution to the problem of woman's devaluation as a result of her association with nature can only come about by both men and women becoming "equally involved in projects of creativity and transcendence" -- for Ortner, "culture" is about transcending nature. She concluded (1974:87): "Only then will women be seen as aligned with culture, in culture's ongoing dialectic with nature".

Micaela di Leonardo (1991) sees the Goddess movement's tendency to emphasize the procreative and nurturing aspects of woman, its romanticizing of the connection between women's menstrual cycles and the lunar cycle, and its insistence that the primary image of divinity was female as evidence that the movement fosters essentialism. She writes (1991:26):

> The dichotomizing, essentializing threads in 1970s feminist evolutionary models today weigh, to paraphrase Marx, like a nightmare on the brains of living feminists. Both feminist essentialists and conservative anti-feminists have continued to draw on the nineteenth-century storehouse of moral motherhood symbolism, stressing women's innate identity with and nurturance of children and nature. Popular volumes with both feminist and antifeminist intent call on women to reclaim "the Goddess" in themselves and to envision a new female and nurturing era to come.... Even feminists with no interest in specious evolutionary reasoning have fallen victim to the vision of an innately nurturant, maternal womankind.

Di Leonardo is right that Goddess spirituality encourages women to acknowledge and celebrate their connection to nature, but she is wrong to suggest that by valuing their procreative and nurturing roles women are lapsing into re-inforcing the dichotomizing and essentializing models proposed in the 1970s by writers like Ortner, Rosaldo and Chodorow (see Woman, Culture and Society 1974). Women in the Goddess movement do not, as di Leonardo claims, "call on women to

envision a new female and nurturing era to come". (What constitutes a "a female era" is unclear -- di Leonardo's term is so vague as to be meaningless.) It is true that women are encouraged to "reclaim 'the Goddess' in themselves", but this "Goddess" is not seen as symbolizing a cluster of essential, "womanly", nurturing characteristics. (The concept of "Goddess" is discussed below in this chapter.) Women in the movement call on and identify with a great range of goddesses with different, sometimes apparently contrasting associations. Hestia, for example, is Greek goddess of the hearth and is therefore associated with home-making.[9] She is a virgin goddess, however, so her attachment to and pleasure in her home is not linked with caring for a husband and children. Athena, on the other hand, who in the Greek myth sprang fully-grown and fully-armed from her father Zeus's head and protected the city of Athens, is associated with the qualities of diplomacy, logical thinking, wisdom, courage, and political astuteness. She is highly motivated to win, is a skilled tactition, and is ruled by her head not her heart. Artemis represents a quite different set of traits: she is the fiercely independent huntress and defender of women who is strongly associated with nature.

I give these examples to demonstrate that the Goddess movement, both in New Zealand and overseas, does not suggest women identify exclusively with a nurturant, maternal goddess. Because of the high proportion of lesbian and professional women in the movement (see chapter six), a goddess associated exclusively with mothering would not, in any case, hold a great deal of appeal for many women in the movement.

It is true that women in the movement are intent on confronting somatophobia and reclaiming the female body, but they are not the only feminists who are currently talking in this vein (see discussion of Kirby below). When women in the Goddess movement say they want to re-connect with the body and with nature, they do not mean that men cannot or should not do this too, and they do not see that re-connecting with nature means that they are shunning or estranging themselves from culture. As I discuss below, women in the movement explicitly see themselves as having a role in "recreating culture". Because women celebrate biological processes such as menstruation, giving birth, and lactation, it does not mean that they think their experience of womanhood, or personhood, should be limited to social roles based on their procreative and nurturing capabilities.

The problem with structuralist models such as Ortner's and critiques such as di Leonardo's is that they discuss essentialism in dualistic terms. Di Leonardo is wrong when she claims that the Goddess movement is perpetuating the dichotomizing models of the 1970s. Women in the movement see the dominant symbolic system of Western culture, which is based on dualisms such as nature/culture and mind/body, as undesirable because it provides the model for dominance and oppression in social relations. Celebrating a connection with nature need not weigh "like a nightmare on the brains of living feminists" if nature is not constructed in opposition and as inferior to culture. A link between woman, nature and the body only becomes a problem when it is made within a symbolic frame of reference which designates such connections as inferior and opposite to man/culture/the mind.

Women in Goddess spirituality see connection to nature as desirable for women and men, not simply as the biologically-determined destiny of women. They are not interested in transcending nature, as Ortner suggests is necessary if women are to achieve equal status with men. The notion that nature and the body need to be transcended and dominated is seen as a legacy of Christian ideology. God's instruction to Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:28) was to "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over... every living thing that moves upon the earth". The desire to disown the body derives from the Christian belief in its contamination by sin.

Recently some feminists have begun to rethink essentialism. In Addressing Essentialism Differently Vicki Kirby writes (1992:6):

> Emerging discussions of essentialism are attempting to confront feminism's anxieties in order to exorcise the somatophobia that underpins the legacy of phallocentrism's mind/body split....[T]he subject is commonly approached with a certain sense of hesitation and guilt....
>
> Although rethinking essentialism marks an avowed return to the body, the reunion is not an easy homecoming. Perhaps commerce with the body is considered risky business because the border between the mind/body split, the border across which interpretations of the body might be negotiated, just cannot be secured. This fear of being discovered unwittingly behind enemy lines, caught in the suffocating embrace of that carnal envelope, menaces all conciliatory efforts.... [I]t would seem that the body is still figured as a dangerous and hostile territory.

Kirby (1992:5) quotes Elizabeth Grosz and Toril Moi who insist that any attempt "to define 'woman' is necessarily to essentialize her". The danger of not defining woman, of doing away with essentializing altogether, Kirby says, is that "the condition of possibility for any political axiology" is lost as well. If the category "woman" is dissolved, where does that leave feminism? For Kirby, "the task is not to dream of

deliverance, of yet another theology that promises to transcend this contamination. Rather, it is to begin to real-ize that we are inextricably immersed within that contamination and that our fundamental complicity with it is, strangely, its enabling moment".

According to Grosz (1990:338), the problem with egalitarian feminism (such as Ortner's and Rosaldo's) was that male achievements, values and standards were taken as the norms to which women should aspire. Equality meant becoming the same as men. Grosz sees an "acknowledgement of women's specificities" as a legitimate feminist position when it is oriented toward the attainment of autonomy for women (1990:339). Grosz's position is one which witches understand and agree with:

> For patriarchs, difference is understood in terms of inequality, distinction, or opposition, a sexual difference modelled on negative, binary, or oppositional structures within which only one of the two terms has any autonomy; the other is defined only by the negation of the first. Only sameness or identity can ensure equality. In the case of feminists of difference, however, difference is not seen as difference from a pre-given norm, but as pure difference, difference in itself, difference with no identity.

I turn now to look at the meaning of the Goddess for contemporary women as presented in the literature on the subject. In chapter eight I discuss the meaning of the Goddess for women I have worked with in New Zealand. Scholars have approached the study of the Goddess from a number of disciplines: from theology (Mary Daly, Naomi Goldenberg, Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow); psychology (Erich Neumann, Edward Whitmont, Jean Shinoda Bolen, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford); archaeology (Marija Gimbutas); the classics (Lucy Goodison); mythology (Miriam Robbins Dexter, Charlene Spretnak); and art history (Merlin

Stone, Elinor Gadon). I list here only a few of the best known names in each field. Others have come to research and write on the Goddess from a variety of backgrounds: from personal experience in feminist ritual work, a training in the Wicca tradition, involvement in peace activism and ecofeminism, involvement in Eastern religions, an interest in shamanism, and having taken undergraduate courses in anthropology.

Starhawk, the North American writer best known to women in feminist witchcraft, and one who has a background in anthropology, political activism and Wicca, provides a useful summary of the meanings of the Goddess. She says women in the Goddess movement today do not imagine that they are dusting off and reviving the prehistoric religion of Europe which existed prior to the rise of Judaeo-Christianity. Goddess religion, according to Starhawk, is "being recreated rather than revived" and is formed out of a "rich kaleidoscope of traditions and orientations" (1989:200,25). Modern women do not worship the Goddess. They do not want to convert people to a "One Right True and Only Way" (Starhawk 1989:201). Goddess spirituality is not primarily a system of religious beliefs and practices centred on a female deity.

For contemporary women the Goddess is a symbol, and as such is given different meanings, including apparently contradictory ones, by different women. While women may personally prefer one meaning or set of meanings to another, all meanings are considered equally valid and are embraced within a holistic world view. Thus, the Goddess symbolizes lover and virgin; female and male; earth and sky; the creative, nurturing Mother Goddess and the destructive, death-dealing

Kali or Hecate. The Goddess represents the whole of humanity and the natural world: according to Starhawk, the Goddess is manifested equally in a drop of water, menstrual blood or excrement. She says (1989:94):

> The nature of the Goddess is never single. Wherever She appears, She embodies both poles of duality -- life in death, death in life. She has a thousand names, a thousand aspects. She is the milk cow, the weaving spider, the honeybee with its piercing sting. She is the bird of the spirit and the sow that eats its own young. The snake that sheds its skin and is renewed; the cat that sees in the dark; the dog that sings to the moon -- all are Her. She is the light and the darkness, the patroness of love and death, who makes manifest all possibilities. She brings both comfort and pain.

Because women in the movement reject the dualistic thinking of Judaism and Christianity, paradox is celebrated. Starhawk continues (1989:95):

> I have spoken of the Goddess as psychological symbol and also as manifest reality. She is both. She exists, and we create Her. The symbols and attributes associated with the Goddess ... engage us emotionally. We know the Goddess is not the moon -- but we still thrill to its light glinting through branches. We know the Goddess is not a woman, but we respond with love as if She were, and so connect emotionally with all the abstract qualities behind the symbol.

Women in the movement consciously and deliberately incorporate the poetic and the political. Starhawk presents her brief background of the movement in the first chapter of The Spiral Dance as a mythology, not as history. She says the symbol of the Goddess is "poemagogic" because "it induces and symbolizes the ego's creativity". Writing of women's connection with the moon because of their menstrual cycles, she drifts into the poetic: "Woman is the earthly moon; the moon is the celestial egg, drifting in the sky womb, whose menstrual blood is the

fertilizing rain" (1989:92). A hundred pages later she says (1989:199) that the responsibility of feminist witches is to "engage in the demanding task of recreating culture" and that

> [a] deep and profound change is needed in our attitude toward the world and life on it, toward each other, and in our conceptions of what is human. Somehow, we must win clear of the roles we have been taught, of strictures on mind and self that are learned before speech and are buried so deep that they cannot be seen. Today women are creating new myths, singing a new liturgy, painting our own icons, and drawing strength from the new-old symbols of the Goddess, of the "legitimacy and beneficence of female power".

This last phrase comes from a well known paper by Carol Christ which was first given as the keynote address at a conference titled "The Great Goddess Re-emerging" held at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1978. It was published in Womanspirit Rising (1979) and again in The Politics of Women's Spirituality (1982). The paper, titled "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections", discusses the significance of the Goddess as symbol. On the importance of religious symbols generally, Christ, drawing on Clifford Geertz, discusses the ways that religious symbols shape a cultural ethos (1982:72). Her point is that "[r]eligious symbol systems focussed around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent" (1982:73). Christ echoes Daly in Beyond God the Father (first published in 1974) in the view that patriarchal religion legitimates male power: the husband who dominates his wife represents God himself.

Summarising "Why Women Need the Goddess" elsewhere (1992:248), Christ lists the most important meanings of the symbol of Goddess for women in the contemporary Goddess movement:

> First, the Goddess is symbol of the legitimacy and beneficence of female power in contrast to the image of female power as anomalous or evil in biblical religion. Second, the Goddess validates women's bodily experiences, including menstruation, birth, lactation, and menopause, and validates the human connection to finitude, which has been denigrated in Western religions. Third, the Goddess symbol in the context of feminist Goddess worship values the female will, which has been viewed as the origin of evil in biblical mythology. Fourth, the Goddess points to the valuing of woman-to-woman bonds, including the mother-daughter relation, which is celebrated in the story of Demeter and Persephone but which has scarcely been mentioned in the religion and culture of the past several thousand years. The symbol of Goddess, I argue, legitimates and undergirds the moods and motivations inspired by feminism just as the symbol of God has legitimated patriarchal attitudes for several thousand years.

Christ is quite explicit about the fact that the modern Goddess movement is a recent invention which draws on numerous Goddess traditions including pre-Christian European, Native American, Mesoamerican, Hindu, African and others. These traditions are tapped eclectically and often partially: some goddesses, such as those who were subordinate to gods, are not considered useful role models and so are ignored. Christ (1982:76) goes on to raise two questions: Is it necessary to invoke a Great Goddess in order to focus attention on women's power? Do women in the movement believe in a Goddess "out there" who is not reducible to a human potential? She groups women's responses into three answers:

(1) The Goddess is divine female, a personification who can be invoked in prayer and ritual.

(2) The Goddess is symbol of the life, death, and rebirth energy

in nature and culture, in personal and communal life.

(3) The Goddess is symbol of the affirmation of the legitimacy and beauty of female power.

Some women are adamant that the Goddess is not "out there" but that the symbol reflects the sacred power or essence within humanity and nature. They argue that the concept of a transcendent deity is a legacy of patriarchal, monotheistic religions "which brings with it the authoritarian, hierarchicalism, and dogmatic rigidity".

In Goddess spirituality, divinity is immanent. Christ (1982:76) quotes Starhawk's reply to the question "What does the symbol of Goddess mean?":

> It all depends how I feel. When I feel weak, She is someone who can help and protect me. When I feel strong, She is the symbol of my own power. At other times I feel Her as the natural energy in my body and the world.

In her discussion of the meaning of the Goddess for English witches (1989a:47), Tanya Luhrmann says that while witches generally agree that the Goddess is a metaphor for nature and nature's transformations, they nevertheless "slip" into referring to her as a personified deity:

> I suspect that for practitioners there is a natural slippage from metaphor to extant being, that it is difficult -- particularly in a Judaeo-Christian society -- genuinely to treat a deity-figure as only a metaphor, regardless of how the religion is rationalized. The figure becomes a deity, who cares for you.

While I agree in principle that women raised in a Judaeo-Christian society are likely to have a strong tendency to conceptualize the Goddess as a personified deity, I do not agree, as Luhrmann seems to imply, that women "slip" into conceptualizing the Goddess in this way

without realizing it or really meaning to. My understanding is that women have the licence to choose to think of the Goddess in any way they find useful, at the same time acknowledging that they are personally constructing this reality for themselves. I have met many women who speak of the Goddess as personified deity, but none of them speaks of her exclusively this way, and none claims, in a positivist fashion, that the Goddess is limited to this form of conceptualization.

The idea that divinity is immanent liberates women from the legacy of a religious and cultural tradition which invokes a war between the spirit and the flesh and tells people, especially women, that their bodies are dirty and sinful. Contemplating Paleolithic and Neolithic images of the Goddess with their large breasts, bellies and thighs is a powerful antidote to the effects of flipping wretchedly through magazines full of young, slim women judged beautiful and desirable by our society. Because the Goddess is represented as Maiden, Mother and Crone, aging and death, as well as youth and life, are celebrated as part of the cycle.

A number of psychologists have written about the power of the Goddess as symbol from a Jungian perspective. Whitmont refers to the goddesses as "archetypal and compelling ideals" which, although not literal objects, are real and powerful (1983:x). He sees a strong link between religious and social/political systems: gender relations within a gynolatric society (one which reveres the feminine) are quite different from those in an androlatric one (which reveres the masculine). He writes (1983:125):

> Misogyny and androlatry, then, are indissolubly intertwined with the religious convictions and beliefs that were held during the last two to four thousand years or more.... Androlatry and misogyny reflect the masculine overthrow of an older order in which the divine was felt

> to be manifest in feminine forms and values. Divinity then was conceived in the images of the Great Goddess.

But the Jungian division between masculine values and feminine values alluded to above is no longer accepted by some recent writers including Goodison (1990), Eisler (1988), and Starhawk (1989). Eisler sees the period in Europe when the pre-eminent deity was a Goddess not as a period in which "feminine values" prevailed, but as a time when societies organized themselves according to a "partnership model" instead of a "dominator model". In her introduction to the new edition of The Spiral Dance (1989) Starhawk says that the central change she would now make to the first edition would be in the way she discussed maleness and femaleness. She now finds the concept that each woman has within her a male self and each man a female self unhelpful and misleading. She says (1989:8):

> I don't identify femaleness or maleness with specific sets of qualities or predispositions.... If we say, for example, "Male energy is aggressive," I can easily find five aggressive goddesses without even thinking hard. If we say, "Female energy is nurturing," we can also find male gods who nurture.

Jean Shinoda Bolen, another psychologist, combines Jungian and feminist perspectives to arrive at her view of the psychology of women. She sees every woman as being acted upon from within by "goddess archetypes" -- powerful inner forces which can be personified by Greek goddesses -- and from without by cultural stereotypes -- roles which society constructs for women. Bolen uses "goddesses" in inverted commas to symbolize "powerful, invisible forces that shape behaviour and influence emotions" (1985:5). As a woman becomes familiar with the particular "goddesses" within herself and at work in her life, she learns

about her own priorities and abilities and how to work with them or, if she wishes, how to "cultivate" a different "goddess" in her life. The Greek goddess myths become "insight tools". Bolen tells the story of when a woman colleague unexpectedly spoke out against the Equal Rights Amendment Bolen was supporting. In her hurt, angry response to her colleague, Bolen says, she was acting like Artemis, archetypal Big Sister, protector of women. Her opponent was like Athena, the daughter who sprang fully armed from Zeus's head ready to defend the patriarchy. Bolen's book Goddesses in Everywoman (1985) is familiar to many women in the movement in New Zealand and her approach is incorporated into the Goddess workshops facilitated regularly by Lea Holford and Juliet Batten.

In this chapter I have emphasized that the modern Goddess movement does not stake its validity on proof that Goddess-worshipping societies were the norm for thirty thousand years or so before patriarchal religions became dominant three to four thousand years ago. Monique Wittig, in the quotation which heads this chapter, urges women to remember a time when women's lives were free and joyous. If it is too difficult to remember, she says: "Invent". The writers I have discussed are clearly quite comfortable about inventing a spirituality which suits women's purposes -- one which is psychologically and politically useful and empowering to them.

Other scholars, however, are not abandoning the pursuit of evidence which will give a greater understanding of Europe during the Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic. Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas has followed up her The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe (1974, 1982) with an even more comprehensive work The Civilization of the Goddess (1991) in

which she examines the Neolithic cultures of Europe (seventh to third millenium BC) prior to the intrusion of the Indo-Europeans which heralded "the transition to patriarchal and belligerant societies" (1991:viii). Before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans, the societies of Old Europe enjoyed a long period of peaceful living. They built spacious houses of four or five rooms, towns of considerable size, and temples several stories high; they were potters, weavers, copper and gold metallurgists; they developed a sacred script; and they developed an extensive trade network circulating obsidian, shells, marble, copper and salt. Warfare appears to have been absent. There are no remains of weapons, village sites were not chosen for their defensive potential, and there are no paintings depicting humans fighting. Gimbutas says it is important to focus on religion to understand more of these societies. She writes (1991:x):

> The primordial deity for our Paleolithic and Neolithic ancestors was female, reflecting the sovereignty of motherhood. In fact, there are no images that have been found of a Father God throughout the prehistoric record. Paleolithic and Neolithic symbols and images cluster around a self-generating Goddess and her basic functions as Giver of-Life, Wielder-of-Death, and as Regeneratrix. This symbolic system represents cyclical, nonlinear, mythical time.
>
> The religion of the Goddess reflected a matristic, matrilineal, and endogamic social order for most of early human history. This was not necessarily "matriarchy", which wrongly implies "rule" by women as a mirror image of androcracy. A matrifocal tradition continued throughout the early agricultural societies of Europe, Anatolia, and the Near East, as well as Minoan Crete. The emphasis in these cultures was on technologies that nourished people's lives, in contrast to the androcratic focus on domination.

Scholars make the point over and over that goddesses were the pre-eminent deities during the Neolithic. Miriam Robbins Dexter's Whence the Goddesses (1990) developed out of her doctoral dissertation on Indo-

European goddesses. Her analysis is based on her translation of classical myths from primary sources. Dexter concluded from her research that the Neolithic peoples of parts of Europe, Asia and the Near East worshipped a goddess who embodied the complete life process: birth, life, and death. She cites (1990:5) the Indic goddess Devī who is represented as Uma and Parvati in her beneficent aspects and as Durga and Kali in her terrifying aspects. Other death goddesses include the Sumerian Ereshkigal and the Greek Hecate. Persephone has both a maiden aspect and is queen of the underworld.

Dexter's conclusion is very similar to Gimbutas's. As the "goddess-centred" societies of the Neolithic were conquered by the "male-centred Indo-Europeans", the image of the divine feminine changed. Some of the goddesses were married off to the conquerors' gods, many lost their autonomous power, and all eventually lost their centrality in the religious systems of patriarchal societies. Some goddesses remained autonomous and powerful, escaping assimilation into Indo-European society. However, Dexter writes (1990:182):

> Many autonomous goddesses were transmuted to witches by the Greeks, Romans, and other Indo-Europeans, and they were often removed to far-away islands or stuck underwater, perhaps thus lurking just at the periphery of men's consciousness. Although some male-centred cultures refused to venerate them, they could not eradicate them.

One such "witch" was the Germanic goddess Rán, old wife of the sea-king, Aegir, who dragged a net under the ocean waiting to catch sailors who fell off ships. The Greek Scylla, a female monster who had twelve feet and six heads and lurked in caves, also lay in wait to grab and devour sailors. Another human-animal hybrid was the Lamia, who stole

children from their beds and ate them (Dexter 1990:179), foreshadowing the fifteenth century witch image.

In many modern patriarchal societies, Dexter says, there is no worship at all of the personification of the divine feminine. Traces of her survive only in the image of the ugly, evil-doing old witch. This imbalance in the character of the divine in much of modern religion, Dexter believes, "reflects upon the wellness, in all of its aspects, of our world" (1990:183). In her conclusion, Dexter says (1990:186):

> What is missing, particularly in Western culture, is respect for an energy which makes things whole, an energy which honours life. The goddesses provide a clue to how we must restructure our world if it is to survive, a clue both to our past and to our future.

Not all contemporary feminist scholars, however, interpret the evidence from the Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic in the ways that, for instance, Goodison, Gimbutas and Dexter do. In her Women in Prehistory (1989), Margaret Ehrenberg, an archaeologist, revives the question of prehistoric matriarchies and the proper interpretation of the cave art and "Venus figurines" found in locations throughout Europe stretching from Western France to Russia dated to between 25,000BC and 2,000BC. Ehrenberg quotes V. Gordon Childe's argument that the "Venus figurines" cannot be taken as evidence of either matriliny or matriarchy any more than can the images of the Virgin Mary in our own patriarchal society (1989:63). To this one might reply that the very fact that Mary, a human woman, has attained the status she has, especially in Catholicism, within such a patriarchal religion as Christianity suggests that the people of Europe were familiar with the idea of a female deity and were more easily induced to convert to Christianity because Mary, as Mother of God, represented for them the Goddess. In any case,

as I have noted above in this chapter, the question of whether or not there were ever matriarchies is no longer an important one in Goddess spirituality, although any new evidence which may help to clarify the nature of gender relations in the past is of vital interest.

Ehrenberg analyses the range of possible interpretations of the "Venus figurines". She says that they may be classified into two categories: those of the Paleolithic and those of the Neolithic. The first group are remarkably uniform in style, characterised by large breasts, buttocks and thighs; nudity or virtual nudity; sketchily represented or absent facial features, arms and feet; and sizes ranging from four centimetres to twenty two centimetres (1989:67). The Neolithic material is more diverse: the majority are obviously female forms, but some figurines show no obvious sexual characteristics, some are males and some are animals.

Ehrenberg regards the similarities amongst the figurines of the Paleolithic as evidence of "a common meaning and linked social or religious tradition throughout Europe" (1989:72). She suggests that they may not have been necessarily intended to draw attention to woman's fertility, but may simply depict women who were extremely well-nourished, a desirable state amongst hunting and gathering peoples. If this is the case, why are there not equal numbers of figurines depicting well-nourished males?

Ehrenberg next considers two lines of argument taken by those who think that the "Venus figurines" were concerned with fertility. The first is that the figurines represent a goddess of fertility or Mother Goddess. The second is that they were used as part of sympathetic magic rituals aimed at making women pregnant. I see no need for these "two lines of

argument" to be regarded as alternative explanations. It would seem quite sensible, if one believed in a goddess of fertility, to incorporate use of an image of her in a ritual designed to induce pregnancy. According to this view, it need not be argued that a figurine represented a goddess instead of the human woman who wanted to become pregnant -- in rituals, symbols are frequently given multiple meanings.

While Ehrenberg thinks the existence of a "continent-wide cult of a Mother Goddess has been greatly exaggerated", she notes (1989:73) that

> the worship of a fertility goddess is attested in historical records in Anatolia, some several thousand years after the Neolithic figurines were produced in the area, and this strengthens the possibility that the earlier Anatolian figures are representations of the same goddess, particularly when their form and context are examined.

Ehrenberg is quick to point out that this evidence does not prove a "universal religion based on a specific female goddess" because this would presuppose a close contact between different small groups over a wide area of Europe. Yet she has already said that the similarities amongst the figurines indicate a "linked social or religious tradition throughout Europe". She makes the important point that the religious beliefs of forager and other small-scale societies who live in close contact with the natural world "typically centre on general spirits and forces, rather than on personified gods and goddesses".

I agree that it would be naive to propose that a "universal religion", according to our twentieth century understanding of that term, dominated Europe during the Paleolithic. Yet what cannot be ignored are the widespread, overwhelming similarities amongst the Paleolithic figurines and the cave paintings depicting large human female forms. It seems difficult to deny that these figurines and paintings had ritual

significance and that in ways which will never be entirely understood they express an essential focus of numerous small communities' developing sense of spirituality. When the archaeological evidence is considered in the light of the work of mythologists, classicists, historians and anthropologists, the case for the existence of belief systems throughout Europe in which the pre-eminent image of divinity was female becomes stronger. Certainly it is clear from the earliest recorded myths that the Goddess flourished in Europe in a great diversity of forms.

In this chapter I have examined the work of feminist scholars to discover the answers feminist witches give to the questions "Who is the witch?" and "Who is the Goddess?". The answers explicate women's rationale for self-identifying both as witch and as Goddess. I have also sketched the historical development of feminist witchcraft, concluding that it represents both a product of specific social, political, spiritual and intellectual conditions and influences of the past two decades and a construction deliberately "invented" by women in response to these conditions. Its adherents make no claim to have found or to have exclusive access to Truth, holding to "the view that reality is multiple and diverse" (Adler 1986:viii). One of the women I interviewed, Joan, commented on the contextuality of feminist witchcraft thus:

> I see it as very much part of the postmodern age. I don't think it would have happened unless other things had happened. I see it as part of a whole cultural context. It can't be isolated out. Just as I see that Satan-worshipping type of so-called "witchcraft" as part and parcel of the Christian age, I see this as part of the postmodern age.

Feminist witchcraft is unique as a religion or spirituality not only because it is deliberately created, but also because the fact of this

creativity is articulated, heartily celebrated and, at the appropriate moments, deliberately forgotten.

Notes

1. One line of argument says that "Wicca" originates with Gerald Gardner -- that he invented this tradition in the 1940s and 1950s. Proponents of this view also refer to "Wicca" as "modern witchcraft" and "Gardnerian witchcraft". Others, including Gardner himself, argue that "Wicca" is an ancient tradition which goes back to pre-Christian times. Proponents of this view refer to "Wicca" as "traditional witchcraft".
2. Luhrmann (1989a:56-7) says that Western Mysteries groups "see themselves as the continuation of the mystery traditions of the West: of Egypt, of Eleusis, of Mithraism, Druidism, and Renaissance Hermetic-kabbalistic magic.... The basic conception behind the Western Mysteries is that the universe has evolved into complex collections of entities with different degrees of material and spiritual existence. There are different 'planes' of existence, of which the material is merely the lowest. After death, it is thought, the human soul does not die, but reincarnates, in a long process in which each incarnation teaches the soul progressively more about its obligations and responsibilites. Eventually, the individual evolves to the point in which reincarnation would only 'inhibit' its development. Most of these highly developed souls leave this world for another, but some remain in contact with the earth, to guide those that are willing to help in the progress of human evolution".
3. I can do no more than refer to this literature here. Recent works on the subject, such as those by Ursula King (1989), Daphne Hampson (1990) and Susan Thistlethwaite (1989), give extensive references.
4. The first two detailed introductions to feminist witchcraft were published on the same day -- Halloween -- in 1979 in the United States: Starhawk's The Spiral Dance and Margot Adler's Drawing Down the Moon. In New Zealand The Spiral Dance is still the first book many women interested in the movement read.
5. The history I give here is necessarily very brief. Adler's Drawing Down the Moon, first published in 1979 and revised in 1986, is an excellent detailed history of the origins of modern witchcraft in the United States.
6. In Sex, Race, and God Susan Thistlethwaite acknowledges the importance of Daly's contention (following Simone de Beauvoir) that woman is always "other" in a patriarchal society, but points out that Daly's work is limited in "that she does not apply her analysis of women's (sic) otherness to women (sic) themselves as a means of exploring the otherness of black women in white women's consciousness" (1989:15). Thistlethwaite argues against "racial oneness" amongst women. In her opinion, "Daly has not really left behind dualistic, oppositionalistic interpretations of existence but has exchanged them for an undifferentiated immanentism in which the races of women make no difference and opposed them, in an absolutist fashion, to phallocracy" (1989:17).
7. According to women I met while doing my research, this view of "spiritual feminists" has been strong amongst New Zealand feminists. Broadsheet, New Zealand's major feminist periodical, for example, was

quoted as being negative, or at least not supportive, towards issues concerned with spirituality.

8. Grosz (1990:334) defines essentialism thus: "Essentialism, a term which is rarely defined or explained explicitly in feminist contexts, refers to the attribution of a fixed essence to women. Women's essence is assumed to be given, universal, and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women's biology and 'natural' characteristics. The term usually entails biologism and naturalism, but there are cases in which women's essence is seen to reside, not in nature or biology, but in certain given psychological characteristics -- nurturance, empathy, supportiveness, non-competitiveness, and so on. Or women's essence may be attributed to certain activities and procedures (which may or may not be dictated by biology) observable in social practices, intuitiveness, emotional responses, concern, and commitment to helping others, etc. Essentialism entails that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times.... Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions which limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization".

9. These ideas about goddess archetypes are taken from a series of workshops focussing on different goddesses taught by Juliet Batten in 1990. See also Goddesses in Everywoman, a popular text, by Jean Shinoda Bolen, a psychotherapist.

Chapter 4

Cults, NRMs, and the Counter-culture:

Relations with Feminist Witchcraft

> Meditating on the infinite may be a religious activity, so may writing a cheque, eating corpses, copulating, listening to a thumping sermon on hell fire, examining one's conscience, painting a picture, growing a beard, licking leprous sores, tying the body in knots, a dogged faith in human rationality -- there is no human activity which cannot assume religious significance.
>
> From New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities by Kenelm Burridge (1969:4).

In this chapter I consider the feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement alongside a range of religious movements which have attracted the attention of sociologists, anthropologists, and specialists in comparative religion. The range of such movements is vast -- taking in such diverse movements as, for example, Melanesian cargo cults, north-east African women's spirit possession cults, the "Moonies", Transcendental Meditation groups, Spiritualists, Satanists, Theosophists, the Aetherius Society and Flying Saucer Clubs -- and their numbers have been growing rapidly in the decades since the Second World War (Nelson 1987:1). Robbins (1988:1) describes the period from the late 1960s to the present in particular as "one of religious ferment and tumult". In the growing literature on New Religious Movements (referred to in this literature and hereafter in this chapter as NRMs), considerations of "Wicca" are beginning to appear alongside sections on "Native American Spirituality Revived", "Modern Gnosticism", and "Gurdjieff Groups" (Ellwood and Partin 1988).

My intention here is not to review the range of religious movements and make point-by-point comparisons between these movements and feminist witchcraft -- a task of that scope is unwarranted in terms of my central focus in this thesis and would be relatively unfruitful in terms of shedding light on feminist witchcraft. Here I limit my discussion to broad comparisons and, more importantly, to a consideration of how usefully academic approaches taken to these movements can be applied to the feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement. I pay attention to the cultural context in which both feminist witchcraft and numerous NRMs arose -- what has come to be known as the "counter-culture" of the 1960s and 1970s -- and examine the relationships between feminist witchcraft, NRMs and the counter-culture.

I referred above to "cargo cults" and "spirit possession cults" because those are the names used in the anthropological literature. However Ellwood and Partin (1988) draw attention to the problems connected with using the word "cult" to refer to religious movements in Western and non-Western societies. "Cult" always refers to the "other" religious group -- "[n]o one calls his or her own religious group a cult" (Ellwood and Partin 1988:18) -- and the word frequently carries strongly negative associations implying "an excessive or unbalanced devotion or 'craze'", a religion which is not only unorthodox but also spurious, faddish and fanatical.

The social psychologist Hadley Cantril called the cult "a deviant organized action, generally rather restricted and temporary, in which the individual zealously devotes himself to some leader or ideal" (cited in Ellwood and Partin 1988:21). Summarizing the definitions of cult given by social scientists who have studied them, Ellwood and Partin

conclude that, above all, cults are defined as deviance from what the dominant society regards as "normal religion". They offer their own definition of cult as "a group offering an alternative to the dominant spiritual tradition, which is small, has strong authoritative and charismatic leadership, offers powerful subjective experiences which meet personal needs, is separatist, and claims a relation to a legitimating tradition" (1988:27). In this definition Ellwood and Partin are careful to avoid attaching to "cult" any notion of deviance or other negative valuation: they hereby attempt to rescue the cult from its pejorative meanings.

It is important to draw attention to the pejorative associations of the cult because they inform the ways we approach alternative religious movements and groups labelled as such. A religious tradition in which some Somali women in north-east Africa (and many other places) become involved (discussed below) has come to be known as a "spirit possession cult" -- this label signals deviance, exoticism and "otherness". While I do not propose to suggest different names for religious movements known as "cults" in anthropological and sociological literature, I want to point to the implicitly negative meanings carried by the label "cult".[1]

In popular thought and in academic literature, witchcraft is often considered to be a cult. Setting aside any objection to the pejorative associations of the label, when we examine feminist witchcraft in terms of Ellwood and Partin's definition of a cult, the movement shows evidence of only some of the characteristics of cults. Feminist witchcraft does offer an alternative to the dominant spiritual tradition, it offers powerful subjective experiences which meet personal needs, and

it claims a relation to a legitimating tradition. It is not separatist, however, in so far as it does not advocate separating itself from the dominant society and operating independently of its institutions and structures. There is not a high degree of uniformity in the way women self-identify in terms of belonging to the movement (discussed in chapter three) and women move freely in and out and around the ill-defined edges of the movement. Neither does feminist witchcraft have strong authoritative and charismatic leadership. There are women who are well known in the movement because of the books they write and the courses they teach, but while these women are admired, they are not gurus and they exert no control over any other woman in the movement. There is a strong emphasis on women discovering their own "power from within". Ritual groups do not have leaders, and the responsibility for making decisions about how the group conducts its affairs and for planning and facilitating rituals is shared. This absence of any centralized control within the movement or any prescriptions about "the right way" to be a witch, and the amorphous nature of the movement, distinguish feminist witchcraft from "cults" described by Ellwood and Partin.

I turn now to a consideration of the women's spirit possession cults which Ioan Lewis (1966, 1971, 1986) traces in "legion" numbers in many parts of Africa and, beyond Africa, from the Arctic to South America and from India through southeast Asia. Lewis describes in detail this phenomenon amongst the pastoral Somali, a strongly patrilineal Muslim society, of north-east Africa. Somali women are "regarded as weak, submissive creatures", are "excluded from the mosques in which men worship and their role in religion is little more

than that of passive spectators" (Lewis 1971:73). While witchcraft and sorcery are not significant phenomena amongst the Somali, women experience spirit possession in certain contexts. The evidence of possession is a wide range of physical ailments ranging from slight illness and depression to acute hysteria and organic diseases such as tuberculosis.

Having examined these contexts, Lewis concludes that the phenomenon of women's spirit possession has to do with gender relationships in an intensely male-dominated society and women's exclusion from full participation in social, political and religious life. A girl showing signs of suffering after being jilted in marriage is said to be possessed by her former lover. Lewis explains the girl's behaviour as a response to the absence of any legitimate means of venting her anger and distress: "For a jilted girl no other means is traditionally available to express her outraged feelings" (1971:74).

Married Somali women may be possessed by malevolent spirits known as sar. The victim is likely to be a "hard-pressed wife, struggling to survive and feed her children in the harsh, nomadic environment, and liable to some degree of neglect, real or imagined, on the part of her husband" (Lewis 1971:75). Lewis continues:

> Subject to frequent, sudden and often prolonged absences by her husband as he follows his manly pastoral pursuits, to the jealousies and tensions of polygyny which are not ventilated in accusations of sorcery and witchcraft, and always menaced by the precariousness of marriage in a society where divorce is frequent and easily obtained by men, the Somali woman's lot offers little stability or security....
>
> In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that many women's ailments, whether accompanied by definable physical symptoms or not, should so readily be interpreted by them as possession by sar spirits which demand luxurious clothes, perfume and exotic dainties from their menfolk.... It is only when such costly demands have been

> met, as well as all the expense involved in the mounting of a cathartic dance ("beating the sar") attended by other women and directed by the shaman, that the patient can be expected to recover.

Lewis (1971:77) concludes that "this characteristically female affliction operates amongst the Somali as a limited deterrent against the abuses of neglect and injury in a conjugal relationship which is heavily biased in favour of men".

As noted above, spirit possession exists not only amongst the Somali, but also in Ethiopia, Egypt, parts of North Africa, Arabia, the Sudan, and in societies beyond Africa. Lewis concludes that spirit possession is a widespread strategy used by women to achieve what they cannot achieve directly within societies which do not permit women to express dissatisfaction or take action to resolve its cause. "Women are, in effect, making a special virtue of adversity and affliction, and, often quite literally, capitalizing on their distress," Lewis states (1971:85). Men tolerate "their" women's behaviour and the pressure and demands put on them by the women in return for retaining their superior position in society. Ultimately the "official ideology of male supremacy is preserved" (Lewis 1971:86).

But this is not the end of Lewis's story. Women afflicted by spirit possession, it turns out, join a "club" of other similarly placed women under the direction of a female shaman. "Such societies meet periodically to hold dances and feasts for the spirits [from which men are excluded] in which their members incarnate their familiars and perform rituals in their honour" (1971:88). These groups constitute a "healing cult", a "clandestine religion", a "feminist sub-culture", an "ecstatic religion". This begins to sound familiar, reminiscent of the

widespread European cults Henningsen (1990) describes (see discussion in chapter two): the cult Lewis describes is also an exclusively women's ecstatic religion connected with healing, shamanism and animal metamorphoses.

Lewis's interpretation of female spirit possession sounds reasonable as far as it goes and given the evidence he uses to support it, but it does not adequately account for the women's cult with the specific connections noted above. Lewis's construction of the women as weak, distressed and desperate members of their societies echoes historians' construction of European witches (discussed in chapter two). We gain no idea from Lewis about the subjective meanings women attach to their participation in the cult. Our understanding of female spirit possession amongst the Somali is not enlightened by explanations from the women who experience possession.

Feminist witchcraft is like the cults Lewis describes in so far as it is a women's solution to patriarchal oppression and a way for women to experience and demonstrate their solidarity. I return to this point below. However, Lewis concludes that while possessed women may be "resorting to oblique redressive strategies" (1971:88) the cults ultimately support the status quo of male domination. Feminist witchcraft, on the other hand, does not support the status quo: feminist witches are not appealing to men to provide temporary relief from oppressive circumstances. Involvement in the movement is not a strategy for coping with existing gender relations, and women in the movement are certainly not "making a special virtue of adversity and affliction" or "capitalizing on their distress" (Lewis 1971:85). Intellectually, witches are explicitly opposed to the perpetuation of male-dominated systems:

like other feminists, they want to transform these systems. In practice, as a result of their involvement in feminist witchcraft, women say that they begin to see themselves differently; they become stronger and find the confidence and inner strength to make changes in their lives. Doing rituals is not distraction from the harshness of "real life": it may be part of a process of changing the conditions of one's real life. For example, through her involvement in ritual, a woman may begin to see herself as valuable, strong, and deserving of respect. Her changed self-image leads to her refusal to continue to tolerate an abusive relationship, and she either ends the relationship or takes positive steps to change it.

Mary Douglas (1973) rejects Lewis's explanation of women's spirit possession cults and revivalist movements generally in terms of deprivation and compensation. She writes (1973:113):

> Compensation theory too glibly explains by reference to physical suffering and deprivation of civil and economic rights. Then it finds this explanation does not cover the throng of well-to-do women who so often predominate in these movements.

However she does find useful Lewis's distinction between a society's "main morality cult" and "peripheral cults", and builds on his (1966) claim that "people who are peripheral to the central focus of power and authority tend to be possessed by spirits who are peripheral to the main pantheon and whose morality is dubious" (Douglas 1973:116). Douglas regards her explanation of "religious revivalism" as an improvement on Lewis's because it applies whether participants, in particular women, are poor and deprived or rich and privileged, and also applies where such a movement develops following a catastrophe. She says (1973:114):

> In all cases, it is the lack of strong social articulation, the slackening of group and grid, which

> leads people to seek, in the slackening of bodily control, appropriate forms of expression. This is how the fringes of society express their marginality. It is enough to say that the experience of a certain kind of structuring of society gets expressed in a certain way, without invoking the emotionally distracting principle of deprivation. In relation to established authority, this area of the social structure is the wilderness from which prophets and new cults are observed to arise.

Douglas thinks it is no surprise that it is women who form the main membership of possession cults because they, along with serfs and slaves, "are inevitably pinned only weakly into the central structure of their society" (Douglas 1973:117). They express their social marginality and "spiritual independence" by participating in cults identified by an abandonment of bodily control (such as is seen during spirit possession): Douglas's explanation rests on an essential connection between the physical body and social body.

Both Lewis and Douglas stress the oppositional relationship between the dominant cult and the peripheral cult and the way in which the latter is a response to the former. When we consider the relationship between feminist witchcraft and the dominant society, it is clear that feminist witchcraft has been deliberately constructed in opposition to what Lewis calls the "main morality cult". Feminist witchcraft invokes many goddesses instead of one God, divinity and the sacred are immanent not transcendent, life is privileged over an after-life, the body and sexuality are celebrated, there is no concept of "sin" or "damnation". It is significant that the movement has emerged in the context of women increasingly articulating their marginality within patriarchal societies and at a time when the structure of society which has held women in place begins to slacken. In Lewis's terms, women, who are peripheral to the central focus of power and authority, have

chosen to invoke deities who, worse than peripheral to the main pantheon, are an anathema to the Christian God and "whose morality is dubious". In choosing to call themselves "witches" they could hardly have chosen a self-identification which is more of an anathema to Christianity. Arguably, neither could they have chosen to identify with a symbol which more strongly represents marginality in both Western and non-Western societies. Self-identifying as "feminist witch" both expresses and challenges this marginality.

Pamela Constantinides (1978) has researched a women's spirit possession cult, the zaar, amongst the Muslims of the northern Sudan. Constantinides places much less emphasis on the phenomenon of spirit possession in the cult than Lewis and Douglas do in their descriptions of parallel cults. She sees the zaar as a women's healing and solidarity movement which "provides women with a basis for association additional to, and sometimes to a large extent replacing in importance, relationships based on more traditional means of social alignment" (1978:190). It is especially important for women who leave their rural tribal areas and move into towns where they no longer have access to a women's solidarity group based on kinship and affinity. (In rural areas, traditional marriage patterns are characterized by lineage and village endogamy.) Whereas men can replace the close ties they experienced in their villages with new forms of association based on their work, women's confinement to the domestic sphere and the Muslim rules which restrict women to associating only with kin mean their social world shrinks. According to Constantinides, the zaar functions to help women adapt to urban living in the same way that Muslim brotherhoods and work and sports clubs function for men. The zaar

"offers both the promise of cure [from almost any form of physical or emotional ailment] and on-going membership of a common-interest, multi-ethnic group, and a widely ramifying network of zaar-based contacts" (Constantinides 1978:195).

Constantinides describes in some detail the way the zaar works and the range of ways the cult effects women's lives. Women begin their association with the cult by consulting a cult leader, a shaikha, when they are suffering some illness or upset. In the course of a healing ritual, during which the sick woman enters into trance and speaks with spirit voices, the shaikha diagnoses which spirits are causing the women's ailment. The spirits always demand that a ritual, with spirit costumes and sacrifice, be subsequently held by the patient. If the woman accepts the diagnosis, the shaikha performs a ritual of initiation which commits the woman to that shaikha and to attending the five or so annual rituals which the shaikha holds for all her followers who may number from about fifty to several hundred women. Thus there are two kinds of rituals -- the small, private, healing rituals attended by the patient's kinswomen and neighbours and some of the shaikha's followers, and the large annual rituals. There are a number of different shaikha in a town or city and their different groups form a network which women use "to form friendships and patron-client relationships, to promote economic transactions, and to offer and gain services" (Constantinides 1978:198).

During rituals a spirit-possessed woman "can express most of the things that affect her, including desire for increased wealth or status, fear of death, fear of childbirth, or dismay at barrenness or low fertility" (1978:199). The shaikha provides on-going advice and minor treatment

for her followers between rituals. Membership of a zaar cult group "leads to invitations not only to the cult rituals of others, but also to various life-cycle rituals such as circumcisions, childnamings and weddings" (1978:198).

Constantinides reveals the zaar cult in a quite different light from Lewis's description of the parallel cult amongst the Somali. She emphasizes the full range of religious, healing, social and economic aspects of the cult and its importance to the women who participate, where Lewis focusses on the distressed state of "afflicted" women. Where Lewis emphasizes that men accede to the demands of the spirits and pay for the rituals intended to cure their wives in return for retaining their dominant position, Constantinides (1978:200) says that "though the expenses of a zaar ritual are usually paid by the patient's father, brother, son, or husband, I was surprised at the number of women who footed their own bills out of the money they had claimed in this domesticated economic system" and (1978:203) "[a] husband's or kinsman's acceptance of a spirit-possession diagnosis, and their willingness to bear the financial burdens of a zaar ritual, is public affirmation of a woman's importance to them".

However, Constantinides finds that zaar cult groups have not developed their potential as political groupings and she does "not believe that its members seek to challenge the basic social order" (1978:202). She would agree with Lewis (1971:86) that ultimately the "official ideology of male supremacy is preserved". Her comment that: "The male political-religious establishment has reacted sharply to the cult in the past, much as the secular male-dominated educated elite ridicules it today" could equally be made in relation to witches past and present.

I pointed out above in this chapter that the sar cult described by Lewis sounded reminiscent of the European cults Henningsen (1990) describes. Constantinides's description of the zaar makes the resemblances stronger. Sicilian "fairy cults" and the zaar of the northern Sudan both constitute women's healing cults which exclude men. The shaikha is a wise woman, healer and spiritual leader. She conducts rituals for small groups of women and for larger companies where, like the Sicilian wise woman, she acts as an intermediary between the spirit world and the human world.

There are also resemblances between the zaar cult groups and feminist witches' ritual groups. The ritual group acts as a therapy group, support group, and spiritual community. While rituals are not about diagnosing and curing physical ailments, they may focus on how a woman deals with physical ailments or conditions, and they frequently focus on women's emotional and psychological well-being. Carson (1992:1) says that a growing trend in the movement "is a strong interest in healing of all kinds: indeed, it may be said that the essence of feminist witchcraft consists of healing the female self". Like the zaar groups, ritual groups are also women's solidarity groups which focus on a female-identified spirituality and perform life-cycle rituals for their members. Ritual groups, however, even in a city like Auckland, do not form a network which is as strong and effective as the zaar groups. Nevertheless, women in groups do ask for and receive advice and support from one another, they socialize together within and outside the group, they sometimes share houses with another group member.

The fundamental difference between the zaar cult and feminist witchcraft, as I indicated above when discussing the sar, is that while

feminist witchcraft provides women with an alternative religious movement and a women's solidarity group in the midst of a male-dominated society, its members oppose and seek to change the male-dominated institutions of their society. If one compares the ways feminist ritual groups and zaar groups operate as groups, parallels can be drawn. The difference appears to be at the level of the political motivation and ideology of participants.

In the same way that women's spirit possession cults operate within the dominant order of their societies, the cargo cult, according to Douglas (1973:166), "explicitly accepts the current material values" of the society: participants engage in cult rituals because they want access to the material goods to which those in power, the European colonizers, have access. Both types of cult arise amongst oppressed groups. The difference is that possession cults do not fundamentally challenge the power relations within the society, whereas cargo cults have emerged in Melanesia and Polynesia where groups who feel themselves oppressed are dissatisfied with existing power arrangements and want to change them (Burridge 1969). Douglas (1973:167) writes:

> Cargo, then, is not wanted for its own sake, but for the new relationships it will permit, when Papuan can exchange with European on fair and equal terms. The cargo cult is to be seen as a specially potent rite which dissolves all existing commitments and relationships for the sake of establishing a new, more profitable set of links.

Participants in cargo cults conceptualize this "new, more profitable set of links" in terms of the arrival of a golden era. They believe this new order will be brought about as the result of their performance of particular rituals. Participants typically give up their normal daily

economic activities, destroy their property, perform rituals, and go to an airfield or wharf to await the arrival of "cargo" (Douglas 1973:165).

While I see cargo cults and feminist witchcraft as very different phenomena, they share the characteristic of participants' dissatisfaction with current power relations in their society, and they both hold up the ideal of a better world. Along with spirit possession cults, they are both religious responses to a sense of oppression. A crucial difference is that people in cargo cults believe that their millenary rituals will cause the advent of a more acceptable social order (Burridge 1969:9). Feminist witches do not believe that the enactment of their rituals will be directly instrumental in bringing about desirable changes in society. Witches' rituals have little to do with their vision of a better world. They are aimed at bringing about or helping to process changes within the lives of the individual women who perform them. They are about life management at the personal level, not about precipitating magical events in the world at large. Witches, on the whole, do not believe that their ritual activity has influence "outside the sacred circle": the efficacy of the ritual act is restricted to the actor. In this respect they differ not only from people in cargo cults, but also from people in Christianity. Christians believe that their prayers can be efficacious "in the world outside": they pray for a sick relative to be healed or for a war to stop. If witches were, for example, to address the problem of war in a ritual, as the group I joined did at the time of the Gulf War early in 1991, they incorporate within the ritual a diversity of personal commitments to work for peace. For example, in the ritual I attended, one woman undertook to write letters to every Member of Parliament asking for New Zealand to take a stand against the war, another decided to join in the

political activities of a peace group, while another pledged to monitor her children's television-viewing and to make her house a "war-toy free zone". These commitments to action differ from the kinds of actions carried out by people in cargo cults in that they fall within the logic of the dominant culture: the rationality for undertaking them does not differ from the rationality of a person outside the movement who might choose to engage in similar anti-war activities. Cargo cults are different in that what is deemed rational conduct by participants is considered irrational by non-participants.

On the whole, one can make only general and rather strained comparisons between feminist witchcraft and the types of cults I have been discussing. We can reach a better understanding of feminist witchcraft by examining the particular historical and cultural context in which the movement emerged amidst a wide range of other movements and "cults". The sixties "counter-culture" gave rise in America to a diversity of religious movements which attracted mostly young adults of middle- and upper-class backgrounds who were searching for a solution to personal problems and needs, emphasized subjective spiritual experience, centred on charismatic leadership, and entertained idealistic prescriptions of society (Ellwood and Partin 1988:20). The counter-culture itself has been interpreted by some sociologists as "a religious crisis or cultural crisis of meaning in which dominant value complexes such as utilitarian individualism were being challenged" (Robbins 1988:1). Robbins attributes the proliferation of NRMs in the United States to three factors: an increased interest in oriental mysticism,[2] the use of psychedelic drugs which became associated with utopian and mystical ideas, and the growth of political activism and the

rise of the "New Left". With regard to the use of psychedelic drugs, Robbins writes:

> It is an interesting speculation as to what degree there was an intrinsic interface between the visual experience of hallucinogenic drugs and the mystical "monistic" worldview in which phenomenal reality is an illusion concealing an immanent "inner" reality of universal oneness.

As the "hippie" era faded, a range of new "religiotherapeutic groups" emerged, most visibly in the San Francisco Bay area (Robbins 1988:3). As we saw in chapter three, it was in this area and in this context that feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality developed with its holistic world view emphasizing "universal oneness".

The decline of student political activism in the 1970s combined with the persistence of counter-cultural values produced a context conducive to this upsurge of NRMs. The same period saw a surge of interest in Pentecostal and fundamentalist Christian groups which also emphasized subjective spiritual experience and protested against the conservative style of the traditional denominations. On the streets of Auckland, as in San Francisco and in other cities around the Western world, "Jesus Freaks", "Moonies", Hare Krishnas, the Children of God, and devotees of the Church of Scientology competed for converts. The diffuse "human potential movement" with its emphasis on personal growth and self-actualization also has its origins in this period.

During the 1980s the surge of NRMs levelled off and those already in existence became "less wild and dissident" (Robbins 1988:8). The emphasis was less on personal religious conversion and salvation and more on holistic health movements, ecology movements, small-group therapies, and individuals' search for a personally satisfying spiritual

path. Roy Wallis (1984) traces a waning of "world-rejecting" movements such as the Unification Church (the "Moonies") and a continuing viability of "world-affirming" movements which help people cope with stress through a modern version of magic. Wallis writes (1984:122):

> The ends may have changed somewhat from physical health, fertility and freedom from witchcraft, to psychological well-being, enhanced self-confidence and freedom from socially engrained inhibitions, but the enterprise is essentially the same.

"New Age" philosophies and therapies, with their emphasis on self-transformation, appear to draw greatest interest from middle-aged adults (Robbins 1988:10). It is interesting to note that it was precisely this group, now among the "socially integrated" in society, who were among the "socially marginal" of the sixties counter-culture (Wallis 1984:121). New Age ideas and practices are also finding their way into educational, business, and even military institutions (Robbins 1988:11).

The NRMs which have proliferated in Western societies in the last three decades differ from the millenial and spirit possession cults I discussed above in that they are not religions of the oppressed. Rajashekar (1987:xii) writes: "Unlike most of the 'new' movements in earlier periods of history which catered to the needs of the 'have-nots', contemporary NRMs seem to appeal to the 'haves'". They are middle-class phenomena and as such are "similar to the new left feminist and ecology groups of the period" (Robbins 1988:44). If the adherents of NRMs consider themselves deprived, the deprivation is not economic but spiritual and social -- adherents are searching for "more meaningful relationships" and a personally meaningful spirituality.[3]

Numerous explanations for the rise of NRMs in the West have been proposed by social scientists. Robbins (1988) gives a comprehensive

review. Some explanations emphasize the crisis of moral meaning and cultural values which emerged in the 1960s and led to attempts to construct new meaning in the face of moral confusion and ambiguity (1988:37). The gradual increase of secularization in Western societies is also seen as setting the scene for a new religious diversity and innovation. Daniel Bell, cited in Robbins (1988:55), claims that cults appear "when religions fail... when the institutional framework of religions begins to break up". While some theorists, such as Robert Bellah (1975), see NRMs as constituting a spiritual rejection of materialism and the erosion of civil religion, others like Marvin Harris (1981) claim that those who join NRMs are not rejecting traditional values but are "hedging against failure and regressing to magical means of grasping material goals" (Robbins 1988:37). Harris's explanation echoes anthropological explanations of cargo cults (Burridge 1969, Douglas 1973).

Some explanations concentrate on the role of fundamental changes in social organization resulting from increased urbanization, mobility and bureaucratization in stimulating interest in NRMs (Robbins 1988:43). With the passing of close-knit communities and families, alternative structures are sought to provide closeness and support with others who share common beliefs and values. The NRM becomes a solidarity group or surrogate family, often employing the language of kinship -- "brothers and sisters", "father", "mother", and so on. James Hunter, cited in Robbins (1988:48), points to the sharp polarity between the "oppressively formidable public sphere" and the increasingly fragmented and de-institutionalized private sphere, and argues that the private realm is now structurally unable "to provide reliable social

parameters for the more mundane activity of everyday life and a plausible, well-integrated system of meaning which gives location and purpose to the individual's total life experiences". Still other explanations point out that the new therapeutic movements "offer to participants a holistic sense of 'who am I'" in the midst of a crisis of personal identity brought about by the growing diversity of roles an individual is required to fulfil in modern society (Robbins 1988:47).

Robbins concludes that most sociological theories which attempt to explain the rise of NRMs "deal primarily with intra-social sources of sociocultural transformation and ignore contemporary 'globalist' or 'world system' influences... and/or they treat the sources of new religious movements in isolation from the sources of other contemporary movements" such as feminism and environmental and anti-nuclear movements (1988:61). As I have noted, these social movements overlap considerably with NRMs in terms of their social base and the emphasis on holism in their world views.

Ellwood and Partin (1988) review the range of theories proposed to explain conversion to NRMs. They criticize "deprivation theory", which holds that converts are predisposed to become involved because of psychological, economic and/or social deficiencies, on the grounds that whereas deprivations of many kinds are widespread in society, conversions to cults are not (1988:269). If cults attract the deprived, they do not attract all the deprived: therefore deprivation is at best an insufficient cause. Ellwood and Partin dispute whether, in fact, those in cults are any more deprived or unstable than those in conventional religious groups. They also criticize deprivation theory because it depicts conversion as a passive process which happens to an individual,

and thereby de-emphasizes the element of active choice on the convert's part.

"Interactionist theory" is criticized by Ellwood and Partin on similar grounds: "the potential convert is viewed as a more or less neutral medium through which social forces operate" (1988:270). Interactionist theory holds that conversion occurs as a result of predisposing conditions (attributes of converts prior to their contact with the NRM) and situational contingencies (conditions which lead to the successful recruitment of such people). In brief, a potential convert experiences an acutely felt tension resulting from a discrepancy between his/her ideal and actual state, is inclined to seek a religious solution to his/her problems (rather than a political or psychological solution), defines him/herself as a religious seeker, encounters the NRM at a turning point in his/her life, forms an affective bond with one or more members, and is exposed to intensive interaction with core members of the group. Ellwood and Partin criticize interactionist theory because it does not explain why people with no previous interest in religion become involved in NRMs.

In chapter seven I discuss the attraction of feminist witchcraft for the New Zealand women with whom I worked. Interactionist theory goes some way towards explaining their involvement. I note in chapter seven that the women are "spiritually inclined" (although why this is so is unclear) -- many have been "religious seekers" since childhood or adolescence -- they meet someone involved in the movement and become increasingly involved themselves, initially through attending workshops and open rituals. Feminist witchcraft is different from NRMs in that there is no "conversion" to witchcraft in the way that this

happens in NRMs or in fundamentalist Christianity. There is no proselytizing in the movement. If there is a "conversion" in the witch's life path, it is a conversion to feminism and to the view that patriarchal religion underpins and contributes to maintaining patriarchy. The process of coming to self-identify as "witch" is one which the individual woman initiates and controls herself (see chapter seven). She does not so much "convert" to a new religion as find a systematic way of describing what she already believes. Feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality gives a spiritual dimension to her feminism.

In NRMs and in Christianity, contact with a charismatic leader, preacher or guru is frequently important in an individual's conversion. In feminist witchcraft an individual's most powerful and comprehensive exposure to the movement is frequently through literature in the first instance.

Summarizing the characteristics of people who become involved in an NRM, Ellwood and Partin (1988:274) find that: 1) members tend to be young (in their twenties) in the more intensive movements (for example, Hare Krishnas, "Moonies", Baba lovers) and older in the less intensive movements (for example, Theosophists, Rosicrucians); 2) members tend to be somewhat socially isolated, unattached individuals; 3) most are middle- or upper-class and well-educated; 4) most find conventional, mainstream religion seriously wanting; 5) most are "religious seekers". The final three of these characteristics also apply to those involved in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality. With respect to age, as I discuss in chapter six, the movement attracts women of all ages, though slightly more in their thirties and forties. Those involved in the movement are not noticeably isolated or unattached. Of the

twelve women I interviewed two were married, six were living with a partner (two lesbian, four heterosexual), and four were flatting with at least one other person.

A fundamental difference between feminist witchcraft and NRMs is that NRMs are centred around authoritative and often charismatic leadership. "The centrality, authority, and power of the leader are such as to promote in the public mind a stereotype of the "cult" leader as one who completely dominates the members of the group so that they obey him or her totally and without hesitation" (Ellwood and Partin 1988:277). Even adherents of the world's great religions typically owe allegiance to a prophet, "great man" or "divine man". In feminist witchcraft, as I have indicated, there are no gurus, leaders or prophets. No woman acts as a medium, channel, or representative of the Goddess. Unlike the Wicca covens in the United States, ritual groups in New Zealand have no priestesses who are regarded as and take the role of ritual specialists.[4] Any woman who wants to may volunteer to facilitate a ritual or part of a ritual. To do this, women do not need and are not expected to know a great deal about ritual or be very experienced. Women are encouraged to trust their intuition and explore their own creativity when devising rituals.[5]

Feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality also differs from the cults or movements I have been discussing in that as a movement it is not well-defined, well-organized or demanding of its adherents. Participants are not required to adopt certain beliefs and practices to avoid sanctions or ostracism; they are not required to try to bring in converts; they are not required to give money, time or energy to working for the movement. The level of involvement is entirely the woman's own choice and she

may join or leave when she wishes. However, there are certain expectations of women who belong to ritual groups. These expectations are decided consensually by the members of the particular group; they are not imposed by an authority outside or within the group. Women in groups are expected to try to attend rituals held by the group, to take their turns at preparing and facilitating rituals, to take an active interest in the affairs of the group, to support other members, and to respect the confidentiality of rituals. Women who belong to ritual groups form only part of the overall number of women involved in the movement: because of the loosely-structured, amorphous nature of the movement, it is impossible to say what proportion.

When we come to make overall comparisons between NRMs and feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality, we find that the movement arose in the same cultural context, or counter-cultural context, and draws on the same social base, as the spate of NRMs which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The influences of oriental mysticism, sixties utopianism and political activism, and the new interest in personal growth and self-actualization are strongly present in feminist witchcraft as they are in many NRMs. I have pointed out that feminist witchcraft lacks the centralized organization and control and the strong, authoritative leadership of NRMs. Neither is it "organized around a belief-system held by [its] adherents to offer some unique and privileged means of access to the truth or salvation" as Wallis (1975:9) claims is true of all religious groups. Feminist witchcraft permits participants to arrive at their own "truths" and holds that there is no "one right way" to believe or live, and no single correct spiritual path: hence the absence of

proselytizing.[6] Since there is no belief in sin, paradise, an after-life, or re-incarnation, the concept of salvation has no relevance.

While comparisons may be drawn between feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality and cults, NRMs or even mainstream religions, such comparisons ultimately miss the main point about the movement: that is, its participants do not see it primarily as a "religious movement"[7] at all, but as an aspect of a broad, contemporary social movement which is challenging the Platonic/Christian/Cartesian way of viewing the world. I see feminist witchcraft as one expression of what witches call "a new consciousness" which began emerging in contemporary Western societies in the context of the counter-culture of the 1960s -- one which sees dualistic paradigms, mind/body splitting, and social models based on dominance and oppression as damaging, and emphasizes instead partnership and a holistic world view. Feminism, gay rights movements, the ecology movement, holistic healing movements, the peace movement, the New Age movement, and civil rights movements are other expressions of this broader movement, "mood", or "new consciousness". Feminist witches frame their way of being part of this broader movement by invoking the symbol of "Goddess" to represent holism; their rhetoric employs "spiritual" metaphors. But their overall motivation for changing social relations and conditions and the world view dominant in Western societies is essentially no different from that of other feminists.

One characteristic of a religion is that it makes a distinction between the sacred and the profane with respect to human experience and the material world (Eliade 1961, Durkheim 1964). "Religion is the process by which one tries to express in symbol, story, and experience

this polarized quality of his [or her] life" (Ellwood and Partin 1988:9). Feminist witches, however, in keeping with their holistic world view and their dislike for dualistic symbolic constructions, resist this sacred/profane dichotomy. They sacralize the ordinary experiences and events of their ordinary daily lives. There are no especially holy days or holy places; they sense the presence of the Goddess in the midst of anger, madness and jealousy as well as in the midst of serenity, joy and love; her presence may be felt as strongly in the bush or in one's own living room as in the remains of an ancient pagan temple.

For witches all of life becomes a spiritual experience, yet they strongly resist seeing their movement as a "religious movement". The label implies for them that "religion" can be placed in a neatly-bounded category separate from other aspects of life such as "politics" and "social organization". To call feminist witchcraft a religious movement is, to witches, reductive and contrary to their holistic world view. Juliet Batten sees feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality as a "spiritual movement" within a broader social movement. During a tea-time discussion at a workshop (in June 1993), she emphasized that "spirituality is about individual experience. Religion is the edifice built upon that experience -- ideology, dogma, a system of ritual practices". She spoke of the danger of losing the spiritual experience under the religious edifice.

Some witches also object to the idea that feminist witchcraft is a religion because of their negative experiences with religion in the past. In a group discussion (in a spa pool following a Winter Solstice ritual), women talked about the association of religion, particulary Christianity, with inflexible dogma and rules: they saw a religion as an institution

which was "heavy" and authoritative. One of the reasons they were attracted to witchcraft was that it was unlike the religion they had grown up with (see chapter seven).

The question arises: is feminist witchcraft a religion or not? In witchcraft there is no polarization of the sacred and profane in the way that there is in other religions. Sacred objects and realities are not contrasted with profane "on the grounds the former are thought of as transcendent, extraordinary and beyond anything in normal experience" (Byrne 1988:9). Yet by seeing the ordinariness of life as sacred, by emphasizing the importance of spiritual experiences, by acknowledging that their beliefs and practices give an overall meaning to life, in all their talk about goddesses and their acknowledgement of unseen forces and energies, it is difficult not to conclude that witches have created for themselves a religion. Witches clearly have psychological reasons for not wanting to call feminist witchcraft a religion: they feel "put off" religion by their past experiences and their negative concept of what constitutes a religion. They prefer to call feminist witchcraft a spiritual movement.

In certain respects, feminist witchcraft is like women's spirit possession cults in many parts of the non-Western world. It is a women's solidarity movement; it is a spiritual response to oppression; it emphasizes women's spiritual experiences, women's healing, mutual support amongst participants, and the sharing of women's advice. As a response to oppression, however, it is not a response to specific oppression experienced by feminist witches as a specific group. It is one particular response -- one of a broad range of responses from different quarters -- which has arisen out of a broad-scale critique of all

forms of oppression and which seeks ultimately to transform the status quo.

The 1960s counter-culture gave rise to numerous new social, political, and religious/spiritual movements. Feminist witchcraft is primarily a spiritual movement, but it is strongly linked in terms of its history and ideology to a number of the new social and political movements. As I showed in chapter three, it was feminist activists who first employed the witch image in their protest activities in the late 1960s. Feminist witches now form a sub-group within feminism. I have emphasized that feminist witchcraft is a constructed spirituality whose belief system and practices have been borrowed and adapted freely from numerous sources: elements of ancient pagan religions, Eastern religions, Native American religions, and Wicca are combined with techniques used in psychotherapy, "Green" beliefs, Left-wing politics, anti-nuclear ideals, and a preference for alternative healing practices. Feminist witchcraft is a spiritual movement which draws on many sources; it is also a spiritual movement whose participants contribute significantly to larger social movements.

The characteristic which crucially distinguishes feminist witchcraft from NRMs, cults, and the major world religions is that feminist witchcraft has been and is being deliberately constructed by women in the movement who understand the role that religion/spirituality plays in determining the ideology and institutions of a society, and its role in giving meaning to the personal lives of individuals. Women in the movement explicitly encourage one another to "invent" a spiritual tradition (Wittig 1972:95). The self-consciousness with which women engage in this process, the way in which they combine cunning and

complete sincerity, gives feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality its uniqueness.

Notes

1. Ellwood and Partin, while seeing as problematic the negative associations of "cult", find suggesting an alternative difficult. They write (1988:28): "Some scholars have used 'new religious movements' or even 'new religions' (after the Japanese examples) for much these same sorts of groups, and these expressions appear to be more neutral. Both of these terms, however, may be too broad to be of optimal use. 'Movement' does not necessarily suggest the sort of tight-knit, clearly-defined entity we have suggested, being indeed capable of confusion with a broad, diffuse 'social movement'.... '[R]eligious' or 'religion' also raises difficulties, especially over whether we are speaking of a religion which, though small, is as discrete as one of the 'great religions' like Islam or Hinduism, or whether the group under question is not actually a denomination or other subdivision of one of them".
2. Robbins (1988:2) says that this phenomenon was, to some extent, an extension of the interest in Zen Buddhism and other forms of mysticism amongst artists and writers of the "Beat Generation" of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1965 the Oriental Exclusion Act was repealed and Eastern gurus and swamis began visiting or settling in the United States.
3. While it is true that the feminist movement has a primarily middle-class base, feminists nonetheless see women in general as "have-nots" (in relation to men who are "haves") in that they do not have economic and social equality with men. The focus is on gender-based oppression rather than class-based oppression.
4. In the United States there is now a trend away from covens having priestesses. Group structure is looser, especially in "Dianic" or feminist covens, with all women taking turns in leading rituals (Stein 1990).
5. In a workshop (in June 1993) Lea Holford said, "Knowing comes from the depths of our unconscious, not from our conscious mind. If only we would learn to trust the depths of our own knowing". She stressed the importance of "the organic base of experience". Here Lea was speaking in a general way about the need for women to trust their own knowing, but this emphasis is an important feature of rituals. Rituals are where women practise relying on their intuition and on what they think/feel is "the right thing to do".
6. A few minutes after I drafted this paragraph, I was speaking on the telephone to a friend in the ritual group I joined about an approach made to me by a woman who needed witches to interview for a television documentary she was making about feminist witchcraft. My friend said: "That's not my scene. I'm not into converting the masses. Each person needs to find their own path; this path isn't for everyone".
7. I do not propose to discuss in detail academic definitions of religion here. In Anthropological Studies of Religion, Brian Morris defines religion briefly as "all phenomena that are seen as having a sacred or supraempirical quality: totemism, myth, witchcraft, ritual, spirit beliefs, symbolism, and the rest (1987:3). Peter Byrne (1988:7) defines religion as "an institution with a complex of theoretical, practical, sociological

and experiental dimensions, which is distinguished by characteristic objects (gods or sacred things), goals (salvation or ultimate good) and functions (giving an overall meaning to life or providing the identity or cohesion of a social group)". Durkheim defines religion thus: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (Byrne 1988:9).

Chapter 5

Methodology: Becoming Enchanted

> [R]eductionist science is inadequate to understand organisms, whether they are spiders, starfish or women; ... we can only understand organisms by seeing with a loving eye.
>
> Cindy Cowden, quoted in Reinharz (1992:3).

> [T]o stand aside from the action, take up a point of view, and ask endless questions as I did during the female initiations led only to a spurious understanding and increased the phenomenological problem of how I could know the experience of the other. By contrast, to participate bodily in everyday practical tasks was a creative technique which often helped me grasp the sense of an activity by using my body as others did. This technique also helped me break my habit of seeking truth at the level of disembodied concepts and deconceptualized sayings. To recognize the embodiedness of our being-in-the-world is to discover a common ground where self and other are one...
>
> From Paths Toward A Clearing by Michael Jackson (1989:135).

> [F]eminist participant observation... means openness to complete transformation.
>
> From Feminist Methods in Social Research by Shulamit Reinharz (1992:68).

I had a charmed entry to the world of witches. My early fears about the difficulties of finding and gaining access to groups of witches, about what might happen if they decided part way through that they did not approve of my research, or worse, that they did not approve of me, quickly proved to be unfounded. For about the first year, however, I continued to be concerned about my position as a researcher in relation to the women amongst whom I was conducting my research. Cook and

Fonow (1986:9) point to the dilemma that "[a]s researchers try to include women as subjects they cannot fail to notice how the practice of sociology [or anthropology] transforms all actors into objects". Lather (1989:12) says that even to "make something available for discussion is to make of it an object". I was uncomfortable about constructing myself as subject and the witches as objects, myself as writer and knower, and the witches as written and known. Like Daphne Patai, who worked on Brazilan women's life stories, I was concerned about "what right we have to intrude into the lives of others and the inequalities attendant upon relationships of researcher/researched and writer/written about" (Lather 1989:24).

I was concerned about the differential rewards which would come as a result of the research enterprise. I stood, I hoped, to gain the "data" to write an ethnography, an academic qualification, and a meal ticket; I could not see what the witches had to gain.[1] Later, as I became more familiar with witches' ways of thinking, I realized that it was not my responsibility to decide what or how much witches might gain from the research. The basis of their decision to work with me as research participants was their responsibility and business. Later again, I also began to see that the research act itself had the potential to contribute to the women's consciousness-raising objectives, one of the basic epistemological principles of feminist[2] research (Cook and Fonow 1986:5). I discuss the concept of consciousness-raising as a specific methodological tool below in this chapter. Given the level of what may seem a neurotic self-consciousness on my part at the beginning of the research, a self-consciousness which was not concealed in academic

contexts let alone amongst witches, it perhaps seems a wonder that I continued.

Richard Schechner (1982:80) describes the fieldworker as "a person not at home either in his own or in someone else's culture -- an in-betweener". According to this definition, the traditional role of participant-observer means becoming a mutant or hybrid, belonging wholly neither to the dominant society nor to the community chosen as the focus of research. Not only did I want to avoid the discomfort of belonging nowhere, I also found this role ethically untenable, noting Judith Stacey's charge that even the most well-meaning feminist research "places research participants at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer" (cited in Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989:21).

During a seminar I gave at the University of Waikato in September 1990, a few months into my research, I was impressed with the awkwardness of my relationship as a researcher to the women who were the focus of my research. In the discussion following the paper I was asked: "How do you identify yourself, as a social scientist or as a witch?". I felt I was being prodded to jump off the fence on to the side of social scientists, or on to the side of witches. To land in either camp meant damnation: it seemed better to be an "in-betweener".

Later I read in Duerr (1985:46) that "[a]s late as the Middle Ages, the witch was still the hagazussa, a being that sat on the hag, the fence.... She was a being who participated in both worlds". Traditionally, then, witches were attributed with the power to be in two places at once. I saw the hag as a useful symbol in relation to my dilemma of belonging nowhere: I could claim to "sit on the fence"

between the two worlds of academics and witches, and at the same time inhabit and participate in both worlds.

In her article dealing with the awkward relationship between feminism and anthropology, Marilyn Strathern (1987:289) concludes that feminist inquiry and anthropological inquiry emerge "as two very different radicalisms" which "are differently structured in the way they organise knowledge and draw boundaries". This business of drawing boundaries, of where to locate the "other" and where the ethnographer, is central to an important debate amongst contemporary anthropologists.[3] It is generally agreed amongst the "new ethnographers"[4] that anthropologists need to present their own actions and reactions in the field context as part of the data to be analysed. The ethnographer is no longer privileged with the special status of an omniscient, invisible spectator. As Clifford (1986:14) would have it, he/she is a character in his/her own fiction. This character's role, however, is distinctly different from those of all other characters: it is that of a researcher amongst the natives -- in the conventional terminology, a participant-observer. The ethnographer, says Clifford, is located at "centre stage": there is no question of him/her merging with or becoming a native. Other characters in the fiction are "informants". Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989:26) claim that in this ethnography the society under study ceases to be the "other"; instead "the postmodernist anthropologist locates the 'other' in himself... constructs himself as the exotic". According to these authors, Clifford "has turned ethnographers into the natives to be understood and ethnography into the virgin territory to be explored". Clifford himself sees the perception of "other-ness" as reciprocal. He writes (1986:23):

"[E]thnography encounters others in relation to itself, while seeing itself as other".

Strathern is more ambivalent about where to locate the new ethnographer. On one hand she says (1987:289):

> Anthropology here constitutes itself in relation to an Other, vis-à-vis the alien culture/society under study. Its distance and foreignness are deliberately sustained. But the Other is not under attack. On the contrary, the effort is to create a relation with the Other, as in the search for a medium of expression that will offer mutual interpretation, perhaps visualized as a common text, or a dialogue.

Here Strathern clearly locates the society being studied as "other" in relation to the ethnographer, though this is not to say that the perception of "other-ness" is not reciprocal. But she also says (1987:288) that "the ethnographer must first translate another's experience through his or her own and then render experience in the written word" and that "[t]he anthropologist's own experiences are the lens through which others of his or her own society may achieve a like understanding". Here Strathern seems to be saying that the ethnographer acts as a representative of his/her own society with whom readers may identify in order to understand the other society, while at the same time the ethnographer doubles as a representative of the "other" to his/her own society. To use Clifford's metaphor, the ethnographer plays not one but two characters in his/her fiction. Strathern draws attention to the paradox this raises by going on to claim that the self can be consciously used as a vehicle for representing the "other" only if the self breaks with its own past (1987:289). In the introduction to A Crack in the Mirror, Jay Ruby also refers to this dilemma (1982:30): "In one sense the success of ethnographers is

measured by how well they can become not themselves while at the same time retaining their original identity".

This paradox invokes the classic dilemma -- or classic conceit -- of the participant-observer. Traditionally anthropologists have gone to extraordinary and sometimes painful lengths to make themselves as thoroughly "native" as they can, believing this will help them understand a society "from the inside".[5] At the same time, they have believed that a full and proper understanding of the other society requires an objective analysis using the paradigms of social science, and so have retained the privilege of stepping outside the other society when it suited them. As an actor in a fiction, this ethnographer may drop his or her mask at any time and return to the "reality" of his or her own society. The new ethnographers are more honest than the traditional ones in that they locate themselves within a society but do not claim to be <u>of</u> that society or to represent it. They are content to play only one character in their fiction.

While it might be argued that the postmodernist ethnographer is more honest than his/her traditional counterpart, it might also be argued that he/she more self-consciously exploits the people being studied. The "other" society becomes the context in which the ethnographer, located centre stage, conducts a kind of glorified navel-gazing -- "self-fashioning", Greenblatt (quoted in Clifford 1986:24) calls it -- believing that "confession" in the ethnography makes this not only acceptable, but also important and valuable. Paradoxically, by moving himself/herself right into the ethnography, the new ethnographer removes the natives from the central focus: the "other" is inevitably objectified and shifted to the periphery.

In claiming that ethnographies are fictions, Clifford (1986:6) is acknowledging that they are not only "something made or fashioned", but also something made up. They do not present the "truth" about a society, he claims, they at best construct a partial truth. It is inevitable that an ethnographer both consciously and unconsciously selects some and excludes other material from the ethnographic account. In claiming that ethnographies are partial representations, however, it could be taken that Clifford is implying that a whole or "true" representation potentially exists, perhaps as the composite of all partial representations. I disagree with the notion that a "whole truth" about any society or culture potentially exists, and would argue instead that ethnographies are not partial representations, but alternative constructions. Each is "whole" in itself, in so far as it represents the way one ethnographer sees and makes sense of the society/culture under study, but the number of alternative ways of doing this is potentially unlimited.

Yet in the other sense of the word "partial", ethnographies are always partial representations. It is inevitable that there is a personal bias and an ethical basis to the choices an ethnographer makes in deciding what to include. The political and theoretical biases of the ethnographer are critical. The new ethnographer would probably claim that so long as such biases are made explicit, along with other personal choices and constraints pertinent to the construction of the text, the nature of the bias does not matter.

Feminist research and ethnography shares certain characteristics with the new ethnography: they are both highly reflexive and suspicious of accounts which are not, both are concerned with anthropology's role

in the maintenance of hegemony -- Western and/or patriarchal, both problematize the relationship between writer and written and are experimenting with new ways of making texts (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989:9). But in respect to the feminist researcher's possession of a specific and explicit political position and research goal, and to her positioning in relation to her research participants, feminist research differs radically. Feminist research, Harding (1987) states, places women, their experiences, needs, demands and interpretations at the centre of the research's focus, while, at the same time, locates the researcher as a subject in the research field. It is concerned quite explicitly "with feminism's political goal of changing the power relationships which underlie women's oppression" (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989:32). It is concerned not only with this political goal as a subject matter for study: a number of writers have claimed that feminist research should also explicitly assist women to transform their sexist societies (Cook and Fonow 1986:12-13). In this respect it differs from postmodernist ethnography. For the feminist researcher, the political goals of her research are essentially aligned with the political goals of her research participants; this is not true for the postmodernist researcher. If the latter has a political goal, this has to do with his or her own society, rather than the one under study (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989:32). Marcus and Fischer write (1986:4):

> We argue, moreover, that the potential for developing a distinctive anthropological cultural critique of American society is inherently linked to the vitality of experimentation on the other front, the traditional arena of research abroad. One distinguishing feature of this experimentation is the sophisticated reflection by the anthropologist about herself and her own society that describing an alien culture engenders.

Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989:32) conclude, and I agree, that to the extent that the new ethnography's political strength lies in the kind of social criticism Marcus and Fischer talk about, "it is disheartening as anthropology". They write:

> It has lost its claim to describe the "other" and yet seems devoid of the capacity to empower anyone but the writer and the reader for whom it serves as academic collateral or therapy.

As Maria Mies (1983:120) points out, however, the feminist scholar's role contains its own paradox:

> If Women's Studies is to contribute to the cause of women's emancipation, then women in the academic field have to use their scholarship and knowledge towards this end. If they consciously do so they will realise that their own existence as women and scholars is a contradictory one. As women, they are affected by sexist oppression together with other women, and as scholars they share the privileges of the (male) academic elite.

Judith Stacey (cited in Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989:21) has questioned "whether any ethnography of the 'other' can be compatible with feminist politics", despite the best intentions of feminist researchers. She argues that the intimacy between ethnographer and research "subject" merely masks actual differences between the two in power, knowledge and structural mobility. The issue of a power differential between researcher and research participants in relation to socio-economic factors is important in instances where, for example, the research participants come from a different culture or class from the researcher, but in the case of my research, the great majority of my research participants were middle class, well-educated, Pakeha women, many of whom had professional qualifications. In terms of power, knowledge and structural mobility vis-à-vis the dominant New Zealand

society, they are my equivalents. If there is a power differential between my research participants and myself, it has to do with my status as writer and my research participants' status as written. Stacey (cited in Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989:21) rightly points out that "the research product is ultimately that of the researcher, however modified or influenced by informants". I return to this below.

I go on now to discuss feminist methodology in relation to my research. Dorothy Smith (quoted in Farganis 1986:57) argues that the natural science research model which emphasizes objectivity is inapplicable to the social sciences. Research on women, Smith argues, must start "with women as they experience the world,... with the world seen through their eyes and not with how the observer sees the world of women, as if they were laboratory objects". This requires the feminist researcher to abandon the oppositional stance of looking at women and take up a position alongside women looking with them at their world. The emphasis is shifted away from describing them in their world to describing the world as they see it. This does not mean that anthropological analysis is excluded from the feminist ethnography; it does mean that women's thoughts and experiences are the starting point, and that they are represented in a way which women recognize and are happy about. In traditional anthropology it was feared that if one got too close to one's research participants in this way one's vision would become blurred: "good research" necessitated a proper critical distance. According to this view, "overrapport represents the researcher's neurotic failing to maintain objectivity or maintain his/her separate identity" (Reinharz 1992:67). In feminist research, the ideal is not to achieve an objective and impartial stance. "[F]eminist

methodology," state Cook and Fonow (1986:9), "rejects the assumption that maintaining a strict separation between researcher and research subject produces a more valid account".

In this text I have tried to represent as accurately as I can the world as witches see it. In order to be able to do this, I tried consciously during the research to see the world this way myself. The result was that I came not only to see the world as witches see it, but to like seeing it this way. To say that my own world view shifted as a result of my research would be to over-dramatize the process because, firstly, I found that I already shared many of the same beliefs and values as witches, and secondly, I did not so much swap one world view for another as extend my repertoire of ways of looking at the world. On the whole, I found witches' world views attractive. There were, however, aspects of their beliefs and practices which did not interest me personally or about which I felt rather sceptical, for example, the use of Tarot cards and a belief in the power of crystals (although this did not stop me from giving crystals as presents and learning about the Tarot). Mies (1983:123) labels the process whereby the researcher abandons neutrality and identifies, at least partially, with her research subjects and their experiences "conscious partiality". This reflects my experience of doing research -- I began neutral with a moderate personal interest; I finished up holding a position in relation to the movement and in this text which is explicitly partial.

I should not have proceeded with the research had I seen the women's world view and activities as nonsense. Feminist methodology involves not only the choice of a particular research topic and a particular way of doing research, it also involves the way in which the

research is analyzed (Cook and Fonow 1986:4). A cynical analysis of witches' beliefs and activities would have been contrary to a basic principle of feminist research.

In their article "Knowledge and Women's Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research" (1986), Cook and Fonow set out five principles of feminist methodology based on their examination of the writings of feminist scholars working within the discipline of sociology. Before they do this, however, they state (1986:3) that feminist methodology is still "in the process of becoming and is not yet a fully articulated stance". To stipulate a "correct" set of techniques at this stage, they caution, would be limiting and premature. This raises the question in relation to feminist methodology: How will we know when we get there? It also raises the question of whether, in fact, it will ever be reasonable or desirable to stipulate very precisely what does and what does not constitute feminist methodology. If the "premature closure on definitions of feminist methodology run[s] the risk of limiting its possibilities" now, there is no reason why it should not continue to do so. Writing six years after Cook and Fonow, Reinharz (1992:4) says, "Rather than there being a 'woman's way of knowing', or a 'feminist way of doing research', there are women's ways of knowing". Reinharz is "not interested in telling feminists what methods to use"; she is interested in the range of methods used (1992:5). As Cook and Fonow admit (1986:5), focussing only on "the abstract components of feminist epistemology, thereby detaching epistemology from its contextual base in actual research studies", is problematic. Some of the studies they examined

incorporated only one or two of their five principles, and yet were still deemed to be feminist studies.

While Cook and Fonow's five basic principles of feminist methodology should not be taken as prescriptive or necessarily exhaustive, they draw attention to critical issues for feminist researchers to consider. They include (1986:5):

> (1) the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender and gender asymmetry as a basic feature of all social life, including the conduct of research; (2) the centrality of consciousness-raising as a specific methodological tool and as a general orientation or "way of seeing"; (3) the need to challenge the norm of objectivity that assumes that the subject and object of research can be separated from one another and that personal and/or grounded experiences are unscientific; (4) concern for the ethical implications of feminist research and recognition of the exploitation of women as objects of knowledge; and (5) emphasis on the empowerment of women and transformation of patriarchal social institutions through research.

An aspect of Cook and Fonow's first principle involves locating the researcher as a gendered being amongst her research participants in a way which simultaneously influences her analysis and shapes her experiences as a researcher. Cook and Fonow write (1986:6):

> [T]he feminist investigator is able to locate herself as a subject in history so that her own vantage point arises from the same social relations that structure the everyday worlds of the experiences of those she studies. Understanding the common experiences of women researchers and women subjects in a society characterized by a marked degree of gender asymmetry enables the feminist researcher to bring women's realities into sharper focus.

The fact that I shared the same cultural, class and educational background as my research participants, as well as many of their values and views -- for example, their broadly liberal politics, their feminist perspective, their concern for the environment, and their concern with

the spiritual dimension -- made it easier for me to achieve a "vantage point" close to my research participants from which to attempt to view the world as they saw it. The double effect was that I was able "to bring women's realities into sharper focus" and to be personally convinced of the validity and attractiveness of many aspects of these realities. Paradoxically, perhaps, my emphasis on coming to understand the women's subjective experiences of their world, and on my own subjective experiences of attempting to understand their world, produced a bias on my part which may be seen as a kind of blindness. Yet I consider that it was precisely by abandoning objectivity and a perspective where one stands back and constantly makes comparisons between the dominant world view and the world view of the group being studied that I was able to bring witches' world views into sharper focus. My efforts to understand their world views and see value in their practices necessitated that I accepted as givens some of their fundamental values and premises. It would have been difficult, in fact, for me to have participated fully and appropriately if I had not. The choice seemed to be between believing and pretending, and I found it easier to believe. I give three examples. Witches see creative visualization (see chapter nine) as a guide to self-understanding and a tool for becoming active in choosing one's path forward or for assisting problem-solving. In order to be able to visualize effectively and to report to the group afterwards, I needed to give myself over to this process. To do this, I needed to believe in it. Feminist witches' ritual procedures place little emphasis on the correct performance of certain acts and recitation of particular words compared with, for example, those of Gardnerian witchcraft or other magical traditions, and place a lot of

emphasis on "getting in touch with intuition" and "tuning in to the flow of a ritual". Thus, to act appropriately during rituals and during the planning of rituals, I had to develop these abilities, and to develop them I had, again, to believe in them. Members of ritual groups develop close interpersonal relationships and depend on one another for mutual support, advice and practical help. Participating fully in the group necessitated my being available and able to respond appropriately when another member needed and requested such support. My response needed to be unself-conscious and genuine. This would not have been possible had I needed to pause in such situations and ask myself, "What kind of response is expected here? What is the 'right thing' to say?". I was often on the receiving end of such support myself.

Because I accepted as givens some of witches' basic values and premises and because I adopted a position of conscious partiality towards the movement, I acknowledge that I may be susceptible to the criticism that my view of the movement seems somewhat utopian. I could respond that if utopianism influences my work, it is a self-aware utopianism. But I do not think it is utopianism at work. While I agree that my overall view is unquestionably positive, I would not agree that I have idealized witches and witchcraft, and I do not see witchcraft as the panacea for the world's current problems. My account is clearly not dispassionate -- perhaps as a reaction against the strongly negative traditional associations of the witch stereotype my representation of witches has become a defense of witches. However, in choosing to focus on some aspects of the movement thereby neglecting others, I have not, as far as I know, concealed aspects of the movement which might cause it to be seen in a negative light. My experience of immersion in the field

context and my belief that this enabled me to understand feminist witchcraft better echoes Karen McCarthy Brown's discussed by Reinharz (1992:69):

> Karen McCarthy Brown first presented herself as researcher in her study of a Haitian Voudou cult, then adopted the "complete participant" stance, eventually becoming one of the people she was studying.... Increasing her involvement in an "alternative world view," Karen Brown "submitt[ed] her own life to the Voudou systems of interpretation and healing." [Brown 1985:78-79] She came to believe that her deep involvement in this world view was personally fulfilling and the most useful way to accomplish her research goals of understanding Haitian religion.

The concept of consciousness-raising, the second of Cook and Fonow's principles, incorporates the feminist consciousness of the researcher and the researched, the use of consciousness-raising techniques as a research method, and the consciousness-raising potential of the research act (Cook and Fonow 1986:6). I think that inevitably the act of objectifying and constructing a substantial written account about a social movement, and making this account available to participants in the movement, especially when there is very little else written about the movement, has a consciousness-raising effect on those participants. The feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement in New Zealand is an amorphous body of completely autonomous ritual groups and other individuals with varying levels of commitment and involvement. There is no regular, sustained contact between different groups to my knowledge, no centralized organization, and only a fairly loose sense of community, although this is developing. When I gave drafts of my thesis chapters to women for their comments and criticism, they were interested in reading my ideas, but they were much more interested in reading about what other women in the

movement were saying and doing, and in gaining an overall profile of the movement. For participants, the writing of my ethnography gave their amorphous movement shape and form. It provided them with a stimulus and focus for discussion of their beliefs and practices. When I asked women in the ritual group I joined to participate in a taped discussion on key themes, for example, several commented on how interesting it had been listening to other women and on how the discussion had made them think about issues in new ways or consider ideas which they had not thought about before.

As they read the thesis, women have been/will be presented with a particular image of themselves and the movement, one which derives from my peculiar choice of focus and way of interpreting the material, and this will inevitably contribute to or challenge the ways they conceptualize the movement. I am not suggesting that the movement will take a different course because of the research, but I am suggesting that the women who read the results will be stimulated to think about themselves and the movement in new ways. Upon completion of the thesis I will need to discuss with my research participants ways of making it available to any women in the movement who wish to read it.

The research act itself has had some consciousness-raising impact outside the movement: first, through my talking about feminist witchcraft in informal social settings and giving talks, seminars and conference papers on the subject, people have come to learn of the movement's existence and something about participants' beliefs, values and practices; second, when talking about the movement I frequently bring out aspects of the world view of participants which challenge some of the dominant society's habitual ways of thinking. Witches are not

interested in converting people to a particular religion, but they are concerned about raising people's consciousness about, for example, who the "witches" of the European witch-craze really were, and about the need to care for the planet, to end the subordination of women and other oppressed groups, to adopt a more holistic world view, to value and celebrate life and accept death, and so on. When talking about the movement, I do not use witches' names or the names of ritual groups.

In November 1992, March 1993, and April 1993 I taught three series of four workshops through the University of Waikato's Centre for Continuing Education designed to introduce women to Goddess spirituality and ritual-making. A new ritual group of twenty six members started in Hamilton at the conclusion of the first series as the result of one woman in the course taking the initiative to organize it. The group is flourishing, meeting on each of the Sabbats and on one evening each month for "learning circles" with women taking turns to prepare and facilitate rituals and learning processes. Some of the original course members have since introduced interested friends to the group. The women who took the course in Te Awamutu have also started their own ritual group.

I have taught these courses for two reasons. First, as a result of my experiences as a researcher, I have become convinced that ritual can be a useful tool in women's lives and therefore want to offer the opportunity to learn about it to other women. Second, I feel indebted to the women who have participated in my research and taught me so much, and I wish to contribute something back to the movement.

In order to avoid the exploitation of women as objects of knowledge (see Cook and Fonow's fourth principle), some feminist researchers

"advocate a participatory research strategy which emphasizes the dialectic between researcher and researched throughout the entire research process, including formulation of research problem, collection of data, interpretation of findings, and implementation of results" (Cook and Fonow 1986:9). The whole research process and the final written product are undertaken collaboratively. Others, as I have noted above, claim that while a researcher might aim to produce a collaborative product, "the research product is ultimately that of the researcher, however modified or influenced by informants" (Stacey, cited in Mascia-Lees et al. 1989:21). About attempts to produce such collaborative monographs, Strathern says (1987:289-90):

> However much multiple authorship is acknowledged, using people's experiences to make statements about matters of anthropological interest in the end subordinates them to the uses of the discipline.... There can be no parity between the authorship of the anthropologist and the informant; the dialogue must always be asymmetrical.

Like Stacey and Strathern, I am ambivalent about both the possibility and the ethics of constructing a collaborative ethnography. In my own case where the ethnography is a doctoral thesis which, despite the women's full support and my concern to incorporate their voices and emphasize their explanations, bears my name on the cover, the product is not collaborative. I never aimed, attempted or claimed to produce a collaborative product. To produce a truly collaborative ethnography, I believe, I would have needed to have been "a native" before I began the research, and the idea for doing the research along with a definition of its parameters, goals and methods would have needed to have come initially from witches themselves. The data collection, decisions about text construction, and the writing itself

would all have needed to have been undertaken collaboratively. This was not what happened. As I have indicated, I chose witches as the group I wanted to study from the position of outsider, and from early in the research I had a clear idea of what I wanted to know about them: my broad but specific goal, as I stated in the introduction to this thesis, was to understand witches' beliefs, values and ritual practices and the reasons why the women found them attractive and compelling, and to understand how being a witch influenced the way women operated in the world. This goal continued to seem important as the research progressed. I recognized that any other ethnographer focussing on the same group of women would have her own particular interests and goals, no more nor less valid than mine, and that even an ethnography with goals explicitly identical to mine would be a different artefact from this. Similarly, any woman within the movement would present a different picture of the phenomenon depending on her own particular interests, concerns, beliefs, experiences and understanding of these. I entertained no illusions about producing a complete picture or the "truth" about feminist witchcraft in New Zealand. The ethnography which results is based on my goals, my experiences with particular witches and with ritual, the friendships I made, the conversations I had and the interviews I conducted with women I chose to ask or who offered to participate, and my understanding and analysis of all this. McRobbie (1982:51) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the subjectivity of the research account and how the mere act of writing it necessarily incorporates interpretation:

> The "account" cannot be objective. It is a political product, its construction comprising a set of explicitly ideological moves. To put it briefly, representations are interpretations. They can never be pure mirror images. Rather they employ a whole set of selective devices, such

> as highlighting, editing, cutting, transcribing and inflecting. Regardless of medium, literary or visual, these invariably produce new permutations of meaning.

I have devoted the first part of this chapter to the contemporary debate amongst anthropologists over issues to do with methodology and the positionality of the researcher, especially the feminist researcher, about the designation and location of the self and the other, because these were my chief ethical and methodological preoccupations at the outset of my research. I have resisted situating myself in relation to the feminist witchcraft movement in a single location as an outsider, an insider, or as an outsider on the inside. My full participation in the world of witches, I claim, does not exclude me from full participation in the academic world nor invalidate me as an anthropologist. I invoked the metaphor of the hag, the one who sits on the fence and yet inhabits both worlds, to describe my position because, unlike the new ethnographer, I had no sense of putting aside one role/world view and picking up another as I moved between the research context and the non-research context. This was partly because of my research topic. All the women who are involved in feminist witchcraft in New Zealand occupy the same "dominant culture" as I do, and all continually travel, as I do, between the "worlds" of the dominant society and witchcraft. During rituals, however, a woman does not lay aside the roles of mother and school teacher to pick up the role of witch, and she does not stop being a witch when she is teaching English or pushing a trolley round a supermarket. In this sense, all witches are hags: they occupy both worlds.

During rituals I resisted seeing myself in the classic anthropological role of participant-observer and all other women as participants

because this would have been to privilege my position as an observer and to privilege other women's experiences as participants. I do not see my experiences during rituals as less authentic and fully engaging nor my understanding of ritual as deeper and more valid than those of any of the other women. My observations have a particular character in that they are those of an anthropologist, but this does not make them more nor less valid than those of another woman participant who may be an artist, a psychologist, an accountant or a chemist. My view is undoubtedly different from those of all other participants, but each participant has a view which is different from all other participants' views. In this sense it would be false to designate the witches with whom I have worked as "others" in relation to my "self", because such a simplistic dichotomization collapses the differences amongst the "other" women. We are all "other" to one another. Or, one might equally say that through the experience of participating bodily in rituals together the self/other dichotomy dissolves. It is true, however, that in my role as researcher and writer I am categorically different from the women amongst whom I have been conducting research. But this difference relates specifically to this role; it does not automatically incorporate a categorical difference of perspective. Nonetheless, it is these contradictions which led Stacey to despair of the possibility of creating a "fully feminist ethnography" (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989:21). The feminist researcher she argues, can apply feminist perspectives and present research which is "rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other", but this does not alter the fact that the research product is ultimately the construction of the researcher.

In thinking about the relationship between myself as an anthropologist and the women with whom I worked in this way, I am drawing on Michael Jackson's radical empiricism. Jackson borrowed the term from William James to describe a methodology and discursive style which emphasizes the importance of the lived experience of the ethnographer as a participant in the society/culture under study and the ethnographer's interactions with others of that society. Jackson (1989:3) makes the important point that such an emphasis on experience "implies that there is no constant, substantive 'self' which can address constant, substantive 'others' as objects of knowledge". The ethnographer is continually being changed by as well as changing the experience of others. The binary oppositions of subject/object, observer/observed, knower/known and self/other become infinitely more complicated or break down altogether. As Jackson (1989:135) states in the quotation which heads this chapter, an understanding of the other is impossible through taking the stance of objective observer; it is necessary to "participate bodily" in everyday practical activities in order "to discover a common ground where self and other are one".

My initiation into this research and my introduction to feminist witchcraft constituted a single process -- as I stated in the introduction to this thesis, when I chose my topic I knew no witches and had no idea of how I might meet some. It is interesting, in terms of gaining an understanding of how women become initiated into witchcraft, that my initiation into research parallelled many women's paths to involvement in the movement. In Jackson's terms, the "lived experience" of my initiation/introduction to witchcraft was very close to the initiation experiences of many participants. As I outlined in the introduction, I

met a witch, read some books, enrolled in two workshops, and joined the ritual group which was formed after one of these workshops.

At the time the process seemed haphazard, but surprisingly straightforward and easy. I quickly met many women involved in the movement through workshops and networking, and soon found it difficult to believe that I had not stumbled across the movement earlier. Beginning my research was also easy because witches and witchcraft turned out not to be dangerous, secretive and bizarre -- in many respects witches were women like me: usually middle-class, Pakeha, tertiary-educated, feminist, often with a period of Christian fundamentalism in their pasts. The witches I met turned out to be well-adjusted, successful women with responsible jobs who seemed, on the whole, to lead happy, well-organized lives.

Reading about witches' world view in manuals such as The Spiral Dance (Starhawk 1989) was easy -- I found their view attractive and, in many ways, broadly similar to my own, although I would not at the time have articulated my own world view so explicitly or coherently as the manuals do. Because there is no fixed body of belief which all witches embrace and women are free to develop their own beliefs and values, I felt no pressure to adopt certain beliefs or to act as if I believed certain things. I "fitted in" without having to consciously make an intellectual shift when entering the research context: I did not need to act.

As I have already indicated, in the course of three years' research I became very familiar with the ways witches see the world, and began to be conscious of these ways of thinking filtering into my own thinking and influencing my world view, particularly with respect to their holistic world view and the sacralization of all life, and with respect to the

politics of feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality. I still regard myself as an atheist in so far as I do not believe in the existence of the Judaeo-Christian God. I remain unclear, though not sceptical, about the nature and powers of the "energy" ("life force", "creative energy") which women in the movement frequently talk about (see chapter eleven) as being contactable and able to influence their lives. I have continued to meet with the ritual group I joined after I stopped recording field notes and, like other participants, find ritual a very effective way of processing small and large transitions in my life.

I interpret the structure of my experience of doing fieldwork along the lines of van Gennep's and Turner's analysis of the structure of all rituals.[6] The research process, like the ritual process, can be viewed as incorporating three phases: separation, a liminal period, and aggregation. At the beginning of the research, as I have indicated above, I was intensely self-conscious about issues of self-identification and belonging, both within and outside the research context. Amongst witches I was concerned about seeming like a fraud or a user; amongst academics I was concerned about seeming to have abandoned the "proper" role of the anthropologist and to have succumbed to an irrational and ridiculous cult. At this initial stage of the research, what I am seeing as parallel to Turner's separation phase, I did not feel quite "at home" either amongst academics or amongst witches. For most neophytes in rituals the separation phase involves physical hardship; my discomfort was psychological. The liminal phase of the ritual process is the time when change occurs; this was the period during which I became immersed in my research. I attended rituals and workshops on ritual; I talked with, wrote letters to, and socialized with

witches; I read about witchcraft and, like any doctoral student, thought constantly about my work. I learnt to think and act like a witch: I became familiar with the moon's cycling and the implications of the different phases; I created an altar at home; I began, not very successfully, to meditate; I developed a greater sense of connection with nature; I helped plan and lead rituals; and, towards the end of the research period, I began to teach workshops on Women's Spirituality and the Goddess. My deepening involvement in research was parallelled by a deepening involvement as a participant in the movement I was studying: I became a "native".

For several months towards the end of 1992 I became concerned that my personal involvement in the movement was taking so much time that I would never complete the thesis. My commitment to the research goal was becoming eclipsed by my commitment to involvement in the movement, especially through the teaching of workshops. At the time, Patricia Laing, one of my supervisors, was writing a paper on supervising the qualitative research of graduate students which included a discussion of research as a "calling out process". Laing writes (1992:10):

> When students choose a topic to research for their thesis they take into account the interest the topic has for them personally as well as the implications the knowledge gained from the research may have for the conceptualisation and theoretical understanding of their professional practice, the practice of their profession, or social change and policy.
>
> The process of completing a thesis using qualitative methods may "call out" personal issues relating to their topic in ways which give students the opportunity to know themselves better. The calling out may happen in unexpected ways and at unexpected times and may subvert the student in their attempts to complete their thesis.

Laing (1992:11) quotes Karol Ortiz, a medical anthropologist who claims that participant observers may become so immersed in their field experience that "they never return, 'going native' being a regular cause of uncompleted dissertations and disappeared researchers".

On one hand, it was reassuring to read in Laing's paper of other writers of dissertations who had faced the same issues and risks that I had concerning the level of their involvement with their research participants and topic and who had gone on to complete their degrees. On the other hand, there seemed, at the time, to be a risk that I would go the way of other "disappeared researchers". While this period seemed unproductive in so far as the stack of typed pages gathered dust instead of rising, I recognized that I was gaining a lot of knowledge about how ritual works in women's lives and the "lived experience" Jackson (1989) talks about. Finally, after doing a ritual with a friend, I returned to writing and was able to complete the thesis.

The completion of my research and this thesis parallels the "aggregation" phase of a ritual where the liminal being re-enters his/her society. The points of entry and exit, however, are different. At the conclusion of a ritual the participants have achieved a new status or entered a new state: after an initiation ritual the child has become an adult; following a marriage ritual the single adult belongs to a partnership. My point of exit from the process of doing research on witches is different from my point of entry. I have learnt new ways of seeing the world; my personal social world has changed; my ways of understanding and dealing with difficult situations have altered; my feminist political stance is stronger. While I am making an exit from the

research enterprise, I intend to continue, for the forseeable future, my involvement in the movement.

In discussing how for me the research process has resembled the ritual process, I have been conflating my personal life with my professional life. Some of the changes experienced as a result of this research relate to my role as anthropologist. I have gained first hand knowledge not only of what it is like to do witches' rituals but also of what it is like to do qualitative research. My understanding of "doing anthropology" has changed as a result of "participating bodily" in the range of experiences essential to undertaking fieldwork -- formulating a research topic, finding acceptance amongst and working closely over several years with one's research participants and coping with the paradoxes of this relationship, keeping records, finding an appropriate way of translating research experiences and "data" into a textual form, and dealing with the ethical issues and practical complexities which attend the whole process. In particular, my ideas about research methodology have changed as a result of the "lived experience" of doing research and of my reading in this area. Most importantly, I now see the quest to understand the subjective interpretations of one's research participants as critically important to the research enterprise. As Naomi Black writes, feminist research "insists on the value of subjectivity and personal experience" (cited in Reinharz 1992:3).

I go on now to outline the practical aspects of my fieldwork. As I stated in the introduction, my first formal "field experience" took place when I participated in a Continuing Education workshop titled "Rites of Passage for Women" led by Elaine Dyer. It was a weekend course, Friday 6 April through to Sunday 8 April 1990, and was held at the

University of Auckland in a pleasant staff tearoom with windows opening on to bush. Elaine has a degree in psychology and has shamanic training, works as a therapist and catalyst with many different types of groups, especially in prisons, and is highly respected for her competence, warmth and wisdom. The weekend centred around each of the nine participants identifying an important transition point, passage or "gateway" which then became the focus of a rite of passage for each woman. One woman's goal was "success in business" (she is a textile artist); another wanted to give up her job as an art teacher to become a full-time artist. Several wanted to leave behind or deal more effectively with problems connected with their families, their health and/or financial management. One wanted to begin to explore her spirituality. My "gateway" or rite of passage was my introduction to research and to feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality. The techniques Elaine used included psychodrama and ritual. The aim of the workshop was to empower each woman to achieve her goal: to make the psychological shifts necessary to see that it was achievable, to identify blocks which needed to be removed and to identify the resources needed to assist in the goal's achievement.

During the introductory session of this workshop each woman was invited to tell the group her reasons for choosing to participate in the workshop. When it was my turn, I explained that I had chosen to do doctoral research on feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality and that I also had a personal interest in this area. This was accepted and greeted with interest and encouragement. At the end of the workshop, two of the women invited me to join a ritual group with them. I met for several rituals with these women and others who had participated in the

workshop, but this group folded when one of the initial two moved overseas and no one else took the initiative to organize another ritual.

In April and May 1990 I attended a series of workshops on feminist ritual-making which ran for six Thursday evenings with Juliet Batten. Juliet, as I noted in the introduction, is one of the best known and respected women in the movement in New Zealand. I wrote to her prior to the beginning of these workshops telling her of both my academic and personal interests in the course, and she replied warmly welcoming my interest and participation. Again, on the first night of the course I explained my academic and personal interests to the other course participants. At each subsequent course I took, I explained my reasons for being there. These courses included: a weekend workshop in May 1990 with Juliet Batten titled "Ritual-making for men and women"; a weekend workshop in July 1990 with Juliet titled "The Woman Warrior"; a seven week course on the Goddess with Juliet from July to September 1990; and an eight week course on the Goddess with Lea Holford from June to August 1991. All courses were held in Auckland.

At the conclusion of the first workshop I attended with Juliet Batten (on feminist ritual-making), those women who wanted to form an on-going ritual group put their names and telephone numbers on a list. I added my name to this list. At this stage, however, no one in the group wanted to take on the responsibility of organizing the first meeting, so the plans to form a group were put on hold. At an open Winter Solstice ritual held shortly after the conclusion of the course, several of the group met up again and decided to hold a meeting to launch the ritual group. This meeting took place on 19 July 1990, and the fledgling group, with mixed trepidation and excitement, held its first

ritual at new moon on 22 July 1990. I was unable to attend the meeting, but I was present at the first ritual.

The group, which has ten members and is based in Auckland, has continued to meet regularly since July 1990 for rituals, social gatherings and meetings (approximately fifty occasions over two and a half years). As well as celebrating all the Sabbats, witches' seasonal festivals (see chapter nine), the group has held rituals to celebrate full and new moons, to bless houses, for several members' birthdays (including a twenty-first), to celebrate the group's birthday and choose a group name, and to mark the death of a flat-mate of two members of the group. The group has held evenings for wand-making, spell-making, circle-dancing, Tarot reading, and pot luck meals, and has spent a weekend together. In September 1991 the group organized for its members a Saturday workshop -- a kind of refresher course on ritual -- with Juliet Batten, and in August 1992 another Saturday workshop was held on the subject of death with Mary Hancock, a funeral celebrant who is involved in the movement.

Most of my experience of feminist rituals has been within this group. I have formed a strong relationship with the women in the group, have discussed my work with them throughout the period of research and writing, have benefitted from their comments, and am indebted to all of them for their complete support and wise advice in relation to both academic and personal issues. During the final months of writing this thesis I have been sustained, delighted and humbled by their phone calls, letters and gifts. This group has provided the on-going basis of my intimate involvement with feminist witches and witchcraft.

I have also participated in rituals in all the workshops I have attended, in large rituals open to any women who wanted to attend, in rituals with five other groups in Auckland and Hamilton, and in rituals with the women I have taught in workshops in the Waikato area. As I have become more involved in the movement, it has become more difficult for me to draw a line between "doing research" and my "normal" everyday life. A lot of my informal socializing is with witches; I do rituals with friends and alone as well as with the ritual group I joined or in other large, more formal contexts; I do not regard reading books by or about witches or the Goddess as "work".

In December 1990 I visited Christchurch and talked to several women prominent in the movement there. I have kept up a correspondence with some of them and have regularly sent drafts of thesis chapters for circulation amongst interested Christchurch women. From these women, as well as from the women I have met in Auckland and Hamilton, I could not have wished for more practical help nor moral support.

My primary research data comprises two sources: firstly, my field notebooks which contain diary notes and jottings of ideas and messages to myself as well as descriptions of rituals, meetings and notes about conversations; and, secondly, interview transcripts. All the descriptions of rituals were recorded after the event, either after I arrived home late at night or the next day. During the rituals I participated fully. Apart from the fact that, like Jackson (1989:135), I considered I could not have come to know the experience of the "other" without participating bodily in the rituals, it would have been quite improper -- in fact, impossible -- for me to have made notes during rituals. The presence of

one woman in the circle scribbling in a notebook would have been disruptive and off-putting for other women; in any case, rituals involve a lot of physical activity and I could not have participated fully as well as make notes. I could not, for example, have made notes while participating in a guided meditation because the participant is required to close her eyes and give herself over fully to the experience. I could not hope to understand guided meditation without participating fully.

Even if I had wanted to make notes during rituals, and had asked permission to do so, I doubt that permission would have been granted. Occasionally I did make notes during workshops, but only when other women in the circle were also making notes. My concern was that my behaviour during rituals should not set me apart from other participants or disrupt rituals in any way, even though the other participants knew that I was an anthropologist and occasionally made comments after a ritual about my "going home to write all this up".

The fact that my notes were written up after the event undoubtedly means that my records of rituals are different from how they would have been if I had recorded them during rituals. Although I tried to recreate rituals accurately and remember small details, my records are nonetheless constructions based on memory rather than constructions based on direct observation. I must have missed details and given undue emphasis to others because they were more memorable. However, because not taking notes enabled me to concentrate and participate more fully in the ritual, my records are based on richer first-hand experiences than they would have been had I made notes at the time.

I wanted to supplement my field descriptions with women's own accounts of their beliefs, feelings and experiences as participants in the movement. To achieve this I interviewed twelve women. I wanted the interviews to be informal, relaxed discussions and so only interviewed women I had come to know reasonably well over a period of time. I am still in regular contact with all these women. The interviews were spread over a long period of time -- from December 1990 to May 1992. Six of the women belonged to the ritual group I joined. Five of them were interviewed in a group following a pot-luck meal together.

One of the women I interviewed, Noreen, lives in Christchurch. I spent a wonderful day with her in December 1990 and we began a correspondence. Some months later I wrote to her asking her if she was prepared to be interviewed. She agreed and I sent a tape and the list of questions/themes. Noreen's partner, who is also involved in the movement, asked the questions and Noreen answered them on tape.

Clearly, twelve women are too few to constitute a representative sample of women involved in feminist witchcraft/ Goddess spirituality, and I did not try consciously to interview "representative women", but, as it turns out, the characteristics of this group broadly resemble the characteristics of the movement on a larger scale. Their ages ranged from twenty-one to early sixties: two women were in their twenties, three were in their thirties, three were in their forties, two were in their fifties, and two were in their sixties. Half were lesbian and half were heterosexual. All were Pakeha, middle class, well educated and articulate.

I constructed the following list of themes/questions for discussion in interviews:

Themes/questions for discussion in interviews

How, when and why did you become involved in feminist witchcraft/ Goddess spirituality?

The place and value of ritual in your life.

The purpose of ritual. How does ritual-making work? What actually happens in a ritual?

How do you get ideas for rituals? Do you do rituals alone as well as in groups?

Beliefs/theology/cosmology/world view.
Who is the Goddess? What does she mean to you?

The relationship between politics and spirituality.

How do you identify yourself? As a ritual-maker, a witch, pagan, something else, or not at all.

Feelings about Christianity, other religions. Involvement in other religions, now or in the past.

Attitudes of other people towards your involvement in ritual-making -- family, friends, colleagues, others.

Where do you think/hope the Goddess spirituality movement will lead? Do you see it growing?

Do you think this kind of research is worthwhile?
Anything else you regard important.

I gave each woman a list of the themes/questions before the interview. I told women that while I felt I needed this framework in order to be able to make comparative use of the interview material, I wanted the interviews to be flexible enough to incorporate what they regarded as important. I said that I would like them to use the themes/questions as starting points for discussion, but if any questions seemed irrelevant they could be ignored.

Because I knew most of the women well, the interviews were friendly and relaxed. The woman being interviewed held the sheet of

themes/questions, talked freely about each item on the list, and then moved to the next item when she wanted to. I did not interrupt except to ask for clarification or elaboration. Towards the end, interviews became discussions during which we shared ideas and experiences. Sometimes women asked me specific questions and sometimes they pointed out where their beliefs differed from my personal ones. For example, Joy asked me about my self-identification and pointed out that her beliefs seemed to differ from mine in that she believed in a transpersonal energy which connects all of nature and can be called upon by people. At the end of interviews we usually gossiped about shared experiences in workshops and rituals and about our personal lives.

The group interview worked particularly well. We had a meal and social time first at the home of two group members. Then we sat in a circle in the living room and began the "interview" as we would begin a ritual. (This was the group's idea.) We lit candles, did a purification, cast the circle, invoked the elements, then got out the question sheets and turned on the tape recorder. Women decided that they wanted to take the themes/questions one at a time and give each person in the circle an opportunity to respond. This general pattern was used, followed by free discussion and comments on the responses of other women. Women reported that they found the session very interesting and stimulating and suggested getting together again for a similar session.[7]

After the interviews I undertook to give each woman the opportunity to check, change and/or censor any part of a transcript to be used in the thesis, and to show them the context in which quotations

would be used. I asked them to choose a name by which I could refer to them in my discussion. The women's names are: Juliet, Noreen, Megwyn, Sybil, Scarlett, Bonney, Kez, Galadriel, Lea, Joan, Joy and Alex.

In the process of writing my ethnography of feminist witchcraft in New Zealand, I have been conscious that I have two audiences: because this is a doctoral thesis, I am presenting an account of a particular social phenomenon to an academic audience, but I am also presenting an image of the women to themselves. I have been deeply concerned with producing an image of the women's reality which the women recognize as the reality they experience. At the same time, however, as I have stated in this chapter, I do not claim to, or wish to, represent the women or the movement in a comprehensive, definitive or objective fashion. This thesis is one account, my account, of my particular research experiences and of the sense I have made of these particular experiences.

Angela McRobbie (1982:46) says that frequently feminist researchers worry about the ways we impose our personal preferences and ways of seeing on the research findings as we write up the account. I have worried too, but I also see these authorial preferences as unavoidable. The problem arises when these preferences are not made clear and when the claim is made that the research report represents the group being studied. McRobbie writes (1982:49:

> Within feminism many of the resentments and hostilities between researchers and practitioners (youth and community workers, social workers and teachers) lie in the already existing division of labour where some skills and competencies are more highly regarded and carry higher status than others. Under this set of arrangements, those who have the privilege of stating; those who write, those who discuss publicly and make pronouncements -- these women are frequently subjected to recrimination by other

> feminist activists. They are criticized for "representing" a movement which has no such official representatives.

I have stated my interests with respect to the movement I chose to study and my partial position in relation to the movement. As well as what I have omitted to discuss for practical reasons of space, some of which is noted in the conclusion, there are also aspects of my research which I have not written about deliberately because I considered it inappropriate. Some things could not be written because they could not be meaningfully or fully translated from the experience of a highly-charged ritual atmosphere to a sheet of paper. Any such attempt would have reduced the experience to the level of misrepresentation. Some things which were said or happened during rituals were too intimate to be taken outside the ritual context. The ritual space is designated a "safe space" where women are "free to be fully themselves" and can trust the confidentiality of other women present. I used my judgement about what was appropriate to record and what I should omit, and checked back with women where I was unsure. For example, during some rituals and workshops, women expose highly vulnerable parts of themselves, experience intense pain, and express deeply-felt emotion. I decided it was inappropriate for me to record these experiences and subject them to analysis in an academic arena and to the scrutiny of an audience outside not only the particular ritual context but also the world of feminist ritual-making. Presenting close-ups of women's pain and expressions of deep emotion would have been voyeuristic and parasitic, and would have dishonoured the "safe space" of the ritual.

Some chapters in this thesis, particularly chapters seven, eight and eleven, rely heavily on quotations from my interviews with women.

Because the women are articulate and used to examining their beliefs and experiences, like women in the movement generally, the interviews provided a rich source for me to draw on. By any standards, these women use language well, and they explain what their involvement in the movement means to them more directly and vigorously than I can. In using a fairly large body of quoted material in the ethnography, I wanted to give space to women's articulation of their ideas and experiences and of their understanding of these experiences. I wanted to bring alive the movement by bringing the voices of some of its participants into my text, and to bring alive my narrative by including their narratives.

McRobbie questions the idea that the inclusion of chunks of direct quotation in a research account somehow makes the account more definitve and authoritative. She writes (1982:51):

> True, there is something direct, immediate and concrete about such an account, but the girls or women themselves are a part of the social relations of the project. And even then, recorded speech goes through a number of transformations before it reaches its readers. The fact that it is "uncommented on" text carries particular connotations, seeming the more "pure" the less it is edited. In this way the intermediary processes fade into the background and fail to be recognised for what they are: activities which are as ideologically loaded and as saturated with "the subjective factor" as anything else.... there is no such thing as "pure" printed speech.

I make no claim that the authority of my text rests on the inclusions of portions of interviews; neither do I claim that the quotations as they appear are "pure" printed speech. The quotations I have included in this text have been extracted from the transcriptions I made of the interview tapes, and edited to remove fillers such as "um", "ah", and "you know"; repeated phrases; false starts (unless they

seemed important); pauses; laughs; and the occasional grammatical error. Occasionally I have added a pronoun or article to remove ambiguity, but otherwise have not changed the transcriptions. The quotations retain the qualities of spoken language and, I hope, convey something of the "voice", vitality and character of each speaker.

All the women quoted were given the opportunity to read the thesis in order to check that they were happy with the transcriptions of what they had said and with the context in which the quotations were used. If any woman wanted something changed, I changed it. This happened in only a few cases. One woman changed a transcript to make her point more clearly; another wanted something negative she had said about her family removed; another corrected factual details. My purpose in giving women the opportunity to make any changes they wanted was to give them the power to make the quotations say what they wanted them to say. In my role as "writer" of the thesis, I chose which quotations to use and how much of any interview to quote. While these choices were mine, each woman had the ultimate control over any particular extract I used from her interview.

Introducing Barbara Meyerhoff's Number Our Days (1978), Victor Turner talks about the way in which the use of verbatim transcriptions of the stories of the elderly of the Aliyah Senior Citizens' Center brings into play "[b]eing, meaning and narrative" and gives the text pungency and surprise. Turner writes (1978:xi): "She uses this material to show us the very processes through which her subjects weave meaning and identity out of their memories and experiences". This is also my intention, especially in chapter seven which includes women's stories of their path to involvement in feminist witchcraft.

I use portions of interviews in my text in two ways. In chapter seven, "The Attraction of Witchcraft", it seemed appropriate to present women's accounts of how they came to be witches as life story narratives[8] and follow these narratives with an analysis of the themes which emerge in them. I discuss my particular reasons for leaving whole the "stories" in chapter seven in that chapter. In the rest of the thesis I include shorter quotations extracted from interviews to illustrate my discussion of specific issues or themes. I frequently include quotes from several women in succession to show a range of voices and responses on a particular issue.

I have claimed in this chapter that in the process of becoming a researcher I also became a native. Moreover, I have shown that I became a native in much the same way and at the same time as the women with whom I worked most closely over the research period -- I took a course on feminist ritual-making with them and became part of the ritual group which was created as an outcome of the course. As a member of this new ritual group, I was in the position of helping to construct the phenomenon I wanted to study. This posed a dilemma. I could not set myself off from other members by becoming a passive observer because groups work through the active, committed participation of all members. On the other hand, if I became very active in decision-making and leading rituals I would be in the unusual if not farcical position of simultaneously fabricating and reporting a phenomenon. I tried very hard to occupy the middle ground between these positions. When I was responsible for planning a ritual with one or two other women, I was always conscious of not being too active or

too passive. I suggested ideas and worked to implement others' ideas. I took my turn in doing practical organization. During administrative meetings I contributed ideas but avoided pushing them forcefully. Rituals involve a lot of turn-taking -- in sharing personal symbols, sharing experiences after guided meditations, performing symbolic acts, and so on. Sometimes I waited till last, sometimes I went first, most often I took my turn somewhere in the middle.

Michael Patton (1990:39) discusses the importance of carrying out research in a "naturalistic setting" and of the need for the researcher to avoid manipulating this setting. Because of my intimate involvement with a close-knit, newly-formed group, it was impossible for me to avoid manipulating the setting. While I emphasized above the ways in which I tried to strike a balance between active and passive involvement, my overall level of involvement increased over time. I quote from a field notebook my response to reading Patton (early in 1992):

> The ritual group's beginning and my joining of the group were simultaneous, so they had no established norms, ways of being together, or ways of doing rituals when I arrived on the scene. These were worked out in my presence and with my full participation. I gave them things I had written to read -- conference papers and seminars -- which must have influenced their thinking about their beliefs and ritual activity, and raised their consciousness about what they were doing. Given this, I suppose that I cannot claim (not that I am) this group is "typical", but it would certainly have been <u>atypical</u> had I made my presence felt at the beginning any more than I did by asking a lot of questions. At first I had less involvement -- a quieter role. I became more and more drawn in, gradually began to do more to the point where after a year I helped plan and facilitate a ritual to initiate new witches. Had I been vigorous in asking a lot of questions at the beginning, I would have not only created my data but quite inexcusably hijacked the group in its infancy.

There were several reasons for the increase of my involvement over time. Firstly, I felt the ritual group was sufficiently well established

after approximately a year for it not to be significantly affected by my more active involvement. Secondly, in relation to feminist methodology, I came to see my fuller involvement as sound so long as I shared the women's goals and commitment to the movement. Thirdly, and dependent upon the two reasons above, I came to personally value ritual more and wanted to become more active.

There were times during the research when I was impressed with the irony of my native status -- in particular, on occasions when new witches were initiated or when existing members were farewelled from the group. I was responsible, along with another woman, for planning and facilitating one of the initiation rituals, and shared in the farewells of three members. In these instances my native status in the group was either older or more enduring than those of some of my research participants.

Throughout this thesis I emphasize that feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality is a constructed spirituality and that the fact of its constructedness is acknowledged by the women who are involved in the movement. In this chapter I have claimed that it is possible to be simultaneously a social scientist and a native: to occupy both worlds. In these roles I am involved in construction at two levels. As a participant in the movement, particularly in the group I joined, I have helped/help to construct the phenomenon which is the focus of my research. As an anthropologist, I am constructing one interpretation of the phenomenon of feminist witchcraft.

Notes

1. In the document "New Zealand Association of Social Anthropologists: Principles of Professional Responsibility and Ethical Conduct", which is based on the American Anthropological Association's "Principles of

Professional Responsibility" (1976), first priority is given to the researcher's responsibility to research participants. The first principle states that it is axiomatic that the rights, interests, and sensitivities of research participants be safeguarded; that the aims of the investigation should be made clear to research participants; that the group to be studied should approve the proposed research and has the right to decline to continue participation at any point; and that fieldwork should be based on a collaborative and equal relationship between the anthropologist and research participants. I did my best to fulfill these responsibilities.

Protecting the women's identity was a chief concern. I did not take photographs during rituals. Occasionally I took photographs of altars before or after rituals, but these never included people. I was concerned that because many women are nervous about self-identifying as "witch" in public the sight of me with a camera would have made them anxious. I only used a tape recorder during interviews (never during rituals) and asked women's permission first.

2. Farganis (1986:57), quoting Acker (1983:423), says that the term "feminist" is used most often to refer to "a point of view that (1) sees women as exploited, devalued, and often oppressed, (2) is committed to changing the condition of women, and (3) adopts a critical perspective toward dominant intellectual traditions that have ignored and/or justified women's oppression". Jaggar (1983:5) describes feminism as a perspective which aims "to end women's subordination". Strathern (1985:21) says: "'Feminism' means knowing that there is a debate on".

3. It is not only anthropologists who are wrestling with the problem of where to locate and how to represent the "other". Edward Said has made a general attack on the way that Western scholars write about non-Western peoples whereby the latter are constructed as passive subjects who must be spoken for (Marcus and Fischer 1986:1).

4. Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989:7) give the following definition of the "new ethnography": "The term 'new ethnography' is commonly used to refer to cultural accounts that are reflexive in a sense seldom seen in traditional ethnographic writing. This reflexivity can take the form of identification of the fieldworker as an actor in the ethnographic situation....; [i]t can present a commentary on cultural difference through the highlighting of intersubjective interactions....; [i]t can experiment with traditional ethnographic rhetorical forms...; or it can offer a close scrutiny of global systems of domination through the examination of symbolic manifestations in the lives of individuals".

5. Ioan Lewis (1986:4) has written: "We are thus true transcultural transvestites, professional aliens, cross-cultural voyeurs.... Whether he likes it or not, every anthropologist is in practice a private eye, prying relentlessly and often irritatingly into the affairs of his foreign hosts and so intruding savagely on their privacy".

6. Other anthropologists have drawn a comparison between the process of doing fieldwork and the ritual process. Lewis writes (1986:5): "As a number of anthropologists have noticed, and none more perceptively than Rosemary Firth, we see here the familiar tripartite structure common to most transition rituals. In the first phase, the neophyte prepares to surrender his old status and to shed ethnocentric assumptions. In the second 'liminal' phase, he retires to learn the new culture of his hosts. In the third phase, he re-emerges to be readopted within his own academic culture in a new role as professional anthropologist".

7. Janet Finch (1984) discusses how an identification between interviewer and interviewee makes for a more relaxed and fruitful interview. Finch was a clergyman's wife interviewing clergymen's wives, but she argues that successful interviews do not require that interviewers must share the same life circumstances as interviewees: she is discussing more generally the "woman-to-woman interview". Finch notes that women are more forthcoming when they can "place" the interviewer. The fact that I identified as belonging to the Goddess spirituality movement, and that women knew a lot about me, undoubtedly contributed to the relaxed nature of interviews. In fact, it is very likely that a would-be interviewer who did not belong to the movement and whom women did not know would have a difficult time finding witches willing to be interviewed.

8. These narratives are not full "life histories" in the way that, for example, Agar (1980) and Luborsky (1987) use the term. I did not say to women: "Tell me about your life". I asked them a specific question: "How did you become involved in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality?". I do not analyse these narratives as texts in the way that Agar and Luborsky do: that is, I do not, for example, analyse the structural organization of narratives, their "cognitive templates" (Luborsky 1987), or the role of myths in the narratives (Chanfrault-Duchet 1991). I am interested primarily in the content rather than the structure of the narratives. According to Chanfrault-Duchet, I should not even call the accounts in chapter seven "life stories". For her, the "life story represents a meaning system complete unto itself, i.e., it is a text. Such a definition... excludes interviews based on questionnaires, even if only 'semi-structured' ones, as well as reports on specific events or stages of life, even when told in the first person" (1991:77).

Having considered Chanfrault-Duchet's point, I have, however, decided to call the accounts in chapter seven "life story narratives". It is true that women told their stories about becoming witches in response to a specific question in a loosely structured interview. But in constructing their answers to my question, two thirds of the women told of a journey from childhood which culminated in their choosing involvement in the movement; the other third referred to changes and choices in their adult lives which led ultimately to their involvement. The resulting narratives have the character of stories rather than "answers": they are stories of women's spiritual journeys, or "life story narratives" focussed on the particular theme of spirituality.

Chapter 6

Feminist Witchcraft/Goddess Spirituality in New Zealand: Its Origins and Development

> I once dreamt of a world, other than the one I know... a place where I would be welcomed, accepted and respected, where my experience would be heard and valued, where I would share freely with women all that is woman-in-me... a place where, after a long journey, I would be welcomed with a kiss, a warm embrace and a gift of wild jasmine, symbol of my belonging and of our deep connection with each other.
>
> From Women's Spirituality Newsletter, no.16, 1989.[1]

> I knew groups existed but I never thought that I would be able to be part of one because I hadn't gone through the education for that sort of thing. I thought ritual groups were for women who'd known each other for ages. You got passed this secret word in the hall and you could join.... I knew it was out there somewhere. I was like Alice in the Looking Glass really. I just had to find it.
>
> From my interview with Kez, 15 May 1992, Auckland.

> I felt I'd been literally dead for years, not feeling, numb.... As I started to delve into Women's Spirituality, I had a sense that I was remembering. It felt very comfortable. Just as becoming a lesbian felt like coming home, finding Women's Spirituality felt like coming home. It felt like every cell in my body was remembering sensations, feelings that must go back centuries and centuries for women.
>
> From my interview with Sybil, 15 May 1992, Auckland.

When I asked women about the origins of feminist witchcraft in New Zealand I was seeking to understand the process by which the movement had spread from the United States to New Zealand before I went on to examine the local variant. I saw the North American movement, following its own dramatic birth at the end of the 1960s and

rapid growth in numbers and maturity during the 1970s and 80s, as the natural parent of the New Zealand movement. Famous North American witches are frequently quoted by New Zealand women and most of the sizable literature on the subject available in New Zealand comes from the States. The format for rituals set out in these books is followed by New Zealand witches; invocations, chants and spells are borrowed from them; the important beliefs, values and few rules[2] of "the Craft" are noted.

While it is true that this literature has played a major part in the growth of the movement in New Zealand, the movement's beginnings cannot be attributed quite so simply to a straightforward diffusion from the United States. A number of women I interviewed began working alone with ritual, exploring the Goddess, or experimenting with spells before or about the same time that books such as Christ and Plaskow's Womanspirit Rising (1979), Starhawk's The Spiral Dance (1979) and Budapest's The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries (1980) were published. Women's points of entry into the movement vary considerably -- from exploring the process of making art, to discovering lesbianism, to sensing a strong affinity with nature, to a childhood fascination with witchcraft, to Christian feminism. Amongst women's stories of how they came to be involved in feminist witchcraft or Goddess spirituality, there were no tales of blinding revelation or instant conversion. For many women the path to Goddess spirituality has been a long personal quest for a satisfactory religion or spirituality or a desire for meaningful rituals unframed by a patriarchal religious context. Not only were some of these women unaware of the newly flourishing movement in the United States at the time they were beginning to explore ritual or

witchcraft, but they were also unaware that other New Zealand women were involved in similar activities and quests.

When I asked these women how they had got the idea of doing their solitary rituals if not through literature or contact with other women, they spoke of a strong inner sense of need and personal enjoyment and fulfillment. Three of the women I interviewed invoked Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonance to help explain how apparently isolated women seemed to be spontaneously "picking up on what was out there".

According to Sheldrake, a biochemist who has been described as "the most controversial scientist on earth",[3] ideas and practices acquired by people (plants or animals) in one place can facilitate the acquisition of the same ideas and practices by other people distant in time and/or place without any obvious means of connection or communication (Sheldrake 1988:181). "Through repetition," Sheldrake says in his introduction to The Presence of the Past, "the nature of things becomes increasingly habitual". Structures of thought and experience contribute to the building up of morphic fields which link a person to the surroundings in which she or he acts (1988:198). People in other places can tune in to these morphic fields, "picking up on" distant structures of thought and behaviour.

In his books (1988, 1991) Sheldrake quotes numerous experiments carried out by himself and others with plants, animals and humans in support of his theory. One famous example of the spontaneous spread of a new habit concerns the opening of milk bottles in Britain by blue tits (Sheldrake 1988:177). The birds attack the bottles minutes after their delivery, tear open the foil caps, drink up to five centimetres of

milk and, occasionally, drown head first in the bottles. The phenomenon was first recorded in Southampton in 1921 and thereafter spread, at an accelerated rate as time went on, to locations throughout the British Isles and also to Sweden, Denmark and Holland. The tits were not learning the practice from each other since the practice reappeared in locations well beyond the birds' home ranges. Sheldrake says that the morphic field (of bottle-opening) was "progressively reinforced by the cumulative effects of morphic resonance from previous milk-drinking tits" (1988:180).

Sheldrake visited New Zealand in 1990, gave lectures in various centres and was the guest at a weekend retreat at Tauhara in Taupo. One of the women who participated in the weekend summarized Sheldrake's theory thus (Women's Spirituality Newsletter, no.24, 1991):

> Briefly, his hypothesis is that memory is inherent in nature. This means that all natural systems inherit a collective memory of their kind. Thus, cats are cat shaped not only because their DNA encodes their proteins, but also because cats have a "morphic field", a cat-habit, that informs their growth and instinctive behaviour. "Formative causation" depends on morphic resonance, a process involving action at a distance in both space and time. This is not a mechanistic process, but a truly creative one. Each morphic field has a morphic attractor -- the end, or goal, towards which morphic fields attract the systems under their influence. Sheldrake is fascinated with how new morphic attractors and therefore fields come into being, and this fascination has taken him into modern evolutionary cosmology....
>
> Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonance complements that of Lovelock's "Gaia" hypothesis -- that the Earth and its atmosphere can best be looked at not as a lifeless physico-chemical construct, but as a living entity with the equivalent of senses, intelligence, memory and the capacity to act to maintain its systemic integrity. This is the context in which women's spirituality is manifesting -- the context of Earth as the life-form of which we are a part, the context which holds all life as sacred and equal.

For women who find Sheldrake's work convincing, the theory of morphic resonance provides part of the explanation for why isolated women in New Zealand began to work spontaneously with ritual about the same time as each other and, apparently, about the same time as women in the States and elsewhere. It also provides a theoretical base for women's belief that in performing rituals they are connecting with women -- including the wise women/healers of five hundred years ago and the priestesses of the Goddess of five thousand years ago -- who have performed similar rituals. One of the women I interviewed, Bonney, said:

> I think that ritual can lay the conditions for the Goddess to be with us and for the wisdom of the ages to be with us. I believe very strongly in this morphic resonance thing. I heard the lecture by Rupert Sheldrake at Waikato last year. He said that when Buddhist monks today enact the same rituals that Buddhist monks have used for thousands of years, they can bring into their presence the knowledge and the wisdom and the life experiences of the monks who did it back then. They are drawn by the incense, by the smells, by the incantations and by the receptivity. There's a base there that you can establish to resonate with the past, with the ancestral wisdom that you're drawing on.

She went on to say that, like contemporary Buddhist monks, contemporary witches may be able to connect with women's ancient wisdom and power through ritual.

It is easy to understand why Sheldrake's work, with its emphasis on the influence of unseen forces and energy fields, appeals to women who describe their rituals as "working with energy", and who frequently talk about "tuning into", "tapping", "channelling", "re-setting" and "grounding" energy. They also speak about "woman energy", "Maiden energy" and "Crone energy", "Artemis energy" and "Kali energy", about the energy of different seasons and different phases of the moon, and

about the energy present in or surrounding particular people or places. In chapter eleven, where I discuss women's explanations of how rituals work, I deal with what women mean by "energy". Sheldrake's more recent work, The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God (1991), espouses a world view which extends Lovelock's "Gaia hypothesis"[4] and is shared by women in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality. I return to a discussion of women's world views in chapter eight of this thesis.

None of the women I spoke to attributed the development of the movement in New Zealand wholly to morphic resonance: its spread is also seen as a natural evolution within the women's movement, and as a result of diffusion through literature and through women talking together informally. Whatever the role of morphic resonance in the movement's origins, it is clear from women's accounts that New Zealand was not virgin territory into which the movement was imported from the United States. Since the late 1970s at least some women had been working on their own and in small groups, and by the early 1980s, when news and literature about the movement began to flow into New Zealand from the United States, the stage was well set for the development of a New Zealand movement.

While I have indicated that many women who today identify as feminist witches and belong to ritual groups began their quests for alternative rituals alone, there were other women at the end of the 1970s who were exploring new ways of imaging the divine and devising new rituals who were in contact with one another. These were Christian feminists. Many of them are still Christian feminists, but others have left Christianity to join covens. Two of the witches whose

stories are told in chapter seven started their search for the Goddess as Christian feminists.

Although my research has focussed explicitly on women involved in feminist witchcraft, I am very aware from discussions with Christian feminist women, reading their quarterley magazine Vashti's Voice,[5] and sharing in a ritual with some of them that the Christian feminist movement is strong and active in New Zealand. And while I am primarily concerned in this chapter with the origins and development of the feminist witchcraft movement, it is important to discuss the relationship between feminist witchcraft and Christian feminism.

In her chapter in Religions of New Zealanders (1990), Catherine Benland includes under the umbrella "Women's Spirituality Movement" both Christians and neopagans.[6] In doing so, she is emphasizing the antipathy both groups of women feel for male-dominated religions and their determination to embrace a spirituality which affirms their womanhood. Benland says (1990:239):

> The religions of "man" have told women they were unclean, guilty, punished by childbirth, mentally inferior, physically deformed or abnormal, ineligible as images of divinity or eligible only to be consorts or mothers of deities, and fit only to follow or serve masters. They advocated as virtues in women: unquestioning obedience, self-sacrifice, patience, humility, and acceptance of male authority in the home (and everywhere else). The qualities of assertiveness, courage, original thought, self-determination, and self-definition that are promoted in women's spirituality would be seen as sinful by patriarchal religion.

While Benland is right about the shared antipathy for male-dominated religions, I think that her portrayal of Christian feminism and neopaganism as two branches of one movement indicates a closer relationship between the two than actually exists. I see neopaganism

and Christian feminism as two separate movements whose participants share many of the same beliefs and values and may share comfortably in the same rituals but have ultimately different preoccupations. My impression is that Christian feminists are preoccupied with women's status and roles within the Church and with transforming the patriarchal structure of the Church. They seem to see themselves as a rebellious, marginalised, often unwelcome minority in their individual churches, yet essentially as still belonging within the Christian community. Paradoxically, despite their identification as "Christian", as Benland points out, Christian feminists often feel they have more in common with other feminists who are neopagan than with fellow members of their own churches. This is perhaps why Benland sees Christian feminists and neopagans as belonging to one movement.

It may be that one's perception of the relationship between the two is governed by where one stands. I write from a position of familiarity with the neopagan movement, while Benland writes as a Christian feminist (she is a Quaker). I suggest that a Christian feminist, perceiving an oppositional relationship between her views (and perhaps herself) and those of the male-dominated Church hierarchy (and perhaps most Church members), may feel closer to neopagan women because she knows they, too, are in opposition to the Church. However the relationship between the Christian feminist and unsympathetic Church members is still <u>contained within</u> the Christian Church community, however marginalised within that community she may feel. A neopagan woman or feminist witch usually perceives an oppositional relationship between herself and Christianity in general. If she was ever

in the Church, and many witches were, she has usually made a decisive break and left.

There are some women who straddle both camps as committed members of covens and churches, but they are few. These women tend to be more publicly open about their Christian identity than their witch identity. One member of a neopagan ritual group was not prepared to talk about her ritual activities because of the difficulties she feared this might cause for her marriage and church life -- her husband is a Presbyterian minister. Her fears are probably justified. Another woman, ordained within the Church and a member of a neopagan ritual group, has been the victim of witchhunting which has exposed the fear and hatred the Church still feels for witches and has caused an upheaval in her professional life.

The antipathy feminist witches feel towards Christianity is directed at the Church as an institution which has for two millenia devalued, silenced, punished and, during the witch-craze, murdered women. The antipathy is certainly not directed at individual members, least of all at feminists in the Church. My impression is that, more than anything else, witches are astonished at the patience, determination and fortitude of Christian feminists who manage to follow their own spiritual path while they struggle to transform the Church from the inside.

As I noted in chapter three, Christian feminists are much more open to neopaganism than neopagans are to Christianity. They are almost as likely to own a wand, wear a "Crone" badge, invoke the Goddess, know some circle dances, and have read Mary Daly and Starhawk as witches. They may attend open rituals organized by neopagan groups to celebrate the Solstices and meet together to create

their own rituals. One of these, which occurred during the third National Ecumenical Feminist Women's Conference held in Christchurch in September 1988, is described by Catherine Benland and in the Resource Book[7] which was published after the conference. The women, both Christian and neopagan, formed a circle on a lawn around a large fishbowl filled with red wine symbolizing menstrual blood and, for Christian women, Communion blood. The priestesses were the oldest and youngest women present -- a "crone" in her eighties and a "maiden" of nineteen. Women talked about their feelings about the symbolic wine/blood in small groups and then, one at a time, went up and dipped small rags in the "blood" and pinned the rags to their clothing. After this they danced a spiral dance chanting, "We are the flow, we are the ebb. We are the weavers. We are the web of life!". This chant is commonly used in neopagan rituals.

Christian feminists are not only focussed inward on the problems they see in the Church. The articles in Vashti's Voice show that women are concerned with and active in social justice as well as spiritual issues in New Zealand and overseas. The May-July 1985 issue (no.27), for example, contains the following articles: "Politics and Feminist Spirituality"; "Nine Moon Rituals"; "Spider Woman", a retelling of a Pueblo myth; and "Asian Women's Reality: Poverty and Oppression". One of the neopagan women I interviewed spoke of her great respect for Christian women's outspokenness on race and environmental issues and felt that neopagan women could do more in this respect.

There are many similarities between feminist witches and Christian feminists. The major difference between them, a difference which Christian feminists clearly think is less important than witches do, is

that Christian feminists are committed to transforming the Church to its patriarchal core while witches see no point in wasting more effort on an institution which has already exacted two millenia of agony from women.

The origins of feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality in New Zealand lie in the diverse, uncoordinated and often solitary ritual activity of women during the 1970s. During that decade some Christian feminists also began defecting from the Church, some to set up or join neopagan ritual groups. It is difficult to gain a clear or coherent picture of the beginnings of the movement because of its diverse and uncoordinated character and because of the fact that little has been published about it in the media or elsewhere. One woman I interviewed explained the reasons for the difficulties of charting the movement's development thus:

> It's part of our oral tradition. We don't have the Bible.
> We don't have the institutions. We don't have the rules.
> We don't have any of the trappings of other religions.
> It's not a sect, let alone a religion. It's a
> will-o'-the-wisp.

There have been a handful of newspaper articles in The New Zealand Herald, Sunday Star, The Dominion Sunday Times and Waikato Times, all of which have gone to some pains to point out that modern witches are not what we have always thought witches to be.[8] They give accurate descriptions of witches' beliefs and practices and are remarkably free of sensationalism.

The cover of the June 8-14 (1985) Listener shows a woman clad in black with teased black hair, black nail polish, a blackened tooth, sneering purple lips, and green eye shadow to match the eyes of her black cat. The cover story (pp.14-16) by Bruce Ansley is titled

"Witchcraft: Women's Rites". The photograph of the "real" witch which accompanies the story shows a comfortable-looking, middle-aged woman utterly unlike the witch on the cover. The article interviews two Christchurch witches and gives a reasonable introduction to feminist witchcraft which Ansley concludes is "Dale Carnegie in the pagan tradition".[9]

The exception to the very fair print media coverage of feminist witchcraft thus far is found in the lead article in the May 29, 1992 New Truth. The paper's billboard that week read "WITCH OUT TO GET YOU" and sported a warty, hunched crone on a broomstick. The reporter got wind of the phenomenon through reading an advertisement in "an underground newsletter called the Green Dollar Exchange -- a service intended to organise trading for produce and services without money". The article reads (p.5):

> A witch network is being set up to link New Zealand covens together for support and socialising. The frightening new move is being orchestrated from a house in Helensville, west of Auckland... The woman in charge... officially lists her occupation as herbalist....
>
> The ad read: Pagan? Witch? Want to meet others for socialising, conversation, comparison, support? Join the Auckland Pagan fellowship. We're networking nationwide.

When New Truth traced the phone number to a house in the "sleepy seaside settlement", the woman who placed the advertisement said she did not want to talk about it. New Truth then interviewed a Mr Malone of the Belmont Baptist church who is quoted ranting about the horrors of witchcraft which is "like an invisible umbilical cord that holds the person to evil, usually without them knowing it's there". According to Malone, Christians in Wellington have begun a group called Ritual Action Group to combat the spread of witchcraft. Malone clearly

constructs those who call themselves "pagans" or "witches" as Satanists, although the article indicates to me that the women are feminist witches who typically abhor any association with Satanism.

While it is easy to dismiss such an article as familiar New Truth sensationalism designed to inflame right wing bigotry, the spectre of a witch-hunt is worth noting. If what New Truth reports about the Ritual Action Group is true -- and the line between sensationalism and fabrication in the paper is a fine one -- it seems that a fundamentalist Christian backlash against neopaganism is indicated. This is the first indication that I have encountered of an organized, explicit witch-hunt directed at neopagans in New Zealand.

In 1987 Yolanda Wisewitch completed an M.A. thesis in Religious Studies at Canterbury University titled Women's Rites: A Study of Fifteen Christchurch Women's Thoughts and Feelings about their Involvement in Women's Spirituality. This represents the first in-depth study of neopaganism in New Zealand. She conducted interviews with fifteen women from five Christchurch ritual groups asking questions about their religious backgrounds, their reasons for leaving these religious traditions, their reasons for becoming involved in neopagan ritual groups and the importance of rituals in their lives. I compare Wisewitch's findings with mine in this and subsequent chapters.

The following year Juliet Batten published Power from Within: A Feminist Guide to Ritual-Making (1988). The book is written for New Zealand women and provides an introduction to the meaning and importance of ritual; sets out a process for creating rituals in seven stages; includes sections on trance, chanting, music, dance, magic, invocations, goddesses, symbols and ritual equipment; gives

suggestions for how to form a ritual group and examples of many kinds of rituals; and sets out "The Wheel of the Southern Year" marking the eight Sabbats or pagan seasonal celebrations -- two solstices, two equinoxes, and four other days which fall between each solstice and equinox. There are numerous North American books which set out "The Wheel of the Year", but these are all geared to the Northern Hemisphere. Halloween, for example, is celebrated at the beginning of winter, on 31 October in the Northern Hemisphere. In New Zealand women use Juliet Batten's revised calendar and celebrate Halloween on 30 April.

Juliet became involved in making rituals at the end of the 1970s through her work as an artist. In an interview with me she explained that in the late seventies she became very interested in working with process -- partly as a reaction against Judy Chicago's preoccupation with the art product. Her first rituals were a spontaneous response in the context of this work with process, initially performed alone on the beach at Te Henga (Bethell's Beach), and later in collaborative art projects with groups of women. Ritual was introduced because "the works seemed to be calling for it": Juliet had not at this stage read The Spiral Dance or any of the other early books on feminist ritual-making from the United States. She describes her response when, later, she did read these books in her introduction to Power from Within (1988:1):

> Like so many feminist ritual-makers in this country, I have been inspired by the writings of modern North American witches, Starhawk and Z Budapest in particular. But theirs is a very different land from ours; the seasons are reversed and even the sun goes round the sky in another direction. Their stars are not our stars. I longed for something relevant to my experience as a Pakeha woman of Aotearoa. In the end, I realised I would have to write it myself.

She emphasizes that her aim is not to be prescriptive or limiting in her suggestions for what to do during rituals (1988:1):

> Because I would like everyone to be able to take that power from within and to create their own rituals, the book takes a very practical line. My aim was to share what I have learned about process, to toss out ideas, to stimulate, but not to inhibit anyone from providing their own content. Too much delineation of what any one ritual should look like can dampen the creative spirit.

Power from Within is a popular reference book, along with books by Starhawk, Budapest, Diane Stein, Barbara Walker and others, for women to use when planning rituals. Batten's encouragement to women to be creative when devising rituals has contributed to the fact that neopagan rituals in New Zealand are much less likely to follow rigid habitual forms including set invocations and actions which seem to be used in the United States and in Britain. Ritual groups in New Zealand use the basic format suggested by Batten and North American writers, but beyond this tend to create their own words and actions or mix their own ideas with ideas borrowed from books. I discuss this further in chapter nine.

There are few other published sources on the neopagan movement in New Zealand. I have discussed Catherine Benland's chapter in Religions of New Zealanders. Noreen Penny wrote an article titled "Feminist Witchcraft" in Broadsheet (May, 1990:16-17) which begins by addressing the antipathy many politically active feminists feel towards witchcraft and Goddess religion. She believes that patriarchal religion is ultimately responsible for our patriarchal society and for women's oppression, and sees feminist witchcraft as "a way of organising ourselves to achieve the long-term gains that will combat patriarchy". Penny summarizes witches' world view, the operation of covens, the

significance of ritual and witches' central purpose. She describes this purpose thus (1990:17):

> The main concern of feminist witchcraft and Goddess religion is the balance of life in the world. It is to celebrate life in all its diversity and to prevent chemical and nuclear pollution from destroying life on this planet. Because consequences are suffered collectively we are also collectively responsible for changing the practices that cause the destruction of life.

Noreen Penny has been a regular contributor to the Women's Spirituality Newsletter and Womanscript magazine, two magazines (discussed below) aimed at women in the movement in New Zealand.

A new book devoted to feminism and spirituality in New Zealand is due for publication by New Women's Press in 1993. This is an anthology aimed at a general audience incorporating pieces from a variety of perspectives -- Maori, lesbian, Jewish, neopagan and Christian. The book, edited by Lynne Alice of the Sociology Department at Murdoch University, Western Australia, will make visible the range of spiritual paths and perspectives of New Zealand women and draw attention to the issues which engage feminists in the various traditions.

The best literary sources for learning about the origins and development of feminist witchcraft and Goddess spirituality in New Zealand are the Women's Spirituality Newsletter and Womanscript magazine. The Women's Spirituality Newsletter was begun early in 1985 by Lea Holford and the ritual group of eleven women to which she belonged. As I noted in chapter three, Lea came to New Zealand from the United States where she had been very involved in Goddess groups and working with ritual. Lea edited the Newsletter from 1985 until 1988. Since 1988 the responsibility for collecting material for, writing and producing each issue has passed around a number of different

ritual groups. Issue number 28, Autumn Equinox 1992, was produced by a coven in Christchurch -- this was the first issue produced by a group outside Auckland.

The Newsletter comes out four times a year, usually timed to coincide with the four major Sabbats -- the two solstices and two equinoxes. It is available only on subscription. At the beginning of 1992 there were eighty five subscribers, most of whom lived in Auckland, but who were spread from Whangarei to Dunedin.

The Newsletter is designed to help women network; offer ideas for rituals; provide a forum for women to discuss spirituality and share their personal experiences with ritual; give notice of upcoming ritual events and workshops; and offer space for book reviews, articles, poetry and advertisements. The content of the Newsletter provides an excellent profile of neopagan women's activity in New Zealand. The rituals described cover not only the variety of ways that the eight Sabbats are celebrated, but also demonstrate the range of ways that ritual touches many parts of women's daily lives. Some of the rituals described are listed below:

Name-giving
Child blessing
Letting go of a child leaving home
Birthday
Rebirthing
Finding a partner
Going overseas
Rite of passage at turning forty
Surviving sexual abuse
Embracing womanhood
Honouring menstruation
Farewelling a womb
Emerging through menopause
Blessing a new home
Cleansing a house or room of a dark spirit or negative energies
Farewelling a home
Gulf War ritual
Honouring the Treaty of Waitangi
Peace and Justice ritual for Bastille Day

Seeking freedom from grief after the death of a child
Funeral

The Newsletter gives a good indication of the kinds of books neopagan women read and of their interests and activities. There are notices and advertisements about Sufi dancing, Hatha yoga, Siddha meditation, essential oil remedies, crystals, Tarot workshops, goddess posters, art exhibitions, environmentally friendly menstrual pads, a lesbian summer camp, women's bookshops, Continuing Education courses, co-counselling training courses, and feminist ritual-making and Goddess workshops.

The editorial of the Summer Solstice 1989 issue of the Newsletter raised the issue of making the Newsletter available in women's bookshops throughout New Zealand. This was seen as desirable because of the fact that "there are very few women on the mailing list compared with the number of women involved in women's spirituality groups". Anticipating women's fears of exposure as witches, the editorial suggested that "fundamentalist men would be most unlikely to get hold of it in women's bookshops". Debate on the issue through the Newsletter was encouraged.

The two women who proposed making the Newsletter more available gave personal accounts of why they held this view. I quote extensively from their accounts below -- the whole of the first and a large portion of the second -- because they deal succinctly and poignantly with the dilemma of self-identifying as "witch" and with the implications of "coming out" publicly as a witch.

> Although I was brought up in the Methodist church I now worship the Goddess. I meet with other women to celebrate the seasons, the moons, and other events which are important to the women in the group. I am proud of this as it is a very important part of who I am. The people

who are close to me know this. I have also mentioned to my workmates that I attend rituals. I have not had any violent reactions to this. I want to move out of the shadow of the burning times. I want to move into an age of the Goddess where the feminine is revered and honoured. Maybe we aren't there yet but I believe we can get there by being visible rather than by hiding away.

I first knew I wanted to be in a ritual group in 1983 but it took me four years to find one. I heard about Lea Holford's women's spirituality course not from a pagan woman but from a woman I knew through the church.

I believe it is important to share knowledge, to let other women know about us so they can choose to join us if they wish. I do not like having too many secrets because as well as keeping information from women whom I would like to have it, I believe secrecy creates fear and mistrust. I want power over my own life but I do not want people to be afraid of me.

This is why I would like to see the women's spirituality newsletter available in women's bookshops.

Women's Spirituality Newsletter, Summer Solstice 1989.

"Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language -- this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable."

For me as a lesbian those words Adrienne Rich wrote in 1976 are very important.... As a witch and a worshipper of the Goddess-in-her-thousand-names, Adrienne Rich's words are equally important.

If we do not speak up and say, "Here we are -- and we feel good about ourselves", how will the attitudes of society about us ever change? We are the unspeakable! Our lives and our loves are censored!

We have every reason to fear the power of the State and the power of the Church. These two powerful bodies once burned wombon like us and the memory of that has been passed down through many mothers to ourselves. The fear is not named but inherited nonetheless. The recent rise of fundamentalism has added to this fear. But when lesbians, gay men and friends stood up against those forces in 1986 during the Homosexual Law Reform Bill debate, it was we who triumphed!

> We witches are a long way from fighting a campaign to get our religion recognised in an Act of Parliament. For me, making the Newsletter available to other wommin through feminist bookshops is a beginning. And I don't do that without some fear -- after all my name, address and my phone number get printed in it. But for my own self pride I need to do this. If we stand together -- we stand strong!!
>
> Women's Spirituality Newsletter, Samhain 1990.

While there has been discussion amongst women about whether the Newsletter should be made available in women's bookshops -- with feelings ranging from enthusiastic to strongly opposed -- there has been no on-going discussion of the issue in the Newsletter. The Newsletter is still available only through subscription.

The Newsletter has had an important role in the development of a sense of community amongst neopagan women, initially by making them visible to each other, although not to New Zealand society in general. Because the Newsletter has, until 1992, been Auckland-centred and focussed, the sense of community it has generated has undoubtedly been felt most strongly by Auckland women.

The centre which has the second greatest number of neopagan women in New Zealand is Christchurch. Womanscript magazine, based in Christchurch, was begun in 1990 and continued publication until mid 1992 when it collapsed, as many little magazines in New Zealand do, because of insufficient subscribers to off-set publication costs. Sub-titled Journal of Wellbeing for/by Women of Aotearoa, the magazine was not focussed explicitly on spirituality issues, but much of the content had to do with this theme. Women's health issues and women's creativity were also recurrent themes. The magazine ran articles on midwifery, "knowing our bodies", herbal remedies, naturopathy, sexual

abuse, women's writing and publishing, drawing and interpreting drawings, dance, vegetarianism, lesbianism, travel, ritual, witches and witchcraft, and the Goddess.

Womanscript had approximately three hundred and fifty subscribers and was sold in women's and university bookshops, "Pathfinder" bookshop in Auckland, and a few other bookshops and health food shops. Most subscribers lived in New Zealand's main cities. About half lived in or around Christchurch, presumably because that is where the magazine was based, and about one third lived in Auckland or north of Auckland. The magazine had very few Wellington or Dunedin subscribers. According to one of the magazine's editors (personal communication), rural-dwelling subscribers "tend[ed] to be those people who choose an alternative lifestyle".

The fact that Womanscript was available for sale in bookshops meant that women who chose to "come out" in the magazine did so knowing that they might be identified as neopagan beyond the neopagan community. The association of the magazine with feminist witchcraft was an issue for the editors and subscribers to consider. The first issue contained more explicit references to witches than subsequent issues -- some women did not feel comfortable supporting a magazine with a centre-page titled "Broomstick" where they were invited to "write to Broomstick for spells & hexes, cures and curses, recipes & remedies, chants, invokations, incantations, herb & weed lore, magic potions, signs & symbols, lunar lore, any magic, mystery or myth you want to explore". Issue six, titled "Ceremonies and Symbols", contained a lot of material about feminist rituals and ritual groups, but without

the explicit references to witches (although one group profiled called itself a coven).

While New Zealand seems full of witches when you know where to look, the phenomemon of feminist witchcraft is less visible and less well established in New Zealand than it is in the United States. There have not been the large scale, media-drawing, political protests,[10] nor the large, regular conferences and festivals that have taken place in the States, Britain and Australia. There are conferences and festivals which witches attend, such as the Women's Ministries and Spirituality Conferences organized by Christian feminists, the Creation Spirituality Conference held in Auckland in January 1990, and the Te Wairua Gatherings held at Owhango, but these are not specifically neopagan. Gatherings specifically for neopagan women have tended to be fairly small -- up to forty women -- and regionally based. A number of ritual groups have held weekend retreats for their own members for the purpose of group bonding: these include formal and spontaneous rituals along with a lot of informal socializing.

In July 1986, forty women attended a weekend camp in Auckland devoted to exploring the theme of "Merging Dark and Light". The camp was organized by one ritual group and advertised through the Women's Spirituality Newsletter. There were rituals for "Honouring the Light" and "Reclaiming the Dark" and workshops titled "Herstory of the Goddess", "Rites of Passage" and "Alchemical Process". Time was also made available for yoga and relaxation, bush walking, face painting, song, dance and poetry. Another weekend camp organized by a different ritual group was held in June 1989 to celebrate Winter Solstice.

A "Wise Woman Within" festival was held at Tauhara, Taupo, in 1988. Catherine Benland describes the festival thus (1990:244):

> Well over a hundred attended including some workshop leaders from overseas. The festival was "to explore, nurture and celebrate the many aspects of our 'wise woman', sharing through circles, sacred dance, song, play, workshops, good food, magic, miracles, and celebration; to explore together our journeys, the Goddess within, herstories and histories, spirituality, feminine (sic) theology, Papatuanuku Earth Mother links and nature knowledge, mysticism and witchcraft, creativity and expression, abundance, wisdom, visions, dreams and challenges".
>
> Workshops included "Cosmic Birth", "Croneologies", "Expressing Feminine Energy -- A Man in the Aquarian Age", "Goddess Archetypes", "Creating Personal Ritual", "Creating Men's Ritual", "Knowing the Wise Women", "The Gaia Perspective" and many more. The word "feminine" (never "feminist") was often used throughout the festival and much use was made of Jung's concepts of feminine and masculine archetypes (stereotypes?) of "anima" and "animus".

In March 1992, Luisah Teish, a woman well known internationally in Women's Spirituality circles as a writer and ritual-maker, visited New Zealand. Teish is of Yoruba (West Africa) ancestry, although she was born and raised in New Orleans. She was the guest facilitator at residential weekend workshops in Auckland and Hamilton dedicated to exploring sensuality and creativity in ritual contexts. As a result of the success of Teish's visit, there are plans to bring out to New Zealand other women prominent in the Women's Spirituality movement in the United States.

Despite the various gatherings I have described above, there is still relatively limited physical contact between ritual groups, especially between groups geographically distant from one another. Apart from at open rituals, mostly held for Winter and Summer Solstices in Auckland and Christchurch, members of different groups have few opportunities

to meet each other in a ritual context. Women from different groups may meet at workshops run privately or through university Continuing Education programmes, but many of the women who attend these workshops do not belong to existing groups -- some attend because they are looking for a group to join. Workshops are seen as providing a structured, informative introduction to feminist ritual-making where there is no pressure for commitment or further involvement. One woman said she took a ritual course because she wanted to "dip her toe in the water".

Most ritual groups in Auckland have been formed through women who have attended a workshop together wanting to continue to meet for rituals and socializing. Lea Holford has been teaching Goddess spirituality and mythology workshops, with about thirty women enrolled in each class, through the University of Auckland's Continuing Education programme since 1984. Juliet Batten has taught workshops on a range of associated themes -- including feminist ritual-making, the Goddess, the Warrior Woman, and "Discovering the Possible Human" -- through Auckland's Continuing Education and privately since 1986. Elaine Dyer has taught several "Rites of Passage" workshops through Auckland's Continuing Education. I described the course of hers that I attended in chapter five. Each of these women has also occasionally taught workshops in other cities.

Several other women teach workshops in Auckland on topics connected with ritual-making and Goddess spirituality -- advertisements for workshops never mention feminist witchcraft -- and in Christchurch two women run ritual and Goddess workshops. Catherine Benland taught the first course on neopaganism in

Wellington in 1984 through Continuing Education at Victoria University. A year long course titled "Women of Power and the Sacred Mysteries" was run in Auckland and Wellington in 1992 to help feminists bring together the political and spiritual -- "to provide a comprehensive framework for inner journeying in sacred space and focused action in the world". In each city participants met one weekend each month to explore themes such as "The Cauldron -- Women, Food and Nurture", "The Blood Mysteries", "Sacred Seers", "Womensong and Spiritdance", "Heart and Womb Ecology", "Laughing Woman" and "Celebration and Embodiment of Ourselves as Powerful Sacred Women".

There are women in the neopagan movement in New Zealand who are now well known and highly respected through their teaching of ritual and Goddess workshops or their work as celebrants, but none has achieved nor sought the status of, for example, Starhawk, Zsuzsanna Budapest, Mary Daly, Luisah Teish or Jean Shinoda Bolen. Unlike other religious groups and organisations in New Zealand, the neopagan movement has no national leaders, spokespeople, gurus, or centralized organisation. The movement is explicitly against the creation of gurus, higher authorities and "power over" structures, instead emphasizing the importance of each woman discovering the divine in herself and "power from within".

The movement is not neatly bounded -- as I have noted above, there are women who identify both as "witch" and "Christian" and others who are atheist and detest any form of Christianity. There are women who have sampled and abandoned eastern religions and those who are still very involved in Buddhism, Sufism and Siddha meditation. Some women do not belong to a ritual group but define themselves as

"feminist witches", hold similar beliefs to those in groups and regularly perform rituals alone or on occasion with ad hoc groups of women. Two of their stories, those of Joan and Bonney, are presented in the next chapter. Women who are "solitaries" may be so because they prefer this, because they cannot find a group to join, or because they do not want to give the time and commitment group membership requires.

In so far as the neopagan movement in New Zealand is an amorphous, loosely-connected group of people, it reflects the movement in England of which Luhrmann (1989a:32) writes: "It is a floating, ill-defined collection of people, practices and organizations". In New Zealand there are many hundreds, possibly thousands, of women who are on the fringe of the neopagan movement. They may occasionally go to an open ritual or to a ritual organized by a friend for a special event such as a birthday, and they may have attended a workshop or two. They are sympathetic to witches' beliefs and values, but they do not identify as "witches" or even as belonging to the movement. Some are sampling neopaganism before deciding whether to commit themselves further. Some of the women who take ritual courses are interested in the New Age and human potential movements and have attended their seminars and workshops. On the whole, however, neopagan women disassociate themselves from these movements because they see adherents as self-obsessed spiritual Yuppies with reactionary political motivations. There is strong criticism of the New Age in Monica Sjoo's new book New Age and Armageddon (1992). Reviewing this book in the Winter Solstice 1993 issue of the Women's Spirituality Newsletter, Noreen Penny writes:

> Monica Sjoo is telling us to be wary of almost all "New Age" thinking. She has done a detailed analysis of the main New Age philosophies, beginning with the Dartington

> Hall Trust inspired by the great poet Rabindranath Tagore, who had become like landed gentry. She questions Transcendental Meditation and Erhard Seminar Training which she feels accept US government funding and are therefore suspect. Later in the book she analyses the Findhorn Community which has become male-dominated and not at all radical.... Another group she queries is the Lucis Trust, founded by Alice Bailey who influenced Findhorn as well. Her "Great Invocation" is all about "the masters" and "the point of light within the mind of God". Monica says that this is typical of New Age thinking -- there is an emphasis on light as opposed to darkness. And when darkness is spoken of, the inference is that it is of the earth, the goddess, the gates of hell, evil and the struggle between light (goodness) and darkness (evil).
>
> But Monica Sjoo reserves her strongest criticism for such movements as Re-birthing.... Monica has investigated the beliefs of Re-birthers and feels that they believe that "all you need to do is change your mind". They are the original proponents of "you create your own reality" type thinking. They have no analysis of the political reasons why people suffer, or of the need to change the political thinking of the patriarchal culture we live in....
>
> What Monica is telling us is not to be sucked in by New Age thinking, but to stick to Mother Earth as our Goddess and celebrate her darkness and her secret watery places as good, positive and affirming.... When Mother Earth is threatened by pollution, or the threat of war brings the shadow of annihilation close to all Mother Earth's creatures, we must take political action.

Neopagan women are also very critical of the expense of attending human potential seminars and workshops -- a course extending over four evening sessions costs in the region of five hundred dollars. One woman who asked participants in a human potential seminar how they could justify spending such enormous amounts of money on themselves when so many people in the community live in dire poverty was asked: "What's your problem? Why do you have to be a martyr and want to save the world? Why can't you spend money on yourself? Don't you think you're worth it?".

The accusation that workshops are unreasonably expensive is also one that has been aimed at the neopagan movement from within and outside the movement. A weekend workshop costs between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and eighty dollars, while a course of seven or eight evening sessions costs between seventy and one hundred and twenty dollars. On a number of occasions I heard neopagan women complain that workshops are too expensive for them to afford. Some women are very concerned that the cost of workshops excludes poorer women and forces a situation whereby access to women's spirituality is restricted to a financially-comfortable elite. The cost of attending ritual and Goddess workshops is likely to continue being an issue about which some women in the movement have strong feelings. While ritual workshops are too expensive for some women to afford, they are only one quarter to one eighth of the cost of human potential seminars.[11]

There are women who believe that acceptance into a ritual group should be restricted to women who have taken some kind of course because this acquaints women with the central beliefs and values of Goddess spirituality and gives them a basic grounding in ritual practice. These women feel that the effective functioning of a group requires that all members have a certain level of knowledge about ritual. There are others who argue that a woman's strong desire to belong to a group should be the only necessary criterion for acceptance. These women claim that a woman's spiritual path is her own business, and that a woman will prepare herself for group participation in her own way. When this debate took place in the ritual group I joined, it was agreed that because there is a financial barrier to some women taking a course,

not having taken a course should not constitute a barrier to a woman joining the group.

Because of the factors I have been discussing, it is very difficult to estimate the number of neopagan women in New Zealand. In Auckland alone Lea Holford and Juliet Batten have each had several hundred women pass through their classes, and, as I have indicated, workshops have also been run by a number of other women in Auckland and in a number of other parts of the country. In the six workshops I attended in Auckland I met eighty four women. It is not possible to know exactly how many of these women belonged to or went on to join ritual groups. Of those who did join ritual groups, it is not possible to know how many of these women self-identify as feminist witches. I discuss issues surrounding women's self-identification in chapter seven.

I noted above that eighty five women subscribe to the Women's Spirituality Newsletter and three hundred and fifty to Womanscript magazine. The open Winter Solstice rituals in Auckland and Christchurch draw, respectively, over one hundred and around fifty women. As well as the open Winter Solstice rituals, some ritual groups hold private rituals.

At least twenty ritual groups operate in Auckland and Christchurch. As well as these groups, there are groups and/or solitary witches in many other parts of New Zealand including Kaitaia, Whangarei, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Hawkes Bay, Wanganui, Wellington, Nelson, Dunedin and Invercargill. In her thesis on Women's Spirituality, Yolanda Wisewitch estimated (1987:3) that "[t]here are probably less than a few thousand practitioners and less than fifty

groups". I would estimate that the number of ritual groups is fewer than fifty, probably closer to between thirty and thirty five. As for the number of practitioners, I would estimate a core of about five hundred women who identify as pagan, neopagan, follower of the Goddess or feminist witch, with several thousand others who occasionally attend workshops and/or rituals, who have read literature on Women's Spirituality, who are attracted by the idea of a nature religion, and who hold similar beliefs and values to neopagans. This larger number would include some, but certainly not all, Christian feminists and some New Agers.

Women involved in the neopagan movement are overwhelmingly Pakeha, middle class, well-educated and urban-dwelling. In this respect New Zealand reflects the United States and England (Adler 1986; Luhrmann 1989a). Luhrmann (1989a:29) regards the fact that most groups of witches in England are city-based as predictable given that there are many more opportunities in, for example, London to become involved in witchcraft. The denser population means there are more groups which create more ritual activity and a larger sympathetic audience. Living in a city gives witches access to bookshops which sell books on witchcraft, ritual and magical practice. In New Zealand, too, the fact that Auckland has many more witches than anywhere else can be attributed to the fact that Auckland has by far the greatest population density in New Zealand and that this is where interested women have the greatest access to workshops, open rituals and bookshops with sections on Women's Spirituality. At least half a dozen introductory workshops are run each year and there are many more for women who want to explore ritual more deeply. The fact that Juliet

Batten and Lea Holford live in Auckland is significant. I would guess that most neopagan women in Auckland have taken at least one course taught by either of these women. Access to literature on Women's Spirituality is important in explaining the urban base of the movement since reading is one of the commonest ways women begin their association with neopaganism.

The reason that Christchurch has the second largest number of neopagans relates to the fact that an early coven was established there in 1981 after a Women's Spirituality Conference was held at Meadowpark Camp in Christchurch. The woman who was largely instrumental in launching this coven, whose story is presented in chapter seven, is reasonably public about her identity as a feminist witch and has been very active in helping women network. The movement seems to spread through this networking process -- once enough women interested in belonging to a ritual group find each other, a group may be started. In the course of time these women talk to friends and share books and the interest spreads.

Luhrmann (1989a:29) also makes the point that in England "many practitioners... became interested in magic and paganism and moved to the country as a result". As one of the editors of Womanscript, quoted above in this chapter, pointed out to me, this is also true in New Zealand -- those neopagans who do not live in cities tend to be "alternative life-stylers".

Writing of the racial and class bias in Women's Spirituality in New Zealand, Catherine Benland says (1990:251):

> Many poor women have had little education and cannot afford the time or money for networking via seditious literature.... And racism coupled with sexism ensures that few non-white women can participate in the movement, welcome though they are -- either they don't have the time

> or energy because of the work they do; or relatives prevent them; or they have chosen racism or democracy as their arena for activism.... The few in New Zealand who do participate are achieving much, e.g. the resurrection of the magnificent Maori goddesses so beautifully pictured and described in Wahine Toa by Robyn Kahukiwa and Patricia Grace.

Benland is right to emphasize that poorer women have less access to the movement. I have noted that women frequently begin their involvement through attending workshops and reading books on the subject. The cost of attending workshops and buying books means that it is mainly women who are financially comfortable who can afford to pursue their interest.

The fact that many workshops are run as Continuing Education courses within a university means that the women who take them need to feel comfortable in a university environment. It is unsurprising that the courses are filled largely with well-educated, middle-class, Pakeha women, many of whom already have university degrees or are students or lecturers. (See below where I discuss women's occupations.)

Again, because of the importance of literature in the movement, these kinds of women are more likely to become involved. Neopagans read more on the subject of their spirituality than the participants of any other religion. All the women I have come to know have borrowed a number of books from libraries and/or have bought their own copies. It is common to go into witches' homes and find half a shelf, or occasionally several shelves, of books on Women's Spirituality. These books span a variety of topics including ritual practice, the history and world view of feminist witchcraft, shamanism, feminist theology, poetry, the archaeological evidence for the Goddess and the contemporary significance of the Goddess.

As we shall see in chapter seven, many women come to Goddess spirituality as the result of a personal spiritual odyssey. It may be that for cultural reasons Maori women are less likely to undertake this kind of personal quest.

The occupations of women reflect the movement's middle class bias. In the course of fieldwork I recorded the occupations of one hundred women including the members of three ritual groups, the participants in six workshops, and other neopagan women I know or know of. I did not record the occupations of all the women I met in workshops, only of those who volunteered the information to the group or to me personally knowing that I was doing anthropological research.[12] The sample is not representative, but it gives a fair indication of the types of occupations of neopagan women.

There are numerous difficulties, however, in compiling and interpreting a list of occupations. Placing women in one category only is problematic. When I asked one woman how she would describe her occupation, she identified herself as "a grandmother, a teacher and a witch". Another woman is an artist, a therapist and a teacher of ritual-making. Another is a full-time University student, but spends a great deal of her spare time as a Youthline counsellor and training other Youthline counsellors. One who is a social worker crafts exquisite miniature witches and sells them to friends and at craft outlets. One of the business executives teaches ritual workshops; one of the music teachers also facilitates rebirthing; the pharmacist also gives "past life readings". Another woman whom I would have described as a mother and part-time student identified her occupation (not her religion) in the 1991 census as "Goddess".

The category "Mother" in the list below contains women whose primary occupation at present is caring for their children. This disguises the recent careers of some and fails to show the full range of activities to which these women devote time and energy. Placing women in one category only can be misleading. Between one third and one half of all the women I recorded are mothers, but only seven women spend most of their day caring for their children. This does not mean that a woman who is a computer consultant or a teacher as well as a mother sees her mother role as less important than the role for which she is paid. For many women being a mother no longer involves daily work -- their children have grown up and left home.

I was reluctant to create a "Retired" category: women who have retired from careers are engaged in a great variety of pursuits including writing, painting, organic and herb gardening, political and community work. Ironically, it was the fact that these women are each active in several areas that made it too difficult to assign them to one category. The category includes a woman who held a position of considerable responsiblility in the Department of Internal Affairs, an ex-lecturer, a nurse, and a woman who owned and managed a Women's bookshop.

A woman's professional label does not disclose the ways in which she may bring ritual into her work. At one workshop a doctor said her reason for taking the course was that she was interested in using ritual in her work with patients who were rape victims. A social worker incorporates ritual in her work with psychiatric survivors. A psychotherapist told me she uses ritual a lot in working with clients and that she knows many other women working in the area of healing, some of whom do not belong to ritual groups, who incorporate ritual in

their professional work. A teacher of junior school children tells her class that witches are not the child-hating menaces of traditional fairy stories and scouts out recently-published stories about good witches, such as The Trouble with Mum by Babette Cole, to read to them. Wherever women work with people, their values and beliefs influence the ways they interact with people in their jobs.

With these misgivings and qualifying comments, the list of occupations is set out below showing the number of women in each category:

Occupations of Women involved in Women's Spirituality

Nurse	4	Mother	7
Medical practitioner	1	Retired	6
Counsellor/therapist	5	Hydrologist	1
Clinical psychologist	2	Computer consultant	1
Naturopath	1	Community worker	1
Ambulance driver	1	Accountant	2
Homeopathy student	2	Shop assistant	2
Health administrator	1	Farmer	1
Childbirth educator	1	Ordained minister	1
Pharmacist	1	Celebrant	1
Patient Advocate	1	Business executive	2
Herbalist	1	Clerical worker	1
Phlebotomist	1	Own gardening business	1
University lecturer	5	Weaver	1
Tutor	1	Writer	5
University student	12	Music teacher	2
Librarian	3	Artist/art student/ art teacher	9
Social worker	3		
Teacher	10		

Total=100

The list makes clear that a large proportion of women in the movement are highly qualified professionals. In so far as the majority work within the broad areas of health and education, the occupational profile of neopagan women mirrors the national occupational profile for women. The fact that so many choose to work in these areas recalls

the feminist view of the witch as a wisewoman/healer. It is in the context of their careers or in the role of caring for their sick children or friends that some women identify most strongly as witches. I quote three women I interviewed below:

> I'm very proud of identifying as a witch in the fullest sense of the word. I am a healer, a storyteller.... The witches were actually healers and there were millions of them burnt. Any one of us would have been burnt then.

> As a healer a few times in the last couple of months I've had to mix up some brews for a friend and I've really felt like a witch.

> Sometimes when I'm cooking up a cough remedy or something over the stove -- grating an onion and putting in the root of a dandelion -- I see myself as a witch. At those moments I really do identify with the women who've done that for thousands of years. And it's really quite wonderful. I feel quite in charge of my health and my children's health. And with nature too -- gathering the herbs and growing the herbs -- I enjoy that. I go out and get buds in spring -- certain buds are good for coughs -- and read my books on herbs. I probably identify as a witch at those times.

The occupational profile of New Zealand neopagans differs from those of the United States and England. Adler (1986:446) reports in the United States

> an amazingly high percentage in computer, scientific, and technical fields.... Out of 195 answers, 28 people or roughly 16 percent were either programmers, technical writers, or scientists -- and I'm not even counting the lab technicians or the students who said they were studying computer programming.

Luhrmann similarly found that in England a high proportion of witches worked in computers. She says (1989a:99) "if any profession predominates, it is the computer industry" and (1989a:106) that "perhaps one or two out of every ten magicians [she] met had something

to do with computers". Luhrmann suggests that the most important reason for this may be that

> both magic and computer science involve creating a world defined by chosen rules, and playing within their limits. Both in magic and in computer science words and symbols have a power which most secular, modern endeavours deny them. Those drawn to the symbol-rich, rule-governed world of computer science may be attracted to magic.

There are two related reasons why a comparison between the occupations of New Zealand neopagans and those of witches in England and the United States based on Luhrmann's and Adler's research may be invalid. First, Adler's and Luhrmann's research included both male and female witches. It could be that many of the North American and English neopagans who worked in the computer industry were men. Adler does not say how many of the one hundred and ninety five respondents to her questionnaire were male or female. It is likely that more were female since one of the three festivals at which she distributed questionnaires was a women-only gathering. In England it seems that both the Gardnerian witch covens and the Western Mysteries groups[13] Luhrmann worked with tended towards equal numbers of women and men. Thus, if half or more than half of Adler's respondents were women, and about half of Luhrmann's witches were women, one may speculate that numbers of English and North American female witches also work in the computer industry. In my sample of one hundred New Zealand women I recorded only one woman who worked in the computer industry.

The second related reason why comparison between Adler's and Luhrmann's research and mine may be invalid is that they both included a variety of witch and neopagan traditions, whereas I focussed

exclusively on feminist witchcraft -- what is known in North America as the "Dianic tradition". This tradition does not recognize the God -- "The Horned One" -- or what is termed the Male Principle of traditional Gardnerian witchcraft. Dianic groups focus exclusively on the Goddess in her myriad forms and have only women members. I know of no Western Mysteries groups in New Zealand, although this does not mean there are none -- according to Luhrmann (1989a:55-75), they are highly secretive. I heard of only one ritual group which operated along traditional Gardnerian lines and included both men and women. The woman who started this group, whom I met at a workshop, used Janet and Stewart Farrar's The Witches' Way as a manual on how to launch and operate a coven. There may well be other "traditional" covens comprising both men and women, but I would be surprised if they were many.[14]

Feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality in New Zealand has its own distinctive character. While it is closest to the Dianic tradition as practised in the United States, rituals are more loosely structured and creative. Many of the women involved in the movement are artists and writers (see the list of women's occupations) who delight in creating their own ritual forms. This aspect of the movement in New Zealand owes much to the ways that Lea Holford and Juliet Batten have introduced women to ritual in their workshops. Both encourage women to choose their own symbols, give their own meanings to symbols, create their own altars or centre-pieces for rituals, write their own invocations, and work intuitively. To New Zealand women descriptions of North American rituals often seem rigid and inflexible. However, as Starhawk notes in the second edition of The Spiral Dance (1989:232),

there has been a proliferation of creative approaches to witchcraft in the United States and elsewhere during the last decade.

Ritual groups in New Zealand have a high proportion of lesbian members. Half the women I interviewed and two thirds of the ritual group I worked closely with are lesbian, and I know of other groups with similarly high proportions of lesbian members. There are, however, other groups comprising mainly heterosexual women. It is not surprising that some groups have high numbers of lesbian members given that women usually find a group to join through friendship networks. Three women who joined the group I worked with a year after its inception were introduced by group members whom they knew through their lesbian network. I did not collect quantitative data on women's sexual orientations, but from my experience in the movement I would estimate that around one third, possibly more, of neopagan women in New Zealand identify as lesbian.

While women are open about their lesbianism, the sexual orientation of group members does not seem to be an important issue within ritual groups and is irrelevant in respect to the close bonds that are formed amongst women in a group through doing ritual work together over a period of years. I did not focus in my research on the question of why so many lesbians are attracted to neopaganism, although some women referred to their lesbianism in interviews. Several women felt strongly that feminist witchcraft is about connecting with women's traditional knowledge and power and that men have no place in feminist ritual groups. One of the women I interviewed, Kez, said:

> I came to Auckland and looked for a long time for a ritual group. I knew it had to be with women ultimately because of my lesbianism and also because I couldn't imagine any

> guys that I wanted to do ritual with. I knew it was going to be really personal; it was going to involve my menstrual cycle and it was going to involve the death of my mother, and I just couldn't get a sense of that with men.

Catherine Benland mentions the high proportion of lesbians in the movement and notes (1990:242) that "lesbians are usually unwelcome in patriarchal religions". Alison Kirkman at Victoria University is currently writing a doctoral thesis on the experience of lesbian women in Christian churches. Her findings on how welcome lesbians are in the Church today will be very interesting. The lesbian witches I spoke to said they left the Church not so much because they felt personally rejected or unwelcome but because they found a male-identified religion in which one is required to worship an omnipotent male God utterly distasteful and alien to their sense of their own spirituality. It is the same reason that many non-lesbian witches give for leaving the Church.

Neopaganism attracts women of all ages. In the ritual group I joined the youngest woman is twenty one and the oldest is sixty one. Apart from one other woman in her twenties, the other eight are in their thirties. As I noted in chapter five, of the women I interviewed two women are in their twenties, three are in their thirties, three are in their forties, two are in their fifties and two are in their sixties. From attending open rituals and workshops I estimate that while the movement attracts women of all ages it attracts rather more women in their thirties and forties. Many of these were young women in the early days of the women's movement and have been involved in feminism for over twenty years.

In Goddess spirituality each phase of womanhood is honoured: each phase represents an aspect of the Goddess. Ritual groups greatly

value having members of widely differing ages: younger women are said to bring playful "Maiden energy" while older women bring "Crone energy" and are valued for their wisdom. The prejudice against aging women in contemporary Western society is seen by neopagan women as a fear of "the wise, willful, wolfish Crone" (Walker 1985:13). Occasionally ritual groups hold a "croning" ritual to honour a woman who feels she is moving into this phase of her life -- "Crone" is a highly esteemed title which women take on with pride.

I have noted that many women come to neopaganism as the result of a long spiritual quest. Only two of the twelve women I interviewed had not been deeply involved in at least one religion or spiritual path during their adulthoods. Most of the women undertook their spiritual quests quite independently: they were not raised by devout parents -- in most cases their parents were either nominal Christians or atheists. The range of religions and spiritual paths explored collectively by the women I interviewed is lengthy. It includes Methodism, Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Quakerism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unification Church, Siddha meditation, Buddhism, Hare Krishnas, Hinduism, Sufism and Taoism.

In her study of Christchurch neopagans Yolanda Wisewitch (1987:24) found that "[a]ll of the women surveyed had had some significant involvement in other religions before their participation in Women's Spirituality". Her list of women's religious backgrounds includes a number of those I have listed and adds others: the Baptist church, Spiritualism, and Christian Science. She interviewed an ex-nun, an ex-missionary, and several ex-fundamentalist Christians. According to Wisewitch (1987:16), women left the Church because they

could not accept the domination of men within the Church hierarchy; they had difficulty believing the Christian doctrine; and they disliked the Church's hypocrisy, arrogance, rigidity, and attitude towards "pleasures of the flesh". Above all, they left because they found they no longer wanted to worship a male God. The ex-nun said, "[O]ver night I lost my faith. I just couldn't pray any more to a male god. The more I read literature written by women I found it difficult to relate to this male god image presented in the Mass".

From Wisewitch's research and from my own it is clear that women's disenchantment with patriarchal religion grew as their commitment to feminism and to honouring their own knowledge, experience and power as women grew. Women's accounts of their dissatisfaction with Christianity and the attraction of Goddess spirituality reinforce Christ's point (1982:73), quoted in chapter three of this thesis, that "[r]eligious symbol systems focussed around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent". In Goddess spirituality women's knowledge and power are legitimated and vigorously celebrated.

But the implications of Goddess spirituality go further than women permitting themselves to image the divine as feminine and to see themselves as sacred. In Laughter of Aphrodite Carol Christ, writing eight years after her famous paper "Why Women Need the Goddess" was published and in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster, says (1987:209):

> For me Goddess has always been more than a symbol of female power. Goddess symbolizes my profound conviction that this earth, our source and ground, is holy. I have always known this. I will never know anything with stronger conviction.

In this chapter I have outlined the development of feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality in New Zealand and discussed the demographic characteristics of women involved in the movement. It is very clear that the descriptions historians and anthropologists have applied to the "witches" of the European witch-craze and to the witches of contemporary non-Western societies do not fit self-identifying witches in New Zealand in the 1990s. I would not describe any of the women I have met as weak, pitiful or impotent members of society (Thomas 1970:65); as spiteful (Macfarlane 1970a:222) or melancholic (Thomas 1970:64); as suffering from hysteria (Trevor-Roper 1969) or senescence (Levack 1987:15); as "dangerous deviants" or as "enemies within the community" (Douglas 1970:xxvi). On the whole, witches in New Zealand are well-educated, confident, creative, concerned about peace and social justice, concerned about the environment, successful in their careers, and extremely friendly. Many are teachers and healers with a strong spiritual sense as, they claim, witches have always been.

Yet, in so far as a high proportion is lesbian and all are feminist, there is a sense in which witches in New Zealand today are on "the outside of the inside" and inhabit "the margins of the social world" (Duerr 1985). Like the women labelled "witches" during the witch-craze, feminist witches are women who, at least in their personal lives, are not under male control. And, like the "witches" of the witch-craze who were frequently accused of "suffering" from "discontent" (see chapter two of this thesis), feminist witches also feel considerable discontent faced with, for example, social injustice and environmental destruction. In the same way that witches were intolerable to the Church five hundred years ago, feminist witches are still an anathema to the Church. As

New Zealand society has become more secularized, however, the antipathy and fear people have traditionally felt towards witches has eased and a re-evaluation of the witch figure is beginning.

Notes

1. I wrote to the Women's Spirituality Newsletter asking permission to quote extracts from the Newsletter. I undertook not to include any women's names or the names of ritual groups to ensure confidentiality. I received a reply saying this would be fine so long as I used unidentified quotations.
2. The rules of witchcraft are discussed in chapter eight. Briefly, there are two rules or principles: the "Wiccan Rede" and "the three-fold law". The Rede is "And ye harm none, do as thou wilt". The three-fold law is: "What you send returns three times over". This is a version of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Starhawk 1989:27). Both rules are severe cautions against hexing.
3. This description of Sheldrake comes from a quotation by Robert Anton Wilson on the back cover of The Presence of the Past.
4. James Lovelock proposed the hypothesis that Earth is a self-regulating living organism with the capacity "to keep our planet healthy by controlling the chemical and physical environment" (Lovelock, cited in Sheldrake 1991:154). Lovelock named this living system "Gaia" after the oldest Mother Goddess in the Greek pantheon. The "Gaia hypothesis" contradicts mechanistic science and humanism.
5. Vashti's Voice is a quarterly magazine published and edited by Mitzi Nairn and other Christian feminists in Auckland. It takes its title from Queen Vashti who appears in the Bible, Book of Esther, chapter one. Each issue of Vashti's Voice contains the following quotation about Vashti from the Women's Bible: "Rising to the heights of self-consciousness and self-respect, she takes her soul into her own keeping and is true to the divine aspirations of her nature".
6. Benland's use of "Women's Spirituality Movement" differs from the use of the term in the large (mainly) North American literature on the subject. In this literature "Women's Spirituality" does not include Christian feminism; it refers only to neopagan women. To avoid confusion, in this chapter I do not use "Women's Spirituality" synonymously with neopaganism. I use "feminist witchcraft", "Goddess spirituality", "feminist ritual-making" and "neopaganism" to refer to the movement I have studied. I would claim that in New Zealand these terms are nearly synonymous. Some women would argue that because some women in ritual groups do not self-identify as "feminist witch", the term "feminist witchcraft" can not be used to describe the movement as a whole. Contrary to what Catherine Benland says (1990:242), I found that most women in the neopagan movement do self-identify as "feminist witches" at least privately in their ritual groups. I discuss the problem of terminology in the introduction to this thesis and issues surrounding women's self-identification in chapter seven.
7. Women's Ministries and Spirituality Conference: A Resource Book for Women: Reports, Resources and Reflections arising from the Third National Ecumenical Feminist Women's Conference held at Rangi Ruru

Girls' School, Christchurch, August 31 to September 4, 1988. Edited by Margie Lovell-Smith et al. Published by The Planning Group, Women's Ministries and Spirituality Conference, 1988.

8. The sources of these articles are: The New Zealand Herald, 6 August 1988, story by Gilbert Wong; Sunday Star, 25 June 1989; The Dominion Sunday Times, 24 June 1990, p.1, and 1 July 1990, p.11, story by Amanda Cropp; Waikato Times, 12 November 1990, p.3, story by Jodi Ihaka.

9. One of the women I interviewed reacted strongly against this evaluation because it trivializes the movement and fails to recognize women's political motivations for involvement. She emphasized that feminist witches are not preoccupied with self-improvement -- they are committed to work for social change and to foster "Green" environmental policies and practices.

10. The only large-scale political ritual I attended was one organized by Juliet Batten as part of the 1990 commemoration of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. This ritual was for Pakeha to focus on what the Treaty meant for them and to make a commitment to some form of action to honour the Treaty. People were asked to bring young trees to donate to the Ngati Te Ata replanting programme at Waiuku. There were over one hundred men and women present.

Early in 1991 at the time of the Gulf War several ritual groups held peace rituals and some women were involved in organizing large peace rallies in Auckland.

11. Lea Holford generously checked a draft of this thesis. In her response, Lea commented that her Continuing Education courses included two full days and eight to ten evening sessions for eighty dollars. About the same time that I received her letter, I received a brochure advertizing human potential seminars run by Jean Houston, with one evening and one full day costing two hundred and fifty dollars.

12. When it came to my turn in the introductory round at the beginning of each workshop, I told women that I was doing anthropological research. Since they had not come to the workshop in order to participate in research, I considered it would have been improper for me to quiz them during tea breaks. If they volunteered information about themselves, I recorded it.

13. "Gardnerian covens" are those which follow the ritual practices set down by Gerald Gardner (see chapter three) in the 1940s and 1950s. Many witches and Gardner himself claim that the form of the rituals can be traced back through "The Burning Times" to ancient pagan rituals.

For the basic conception behind the Western Mysteries, see note 2 following chapter three of this thesis. Luhrmann (1989a:57) says that those who belong to a Western Mysteries fraternity or lodge see themselves as "spiritual commandos", a "secret band of do-gooders" who stand guard over humanity.

14. Just prior to binding this thesis, I came across Magic Pentacle: A Quarterley Magazine of the Esoteric (volume four, number three). This is a photocopied and stapled publication put together by editors Michael Freedman and Alys Goldenthorpe. It was launched in 1990 and is devoted to publishing "articles, poems, drawings and letters on the practical and theoretical aspects of Magic and ancient and modern Western Paganism". The magazine indicates that at least some gender-mixed magical and pagan groups of the kind Tanya Luhrmann worked with in Britain (primarily Gardnerian groups) exist in New Zealand.

Secrecy is clearly important to such groups: contributors are encouraged to use a nom-de-plume, and the editors promise to post the magazine in plain envelopes and to keep the mailing list secret. During three and a half years' fieldwork I never heard feminist witches mention this publication. Its strong Gardnerian thrust would make it unappealing to them, and drawings such as the one inside the back cover, which depicts "The Great Rite" -- a woman with trailing hair and jutting breasts lying corpse-like beneath a man in the throes of exultant ejaculation -- would, I am certain, disgust them.

Chapter 7

The Attraction of Witchcraft

> What attracted me to witchcraft? I think a sense of magic. And a feeling of being able to creatively visualize how my life could be... having the right to decide.
>
> From my interview with Galadriel, 15 May 1992, Auckland.

> I think the deconstruction of the word "witch" has been brilliant. A "witch" to me is just a woman who makes rituals. We're not somebody against Christians who's having sex with Satan -- all that Christian-invented crap. A witch is a healer and a wicca and a woman who has a herb garden. We're going back to the original view of witches. The fertile imagination of those medieval people -- the mind boggles, doesn't it?
>
> From my interview with Joan, 16 February 1992, Hamilton.

> I think it's wonderful to start reclaiming concepts like "witch", but in terms of the reclaiming process we have a long, long way to go and I'm quite realistic about that.... I'm not on a crusade for the witch. For me it's an inner networking growth thing. Like an underground movement. And I'm very happy for it to be like that, because that's the way it will gather its power.
>
> From my interview with Juliet, 17 October 1991, Auckland.

In chapter two of this thesis I argued that academic studies of witchcraft, whether by historians or anthropologists, have typically dealt with the witch as "other" by focussing on how societies think about and act towards witches, instead of on how witches themselves think and act. Their functionalist interpretations illuminate societies' witchcraft beliefs not witches' beliefs. I quoted Carlo Ginzburg (1990a:22) who points to the omission of "the subjective dimension" in studies of witchcraft, either because it is difficult to document or

because it is considered irrelevant. The voices of the witches tried during the European witch-hunts, he says (1990a:10), "reach us strangled, altered, distorted" in testimonies filtered by the demonologists, inquisitors and judges. In his own work, Ginzburg was forced to rely on fragmentary and indirect witches' testimonies, with the result that "[t]he meanings attributed by the actors to the myths they relived in ecstasy, as well as to the rituals in which they participated, generally escape us".

If the stereotypical image of the witch is interpreted by historians and anthropologists as "a logical inversion of the stereotype of moral personhood" (Jackson 1989:96), the witch is unavoidably consigned to the status of "otherness": in such terms the witch image is essentially a negation of the normative. To interpret witches solely in these terms -- as peripheral members of their societies, as "victims" and "scapegoats", as spectres of the not-self (Jackson 1989:x) -- not only renders them mute and gives them negative and marginal status, but also recapitulates the prejudices of their own societies. Witches are made "other" all over again by academic scholars.

I emphasized in chapter two my intention to focus on the subjective dimension of witchcraft, to place self-identified witches at the centre of my enquiry. I am not concerned with the debate over the rationality versus the irrationality of witchcraft: my aim, using Jackson's words (1989:101), is "to throw light on the lived experience that lies behind the masks and facades of category words", in this case, the category word "witch". As I discussed in chapter five, I found Jackson's philosophy of radical empiricism (1989:3), "a philosophy of the <u>experience</u> of objects

and actions in which the subject itself is a participant", spoke to my experience of fieldwork:

> [Radical empiricism] implies that there is no constant, substantive "self" which can address constant, substantive "others" as objects of knowledge. We are continually being changed by as well as changing the experience of others. "Our fields of experience," writes James, "have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a more that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds" (James 1976:35). The "self" cannot, therefore, be treated as a thing among things; it is a function of our involvement with others in a world of diverse and ever altering interests and situations.

When I began my research I was intrigued to learn what attracted women to become witches and to understand the processes by which they came to self-identify in this way. It seemed paradoxical that women, especially feminist women committed to challenging gender relationships and stereotypes, should choose to adopt a category name which evokes, arguably more than any other could, the misogyny of patriarchal societies. In chapter three of this thesis I outlined how "the witch" has been deconstructed by feminist scholars and discussed the symbolic value of the witch for contemporary women. In this chapter I explore the reasons why and the processes by which the New Zealand women I interviewed came to be involved in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality.

The first question I asked the twelve women I interviewed was: How and why did you become involved in feminist witchcraft/ Goddess spirituality/feminist ritual-making? Lea Holford's account of how she became involved in Goddess groups in California in the late 1970s is given in chapter three. The stories of the other eleven women are presented in this chapter. In a sense they are "witchcraft

confessions", yet only three of the women talk about themselves as being witches in the accounts set out in the first part of this chapter. However, eight of the eleven women self-identified as "witch" and all thought of themselves privately as witches in some respects. The second part of the chapter deals explicitly with women's self-identification.

I use the term "witchcraft confessions" for political and rhetorical purposes: invoking a connection between the "witches" persecuted during the European witch-craze and contemporary feminist witches assists a deconstruction of the "witchcraft confession". The witchcraft confessions in this chapter contain no examples of anti-social malevolence or diabolism -- the women are strongly averse to both. Essentially the women describe how feminist witchcraft affirms their sense of their own sacredness and their connections to the earth and to each other, and how the impulse to make rituals enables them to celebrate these connections and to mark important transition points in their lives.

But women also talk about their disaffection with Christianity and their desire to "create for themselves [a spirituality] outside the patriarchal religions and churches" (Joan), the satisfaction of being able to choose their own beliefs and create their own rituals, personal empowerment, and "dabbling in alternative medicines" (Bonney). Feminist scholars have argued (see chapter three) that in fact these were the real "crimes" of the historical witches; as Sybil pointed out in an interview, "Any one of us would have been burnt then".

The elements of diabolical and anti-social activity in the historical witches' confessions were a production of the demonologists' and

inquisitors' fantasies and misinterpretations of witches' testimonies. As I demonstrated in chapter two, stories of encounters with goddesses and fairies were transformed into trysts with the Devil (Duerr 1985:5). Where women confessed to crimes, they did so after undergoing a number of periods of torture and as a result of being hounded by their judges to accept charges of guilt.

Women who choose to self-identify as feminist witches make a strong connection between themselves and the historical witches. During a discussion of her self-identification Joan said:

> It was tragic how many people got tortured. It was like a mass hysteria, sexually perverse... People talk about how wonderful the Renaissance was, but alongside that, in conjunction with that, women were being tortured and raped and burnt in a terrifying holocaust. I really believe that the witch ripples are still very much there in our psyche. They're in our cultural knowledge. They're in our literature, in our fairy tales. They're everywhere.
>
> I see the witch-craze very politically. I see it as the final attempt to suppress pagan religions and to suppress the power and healing of women. And also for the Church to gain a lot of property. Somebody only had to point the finger and you were gone. It was an incredibly powerful form of social control. I see it as the medieval equivalent of the K.G.B. where people were spying on each other and telling on each other.
>
> I cannot read that Malleus Maleficarum. It brings up something so frightening to me. This is where I find this sort of work so healing. I think it's giving us an understanding. It's a retrieval of tradition. It's an understanding of why that happened and it's getting rid of the fear of it. I think it had to happen.

The stories presented in this chapter show that there is no typical path to involvement in feminist witchcraft. Only three of the twelve women had a religious upbringing -- the others had parents who were lapsed church-goers or atheists. The women who did not have religious upbringings expressed just as strong an antipathy towards Christianity

and patriarchal religions as the three who consciously turned against Christianity.

When asked to tell how they became involved in feminist witchcraft/ritual-making, all but three of the women traced their spiritual quest back to their childhood or teens. Only one woman, Joan, had never been interested in spirituality before discovering feminist witchcraft in her late forties. Bonney's quest began when she left the Anglican church and took her via the Unification Church, the Hare Krishnas and Buddhism. Sybil experimented with Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism and Taoism. Kez tried out Catholicism and Pentecostalism. Alex spent some time with the Jehovah's Witnesses and then began researching traditional witchcraft and trying out spells. Noreen and Megwyn spent many years of their adult lives intensely involved in Christian churches, became interested in Christian feminism, and eventually left the Church. After leaving her parents' church at twenty one, Galadriel decided she needed to find an alternative religion, shopped around, and chose witchcraft.

Clearly, the spiritual odyssey is a recurring feature in the women's stories. Women consciously set out to find a spiritual path with intellectual, moral, political and spiritual appeal. In her study of Christchurch witches Yolanda Wisewitch (1987:24) also found that "[a]ll of the women surveyed had had some significant involvement in other religions before their participation in Women's Spirituality". It is less clear why women should have felt this urge in the first place. It could be argued that those who had become disenchanted with Christianity needed to find a replacement religion. But most of the women did not come from religious backgrounds: they spontaneously became aware of

personal spiritual needs, often in their teens, and set out to find a spiritual path which satisfied these needs and fitted their world view. Because they embraced feminism and because they sought a spiritual path, the spiritual tradition which best fitted their world view was feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality.

One looks for what the women have in common that might have inclined them to embark on a spiritual quest. All are feminist, but feminism in itself does not propel women to seek a woman-identified spirituality. As I noted in chapter three, many feminists think that women who take up religion are shirking the political work of feminism. All the women I interviewed have a strong sense of connection with the earth and a desire to protect the environment, but there are plenty of nature-lovers and Green activists who are not interested in religion, let alone witchcraft.

We might consider whether the women have particular psychological or socio-economic characteristics in common which predispose them to want or need a spiritual dimension in their lives. Luhrmann (1989a:99) points out that "[m]ost sociological accounts would suggest that people join marginal groups out of socio-economic frustration". She says, however, that this claim is "patently false" in regard to witchcraft in England. It is also false in relation to New Zealand. As I showed in chapter six, women involved in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality in New Zealand tend to have successful, satisfying, and often lucrative careers.

Luhrmann goes on to say that the witches she met did have certain personality traits in common. She writes (1989a:100):

> The sort of person who takes the relatively dramatic step of initiating contact with magicians and then enjoys the practice well enough to continue with it, may well be

> imaginative, self-absorbed, reasonably intellectual, spiritually inclined, and emotionally intense. [S]he also may be rebellious and interested in power, possibly dreamy or socially ill at ease. [S]he may be concerned on some level with issues of control -- controlling [her]self, or the world, or the two in tandem. This is a descriptive, not a causal, account. The basic point is that magicians are middle-class people of a particular, and not uncommon, temperamental cast -- not people with similar socio-economic profiles.

With qualifications, Luhrmann's description fits many of the women I met. The relatively large number of artists, writers and musicians (16 per cent of my sample -- see chapter six) suggests that women in the movement tend to be imaginative, creative, inclined to value intuition, and perhaps emotionally intense. I would not say that the women I met are concerned with controlling themselves or the world, but they are concerned with finding their own "power from within" and with learning to discover and achieve personal goals. In the political sphere, they are very concerned with the issue of patriarchal control in society. I would not say that the women I met are "socially ill at ease" -- I found them friendly and socially confident. The kinds of careers they choose and their success in these careers indicate that they work well with people. They have strong connections with and commitment to community. The communities they mix with socially and sometimes professionally, however, may be viewed as marginal in relation to New Zealand society in general. I estimated in chapter six that at least one third of women in the movement is lesbian and virtually all are feminist. When one looks at New Zealand society as a whole, the feminist community is marginal and the lesbian community is more so. Many women are involved in alternative healing as

professional practitioners or as consumers: while this community is growing in New Zealand, it is still marginal.

Luhrmann describes witches as "self-absorbed". All people are self-absorbed, but it is true that women involved in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality devote considerable time and energy to understanding -- "tuning in" to -- their own psychological processes and to working with them during rituals. My observation is that they do this relatively successfully. When I compare my friends who are witches with woman friends who are not, the latter seem more likely to "get stuck" in their attempts to deal with decisions, transitions or crises in their lives. They find it more difficult to isolate issues which need to be addressed, harder to "know what to do", and harder to act on decisions. The same or similar problems come up over and over again. I am not suggesting here that witches are simply more effectively self-absorbed on account of some inherent trait they happen to share. I argue that through learning to work with ritual women are able to gain insight on issues and problems in their lives and on practical ways of dealing with them, and have the opportunity to symbolically enact decisions they have made or changes they wish to make.

Ritual provides women with a tool for processing transitions. The ritual process assists women first to become fully aware of their thoughts and feelings about an issue, to become immersed ("absorbed") in its complexities and their own anxieties about it; secondly, to gain a degree of intellectual and emotional distance from the issue, to objectify and directly confront it; and, thirdly, to find a solution or way forward. Stein (1991:2) writes: "Rituals... create a microcosm, a 'little universe' within which women try out what they want the macrocosm, the 'big

universe' or the real world to be". I discuss how ritual "works" in detail in chapter eleven.

To call witches "self-absorbed" suggests that they are pre-occupied with themselves to the extent that community concerns and goals are unacknowledged and/or unimportant. This is not the case. Apart from the fact that many women work in the "helping professions" (as women have traditionally done), women also devote spare time to voluntary community activities. In the ritual group I joined there are women involved in supporting people with AIDS, campaigning for the Green Party, counselling the dying, working in cooperatively-run organic gardens, and working for Youthline. In the quotations from interviews that follow, women state that ritual is "a very good way of building community" (Joan) and that it has "a much wider application which spills over into the community I meet and work with" (Joy).

Luhrmann says that a characteristic of witches is that they are "spiritually inclined". Clearly, this is the singular, common characteristic of people who become involved in witchcraft. The majority of people who are imaginative, self-absorbed, intellectual, emotionally intense, rebellious and interested in power obviously do not become witches. What all witches have in common is a sense that spirituality is important in their daily lives. What causes some people to become spiritually inclined, especially in an increasingly secular society, remains unclear. Luhrmann, quoted above, says her account of the typical witch is descriptive not causal.

We return to the point made above that a recurring feature of the women's stories I collected is the spiritual odyssey. Women who become witches share similar world views, politics, socio-economic

backgrounds and perhaps personality traits, but they are only a small proportion -- the "spiritually inclined" proportion -- of all women who share these characteristics. I can be no more definitive than Luhrmann about what causes this small proportion to embark on a spiritual quest which ends with them becoming witches. What induced Kez (see her account below) to begin hugging a tree and thinking of it as her God/Goddess when she was eight years old, long before it became fashionable to hug trees? Why did Juliet intuitively begin to make art works on the beach at Te Henga and offer them to the sea? What induced Sybil, from the age of twelve, to begin avidly reading books on Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism and Taoism? While it may be true that, as she suggests, puberty is often a time of spiritual awakening and experimentation, it seems most people leave this behind when they emerge into adulthood. The causes of "spiritual inclination" are elusive. One can only observe that some people do, and others do not, see spirituality as important to their lives.

I would be much less prescriptive than Luhrmann in describing the type of woman likely to be attracted to witchcraft. Essentially, they are spiritually inclined feminists. Their feminist identification is strong enough to make all patriarchal religions unacceptable. Some women manage to combine Eastern spiritual paths such as Buddhism and Siddha Yoga with witchcraft.

While women's paths to feminist witchcraft are diverse and tend to begin as solitary quests, there are several common immediate causes for becoming involved in the movement. Women tend to come across books on the subject, they meet other women who are involved in the movement, and they attend a workshop. These causes are inter-related

-- women often hear about the books and workshops through feminist friends. As I noted in chapter three, literature on feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality is now relatively easy to come by in New Zealand. The Women's Bookshop in Mt Eden, Auckland, the Kate Sheppard Women's Bookshop in Christchurch, and Dimensions Women's Bookshop in Hamilton all have extensive sections on the subject; university bookshops, New Age bookshops, some alternative health stores and public libraries also carry books on the theme.

Some women become involved by beginning to create their own rituals, performed alone, usually in natural settings, either spontaneously or in conjunction with their reading. In the accounts that follow we read of Alex doing rituals on the beach at Mangonui, Bonney singing in ecstatic trance on a hill-top overlooking Cook Strait, Juliet offering art works to the sea at Te Henga, and Kez making rituals on the beach at Russell.

As I prepared to write this chapter, I was faced with the decision of how to present women's accounts of how they became involved in feminist witchcraft. It became apparent that while women arrived at witchcraft via diverse routes, there were recurring elements in their stories -- elements which could be taken to constitute the reasons women are attracted to witchcraft. These include:

* disenchantment with Christianity/ anger at God;
* a desire to affirm or to create one's own spirituality independently of institutionalized patriarchal religions;
* a desire for a woman-identified spirituality and to belong to a women's spiritual community;
* a desire for a spirituality which celebrates connection with

the earth;

* the sense of a need to consciously mark life transitions using ritual;
* the sense of a need to bring a spiritual dimension to feminism;
* the intellectual appeal of feminist theology;
* a desire for a religion which offers the elements of magic, excitement, fun and play.

Some women were also attracted to witchcraft for political reasons, but these tended to be less explicit and often, as noted in chapter three, women's political motivations for involvement emerged as a result of their involvement in the movement.

The eight elements listed above weave in and out of women's stories. Some, such as the desire for a spirituality which celebrates connection with the earth and the desire for a woman-identified spirituality, are common to all women. Sometimes all eight elements are important to a woman and sometimes only one or two.

In deciding how to present women's stories, I had two options. The first was to use a thematic approach: I could discuss in turn each of the eight points, illustrating the discussion with extracts from my interview transcripts. This approach would emphasize the resonances in womens' accounts, highlight their similarities, and provide a neat and methodical way of accounting for the attraction of witchcraft.

For political (and perhaps literary) reasons, however, I was disinclined to carve up women's stories in such a way. Having referred in this chapter to the interview transcripts as "witchcraft confessions" and connected them with the witchcraft confessions recorded during

the witch-hunts, I resisted altering, distorting or fragmenting the stories women told me. There were also practical difficulties in breaking up women's stories. I found they did not carve well: one part of a woman's account frequently referred back to an earlier part and illuminated, balanced or revealed another dimension of it. In some instances, to separate these parts could be distorting if not misleading. For example, the catalyst for Joy's involvement in ritual-making was that she felt she needed to mark an important life transition -- her retirement -- with a ritual. Her decision to take a course on feminist ritual-making was a cool-headed, pragmatic decision in response to this looming event. But her inclination towards ritual also had something to do with her childhood experiences of fifty years earlier and the influence of a mother who encouraged her children "to play with fires, to light fires, to mould clay, to run wild, naked in the rain". While Joy's explicit association with feminist witchcraft had a clearly identified beginning, Megwyn's was the outcome of decades of gradual change in her life: she joined the Student Christian Movement as a teachers' college student, her political awareness grew, she found feminism, she began to address self-esteem issues, she read Christian feminist books and was influenced by Christian feminist friends, she took a Goddess course taught by Lea Holford, and today she identifies as a feminist witch. Each part of the process, and of her story, is essential to explaining how she came to self-identify as a witch.

The other option for presenting women's accounts was to leave them whole as life story narratives and arrange my discussion around them.[1] This was the option I chose, ultimately because I preferred to give priority to the women and their stories rather than to the themes I

had identified within the stories. (These themes are discussed following the narratives.) I decided that the articulation between parts of each account was more important than the articulation between one account and the other ten. It seemed more important to make visible the internal coherence of each account than to group together fragments under specific themes. Preserving the wholeness of women's stories emphasizes their diversity, whereas a theme-centred discussion would draw attention to their sameness: I preferred to accent the diversity. In any case, I think recurring themes resonate as one reads successive accounts. Left uninterrupted, women's voices become more audible.

The following transcripts, then, represent women's answers to my question: How did you become involved in feminist witchcraft/ ritual-making/Goddess spirituality?

Joan

I have never been interested in spirituality. I've never been a Christian. I'm a fairly pragmatic sort of a person; I don't really go in for spooky things.

My involvement in ritual-making... First of all, a lot of people who I knock around with were getting interested in it and I thought, "Well, they're smart, there must be something cooking here". I was curious and I started to research it out of interest. The books were coming out from America -- I'm not at all interested in New Age, I think most of it's a lot of crap, so I wasn't reading New Age books -- but I read feminist books right from the start.

I became very interested in it intellectually, and then I went to a weekend Continuing Education course with a well known New Zealand woman ritual-maker and saw about thirty five women there, an immense diversity. It was so exciting. It struck me that women really liked it, that it was tapping into something really -- I hate this word -- elemental, something that women could create for themselves outside the patriarchal religions and churches. That to me has been the driving force -- the fact that it's an alternative thing, it's a fun thing, it's something that you can create yourself. It's highly individualistic, but it's also a very good way of building community.

So that's why I became involved -- I became interested intellectually first, and then I saw the very, very good things that happened between

people and the nice feelings that people had about it, and the way that people started to tune in to the landscape and to the earth more. The ways that ritual links in to the community that you're in really fascinate me. As a feminist I'm living in a fairly consciously-constructed community anyway. I saw this as a very exciting and new development in the feminist community. But I didn't see it as a personal need. I still don't. I see it basically as a fun thing and very useful.

Bonney

I guess I could go back to the fact that I really enjoyed the ritual in the Anglican church when I was young. I was in the choir and enjoyed a sense of holiness that I felt came about particularly when we participated in taking communion. I was aware of the symbolism of it even at a very young age, and got quite a buzz from it. But I found them far too pedantic and too insistent that you repeat rote prayers that had no relevance for me. When I started to miss out every second sentence in the prayers we were meant to say I kept getting nudged on the left and the right by my parents for missing out the things I didn't believe in, and was grilled afterwards over Sunday dinner. I didn't believe in "God's only son" and all sorts of different things. I stopped attending church when I was old enough to not have to go with my parents.

Later on at the age of about twenty one I joined the Unification Church and really enjoyed the Eastern ritual that they participated in there. I enjoyed it when it was voluntary; I didn't like the compulsory aspect of it. There wasn't much room for anyone who wanted to be deviant which meant that only a certain kind of people stayed and the colourful ones continually left. I found it was more and more boring people who managed to comply and be accepted by the people who were running the church. I eventually felt I had lost contact with my own spirituality through having to follow such a strictly prescribed way of life.

Between coming out of the Anglican church and going into the Unification Church I had a time when I was very free. I drove a motorbike, had a pack on my back a lot of the time, and hiked around the country and lived in different communities. I often had experiences where I'd be alone in the bush or alone on a mountain top and I would start to sing or start to talk out loud. I felt as if I could draw a power down to be with me and felt totally uplifted by whatever I did. I engaged in ritual things very subconsciously at that time and felt very powerful through them.

One experience I remember particularly was when I took a Bible up to the top of a very high, windswept hill overlooking Cook Strait. I sat up on this hill and felt really elated by the view and the sense of peace that I had within me. I started to read the words of the Bible out loud -- I didn't consider myself Christian at all -- I'd go to Hare Krishnas and chant with them and went to Buddhist meetings. But I started to read from the Bible and the words seemed to have a rhythm and I started to sing the words. I had an experience where I felt the music came to me and the words rearranged themselves to match the music that was coming through me. I sang and read like that in an ecstatic state for an

hour or more. It was an experience of energy just pouring through me; I felt so strong. It was a very whole experience, a feeling that whatever there was that was spiritual in the cosmos was living in me and I was a part of it -- I was having an exchange with it. It was a time when religion was not important -- it was the way I dialogued with my own spirituality that was important.

When I finally got rid of Unification Church from my life it was because I realized I had lost the spiritual side of my life which was the more fundamental. I left thinking I've got to get back to that personal experience that I had on that mountain top of feeling that my spiritual life and my body are one. I can bring my body to life with my spiritual life -- it begins within me rather than within any organization. It's totally personal.

I went to a one day workshop with Juliet Batten and others in about 1982 or 1983. In the afternoon I chose an option of going into a workshop with a woman from New Plymouth who considered herself a witch. After leaving Unification Church and Christianity behind and wondering what on earth there was for me, I felt maybe that was more my category than anything else. I sensed that within the Women's Spirituality movement from what I'd read there were a lot of powerful women who were seeking a personal experience of their own spirituality in the way that I had enjoyed. So I thought I might find company in that direction.

I went to the workshop with the woman who considered herself a witch and she explained exactly what that meant to her and everything that she said seemed to be the same as what I believed. I had dabbled in alternative medicines and I saw witches as healers and I thought witches had been maligned for a long time, so I was quite comfortable with the idea of witches being good people. They were people who seek personal empowerment more than praising a God. They were a positive image to me. At the end she said, "Is there anyone here who would like to go through an induction as a witch?" and I put my hand up. Half the people walked out and half of us stayed and went through a ceremony to become witches. I felt very good about that. There was a sense of identifying with other women who believed this. There was a sense of connection, but no sense of obligation. It gave me the freedom for my individual expression.

Sybil

I don't come from a religious background. My father was a very lapsed Catholic and my mother was lapsed C. of E. I did get sent away to Christian Youth Camp in Ngaruawahia and came back singing religious songs. It lasted about two weeks.

Round about when I hit puberty, which is the time I think a lot of kids start to go through an emotional and spiritual awakening, I started to get a sense of definitely going on a search and wanting something in my life, wanting some answers. I'm not quite sure what I was looking for. I shopped around for a religion. I was reading books avidly on Buddhism and Hinduism and Sufism and Taoism and everything else. My family

used to make smart comments about what was the religion this week, what was I allowed to eat this week. All these weird practices I got into virtually did change weekly. But I think I was quite lucky that the first book I picked up on alternative religions said, "You don't buy the first hat you pick up, so why is it that for something as major as a spiritual belief system we accept the one that is put upon us?". I liked that. To my twelve year old mind that made perfect sense.

Once I'd shopped around all the religions, for a while there I got into drugs in a big way, especially the psychedelic ones. I temporarily thought I'd found God. Later on, of course, I realized I hadn't.

Many years later I started to challenge my life style in terms of my whole way of being in the world. My spirituality wasn't awakened again until I became a lesbian in fact, and that brought about for me another period of questioning and an awakening. I felt I'd been literally dead for years -- not feeling, numb. I met a few women who were very much involved in work with crystals and using women's Tarot decks. I got interested in that, and then started to discover that lo and behold there had been a matriarchal society all these centuries and centuries ago. I found that incredibly exciting and incredibly uplifting. And as I started to delve into Women's Spirituality I had a sense that I was remembering. It felt very comfortable. Just as becoming a lesbian felt like coming home, finding Women's Spirituality felt like coming home. It felt like every cell in my body was remembering sensations, feelings, that must go back centuries and centuries for women.

I was living in Australia at the time and didn't actually encounter a group to be part of, just individual women. I did a lot of private practice on my own, went to a few healing centres, used to do some meditation or work with friends. It wasn't until I came here that I heard about a workshop of Juliet Batten's and got immediately extremely excited. I realized that I wasn't going to become part of a ritual group until I was home here again. I'd looked everywhere in Australia. I knew there were ritual groups out there. I wanted to join them but it felt like a secret society, a well-guarded secret. I get a sense that now the time is right. Things do come to you when the time is right.

What attracted me to it basically was that thing of remembering -- it was home -- something that was very familiar, very affirming, very empowering and very exciting.

Alex

I was brought up in an atheist household, although my mum was very religious with the vaccuum cleaner -- twice a day it came out. Later on I got involved with the Jehovah's Witnesses church. In the church all the men got up and talked and it was only the men who could play the musical instruments. I was there for about a year. I left when they offered me a man on a platter to marry if I would get baptised. He was the spunkiest they had, but I thought there was something wrong about that.

When I was about fifteen I was really sick for a couple of years with glandular fever and I used to spend a lot of time at the library reading law books and also getting out books about witches. I used to read about how witches wore black and I liked black and always used to be known as "the lady in black". I still love it -- it's still my favourite colour.

Because I was at home a lot on my own, I used to do spells. I used to have this thing... on Friday I would lock up the house and I'd pull all the curtains closed because my grandfather would try and visit me. So I used to hide under the bed, and when he'd gone I used to have my little spells. I think I used to have a broom I waved around. I used to enjoy doing all that. For me it was like a fantasy because I was home on my own all the time.

In 1985-6 I lived up North for a year and I used to do the thing on the beach at Mangonui. I used to have this one little part where I'd sit and watch the water and I'd collect shells and seaweed and all sorts of stuff. I used to write my poetry a lot.

Then I came back to Auckland and got sick again and then I met [woman's name]. Just all of a sudden one night she said, "[Woman's name] and I are going to a women's ritual. Would you like to come along? You'd really like it". I don't know why she asked me. I went to Winter Solstice at the Orange Ballroom. It was fantastic, wonderful. There was something special about it. I felt like I was floating around. I think it was that coming into contact with the elements and feeling so really good about it all. I like the outside rituals more than the inside. I like the cold air around me and hearing the sound of the wind and waves. Last year when we went to the one out at Te Henga, that was just incredible, especially the drumming.

Joy

I think the reason for my becoming involved in ritual was that I'd observed Juliet Batten for a long period of time -- I had seen her speaking as a feminist artist at something I had been involved in at work and I'd read a lot about her work in ritual-making with women and the exhibitions at Outreach. I'd never been brave enough to come any closer to it at that stage, but always had in the back of my mind that that was something I would actually like to do.

This year has been particularly significant because I turn sixty in two days time and I was leaving a job that I'd been involved in for thirteen years and it seemed the right time. I was very conscious that what I wanted to do in leaving this job was to take with me some of the things that I believe in at work. In work I engage with people; I am a person who, working in part of a big bureaucracy, is supposed to be able to actively engage with a group, listen to what they have to say, transmit that later -- actually engage and communicate with them and disengage.

There are lots of rituals that I observe at work and processes that I've devised which are really important. If I were going into any situation, I

would prepare for it, I would know what I was going to be there for, I would enter into a situation -- wind myself up if you like -- operate effectively and then disengage. Those sorts of rituals have been very much part of my life and very important to me, so it seemed perfectly natural to move into something which also was about a very deeply personal ritual. In some ways I've been very concerned with myself during this period, and how best to handle this transition with as deeper meaning for myself and for anyone who comes into contact with me as possible.

I suppose I was more and more thinking that I wanted to deepen my own spiritual experience. That was something I'd done through my own gardening and through my own influences from childhood. I had been brought up in the country in a place which was very remote, very high up, a place where it was very windy, very wild, where I was very conscious of the elements. My mother encouraged me to be open to experiencing the elements -- we were encouraged to play with fires, to light fires, to mould clay, to run wild, naked in the rain, and if there was ever flooding, which there frequently was, we were always very conscious of those elements, conscious of the seasons. So that was instilled in my childhood as being really, really important.

My mother was also a keen gardener, and the patterns of my being keen about gardening were partly to do with my mother's influence. The presence of my mother in those early years was really, really important. Her early death when I was sixteen removed someone who was a very strong influence. Unfortunately I was never able to talk to her about the reasons why these things were important to her which I would liked to have done.

I think that always in my life there have been teachers who have been very significant in my learning, and I suppose in this transition I really wanted to be with someone who was an excellent teacher and I think that Juliet is a most superb teacher.

I'd decided after doing the feminist ritual-making workshop that I was not going to join a group because I wanted to step back and just have a think about it. Now in the group that I'm in I think that I'm very happy about that -- still needing to do a lot of work myself. Ritual has a very immediate, personal application where I feel enriched in that small group, and a much wider application which spills over into the wider community I meet and work with.

Juliet

I really became involved through my work as an artist which became increasingly ritualistic. There were two things that were the context for it. One was my solitary work on the beach -- making work at Te Henga and offering it to the sea -- that was working with process. In my artwork I became more and more interested in process rather than product partly as a reaction against Judy Chicago's way of working which was so product-centred. I became aware that I was much more interested in working collaboratively with women and getting involved in process. So there were my solitary processes out at the beach, and then

there were the processes of doing collaborative art projects with women. I was doing a number of them through the late seventies and eighties. Right from the beginning they seemed to be calling for ritual.

When I started making art environments with women at a Summer School, they wanted people to come in and look at it. It seemed to involve a process -- how were people going to come in and engage with this work? It seemed that a ritual was necessary. Then I did the Lifescape, and we needed to open it. There were two hundred women crammed into this art gallery. The Lifescape was about a journey through women's lives and they started by going through a great big birth tunnel. The ritual was hastily created because there seemed to be a necessity. I put a big membrane over it and then just cut it -- it wasn't even particularly thought out -- I didn't really know the processes.

But I began to know the processes through working with the group. When they needed to take that work down afterwards there was a lot of distress. They'd put all this energy into this work, it had been up for two weeks, and then they had to take their work apart. And they couldn't do it. It seemed that something had to take place, there needed to be a bridge. It was one of those moments of transition -- that's how I identify it now. I found myself generating a ritual.

I hadn't read Starhawk or anything. These things were happening spontaneously. By working with women's processes and being involved in the women's art movement I was tapping into that field anyway. There was just a whole evolution in the Women's Movement where everyone was being so materialistic in their politics and then there was a call for something more spiritual. I think it was a natural evolution. I started developing rituals for art environments much more consciously then. In the next one -- The Menstrual Maze in 1983 -- the rituals were very, very conscious and the whole work involved a series of rituals.

Noreen

I was very committed to Christianity in the past from early teens on, and felt that the only way to be a Christian was to be a committed one and to take part in everything that Christianity represented. I suppose that what's happened now is that I feel that if one isn't going to be a Christian, one should be committed to whatever else one decides one is.

I'm more and more in disagreement with Christianity. I had a vague feeling that I disagreed wholeheartedly when I left, but I didn't know exactly what I disagreed with -- I had difficulty identifying it. It's only really in the last year or two that I've come very much into disagreement with Christianity. I've been writing about the Nicene Creed and pinpointing its anomalies and its antagonism towards women. So I'm beginning to get a focus for the anger against Christianity. Whereas I was baffled before and couldn't explain it, I now feel that I have identified the things that Christianity, as exemplified in the Nicene Creed, has done to women.

I became involved in feminist ritual-making by going to the United Women's Conventions that were held first in 1973, then in 1977, then in 1979. At the 1979 convention, in the geographical groupings at the end of it, I stood up and asked if there were any others who were interested in becoming involved in a Christian feminist group. We held meetings from late 1979 right through 1980 and we still called ourselves "Christian feminists".

And then at the begining of 1981 we organized a conference which we called a "Women's Spirituality Conference" here in Christchurch at Meadowpark Camp. At that conference a number of women came along who were not interested in Christian feminism as such, and several of them organized rituals which were self-blessing rituals and rituals about symbolic things that people had brought along. From that early 1981 conference we decided to form a ritual group, whereas some of the others remained in a Christian feminist group. We had our first ritual at Hallowmas at the end of April in 1981. We discovered there had been thirteen of us there quite by chance which seemed very symbolic.

Scarlett

My family were atheist really. My father went to Presbyterian harriers and there was the funeral of my grandparents done in the Presbyterian church, but they never went to church. Actually, to me, the most spiritual thing in the household was that my father was totally religious about going for his run. I expect he went into a meditative state. Also there were these strange little books about dreams and astral experiences and all these kinds of things; there seemed to be a time in his past -- when he was in his twenties -- when he had been interested in these things. Then later he got his mind into more intellectual things, studying, etc.

I felt at a period of my life an urgent need to be with other women and to be with them on that spiritual level. I'd been going to therapy and that had awakened a whole lot of sudden urgent needs and this was one of them. I'd actually left therapy, I'd got to a point when I didn't want to carry on. I felt a need for a break. Then Juliet Batten's ritual group came along. It was something there for me; it felt great because I didn't need to keep expending emotional energy and yet I was still learning.

After doing the six week ritual course I went back into therapy feeling very safe because I had this new awareness that I realized had been a need in me for a long time.

Megwyn

I wasn't particularly brought up in the Christian church at all. My mother was an atheist; my father was a lapsed Anglican. I was sent to Sunday School which I hated. But I did go to youth holiday camps because that was one wonderful way to get a holiday. Because of the influence of really delightful people, especially nice women, I became part of a youth movement which was quite vital in New Zealand in those days -- that was in the Presbyterian church in Southland. I continued

in that all the way through secondary school, and when I went to Teachers' College in 1955 I got involved in the Student Christian Movement which was at that time considered very radical and was not liked by mainstream churches because it was too based on social action and socialism. Out of that group came people like the leaders of HART and CARE and the anti-racism people -- people who were concerned with the issues that were going on in the world.

At that stage I was still kicking -- I was still a bit of a rebel in the Church. I hadn't any awareness about sexism -- looking back I can see that all those people were incredibly sexist. There was still a very male-based structure in the Church. I stayed in that through my marriage and became a Methodist which was freer. I got into some self-esteem stuff through the Methodist church, and really liked the freedom of the ritual and the ability to communicate and be helped through that group.

From then I started to read feminist books and went on to build up my own self-esteem. I started reading Christian feminist articles where the whole idea of God being male was questioned. I was quite excited about that.

When I moved to Auckland I joined a Christian feminist group. This was in 1981, the year of the tour -- a time when lots of people had their whole insides shaken up, their whole value system, everything. At the end of that I started questioning my involvement in all kinds of things. I joined lots of radical groups like HART and CARE and conservation groups, and got more and more angry with how the Church was not taking part in what was going on in the world.

One of the groups I belonged to was an alternative worship community that met on a Friday night in Auckland with a lot of fringe church people. One woman had already been to a Lea Holford course. On those nights someone would set up some kind of alternative ritual. We did lots of things liking lighting candles and meditating and creative visualization. I'd been reading Mary Daly and The Changing of the Gods [by Naomi Goldenberg] and lots of other articles. Then we started reading Starhawk.

Without really realizing it, I shifted from a Church base into ritual-making, and found that absolutely wonderful. It was the freshness of the symbols and how they could mean something personally. After that I really couldn't go back to the Church. I realized that so much of what we'd been doing in the Church was outside us; it was not really talking to me where I was at. It had actually been a struggle all along -- the feeling that I wasn't good enough because I wasn't fitting into what was expected of me by the Church authorities.

I went to Lea Holford's course where straight away we were into a whole variety of symbols and different things that seemed so alive and so vital and touched me immediately. I would go exhausted at the end of a school day to one of her courses, wonder how on earth I was going to get involved, but every time there was a feeding. I'd go home feeling really integrated.

Kez

For me it was ritual that was the attraction. Ever since I can remember -- since I was about five -- I liked to have ritual. It didn't matter what it was... whether it was saying grace before dinner or making sure my room was just right before I went to bed. I used to go and hug this tree all the time when I was eight years old -- it was my God/Goddess, whatever you want to call it. I looked for ritual all my life.

I spent a long time resenting the fact that my parents weren't Catholic because there seemed to be an incredible amount of ritual in the Catholic church. My parents were boring old Baptists and we didn't go to church very often, just on Christmas Day. I used to go into Catholic churches and sit in them on my own and look at the white candles and wish I could have one.

When I was twelve or thirteen I discovered the Pentecostal church. That was pretty way out stuff. I was quite intrigued by all the speaking in tongues and singing out praise to the Lord. I stayed with that church about six months because of all the ritual, singing and dance. But I got very freaked out too because of my father's reaction -- he thought it was really about witchcraft. There was a woman pastor who ran the group which I always thought was quite significant. I got put off the church because I got very close to being abused by one of the guys who took me there. I left, and left myself high and dry for a long time.

Then I lived in the Bay of Islands for a long time and used to do my own kind of rituals like going to the beach and collecting shells and making patterns and sitting watching the tide going in and out. But I wanted to talk about it, and I wanted to share experiences. And I wanted to do it in a group because I'm quite tribal.

I came to Auckland and looked for a long time for a ritual group. I knew it had to be with women ultimately because of my lesbianism, and also because I couldn't imagine any guys that I wanted to do ritual with. I knew it was going to be really personal; it was going to involve my menstrual cycle and it was going to involve the death of my mother and I just couldn't get a sense of that with men.

I heard about Juliet's feminist ritual-making course and I was very excited. I had no idea what feminist ritual was. I was very ignorant, but just fell in love with making my wand... all that sort of thing.

I knew groups existed but I never thought that I would be able to be part of one because I hadn't gone through the education for that sort of thing. I thought ritual groups were for women who'd known each other for ages. You got passed this secret word in the hall and you could join. In a way that happened when I moved into Sybil's house. I mentioned this and she said, "Well, we have this ritual group", and it was like getting the secret word. I was so excited.

So that's what it was for me. I knew it was out there somewhere. I was like Alice in the Looking Glass really. I just had to find it. I'm very pleased to be part of it now. I came to my first real ritual at Candlemas

with [group name]. I felt it was very, very powerful. Just seeing all those candles floating... it was like all of a sudden what I'd been searching for in ritual had just come to be. It was just amazing. That's what brought me to feminist ritual-making -- it was the ritual and that unity of women.

Galadriel

I grew up in a strict fundamentalist Christian background and there were a number of results. One of them was that I lost a sense of magic and beauty and wonder of life. And so I loved science fiction and fantasy books. Magic had always fascinated me but I didn't attach any importance to it because of my upbringing.

When I was sixteen I started getting a really strong sense of despair and I thought I needed to break away from Christianity. But at church people said you couldn't leave and go to a void -- if you didn't have God in your life you had a void. And I knew that. I'd seen lots of people who'd left the church and didn't make it for that reason.

When I was twenty one I disliked myself and my life so badly that I made a suicide attempt. Once I came to that point, I realized I needed to make some real changes and one of them was finding an alternative religion. I went to Pathfinder bookshop and looked through all the stuff on witchcraft, but it was all so heavy. I didn't like the flavour of Satanism. I looked for something with a bit of magic and something that had a spirituality base that wasn't too restrictive, not too entrenched in what you had to conform to.

Then I read a few things, one of them by Juliet Batten, that were about women making it their own way. And that's basically what I did -- I started developing my own way. I thought about it for a long, long time. There were a lot of risks involved for me. I really had been trained to believe that getting involved in witchcraft was like saying: "Okay, I'm quite willing to go to hell". It's an amazing shift in your thinking to say: "Okay, I'm going to go that way".

And so I decided on my witch name and I began my career as a witch. Then I think about a year later I got involved with Juliet Batten. I wrote away to her and got involved in an open ritual and then she sent me some material about a course and that's when I met the other women in our group.

What attracted me to it? I think a sense of magic. And a feeling of being able to creatively visualize how my life could be... having the right to decide.

Whatever the process by which a woman comes to self-identify as a witch, it is a process which in every case she initiates and controls

herself. No one is converted to witchcraft in the way that people may be converted to, for instance, Christianity. Witches do not proselytize -- a person's spiritual path is regarded as her/his own business and responsibility. Witches' priority is not to build up a large spiritual community: they are much more concerned about effecting broad attitudinal changes in society with respect to social justice and environmental issues (see chapter eight). Women may invite friends whom they know or judge to be sympathetic to or interested in witchcraft to an open ritual, as happened to Alex, but pressure is never placed on anyone to adopt particular beliefs or to join a ritual group. On the contrary, many women I met, including Kez and Sybil, told me that they had spent years actively searching for a ritual group or coven to join.

So women are not converted to witchcraft: they do not decide to swap one world view for another they deem to be superior as the result of reading a convincing book, listening to a convincing speaker, meeting charismatic individuals or having an outstanding spiritual experience. It seems that for spiritually inclined feminists, witchcraft is a means of sacralizing feminism. For many women, discovering witchcraft simply means discovering a name for what they already believe and value and for what some of them have been already practising spontaneously. In her account quoted above, Sybil says that "finding Women's Spirituality felt like coming home". Women who had been in the habit of doing rituals alone (Juliet, Alex, Kez, Bonney, Sybil and Galadriel) found the transition to working in a more formal group context easy and natural.

For women attracted to witchcraft, the element of personal autonomy is crucial. Bonney left the Anglican Church and the

Unification Church because she "felt [she] had lost contact with [her] own spirituality through having to follow such a strictly prescribed way of life". She chose to become a witch because "it gave [her] the freedom for [her] individual expression". Galadriel talked about looking for a religion that "wasn't too restrictive", read about women "making it their own way", and then "decided on [her] witch name and began [her] career as a witch". Sybil talked about "shopping around" for a religion. Joan was attracted to witchcraft because it was "something that women could create for themselves". Joy decided after participating in a feminist ritual-making workshop that she did not want to join the on-going group that formed after the workshop (the group that I joined), preferring to "step back and just have a think about it". Later she decided that she did want to join, and is now very committed to and actively involved in the group.

Because women, on the whole, undertake their spiritual quests alone, because there is no pressure or even encouragement to join a ritual group, and because personal choice, responsibility and empowerment are important features of the world view of feminist witchcraft, women's autonomy is assured. When women decide to leave a group, as happened on several occasions over two years in the group I joined, the decision is respected. During the farewell the woman's decision to leave is acknowledged as being "right for her", her time spent in the group is celebrated, the group's blessing is given to the woman's future path, and gifts may be exchanged.

More than anything else, witchcraft is attractive because it gives women a theory of connection. This connection works on three levels. First, it provides a theory and an experience of inner connectedness. In

witchcraft there is no spirit/body split as there is in Christianity, where the spirit and the body -- spirituality and carnality -- are conceptualized as being in conflict with one another. Bonney expressed this sense of connection as "a very whole experience, a feeling that whatever there was that was spiritual in the cosmos was living in me and I was a part of it -- I was having an exchange with it". Her exploration of her own spirituality gave her the "feeling that [her] spiritual life and [her] body are one". Sybil also referred to this sense of spirit/body connection: "It felt like every cell in my body was remembering sensations, feelings, that must go back centuries and centuries for women".

By collapsing the dichotomous relationship between the spirit and the body, witchcraft permits women to celebrate their sexuality. According to the witch-hunters of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, it was woman's sexuality which ultimately damned her: as noted in chapter two, the Malleus Maleficarum declared that "all witchcraft stems from carnal lust which is in women insatiable". While, in the historical Church's view, women's heterosexual lust is bad enough, lust between women has been, if possible, even more of an anathema to the Church: if women must be sexual, it is thought, at least they should submit sexually to men. Witchcraft sanctions and affirms both heterosexual and lesbian sexuality. Several of the lesbian women I met (including Kez and Sybil in their interview extracts quoted above) explicitly made a connection between their lesbianism and their attraction to Goddess spirituality.

As I noted above in this chapter, ritual enables women to "connect with" or "tune in to" the issues and concerns that are important in their lives and provides a tool for processing what emerges from these

understandings. Joy was aware that in planning her retirement ritual she was deepening the meaning of the transition for herself: she wanted to be fully "engaged" in the process of the changes which were coming in her life. Juliet spoke of women's need to internally bridge the experience of participating in creating and exhibiting a collaborative art project with the dismantling of the project and of the group.

Secondly, feminist witchcraft provides a theory and an experience of connection with other people, both within and outside the witch community. According to witches, every person is an expression of the Goddess and all are equal irrespective of cultural, racial, class and gender distinctions. Bonney referred to the "sense of connection" with other women that she felt in identifying as a witch. Other women (Sybil, Joy, Noreen, Megwyn) also talked about this desire to belong to a community of like-minded women. For Kez, ultimately "it was the ritual and that unity of women" which attracted her to feminist witchcraft. While women's sense of connection is primarily with other women, feminist witches are not antagonistic towards men. They are, however, antagonistic towards patriarchal institutions.

Thirdly, feminist witchcraft gives women a strong sense of connection with the earth. Witches believe that all of nature, as well as every person, is an expression of the Goddess. Starhawk writes (1989:22-3):

> She <u>is</u> reality, the manifest deity, omnipresent in all of life, in each of us. The Goddess is not separate from the world -- She <u>is</u> the world, and all things in it: moon, sun, earth, star, stone, seed, flowing river, wind, wave, leaf and branch, bud and blossom, fang and claw, woman and man. In Witchcraft, flesh and spirit are one.... Religion is a matter of relinking, with the divine within and with her outer manifestations in all of the human and natural world.

This belief in the connectedness between the whole of the natural world and humanity is the source of witches' extreme concern with environmental issues. The sacralization of nature means that women tend to anthropomorphize nature. Admiring a full moon or a rounded hill they will say: "Isn't she beautiful!". As my own involvement in the movement increased, I began to feel extremely rude referring to an element in the natural physical world as "it". I began to reconceptualize my view of nature, began to take seriously the Gaia hypothesis (see chapter six), became familiar with the moon's cycling, and minded less about getting dirty, cold and wet.[2]

Women in feminist witchcraft place a great deal of emphasis on becoming aware of the earth's cycles -- the eight Sabbats mark points in the annual cycle -- and frequently talk about "tuning in" personally to these cycles. For example, a woman leading a guided meditation at the beginning of a ritual will often invite the others present to contemplate the season, the current phase of the moon, and the current phase of their own menstrual cycles. The four elements -- air, fire, water and earth -- are invoked at every ritual (see chapter nine), and women associate the symbolic meanings of the elements with aspects of their own personalities. Air is symbolically linked with the intellect and will, water with the emotions, fire with passion and energy, and earth with the body. A woman who is said to be "all air" is highly intellectual and pays little attention to the intuitive, emotional aspects of herself. One who is an "earth woman" is self-sufficient, "grounded" and intuitive. The constant use of natural metaphors enhances women's sense of connection with the earth and its/her natural processes and cycles.

In the accounts of how women became involved in feminist witchcraft included in this chapter, women frequently refer to the importance of the connection between their spirituality and the natural world. Joy spoke of how her childhood, during which she lived "in the country in a place which was very remote, very high up, a place where it was very windy, very wild", influenced her later life. Explaining her enjoyment of the first open ritual she attended, Alex said: "I think it was that coming into contact with the elements and feeling so really good about it all.... I like the cold air around me and hearing the sound of the wind and waves". Juliet, Kez, Alex and Bonney talk in their accounts about the rituals they performed alone on beaches and a hill-top. Joan, whose initial attraction to witchcraft was intellectual, notes that as she became more involved she observed "the way that people started to tune in to the landscape and to the earth more".

My findings about what attracts women to witchcraft echo those of Yolanda Wisewitch in her 1987 study of Christchurch women involved in Women's Spirituality. The reasons for involvement given by the fifteen women she interviewed fitted into four categories: first, women were attracted by a religion which connected them with other women and which was "totally woman-identified"; second, women enjoyed the spiritual freedom and autonomy which Women's Spirituality offered after the rigidity of their past religions; third, Women's Spirituality appealed because it affirms women's power and beauty -- "It's loving yourself"; and fourth, Women's Spirituality provides a connection with the earth and the seasonal cycles. Concluding her section on the reasons for women's involvement in the movement, Wisewitch (1987:37)

writes: "The word that comes up again and again in what they say is 'connection'".

In the remainder of this chapter I discuss the issues surrounding women's self-identification as "witch". In chapter three I stated that women's intention in adopting the label "witch" is to challenge conventional interpretations of the witch-craze and to draw attention to a feminist re-evaluation of the women labelled "witches". I noted that feminist witches are well aware that the women killed were victims of labelling and not self-identified witches. For contemporary women, I stated, the witch has become a potent symbol of woman as possessor of power and knowledge which is not sourced in nor controlled by patriarchal institutions and not dependent on patriarchal legitimation or approval.

The women I met who self-identify as "witch" do so according to these terms. Their image of the witch clearly differs from the traditional popular image. As can be seen in the extracted quotes below, the definitions which emerged in interviews focussed on the witch as woman of wisdom, healing and power:

Galadriel: I like the title "witch". A witch to me means "woman in control" and "woman directing her destiny". Part of venerating the Goddess within me is being a witch and claiming that.

Scarlett: For me "witch" means the person who can be fiery. The witch part of me is the part that will be me regardless of other people's expectations.

Sybil: I'm very proud about identifying as a witch in the fullest sense of the word. I am a healer, a storyteller.

Joan: I'm a feminist witch. I like that term. A "witch" to me is just a woman who makes rituals. We're not somebody against Christians

who's having sex with Satan -- all that Christian-invented crap. A witch is a healer and a wicca and a woman who has a herb garden.

Bonney: I certainly wouldn't deny anyone calling me a feminist witch. I would see myself more in that category than in any. Sometimes when I'm cooking up a cough remedy I see myself as a witch. At those moments I really do identify with the women who've done that for thousands of years. And it's really quite wonderful.

Kez: It took me a long time to put that sticker -- "My other car is a broom" -- on my car. I didn't want to have to justify myself to anyone and I didn't want to start to feel vulnerable. Women throughout the centuries have been made vulnerable because of what they know.

Megwyn: Yes, I am a witch. A witch is a wise woman who is gaining the wisdom of centuries, of passed on intuitive and healing ideas, values for the earth. A witch is a woman who is free to be herself. The Church couldn't cope with women being wise, so they had to squash them.

In a group discussion women contrasted their images of the witch with the dominant society's image:

Sybil I think I've always been fascinated with witches. Even as a child I was aware that the witch was thought of in totally different terms -- you know, the image of the old witch down the road. I was always fascinated with them, never, never horrified. I don't have any memories of fear attached to them.

Galadriel I've got this lovely image of the witch... the Queen of Wands. She's got lots of energy; she's bright, cheery, gets things going. She's the person I'd like to be.

Scarlett Sometimes I see the witch as Kali. The name "witch" is very much a part of woman's culture for me.

Galadriel I always associated the witch with magic. I was always very curious about how the gingerbread castle got there. What skill, expertise, or mastery did she have to work things like that? I read Lord of the Rings quite young, and I really identified with the Elven women there. That was my image of "witch" -- woman of power, prestige, and magic.

Kez I identify with the witch because I see the witch in my childhood and in story books as an outcast in society -- she was considered an outcast in society. There was always a witch in our neighbourhood; there was always an old woman who lived in a house that had curtains

that didn't open very much and she lived behind a hedge. I spent most of my time not frightened of her but very worried for her. I was worried that she wasn't warm enough, and I wondered how she got out to get food. I was worried that the boys in the neighbourhood would attack her. It was very real for me, that worry all the time. I perhaps relate to the witch in the same way as I relate to being a lesbian... as an outcast.

Sybil — I never see witches as having a "bad" association for me. I see witches as being in society's terms "naughty", as are all powerful, so-called "unruly" women. Identifying as "witch", and also identifying as a lesbian witch, I feel more fulfilled in this time of my life than I have in any other.

Scarlett — It's so interesting hearing people speak, because I'm just realizing how lost all the aspects of being a witch have been to me -- like the healing and the wisdom.

Sybil — I don't know how it happened, because she used to be the one who delivered babies -- she never ate them.

She has feelings and needs and a voice and everything that's quite normal. That was an image that was held up to us of the witch as being synonymous with the Devil or the harlot.

Feminist witches are well aware that they are contesting the popular image of the witch: their self-identification as "witch" is conditional upon "witch" being defined according to their terms. All would deny witch identity in a context where "witch" is defined by the dominant culture according to the traditional stereotype of the witch. This explains why some women are ambivalent or reticent about self-identifying as "witch" and why for most the decision about whether or not to identify is based on social context. As I noted in chapter three, this decision is not made once and for all, it is made over and over as an individual woman judges each social context.

The paradox is that while women are determined ultimately that the dominant culture's image of the witch should be transformed in line

with a feminist re-evaluation of the witch, and while they believe that reclaiming the name "witch" themselves is an effective way of assisting this transformation, they are also frightened of the possible repercussions of openly and unreservedly identifying as "witch". To re-invent the witch, as Juliet points out in the quotation heading this chapter, is no small nor easy task. Feminist witches are acutely aware not only of the dimensions of the task, but also of its dangers for them personally. The fear of a Christian fundamentalist backlash is realistic: such a backlash would not only make individual women vulnerable, it would damage the reclaiming process as a whole.

The other reason why some women do not make a point of openly self-identifying as witches is that they are not interested in proselytizing. As I have noted above in this chapter, feminist witches are much more urgently concerned about people outside the movement changing their attitudes towards environmental destruction and social injustices than they are about converting people to a religion called "witchcraft".

Most witches draw a line between public and private self-identification. The line is drawn in different places. At one end of the scale there are women who do not claim to be witches even in a private context but who see some parts of themselves -- aspects of their characters, experiences or work -- as witch-like. Women talked about "the witch part" of themselves as the "fiery", "banshee" parts of their personalities; in relation to themselves as healers or as possessors of "women's knowledge"; or as the person who loves cats and loves wearing black.

The majority of women in feminist ritual groups do identify as witches within the private context of the group where it is safe to do so and where a common understanding of what being a witch means is shared by group members. One woman said:

> I identify as a feminist witch within the women's circles and anything that involves the public I call myself a ritual-maker. I don't want to be drawing down negative energies upon me because I want to protect the spiritual process. Part of my protection is not calling myself a witch in the media because for me that's drawing down unnecessary hostile energies towards me. I know there's a lot of fear out there. I've come through the women's movement fighting for abortion and getting the fundamentalist backlash. And I've been at the women's forum with those fundamentalist women where they come in busloads. I have experienced the amount of power they have and the amount of fear they have. I'd get much more noticed if I went round calling myself a witch, but I see no value in having that.

Beyond the context of the ritual group, most witches I met judge carefully whom to tell that they are witches. There are several important criteria for public self-identification. First, women only identify as witches in a context where they have an opportunity to explain what such an identification means to them. Thus, public self-identification virtually always goes hand in hand with an attempt to deconstruct the stereotypical image of the wicked witch. Noreen said:

> I attempt to explain what I mean when I say I'm a witch if I'm talking to friends who know me well, and I also attempt to explain paganism to people who are sympathetic. It's really impossible to explain it to people who are antagonistic, but I do try with friends. My friends are generally sympathetic. They sometimes don't understand, but they are usually quite happy to ask questions to try to find out what I'm talking about, and when they do hear, they generally are very interested and perhaps find themselves in agreement with it.
>
> I certainly don't discuss ritual-making or the words "witch" or "pagan" with casual acquaintances -- I never mention anything like that because of the impossibility of explaining it to them.

Megwyn said:

> I'm not likely to go round saying I am a witch unless I could give a whole lead in to people to say what a witch really is so that they had some notion of the historical background and how the horrible ideas have been brought in very recently. It really is only the last few hundred years that all that horrible imagery has been brought in.

Second, women usually only disclose their witch identification to people who know them fairly well. Women expressed the concern that people should have a balanced and rounded view of them before finding out that they are witches. Galadriel said:

> Occasionally it can get in the way of how people see you. But if it fits into the context of the conversation and you're essentially validated as a person, introducing the fact that you're a witch is just an extra fill-in to your character.

Joan said:

> I think "witch" is just a label I'd use for myself and also my close friends. People who know where it's from and have other dimensions of me, not just that.

Third, women tell others that they are witches when they judge that it is useful and safe to do so.

I noted above that at one end of the scale are women who do not self-identify as witches but who think of themselves as being witch-like in certain respects. At the other end of the scale are women who openly tell their friends, family and colleagues that they are witches. In chapter six I quoted two letters published in the Women's Spirituality Newsletter written by women who, not without some misgivings, have "come out" publicly as witches. For these women, publicly reclaiming the name "witch" is a way of "moving out of the shadow of the burning times... into an age where the feminine is revered and honoured". If

witches become visible, these women believe, people's fear, mistrust and misconceptions about them can be addressed and eventually removed.

However, even women who are publicly relatively open about their witch identification are cautious, and not only because they do not want to become victims of a fundamentalist backlash. As I pointed out in chapter three, the point of publicly adopting the name "witch" is to expose the historical witch as an invention and to explicate the link between the wise woman and the witch and the process by which the former became anathematized. In short, the only point of publicly self-identifying as "witch" is to re-invent the witch. Women who are committed to participating in this re-invention process walk a fine line, and they know it. In the interview extract which follows, Sybil speaks of her sense of connection with the historical witches, the political aspect of her public self-identification as a witch, and her pride, tempered with caution, in claiming this identification.

> I'm very proud about identifying as a witch in the fullest sense of the word. I am a healer, a storyteller. I wear very proudly my pentacle around my neck and on my finger as well. Coming out as a witch for me is a very similar process to coming out as a lesbian. There are situations where I won't necessarily say I am a lesbian or I am a witch, but by wearing those symbols proudly, I feel it is easier for other women who also identify as being witches or lesbians to recognize me. It's saying I'm not alone, I'm identifying with a group of women.
>
> For me it's also quite a political thing too because I've noticed that all manner of people will actually comment on the symbol I'm wearing around my neck. It's been very interesting. I'm quite happy to talk about it, but I will judge very quickly by their reaction how much to talk about it and what to say. Some people know immediately what it is. My mother recognized it. She knew I belonged to a women's spirituality group, but she said, "Oh, you've got the witch's symbol on your finger, dear!". That was absolutely fine. She did have this whole stigma which a lot of people have attached to the idea of witchcraft which I've talked to her at great length about.
>
> It's a reclaiming of the name for a start. "Witch" for me

> is more than wearing black, more than honouring the banshee side of myself. The witches were actually healers and there were millions of them burnt. Any one of us would have been burnt then.
>
> I think women's reluctance to take on the title "witch" does come from centuries of stigma being attached to it and the millions of women who were burnt who weren't necessarily even self-identified "witches". It was a label that was put on them. They were the healers. They were any women of power basically. Any woman who owned land. Any woman who wasn't married. Any woman who dared to say more than two words strung together. They didn't have to do much to qualify as a witch.

Near the beginning of this chapter I quoted Joan stating her belief that the terror and tragedy of three centuries of gynocide in Europe have penetrated the cultural and individual psyches of people in Western societies. These "witch ripples", she says, permeate our cultural knowledge, myths and literature. We might consider the effects of these "witch ripples" in the psyches of men and women in the two hundred years since the last witch-killings. For men, the witch is "other", to be feared, dark, dangerous and voracious. For a woman, the witch is an image of her own dark, dangerous power which she has been taught effectively to fear. The witch is an image of her old age, her aloneness, her sexual undesirability, her woman's knowing trivialized as "women's intuition" by a male-oriented intellectual tradition. For women, the witch image is more frightening. The witch is a symbol of what she can become and will be damned for becoming.

In the quotation near the beginning of the chapter, Joan goes on to say that by reclaiming the name "witch" contemporary women are finding a means of understanding why the witch-craze happened, of meeting and healing their fear of the witch, and of retrieving women's power, knowing and healing. By self-identifying as "witch", women are

reclaiming and re-instating the Crone as the third aspect of the Goddess. In doing so they are reclaiming an alienated part of themselves and identifying themselves as Goddess. Remembering the "witch" -- the Crone Goddess -- is a way of re-membering ourselves.

Notes

1. See note 8 following chapter five.
2. It seems that some women take the connection between humanity and the earth even further -- they sense not just a connection with the earth, but an identification or merging with it/her. During a winter-time ritual in a very damp paddock in the rural Waikato, one woman said, in tears, "Sometimes I could rain for days and days when I feel her [earth's] pain" (referring to environmental destruction).

Chapter 8

Witches' World Views/The Attraction of the Goddess

> I believe women must develop a theory of symbol and thealogy[1] congruent with their experience at the same time as they "remember and invent" new symbol systems.
>
> From "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections" by Carol Christ in The Politics of Women's Spirituality (1982:77).

> The first "goddess", as it were, that I ever encountered was Hecate. She came to me in a time that was very dark and where I was very depressed and suicidal. I've always honoured that dark side of myself and that dark side of her because of that. She isn't only the virgin. She's wildness and she's running about screaming and she's all those things that are not allowed to be God.
>
> From my interview with Sybil, 15 May 1992, Auckland.

> Somewhere along the way the Goddess got taken away from us and put OUT THERE. We had to earn it. I don't understand why that was necessary.
>
> From my interview with Kez, 15 May 1992, Auckland.

A skeptic I met during the period of my fieldwork defined feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality as a "designer religion". It was a flippant and patronizing remark, but also fairly astute. Goddess spirituality draws on Paleolithic and Neolithic images of the Goddess and invokes a wide range of goddesses from contemporary non-Western cultures with a vigorous and unabashed eclecticism. It draws on a range of philosophical perspectives and religious traditions: the holistic, cosmological world view of the Greek philosophers, the Romantic view that nature is an organic totality, the Hegelian view which sought to transcend dualisms, the Hindu concept of karma with its recognition of

continuous cycles of change (Morris 1987:8), Jungian ideas about the collective unconscious and archetypes, and poststructuralist ideas about the collapse of metanarratives. It draws on the women's movement, the ecology movement, the peace movement, alternative religious traditions, alternative healing, and aspects of New Age philosophies and therapies. It attracts women who are smart, arty, left wing, right-brained, into recycling and rebirthing, tofu and the Tarot, and who are committed to both personal empowerment and social transformation.

"Designer religion" is apt in so far as the intellectual and the aesthetic are neatly integrated in Goddess spirituality. Women in the movement are highly literate and articulate about their beliefs, and are used to and comfortable examining the intellectual basis of their spirituality. Yet equal emphasis is placed on the aesthetic. Rituals are carefully designed to have sensuous appeal: incense and candles are lit; flowers, beautiful cloths and symbolic objects are arranged on the altar; poetic invocations to the Goddess are spoken; music is played and made; and each ritual concludes with feasting.

In the sense that it is trendy, creative, eclectically constructed and highly self-conscious, Goddess spirituality can be seen as a designer religion. But women in the movement are not self-indulgent opportunists nor poseurs preoccupied with image whose rhetoric, beliefs, values and commitment are superficial. To dismiss it with a cute label is to misunderstand and underestimate what Goddess spirituality is about.

Like all religions, it is a constructed spirituality; but unlike other religions, its participants are not only aware of but also emphasize and

celebrate its constructedness and their own role in this process. Starhawk (1989:200) says:

> Witchcraft is indeed the Old Religion, but it is undergoing so much change and development at present that, in essence, it is being recreated rather than revived. The feminist religion of the future is presently being formed. Those of us who are involved in this re-formation must look closely at the cultural context in which our own ideas about religion were formed, and examine the many regressive tendencies present in society today. Otherwise, the new incarnation of the Goddess will be subtly molded on the very forms we are working to transcend.

In the quotation below from my interview with her, Joan states her belief that the notion of the sacred is a human artefact and claims that scientists have no greater access to nor claim on "real truth" than Christian fundamentalists -- despite the prevalent, unchallenged belief to the contrary held both in academia and in society generally. She sees it as quite possible for individuals to hold passionate personal religious beliefs while understanding that all such beliefs are meaningful only because those who hold them charge them with meaning. Joan said:

> I don't believe in any gods. I don't believe in life after death or sin or any of that sort of crap. I believe in the sacred and I believe in the spiritual, but I think it's contextual. I think that human beings create the notion of the sacred; I think it's a human artefact. I think we create the sacred because life's too horrible otherwise. I have quite a functionalist view of it, and I think there's nothing wrong with that.
>
> I think it's wonderful to have an imaginative world of tuning into the earth and the landscape. I've never, ever been religious -- I always thought it was an ideology of great power and danger, especially to women. On the other hand, I do think this [Goddess spirituality] is a really good way of not hurting anyone or getting into some sort of rule-bound dogma. And I think it's fun. It's great to feel that there are supernatural things, and I think it's fine to invent them. Because when you're actually doing the rituals, you do believe in it. You're not sitting there all cynical saying, "What a load of rubbish!".

> I think people like The Sceptics' Society and the Rationalists are real death-dealing types. They are part of the problem. It's almost like you have this huge system of Christian morality and belief, and up against that you have these dork scientists. They're both as bad as each other, if you ask me. The ones who are the Rationalists don't see that they have got a perspective -- they think they've got the Real Truth. I don't think there's any real truth, but I prefer this [Goddess spirituality]. I have more control over this truth than I do over the received dogma, and that's why I do it. The fact that you know you're creating it doesn't take away from the sacredness of it. If you think something can only be sacred if something higher than you creates it, you've obviously got to go into one of the traditional religions (or shoot yourself).
>
> You can understand about relativity and still fiercely believe in something. It's never been a contradiction to me, and I don't think a lot of women have a problem with it either. I think it's only the trained-rat, patriarchal mind that has a problem with it.
>
> I think magic is marvellous. There's got to be more to life than watching television and eating McDonalds. There's got to be a spiritual dimension, and I think Goddess spirituality is a brilliant way of doing it. It doesn't hurt anybody. It brings women together -- which is why of course they used to burn us for doing it -- and I also think it has terrific potential for good things for the environment. You can't fault it really.

Joan sees the sacralizing of life as both inevitable and positive -- it provides the "spiritual dimension" which gives coherence to and a basis for what she regards as a healthy world view, enhances bonding amongst women, and motivates them to work for the protection of the environment. There is the implication in what Joan says that if all religious belief systems are created anyway, feminists might as well create one which fits their world view, one they have control over, and one which is useful and affirming for women.

Echoing Joan's refusal to privilege a "scientific" or rationalist world view over a religious one on the grounds that both are intellectual

constructions, Galadriel implies in the quotation below that atheism, rather than being an absence of spiritual belief, actually constitutes a coherent system of beliefs.

> I think people have a need for some form of spirituality. Few people exist in a vacuum. Even those who claim to be atheist have a set of very fixed thought processes about it. It has a culture of its own.

In her chapter on "Creating Religion" in The Spiral Dance, Starhawk describes the conflict between religion and science as spurious -- the dichotomy between the two is a result of the Judaeo-Christian view that God and nature are separate, that God is a transcendent entity who controls and rules the world. She says (1989:202):

> When God is felt to be separate from the physical world, religion can be split off from science, and limited to the realm of things having to do with God. But the Goddess is manifest in the physical world, and the more we understand its workings, the better we know Her. Science and religion are both quests for truth -- they differ only in their methodology and the set of symbols they use to describe their findings. The field of inquiry is the same.

The work of Rupert Sheldrake is taken very seriously and often quoted by women in Goddess spirituality (see chapter six). Sheldrake (1991:3) argues that the mechanistic theory of nature, the central doctrine of orthodox science, is relatively recent -- only three centuries old -- and that prior to the seventeenth century "it was taken for granted that the world of nature was alive". Sheldrake writes (1991:5):

> We have to remember that what are now commonplace assumptions were once controversial theories, rooted in peculiar kinds of theology and philosophy, believed only by a handful of European intellectuals. Through the successes of technology, the mechanistic theory of nature is now triumphant on a global scale; it is built into the official orthodoxy of economic progress. It has become a kind of religion. And it has led us to our present

crisis.

Sheldrake claims (1991:90-2), however, that "old-style deterministic physics" is now becoming outmoded in the wake of developments such as quantum theory and, more recently, chaos theory which argues that while "ordered", most physical systems are so complex that the human mind can never completely account for or predict that complexity. He says (1991:92) that as a result of recent developments "an inherent spontaneity in the life of nature has once again been recognized by science" and that (1991:95) "[n]ature is now once again seen to be self-organizing". This reanimation of nature does not, however, according to Sheldrake, return us to a premechanistic world view, but leads us to a postmechanistic one with "an even stronger sense of her spontaneous life and creativity than the stable, repetitive world of Greek, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy". Learning to view Earth as a living, self-regulating organism leads to a holistic philosophy of nature and an acknowledgement that humans, rather than being the owners or stewards of the planet (Lovelock 1988:14), are simply another species, are, metaphorically speaking, all "Earth's children" (Sheldrake 1991:150), and as such are responsible for protecting the balance of nature. This holistic philosophy of nature, of the crucial interdependency of all plant and animal species and the earth, is fundamental to Goddess spirituality. I return to it below.

Goddess spirituality is not a simple revival of paganism. During workshops, rituals and their day to day lives, women habitually invoke ancient "pagan" goddesses, mostly Greek, but, as one woman pointed out during a Continuing Education workshop at the University of Waikato, there is nothing to stop individual or groups of women

inventing entirely new goddesses with new names if they wish. Several others in the group agreed heartily; one who had just moved into the Waikato commented that she would like to create new goddesses to help her to familiarize herself with and "feel connected" to her new environment. Thus, Goddess spirituality goes beyond an eclectic gathering up of pantheons of goddesses from societies which are historically or culturally distant from contemporary Western cultures: women in the movement are welcome to create their own new ones. I described Goddess spirituality above as a constructed spirituality, yet in a sense this is inaccurate. For individual women and for the movement as a whole, the process of constructing is and will continue to be dynamic and on-going.

The concept of "Goddess" is not restricted to a number -- even a very large number -- of named goddesses, either ancient, non-Western or newly created, who are worshipped or invoked as if they existed in some transcendent sense "out there". Some women in the movement speak of goddesses or pray to goddesses in this way, but mostly goddesses are thought of, taught about in workshops, and written about in books such as Bolen's Goddesses in Everywoman as archetypes or images of womanhood. I discussed this in chapter three. The concept of "Goddess" includes all these archetypal goddesses, and a whole range of other meanings as well. The earth is the sacred body of the Goddess; she is expressed in all of nature -- in rocks, water, fire and earth and in plants, animals and all people; she is spoken of as the Creative Energy, the Life Source, the Ultimate Reality, the Sacred Feminine, the Great Mother, and the cycle of life and death. Underlying all these meanings is the particular view of the world shared by women

in the movement: "the vision of life as a living unity" (Baring and Cashford 1991:xi).

There is an interesting paradox here. Goddess spirituality can be seen as a designer religion created out of such apparently disparate fragments as millenia-old Goddess images and myths and contemporary social, political and environmental concerns. Yet, as Baring and Cashford (above) say, the world view of Goddess spirituality is essentially holistic. As I concluded in chapter seven, more than anything else, Goddess spirituality provides women with a theory of connection -- of personal spirit/body connection, of connection with other people, and of connection with the environment. In the introductory notes she gives out to participants in her Goddess workshops taught through Continuing Education at Auckland University, Lea Holford writes:

> The central theme of the Goddess religions concerns the wholeness and continuity of life, encompassing the transformations between birth and death, light and dark, pain and pleasure. Known as the "myth of eternal return", this recurring order of fixed forms constitutes a miracle of continuous arising and dissolution.... All living things go through cycles of transformation and return to repeat them again and again. Thus, the mother gives birth to a daughter, her body having transformed into another of like kind. The harvest of the season dies to the winter only to be reborn in the spring through the dormant seed. The vessel itself is that which contains this transformation, the womb of life itself.

Women in the movement contrast their holistic world view with the dualistic Christian one, derived ultimately from Plato (Christ 1987:216), on which contemporary Western culture is founded. In the following extract from an article in the Brigid 1991 issue of the Women's Spirituality Newsletter, one Auckland woman describes her

confrontation with dualistic thinking and something of the process by which she consciously remakes her world view.

> During the week before the ritual I felt a need to grapple with the dualistic Christian ontology which divides the cosmos into two halves -- the good, active, pure, light of the heavenly father and the evil, passive, impure dark of the earthly mother. I wanted somehow to turn these notions on their head and clear the way for a different cosmology....
>
> Through my reading I also discovered that in the religion of the Great Goddess, the dark is positive -- the source of all creation, all life, the entire cosmos. The dark is the womb where everything is conceived and generated. It is from the dark that light and life come forth. It is the place where all brilliance and enlightenment gestates....
>
> It is too simplistic to say that in the religion of the Great Goddess there was a reversal of the Christian associations of black and white, dark and light. What is significant is that in the religion of the Great Goddess, "light" and "dark" were seen as two manifestations of the same Goddess which constantly alternate in a ceaseless cycle.
>
> We were asked to bring symbols to the ritual and I began searching for a positive symbol of the dark. I thought of the Goddess Nut whom I had first encountered in the Egyptian tombs at Luxor in 1985. Here I had seen the most breathlessly beautiful frescoes of Nut painted in azure blue and bright yellow across expansive ceilings. Nut could be seen giving birth each morning to a red disc, the sun, and swallowing the same red disc each evening to give birth to the stars and moon. It was an extraordinary experience to be deep in the side of a hill, in a womb/tomb, which gave such awesome power to a woman, a Goddess, on such a grand scale. However it is only in recent years that I've come to understand that in Luxor I experienced the preserved remains of a Goddess-centred cosmology which shows us that darkness and lightness are both part of a continuous cycle, that darkness is necessary for light, and that out of the vast darkness of the void all existence arises.

This emphasis on holism, on seeing light and dark as part of a cycle instead of polarized, is also stressed in the Women's Spirituality

Newsletter (Summer Solstice 1990) article by another Auckland woman from which the following quotation comes:

> The choice between good and evil, light and dark, waxing and waning, is irrelevant to [Goddess spirituality]. They are all sides of the same whole and for that reason women are reclaiming the dark by looking toward endarkenment instead of enlightenment -- a patriarchal ideal. Wonderful things happen in the dark -- embryos are conceived and grow, seeds germinate, and people dream.

As the first of the two preceding quotations points out, and as I noted in chapter three, women in Goddess spirituality have moved beyond wanting to "pay men back" by inverting patriarchal rule to create a system of social relations where women are dominant, and are beginning to conceive a new system in which what Riane Eisler (1988) calls the "dominator model" of social relations is replaced by a "partnership model". Eisler writes (1988:xvii): "In this model -- beginning with the most fundamental difference in our species, between male and female -- diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority". According to Eisler, a "cataclysmic turning point" occurred during the prehistory of Western civilization when "the direction of our cultural evolution was quite literally turned around" as the result of the arrival in Neolithic Europe of three waves of Indo-European (Aryan) invaders who brought different economic, social and ideological structures. This invasion ultimately meant the transition from a partnership to a dominator model of social relations, where the peaceful, Goddess-worshipping societies of Europe were transformed into "patriarchal and belligerent" ones (Gimbutas 1991:viii)[2]. Eisler's work is highly regarded and often quoted by women in the Goddess movement in New Zealand. During my interview with her, Juliet Batten said:

> I like Riane Eisler's book. The partnership model as opposed to the dominator model is a much more useful way of looking at it than matriarchy versus patriarchy, which makes matriarchy look like patriarchy in reverse, which is another dominator model. The partnership model, which evolves around the Goddess, means espousing partnership with the earth, partnership with other human beings -- they all go together.
>
> Part of that partnership is resurrecting the Goddess in order to get the equality back. We have to put a lot of energy into the Goddess to counteract all that energy that was put into the God. There's a lot of redressing and reclaiming that is there for us when we start to go for the Goddess. The Goddess for me is about reclaiming our female power, but not personal power -- female spiritual power, the power of spiritual connection. It means affirming the deep roots that we have as women. If those ancient Goddess religions had never existed we'd have no ground to stand on. It's so wonderful that they do.
>
> Riane Eisler says that the patriarchal period is just a hiccup in a whole history of partnership -- I like seeing it that way. It's very recent and very short.

In her paper "No Credence for the Creed" serialized in issues twenty seven to thirty of the Women's Spirituality Newsletter, Noreen Penny writes of the social relations in European societies prior to the Indo-European invasion which resulted in patriarchy becoming dominant between 3500 and 1500 B.C.:

> We are certain now that all were equal in these [pre-patriarchal] societies. The Goddess was the mother of all, but her representatives on earth, the women, were not the rulers nor the power-mongers. In other words, there were never matriarchies in the way that there are now patriarchies.

Under the heading "Why Study the Goddess Religions?", Lea Holford writes in the course notes for her Goddess workshops:

> The intent of this course is not to revive the ancient religions as a substitute for modern patriarchal religions.... [T]he importance of this study is to help us realize our inherent divinity as women and how this has manifested in the past. By contrasting [Goddess] religions with modern religions, perhaps we can begin to formulate a religion where both Masculine and Feminine are

> recognized as co-equal and interdependent.

Here Lea makes explicit the two points I have emphasized in this chapter thus far: that feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality is deliberately constructed and that its world view centres on holism and balance.

The last three women quoted above, Juliet Batten, Noreen Penny, and Lea Holford, are amongst the most prominent women in the Goddess spirituality movement in New Zealand. All have over ten years intense involvement in the movement; Juliet and Lea have taught numerous workshops in Auckland and in various other parts of the country, and Noreen was instrumental in starting the first ritual group in Christchurch and has identified herself with the movement in the media. Their strong emphasis of the fact that Goddess spirituality does not entertain fantasies of toppling patriarchy in favour of a utopian matriarchal future was echoed by the women with whom I worked. While most of the women I know say emphatically that they want to do ritual work in women-only groups, at least in the immediate future, they stress that this desire to work separately does not derive from a feminist separatist political stance. In my interview with her, Juliet described her vision of the future:

> I'll tell you what my vision of way ahead is. I'm very fascinated by what's been happening with Robert Bly[3] and the men's movement in the United States and how men are working with ritual. I'm starting to read a lot of the men's books, and my partner's involved in a men's group who are finding their own way. My vision way down the line is that the men obviously have to gather their spiritual power together as they discover the Wild Man[4] in themselves, and that there's going to be meeting. They've now got to do their own work and we'll meet in a different way. So I see true partnership coming way down the line. It's not going to be just a women's spirituality movement. It will be about men who are learning to honour the Goddess, and learning to find the

> Wild Man in themselves and the Dionysus and the Green Man who connects with the planet and the earth.

Although the women with whom I worked are not feminist separatists and do not want to pay men back for what three thousand years of patriarchal rule has meant for women, they are unequivocally feminist. In an article titled "Reflections about Women's Spirituality" in the Women's Spirituality Newsletter (Winter Solstice 1990), Helen Palmer, a therapist and facilitator of workshops on Women's Spirituality in Auckland and Wellington, writes:

> What is Women's Spirituality?... What does it mean for me, and for you reading this?
>
> For me, I know it's inextricably linked with my feminist perspective. This means I experience my spirituality differently from a woman who worships within a male dominated structure. In my experience as a therapist working with women, women in such structures often internalise a punitive male God/Father whose approval is usually withheld. Seeking His approval means they strive hard to be perfect, reinforced by a lot of cultural expectations. Of course, many women do this without being particularly affected by a spiritual or religious connection, but I'm concentrating on how women's spirituality changes when it is outside the culturally based religious forms.
>
> Women who question the language and structures of male spirituality begin to validate their own life experience. They derive more inner strength and power from becoming aware of the Goddess, the Great Mother. They can affirm and love themselves without taking on the shadow of Eve, scapegoated throughout the centuries. They can, and are, turning to archetypal images of female love and power from many different cultural and spiritual traditions.

Given their disenchantment with patriarchy, women's disenchantment with patriarchal religion is hardly surprising. During interviews women frequently spoke of the annoying and embittering experiences they had had as members of various churches. Galadriel said:

> I think women, once they become aware of themselves -- even with a bit of the feminist flavour -- or if they've been an oppressed minority such as psychiatric women or Maori or Pacific Island women... you start to realize that what's around is really for the men, you know. There's actually not a lot out there for women. Not a lot that really affirms us. In the church I went to, the men preached and the women glorified God by cleaning the toilets. I was discouraged from going on to my chosen career of medicine; the women's place was in the home.

According to Joan, this subordination of women can be traced ultimately to the subjugation of the European Goddess-worshipping societies by the patriarchal, God-worshipping, Indo-European invaders who swept into Europe in three waves between 4300 and 2800 B.C. Drawing an explicit connection between the gender relations and religious belief system within any society, Joan sees the replacement of the Goddess with the God as the model for the inferiorization of women:

> To me the whole meaning of patriarchy is the fact of that tremendous change from seeing God/dess as the earth, which was almost a universal thing for bloody donkeys' years, to suddenly intellectualizing: "No, it must have been a man who did this". The only way that they've been able to do that is by placing women in an inferior position or by constructing them in terms of "virgin versus whore". They had to kill off that Earth Mother thing. To me that is the core of understanding feminism; it's the core of understanding the essence of woman-hating. It's a tremendous fear of that alternative women's religion coming back.

While all women involved in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality are feminist, the converse is not true. As I pointed out in chapter three, since the movement's origins, there have been feminists who have dismissed it as a self-indulgent diversion from "real" political work opted for by lazy and self-obsessed sisters. The debate between "political" and "spiritual" feminists (see chapter three) has taken place to

some extent in New Zealand as well as in the United States. Juliet Batten said in my interview with her:

> Radical feminists working politically always feared that anything spiritual was going to mean that women would get self-indulgent and forget about political change. I think the challenge for the Women's Spirituality movement is to keep its feet on the ground, and to be aware that we do need change at that level too -- that we should be embracing all levels. We don't have to split off and build castles in the air. The Goddess is so earth-centred; she keeps challenging us to take care of the earth and to be grounded.

A negative view of "spiritual feminists" is still held by some feminists in New Zealand. Sybil said that shortly before I interviewed her a feminist woman had commented disparagingly when she learnt of Sybil's involvement in a ritual group. Sybil concluded that "there was still that stigma attached to spirituality being a cop-out". Women have commented to me that Broadsheet, New Zealand's best known feminist magazine, has a tradition of being averse to publishing on the theme of spirituality.

On the other hand, there are women who started out as "political feminists" who have since added a spiritual dimension to their feminism. In my interview with her, Kez said:

> When I first came into women's politics, we didn't talk about spirituality or witches or goddesses at all. We talked about women being strong and burning their bras and having a voice and having a women's community. It was not in terms of the spiritual side of things; it was in terms of having a sense of our own material worth and being able to own homes together, and being able to have skills that men had, and have information-sharing on those lines.
>
> Whenever a group arose that was "spiritual", the so-called "political" women didn't really take that group seriously as a feminist group. We didn't look upon our spiritual side as being important in those days. We were more interested in getting knowledge that men had, and having the right to have abortions, and the right not to be raped, and the right to walk the streets safely. Really it's only in the last ten years of my women's politics

> that spirituality has become a political issue.
>
> I didn't really hear about it until I came across Anne Cameron's Daughters of Copper Woman -- that was the first political/spiritual book that I ever read. I thought, "Gee, this is a different way of looking at stuff". Now I see my spirituality as strengthening my womanhood. It's grown into a spirituality that is much bigger than I had ever thought possible, and it's made me excited again to look at feminism. I think that's happened for a lot of women. And I think it's allowing other women to come in and be part of the politics.

I showed in chapter three that the Goddess movement developed in the United States subsequently to the feminist movement as a whole, and clearly many of its adherents in both the United States and in New Zealand have come from the body of feminist women who were first politically active during the 1960s and 1970s. Like Kez, these women have found that feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality offers a religious or spiritual belief system which fits their feminist perspective. I also noted in chapter three that there are other women in the movement who have not come to it from a staunch feminist perspective, but who have become very committed feminists as a result of their involvement.

As Lea Holford explained (quoted in chapter three), women who become involved in Goddess spirituality approach political work quite differently; they do not see themselves as engaged in a power struggle with men -- the position of "We don't have it and you do, so give it back!" -- but are conceiving and working towards a new model of gender relations, a partnership model, and a new model of power where emphasis is placed on "power from within" instead of on "power over" structures. Power from Within is the title of Juliet Batten's guide to

feminist ritual-making, as yet the only book on the subject written by a New Zealander.

"If we are to survive," writes Starhawk in Dreaming the Dark (1988:4), "the question becomes: how do we overthrow, not those presently in power, but the principle of power-over?". She sees the principle of "power over" dominant in Western society as permeating our economic, social and religious institutions, as informing our treatment of races and cultures other than our own, as shaping relationships between women and men, and as pertinent to issues ranging from rape and war to pay equity legislation and enviromental destruction. According to Starhawk, the model for power over structures derives from the Judeo-Christian belief in a transcendent God who has power over humanity and who in turn gave to humanity power over plants and animals and to men, power over women, thereby implicitly sanctioning gender inequality and environmental exploitation.

As I pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, it is not only feminist witches who are concerned about what Eisler (1988) calls the "dominator model" and what Starhawk calls "the principle of power-over". In recent decades the civil rights, peace, and ecological movements, feminists, non-Western and Third World peoples have all been proclaiming the intolerability of "power over" in its diverse forms, and have been working for the establishment of a different basis to social and political relations. Van Gelder, for example, an ecofeminist, writes (1989:60-1) that ecofeminism is "a philosophy that takes on not just the domination of the earth by polluters, but domination itself, in all its forms.... In an ecofeminist society, no one would have power over

anyone else, because there would be a understanding that we're all part of the interconnected web of life".

The women I met have no illusions about the huge scope of the task of, as Starhawk puts it, overthrowing the principle of power-over. They envision such a fundamental change in Western cultural values as being slow, but as essential and ultimately possible. Through individuals and groups learning to see the world differently and gradually having some influence on people around them, they see the dominant cultural mind-set ultimately changing. In a group discussion I recorded, one woman said:

> I think Women's Spirituality introduces a new way of thinking that venerates the woman, the earth. That type of social change is slow, but it's also really effective. It's changing the whole mind-set. And it's changing the energy that's out there. I mean the whole Christian belief is based on own, conquer, obey, take over, man is higher than woman, humankind is higher than animals. It's disgusting. That's why we're in the state we're in now. It requires a huge change, more than a mind-set, but an energy-set. I believe very much in the power of the collective consciousness.

In feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality, power is not a limited commodity to be competed for, fought over, possessed or wielded. Because of the belief that divinity or the sacred is not transcendent, or not exclusively transcendent, but immanent -- "the awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, interacting, and infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance" (Starhawk 1988:9) -- the whole natural world is valued for its own being. "Power from within" is available because divinity -- alternatively called "the Goddess", "the life force" or "creative energy" -- is immanent in every person: power is simply a function of being. When witches talk about "contacting their inner power", as they frequently do,

they are not referring to some paranormal ability or magical power, they are simply acknowledging, perhaps reminding themselves, that they have the right to choose their own lives and can achieve what they choose, and that the strength and resourcefulness to do this comes from within themselves. Starhawk writes (1988:12):

> Immanent power, power-from-within, is not something we have but something we can do. We can choose to cooperate or to withdraw cooperation from any system. The power relationships and institutions of immanence must support and further the ability of individuals to shape the choices and decisions that affect them. And those choices must also recognize the interconnectedness of individuals in a community of beings and resources that all have inherent value.
>
> It is challenging to try to envision a society based on that principle. The implications are radical and far-reaching, because all of our present society's institutions, from the most oppressive to the most benign, are based on the authority some individuals hold that allows them to control others.

Jade writes (1991:23-4):

> The basis of most women's magic and ritual lies in identifying, affirming, and connecting with the Goddess in yourself, and through this connection accessing a collective goddess energy.... As opposed to being the victim of the capricious whims of a deity with which one has little personal contact, any power needed is consistently within reach because you are "a part of this energy and it is yours to direct". In the emerging cosmology of women's Wicca, power is thought to be available to an individual because the Goddess is an intimate part of each woman.... [T]he power to create and/or change the forms and circumstances of one's life comes from this connection.

In a seminar titled "Paganism, Narrative and Stuff" given prior to beginning her doctoral fieldwork,[5] Roberta James discusses pagans' notions of power and points to "the close paradigmatic relationship between power and being" (1993:10-11):

> Pagan notions of power are complex and difficult to describe things.... Pagans work very hard to uncover the

> ways in which they are interconnected with the universe and to consciously experience them. This process is about coming into Beingness -- conscious and embodied knowledge of life and the life force. It seems to be a process of unmasking what is already so, only hidden by necessarily imperfect knowledge. The object of life is to learn about and honour those interconnections....
>
> I am interested in Pagan hermeneutics for a number of reasons: the close paradigmatic relationship between power and being -- coming to personal power and developing a strong sense of relationship with the universe are part of the same process, and that process is simply living a life; the profound textural and textual richness of engagement with being human; the significant relationship between experience and narrative. Power is immanent in the Earth, in the Universe. The process of uncovering interconnections with the Universe through lived experience is also the process of embedding the self further and further in the Universe, in power and in power that is constituted precisely of these interconnections...

The business of contacting, affirming and working with one's "power from within" is a central preoccupation of the women I met during fieldwork. It is this preoccupation which has undoubtedly given rise to the accusation that women in the movement are self-engrossed and apolitical. It is true that most of the ritual work done in the workshops I attended and in the ritual group with whom I have worked closely has related to women's personal psychological and emotional processes; to issues in their domestic, social and working lives; and to problems, decisions or transitions they are facing. But as I noted in chapter six, these women are not inept, wimpish or megalomaniacal. The sorts of issues they deal with through ritual are the ordinary issues and problems many women (and people) come across in the course of their lives. Through ritual women confront, gain an increased understanding of, and find a way of coping with, solving, or moving through a problem, issue or transition. Women in ritual groups do not have more problems and are not more obsessed with these problems

than any one else in society. In fact, I argue that women in ritual groups probably spend less time fretting about and returning to problems or issues in their lives than other people because through ritual they have an efficient, structured means of dealing with whatever arises in their lives.

Lea Holford wrote in the April 1987 Women's Spirituality Newsletter:

> For myself, spirituality begins with psychic healing for I believe one can not touch the inner Goddess or the outer Universe unless one has met one's own demons. They test our sincerity and commitment to change. Therefore, I feel one very important aspect of spiritual work is dealing with our shadow aspects. For myself, this has occurred most fruitfully in group sharing situations where members are willing to risk being honest and where mutual respect of differences is well tolerated.

Rather than constructing women's concern with their own inner processes as an unhealthy and apolitical self-absorption, almost implying that there is something anti-social about what goes on in rituals, I see women's concern with themselves as being motivated by a desire for personal autonomy and responsibility which in turn motivates and sustains their activity in the "outer world".

The importance of personal autonomy extends to women's belief systems. Feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality has no fixed doctrine which all participants believe or are required to believe, and women in the movement strongly resist the idea of developing one. Women are free to and are expected to work out their own beliefs and values. To women who have left the Church, the absence of a rigid, restrictive, imposed doctrine is attractive. Megwyn said:

> What got me about Christians was the arrogance of thinking that theirs was the only religion, that this was the only way to go. I just became so fed up with that. I went to a yoga weekend once, and the woman said, "Now we're going

> to tell you all these ideas that are basic yoga ideas that will help you. You don't have to believe any of it. Whatever's right for you will come to you". I just couldn't believe it. I felt so free and so wonderful, and gained so much from being given initial freedom to actually believe what I wanted to for myself.

There are only two laws or principles in feminist witchcraft. The first is the Wiccan Rede which states: "And ye harm none, do as thou wilt". The Rede gives women the freedom to do as they please according to their personal morality, so long as their actions do not adversely affect another person or deprive another of the same right. Some witches believe that this law is a remnant of ancient witchcraft which has been passed down through the centuries and possibly millenia, while others believe that Gerald Gardner (see chapter three) created it (Jade 1991:46). Whatever its origin, the Rede is taken seriously by feminist witches as the principle which encapsulates and combines the important principles of personal freedom and social responsibility. Two of the women I interviewed talked about the Rede. Joan said:

> The old witches' maxim which is very ancient is: "Do what thou wilt and harm no one", and that's my motto; that's my theology. I'll do what I bloody well like, but I'm not going to be hurting anyone in the process. I wish to God... if that became a universal golden rule round the world, that would be the beginning of a real New Age.

Noreen said:

> Our creed is: "Do what you will and harm none", which means of course that you have that control that you're not going to harm anyone no matter what you do. After saying that, you then choose how you behave.

The Rede outlaws hexing. Another sanction against hexing is the second principle of feminist witchcraft: the three-fold law. This law states that whatever one sends out will return three-fold. It expresses a

belief in karma and is a strong version of the Christian "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Witches believe that if they think and act positively about themselves and their lives, and if they act positively towards others -- if they are loving, supportive, honest, generous, and so on -- that they will reap the benefits in their lives. Conversely, by thinking negatively about oneself or others, and especially by hexing, one generates, attracts or lays oneself open to negative energies. Thus, however bitter or angry witches might feel towards another person, they may not, in their own interests, hex that person. They may do a self protection ritual, but they may not invoke harm on another person.

When I asked Noreen about her world view, she began by contrasting her present beliefs with those of the Church with which she had been intensely involved for much of her adult life. She emphasized the importance of personal choice and responsibility for one's actions and the importance of caring for the planet. Noreen said:

> There is no male God in our cosmology, no male-only God. There are no hierarchies, so we don't have "Lords" and "Masters" and so on. Nobody is above, and so there is no one below either. There is no sin/repentance idea, no idea that somebody is coming to judge. And there's no searching for immortality as a reward.
>
> So, therefore, the opposite to those negatives... there's the idea of "Goddess" or "woman energy" or self-empowerment as being the force we're interested in and we're looking for. All are equal, so nobody tells someone else what they must do, and nobody would necessarily ask someone else to tell them exactly what to do. We're interested in joyousness in life on this earth. We're interested in celebrating life here and now, every day, every minute of every day, so therefore conservation is very important to us -- all kinds of conservation -- care for all life, generally being aware of the need to care for this earth.

Bonney also stressed the importance of spiritual autonomy and personal responsibility and of the urgent need to avoid further environmental destruction. She emphasized the implications of her belief in the immanence of the divine whereby the Platonic/Christian spirit/body split dissolves and all human experience -- including sex, menstruation, pain, and our relationship to the earth -- becomes sacred. Bonney said:

> To start with, Christianity has taken away the personal responsibility of people to perform their own rituals and to make their own connection with their own God. By having ritual-makers in churches, they deny you the opportunity of setting up those conditions yourself for that wisdom to come to you and for that personal knowledge to come through you.
>
> The other thing they've really ignored is responsibility to the planet. I see that for a long time through Christianity we've just embraced heaven and tried to deny our physicality, deny our menstruating, our pain, our birth-giving, our love-making, and deny our relationship to the earth. Every time we gather together our compost and throw it in a plastic bag to put in the rubbish dump where it won't decompose for four hundred years, we're actually raping the soil of its goodness for the food we eat, but not putting it back in. We haven't realized that unless we are taking from the earth, giving it to the Goddess in some way by being thankful for it and being aware of what a beautiful gift it is, and then returning the waste products to the earth, we haven't completed the cycle of being fully integrated spiritual beings. I think being spiritual is a two way thing -- it's spiritual and physical, and we've got to get the integration of the two in order to progress as a human race. We've got to complete a circle there that's been broken for a long time. So I see myself as an ecofeminist as well as a spiritual feminist.

A central aspect of any religion is its beliefs about death. A key feature of Goddess spirituality is that it fully embraces human physicality (Bonney above) and is committed to "celebrating life here and now" (Noreen above). The focus is on <u>this</u> life, not on an afterlife. The numerous books on feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality, while

reiterating a general belief in the cyclic process of life, death and regeneration (not reincarnation), do not spell out any specific beliefs about what happens to an individual after death. Neither did I hear any discussions in workshops or informally amongst ritual group members about what happens after death despite the fact that women, at least those I came to know, talk about dying and the importance of death rituals/funerals to celebrate the "final passage of the body" much more than people outside the movement. I have never heard anyone claim to believe in heaven or any form of paradisial land, real or metaphorical, or to believe in the immortality of the individual soul. Joan (quoted near the beginning of this chapter) stated quite unequivocally: "I don't believe in life after death or sin or any of that sort of crap".

There is a belief, however, sometimes very vague, amongst some women that upon death a person's spirit or life energy is absorbed back into the great pool of cosmic creative energy which is the source of all life forms. Some women, especially those with some involvement in Eastern philosophies and religions, believe in reincarnation. Some have formed no clear idea about what happens after death and the question does not figure as important for them. Death itself is very important in Goddess spirituality, for both the dying and for those who will mourn her, but life after death is not a concern.

Goddess myths widely known and invoked in Goddess spirituality present death as a phase in the continuous cycling of life: the Greek Persephone, the Egyptian Nut, the Polynesian Hina, the Sumerian Innana, and the Babylonian Ishtar are all goddesses who journey to the place of the dead and back to the world of the living. Their journeys represent not only the cycle of life and death, but all the cycles which

constitute our lives -- the cycle of day and night, the cycling of the seasons, women's menstrual cycles, the moon's cycle, and so on. For the women I worked with, the belief that death is a natural part of the cycle of life and the absence of any belief that death is followed by divine judgement remove much of the fear and anxiety which death evokes in our society. Juliet said:

> I think for me the Goddess is about affirming the life and death cycle. Death is still very untalked-about in our society -- very much a taboo subject. The Goddess gives us permission to talk about death again because it is just part of a cycle. It's not that line. I remember once in a workshop we did lifescapes and a woman did this line, and she had a cliff, and death was falling off the cliff at the end, and she was devastated by this. This was how she saw death. But the moment you get the Goddess, you get the cycle. It gives death a place again. It's very empowering because we know about cycles as women, and we know about the cycles of the seasons and the cycles of the moon, and the more we learn to respect cycles, the more respectful we're going to be of each other and the earth. And even our view of history might be different. So it's a very empowering model.

Lea said:

> We have to die in order for new life to come forth. It's not a tragedy; that's just the cycling of life -- that's just the way it is. Next time you might be a waterfall, a butterfly, or a really nice rock. You don't have to believe in other <u>lives</u>; all these transformations happen to us in <u>this</u> life.

Joan said:

> I think one of the neatest things personally since I've got into this is that I've lost my fear of death. I think that's been the bonus. And I think a lot of other people feel the same, because you're tuning into something beyond yourself. It takes down the importance of the ego; it takes down that feeling of being alone that patriarchy gives us. I don't actually believe in the existence of individuals; I think it's a bit of a myth. I think the individual itself is a modern construct; it's very Western and incredibly destructive. If you were an Aboriginal or something you just didn't feel like an individual.

The emphasis in Goddess spirituality on fully experiencing and celebrating this life is tied to women's intense concern with preserving the environment. Carol Christ's essay "Finitude, Death and Reverence for Life" in Laughter of Aphrodite (1987) deals very powerfully with this theme. The essay was written on the Greek island of Lesbos "under the invisible cloud of radioactive fallout from Chernobyl". Christ (1987:213) sees the threat of global destruction as a result of "the failure to acknowledge our own finitude and death and the potential finitude and death of the earth". This denial stems from our religious and philosophical traditions which have, since Plato, "attempted to deny finitude and death and have prevented us from fully comprehending our connections to this earth". The classical Christian theological position in which God transcends all of his creation has led to the view that the earth, our bodies, and carnal, finite life are to be despised and ultimately transcended. The denial of death is, paradoxically, our culture's failure to affirm this life on this earth in these bodies. Christ writes (1987:214-5):

> It might be argued that the denial of death expresses an affirmation of life. But life bounded by mortality is the only life we know, the only life we can know. We must learn to love this life that ends in death. This is not absolutely to rule out the possibility of individual or communal survival after death, but to say that we ought not live our lives in light of such a possibility. Our task is here.

Christ argues that the spirituality we need for our survival is not one which denies our physicality and mortality but one which encourages us "to recognize limitation and mortality, a spirituality calling us to celebrate all that is finite" (1987:222). She claims (1987:226) that it is destructive of the finite, embodied reality we know

to focus on some imagined "higher reality". Christ's introduction to her essay points to the crucial and inextricable link between spirituality and politics (1987:210):

> I feel deeply that the flight from finitude and death is at the root of the problems we face. It seems so simple: if we truly love this life which ends in death, then however could we destroy it? It must be that we do not love earth and life enough. Maybe something went wrong, massively wrong, when Platonism and Christianity became the dominant symbol systems of our culture. Maybe the return of the Goddess can help us to re-member ourselves, to re-member this earth, which is our home. Maybe she can help us to turn away from our quest for immortality, our quest to escape change, our quest to control the conditions of our lives. Perhaps she can help us to love a life that ends in death.

In August 1992 the ritual group I joined held a workshop to address issues surrounding death. Mary Hancock, a funeral celebrant who is very involved in Goddess spirituality, was asked to lead the day-long workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to explore the practical issues surrounding death and possible funeral ceremony options. The practical information covered everything from the physical changes which take place at death, the legal requirements for dealing with the body, the embalming process, and cremation and burial procedures to the variety of available headstones and the prices of plots. We visited a funeral director's premises where we examined a range of caskets, toured the embalming room and rooms where viewings and ceremonies are held, and asked questions of the funeral director.

Later in the day we discussed the significance of the funeral as a ritual and watched two videos on the subject, and women were encouraged to begin to think about what they would like to happen at their own funerals. We discussed ancient Celtic funeral rituals and the possibility of adapting and using them. Some women became

enthusiastic about designing and making a pall to be used at group members' funerals. In the weeks following the workshop women continued to think about and discuss the issues raised during the workshop and several planned their own funerals in considerable and creative detail. A follow-up discussion evening was held.

There was nothing in the least morbid about the workshop or about women's attitudes towards the business of death. In the centre of the workshop discussion area a simple altar was set up with symbols of the four elements and Mary began the workshop by lighting a white candle and a black candle to symbolize the cycle of life and death. It was emphasized that death, as one of the greatest transitions people experience, needed to be honoured and marked with carefully thought-out rituals. In choosing to set up the workshop and hire someone to lead it, group members were seriously and practically addressing the issue of their own mortality. Several of the women had been recently involved in helping with the funerals of friends or were soon expecting to be involved and they felt they needed to prepare for this.

The funeral or death ritual serves two purposes. It is a time to honour the dead and to celebrate her or his life, and it provides a context for people to grieve and to farewell the dead. In Goddess spirituality women mark or celebrate with ritual a number of important life transitions -- births, birthdays, name-givings, menarche, menopause, marriage, new jobs, new homes, new relationships, leaving jobs, leaving homes, ending relationships and so on. Thought, care and time is given to planning and executing each of these rituals. Women also expect to devote adequate thought, care and time to planning and

carrying out death rituals which mark arguably the major transition a person faces.

In the remainder of this chapter I look at what the Goddess means for some of the New Zealand women with whom I worked closely. In chapter three I explored the meaning of the Goddess as presented in the literature on the subject, most of which comes from the United States. I emphasized that for contemporary women the Goddess is a symbol, and as such is given different meanings by different women. Women may prefer one meaning or set of meanings to another, but all meanings are deemed equally valid and are embraced within the holistic world view of women in the movement. In this chapter a number of meanings of the Goddess have been noted: the earth is spoken of as the Goddess and she is expressed in all of nature -- in plants, animals and people; she is the Creative Energy, the Life Source, the Sacred Feminine, and the cycle of life, death and rebirth; she includes both male and female and embraces all dualities; she is "woman energy" and "power from within"; she is immanent and transcendent; her images include ancient European goddesses and contemporary non-Western goddesses. During workshops I attended and interviews women described their images of the Goddess in a great diversity of ways: as a voluptuous, heavy woman surrounded by energy and movement; as a very old, very wise woman; as a typical Greek goddess in flowing white robes; as a woman wearing a faded blue sweatshirt and cut-off jeans; as a large woman with burning red eyes; as an invisible presence.

In chapter three I quoted Starhawk's reply to the question "What does the symbol of Goddess mean?" (Christ 1982:76) where she refers to the Goddess as "someone who can help and protect me", as "the symbol

of my own power", and as "the natural energy in my body and the world". Here the Goddess is both transcendent and immanent, is both a metaphor for nature and a personified deity. "It all depends how I feel," Starhawk says.

The women I quote below speak of the Goddess in much the same vein. What is clear from what they say is the multiplicity of meanings of Goddess, the freedom women have to choose any particular meaning at any particular time, and women's awareness that they are constructing the meanings.

Megwyn's reply to "Who is the Goddess?" was:

> You are the Goddess and I am the Goddess. Starhawk really sums it up for me. At times I think of the Goddess as my real self; it's the real me, the real self becoming balanced and whole. At times it's all nature. And then at times it's just what I'm needing when I don't feel I've got a lot inside. I want to think of a symbol outside myself, and so I think of a Goddess outside myself. So it's outside and within and through the whole of creation. That's really how I see the Goddess.
>
> There's no judgement, no reproach. There's nobody telling you off and saying you haven't done the right thing. I can feel silly and disappointed about what I've done, but I don't feel that I'm reproached. It's always loving and caring and supportive and helping me to get back to a centre of balance.
>
> There's the wonderful idea that you are linking in with every other person's idea of this as well. The trite phrase is the Universal Consciousness. In a way it's like that. I do think there is a common knowledge and we can link in with each other.

Sybil's response to "Who is the Goddess?" was very similar:

> I definitely think of the Goddess as being within myself, within every woman whether she accesses that or not. But I also see the Goddess very much in the elements -- they give me a physical, tangible sense of her being in the earth, the air, the water and fire. I also get her spirit sense from the feeling I have of an Other other than myself, and other than what I can see. So I do very much feel her presence in a very spirit sense, something that's much bigger than me and much bigger than any of us, and

> yet something that resides in all of us. It's that feeling very much that the Goddess is everywhere.
>
> I talk to her and sometimes that will be getting in touch with the Goddess in myself, and sometimes she will be the inner child, and sometimes she'll be my inner guide or wise woman or my mothering self. And other times I'll be very much talking to someone out there. Sometimes that will be in praise almost, and other times it might be sheer desperation and despair.
>
> And then I feel very much like I'm talking to her when I go for walks somewhere like Te Henga or through the Waipoua forest, or go for a sail out in a boat, or sit around a big fire, or any of those situations where I feel very much connected.

I asked Sybil whether she was talking about the Goddess as one who inhabited her in the way that Christians say God can enter and inhabit them, or whether she was talking about herself as being the Goddess. She replied:

> I think they're both correct. It's an all-pervasive sensation for me. At times it can feel like getting in touch with different parts of myself. But at times it can feel like the Goddess resides in me. It feels like all of those. I don't have a sense that I invited her to enter me [as Christians do]. When I invoke her in rituals, I get the sense that what we're doing is just acknowledging her because her presence is already there. It's just focussing that energy and increasing our awareness of something that already exists.

Scarlett's concept of the Goddess echoes Megwyn's and Sybil's:

> For me, the Goddess is in me and in each one of us and in everything, in the sea and in the elements. I pray to her a lot and meditate and she's like a friend to me or she's whatever I happen to be needing. It makes it very easy. I know she's not going to be anything other than exactly what I need. So if I need a friend, she's a friend. If I need all-pervasive protection, then there she is. If I'm desperate, she's there then.

What is notable above is the apparent paradox between conceptualizing the Goddess as someone to whom one prays, implying

that she is an anthropomorphic and transcendent entity, and seeing her as "whatever I happen to be needing", implying that the Goddess can be constructed and reconstructed in a variety of ways by an individual woman. To say "She's whatever I happen to be needing" is quite a different statement from "She gives me whatever I happen to be needing". The former carries the idea of the Goddess as continually changing and ever changeable: her form is not static nor bounded. She does not simply bestow on the supplicant a solution to a need: she becomes the fulfilment of the need.

Sybil, quoted above, referred to the Goddess as "sometimes... the inner child, and sometimes... my inner guide or wise woman or my mothering self". In this statement she was not conceptualizing the Goddess as an entity out there which can transform or which can be transformed; instead she referred to various aspects -- parts or forms -- of herself as Goddess. Galadriel's construction was similar: she explained her understanding of the Goddess in terms of an adaptation of Freud.

> When I read a lot about psychology, I read about us having a child, an adult, and a parent, and also the id, ego and super ego. I was introduced to the idea of the super ego as being your God-consciousness. When I left Christianity I resented the idea of having a God-consciousness, so I looked to the idea of my super ego being my Goddess consciousness. In other words, a part of me. That fitted in nicely with the idea of the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone. When I did a spell I looked on it as contacting the child part of me, a younger self. I thought it was a very nice dialogue between my inner child and my parent Goddess-consciousness or super ego. It bypassed the adult which is very rational in interacting with the every day world. That's part of what the Goddess is to me.

For a number of women, Goddess spirituality is attractive because it contains no concept of sin, repentance or divine judgement. Joan

scoffed at the idea of sin; Noreen said, "There is no sin/repentance idea, no idea that somebody is coming to judge; Megwyn said, "There's no judgement, no reproach. There's nobody telling you off". Kez said:

> One of the big problems for me with other religions was that I never felt I was good enough to have God in me. No matter how many times I went to church and tried to do what I was supposed to do, I never actually felt God came into me. It was an incredible trauma for a long time. One reason I left the Pentecostal chuch was that I never felt I got it right.
>
> The Goddess I discovered one day -- someone led me in a visualization in a counselling session actually -- I discovered she was my strength and wisdom. She was there even though I'd done all those naughty things. It was very powerful for me all of a sudden. It was such a relief that I didn't have to be good to get her. I didn't have to go through pearly gates to get there.

Helen Palmer, an Auckland therapist quoted above in this chapter, made a connection between religious belief systems and socio-political structures which oppress women: "[W]omen in such structures often internalise a punitive male God/Father whose approval is usually withheld" (Women's Spirituality Newsletter, Winter Solstice 1990). Palmer echoes Mary Daly who states in her introduction to Gyn/Ecology (1979:1) that patriarchy does not "exist simply 'outside' women's minds, securely fastened into institutions we can physically leave behind", but it is "also internalized, festering inside women's heads". This "internalized Godfather" must be exorcised, Daly says, if women are to discover and create a world other than patriarchy.

Women relish the idea that the Goddess incorporates a dark, destructive aspect as well as her creative, nurturing aspect. In the extract from a group discussion I recorded below, it is clear that the Goddess acts as a role model for women, enabling them to accept the "dark" or "naughty" parts of themselves.

- The thing I love about the Goddess is that she is all those naughty things we do as well. The first "goddess", as it were, that I ever encountered was Hecate. She came to me in a time that was very dark and where I was very depressed and suicidal. I've always honoured that dark side of myself and that dark side of her because of that. She isn't only the virgin. She's wildness and she's running about screaming and she's all those things that are not allowed to be God.

- I really like that thing of her being Hecate and being all the negativities.

- Yeah, for a long time we only had the Blessed Virgin held up to us as something to strive towards. She didn't have a voice. She didn't have a character. She didn't have anything going for her much. Powerless.

- Worshipped for her unreachable qualities.

- She never lost her temper or had a fit.

- What's very important about women's ritual groups for me is that I have my womanhood sanctioned by what we do.

- Somewhere along the way the Goddess got taken away from us and put OUT THERE. We had to earn it. I don't understand why that was necessary.

The Goddess is attractive to women because she sanctions womanhood. She affirms not only women's procreative and nurturing aspects, but also helps them to reconnect with the "dark feminine": she is the nurturing mother and the destructive Kali. She affirms women's sexuality and allows them to be unruly: as Sybil said, "She's wildness and she's running about screaming and she's all those things that are not allowed to be God". She is a symbol of woman's wholeness. For women who have grown up in a society where divinity is imaged singularly as an omnipotent, punitive male, and where woman is

imaged as the temptress Eve or as the pure, powerless Mary, discovering the Goddess is enormously liberating. Christ writes (1982:84):

> As women struggle to create a new culture in which women's power, bodies, will, and bonds are celebrated, it seems natural that the Goddess would re-emerge as symbol of the newfound beauty, strength, and power of women.

The absence of any imposed doctrine of belief in Goddess spirituality and the fact that women have autonomous control over both their beliefs and spiritual practices and their lives contribute to the Goddess's attraction. Above all, the Goddess is attractive because she is a symbol of the holistic nature of life, the central, essential element of witches' world view. She opens up new options for reorganizing gender relations; she is a reminder of the interconnectedness between humanity, the rest of the natural world and the earth; she gives death a place as part of the celebration of life.

Notes

1. "Thealogy", as opposed to "theology", is a term "coined by Naomi Goldenberg to refer to reflection on the meaning of the symbol of Goddess" (Christ 1982:85).
2. Marija Gimbutas, professor of European archaeology at UCLA, has researched and published extensively on the archaeology of Neolithic Europe before the Indo-Europeans. Gimbutas is a strong exponent of the view that in Old Europe there was no "imbalance between the sexes or a subservience of one sex to the other" (1991:xi). She believes, however, that women had an especially revered status in religious life.
3. Robert Bly is author of Iron John: A Book About Men (1990).
4. In Iron John Bly encourages men to get in touch with the "Wild Man" in themselves in order to find an alternative image of masculinity, to reconnect with the earth, and to be able to honour the feminine and to live in partnership with women.
5. When I was close to completing this thesis Dr Wendy Cowling (Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, University of Waikato) passed on to me Roberta James's "pre-fieldwork seminar" which gives an introduction to her proposed doctoral project involving research amongst pagans in New Zealand. The seminar was presented to the Anthropology Graduate Programme Seminar of the Department of

Archaeology and Anthropology at Australian National University on 14 May 1993.

Chapter 9

What Witches Do

> The rituals affirm that we are all part of the earth and cosmos, and that we must all be caretakers of our bodies and our environment. Rather than relying on a God or a Supreme Being to solve our problems, it is our responsibility and within our power. I am the Goddess and you are the Goddess, and therefore we are all equally responsible to care for the world, to fight against injustice in a patriarchal society, and to work for change.
>
> From a draft of a paper called "HAGS: A Women's Ritual Group" by Margaret Dodd and Audrey Sharpe to be included in a forthcoming book on feminist spirituality in Aotearoa edited by Lynne Alice and due for publication in 1993.

This is the first of four chapters which deal with feminist witches' rituals. In this chapter I describe the different categories of rituals, the structural framework of rituals, and the variety of ways seasonal rituals and rites of passage are marked. In chapter ten, I again take up the idea that feminist witchcraft is a constructed spirituality, and show that witches' rituals, like their belief system, are artefacts constructed self-consciously using various sources. In chapter eleven I discuss anthropological conceptions of the function of rituals along with witches' own conceptions of how their rituals "work". In chapter twelve I show how women, through ritual, embody the symbolic meanings of "witch" and "Goddess", how they "bring to life" these meanings in their beings and lives.

Two broad categories of rituals are celebrated in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality: rituals connected with the earth's changes in the course of the annual cycle, including the eight Sabbats and moon rituals, and rituals connected with the changes, crises and

transitions in women's personal life cycles. The concept of cycles is crucial to witches' world view (see chapter eight). It was frequently emphasized to me from early in my fieldwork that witches' view of time and life is non-linear -- the spiral is the symbol frequently used to explain how life moves in continuous cycles. During rituals the image of the cycle is continually evoked: the cycle of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth; the cycle whereby the mother gives birth to a daughter who later becomes a mother; the annual seasonal cycle, the moon's cycle, women's menstrual cycles; the cycling of day and night, and so on. Not only is the cycle the dominant and recurring metaphor in witches' world view, but the earth's cycles and women's life cycles, what Starhawk calls "the inner and the outer cycles", are analogously connected. Starhawk writes (1989:181):

> Winter, Spring, Summer, Autumn -- birth, growth, fading, death -- the Wheel turns, on and on. Ideas are born; projects are consummated; plans prove impractical and die. We fall in love; we suffer loss; we consummate relationships; we give birth; we grow old; we decay.
>
> The Sabbats are the eight points at which we connect the inner and the outer cycles; the interstices where the seasonal, the celestial, the communal, the creative, and the personal all meet. As we enact each drama in its time, we transform ourselves. We are renewed; we are reborn even as we decay and die. We are not separate from each other, from the broader world around us; we are one with the Goddess, with the God.

Diane Stein writes (1990:93):

> The wiccan/Women's Spirituality year is a circle without beginning or end. It follows the agricultural growing cycle through the seasons, and the themes of the Sabbats are themes of passage through life and death. The Goddess is born at Yule (Winter Solstice, December 20-23), is a fragile new hope at Candlemas (February 2), a child at Spring Equinox (March 20-23), a Maiden discovering sexuality at Beltane (May 1), the Mother of all life at Summer Solstice (June 20-23), the maturing matron at Lammas (August 1), in menopause at Fall Equinox's harvests (September 20-23), and the ancient Crone at Hallows

(October 31).

Because of the link made between "the seasonal, the celestial, the communal, the creative and the personal", the rituals to celebrate the eight seasonal festivals also frequently involve rites of passage. The connection between the personal and seasonal was made in a Winter Solstice ritual (described in chapter ten), for example, where women were invited to face their own inner darkness (Winter Solstice being the longest night), and contemplate what they wanted to "sacrifice" to fire -- outmoded, negative or unconstructive thoughts, attitudes, or behaviour patterns, and so on. Sticks of firewood became symbols of what women wanted to sacrifice and were thrown on the fire in symbolic acts of destruction. Other seasonal festivals are symbolically connected to other aspects of women's personal psychological processes and life "journeys" or cycles. An invitation I received to Candlemas, the festival which follows Winter Solstice, invited women to "contemplate what is beginning in your life right now and where you want to put your energy". Spring Equinox is the "time to farewell the dark and get ready for growth -- the child is coming out to play!" (invitation to Spring Equinox, 1991). Beltane is a time to celebrate both the burgeoning of the earth's new growth and human sexuality. At Lammas, the harvest festival, women celebrate their achievements and successes. At Autumn Equinox they contemplate the approach of winter and consider what resources they "want to take into the darkness" to sustain themselves (invitation to Autumn Equinox, 1992).

The eight pagan seasonal festivals, known in the Wicca tradition as Sabbats, and their dates listed by Stein in the quotation above are those given in all the North American manuals on feminist

witchcraft/Goddess spirituality. The dates relate to the seasons in the Northern Hemisphere. In Power from Within Juliet Batten gives a revised "Wheel of the Year" appropriate for the Southern Hemisphere. The year is divided into two solstices, two equinoxes, and four cross-quarter days between the solstices and equinoxes. The dates of the solstices and equinoxes are considered solar Sabbats and their dates change with the solar year. The other four Sabbats are considered lunar Sabbats and their dates are fixed (Stein 1990:93). The eight festivals fall at intervals of about six weeks throughout the year.

I set out below the names, dates (taken from Batten's book), and a brief description, in note form, of the importance of each of the eight Sabbats as they are celebrated by women in New Zealand. The symbols listed are from those suggested by Batten in Power from Within.

The Wheel of the Year

Winter Solstice (also known as Midwinter and Yule) June 20-23

Symbols: caves, fires, rocks, drums, branches, sun symbols such as oranges and other citrus fruit.

Colours: black, red, yellow, gold.

The longest night/shortest day of the year; the turning point -- light begins to increase. "The Great Mother again gives birth to the Divine Child Sun" (Starhawk 1989:182). A time to acknowledge the Goddess in her Crone aspect, to turn within to face one's inner darkness; gestation period for new projects. Also a time to celebrate the "rebirth" of the sun, rebirth from our own darkness, give gifts, make merry, plant garlic to harvest at Summer Solstice.

Brigid (also known as Candlemas and Imbolg) August 1

Symbols: fires, candles, first buds, new spring bulbs, jasmine, daphne, freesias.

Colours: white (initiation, new beginnings), green, orange (along with white, Irish national colours), yellow, red (fire).

The fire festival of increasing light marking the beginning of spring. Named after Brigid, Irish (Celtic) goddess of fire, inspiration, smith crafts, poetry and healing (Batten 1988:42; Stein 1990:101). A time to initiate new coven/ritual group members, to set new directions, to nurture new projects, to let go of winter's darkness, to celebrate and share creativity, to spring-clean.

Spring Equinox (also known as Eostar) September 20-23

Symbols: coloured eggs, spring flowers, balancing scales, pictures of children.

Colours: pastels

Days and nights are equal in length; the light is increasing -- a time of joy, freshness, playfulness and balance. Time to contemplate the theme of balance in one's life. The primary symbol is the egg, symbol of new life and fertility. Eggs may be coloured, decorated, exchanged. Persephone returns from the underworld: a time to reclaim childhood and the child within.

Beltane (May Eve in the Northern Hemisphere) October 31

Symbols: high airy places, maypole and ribbons, flute music, bonfires, garlands of flowers.

Colours: red, rose, pastels.

A celebration of the earth's fertility, rising energy, sexuality. May Eve (translated to November Eve in New Zealand) was the time of the maypole dance and heralded "the merry month of May". Traditionally the maypole was a phallic symbol planted in Mother Earth. In Goddess spirituality it is taken to represent sexuality generally, since a high proportion of women is lesbian. A time to make and wear garlands of flowers and greenery, to dance around the maypole, to leap over bonfires and make wishes, to make love spells, to feast, to pour energy into projects. A time to honour mothers and daughters and to make rituals for young women to celebrate menarche.

Summer Solstice (also known as Midsummer and Litha) December 20-23

Symbols: sun, pohutukawa flowers, karaka berries, red roses, fire.

Colours: red, green, gold, yellow, white.

The longest day/shortest night of the year -- light begins to decrease. A time to celebrate the Goddess in her Mother aspect at the height of her strength, sexuality and fertility. A time to celebrate the year's achievements, appreciate success, harvest garlic planted at Winter Solstice, acknowledge that after the peak comes the waning. Celebrate outside when the sun is at its zenith.

Lugnasad (also known as Lammas) February 1

Symbols: flax seeds, herb flowers, stone fruit, corn on the cob, grains.

Colours: dark green, yellow, golden, orange.

Lammas was the festival of the wheat harvest, the "Feast of Bread". It is a time to celebrate the first fruits of the harvest, to bake and share fresh bread, to make a corn dolly, to acknowledge the fruits of one's labours and lessons learned, to celebrate personal harvests and to "[c]ontemplate what you wish to carry forward from your own fruiting as the light wanes" (Batten 1988:44). A time to make rituals to honour women passing through menopause.

Autumn Equinox (also known as Mabon) March 21-23

Symbols: Late vegetables such as capsicum, aubergine, tomatoes; grapes, seeds, nuts; autumn leaves; balancing scales.

Colours: autumnal

Like Spring Equinox, a time of balance where days and nights are equal in length. "It is a time to let go, to plough the fruits of experience back into earth, to revert to essence" (Batten 1988:45). A time to light the first fire, to do what is necessary to achieve balance in one's life, to plant a seed/wish to gestate over winter, to focus on one's inner life. The Mother has become the Crone: a time to acknowledge the wisdom and life experience of older women.

Halloween (also known as Samhain and All Souls' Eve) April 30

Symbols: pumpkin lantern, egg-shells, cauldron, pine cones, nuts.

Colour: black

The end of the annual cycle, but also its beginning: Halloween is the witches' new year and the time when the veil that divides the worlds between the living and the dead is thinnest (Starhawk 1989:193). It is a time to remember the dead by lighting black candles, to make and light

pumpkin lanterns to symbolize the full harvest moon and Hecate's fire, to burn symbols of fears in Hecate's cauldron, to destroy the unwanted, to clear out the old to make way for the new. At this Sabbat feminist witches adopt the archetypal witch's image, dressing in black costumes and wearing macabre make-up (see chapter twelve).

As well as celebrating the eight Sabbats, ritual groups may also regularly or occasionally hold rituals to mark various phases of the moon, especially full moon, "dark moon", and new moon. Some groups meet every full moon. Moon goddesses from numerous cultures are invoked in Goddess spirituality: Selene (Greece), Isis (Egypt), Izanami (Japan), Shakti (India), Tiamat (Near East), Yemaya (Yoruba West Africa), Kwan Yin (China), Hina (Polynesia) and others (Stein 1990:69).

The moon is held to be intimately connected with women because their menstrual cycles are approximately the same length as the twenty eight and a half day lunar cycle. As well as the connection between women's monthly cycles and the lunar cycle, a connection is made between the lunar cycle and a woman's fertility cycle extending over her whole life: the waxing moon is linked to menarche; the full moon to the fertile, sexually active mature woman; and the waning moon to menopause. Various stages of the lunar cycle are said to represent the Goddess in her various aspects: the waxing moon symbolizes the Goddess as Maiden, at full moon she becomes the Mother, and when waning she is the Crone.

In feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality menstruation represents the procreative power of women, their sacred connection to nature: menstrual blood is called "moon blood". Menstruation is not "the curse" or "women's dirty secret", but a time of "psychic opening" and

heightened intuitive powers. I have been in rituals where pieces of red wool have been passed around for menstruating women to take and tie to their wrists so that their special state can be acknowledged and honoured by other women present. Rituals are held to celebrate menarche and menopause, symbolizing respectively initiation into womanhood and initiation into "cronehood". Two Auckland women, one a naturopath and one primarily a ritual-maker, have begun organizing "Moon Lodges", workshops for women to "honour the mysteries and the symbolism of the bleeding cycles.... to reclaim the feminine and the sacredness of the womb.... to heal the pain connected with the womb" (Women's Spirituality Newsletter, Summer Solstice, 1990). The workshops cover myths and traditions surrounding bleeding, diet and herbs as self-healing aids, ritual, art and movement, and provide a context where women can share their experiences of menarche, menstruation and menopause.

In 1983 at Winter Solstice Juliet Batten facilitated a "Menstrual Maze Performance Ritual" designed to "break the taboos that have been laid upon us and reclaim our power" (Batten 1988:62). The ritual began with women reciting warnings from the patriarchal mythology surrounding menstruation: "A menstruating woman will turn the meat bad"; "She will contaminate the crops"; "Don't walk under a ladder -- a drop of red paint will fall on you and you will die"; "If a man looks upon a menstruating woman, his bones will soften and his weapons will be rendered useless". The final part of the ritual was a celebration of a young woman's first menstruation which concluded with all the women present being given sprigs of rosemary with the words: "We bring you rosemary, for remembrance. Remembrance of your pain.

Remembrance of your strength. Remembrance of your ancient power. Take it, and enter the Maze. We give you the gift of your selves".

Moon rituals are primarily about women reclaiming their bodies, re-evaluating their bodies' natural processes, and learning to see and experience menstruation differently. But moon rituals are also done for more general purposes. Each phase of the moon is associated with a different "energy": the waxing moon with waxing energy; full moon with intense, abundant energy; the waning moon with banishing or relinquishing energy. A ritual held while the moon is waxing is likely to be focussed on starting or putting energy into a new project. Full moon rituals celebrate the consummation of projects and plans, achievements, fulfillment. In waning moon rituals women usually focus on the completion of projects, on letting go of, banishing, or healing the effects of negative influences in their lives.

The eight Sabbats and moon rituals are tied to the calendar and constitute one category of rituals. The other major category includes a great variety of rites of passage rituals which are held whenever a woman or a group decides she/it wants to call women together for a ritual with a specific purpose. Such occasions include birthdays; baby blessings (to replace christenings); trysts or marriages; leaving a home, job or relationship; blessing/protecting a new home; starting a new job or relationship; completing a course of study, an important personal project or life phase; making the transition from maidenhood to motherhood or from motherhood to cronehood; funerals/death rituals or any other important transition a woman is facing in her life.

In feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality all rituals, both seasonal and rites of passage, follow the same prescribed structure.

This structure derives ultimately from the Wicca tradition, but has been simplified in feminist witchcraft. I have noted that ritual structure is less tightly prescribed in New Zealand than elsewhere, but New Zealand witches are nonetheless very strict about adhering to a basic format -- a simplified version of the one set out in North American manuals. This structure includes the following stages: purification, casting the circle, invocation of the directions and elements, guided meditation, enactment or body of the ritual, opening the circle. Other components may be added in at various stages if women wish: chants, dances, the raising of a "cone of power", symbolic acts to "ground" the experience. Rituals conclude with a shared meal or supper.

In New Zealand there are no prescriptions for what is said and done at any stage of a ritual -- that is left entirely to the woman or women responsible for organizing the ritual. The only part of a ritual with a set verbal form is the opening of the circle/final blessing at the conclusion of the ritual (set out below). This blessing has been used in all the rituals I have attended and is known by all women who belong to ritual groups/covens. There are no set prayers or invocations which must be included in rituals, although manuals are full of ones for women to use if they wish. Most women borrow, adapt or create their own invocations.

I discuss the various components of ritual structure, beginning with the preparation of a ritual, below under the following headings:

1. Preparation
2. Preparing the space/setting up
3. Entering sacred space
4. Welcome/purpose of ritual
5. Purification
6. Casting the circle
8. Guided meditation/ visualization
9. Enactment
10. Chanting
11. Dance
12. Opening the circle

7. Invoking the directions/elements 13. Re-integration

Preparation

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, ritual groups are fairly small -- usually up to thirteen members -- and quite autonomous. Like feminist covens overseas, but unlike the traditional, gender-mixed Wicca covens overseas, there is no hierarchy in New Zealand groups, and no special status designations for particular women in groups such as "priestess" or "initiate": all are equally entitled to lead or facilitate any part of a ritual if they wish.

In the group I joined, the dates and times of rituals to mark the Sabbats are decided by group consensus and the responsibility for organizing a particular ritual passes around the members of the group -- usually two people plan each ritual. A roster is constructed at an administration meeting. While the dates of the Sabbats are tied to the calendar, and every effort is made to hold the ritual on the "correct" date, practical considerations, such as whether the date suits most people, are taken into account when deciding when to hold rituals. During my fieldwork the group took into account my difficulty in getting to Auckland during the week, and a ritual would sometimes be shifted one day from the "correct" date so that it would be easier for me to attend. Women are reluctant to shift rituals more than a day or two from the prescribed date, however, because the "energy" is strongest on the proper date.

Women volunteer to undertake the organization of a Sabbat ritual on the basis of their feelings about the particular Sabbat, their confidence, and the space their personal diaries allow them. Rite of passage rituals may be called for at any time by a member of the group

as the need arises. Usually the woman who has called for the ritual will ask another member to help her plan it.

Occasionally a ritual will not be planned at all, beyond deciding on a time and place to meet. These rituals take shape as women tune in to the theme of the particular Sabbat, listen to their intuition, and spontaneously set up an altar, cast the circle, invoke the elements, lead a meditation, and suggest symbolic acts to perform. In the group I joined, Summer Solstice has always been a spontaneous ritual held at a beach because women have felt too busy with end of year activities to plan it in detail beforehand.

Preparation for a ritual involves the women who have offered to organize it meeting for a planning session sufficiently in advance of the date of the ritual for them to send out invitations to other group members detailing where to meet and what to bring and to give themselves time to do the necessary detailed preparation. At planning sessions women spend time brainstorming, consulting a variety of manuals on feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality, debating the virtues of various venues, making notes, delegating responsibility for leading various parts of the ritual, making lists of materials to be collected and brought to the ritual, constructing an outline for the ritual, writing the invitation, and drinking a lot of herbal tea.

Rituals are usually held in group members' homes or gardens, in community buildings hired for the occasion, in parks or public gardens, on mountains or beaches. Privacy is an important consideration. It is very rare for a ritual to be held in a house when other members of the household are at home. If the ritual is to be held outside in a public place, the organizers will visit the site to find a suitable spot, and, if

necessary, prepare it on the day of the ritual by tidying the space, clearing stones, thistles, cow-pats, and so forth. Juliet Batten says (1988:7): "For outdoor rituals I have found that privacy is more easily achieved in a wide open space than in an enclosed corner. Other people find it harder to approach when they themselves are clearly visible". While privacy is important to enable women to concentrate fully on the ritual, secrecy is not important. In this respect New Zealand witches' rituals differ from the English witches' rituals Luhrmann (1989a) describes.

Invitations to the ritual are posted to group members by the organizers and include the following: information on the date, time and venue; a list of things to bring which usually includes a symbol, a candle, food to share, and other paraphernalia to be used in the ritual; a brief statement about the theme and purpose of the ritual; and, on occasions, a guide to what colours to wear. During my fieldwork it was always easy to tell when mail came from ritual group members -- the envelopes were typically recycled, were often decorated with pentacles, witch stamps, spirals or other symbols, and, when opened, it was not unusual for little gold stars, hearts, glitter, pressed flowers or bright autumn leaves to fall out.

Preparing the Space/Setting up

Where the ritual is to be held inside, the room is carefully prepared by the women who have planned the ritual. It is cleaned meticulously and, as far as possible, signs of the room's mundane functions are removed or concealed. Posters or paintings are draped with silk scarves and batik cloths, extraneous furniture is removed, and curtains are closed.

Candles are placed around the room if the ritual is held at night. At one ritual, which the women organizers had wanted to hold in a cave but could not find one suitable, a simulated cave was built in a bedroom using indigo-dyed sheets.

In the centre of the room an altar is set out on the floor, or occasionally on a low table, around which the women will sit in a circle on cushions. The altar is the focus of the ritual and reflects its theme. A circular or square cloth is spread out. The colour of the cloth depends on what the women regard appropriate for the particular Sabbat -- it may, for example, be black at Halloween, gold at Lammas, white at Candlemas. A compass is used to check the orientation of the room so that symbols of the four elements can be placed on the cloth in the appropriate directions. Symbols of air are placed in the east, symbols of water in the west, symbols of fire in the north and of earth in the south. The element/direction correlations for water and air are the same as those used by witches in the United States, but those for earth and fire have been reversed for the Southern Hemisphere.

Incense, ready to be lit when the elements and directions are invoked, is placed in the east as a symbol of air. Other symbols of air are added, for example, feathers, ornamental birds and butterflies, seed pods, toetoe, white flowers, a fan, a bell. The ritual sword, the athame, is a symbol of air. It is commonly mentioned in North American manuals on witchcraft, but I have rarely seen it used in New Zealand. Symbols of water are placed in the west: these may include a chalice or bowl of water, preferably fresh spring water or sea water; shells of all kinds; a starfish; an ornamental dolphin; blue flowers. A candle to be lit during the invocation of the elements is placed in the north as a

symbol of fire along with other fire symbols: a wand, symbol of the witch's will; red flowers, berries or leaves; red/orange skinned fruit. Symbols of earth are placed in the south: pentacles, a pot-plant, flowers, a sheaf of wheat, bulbs, fruit, herbs, crystals, stones, clay sculptures, a dish of salt, a dish of earth.

Various goddesses are associated with different elements and their images or symbols may also be placed in the corresponding directions: Hecate, Kali and Mahuika are fire goddesses; Artemis, Persephone and Hine-titama are associated with the east; Gaia, Demeter and Papatuanuku are earth goddesses; Aphrodite and Ishtar are associated with water (Batten 1988:60). A special symbolic object relating to the theme of the ritual is placed in the centre: an orb, a Goddess image or sculpture, a flower arrangement, a candle. A Tarot card relating to each of the elements may also be placed on the altar.

Altars are always artistically created and beautiful. The symbols are intended to help women contemplate the theme of the ritual. At Candlemas 1991, for example, the altar was a blaze of candles forming a pentacle shape on a gold-coloured cloth. At Lammas 1992 the altar was crowded with symbols of the harvest: fresh breads, corn cobs, grapes and grape juice, grains, ears of corn, fruits and vegetables.

For outside rituals the altar is much simpler, partly because the whole outdoor environment is evocative in itself, and partly because it is difficult to carry a lot of gear to an outdoor site. A circle of stones might be made to mark the space inside which the women will sit. Beltane rituals are usually held outside so that maypole dancing and bonfire jumping can take place.

It is important that rituals are prepared with meticulous attention to detail to avoid technical hitches which would interrupt the ritual's flow and women's concentration. Once the circle is cast, women may not leave it except in the case of an emergency (and looking for a box of matches is not regarded as such). Taped music must be ready to go, matches must be conveniently located, water must be on hand to dowse a fire if necessary, there must be sufficient light for a woman to read a guided visualization, and so on.

The final stage of preparation is for the women who are leading the ritual to choose where they are going to sit in the circle, to place their notes and any materials they will need close at hand, and to allow a time for meditation before the ritual begins. The leaders may sit anywhere in the circle they choose, not necessarily beside one another. Women's decisions about where to sit are based on practical considerations, such as proximity to an electric point so that they can switch on music, and on which direction they feel drawn towards. For example, if a woman feels nervous, distracted or "scattered", she may feel she needs "grounding", so may choose to sit in the south, the direction associated with earth. A woman who lacks energy may say she "needs more fire energy" and choose to sit in the north.

Before the ritual begins, the telephone is taken off the hook so that there will be no distractions. If the ritual is held in a community building which may be used by other people while the ritual is in progress, a "Do not disturb" sign is fixed to the door.

Entering Sacred Space

The boundary of the ritual space is consciously marked by the women planning the ritual, and frequently symbolic acts are performed by those attending the ritual as they cross this threshold. In New Zealand shoes are removed before women enter the space if the ritual is held indoors. The door to the room in which the ritual will be held is kept shut until the organizers invite the women to come in. If the room has no door, a makeshift curtain is used to create a symbolic veil between the ritual space and the everyday world. Any instructions to participants are given before women enter the room. In Power from Within Batten says (1988:7):

> Be aware of the physical form of the boundary between every day and sacred space. An action performed as each woman crosses the actual threshold can be very effective; or do a purification outside the sacred space before entering. Use a curtain or doorway imaginatively, or create a sense of threshold, e.g. sweep it "clear" with a small broom before each woman enters; step over a broom or bundle of sticks; dip into a bowl and self-bless as you enter; step from light into darkness.

Women may be greeted at the entrance by the organizers with a kiss or hug. A description of a Winter Solstice ritual in the Women's Spirituality Newsletter (Brigid 1991) describes how women were symbolically birthed into the ritual space:

> Each woman came up the stairs and was greeted by two women, hands joined, arms in an arch. As they walked through the arch the arms fell to encircle them. "From woman you were born into this world. From women you are born into this circle".

When women enter the room they choose a place to sit around the central altar, set down their candle, symbols and anything else to be used in the ritual, and wait quietly for everyone to be seated. This is a

time to "become centred" -- to relax, to become aware of one's physical, emotional, mental and spiritual state, to focus on the purpose of the ritual. Music, instrumental or Goddess chants, may be playing quietly. Candles are lit around the room outside the circle. Once everyone is seated, the atmosphere has stilled, and there is an air of expectation -- all of which are judged by the organizers -- the ritual begins.

Welcome/Purpose of Ritual

One of the organizers welcomes the women and may say a few sentences about the ritual's theme. This is not a time, however, for lengthy explanations, and, in fact, at no point during a ritual is there any sermonizing. "Ritual is a 'right brain' activity," Batten says (1988:16), where women allow the creative, emotional, intuitive aspects of themselves free reign. Music, dance, drawing, trance, meditating on symbols and symbolic acts are all "right brain activities". Language and rationality belong to the left brain and are downplayed in ritual. An example of a welcome to an Autumn Equinox ritual is set out below:

> Welcome to Autumn Equinox everyone. This Sabbat is also called Mabon after Queen Mab of the Faery People or Maeve of the Celts. Mabon is the harvest festival. It is a time of balance and poise: light and dark are equal, and the dark is about to increase. We meet to celebrate our personal harvests, to rediscover balance in our lives, to fuel our inner fire as the darkness increases. The Mother has become Crone. We honour the wise women in our lives.

Purification

The purification may take place as women cross the threshold into sacred space, or it may occur before or immediately following the welcome. During the purification women symbolically clear away or leave behind any worries or preoccupations which might prevent them

from concentrating fully on the ritual -- from being "fully present". Stein writes (1990:49): "Purification means letting go of the earthplace in readiness for entering between the worlds, the place of connection with Goddess". Batten says (1988:11): "I have found that the transition from outer world into sacred space is not always easy to make, and attentiveness to the need for clearing opens the way for the inner journey". In the Winter Solstice ritual I describe in chapter ten, the journey to the cave was a time for women to leave behind mundane concerns.

Purification is not meant in any sense to represent a purging from sin -- there is no concept of sin in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality. The things women symbolically leave behind are simply those which might distract their concentration. Examples include: tiredness, busyness, nervousness, self-doubt, guilt about leaving children for the evening, concern about an unresolved issue with a partner, physical aches and pains, worry about work, anxiety about money, preoccupation with a domestic issue, feeling "buzzy" with over-excitement.

The purification involves each woman in the circle performing a symbolic act and, although this is not obligatory, articulating what she is leaving behind. Examples of purifications are listed below:

- A bowl of scented water with floating flower petals is passed around the circle for women to wash their hands and touch any other part of their body felt to be holding tension. Or they may sprinkle or flick water all around the body. If the purification takes place before women enter the ritual room, the bowl is set up on a table at the entrance to the room and women file past, purify, then enter.

- Each woman strokes the aura of the woman next to her in the circle with a stick of incense, a stalk of wheat (Autumn Equinox), a long-stemmed flower (Spring Equinox), a wand or a feather.
- Each woman shakes maracas or bells all around her body and then passes them to the next woman.
- A large stone is passed around the circle. Each woman projects into the stone everything she wants to leave behind, then plunges the stone into a bucket of sea water.

Casting the Circle

The casting of the circle is critically important to all feminist witches' rituals and marks their formal beginning. It is "a gesture of unification that marks the enclosure of sacred space" (Batten 1988:12). "To cast the circle means to create sacred space, to set the room off from earthplane reality and enter between-the-worlds" (Stein 1990:49). The circle is a place where women are free to be themselves, where they can expect loving acceptance and can address issues in their lives in a safe, confidential and supportive context, and where they can perform symbolic acts of self-transformation.

But the cast circle is more: it is seen as an "energy form" (Starhawk 1989:72) which contains positive energy the women generate. It is this energy which assists in making the ritual a more powerful experience for participants and which, some believe, helps women make the transformations they want. Because the circle is seen as a container of energy, it is crucial that once the circle is cast no one enters or leaves it. If someone arrives late to the ritual, she is unlikely to be admitted. If the group does decide to admit her and the circle has already been cast,

the circle must be recast. By casting the circle ritual participants explicitly separate from the everyday world and enter the liminal state. Starhawk says (1989:71-2):

> In Witchcraft, we define a new space and a new time whenever we cast a circle to begin a ritual. The circle exists on the boundaries of ordinary space and time; it is "between the worlds" of the seen and unseen, of flashlight and starlight consciousness, a space in which alternate realities meet, in which the past and future are open to us. Time is no longer measured out; it becomes elastic, fluid, a swirling pool in which we dive and swim. The restrictions and distinctions of our socially defined roles no longer apply; only the rule of nature holds sway.... Within the circle, the powers within us... are revealed.

The boundary of sacred space may be conceptualized as the circle of women themselves, or it may be the whole area to be used during the ritual. For an outside ritual the whole area may be "protected" by women walking around its perimeter making a symbolic boundary using the four elements. For example, if eight women were present, they might each carry one of the following: lit incense for drawing pentacles in the air, a bell (air), a dish of salt water for sprinkling, a watering can (water), a candle, a wand for drawing pentacles in the air (fire), a dish of salt or a dish of herbs for sprinkling (earth).

In the Southern Hemisphere the circle should be cast in an anti-clockwise direction, following the direction of the sun's movement, according to North American manuals (Starhawk 1989:75; Stein 1990:50). However the direction of the casting does not seem to matter to New Zealand witches: Batten does not mention it and during the rituals in which I participated the direction chosen for casting seemed arbitrary.

I list below some methods of casting the circle when women are seated around the altar:

- An object (candle, orb, crystal) is passed around the circle. Each woman, as she passes it on, says to the woman next to her, "Welcome to Beltane [for example], ____ [woman's name]".
- Women join hands and a squeeze is passed around the circle three times. Women visualize energy swirling around the circle.
- One Lammas a chalice of grape juice was passed around the circle and each woman welcomed and toasted the woman to whom she passed the chalice.
- Each woman in turn chants her name into the circle and the others echo it back to her three times.

After performing one such symbolic act, all the women join hands, close their eyes, and contemplate their connectedness within a circle of sacred space.

Invoking the Directions/Elements

Starhawk writes about the directions/elements (1989:75,226):

> The concept of the quartered circle is basic to Witchcraft, as it is to many cultures and religions. This concept is common to Native American, African, East Indian, Tibetan, and many other spiritual systems, as are the four elements of air, fire, water, and earth. Of course, we know that these are not elements in the same sense as are hydrogen, helium, and carbon, but they are the basic necessities for sustaining life.

Juliet Batten calls this phase of the ritual "orientation". If the ritual is held outside, and sometimes if it is held inside, the tangata

whenua are honoured, "acknowledging other layers of experience of this land and deep identification with it" (Batten 1988:12).

The directions and corresponding elements are invoked verbally, along with the qualities of each element and any goddesses associated with particular elements or directions whose presence or "energy" the women wish to invoke. The invoking may be done by one of the organizers or by four different women, each one seated near one of the directions. In the latter case, the invocations are usually written on cards and placed at the edge of the altar in the appropriate direction. In groups where women are experienced ritual-makers, the invoking may be done spontaneously. As air is invoked the incense is lit; as fire is invoked the candle in the north is lit. I set out below lists of qualities or associations connected with each of the elements (compiled from Batten 1988 and Starhawk 1989).

Fire/North: spirit, energy, power, will, passion, opening, manifesting, destruction, summer.
Earth/South: body, depth, withdrawal, inner journey, nurturance, darkness, fertility, winter.
Air/East: mind, dawn, beginnings, newness, freshness, knowing, intuition, rationality, clarity, spring.
Water/West: emotions, flow, return, surrender, daring, Autumn.

The centre is the fifth direction and is invoked last. It is the catalyst, the point of transformation, "the place where magic happens". Starhawk writes (1989:81): "It corresponds to pure essence, to

timelessness, to transparent light, to the power to go, to move, to change, transform".

Two examples of what is said during invocations are set out below. The first was used in a Candlemas ritual by the group I joined. The second was used in a ritual for a woman about to leave New Zealand for an overseas trip.

1. I invoke the element AIR
And invite Artemis
Goddess of the East
To bring us inspiration

I invoke the element FIRE
And invite Hecate
Goddess of the North
To bring us power and passion

I invoke the element WATER
And invite Aphrodite
Goddess of the West
To bring us healing and love

I invoke the element EARTH
And invite Demeter
Goddess of the South
To open us to beauty

I invoke the CENTRE
And invite the Goddess
In each of us
To awaken us to her mystery

2. Hine-titama, Goddess of the East and the air, the dawn maiden, you are the mother of us all and you greet us in death. Come and be with us now.

Mahuika, Goddess of the North, the one who gave the world fire, you warm us with your energy. Come and be with us now.

Taranga, Goddess of the West, who gave birth to Maui in the ocean, you keep us alive with the water of life. Come and be with us now.

Papa-tuanuku, Goddess of the South, who came forth from Te Po, the darkness, you are our mother earth. Come and be with us now.

> Hine-ahu-one, the essence of all living things, breathe with us now and energize us with your power. Centre us now.

Guided Meditation/Visualization

Almost all witches' rituals include what is known alternatively as a guided meditation or guided visualization which is designed to invoke a state of trance. The meditation takes the form of an imaginary journey in the course of which each woman receives new energy, insight, a symbolic gift, or a message from a Being or the Goddess who may take a variety of forms. The form the Goddess takes may turn out to be the woman who is imagining the journey, possibly at a different stage of her life.

One of the organizers prepares the meditation, either by taking one from the many manuals or by writing her own. Taped music may be played softly in the background if some can be found which is suitable. Meditation tapes or classical music are used most often.

Before the meditation women are asked to make themselves comfortable -- they may sit or lie down. The woman leading the meditation asks them to close their eyes, then takes them through a full body relaxation sequence. The journey may begin with women imagining themselves in a beautiful or wild place in nature usually one which is familiar to and loved by them -- it may be a beach, a forest, a field of flowers. Or the journey may begin by women discovering an entrance -- to a cave, a magical garden, a labyrinth. In some journeys women travel back in time, either to another stage of their own lives or to a past era. As the journey unfolds the woman leading it tries to make

the experience as real as possible by evoking the senses. Women are encouraged to listen, smell, see colours, feel, and so on.

Once the goal of the meditation experience has been reached, the person leading the meditation guides the women back to its starting point -- back to the gate to the garden, to the entrance to the cave, to the field of flowers. This is important, as some women fall into trance easily and deeply and may find it difficult to "return" to normal consciousness. Following the guided meditation women "ground" the experience by drawing an image from their journey or by making a simple statement about how the experience was for them. In this way the essence or goal of the experience is crystallized.

Starhawk describes the point of trance thus (1989:157):

> Trance unlocks the tremendous potential inherent in our unused awareness. We can augment our sensitivity, growth, and creativity.
>
> In trance we are more suggestible -- a fact that underlies the most common uses of hypnosis.... The Craft teaches the use of suggestion to help us consciously direct our own minds.... [W]e increase our awareness of the functioning of suggestion and learn to use it deliberately on ourselves.... The unconscious is no longer split off, but is in constant communication with the conscious mind.
>
> We can use our own suggestibility for both physical and emotional healing. Mind and body are linked, and our emotional state contributes to disease, whether it is purely physical or psychosomatic. Suggestion can aid learning, increase concentration, and further creativity. It can also open up new forms of awareness and awaken the psychic senses.
>
> Trance stimulates vision and imagination and opens up new sources of creativity. When the barriers between the unconscious and the conscious are crossed, ideas, images, plans, and solutions to problems arise freely. As the right-hemisphere, holistic vision is awakened, it becomes a rich source of insight, of new and original approaches to situations.

Guided meditations are based on the idea of "power from within" -- that each individual is her own ultimate source of knowing about herself and her life, and has within her the power to know and meet her own needs and to realize herself fully. By passing into an altered state of consciousness, women believe they gain access to this self-knowledge and discover the tools they need to use the knowledge effectively in dealing with and directing their own lives. Whatever is "brought back" from the imaginary journey may be applied to specific issues or situations in a woman's life: her "deep self" gives her conscious self insight on the situation.

My understanding of how guided meditations or visualizations work for New Zealand witches is rather different from Luhrmann's understanding of their function for English witches. In England, the guided visualization is called a "pathworking" and constitutes the most important component of a ritual. English witches seem to believe that as the participant imagines the pathworking power to bring about a desired change is released and independently produces the change. The "power" is seen as some kind of force outside the individual which can be activated. The greater the ability of the participant to visualize powerfully, the greater the power. Luhrmann writes (1989a:194):

> A pathworking is the paramount form through which power is supposedly generated, gathered and released as the story develops and climaxes. The standard explanation for a ritual is that as the story is being told, the power is flowing, stimulated by the participants' imaginations. At the climax of the story, the power is released through the final images in the rite.

New Zealand witches do not believe that as they are sitting in a room imagining a journey and an encounter with a powerful Being power is released "out there" on their behalf. They believe that the

experience of the guided meditation enables them to contact their own inner power and knowledge and gain insight on how to use them effectively.

The guided meditation for Lammas 1991 was written by one of the women in the group I joined. Following a relaxation exercise we were asked to imagine ourselves in a beautiful garden, to discover a path and follow it, to enter a warm enveloping mist, and then to emerge on the other side of the mist where we met the Goddess. The Goddess gave us each a gift which we took back with us along the same route. Following the visualization we were invited to make statements about the experience beginning: "In my trance I saw... ". After the ritual I recorded what I could remember of the women's statements:

> In my trance the Goddess gave me a book. It was the story of my life and it was only half written. It was for me to write the rest.
>
> In my trance I saw the Goddess and she was wearing black and seemed a little sad.
>
> In my trance I saw the Goddess and she was all in white.
>
> In my trance I saw the Goddess, and she was me.
>
> In my trance the Goddess gave me a stone which was many times heavier than its size.
>
> In my trance the Goddess was an empty space showing that she can take any form at all.
>
> In my trance the Goddess was a bird.
>
> In my trance the Goddess became very old and turned into a Crone before my very eyes.

The guided meditation usually takes place before the "enactment" phase of the ritual. It opens women to a new state of consciousness, gives them a sense of connection to their inner or "deep self", enhances their sense of the sacred through the imagined meeting with the

Goddess, and provides an intense imaginative and emotional experience which prepares them for the transformation work which occurs during the next phase of the ritual.

Enactment

"Enactment" is Juliet Batten's name for the heart of the ritual, "the place where the central purpose is enacted, the place of transformation" (1988:13). I have already shown that the purpose of the Sabbat rituals is to make a connection between the seasonal cycle and women's own inner cycles. This enhances women's sense of connection with nature, central to their holistic world view. Whether the ritual is to celebrate a Sabbat or to mark a rite of passage, the process is essentially the same. It usually incorporates two main parts: a sacrifice and a constructive, constitutive component. The sacrifice involves women identifying what is preventing them from moving forward in their lives and then performing symbolic actions to leave behind, destroy or banish these things from their lives. Having cleared away negativities or obstacles, women are then ready to "bring in the new" (Batten 1988:14). Here, women affirm their new goal, acknowledge new learning or insight, make a commitment to themselves, pledge an action to the group, prepare to embark on a new phase. Again, a symbolic act is performed.

Prior to the sacrifice, there is often a meditation time for women to "go within", to focus on the transformation they want to happen, and to find what is standing in its way. In their heightened state of awareness women seem to discover this very clearly. They may write down or draw a symbol of anything negative they feel they need to leave behind. The commonest sacrificial act is to burn the bits of paper on which the

words or symbols have been drawn. This is often done very dramatically. If possible, a cauldron is used for the burning. If no one owns one, a metal rubbish bin or a wok does instead. As each woman steps forward, names what she is burning, sets it alight, and drops it in the cauldron, the rest of the group may stamp and shout and beat drums. Or they may chant repetitively something like: "Banish, burn, go!". The burning may be done in silence, but in a highly charged atmosphere.

Fire is regarded as the most potent form of sacrifice, but other methods are also used. Symbols of what is to be sacrificed may be buried in earth or sand or thrown into the sea. Cords representing what is binding a woman to the past may be cut. Feathers may be blown away. Clay may be moulded into a symbol of an obstacle and then pounded.

At a birthday ritual for one of the women in the group I joined, the woman who was celebrating her birthday had pinned a red paper heart to her top and suspended a "cage" cut from a cardboard box around her neck covering the heart. She explained that she had been finding it difficult to get emotionally close to friends and people she loved, and wanted to change this. She took off the cage, cut it up, and burnt it in the fire-place, symbolically freeing her emotional self. She also wore a "skirt" made of strips of paper. Each strip represented something she wanted to leave behind or an issue which needed resolving. Each of these was named, ripped off the waist-band, and thrown into the fire. In the following weeks the woman dealt with and resolved these issues and conflicts.

Following this symbolic sacrifice the woman reported feeling "lighter and better". She felt, though, that her heart was too exposed and needed some protection. During the constructive phase of the ritual she placed garlands made of different coloured ribbons around her neck, each symbolizing an aspect of her life which would be important during the coming year -- career, friends, ritual, health, home, "lots of fun", and so on. She arranged some of the ribbons to fall across the heart so that it would "feel less exposed". Everyone in the group gave her a gift to symbolize what we wished for her in the coming year. These were attached to her clothing or body in some way. The gifts included: a black lace garter for sensuality, a bulb of garlic for good health, a badge bearing the woman's symbol symbolizing women's strength, a bracelet woven from eleven strands representing the love of members of the ritual group, a bracelet of shells with various symbolic meanings including wisdom and protection. The ritual concluded with a lot of eating and drinking.

The key elements in the constructive phase of the ritual are healing, change and transformation. During a Goddess workshop I attended Lea Holford used the myth of Demeter and Persephone as a focus for healing work around the theme of mothers and daughters. We had been asked to bring symbols of our mothers and we shared these in small groups. One woman brought a Chinese "good luck egg" symbolizing procreation and nurturing. Someone else brought a recipe book -- her mother was always preparing food for her. Another, an artist, brought a symbol of her artistic grandmother with whom she identified because she could not face thinking about her mother.

All the women in my group experienced love-hate relationships with their mothers. Lea used the myth of Demeter and Persephone in its pre-patriarchal form (that is, where Persephone enters the underworld freely, not as the result of abduction by Hades) as a parallel for women's psychological experience of the mother-daughter relationship. Persephone's separation from Demeter, descent into the underworld, achievement of the status "Queen of the Underworld", and eventual joyful reunion with her mother was presented as a metaphor for a daughter's inevitable separation from her mother -- the underworld representing the turmoil of adolescence -- in order to become a fully independent woman capable ultimately of relating to her mother equally as another woman. The ritual acknowledged the necessity of this process and its painfulness.

The underworld was also presented as symbolizing a person's "inner world" where we find the "dark side of the mother". Before a period of creativity, Lea said, we often withdraw and feel enervated. In this state we need to nurture ourselves. We were invited to focus during a meditation on: "What needs to be nurtured in your life at present?". Lea had brought a large pot of dirt: we each planted a seed in the pot to symbolize what we wanted to plant and nurture in our lives. Several weeks later, when the seeds had sprouted and begun to grow, Lea repotted them individually and gave each woman one to take home (see chapter twelve).

The planting of seeds or bulbs is a common symbolic act used in the constructive part of the ritual. Examples of other constructive symbolic acts are set out below.

- In a Beltane ritual women made garlands of spring flowers to be worn during the maypole dancing. Each flower was chosen to represent a quality or something new which they wanted to bring into or foster in their lives.

- In an Autumn Equinox ritual women plaited girdles from carpet wool, weaving in symbols of their personal harvests or qualities they wanted to carry forward into the dark, lean period of winter.

- On the last night of Juliet Batten's Goddess course in September 1990 we were invited to choose two goddesses of those we had studied whose qualities we especially wanted to invoke in our lives. Juliet unwrapped her wand from a pink silk scarf and laid it across a glass bowl of water. She produced containers of glitter in different colours -- each a symbol of a different goddess: yellow for Hestia, blue for Artemis, green for Aphrodite, red for Demeter and so on. Each woman sprinkled glitter from two containers representing her two chosen goddesses into the bowl of water and stirred them together so that they swirled and sparkled in the candlelight.

- In a ritual focussed on Artemis led by Lea Holford we were encouraged to think of something we wanted to request of Artemis. Each woman in turn placed "Artemis's crown", a headdress of peacock feathers, on her head, made her request, and beat on a drum saying: "Artemis, hear my call". The requests included: vindication for a shamed daughter, help to find a focus in life, help to explore creativity, help to care for oneself, help to deal with a bureaucratic institution. One woman invoked Artemis the huntress by stating: "I want to become the arrow, the bow and the target".

Chanting

Chants, the simpler and more repetitive the better, are said to help induce a state of trance. The effect of "droning music", says Shekinah Mountainwater (1991:93), is enchanting and hypnotic, and has a powerful effect on consciousness. North American witchcraft manuals give the words to numerous chants, mostly written by women and some men over the past two decades, but including Sumerian chants and chants borrowed or adapted from other religious traditions. Only a few of these are used in New Zealand, probably because women do not know the tunes to most of them. New Zealand women frequently say they wish they knew more chants. Apart from a handful of well known and often used chants, chanting in New Zealand witches' rituals tends to be spontaneous and lacking in specific verbal and musical forms.

Chants may be incorporated into any part of a ritual. A "names chant" may be done at the beginning to acknowledge each woman and to welcome her. In a large group, all women may simultaneously sing, say or chant their names repeatedly into the circle; the sound builds to a crescendo and then dies away. The process is guided by women listening and "tuning in" to one another. In a smaller group, each woman in turn chants her name in a way which expresses how she is feeling, then the group echoes the chant back to her (Batten 1988:19). The elements may be invoked by members of the group spontaneously chanting the qualities of each element in a way which evokes the energy of the element.

I noted above that during the sacrifice phase of the ritual women may repetitively chant a simple phrase such as: "Banish, burn, go!" accompanied by a drum beat. Chanting may also be used in the

constructive phase of the ritual. During a workshop with Juliet Batten, each woman plaited a "magic cord" using three strands of twine in different colours. Each colour represented a quality we wanted to weave into our life: the qualities women chose included serenity, spontaneity, self-trust, creativity, toughness, healing, joy, faith, opening and self-love. After plaiting the cords, we tied them around our waists or wrists or made headbands or necklaces from them, then held hands in the circle and spontaneously chanted together the three qualities we each wanted to invoke.

The most powerful and dramatic chant is "the cone of power". From reading North American manuals one gets the impression that a "cone" is raised during almost every ritual. Stein (1990:61) writes:

> Raising the cone of power is the energy climax of the ritual and it is done in almost every group ritual in some way.... By this time in the ritual a great deal has happened on the psychic/subconscious/Goddess-within levels for the women in the ritual.... The cone of power is raised to concentrate that energy and to direct it, as energy without direction either degenerates to nervous tension or dissipates without an outcome. In raising the cone of power, that psychic energy is collected, formed, concentrated and sent. Its direction is to further the purpose of the ritual, the inner transformations, within each participating woman.

Batten (1988:21) describes the technical aspects of raising the cone:

> The group begins with linked hands, relaxes and breathes together, until there is a sense that the group is one whole. Then the breath becomes a simple quiet hum. It builds in strength, throats open and vowel sounds emerge. The notes build. Consonants, words may be added, or the notes may simply rise, higher and higher, building in both pitch and intensity as the visualised cone builds to a peak. A drum or other percussion instruments may join the chant. When the energy has built to its highest point, the leader cries out "Now!" The sound is cut, and everyone grounds, palms to the earth, allowing the energy to return to the source. They breathe, in trance. The energy flows through them strongly, clearing and

> purifying, carrying with it tears from released pain, anger, tension, blocks and resistances. By relaxing into the energy flow and trusting the process, the women experience a letting go. They feel energised and clear.

In my experience the raising of a cone of power is done much less frequently in rituals in New Zealand and has rather different purposes from those described in North America. Starhawk (1989:237) and Stein (1990:61), for example, talk about the cone as a concentration of energy which can be directed toward the achievement of a specific goal, either related to the women in the ritual or to a goal outside, such as the healing of a person. The success of the exercise depends on the women visualizing their intent very clearly. In New Zealand the point of the raising of the cone, according to Batten above, seems to be its general therapeutic value for the women participating in the chant.

The words of two chants widely known and used amongst New Zealand witches are set out below. Both have actions. The theme of the first is the holistic connection and the cyclic nature of all life; the theme of the second is transformation and the ever-changing nature of life.

1. We all come from the Goddess
   And to Her we shall return
   Like a drop of rain
   Falling to the ocean

   Hoof and horn, hoof and horn
   All that dies shall be reborn
   Corn and grain, corn and grain
   All that falls shall rise again

2. She changes everything She touches
   And everything She touches changes

Dance

Dancing to music, either free and unstructured or simple "circle dancing", is a part of many rituals, especially the light-hearted rituals of Spring Equinox, Beltane and Summer Solstice. In circle dances women retain their place in the circle, often link hands, and perform very simple steps which take them toward the centre and out again and move them to left and right in the circle. Because the steps are so simple and repetitive, and women may close their eyes while dancing, the effect of the movement may be to induce a state of trance. Circle dances include traditional dances from different countries, for example, Greece, Yugoslavia, Ireland and Germany, and dances which women create themselves to suit the mood and theme of the ritual. Sometimes women dance with streamers or long scarves. At Summer Solstice 1992 in Hamilton women held three crepe paper streamers -- red, yellow and orange -- in each hand for the dancing on the river bank.

Chanting may be accompanied by women walking or dancing in rhythm around the circle, often accompanied by percussion instruments, especially drums.

Dance may be included at any stage of a ritual.

Opening the Circle

At the conclusion of every ritual, the circle is opened with the words from the Wicca tradition:

The circle is open
But not broken
May the peace of the Goddess
Go in our hearts.
Merry meet and merry part
And merry meet again.
Blessed be.

In established ritual groups all women may join hands and say the above blessing together. In workshops or in groups where not all women are familiar with ritual, the woman organizing the ritual will say the blessing and those who know it may join in. The opening of the circle marks the formal end of the ritual. Candles are blown out, lights are turned on, women retrieve their symbols and the altar objects are put away.

Re-integration

The passage between the "sacred space" of ritual and woman's everyday lives is facilitated by the sharing of food and drink, talk and music. This is said to "ground" women and bring them back to "everyday awareness" before they go home (Batten 1988:15). This is a relaxed time of socializing and, in the group I joined, a time to discuss administration details such as the date and organizers of the next ritual.

In this chapter I have described different categories of witches' rituals and the structure of these rituals. Most rituals conform to the structure set out above. The various phases may or may not be announced as such (for example, "We are going to cast the circle now"), but they are usually readily identifiable to anyone familiar with, for example, Juliet Batten's Power From Within or North American manuals by Starhawk, Diane Stein or Barbara Walker.

As well as the fairly elaborate rituals I have described, witches do spells. A spell is a "mini-ritual" (see below) usually performed by one woman. It may be incorporated within the framework of a group ritual

(at any stage after the elements have been invoked), or it may stand alone. In the latter case, the woman who is doing the spell will prepare and perform it largely on her own -- the other women sit in the circle with her as witnesses and to provide moral support. They may join in during part of the spell, but this only happens at the request of the woman who has chosen to do the spell. On several occasions the ritual group I joined has gathered for an evening of spells, and space is sometimes set aside during workshops for women to do spells if they wish.

During the first series of workshops I attended on feminist ritual-making taught by Juliet Batten, we were given a hand-out about spells. The text of this hand-out is set out below:

Spells

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

How to cast a spell:

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

2. Get in touch with the desired end. See it clearly. See yourself achieving it.

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

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

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

the place of the anger. Breathe in the gift, chanting suitable words.

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

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

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

* See Starhawk, The Spiral Dance, p.110 on, for more ideas. Never do a spell to hex or damage another person. Whatever energy you give out will return to you threefold!

Several points worth noting about spells arise from the above. Firstly, spells are explicitly and primarily intended to have an instrumental purpose, although they may also include a communicative function -- the woman performing the spell may be telling herself and the other women present about a decision she has reached, about what is important to her and happening for her at present, about her concerns and goals for herself and her situation. I deal further with anthropological discussions about the instrumental and communicative functions of ritual in chapter eleven.

Secondly, spell-making is a creative enterprise. There are no prescribed actions using prescribed objects or ingredients. There are no prescribed word forms which are believed to possess an inherent magical power. It is not possible to make a dangerous mistake while making a spell. No ritual specialist is required to perform the spell or to

guarantee its efficacy. Any woman may decide to do a spell for any purpose she chooses (except to harm someone), she may choose the symbolic objects she wants to use and the actions and words she wants to use.

Thirdly, we can derive from the notes Juliet provided on spells that the symbols used in a spell are not in themselves thought to be responsible for causing the change the woman desires. Symbols are chosen and manipulated to represent what the woman wants to happen. Her expectant attitude, commitment to change, and belief in what she is doing are crucial if the spell is to "work".

Feminist witches' beliefs and practices around spell-making may be compared usefully with the canonical anthropological explanations of magic offered by Tylor and Frazer. Tylor posited that magicians rationalize a causal connection between things which resemble each other or are contiguous in time and space. A symbolic and subjective association between objects is made so that the fate of one object influences that of the associated object. Tylor emphasized that an impersonal power, rather than a personalized spiritual being or beings, was responsible for the causal connections between associated objects (Morris 1987:101). Frazer followed Tylor, claiming that fundamental to magical thought "is a faith, implicit but real and firm, in the order and uniformity of nature" (quoted in Morris 1987:104). He divided magic into two categories: homeopathic or imitative magic, based on the law of similarity between objects; and contagious magic, based on the law of contact between objects. In Juliet's hand-out notes above, the two examples of spells given under point three are examples of homeopathic magic -- the stone resembled cold, hard anger and the clear water

resembled a clear mind. Witches also choose symbols which are believed to be potent because of their previous or on-going contact with another object (contagious magic). For example, a woman wanting to address her anger towards her child might incorporate within the spell symbolic acts using a toy or article of clothing belonging to her child. Such symbols are acknowledged as being potent not because of their contact with an associated person or object, however, but because they evoke a potent psychological association for the woman doing the spell.

The symbols used by witches always have properties which may be categorized as pertaining to either homeopathic or contagious magic. The importance of the symbol and the poignance of the symbolic act for the woman depend upon her conscious acknowledgement of these links.

It is also true that feminist witches, like Frazer's magicians, rationalize the potency of the symbolic act as having to do with an energy or force which connects all things -- concrete objects, the elements, human thought, emotions, motivations, and so on. In Juliet's hand-out this force is called the "universal energy flow".

While symbolic objects are chosen because of the kinds of connections I have been discussing, and witches posit a potent connection between symbols and their referents, it is not accurate to say, as I noted above, that the objects themselves are believed to have the power to bring about change in some magical way. It is not the manipulation of symbols alone which is thought to cause change. The symbolic act is explicitly recognized by witches for what it is. The manipulation of symbolic objects during spell-making does, however, have a part to play in creating change. As I understand it, the change is thought to come about through a complex interaction between the

psychological state of the woman doing the spell, her symbolic acts using symbolic objects, and the creative "energy" in the world at large which connects all things. I return to a discussion of feminist witches' beliefs about how ritual works in chapter eleven. I conclude this chapter with some examples of spells made by women in groups where I was a participant.

During a workshop session with Juliet Batten a young woman did a spell to cast off her feeling that she occupied an inferior position in her family and to acknowledge herself as an adult equal to the other adults in her family. (She is the youngest child in the family.) She began by talking about how she felt she was the "ugliest and boringest" member of her family. She had drawn a picture of her family (she is an art student) -- herself as a little, dirty girl at the end of a family of five. She ripped up this picture and put it into a box. She produced a fragment of an old garment, telling us that this was a symbol of her childhood -- she always wore dirty, paint-covered clothes. The cloth was put into the box with the ripped-up picture. She said she had a lot of childish habits which she wanted to leave behind (these were not detailed). She scattered dead leaves representing the habits in the centre of the circle and trampled them. She then announced her new decision to wear clean, bright clothes and pulled a purple silk scarf out through a hole in the box. She brought out some new shoes bought that day as a gift to herself and put them on along with the scarf. Finally, she lit a huge red candle (about a metre high) to symbolize her bold adult status. All the women in the circle gave her three cheers.

On another evening, another young woman who had just bought her first car did "a spell for safety when driving". She set out a blue

cloth and lit a blue candle to symbolize calmness. She named each of her fears about driving -- bad judgement, tiredness, nervousness, and so on -- and for each placed a card with the fear written on it on the cloth. She then said how she intended to deal with each fear -- for example: "I will take a Defensive Driving course to improve my judgement"; "I will not drive when I am very tired"; "I will put aside my nervousness", and so on. As she spoke, she turned over each of the fear cards and revealed the solutions to her fears written on the reverse sides.

During a different workshop a woman did a spell designed to help her "accept cronehood and aging". She set out a cloth and placed on it symbols representing different parts of her life. She spoke tearfully about the difficulty of giving up some sports altogether and accepting lower performance levels from herself in other sports. She talked about her fear of becoming less attractive according to society's standards, and her frustration about her waning strength. She asked the women in the circle to give her gifts for her cronehood. Each woman spoke briefly, honouring her age and courage, wishing her well, and giving her a "gift" -- these included wisdom, acceptance, expectation, celebration of inner beauty.

When witches do spells, they are seldom looking for dramatic answers to crises in their lives or for miracles. Spells are mostly done to address the kinds of issues and problems which occur in most people's regular lives from time to time. A spell focusses a woman's attention on an issue; enables her to bring it into the open; provides a formal, safe, and supportive context in which she can name and address the issue; and enables her to symbolically deal with it in ways she sees fit -- thus

she gains a sense of being able to do something practical and useful about it. She may symbolically enact a solution to her problem or, if she cannot see a solution, isolate the issues which constitute the problem. Starhawk writes (1989:125):

> Spells... go one step further than most forms of psychotherapy. They allow us not only to listen to and interpret the unconscious but also to speak to it, in the language it understands [through symbols].... Through spells, we can attain the most important power -- the power to change ourselves.

Chapter 10

Ritual as Artefact

The practice of religion is ritual, and every ritual is a human invention.

From Women's Rituals by Barbara Walker (1990:3).

Winter Solstice 1991, Te Henga

We pulled into the near-empty car park at Te Henga just before 11:30am. A few other car-loads were arriving and unloading -- I didn't recognize anyone, but it was easy to tell they were here for the same reason -- all women, well wrapped up, mostly in black or dark colours, lugging bags of firewood, jar lanterns, kits containing Thermos flasks and rugs.

Unsure of what to do or where to go, we made for a sandy path between the dunes. We were met and greeted by two women I faintly recognised from last year's Solstice. They were updating the Women's Spirituality Newsletter mailing list and collecting donations towards Luisah Teish's visit scheduled for early 1992. We were told to go further along the path where another woman would meet and brief us on the ritual.

With this third woman we formed an "information circle" and were told the procedure for the first phase of the ritual -- the journey to the cave -- and the chants to be used. After the briefing, we climbed higher into the dunes to join women who had been inducted in similar circles.

By noon close to one hundred women had gathered, were sitting talking quietly in small clusters with friends or others belonging to the same ritual group or coven, or alone in meditation overlooking the sea. The sky was heavy but the rain held off; there was a light, salty breeze off the Tasman, a strong sense of anticipation, excitement.

A woman holding a tall staff signalled that we were about to begin the journey to the cave. We stood and filed after her in silence. We had been told that this was a time to ground and centre ourselves in preparation for the ritual and to leave spaces of several metres between us to facilitate this. The line stretched out in front of me and behind, disappeared into the sand-hills and re-emerged

snaking between the dunes.

The cave is at the south end of the beach. Over the brow of a hill I saw in the distance a woman standing very erect in its entrance holding a staff, watching us. At our approach she raised the staff and a drumming began deep within the cave, echoed out to us over the sand-hills. We climbed down over mussel-covered rocks and, between in-rushings of the tide, entered the cave.

We lit our lanterns and stowed any extra gear against the cave walls beyond the reach of the tide. The cave was deep and domed high overhead. Towards the back, in the centre, a fire had been lit and an old woman in a purple cloak sat tending it. A circle of women had begun to form towards the back of the cave. We joined it, arranging ourselves cross-legged on bits of plastic with our candle lanterns in front of us.

As the last women entered the cave and the circle of lantern-light closed, the drumming intensified. Other drummers joined in; the rhythm changed; women on the other side of the circle began beating maracas. The sound reverberated around the cave walls, seemed to swirl around the circle, became engulfing.

Light from the cave mouth illuminated a pall of smoke hanging above us. The woman who had led us to the cave walked anticlockwise around the circle, then stationed herself between us and the cave mouth to stand as guardian.

The drumming stopped. The woman by the fire stood and said, "Welcome everyone! Welcome to Winter Solstice. We celebrate the long dark and welcome the return of the sun". She moved to face each of the four directions and repeated the welcome, beginning in the west, and then took her place in the circle amongst her coven members.

Another woman stood and walked to the centre of the circle facing the mouth of the cave. She gave its full Maori name and acknowledged the tangata whenua of the area and our gratitude for their blessing on the holding of the ritual.

It was explained that we would invoke the elements first with a "walking meditation". We all stood and walked or danced anticlockwise in the circle chanting, accompanied by percussion instruments, "The earth, the water, the fire and the air; Returns, returns, returns, returns". Then four women performed an invocation to the four directions, chanting the words loudly and slowly:

West, water, water, West, water, water

Turn the ocean tide... LISTEN

North, fire, fire, North, fire, fire
Turn us to the dark... WATCH

East, air, air, East, air, air
Breathe the winter wind... FEEL

South, earth, earth, South, earth, earth
Hold us in the dark... TOUCH

We were invited to "bring our energy into the circle" by chanting, singing or shouting our names into the circle. Women began immediately to do this -- the chanting tentative at first, then building to a crescendo and ebbing away.

The old woman who had welcomed us stood and invited the Goddess to be with us, concluding the invocation with, "Help us to dream our lives again".

We were told that there was to be a time for personal meditation, accompanied by drumming, during which we were to ask ourselves, "What are you ready to sacrifice to fire?". We were asked to let any images or words come into our minds; the slowing of the drum beat would bring us back from the meditation. We closed our eyes and again the drum-beat began swirling around the circle, this time created by one woman drumming while walking quickly around the perimeter of the circle close to us.

The drumming slowed and stopped. We were invited to sacrifice whatever we felt we no longer wanted or needed in our lives by leaving our places in the circle, taking sticks of wood to symbolize what we wanted to destroy from one of four piles, and casting them into the central fire. Women did this as they felt ready, usually several women at a time. The wood-piles gradually emptied and the refuelled fire blazed.

The sacrifice ended and a chant began:

We all come from the Goddess
And to Her we shall return
Like a drop of rain
Flowing to the ocean

Another meditation followed. This time we were encouraged to go within and find our own "inner sun", a personal strength to celebrate. When we opened our eyes one of the women facilitators had changed into a long, bright yellow dress. She announced that the shortest day had passed; it was time to welcome the sun's return. We were each given a yellow balloon to symbolize our personal "inner

> sun". The balloons were blown up, knotted, waved or thrown into the air amid whoops of celebration.
>
> The women who had organized and facilitated the ritual formed a circle in the centre holding hands, facing outwards (towards us). They led the final blessing:
>
> The circle is open but not broken
> May the peace of the Goddess go in our hearts
> Merry meet and merry part
> And merry meet again
> BLESSED BE
>
> One woman said, "Let the feasting begin!". Women fetched hot soup, chocolate and other food and shared it in groups. There was laughter and embracing as women met up with others from their ritual groups or women they had met at ritual workshops. Some took a mid-winter swim.
>
> We finished our picnics, packed up and trekked back to the car.

This account of Winter Solstice held at Te Henga (Bethell's Beach on Auckland's west coast) on 22nd June 1991 comes from my field notebook. I quote below extracts from three other women's accounts of the ritual published in the Brigid 1991 issue of the Women's Spirituality Newsletter.

> Senses totally stimulated -- the power of the sea calling me inside myself. The safety of the cave and the sense of love and belonging drawing me close to the other women. Feeling my baby stirring within my womb, and knowing I have come home.
>
> Moving in silence with many other women, serpent-like over the soft, undulating body of the Great Mother -- entering the darkness of her womb and exploring my own darkness. Feeling connected to nature and safe to face my fears. Yearning for the light.
>
> The journey beginning with oneself
> Among the dunes of Bethell's
> Being in one's inner darkness
> Letting go unwanted thoughts, feelings
> Being there...
> At home in the bosom of the Great Mother
> The Spirit of Te Henga
> Papatuanuku

I have argued consistently in preceding chapters of this thesis that feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality is a constructed spirituality. I showed in chapter eight how its world view is eclectic in its borrowings from a diversity of ancient pagan traditions and contemporary non-Western religious traditions undergirded by a contemporary Western preoccupation with "Green" issues, gender issues, alternative healing, self transformation, and so on. I begin this chapter with my description of the Winter Solstice ritual to demonstrate, firstly, that feminist witches' rituals, like their belief system or systems, are collages constructed of borrowed, adapted, and newly created elements.

Luhrmann (1989a:244) has made this point very clearly about contemporary English witches' incorporation of diverse mythologies and symbolisms within their magical practices: "They poach from the past in the interests of the present and plunder the world's mythology for their symbolic goods". While Luhrmann's general point is sound, I object to her use of the terms "poach" and "plunder" on the grounds that they imply that contemporary witches' beliefs and practices are consequently somehow illicit, exploitative and inauthentic. I think it is more accurate to say, at least in respect of New Zealand feminist witches, that these women recognize a universal value in a great diversity of spiritual practices and embrace these practices eclectically and unapologetically in their creation of their rituals. They make no attempt to undermine or disrupt the religious systems from which they borrow; these systems, along with the cultures in which they are embedded, are respected and acknowledged whether they are, for example, Native American, African, Indian or Maori. Starhawk says (1989:214):

> [A]ny real spiritual power we gain from any tradition carries with it responsibility. If we learn from African drum rhythms or the Lakota sweat lodge, we have incurred an obligation to not romanticize the people we have learned from but to participate in the very real struggles being waged for liberation, land, and cultural survival.

In my experience women do not claim to replicate, or even necessarily to imitate, a particular element of spiritual practice from another culture, such as, for example, shamanic drumming -- they are quite clear that they are simply adapting its use. As Joan said, quoted at the conclusion of chapter three, feminist witchcraft is "very much part of the postmodern age .... part of a whole cultural context". Joan talked about the way in which she constructs rituals:

> Sometimes I'll go through the Juliet Batten book or I'll go through some of the other books I've got, like Zsuzsanna Budapest's, and I'll take chants and rearrange them. It's like taking a bit here and a bit there, and then adapting it for the woman you are doing the ritual with or to the circumstance.

Noreen also described how her coven builds up a ritual using a variety of literary sources, all of which draw on their own variety of favourite sources:

> At the beginning of our coven, we used Zsuzsanna Budapest's ideas a lot. It was helpful to have something already set out that could just be followed through. They were modified in various ways, wording was changed and rituals were changed for the Southern Hemisphere too. I like Z. Budapest's poetic forms -- some are quotes from ancient poems and some of them are her own.
>
> We do use Starhawk quite a lot; she also has some interesting wordings and ideas. And we're using Barbara Walker who has a relatively new book out on ritual. She's like Juliet Batten here in New Zealand, suggesting ideas but leaving us to find our own forms and wording. We might use other sources like something out of Motherwit or other books about meditation, things out of Thesmophoria, Z. Budapest's regular publication, or out of Womanscript. We might use quotes out of there, poetry and so on.

Moore and Myerhoff in Secular Ritual warn of the potential danger that those carrying out rituals will glimpse themselves as the inventors of those rituals, as the makers of their meaning, and as the creators or their own culture, and will thereby discharge the rituals of meaning. They say (1977:18):

> And underlying all rituals is an ultimate danger... -- the possibility that we will encounter ourselves making up our conceptions of the world, society, our very selves. We may slip in that fatal perspective of recognizing culture as our construct, arbitrary, conventional, invented by mortals.

This "danger" is clearly not applicable to or a concern for feminist witches. They are quite well aware of the fact that their rituals are deliberately and self-consciously constructed, yet they obviously find them meaningful and useful. Understanding that not only their own beliefs and rituals, but all religious rituals in all cultures, are constructed leads them not to reject all rituals as meaningless, but to recognize a universal importance of ritual in the lives of human societies past and present. Witches do not believe that theirs is the "One Right, True and Only Way" (Starhawk 1989:200) and regard all such absolutism as regressive and divisive.

It is not insignificant that a large proportion of the women involved in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality have university degrees, many in the social sciences (see chapter six). I met many who had studied at least some anthropology and had some familiarity with the role of ritual cross-culturally in rites of passage and to mark the annual seasonal cycle. In her Goddess workshops Lea Holford explicitly discusses the tri-partite process broadly common to all rituals in all societies using much the same kind of explanation as van Gennep's

(1960) and Turner's (1974). In Lea's classes women are simultaneously introduced to both the theory and practice of ritual. Engaging in an analysis of the ritual process does not remove for women its mystery or faith in its efficacy. Starhawk, American author of the best known manual on feminist witchcraft, The Spiral Dance, regularly draws on anthropological knowledge in her writing.

Neither is it insignificant that a notable number of the women involved in Goddess spirituality in New Zealand are psychotherapists or counsellors (see chapter six). Juliet Batten and Lea Holford, the best known teachers of ritual in Auckland where the movement is strongest, are both psychotherapists, and I suggest that it is as a result of the significant influence of these two women that feminist ritual-making in New Zealand has its particular character.[1] Lea in particular uses a Jungian approach to psychotherapy where work with symbols and archetypes is fundamental to working with personal psychological processes; in her workshops she similarly facilitates processes where women work with symbols and are taught about goddesses as archetypes. Almost all the feminist rituals I participated in during my research incorporated work with symbols, usually symbols brought from home. The meaning of personal symbols was always articulated and symbolic acts were always explicitly acknowledged as such (for example, the casting of bits of wood on the Solstice fire to symbolize the destruction of negative influences in one's life). The importance of symbols is discussed further below in this chapter.

I return now to an examination of the Winter Solstice ritual with respect to the elements used in its construction. Winter Solstice, as we saw in chapter nine, falls between June twentieth and June twenty-

third in the Southern Hemisphere, and is one of the eight seasonal celebrations which mark the annual cycle or "Wheel of the Year". Winter Solstice is the longest night of the year, but it is also the turning point when the light begins to increase.

At this ritual death goddesses from different spiritual traditions are typically invoked: Hecate, Kali, Hine-nui-te-po, Inanna and so on. Feminist witches say that Winter Solstice is a time to withdraw inside oneself, to face one's deepest concerns and fears -- one's "underworld" -- to recharge and to prepare oneself for renewal. "Going into the void allows for the birth of the new," writes Juliet Batten in Power from Within (1988:41).

Because Winter Solstice marks the point when days begin to increase in length, it is also a time of celebration and hope. Fires are lit, gifts are often exchanged, and there is feasting and merry-making. Garlic is planted which will be harvested six months later at Summer Solstice. It may be a time of gestation for new projects, when first steps are taken towards a new phase in one's life.

An "open ritual" is held in Auckland and Christchurch each year at Winter Solstice. In Auckland it is the largest open ritual held during the year. It is advertized via the Women's Spirituality Newsletter, ritual workshops and word of mouth. It is usually held in the large cave at Te Henga, one of Auckland's west coast beaches, at an hour to fit in with low tide. The open ritual is organized by one ritual group and attracts women from many other groups, those who are deeply committed to Goddess spirituality but do not belong to a ritual group, and those who have an interest in ritual but have had little previous experience. Open rituals such as this provide a context where interested women can

"taste" ritual without having to commit themselves to taking a course of workshops or to becoming a member of an established group or coven.

The Winter Solstice ritual was clearly designed by the Auckland ritual group that organized it to evoke, at least in some respects, what they imagined an ancient pagan ritual to have been like. The venue was a cave -- judging by the archaeological evidence, caves have apparently been used as sites for venerating the Goddess since the Paleolithic. The fire, the drumming, the invocation of a trance-like state, and the "crone" tending the fire were all deliberately chosen images intended to assist women to imagine that they were participating in a ritual which had its roots in the rituals performed by the earliest Goddess-worshipping societies.

There is a paradox here -- there seems to be a feeling amongst feminist witches that any claims to authenticity for their spiritual practices require some claim to historicity. Luhrmann (1989a:244) also makes this point, stating that English witches "make an effort to ground their myth and symbolism in history". "Yet," she says, "magicians free themselves from the need to prove their historical accuracy and the cultural pertinence of the appropriate mythology by arguing that history can serve the role of personal metaphor or myth". It is true that Starhawk concludes her account of the "history" of witchcraft by saying (1989:2):

> Witchcraft has always been a religion of poetry not theology. The myths, legends, and teachings are recognized as metaphors for "That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told", the absolute reality our limited minds can never completely know.

The details of the history of witchcraft are regarded as superficial, less important than the broad outline of the "history" and its symbolic

importance. While on one hand historians, art historians, classicists and archaeologists are building a body of scholarship which sheds light on pre-patriarchal Europe, on the other hand women in the movement do not require this kind of authority in order to claim that their spirituality is valid. It is as if they know that spiritual traditions typically lay claim to a "history" which acts to authenticate the tradition primarily for insiders but also for outsiders. In their "re-creation" (Starhawk 1989:23) of a Goddess religion, feminist witches have constructed for themselves what they variously name their history, their traditions and mythology, or a poetic narrative which has metaphoric significance.

Realistically, we can have little idea about the details of how Winter Solstice was celebrated thousands of years ago, but the legitimacy and success of feminist rituals do not require this knowledge. It is enough to invoke an imaginative connection, a connection women "intuitively feel" they have with early Goddess-worshipping societies. It is clear from what women who participated in the ritual wrote about it afterwards in the Women's Spirituality Newsletter (quoted following my description of the ritual) that the ritual's imagery had evoked in them an imaginative, emotional response -- they talked about the cave as the womb of the Great Mother and saw the dunes as her soft, curvaceous body. The poignance of this imagery heightened the women's ritual experiences. They felt close to other women, connected to nature, and safe to face personal fears and inner darkness.

Moore and Myerhoff (1977:7) argue that

> certain formal properties of that category of events ordinarily called collective ritual (or ceremony) all lend themselves singularly well to making ritual a "traditionalizing instrument".... [C]ollective ceremony can traditionalize new material as well as perpetuate old

traditions.

The means by which new ritual forms become traditionalized, according to Moore and Myerhoff (1977:7-8), include: repetition, either of occasion, content or form; acting (rather than behaving spontaneously); "special" behaviour or stylization -- the use of actions and symbols in a way that sets them apart from mundane uses; order -- the imposition of a prescribed structure; evocative presentational style, including the manipulation of symbols and sensory stimuli; and the "collective dimension" -- the very occurrence of the ritual contains a social message. Moore and Myerhoff claim (1977:8):

> In the repetition and order, ritual imitates the rhythmic imperatives of the biological and physical universe, thus suggesting a link with the perpetual processes of the cosmos. It thereby implies permanence and legitimacy of what are actually evanescent cultural constructs. In the acting, stylization and presentational staging, ritual is attention-commanding and deflects questioning at the time. All these formal properties make it an ideal vehicle for the conveying of messages in an authenticating and arresting manner.

Feminist rituals in general and the Winter Solstice ritual I have described in particular contain each of the traditionalizing properties Moore and Myerhoff list. The form of rituals, discussed in detail in chapter nine, is orderly, repetitive and prescribed, although there is room within rituals for spontaneity and improvisation. The Winter Solstice ritual included the qualities of acting and staging -- we were told before the ritual the words of the chants to be included, and the whole ritual, in fact, had the quality of a theatrical performance. This element is much less obvious in smaller rituals where only a few women who know each other well participate. The invocation of the elements and directions by the four women, in particular, was a staged

performance with well-rehearsed and carefully synchronized movements, words and sounds. The combination of invoking an imaginative, emotionally-charged connection with ancient pagan rituals through the use of particular images and the employment of the traditionalizing properties Moore and Myerhoff describe contribute to the "tradition-like" (Moore and Myerhoff 1977:8) quality of feminist rituals.

The prescribed form of feminist rituals is based on the structure of rituals in the Wicca tradition which dates at least to the 1940s and 1950s. Some witches claim that Wicca's roots can be traced back hundreds of years via the European witch-craze (see discussion about Gerald Gardner's role in modern witchcraft in chapter three). The Winter Solstice ritual followed the format set out in numerous manuals on modern witchcraft (see, for example, Starhawk 1989; Stein 1987; Walker 1990). It began with a time for grounding and centring during the journey to the cave; the circle was cast by a woman walking outside the perimeter of the circle of seated women; the elements and directions were invoked; there was a meditation followed by a symbolic sacrifice -- the casting of wood into the fire; there was a second meditation to find our "inner sun" representing the positive, constitutive aspect of the ritual which typically follows the sacrifice; the circle was opened with the customary blessing; the ritual concluded with the sharing of food.

While feminist witches construct their rituals using a format derived from Wicca, women are not bound to adhere rigidly to this structure and in New Zealand the structure is rather looser than the one mapped out in North American manuals. The manuals themselves

recommend that women experiment, adapt and create the content, and, to a lesser extent, the format of their rituals. Walker (1990:7) says:

> Rather than bog down in endless discussions over minor technicalities, it is best to jump right in and do some rituals.... Flexibility is important. Experimenters should feel free to adapt and innovate.

I have noted that an important component in the construction of many feminist rituals is the adaptation of aspects of contemporary non-Western spiritual traditions, especially those which fall into the category of nature religions. In North America women draw on Native American spiritual practices in particular, and some of these have filtered into New Zealand either through New Zealand women picking them up while in the United States or through American women or men experienced in such techniques visiting New Zealand. The use of particular drumming rhythms to induce a trance-like state in the Winter Solstice ritual recalls shamanic drumming used to induce altered states of consciousness. Workshops devoted to shamanic drumming have been held in Auckland (at least).

The "shamanic journey" is another element which may be incorporated into rituals or workshops. Juliet Batten included this in a weekend workshop on the theme of "The Woman Warrior" I attended in July 1990. To begin with, all the women participants sat in a circle, linked hands, and closed our eyes. Beating her drum and using maracas, Juliet called in all the animal spirits from the four directions. Then she asked us to lie down in a space in the room, cover ourselves with a blanket, and place a covering over our eyes. We were told that we would be taken on a shamanic journey to meet our personal power animal which would then remain with us as our spirit guide. The

journey took the form of a guided visualization which Juliet talked us through, accompanied by a steady drum beat. In essence, the visualization involved finding an opening in the earth and journeying deep into the earth where, it was said, an animal would show itself to us four times. This animal would then become our spirit companion providing guidance and protection.

After we re-emerged from the journey, we were provided with thick cardboard, wood, and collage materials with which to make a shield to symbolize our power animal. Later we danced with our shields inside individually constructed sacred circles, danced freely around the room with our shields, and made affirmations in which we identified as our power animal -- for example, "I am Bear. I let no one into my lair"; "I am bison. I am wild and untamed". The animals included several tigers, a tuatara, a stingray, a bison, an eagle, a lion, a bear and a bird. At the end of the day Juliet suggested that we ask the dream-maker to give us a dream of our power animals that night.

Another Native American technique sometimes used in the "purification" stage of a ritual (discussed below) is smudging. This involves setting alight a container of a special combination of dried herbs and using a bird's feather or wing to waft the smoke from the smouldering herbs all around the body, the palms and the soles of the feet. This is believed to remove any negative energies or thoughts.

I am not aware of any inclusion of specifically Maori spiritual practices or ritual elements within feminist rituals in New Zealand. Maori goddesses are often invoked along with other goddesses, and in rituals held outside, such as the one at Te Henga, the tangata whenua

and "spirits of the place" may be acknowledged and/or thanked, but that is the limit of any reference to Maori spirituality.

The other two elements used in the construction of feminist witches' rituals are concepts and techniques derived from New Age therapies and those adapted from psychotherapy. Terms such as "grounding" and "centring" are popular New Age jargon which have spilt into feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality and are beginning to spill into the every day speech of New Zealanders unconnected with either movement. Central concerns of New Age therapies are self awareness, self-healing, self development and self transformation. In the Winter Solstice ritual the invitation to "bring our energy into the circle" by chanting, singing or shouting our names was inspired by New Age self-affirmations. Creative visualization and guided meditation, components of most feminist rituals, are techniques borrowed directly from New Age manuals.

I noted above the importance attached to working with symbols in feminist rituals and how Lea's and Juliet's work as psychotherapists has strongly influenced this in New Zealand. When one compares, for example, English witches' and even North American witches' rituals with New Zealand witches' rituals, it is very clear that in New Zealand rituals are much more loosely structured, less rule-bound, and less encumbered by specifically required symbolic paraphernalia than those elsewhere. However, in New Zealand, working with symbols in a focussed and self-conscious way is usually the most important component of any ritual. By contrast, in Britain the guided visualization is the most important part of most rituals (Luhrmann 1989a:250).

Most invitations to rituals ask participants to bring a symbol, often of something related to the theme of the ritual. I have been asked to bring a symbol of, for example, a personal quality I have in abundance, my spirituality, the four elements, my creativity, my sexuality, a recent achievement, rising energy, qualities needed to sustain me through winter's dark, my childhood, an old fear or chapter of my life to be sacrificed. For the Winter Solstice ritual I described we were not asked to bring a specific symbol (although the firewood we brought in fact became symbolic), perhaps because with such a large number of women, some would not have received the message to bring a symbol. The casting of wood on the fire, representing the destruction of anything negative in our lives, was a symbolic act fully recognized as such by participants.

On the first night of her Goddess course (10 June, 1991) Lea explicitly discussed the importance and function of symbols. She talked about the transpersonal quality of symbols, their ability to "take us beyond profane life", their multivocality, their capacity to represent many levels of experience as well as meaning, and their ability to cope with or incorporate paradox. She emphasized the importance of finding symbols which have personal meaning. In my interview with her, Lea talked at length about symbols. Part of this is transcribed below:

> I think symbols are the most important part of Women's Spirituality actually, because they take us out of the intellectual, verbal realm into our deeper experience and that's very much the language of the inner world. Symbols represent collective experiences of the feminine that go through time, and so connect us to our ancestors and the whole continuity of female experience throughout time....
>
> What is exciting for me is that they resonate with something so deep in our experience that rings true and it brings a sense of empowerment and fulfillment that simply cannot come out of ideas. Ideas excite and provoke and challenge us to search -- I don't underestimate ideas --

but they don't bring that sense of real fullness that the inner images can about really resting within a larger reality, being embedded within a larger reality. I think the symbols are very important carriers of our wholeness, and that the more we work with them, the more we can surrender to an inner reality that's larger than ourselves. The use of symbols is a major vehicle for moving from what I call ego-consciousness to larger self-consciousness -- by "self" I mean that part which recognizes inter-relatedness with all people, with all living things, with all life forms. The more we work with symbols, the more it takes you into that realm. And that transforms the personality quite dramatically, which is why, of course, all religions have symbols.

I think for a lot of women, learning to work with symbols is the first step to honouring the depth of their experience and the validity of it, and taking it as not just some little personal story -- it is a universal story of the feminine they're tapping into. It's almost like getting practised at it. The more you do it, the easier it gets to tell your story, and to trust it is other people's story. When you touch your own mysteries, it is easier to trust that these are things that are meaningful to other people as well, and to share them, and to work out of those, and to trust it'll help other people. So it's that linking of our psychic paths with each other and knowing that in mysterious ways we're very inter-related.

The more women work with symbols, the more they can make sense of their own dreams and their own fantasies, and use those inner powers, develop their intuition. And I think it empowers women then to face themselves at deeper levels. Often if they don't develop those tools, they're just too terrified to face their personal history and their personal woundedness. If you get enough trust in that inner work, you're not so scared to go deeper and deeper. It's like, "So what if I hit one of those old memories and this horrible thing -- I'm not scared of it. I've got something I trust that's guiding me and holding me and carrying me through it, and I trust I'll find meaning in this. I trust I'll find wisdom in it".

It's essential work because otherwise power remains out there. Working with symbols helps women to find the power's actually within themselves. The symbols help them see it more clearly and work with it more effectively, focus it.

Lea talked about the link between universal symbols and women's personally chosen ones, and noted that women frequently do not

recognize that symbols which are important to them as individuals are likely to have a universal symbolic referent. For example, she said, a precious quilt made by a woman's grandmother and the altar cloth used in many religious traditions are both symbolic of the nurturing powers of the feminine.

According to Lea, women achieve a sense of empowerment in working with symbols firstly through beginning to recognize their connections with all other women -- in an immediate sense with those they meet and work with in rituals, but also with all women throughout time. The immediate connections are able to be perceived by women because of the ability of the symbols to elicit a woman's personal story which is then found to echo the experiences and feelings of others in the group. Secondly, symbols are "tools" -- tangible, visible and "real" -- which women can use as a focus in their efforts to understand their psychological processes, face their personal histories, and seek healing, insight and power. Luhrmann (1989a:245) also makes this point:

> Magicians use symbolism to capture, express or articulate their experience, and in its mixture of precision and evocation it becomes tremendously important to them. Ultimately, it can become a means of therapy.
>
> One way that symbolism forms a magician's hermeneutic is by providing an apparently objective medium in which to talk about one's quite subjective self.

In this chapter I have argued that feminist witches' rituals are deliberate constructions and have discussed their various common components. As well as incorporating borrowed and adapted elements, however, rituals include highly original elements. They are both derivative and creative. Women responsible for organizing a ritual are

free to include any activity they see fit. I asked Juliet Batten how she decided what to do in a ritual. She replied:

> I get my ideas for rituals by meditating -- I tune into the morphic field and let the ideas come. I really just work very intuitively. Whenever I'm planning a ritual workshop I open myself in a particular way and I get the ideas. Even when I'm working with a group I'll be totally open and I'll get messages: "Don't do that. Do this". Things will come to me. I tune in to the group and I tune into the season and what's needed here. It's a matter of trusting and staying open.

I concluded chapter three by arguing that feminist witchcraft is unique as a religion or spirituality not only because it is deliberately created, but also because the fact of this creativity is articulated, heartily celebrated and, at the appropriate moments, deliberately forgotten. When women are fully engaged as actors within the rituals they have created, they do not question the authenticity of what they are doing, and are convinced of its value, efficacy and power. They know that they have "made up" the ritual, but they also talk about the ritual as, in some way, having its own power. For example, a woman entering a ritual seeking clarity on an issue so that she can make a decision about it will talk about the need to "trust the process" in order for the ritual to "work". The ritual process is believed to entail more than a participant proceeding through a series of chants, invocations, prayers, statements of intent and commitment and symbolic acts: the participant is not simply "doing" the ritual. The ritual itself is perceived as a dynamic whole capable of having a powerful impact on the woman actor and of taking a turn which she does not expect. In the course of a ritual unimagined and unexplainable things may happen. Lea Holford described to me her first experiences of this:

> We'd come with these symbols and then, after casting the circle, creating that sacred circle, it was just amazing

> what would come out. All of us were absolutely overwhelmed with the power of it. So often it would bypass rationality. We all came in there with these belief systems -- "This is the way the world is" -- and yet when we went to that deeper level of work, a whole different wisdom came out that we didn't know about. It was much more profound and had a much greater truth than anything we'd come in there with. Every time I'd go home and think, "What was this power we contacted?". Obviously it was in all of us. We all tapped into it. It was present for two or three hours and it was something we could feel ourselves taking home every time and building something quite new, a new psychic structure.

Other women talked about "contacting" or "tapping into energy" through ritual -- I return to this in chapter eleven where I discuss how women believe ritual "works". Here, my point is that women's acknowledgement of the constructedness of their rituals does not prevent them from attributing to rituals a power which is greater than human artefact.

Notes

1. I do not mean to imply here that witches' rituals in New Zealand are unique in their concentration on working with symbols, simply that this work is given greater emphasis in New Zealand. I suggest this is because many of the women who belong to ritual groups have done workshops with Lea and Juliet -- it is after such workshops that new groups often form -- and when they come to devise their own rituals, they tend to use the models they are familiar with from workshops. Neither is the movement in New Zealand unique in having psychotherapists amongst its most active members -- a number of the best known writers on Goddess spirituality have a background in psychology, especialy Jungian analysis. Some examples are Jean Shinoda Bolen, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, and Edward Whitmont.

Chapter 11

The Function of Ritual/How Ritual Works

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.... [L]iminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.
>
> From The Ritual Process by Victor Turner (1974:81).

> In Witchcraft, we define a new space and a new time whenever we cast a circle to begin a ritual. The circle exists on the boundaries of ordinary space and time; it is "between the worlds" of the seen and unseen, of flashlight and starlight consciousness, a space in which alternate realities meet, in which the past and future are open to us. Time is no longer measured out; it becomes elastic, fluid, a swirling pool in which we dive and swim. The restrictions and distinctions of our socially defined roles no longer apply...
>
> From The Spiral Dance by Starhawk (1989:71-2).

In this chapter I discuss anthropological understandings of the meaning and functions of ritual alongside witches' own understandings of how their ritual "works". As I have already noted, women are able to objectify and analyse this activity and to articulate their understanding of it: when they do so, they frequently incorporate some awareness of the kinds of analyses anthropologists make about rituals. Noreen summarized her view of the function of ritual thus:

> Ritual provides a framework for living. We recognize the seasons and the moon's phases, so we're much more aware of the seasons and the changes that are going on.
>
> Rituals are also rites of passage -- when something important is happening in a person's life, there is a ritual to mark that passage. Rites of passage are important -- the formalizing of events within a framework; it's a social acknowledgement that something is happening in the person's life. The ritual provides us with a

> familiar shape, something to which we become accustomed and which feels safe. The ritual allows us to put our feelings into words. Ritual reinforces meaning -- meanings that are important to us.
>
> A ritual also involves sharing of energy. Quite often when the group gets together it's amazing the amount of energy that evolves from the sharing together and the effect it can have.
>
> Ritual is also a drama: one is playing out something that is very important and it can be seen in visual form.
>
> Often we've discovered that when a ritual has been held, healing has taken place, either healing of the feelings or healing of the body.
>
> Rituals are also fun. That's one of the main reasons for having them.

In this quotation Noreen divides witches' rituals into two categories -- those which mark the annual seasonal cycle, the Sabbats, and those which mark important transitions in an individual's life cycle, rites of passage (see Turner 1974:157). Noreen refers to the importance of the formal structure of rituals; the expressive, communicative character of rituals; their dramatic quality; the importance of coming together with others to share and generate energy; ritual as instrumental in bringing about emotional or physical healing; and the play aspect of rituals. Her summary of how rituals function for witches strongly resembles the range of functions of ritual that anthropologists have proposed and debated over in relation to their examinations of ritual in cross-cultural contexts.

Luhrmann (1989a:345-6) summarizes what has come to be known in the anthropology of ritual as the "rationality debate" which became established in the wake of Evans-Pritchard's famous ethnography on Azande witchcraft. Two broadly opposed camps were established -- the intellectualists, who claimed that belief in magic arose from a particular

view of the way the world operates and "differed from science primarily in being wrong" (Luhrmann 1989a:347), and the symbolists, who claimed that magic and ritual are primarily symbolic systems which express important meanings, often about the social order, through metaphor and analogy.

"Tylor and Frazer are claimed, post hoc, as the canonical intellectualists," Luhrmann writes (1989a:347). They held that non-Western, and therefore "non-scientific", societies explained cause and effect in the natural world as determined by laws of magic -- magic was a substitute for science. The neo-Tylorians, such as Horton, see the "critical feature of religion, and therefore of (religious) ritual, as being belief in, and communication with, the 'supernatural' world or a 'transtemporal' other world" (Tambiah 1985:129).

Durkheim's is the name most prominantly associated with the symbolist or semiotic approach to understanding ritual. This approach "views the category 'ritual' as spanning sacred-secular, natural-supernatural domains, and as having as its distinctive feature a tendency toward certain forms and structures of 'communication'" (Tambiah 1985:129). Variations of this school of thought, or analyses which lean towards it, have come to dominate anthropological thinking, although the instrumental component of ritual is not ignored altogether by scholars such as Firth, Beattie and Leach (Luhrmann 1989a:348; Lewis 1980:16-7). The idea that rituals can be judged against "the perspective and truth canons of Western scientific rationality" is now generally regarded as naive, and anthropologists are now more interested in "viewing the logic of such purposive acts and the canons for their validity from the actors' point of view" (Tambiah 1985:135-6).

Tambiah (1985:129-30) strongly emphasizes the communicative and performative aspects of ritual, defining it as "a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication". He argues that the performative and creative aspects of ritual are overlooked by neo-Tylorians. He claims that people's cosmological conceptions can be understood less through their stated "beliefs" than through their myths and rituals: rituals "enact and incarnate cosmological conceptions". If a society's rituals and cosmology are thus closely associated, Tambiah says, "then we can legitimately ask what a society seeks to convey to its adherents in its main performances". He admits (1985:136) that there are "fuzzy instances" of ritual -- such as curing rites, divinations, and rain-making rites -- which must be taken into account. These he chooses to call "regulative" rather than "instrumental", saying that they regulate or orient a practical or technical activity, address the aesthetic style of the activity, without constituting it. These rituals cannot be "falsified" any more than other kinds of rituals can, and they retain a performative validity whatever the outcome. This argument seems to strain Tambiah's own argument that the logic of such purposive acts should be viewed from the actors' own point of view. If the actors in a ritual say quite unambiguously that their reason for doing a ritual is to bring rain or to heal somebody, then the ritual must surely be regarded as being intentionally instrumental, whether or not the anthropologist identifies in the ritual regulative or communicative functions as well or instead.

A number of other anthropologists have concentrated on the performative, dramatic aspect of ritual, most notably Richard Schechner, who with Mady Schuman edited Ritual, Play and

Performance: Readings in the Social Sciences/Theatre (1976), a collection of contributions from many authors on subjects ranging from shamanism to ethological studies of play and ritual to experimental theatre to psychotherapies that emphasize dialogue, acting through and body work. In his introduction, Schechner (1976:xvi) shows how ritual, along with all the other subjects included in the book, shares with drama key characteristics: like ritual, drama deals universally with crisis, schism, conflict, and the resolution of these disruptions; the themes of drama centre on sexuality, rebellion, generational conflict, and the rites of passage; and the techniques of drama centre on transformation -- "how people can turn into other people or other beings in order to show a there-and-then story in ... a here-and-now place".

In this volume, and in Jay Ruby's (edited) A Crack in the Mirror, Victor Turner explores rituals as social dramas or performances in response to Schechner's particular interest. Unlike Tambiah, Turner sees rituals as social dramas not because they communicate through performance the fundamental "cosmological conceptions" of a society, but because they constitute a dramatic form for dealing with a breach or crisis in the regular, norm-governed life of a community (Turner 1982:86). Since The Ritual Process Turner has argued for the "extreme importance of religious beliefs and practices for both the maintenance and radical transformation of human social and psychical structures" (1974:4), but his emphasis has been on the latter -- the way in which ritual represents an "anti-structure" in opposition to the institutionalized, norm-governed structure of society. For Tambiah, rituals are performances generated by a society to convey to itself messages about its social norms and structure; for Turner, rituals,

along with myths, philosophical systems and works of art, are generated out of conditions of liminality (discussed below), marginality, and structural inferiority (Turner 1974:116). The bonds created between participants in a ritual -- what Turner calls "communitas" -- are anti-structural in that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian and direct as a result of participants having stripped, or, more likely, having had stripped from them, signs of their social status.

In her review of the rationality debate, Luhrmann pinpoints a critical problem with both the intellectualist and symbolist approaches: they wrongly assume the pre-existence of clear-cut, coherent beliefs. She states (1989a:352):

> In its crude form the symbolist-intellectualist debate sets up two straw men, the one with his articulate theory like a banner before him, and the other with no beliefs at all but an emotive, expressive, socially apt poesis. On the one side there is the pseudo-scientist, clear, intellectually coherent, acting on the basis of prior beliefs. On the other, there is the intellectually vacuous but metaphorically rich emoter, whose actions carry no cognite relevance. The debate, then, has centred around the explanation of the apparent belief in magical efficacy.

As Luhrmann points out, one cannot apply an intellectualist approach to understanding the practice of magic amongst middle-class practitioners in contemporary England. It would be ridiculous to construe magic as a poor substitute for science amongst these witches, especially since so many of them have jobs in some field of science (notably computer science). Central to Luhrmann's thesis is the argument that beliefs are not what they have been assumed to be, and that they are as likely to develop as a result of ritual activity as to exist in a prior foundational sense to ritual activity as Tambiah, for example, would have. In her final chapter Luhrmann says (1989a:353):

> This work on magic has suggested that beliefs are not the sorts of things they are stereotypically assumed to be: propositional commitments held consciously and claimed consistently and in a logical relationship to other such commitments. At least in the case of modern magicians, the ideas associated with their practice become persuasive because people rationalize an imaginative, emotional involvement. Their beliefs are not fixed or consistent, for they are often presented to justify some action. Beliefs do a job; they are not always disinterestedly asserted because they are felt to be true in themselves. Ideas and beliefs drift in a complex interdependency of concept and experience.

Much of what Luhrmann says here is also applicable to feminist witchcraft in New Zealand. I agree with her that people's belief systems are often much "fuzzier" (Luhrmann 1989a:10) than we assume, and that beliefs may develop in response to, as well as prior to, experiences, may "drift" over time, or may be held concurrently with other apparently contradictory beliefs. Women create and perform rituals out of a general world view (discussed in chapter eight), but their specific beliefs about the specific function of a particular ritual may not be fully thought out prior to the ritual, and/or may not be able to be articulated before or even after the ritual. Before, during and after the ritual, they may have conflicting ideas and feelings about the function and potential efficacy of the ritual. They self-consciously and good-naturedly acknowledge that their belief in the efficacy of ritual is not shared by, is probably ridiculed by, the dominant society. At times they appear to mock their own belief as a result of their internalized knowledge of the dominant society's view of magic as a silly, childish activity.

Gilbert Lewis acknowledges this difficulty with articulating meaning in relation to his study of puberty rituals amongst the Gnau of the West Sepik in New Guinea (1980:24):

> Things [in ritual] may be expressed in complex ways and it is often hard for the actor to put them exactly into

> words. There is the further argument that they are sometimes expressed in complex ways because it is the only way or the best way they can be expressed. There is no way except through music for some to express certain things: we cannot put a perfume into words. This argument, like that on the heresy of paraphrase in art, would assert that it may not be possible to translate some expression adequately into another medium, or into words. We must expect our informants to be at times inarticulate or silent about part of what the ritual means to them, or does to them, or makes them feel.

I would argue, and I think Lewis implies, that not being able to articulate meaning and not "knowing" meaning are not the same phenomena. In many anthropological field contexts, especially when there is a language barrier between the anthropologist and those with whom she or he is working, it may be difficult for the anthropologist to tell when "not being able to say" is the same as "not knowing". With feminist witches it is easy: women differentiate between the two themselves. Moreover, because the women involved in the movement are, on the whole, articulate, when a woman declares meaning to be inarticulable, she does not mean that she does not have the necessary skill to express the meaning, she means that it is ineffable.

Lewis (1980:25) makes the point that no amount of minute description of what one observes in ritual followed by minute analysis of that description can convey the full "meaning" of ritual:

> A minute description of observed ritual limited to the properties it presented and excluding any element of expression recognised would be something parallel to the minute description of a canvas as the concatenation of particular oily pigments in different-sized patches on a flat surface, when that canvas was a painting in perspective of a landscape.

In this respect, the intellectualist and symbolist approaches to understanding ritual are both reductionist. The full "meaning" of ritual

is not articulable by the anthropologist or the "native" participants, let alone reducible to having either an instrumental or a symbolic, expressive function. Lewis regards both approaches as limited. About the symbolist approach he says (1980:117):

> To presume that ritual is essentially a form of communication prejudges what is to be found out.... The emphasis on communication can lead to a contrived intellectualisation of ritual in which the conviction that it is to be understood by means of a linguistic model distorts observation, and provokes such ingenuity in detection that the actors are told what they mean when they do not know it.

Lewis acknowledges that there is an expressive component in ritual, but that this is only a part of ritual's function (1980:118-9):

> If people want to say something, why do they not just say it? If people do ritual, it is because ritual can also do something different from saying it or something more than just that. It may be that it is difficult to phrase or formulate something they wish to say -- the actor lacks the words for what he feels or senses obscurely, or he can express it better, more powerfully, by action and object...
>
> Ritual may indeed seek to convey, through symbol and metaphor, particular ideas: that is, or may be, part of what it does and how it produces its effects, but it is only part, not all.

In contrast to the approach to ritual which stresses the communication of meaning, Lewis emphasizes the importance of the emotional and aesthetic responses of the people who perform rituals and the importance of ritual as an experience. His point is close to the one I made in chapter ten about ritual being more than the performance of a series of activities -- chants, invocations, symbolic acts and so on -- which are thoroughly understood and articulable by participants and expected by them to have a particular outcome. I claimed that a ritual is perceived by participants as a dynamic whole, greater than the sum

of its parts, capable of having a powerful and often unexpected impact on participants. Lewis says (1980:118):

> [Ritual] is primarily action -- a way of doing, making, creating, showing, expressing, arousing -- a complex form of stimulus to which people respond. Things done in ritual also have the power to arouse or to release, to serve a substitues, as focuses for fantasy: they meet needs and stem from motivations. By seeing the objects or actions as substitutes that will make do perhaps for a god, for an enemy, for a horse, for a breast in that situation, we do not have to exclude emotion and feeling, we do not have to traduce the usual meanings of metaphor or symbol, nor do we have to suppose that the actor necessarily bothers with the distinction of appearance from reality.

Where I quoted Noreen above on the function of feminist witches' rituals, she indicated that rituals have both an expressive, communicative function and an instrumental one. She also noted that ritual is a drama. The other women I interviewed also spoke of the variety of functions rituals have. Juliet emphasized the instrumental function, making clear her belief that within a ritual participants experience transformation as a result of "energy shifts" generated in the course of the ritual. She said:

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

Other women too spoke of "tapping into" and "moving energy" -- I return to this below where I discuss how ritual is believed to work. Juliet also talked of ritual as having an expressive role by "affirming the

values that people bring to it". She noted that transformation is only part of what ritual does: "It's not all about change -- a lot is about building continuity. It affirms a sense of community and bonding, and that builds community". Joan also stressed the sense of community which develops amongst women who do rituals together:

> The value of ritual is that with the women I've done a ritual with there is always a huge deepening of our relationship. There's a sharing of pain. There's a sharing of joy. There's a sharing of grief. It just seems to provide a focus for people to really reveal themselves. It does create a tremendous special sort of intimacy. You don't divulge afterwards what people have said or done.

In this quotation Joan directly expresses what Turner (1974; chapter 3) describes as communitas, the intensely close bond which develops amongst ritual participants who have left behind the norms of their secular lives. Turner (1974:81) describes ritual participants as "liminal personae", "threshold people", since "these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space". In the liminal state, secular status distinctions disappear, resulting in "equalitarian" relationships, one of the qualities Turner denotes as essential to communitas. In cross-cultural contexts, rites of passage, such as initiation or puberty rituals, frequently involve ritual participants undergoing ordeals, often physical, together. "The ordeals... to which neophytes are submitted," Turner writes (1974:90), "represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities". This sharing of suffering enhances communitas.

In the quotation above, Joan referred to the sharing of pain, grief and joy amongst women in a ritual, and how this experience deepened the bonds amongst women. The "ordeals" which women undergo are different from those Turner describes in that they are not imposed upon women by elders or ritual specialists; they are experienced as part of whatever transformation the woman has chosen to embark upon. Sometimes rituals involve suffering for a woman because she is leaving behind or marking the passing of something very important to her. For example, she may invite friends to do a ritual with her concerning leaving a home, job or relationship, or to mourn the death of someone close to her. In these situations the woman may not have chosen to leave the job or home, but she has chosen to do a ritual in order to deal with her feelings about the issue or circumstance. A "rite of passage" which is essentially a celebration may also involve some form of sacrifice or suffering. For example, celebration of pregnancy may involve for a woman an acknowledgement of her willingness to leave behind some of her independence, her familiar body shape, a fear of childbirth, and nights of unbroken sleep. In a ritual to celebrate a new relationship a woman may "sacrifice" her fear of emotional intimacy, her reluctance to make a commitment, her dislike of some habit of her lover. In a ritual to celebrate her birthday a woman may want to leave behind her fear of growing older, some destructive habit or pattern, her procrastination about taking a new direction in her life. As I discussed in chapter nine, feminist witches' rites of passage or transition rituals almost always incorporate some form of symbolic "sacrifice" or clearing away of destructive patterns or elements before reconstitution, transformation and celebration can occur.

Lea Holford's definition of ritual echoes a range of anthropological definitions of ritual's function:

> Rituals are ceremonies which evoke the sacred through shared experience [communitas].... Ritual can be used to reveal the ineffable aspects of ultimate reality, to reinforce a felt sense of the sacred, to mark important events and life mysteries, and for personality transformation.

In The Ritual Process Turner states (1974:3-4) that despite the fact that most of his eminent predecessors have taken the "implicitly theological position of trying to explain, or explain away, religious phenomena as the production of psychological or sociological causes of the most diverse and even conflicting types, denying to them any preterhuman origin", none has denied the "extreme importance of religious beliefs and practices, for both the maintenance and radical transformation of human social and psychical structures". For women involved in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality, the radical transformation of psychical structures is the most important feature of their spirituality. They are much less concerned about and less sure about whether or not their spirituality has a "preterhuman origin". They do not argue about and appear to take little interest in theology for its own sake: their chief interest is in the effectiveness of the ritual process. Their explanation of the ritual process echoes the canonical explanations of van Gennep and Turner which identify within all rituals three phases. Turner succinctly sumarized this analysis of the ritual process thus (1974:80):

> Van Gennep has shown that all rites of passage or "transition" are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen, signifying "threshold" in Latin), and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a

> "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more...

Turner's description of the middle or liminal phase of the ritual process is remarkably close to the way witches describe this phase, as one can see from the quotations from Turner and Starhawk which head this chapter. Turner talks about ritual participants as being "betwixt and between" conventionally assigned positions; Starhawk talks about witches entering "between the worlds" where socially defined roles no longer apply. Turner says liminality is like being in the womb; Starhawk says that the sacred circle is "a swirling pool in which we dive and swim". Turner says liminality may be likened to the wilderness; Starhawk says the sacred circle exists on the "boundaries of ordinary space and time".

Turner states that nudity is often associated with liminality: performing rituals naked symbolizes ritual participants' emancipation from constricting social norms. In the United States and in Britain, where the link with traditional Wicca is stronger, witches frequently work "sky-clad", but this seldom happens in New Zealand except amongst women who have worked together in a group for a relatively long period.

I discussed briefly above the special relationship -- termed "communitas" by Turner -- which develops amongst ritual participants, especially amongst those who belong to a group which does rituals together regularly. About communitas, Turner writes (1974:114):

> Buber lays his finger on the spontaneous, immediate,

> concrete nature of communitas, as opposed to the norm governed, institutionalized, abstract nature of social structure.... [C]ommunitas has an existential quality; it involves the whole man [in the case of feminist witches, whole woman] in his [her] relation to other whole men [women].... Relations between total beings are generative of symbols and metaphors and comparisons; art and religion are their products rather than legal and political structures.

The communitas which develops amongst women who do rituals together is an important component of the ritual context: it provides a supportive "container" which assists the working of the ritual process. I have noted that women who do ritual together believe they generate positive energy which assists the transformations which are the purpose and goal of a ritual.

I have noted that many women involved in feminist ritual-making demonstrate an understanding of the structure and function of ritual cross-culturally. If they have not picked this up at university themselves, they have read about it in books on feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality by scholars with backgrounds in various relevant disciplines -- anthropology, psychology, religious studies, theology -- or they have been taught about it in workshops.

In her teaching about the ritual process in Goddess courses, Lea Holford, who has a background in comparative religion as well as psychology, explicitly discusses van Gennep's three phases. On the blackboard at a workshop of hers I attended, Lea had written:

Phases of Ritual

1. Separation -- prepare to leave certain things behind when make a commitment to change; something dying.

2. Threshold of sacred world -- must leave ego self in order to join larger Self -- whole in larger dimension.

3. Re-incorporation/Re-entry -- bring sacred to profane; spiritual into physical manifestation; transformation -- reformation.

In the separation phase, Lea said, "We deliberately sever ourselves from the normal dimension. For example, we do a purification, we stop talking, we put on special clothes". She pointed out that what is "left behind" is often left behind permanently; the separation is not simply separation from the mundane world for the duration of the ritual. When "re-entry" occurs, a transformation, shift or awakening has taken place. Because letting go and leaving behind makes women vulnerable, the circle is cast to make the ritual space safe. The invoking of the directions and elements marks the beginning of the threshold phase. In this phase, women are transported "into a much larger dimension of experience and awareness".

During the reincorporation/re-entry phase, Lea said, it is important to anchor or ground the experiences of the ritual -- "If you don't ground, the spiritual is a fantasy". Grounding is achieved by a symbolic enactment of the transformation which has taken place and by declaring the transformation to have occurred or by making a commitment to action in front of the group.

In recognizing the universality of the ritual process, witches are not setting their spirituality off from other spiritual traditions, are not making special claims to authenticity, authority or Truth, and are not claiming that their rituals possess some special, exclusive power. They acknowledge with Turner (1974:4) that ritual is a technique which in cross-cultural contexts is effective in transforming social and psychical structures, a process which they can use themselves in working to bring about transformations in their own lives. Their intellectual analysis of

ritual does not desacralize the ritual process: witches respect and place trust in the power of ritual.

Over two and a half years of working closely with one ritual group I became convinced that for these women ritual is a powerful tool for processing transitions ranging from relatively small interruptions to their familiar routines to life crises. One woman in the group worked successfully with her anorexia and was able to celebrate the return of menstruation; another used ritual to deal with the transition to retirement after holding a position of considerable responsibility in a large institution for many years; two others had a flatmate die and were involved in organizing the death rituals. The woman who died belonged to another ritual group and her own group was with her before and during her death, during the mourning period and rituals which followed, during the embalming, and finally carried her into the furnace at the crematorium.

To the determined skeptic, planting a seed, stirring glitter in a bowl of water, plaiting a magic cord, or burning strips of paper in a wok may seem trivial and banal activities which have little to do with "serious religion". But no symbolic act, irrespective of how it may appear to the outside observer, has any inherent importance or meaning, and certainly cannot be judged against the symbolic acts of other religious traditions with respect to its banality or otherwise. The only importance and meaning any symbolic act has is that imputed to it by the ritual participant and those who share in performing the ritual. Kneeling at an altar and poking out one's tongue to have a wafer placed on it has no more intrinsic religious significance than the symbolic acts performed by witches that I have described. A spiritual tradition which enables

people to deal openly, practically and thoroughly with death, the major life crisis of all, in the way that I observed witches do can claim to be a serious religion.

When I asked women during interviews about why ritual was important to them, they frequently made the point that ritual gives them a sense of being able to actively control or direct their lives, a feeling that they are not at the mercy of forces beyond their control. I quote Sybil and Joan respectively:

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

> Ritual creates a feeling that you do have some sort of control, that you're actively acting on something, that you're not a mere whim of fate, that <u>you</u> are going to take steps. Quite often after a ritual a woman will ring up and say, "Look, after that ritual I bloody well told so-and-so to stuff off", or, "I did this," or, "I made a decision," that she had been prevaricating or being passive about, or made some sort of change. The fact that she has consciously chosen to conduct this ritual makes it an <u>active</u> act. It's not like praying in church and saying, "Oh God, help me," and this sort of stuff. You're actually doing it yourself and you're saying your own words.

When women choose to take control of, or one might equally say take an active reponsibility for, their lives through doing a ritual, they are consciously setting up the conditions in which they can deal with an issue or situation. First, they acknowledge the issue/situation exists; secondly, they choose to give it their attention and to go through a process to deal with it which, according to their belief and past

experience, works. Joy spoke about this in relation to her ritual work around her retirement:

> First of all, you have to think that it's worth the effort to take the time to think about these things. So I spent time with Juliet planning it. I did a lot of preparation. You have to think, "This is really important for me," and take the time. You have to think, "This is worth doing, I'm going to spend this much time on it". It has to be a priority. You're taking the time to stop and do something; you're showing tremendous respect to it and to the people that you're coming together with, that it's important enough to you to take care over this practice and to bring it into your own life. It's really a sacred thing.

Joan also talked about ritual as a structured way of addressing and doing something about a situation in need of attention:

> I think to me the place of ritual is that it is making an occasion. Instead of vaguely thinking, "I'd better get rid of these bad feelings," you actually make a place and a time; you pay attention to it. You go through a process. You go through the cleansing rituals and all the things you do before you do the ritual itself, and then you have food afterwards. It's making an event. It's making something important which a lot of other people may think is trivial. It's the invention of a structure. It does work too. It's very, very powerful.

All the women I interviewed talked about ritual as a means of bringing about personal transformation, or as a means of making transformations or transitions which were already happening in their lives easier to deal with. When I asked them about how ritual works in this way, I wanted to know whether a ritual is believed to concretize, and thereby somehow "make real", a woman's wish for transformation through her symbolic enactment of the desired change within a specially constructed context in the presence of others, or whether women believe that during a ritual they can contact an energy or force beyond themselves which can be harnessed and directed to cause the

desired change to happen. I wanted to know whether women saw themselves ultimately as the agents of change, or whether they located the source of power outside themselves. I never found the answer, at least not one which neatly fitted the dualistic construction of my question. The answer lies somewhere between both and neither of the alternatives I proposed. Most of the women I spoke to said explicitly that they believed they contacted an energy during ritual which played an active role in "making things happen". But they also believed that the symbolic acts they did during rituals were an extension of the power of positive thinking, a way of formalizing, concretizing, making visible, the changes they desired. Joy said, "I think the ritual symbolizes something that has already taken place, and it makes it visual. I think you are making it real by action". Witches may not believe that they can completely create their own destiny, but they believe that they can participate in creating it. I set out below the transcription of part of a taped group discussion amongst Sybil, Kez, Scarlett, Galadriel and Alex about the role of symbolic action in ritual and the part played by an energy or force greater than those performing the ritual. My questions are indicated by a Q.

Q How does a ritual work?

- I get a sense that ritual concretizes spirit. The group energy focusses on a change we want to bring about, an energy we want to invoke, a time we want to honour. It's to do with calling upon that spirit energy and bringing it into the group and channelling it into something that becomes almost concrete. It becomes a physical act. It's no longer something intangible that you're wanting or dreaming or fantasizing about, but something very concrete that you're doing.

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

Q What is the energy that you're talking about?

- The energy of the Goddess, whether that be the ever-present energy, or the energy within ourselves. Quite often it's something within ourselves.

- Yes, it's like being able to <u>see</u> this energy in symbolic things that are precious to me. It's not just all floating around in there in my head. I can see something symbolic that I've made that will always bring me back to that time. It's something I can go away with and return to and look at without having to conjure up all that again.

Q Is the symbolic act a way of acting out the change you want to take place, or is it actually harnessing, moving and working with energy? I don't grasp the concept of energy.

- It isn't anything you can <u>grasp</u> until it's brought into everyday things that we find precious and special. I don't think you can say, "What is this energy?".

- I had an amazing experience with the energy. For me it was like giving myself permission to visualize where I wanted my life to go. Ritual begins with creative visualization. You see things in your head. After a while I come to know that they're real, and they're something that feels right for me.

  By doing the ritual I'm solidifying the visualization and I'm moving it from the unformed into an increasing level of form. That focusses my purpose even more, and it reaches my subconscious so I put myself in the way of opportunities that can lead me to getting my desire or need met. And I invoke the greatest good for myself and others. That's how I see it working.

- Yes. Doing the ritual is like saying, "I'm ready now".

- For me, the Goddess is like part of myself. After I have done a ritual, it goes into my subconscious and it directs the choices I make in every day life that lead me to the meeting of that need or desire -- like phone calls I make, people I talk to, things I do when I meet people, things I say. It's not a petitioning of the Goddess. It never has

been. I've always drawn back from that because of my experience with Christianity.

- If you do a ritual on your own, that's very powerful and symbolic, but the whole idea of doing it in a group -- apart from the very obvious one that it's witnessed and shared -- is that the energy is increased by more than the women in the group. The sense I get is that you've actually invited the Goddess to become part of the circle and her energy is there. You are calling upon that energy -- the Goddess energy.

  Once when I had my eyes closed in the circle I actually saw four of my favourite Goddess images come to the circle, sit down in between us, and join our circle of linked hands. That gave me a sense of what happens when you invoke certain elements or certain goddesses. That energy does come and join you and become part of the ritual group. So you're working <u>with</u> rather than asking that energy to intervene to do it for you.

- What I like about what we do is the way we concretize things by acting them out symbolically or making things. For me, that's such a powerful act to do with other women in ritual space. It helps bring about that change. It helps focus energy in that direction. It's almost like accessing something that's there for the asking.

- It's really fun talking about it because I feel we're inviting her here now as we speak.

- We're validating her presence in our lives in a group. That alone is a powerful memory to go away with.

- Speaking about ritual makes me realize we are creating the actuality.

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

In the extract above, as well as generally, witches talk a lot about energy. Energy is present in an embodied form in all of nature -- in people, plants, animals and the physical world. Particular objects may be said to possess energy, especially those created from natural

materials -- a clay sculpture or a crystal ball may be said to have an energy, but not a Tupperware box. Energy is also believed to exist in a disembodied form -- a house may have "good energy"; during a ritual the presence of "healing energy" may be sensed; "negative energy" may be felt in a room where arguments have taken place. In this sense, "energy" corresponds closely to, but is stronger than, "atmosphere". There is energy which is disembodied but has very specific characteristics because of its associations -- witches talk about "woman energy", "male energy", "earth energy" and "air energy" (having the qualities of the elements earth or air).

Energy may be spoken of in general terms as being present or absent to varying degrees: women might say that "a lot of energy" was present during a ritual, or that they "don't have the energy" to prepare a ritual -- this is not the same as saying they feel physically tired. Energy may also be characterized as having specific qualities -- a person may be said to have a gentle energy, a fiery energy, or a destructive energy.

Energy can be invoked, generated, focussed, increased or altered, either deliberately or unconsciously, by people's thoughts or behaviour. A "negative energy" can be "cleared" and replaced with "positive energy". A personal goal or wish can be "energized" by concentrated thought. The energy of a particular element (air, earth, water or fire) or the energy of a particular goddess can be invoked. A woman may report an "increase in energy" as the result of a ritual.

For witches, the distinction between their personal energy and the energy outside themselves, between the seen and the unseen, the formed and the unformed, is not a well-drawn line. According to their holistic world view, the energies of all people and things -- some would

say, past, present and future -- are actively connected and impact upon one another. Witches believe that through ritual they can tune in to an energy greater than themselves, the creative force which brought and brings all things into being. The symbolic act performed during a ritual is a concretization of personal intention which holds a woman to her intention and helps activate her will, but this process is made more potent because, it is believed, the woman is aligning her energy with a greater universal energy and working with it. Joy said:

> I think you make use of that energy for yourself. I think ritual is very much about the elements, about the universe -- for me, now, the whole survival of the universe has become more and more important. Whereas a Christian might call on a God outside, I would actually use the elements for my own purposes. I think that a vital part of ritual is to tap that energy, to acknowledge its relevance and tap it.

Juliet's theoretical basis for her belief in how ritual works is drawn from her reading of Roberto Assagioli, a contemporary of Freud and Jung who developed psychosynthesis, a form of psychotherapy which emphasizes the spiritual dimension. Juliet said:

> I've got my own personal will and I can make things happen, but I can also align myself with the powers and energies of the universe, or the transpersonal will. If I'm in alignment with that, that can be quite powerful. Things can really happen. On the very simplest level, we can energize something by giving it our thought and attention. This is how affirmations work -- it's the power of positive thinking.
>
> But we're talking about the principle on another level too, which is how we can go beyond that personal level and draw on something greater. In a ritual I believe that we do move energy, and we do invoke energy to come and assist us. This is what prayer is about, and meditation. We actually have our wish, and we are asking for it to be supported. I think that is why the energy-raising in a ritual is very important -- that we really open ourselves, and really align ourselves with what is there to work with us. We have to feel that our purpose is a benign one -- this is very important.

I have argued that by doing rituals women say that they gain a sense of control over their lives and can make use of an energy source which is both within them and greater than they are. But rituals are not only about women harnessing energy. As I pointed out in chapter ten, a ritual has a powerful impact on the participant, and in the course of it unexpected and unexplainable things may happen. Ritual is not a mechanical process which women totally control. Women are always in control of what they say and do during a ritual, but sometimes, or perhaps frequently, women experience a fundamental shift in their perceptions -- in Turner's terms, the beginning of a transformation of their psychical structures. When I asked Lea Holford how ritual brought about transformation, she said:

> Many things are possible if you change your point of view. If you look out and you think, "All men are monsters", then they probably will be. That will be all you see, and experience, and get. But if you start to see that there are some really wonderful, kind men who really honour the feminine out there, you're also very likely to start seeing and experiencing that.
>
> I believe that how we perceive reality has an awful lot to do with how it happens, but I would see it more that we're sending out psychic energy which has a big impact on the environment which causes things in the environment to be as they are. So if we believe something, we'll probably find it out there which will reinforce our belief. So there's a closed circle.
>
> I think if we look at that spectrum of transformation and change and send out, "I believe this can change. I believe this can be different", I think there's a very good chance it can be different. We can see possibilities that we were unable to see before, and move into those very quickly, and work with those very quickly. So I'd say the universe is always full of these possibilities, it's just that we're blind to them the majority of the time until our inner sight is awakened to those possibilities.
>
> So for me, the idea of symbolic enactment in ritual is more the making of a major commitment to your spiritual work, to your inner world and your outer world. It's

> saying, "I really want to become more this kind of person, and bring these energies into my life and integrate them. I make this commitment and embody it in this symbolic form". To me, it's like making a vow, in a way, and saying that in front of a group of people, "I really want this to be who I become, and here and now I honour this process and I want to put this in motion". I don't believe the symbolic act in itself makes it happen. I believe that once you say "Yes" to these possibilities, you can start to see them out there.

Lea talks above about the importance of the group in making a ritual effective. When a woman articulates a commitment publicly amongst those whom she respects and whose respect she wants, her sense of obligation to fulfill the commitment is increased. But she went on to say that the presence of the group also generates a lot of psychic energy which each woman can draw on to assist the transformation process:

> If we offer this possibility for transformation in a social context, especially in a context where everybody else is also making a commitment to transformation, I actually think we are empowering each other in quite major ways. It's almost like we are feeding each other with energy. It's like you get all these single candle flames, but if you put them all together, it's much bigger than the sum of the individuals. You bring together a massive amount of energy.
>
> I think any kind of group where you've got a lot of individuals who believe in the same thing, who want the same thing -- it's very powerful. It's not just that one person -- if it's very effective it's because this resonates powerfully with all the psychic energy of those people in there. They all want this, and they're all putting that energy toward it. You go out in the world and you think, "I'm not sure whether I can do this, but they all believe in me. Yes, I can do it". It's like you draw on this huge amount of energy, internalized energy that you've carried forth from the ritual.

Megwyn also talked about the way that in ritual the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, about how rituals work in unexpected ways, and of the importance of the group in creating sacred space:

> I am constantly amazed at how ritual works. I think one of the most amazing things is actually creating a sacred space. As we developed our group, for a start we did everything so carefully and so tightly because none of us were sure. But we were always constantly amazed at what developed. And now we just know it's going to happen, even if it's not always as profound.
>
> Each symbol that we use, if put separately on its own, looks of no significance really. But when it's put with a group of people who've come with a common purpose, the object takes on a different meaning, and it's linked to the words, and then what goes on with each person. So by the time you've got all those things together, it's got more power than each of those things on its own. For each person, there's a transformation that happens inside their thinking, and this is always very profound. And then the person takes that away with them.

All the women I interviewed do their own rituals alone, but all talked of the power of doing rituals with other women. Broadly, the group's two functions are to provide solidarity and support, and to generate and focus energy. I quoted Joan above talking about how the sharing of pain, grief and joy amongst women in rituals leads to a "huge deepening of our relationship". Joy said that during the rituals and farewells surrounding her retirement it was "so wonderful to have women as attendants. I felt utterly loved and utterly cared for". Joy continued:

> I think it is important that quite often you ask other people to help you, to support you. In putting it out like that you are acknowledging that there is something that you are having difficulty with, and you are asking people to know about that, and to support you in that. If people know that this is something you are acknowledging and that you need to deal with, their very presence... it's the ultimate caring and being with people.

From my reading of witchcraft manuals, and from my observation of and interviews with New Zealand witches, it seems that rituals are believed to work in two ways. The first is through suggestion: symbols

and images implant certain ideas in the unconscious mind and in turn influence the ritual-maker to actualize those ideas (Starhawk 1989:126). Witches' second explanation for how ritual works is probably more difficult for the uninitiated to accept. It is based on a world view which "sees things not as fixed objects, but as swirls of energy.... If we cause a change in the energy patterns, they in turn will cause a change in the physical world" (Starhawk 1989:126). Witches believe that when their own energy is concentrated and channelled during a ritual it can influence the broader energy currents in the world beyond. Symbolic objects and visualized images become channels for witches' power. Starhawk writes (1989:126): "When energy is directed into the images we visualize, it gradually manifests physical form and takes shape in the material world".

Symbolic objects are simply props: they have no inherent power. "Props may be useful, but it is the mind that works magic" (Starhawk 1989:124). Zsuzsanna Budapest (1986:1) says that ritual-making is like cooking: "It isn't the tools which make the magic come to pass, it is our own brain".

For witches, ritual is not anti-science or primitive science. It exists alongside science: ritual is just another way of addressing a problem. It is often used in addition to the problem-solving strategies used by people in the dominant society. For example, a woman trying to come to terms with surviving incest may decide to have psychological counselling, to confront her abuser, to enroll in a workshop for incest survivors, and to do a healing ritual with supportive friends. A woman who is afraid of being in a house alone at night may take a self defence course and do a nightly ritual to help herself feel safe. A woman who

lacks confidence as a driver may take a defensive driving course, make a decision not to drive in peak-hour traffic, and do a ritual of self-affirmation.

As well as their instrumental and communicative functions and their strong aesthetic appeal, witches' rituals are fun. As Noreen (quoted above) said, "That's one of the main reasons for having them". But they are taken very seriously: witches use ritual as a tool for processing all the major transitions of their lives as well as many less important ones. Ritual enables women to access their inner power and to connect with a power beyond themselves. Stein (1986:2) says that rituals create a microcosm, a "little universe", within which women try out what they want to be, and what they want the "big universe" to be.

Chapter 12

Re-membering the Witch and the Goddess

> How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don't have to be turned into women by them, labelled by them, made holy and profaned by them. That that has always already happened, without their efforts. And that their history, their stories, constitute the locus of our displacement...
>
> How can we speak so as to escape from their compartments, their schemas, their distinctions and oppositions: virginal/deflowered, pure/impure, innocent/experienced... How can we shake off the chain of these terms, free ourselves from their categories, rid ourselves of their names? Disengage ourselves, alive, from their concepts? ...
>
> Wait. My blood is coming back. From their senses. It's warm inside us again. Among us. Their words are emptying out, becoming bloodless, dead skins. While our lips are growing red again. They're stirring, moving, they want to speak.
>
> From "When Our Lips Speak Together" in This Sex Which Is Not One by Luce Irigaray (1985:212).

Throughout this thesis I have emphasized the holistic character of feminist witches' world view, noting that it contrasts with the dualistic Christian one, derived ultimately from Plato, which is fundamental to the thinking of contemporary Western societies. Over the past few decades feminist scholars have examined the implications of dualistic thinking for gender relations. The fundamental dichotomous pair is, of course, man/woman. Headed by this pair, long lists of binary oppositions have been constructed. Hélène Cixous (quoted in Tong 1989:224) listed the following: activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, day/night, speaking/writing, high/low. Thus, "man" is symbolically connected with all that is active, cultural, light and high --

in other words, that which is positive -- while "woman" is associated with all that is passive, natural, dark and low -- that which is negative. In Cixous's view, "Man is the self; woman is his Other. Thus, woman exists in man's world on his terms" (Tong 1989:224). In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir wrote (quoted in de Lauretis 1990:117):

> Humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.... He is the Subject, he is the Absolute -- she is the Other.

Recently, postmodern feminists and others have begun to challenge not only man's terms, but the whole construction of "woman" and "the feminine". There has been a growing refusal to continue to accept a symbolic system where woman is constructed as "other" -- a refusal, in fact, to accept any symbolic system where man constructs woman. Cixous urges women "to write themselves out of the world men have constructed for them by putting into words the unthinkable/unthought" (Tong 1989:224).

Lucy Goodison's recent volume is devoted to the argument that "symbols are not universal or inevitable, but are the product of a society in a specific time and place; they serve to validate and perpetuate the status quo in that society" (1990:3). While the proposition that symbolic systems are socially constructed specifically and locally for political purposes challenges theorists such as Freud and Jung, who traced symbols to a universal source and "primordial images", this idea is no longer new. And because symbolic systems are constructed, they can also be deconstructed and replaced by other constructions. Goodison, with winning optimism, believes that what is needed is "a revolution of the imagination to free us from what is a highly complex

symbol system continuously reiterated and endorsed by our cultural heritage, by advertisements and the media as well as in schools and churches, in psychology and history books" (1990:4).

The splitting does not stop with man/woman, culture/nature, and so on. As Ortner (1974:85-6) pointed out, "woman" can be assigned polarized and apparently contradictory meanings. She says:

> Feminine symbolism, far more often than masculine symbolism, manifests this propensity toward polarized ambiguity -- sometimes utterly exalted, sometimes utterly debased, rarely within the normal range of human possibilities.

Psychoanalytic feminists explain this splitting of woman in terms of the development of human individuality, where the individual "alternates between fear and loathing of the mother and a deep desire to return to her for nurturance and protection" (Holford ms. p.21). Holford says:

> The result has been a deep-seated ambivalence toward women, and for nature as an extension, as "powers" which can both give birth and take life (because the mother is experienced as all-powerful in infancy).

This idea of symbolically splitting woman into the feared and the desired, the "utterly exalted" and the "utterly debased", has been critical for my study. When I was asked, at the beginning of this study, to define my chosen topic, I described it as a study of feminist witchcraft or Goddess spirituality. As I said in the introduction, people baulked at the idea that these were two names for the same phenomenon: we are used to thinking of the hideous hag and the divinely beautiful Goddess as polar opposites. One is utterly evil; the other represents physical and moral perfection. One evokes fear and ridicule; the other, awe and adoration. The witch is "utterly debased"; the Goddess, "utterly

exalted". Our society's perception of this duality can be expressed symbolically thus:

witch	Goddess
ugly	beautiful
old	young
evil	good
below	above
feared	desired
dark	light
destructive	creative/protective
death-dealing	life-giving

What the witch and the Goddess have traditionally in common, recalling Ortner quoted above, is their existence outside the accepted range of possibilities for "normal" women. If woman is "other" in relation to man, she is also "other" in relation to both the Goddess and the witch. The Goddess's positive qualities place her so far above ordinary women that she is unobtainable; she inhabits the realm of the supernatural. The witch, on the other hand, is beneath women in spatial symbolic terms because of her association with evil, darkness and death. I argue that the reason why the witch and the Goddess are designated out of bounds for women is that they both constitute images of woman's power. Wherever they appear, from fairy stories to Greek mythology, witches and goddesses are powerful females; they perform magical or supernatural acts; they make things happen. Their power comes from an inherent source; it is "power from within"; it is absolutely independent of male power structures and men's power.

I have shown in this thesis that the women I worked with, along with their counterparts in other Western countries, are challenging our culture's dualistic symbolic system, a system which classifies the witch and the Goddess as polar opposites, both of whom are ruled out of bounds for women. Feminist witches make two claims: firstly, that the

witch and the Goddess are one; secondly, that "ordinary" women can see themselves both as witch and as Goddess. These claims, I argue, are aimed at collapsing the symbolic system which polarizes the witch and the Goddess. Through their understanding of the power of symbols, women deliberately play with, transform and deconstruct the meanings of symbols. In this chapter I demonstrate how women dramatize their claims by manipulating symbols in the context of ritual.

I begin by discussing a Samhain ritual held on Sunday evening, 28 April 1991. The ritual was organized by and for the ritual group I joined, and was held in a hired room in a community building in one of Auckland's inner-city suburbs. This ritual represented a critical point in the process of group members' self-identification in that it was the first time in a year of meeting that the women explicitly and formally articulated the claim "I am a witch" and played dramatically with the witch image.

In thinking about the definitional aspects of this ritual, I have found Barbara Myerhoff's article " 'Life Not Death in Venice': Its Second Life" (1986) very useful. Myerhoff analyses a definitional ceremony enacted by a community of elderly immigrant Jews in Venice, California. Superficially, this community and its activities might seem to have little in common with feminist ritual-makers in New Zealand. But Myerhoff's analysis of the way in which the Jewish community manipulated symbols for the purpose of self-definition provides an interpretive model which elucidates an understanding of definitional ceremonies or rituals in general. Here I use her work as a springboard for my discussion of the Samhain ritual.

Myerhoff describes how the community launched a highly successful protest march after one of its members was knocked down and killed by a bicyclist on the boardwalk not far from the community's Centre. The march culminated in a funeral in a synagogue which was followed by a birthday celebration back at the Centre for another community member who was turning 100.

Myerhoff's view is that definitional ceremonies deal with problems of invisibility and marginality. In these ceremonies, or rituals, the "invisible" group denies its invisibility and impotence and refuses to accept definition by the dominant culture. By deliberate and cunning use of symbols in ritual they display their own interpretation of themselves. Thus, they claim the right to define themselves: they become "authors of themselves" (Myerhoff 1986:263). By dramatizing their version of reality, the "invisible" make their claims and themselves visible.

In the case of Myerhoff's Jewish community, the protest demonstrated a rejection of their assigned position as helpless victims and a determination to make themselves visible and their claims heard. Throughout the protest, community members projected an image of themselves as being strident and flamboyant as well as vulnerable. They dressed in bright clothes, carried placards, and answered hecklers strongly. Two blind men led the procession and people using walkers and canes placed themselves prominently alongside a symbolic black "coffin" representing the woman who had been killed.

This display of themselves was partly how they already saw themselves (and how the dominant society saw them), and partly how they wanted to be seen. Thus, the ceremony not only reflected their

reality, but also helped to create it. By acting out this reality in public, and attracting a lot of media coverage in doing so, the community successfully began to transform the way in which outsiders saw them. As well as defining themselves, they redefined the way the dominant culture saw them. Their success was clear when a few weeks after the protest barricades were set up on either side of the Centre which provided a four-block section where the old people could walk safely.

I want to look now at how the Samhain ritual can be interpreted as a definitional ceremony. In this ritual, members of the ritual group, like the Jewish community in Venice, claimed the right to define themselves and dramatized these claims in a way which both reflected and helped create their reality. In doing so, they became "authors of themselves". As Cixous recommended, they symbolically wrote themselves out of the world constructed for them. By examining the symbols they used we see how these women see themselves and how they wish to be seen. The subversive element of the ritual is clear from the choice of symbols and the ways they were manipulated.

Samhain, also known as Halloween and All Souls' Eve, is the witch's new year festival. As noted in chapter nine, it represents simultaneously the end of the annual cycle and its beginning. Held at the beginning of winter, it is a time for facing darkness, for embracing destruction so that change can take place. It is also a time to remember the dead, especially biological and cultural foremothers (Batten 1988:46).

Two weeks before the ritual, the two women responsible for planning it sent out invitations to the rest of the group. Women were asked to think before the ritual about old chapters, patterns or fears in

their lives that they wanted to close off. We were asked to think about what the word "witch" meant to us personally, to bring a favourite witch story, or to be prepared to talk about what we knew of witches in the past. We were asked to bring along black and white candles, musical instruments, wands and broomsticks, and were invited "to openly celebrate witchiness" by dressing up in hats, masks, costumes and make-up. (None of this was obligatory.)

On the night of the ritual we were greeted in the hall outside the ritual room by a jolly, life-sized hag (painted and cut from thin board) who directed us to park our broomsticks and wait. When it was time to begin, we removed our shoes, greeted each other quietly, and went inside.

The room was lit with black candles and an orange pumpkin lantern glowed from a table opposite the door. The walls were draped with dark silk and batik cloths to block out signs of the room's other functions. In the middle of the room there was a circle of cushions on the floor arranged around the centre-piece. A circular black cloth was set out with symbols of the four elements in their corresponding directions. In the south, the direction associated with earth, there were crystals and a coiled green satin snake; in the east (air) there were feathers, a toy bat and incense; in the west, a jug of water, toy frogs, shells and an orange starfish; and in the north (fire) a dainty green-skinned witch doll, wands, and toy black cats. In the centre of the circle there was a cauldron. We set the black and white candles we had brought around the outer edge of the cloth. All the women had dressed up as witches -- in black trousers and cloaks, a star-spangled scarf, a pointed black hat, and make-up applied to create gaunt, wrinkled faces.

The ritual began with a purification of the room followed by a personal purification using percussion instruments. The circle was cast and the elements/directions invoked. The women who had prepared the ritual spoke briefly about the significance of Samhain as a time for facing and letting go of fears, resentments and unwanted parts of our lives, a time for confronting darkness and honouring death as part of the cycle. We were reminded that the theme of destruction in this Sabbat is symbolized by the Goddess in her Crone aspect -- as Hecate, Kali, Cerridwen, Baba Yaga, Spiderwoman, and Hine-nui-te-po. We then each lit black and white candles in memory of dead foremothers.

An open time followed when women were invited to say what the word "witch" meant to them personally. The first woman said that for her to be a witch meant to identify with the nine million victims of the European witch-craze, many of whom were tortured and executed because they were wisewomen, midwives and healers who threatened the dominant patriarchal institutions in their societies, especially the male medical profession. She said that she saw the reclaiming of the name "witch" as a reclaiming and a continuation of the wisewoman tradition, and as a reminder to patriarchy that despite the holocaust of the 15th to 18th centuries it has failed to obliterate this tradition. She concluded by reading what was a significant statement for her:

> A witch is ruled by none
> And answerable to none
> Save herself

Another woman said that this Samhain was special for her because it was the second anniversary of her decision to identify herself as a feminist witch. This decision represented a final rejection of a strong Christian upbringing after a long period of growing dislike for the

negative messages which Christianity gives women. She saw it as a freeing of herself from the bonds of patriarchal religion in order to adopt a spirituality which fitted her own beliefs and values. Since identifying herself as a witch, all the personal goals she set for herself two years ago have been achieved.

A third woman read a piece of "Lesbian Lore" written by Billie Potts and quoted in Dreaming: An Almanac of Lesbian Lore and Vision (1983:133):

> Remember witchcraft healing traditions in dealing with unexpected events. What we call today the "witch's altar tools" formed a kind of first aid kit. These tools were: something to cut, something to bind, something to beat with, woman's plants or their extracted essences.

She also read from her shemoon diary:

> The path of the witch is a door to self knowing. These patterns of spiritual practice of a witch develop balance and harmony within each witch. This may not always be a comfortable change, as to move from disharmony and lack of balance into harmony and calm often requires great personal change. The practices bring with them the strength and courage to face and live through these changes... One of the significant parts of a witch's spiritual belief is that it is morally acceptable and life-enhancing to wield power and craft spells. The rule of three gives us Harm none, for the good of all, and what you give, so shall you get. These are powerful limits to craft spells within.
>
> (Spider Redgold 1991, 20 October)

The next woman read an extract from Diane Stein's Casting the Circle (1991:247) quoting a now famous statement made in an early position paper put out by WITCH, a group of radical political women in New York City who began one of the first feminist witch covens on Halloween, 1968. The statement reads:

> WITCH is an all-women Everything.It's theater, revolution, magic, terror, joy, garlic flowers, spells. It's an awareness that witches and gypsies were the original

> guerrillas and resistance fighters against oppression -- particularly the oppression of women down through the ages. Witches have always been women who dared to be: courageous, aggressive, intelligent, nonconformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary...
>
> WITCH lives and laughs in every woman. She is the free part of each of us... There is no "joining" WITCH. If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a Witch. You make your own rules...
>
> You are a Witch by saying aloud, "I am a Witch" three times and thinking about that. You are a Witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous and immortal.

Another woman read a poem she had written:

> A witch is a wise natural humorous woman
> Who has spirit and knowledge; she sees
> What others fail to perceive
> She is a woman I need not fear

Following these personal statements about the meaning of "witch", we were invited to act on the suggestion made by WITCH in their position paper -- to say aloud, together, "I am a witch" three times.

Women were then asked to think of anything in their lives at present which they did not want there. Paper and pens were passed around so that we could write down what we wanted to get rid of -- fears, anxieties about the present or future, problems in interpersonal relationships, dissatisfaction with any aspect of our lives, difficulties at work, and so on. A fire was lit in the cauldron. There was a lot of fast scribbling followed by enthusiastic ripping and burning. Each negativity was named as it was thrown into the flames and symbolically destroyed. Then one of the women who had planned the ritual passed around a basket of tissue-wrapped gifts for each of us -- "symbols of the transformation that happens once we have let go". The gifts were miniature pumpkin lanterns modelled from orange fimo.

Next there was a silent time for meditation during which we were to focus on our inner lives and confront any remaining concerns or fears. After the meditation a basket of collage materials -- tinsel, wire, stars, shells, twigs, glitter, glue, feathers and ribbons -- was placed in the centre on top of the cauldron and we were asked to make a symbol of "the safe place" in our lives. When all the symbols were completed, each woman explained the significance of her symbol. After each person spoke, the group chanted:

> She changes everything She touches
> And everything She touches changes

The next phase of the ritual was "to welcome in the new". The group had decided before the ritual to begin the process of finding a group name, and women had been asked to bring along suggestions to the ritual. One of the women had prepared a wooden box with a "nest" inside made from layers of silk scarves. We were invited to write down ideas for potential names and place them in the box. Each name was chanted three times as it was put in the box so that we could hear how it sounded. The box was then passed around the circle and each woman pulled across several corners of the scarves to close the nest. Eventually, at a subsequent ritual, one of the names was to be chosen as the group's name.

The ritual concluded with the opening of the circle and a feast.

The choice of symbols for this ritual makes very clear its dominant message. Even an infant would recognise immediately from her first fairy tale book the black cloaks, pointed black hats, "ugly" faces, wands, broomsticks, pumpkin lantern, cauldron, black cats, bats, frogs, and so on. The women's claim is unmistakable: "We are witches".

Considering the extremely negative associations attached to the witch, and the fact that patriarchal society invented her anyway, we might well ask why feminist women should want to take on the witch image themselves. It might be argued that the symbol of the witch as an evil, frightening woman is damaging for women trying to free themselves from the negative stereotypes foisted upon them. We might expect women to want to construct for themselves an entirely new image using new symbols rather than to adopt old symbols charged with negative meanings.

Myerhoff claims that the symbolic system used in a ritual "can be unpacked to elucidate the community's understanding of itself" (1986:262), and that definitional ceremonies "are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one's own terms" (1986:267). Why do these women see themselves and want to be seen -- to "become visible" -- as witches? In claiming the right to define themselves, why choose a symbol which expresses so unequivocally patriarchal society's misogynism?

There is an apparent paradox here whereby women who abhor the process by which women were labelled witches five hundred years ago now choose to self-identify as witches. But in doing so they are not simply adopting the popular stereotype and thereby reinforcing and helping to perpetuate it. They are doing what Blacks and dykes have done -- taking the dominant society's label and using it to name themselves, but rejecting the pejorative meaning and value attached to the label. As Noreen Penny, writing in Broadsheet (1990:178), has stated: "We do NOT accept the pejorative meaning of witch or coven. These are OUR terms and we use them in OUR way".

These women are attempting to subvert the popular definition of the witch, claiming that patriarchal society first subverted the image of the wisewoman/healer by defining her as a witch. They are reclaiming the wisewoman/healer and identifying with her. They are also reclaiming the witch symbol and reassigning it with positive meanings and value.

Part of their purpose in dressing up as witches and using familiar symbols is to do what Luce Irigaray has suggested as an effective strategy to deal with patriarchy -- to mime the mimes men have imposed on women: "If women exist only in men's eyes as images, women should take those images and reflect them back to men in magnified proportions" (Tong 1989:228). Irigaray (1985:76) says:

> There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one "path", the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it...
>
> To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself -- inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible", of "matter" -- to "ideas", in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible", by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.

By taking on the witch image, women are taunting patriarchal society with an image of its own invention. They are not, however, reflecting an image identical to the traditional one. During the ritual women used the symbols popularly associated with the witch, but they did so in ways they invented themselves. Their aim was to transform the image of the witch. What women said and did during the ritual bore

no resemblance to descriptions of the witch's Sabbat invented around the time of the witch-craze. There were no babies boiling in the cauldron and the feast was strictly vegetarian -- not a newt's eye nor a bat's wing in sight. There was no orgy, no flying around the room, and no bare-buttocked Devil.

Thus, these women are attempting to split the image of "witch" from the negative meanings traditionally assigned to the image. They are projecting themselves as responsible, sensitive and intelligent, not as nasty and evil. By making themselves "ugly", they are symbolically rejecting the dominant society's definition of female beauty, and by dressing up as "bad witches", they are symbolically rejecting the definition of a "good woman" as one who cooperates with patriarchy.

These women are not prepared to abandon the witch as an unfortunate invention because to do so leaves the power to define her solely with the misogynists of the witch-craze down to the present. Refusing to be objects of definition themselves, or to accept that women should ever have been the objects of definition, they are claiming the right to define and evaluate the witch themselves. By projecting an image of the witch that was in part a reflection of the dominant society's image and in part their own invention, they were cunningly distorting the traditional image and exposing it as myth. It was an act which was simultaneously defiance and self-definition.

Like Myerhoff's Jewish community, the members of the ritual group are trying ultimately to transform the dominant culture's ways of seeing. The Jewish people also projected an image of themselves which in part reflected the dominant society's image of them and was in part their own invention. By having blind men lead the procession and by

using their walkers and canes, they were not denying their vulnerability, but they were refusing to accept that this made them invisible and helpless. They were splitting the image of vulnerability from its culturally-assigned negative value. By combining symbols of their weakness with symbols of strength they created a new image for themselves and succeeded in convincing the dominant society to accept this image.

One obvious difference between the Jewish community's protest and the Samhain ritual is that the Jewish community had a large public audience. They dramatised their version of themselves to show themselves to themselves, but at the same time they showed themselves to others. In the Samhain ritual women were also dramatising their version of themselves, but their audience was the rest of the group. On this occasion, they did not seek witnesses outside the group.

My own role in this process of reflection and self-creation needs to be acknowledged. By describing and theorizing about their activities and giving the result (in the form of drafts of this chapter) to the women to read, I am reflecting back to the women an image of themselves. They are playing with, distorting and reflecting an image of the witch, and I am playing with that image through my writing and reflecting it back to them. My image is also "distorted" in so far as I am choosing to explain the ritual through a particular analytical framework, that is, I am interpreting it as a "definitional ceremony". While the women were very positive about this interpretation, there are many other ways that the ritual might be understood.

As well as holding up a mirror to the group, I am reflecting an image of the group and its activities to people outside the group. In this

sense, the group is gaining an audience, or showing itself to others. Through my research, I am drawing attention to and helping publicize the women's claims: in this respect, my responsibility is to represent these claims as accurately as I can.

Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989:19) say that the postmodernist anthropologist's goal is to "include themselves as characters in ethnographic texts instead of posing as objective controlling narrators". I would argue that these two roles are not necessarily opposed: I see myself occupying both. As a full participant in the ritual I am a character in the text - the part of my character is included in the text - but I am also the maker, the narrator, of the text. The issues arising from this -- of the relationship between researcher and research participants, the ethics of research, and the positionality of the researcher -- were discussed in chapter five.

Although the Samhain ritual was conducted in a private context, I think the ritual can be seen as a political act. The act of dressing up as witches and saying aloud "I am a witch" together was both a personal and a political statement. Because this was the first time women had made this claim explicitly, it was safer to do so privately.

The theme of the ritual was "confronting fears", and, for some women, participating in the ritual meant confronting their own fears about the implications of self-identifying in this way. The woman who read out her poem during the ritual expressed this in her last line: "She [the witch] is a woman I need not fear". The process of self-creation is a delicate business, especially in this case. It involves turning the value system of the dominant culture on its head and learning to value highly and celebrate what one has been taught since infancy to fear and hate.

Although the Samhain ritual was a private event, in their daily lives outside the ritual context, women in the group present themselves as witches to outsiders in many ways. They talk informally to friends and colleagues who are likely to be sympathetic, sell toy witches at craft fairs, make witchy greeting cards, display bumper stickers saying "My other car is a broom", and wear buttons saying "Born Again Pagan". As noted in chapter nine, some rituals are held in public places, such as beaches and parks, and large open rituals are occasionally held. Women organize birthday, name-giving, marriage and other rituals to which they invite friends and relatives. Rituals have been reported in newspapers. A Winter Solstice ritual held in Christchurch in 1990 was the lead story in The Dominion Sunday Times the following day. Womanscript magazine, with its central theme the empowerment of women and containing material explicitly about feminist witchcraft, was sold in bookshops. Despite the risks of public self-identification, discussed in chapter seven, some witches are "coming out".

The witch is more than a symbol women use to make a political statement. Myerhoff (1986:269), quoting Geertz, points out:

> [S]uch symbolic dramas are not "mere reflections of a pre-existing sensibility, analogically represented"; they are "positive agents" in the creation and maintenance of the subjectivity they organize into a proper, coherent tale.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, rituals are not merely women's attempts to mimic the popular image of the witch or exercises in showing themselves to themselves. They are the context for women to deepen their personal spirituality, and for many this is more important than the political implications or goals of ritual. Rituals express what the women want to become. "In ritual," says Myerhoff

(1986:268), "Doing is believing, and we become what we display". Women are not only trying to transform the dominant culture's ways of seeing, they are also transforming the ways they see themselves.

How do they see the witch? In the Samhain ritual, women made their faces look old and lit black candles to remember dead foremothers. The ritual was a celebration of the wise old woman -- the crone. As I pointed out in chapter three, feminist witches argue that patriarchal society in general, and Christianity in particular, has embraced and merged the Virgin and Mother aspects of the Goddess, but has shunned the third aspect -- the Crone -- because of her destructive qualities (Walker 1985:22). This destructive side of the Goddess is accepted by women as an essential phase of the perpetual cyclic nature of life, where day gives way to night, summer to winter, youth to old age, and so on: creativity and destruction are incorporated within a holistic world view. This view is quite different from the popular stereotype of the witch who destroys crops and cattle and murders babies. The Goddess-as-Crone is not evil or malevolent; her destructive aspect is seen as simply part of a natural cycle.

Feminist witches see the witch as patriarchy's distortion of the Crone -- a distortion which results when the dark, death-dealing, destructive aspects of the Goddess are split off from the creative, life-giving aspects and are loaded with negative moral associations. As well as reclaiming the witch, women are reclaiming and redefining a hoard of other names: crone, hag, spinster, gossip, nag, shrew, harpy, crackpot, and so on. Mary Daly (1988) has produced a "Metadictionary" or "Wickedary" of them "written by and for Wicked/Wiccen Websters ...

that Gossips out the Elemental webs of words hidden in patriarchal dictionaries and other re-sources" (1988:xiii).

The individual symbols used in the ritual -- the cauldron, pumpkin lantern, snake, wands, black candles and so on -- represent more than a stereotypical collection of witches' baggage. These symbols have also been individually reclaimed and their meanings help elucidate the women's world view. When selecting symbols for rituals women use their intuition -- choosing what "feels right" or what draws them -- but they also pore over a number of recently published books which explain the traditional or newly invented meanings of symbols. Mary Daly's Wickedary and Barbara Walker's Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects (1988) are two which are commonly used.

In the centre of the circle forming the focus of the ritual was a cauldron. In The Crone (1985), Barbara Walker claims that in pagan religions worldwide the cauldron was a symbolic womb, or sometimes represented the Earth Mother herself. The three legs of the cauldron are often said to represent the Maiden, Mother and Crone aspects of the Goddess. Walker (1985:103) says:

> Always the cauldron was understood to signify the cosmic womb, source of regeneration and rebirth. All life, mind, matter, and energy arose in various forms from the ever-boiling vessel, only to return thereto, when each form came to its destined end.... As the Christian cross stood for linear finality -- one death, one resurrection, one post-mortem reward (or punishment) forever -- so the pagan cauldron stood for its opposite, perpetual cyclic recurrence.

The snake, which represented the element earth in the Samhain ritual, is also a symbol of regeneration and rebirth because of its ability to shed its skin. Snake goddesses appear in numerous cultures. The uraeus, the Egyptian cobra symbol, represented the Goddess as creator

and stood for royalty, healing and wisdom. In Aboriginal Australia the Rainbow Serpent was also a creator. The Lamia was originally the serpent goddess of Libya; the Greeks called her Medusa and the Egyptians called her Neith (Walker 1988).

The Christian tradition transformed the sacred serpent into the primary symbol of evil: thus, for most people, the snake now evokes fear and often revulsion. Because Eve succumbed to the serpent's temptation in the Garden of Eden and then in turn tempted Adam, Eve has become symbolically associated with the evil serpent and the image of temptress has been extended to women generally. Joseph Campbell (1987) has pointed out, however, that the association between the snake and woman pre-dates "The Fall" described in Genesis: at 3500 B.C.E. the serpent and the Mother Goddess were depicted on Sumerian seals. Reviewing snake iconography dating to the late Neolithic, around 3,500 to 2,800 B.C.E., Dexter (1990:6) concludes that the snake was probably worshipped in many areas of Neolithic Europe and was perhaps identified with the "Goddess of Regeneration" because of its ability to "miraculously renew itself". In the periods succeeding the Neolithic the evidence for snake goddesses grows from dynastic Egypt onwards. Merlin Stone (1976:238) states:

> It can hardly have been chance or coincidence that it was a serpent who offered Eve the advice. For people of that time knew that the serpent was the symbol, perhaps even the instrument, of divine counsel in the religion of the Goddess. It was surely intended in the Paradise myth, as in the Indo-European serpent and dragon myths, that the serpent, as the familiar counsellor of women, be seen as a source of evil and be placed in such a menacing and villainous role that to listen to the prophetesses of the female deity would be to violate the religion of the male deity in a most dangerous manner.

Feminist witches have reclaimed the snake symbol and given it a new, or the original, positive meaning. Because the snake is consistently presented to them as a positive symbol, women in the movement seem to feel and think differently about it from women (or people) outside. Women in ritual gatherings speak glowingly of snakes. One, reporting back on her shamanic journey, described her new spirit guide as "a beautiful grey-green snake which had just shed its skin". Another said that in her meditation she had been in a pit of writhing snakes and that it had been a lovely experience. Starhawk, North America's best known contemporary witch, keeps two boa constrictors as pets. In their description of feminist witchcraft in California, Lozano and Foltz (1990:223) say: "Snake jewelry is popular and live pet boas can be seen at almost any large pagan gathering ". After I began this research, I began to get mail with snakes writhing cheerily across the envelopes. As I conclude this research, I no longer find snakes frightening and repulsive. At Summer Solstice 1992 I chose to mould a snake from clay as a symbol of my spirituality.

The pumpkin lantern, probably the commonest symbol of the commercialised version of Halloween, is said to represent the Goddess in her Crone aspect as destroyer or Death-goddess -- as Hecate, Kali, the Celtic Morrigan and so on. Walker (1988:247) explains that the term fata morgana, the Latin name for Morgan le Fay, the Arthurian version of Morrigan, is now applied to a kind of mirage said to represent Morrigan's secret palace beneath the waves. The term fata morgana has been extended to other illusory phenomena including "Saint Elmo's fire" seen on board ships at sea and the glowing will-o-the-wisp (marsh gas) seen over swamps. As another mysterious night light, the Jack-o-

lantern is also linked with the fata morgana and hence with Morrigan. The lantern also represents the full harvest moon.

It is usually fairies who are associated with wands. In this movement, however, fairies and witches are regarded as synonymous (Starhawk 1989, ch.1). According to Pennethorne Hughes (1965:76) there is a well established historical basis for this:

> [T]he people who until the late Middle Ages were called fairies by one name or another were often those who, until the seventeenth century or so, were called witches.

In chapter two we saw that in Sicily the term donna di fuora referred to a being which was "something of a fairy and something of a witch although one cannot really distinguish which is which" (Henningsen 1990:195, quoting the Sicilian folklorist Giuseppe Pitrè). There was no association of this fairy/witch with wickedness. Feminist ritual-makers claim that the split between the good fairy and the wicked witch was created and fostered by the Christian church. We saw in chapter two how the "confessions" of accused witches were transformed in the court records of witch trials. Duerr (1985:5) illustrates how, in a Scottish witch trial, the fairy made the symbolic leap to be reinterpreted demonologically. In the 1597 trial the accused, Andro Man of Aberdeen, spoke of his dealings with "the Quene of Elphen", a queen of the fairies. The court records translated this creature as the Devil. In the historical literature on witchcraft there are very numerous examples of how goddesses and fairies mentioned in "confessions" were demonologized.

For the feminist witch the wand is a symbol of fire, energy, transformation and power. It represents her will. As a magical rod of power, Walker (1988:32) states, the wand is akin to the royal sceptre, bishop's crozier, flagstaff, battle standard, and walking stick. This

magical rod has ancient links with the witch's broomstick -- the instrument which gave her the power of night flight (Ginzburg 1990).

It is clear from looking at the meanings of these few symbols that considerable effort is going into constructing a coherent world view based on a newly constructed symbolic system. This has the dual functions of helping to expose the mythical status and misogynistic nature of traditional ideas about witches and to create new, empowering meanings for women. Participants are well aware of the psychological value in taking symbols with traditionally negative meanings and reassigning them with positive ones.

The statements made in the Samhain ritual in response to the question "What does the word 'witch' mean to you?" contradict the popular stereotype of the witch. The women's statements present the witch as a wisewoman/healer; an independent woman "answerable to none save herself"; a woman who recognises her own sacredness and defines her own spirituality; a woman who wields power; a woman who is free, courageous and revolutionary; and a woman whom women do not need to fear. Essentially, they are about women claiming and celebrating independent knowledge and power. The burning of fears and other negative influences in the cauldron and the symbolic creation of personal sanctuaries demonstrate the women's intention to define themselves and take control of their lives.

I have argued that women in this movement see the witch, not as the opposite of the Goddess, but as one aspect of her -- the Crone, or "the negative aspect of the all-powerful Mother" (Walker 1985:12). Before going on to look at how women self-identify as Goddess and thereby symbolically collapse the witch/Goddess dichotomy, I will

review briefly how the Goddess is conceptualized in the literature on Goddess spirituality. Chapter three dealt with this in greater depth.

Starhawk, who first popularized the idea of "Witchcraft as Goddess Religion" in The Spiral Dance, says (1989:228):

> The Goddess is the living body of a living cosmos, the awareness that infuses matter and the energy that produces change. She is life eternally attempting to maintain itself, reproduce itself, diversify, evolve, and breed more life; a force far more implacable than death although death itself is an aspect of life.

and (1989:209):

> The most important [underlying concept in Witchcraft] is the understanding of the Goddess, the divine, as immanent in the world, manifest in nature, in human beings, in human community. The All-That-Is-One is not now and never has been separate from this existing physical world. She is here, now, is each of us in the eternal changing present; is no one but you, is nowhere but where you are -- and yet is everyone.

Starhawk relishes using the kinds of paradoxes found in the quote above and in the following (1989:95):

> I have spoken of the Goddess as psychological symbol and also as manifest reality. She is both. She exists, and we create Her.

This continual playing with paradoxes is an attempt to challenge the habitual structures of our thinking, to dissolve the idea of "truth" as being singular and immutable, and to celebrate the multiple nature of reality. Starhawk is pointing up the difference between Christianity, with its one received "Truth", and Goddess spirituality.

Carol Christ (1982:76) also draws attention to the multiplicity of ways in which women conceptualize the Goddess: she is divine female, a personification who can be invoked in prayer and ritual; symbol of the

life, death, and rebirth energy in nature and culture, in personal and communal life; symbol of the affirmation of the legitimacy and beauty of female power. Here Christ echoes Starhawk's idea that the Goddess is both psychological symbol and manifest reality. By symbolizing both nature and culture, life and death, the Goddess becomes the primary symbol for a symbolic system which emphasises holism instead of dualism.

The Goddess is not a feminist substitute for the Christian God. In Christianity, notions about God fit into a symbolic system based on pairs of opposites. We have God/Devil, good/evil, light/dark, white/black, high/low, life/death, creativity/destruction, heaven/hell, spirituality/sexuality, positive/negative, and so on. The symbolism of the Goddess, however, does not fit this kind of system, and therefore she cannot replace God in it. She incorporates both creative and destructive aspects, gives life and brings death, represents light and dark, heaven and the underworld, the maiden and the crone.

The concept of God is clearly diminished in comparison with the concept of Goddess. The Goddess incorporates both positive and negative; yet, in a sense, these classifications are meaningless because the negative is valued as highly as the positive. Starhawk says (1989:210), "[B]oth poles of any duality are always valued because between them flows the on-off pulse of polar energy that sustains life".

The central idea of Goddess spirituality is that of immanence, the idea that each woman (and man) is herself an aspect of the Goddess. This is different from the Christian belief that God can inhabit particular people who "invite him in" and who then become his temples

or vessels. In Goddess spirituality women see themselves as Goddess. Diane Stein says (1990:6-7):

> Every woman is Goddess, a Be-ing to honour and worship... In worshipping deity as female, a woman worships her own divinity, herself as Goddess-within... The cast circle is a safe space [where] women enact themselves as Goddess-within, creating a universe of their own design.

This determination to create a new universe comes from a rejection of a symbolic system which designates woman as "other" in relation to man. Just as importantly, it is a rejection of woman's status as "other" in relation to the Goddess and the witch.

Late in 1989 I was at a dinner party where the conversation came round to my proposed research. After several minutes, the host (unfortunately) became very distraught and, spitting with indignation, burst out, "These women are just turning themselves into Gods and worshipping themselves!" As well as deploring the heresy, he seemed personally wounded.

He was right about the women, and he was justified in feeling wounded. Women who begin to see themselves as Goddess reject a religious order which has an omnipotent, omniscient male God and a social order in which man, who is created in God's image, dominates. These women do not want to worship a male God or a male who thinks he is God. This may be unfortunate for men, but it is very liberating for women.

I turn now to look at how women self-identify as Goddess in the context of ritual.

From June to August 1991 Lea Holford taught an eight week Continuing Education course at Auckland University on Goddess religions of the past and contemporary Goddess spirituality. After the

introductory evening, each two hour session focussed on one particular Greek goddess, with a final session on integration. The goddesses included were Demeter, Artemis, Hestia, Athena, Hecate and Aphrodite. Each evening included slides of ancient depictions of the particular goddess, some teaching about her symbolic importance historically and for contemporary women, and a ritual where women explored the "energy" of the particular goddess.

We were encouraged to see the goddesses as symbolizing different archetypes or energies which may operate within individual women. Thus, Artemis, the virgin huntress, symbolizes the strongly independent, well-focussed woman who "is in touch with the wild, instinctual part of herself" (Holford). As a virgin and the Greek goddess of young girls, she is a favourite with feminists. Athena, the warrior goddess who sprang, fully-armed, from her father Zeus's head, was the Greek goddess of wisdom and crafts and the protector of Athens. She symbolizes the intellectual, rational, practical, self-disciplined, judicious woman. Like Artemis, she is a virgin, which originally meant "a woman who was free, not at the beck and call of any man" (Duerr 1985:16). But in other respects she represents the opposite of Artemis: her intellect rules her instincts.

Artemis and Athena, along with all other goddesses in all cultures which have or had them, are conceived of as aspects of "The Goddess" or "The Great Mother". Thus, the duality represented by Artemis and Athena -- wilderness/civilization -- is contained within "The Goddess".

The rituals Lea organized had two important functions. They helped women to understand themselves better by thinking about various "goddess energies" which seemed to be present and working in

their lives. They also helped women find ways of bringing new "energies" (qualities, personality attributes) into their lives. For example, a woman who identified closely with Athena, who saw herself as "an Athena type", might want to bring more of Aphrodite's spontaneity and passion into her life.

On the evening we focussed on Artemis part of the ritual was a guided meditation which involved visualizing a meeting with Artemis. Afterwards women talked about how this experience had been for them personally. The ways women imagined Artemis varied: she appeared as a typical Greek goddess, magnificent in flowing robes; as a large woman with burning red eyes; as an invisible presence; as a woman wearing a faded blue sweatshirt and cut-off jeans. Each woman created her own goddess. Several in the group, as in the last example above, created an image of which was very close in appearance to themselves.

Later in the ritual we were invited to think about a goal we wanted to achieve or something we would like to ask Artemis for. Each woman was given the opportunity to articulate this goal, wish or request. Before she did so, Artemis's crown, a head-dress decorated with peacock plumes, was placed on her head. (See chapter nine where I discuss the Enactment phase of rituals.)

In chapter eleven I discussed women's perceptions of how this kind of act effects change in their lives. Explanations of how the "magic" works vary. A common explanation is that Artemis is a metaphor for a particular kind of energy which can be invoked, claimed, channelled or tapped into during ritual when one is in a heightened state of consciousness. As the goddess of the hunt, Artemis is goal-oriented; as the goddess of childbirth, she assists women in their creative efforts:

hence the relevance of invoking "Artemis energy" in the ritual act described above. In Goddesses in Everywoman, Jean Shinoda Bolen says (1985:49):

> The Artemis archetype gives women the innate ability to concentrate intensely on whatever is important to her and to be undistracted from her course... Goal focus and perseverance despite obstacles in the way or elusiveness of the quarry are Artemis qualities that lead to achievements and accomplishments.

By putting on Artemis's crown each woman became the Goddess. After stating her goal or request she beat on a drum and said, "Artemis, hear my call". The implication seemed to be that we were appealing to a Being, or at least a Force, which was in some sense transcendant. Thus, a woman simultaneously became the Goddess and a supplicant.

I pointed out in chapter eight that women in the movement seem quite comfortable with this kind of paradox: they are aware of it, draw attention to it, and celebrate it. As Starhawk, (quoted in Christ 1982:76) said: "When I feel weak, She is someone who can help and protect me. When I feel strong, She is the symbol of my own power. At other times I feel Her as the natural energy in my body and the world". Discussing this quote, Christ points out that these are not the words of a sloppy thinker, but those of one who does not believe that a symbol must have a single "true" meaning. She says (1982:77):

> The diversity of explications of the meaning of the Goddess symbol suggests that symbols have a richer significance than any explications of their meaning can express, a point literary critics have long insisted on.

On the last night of the course Lea facilitated an integration and healing ritual. Some women set up personal altars and talked about the significance of their symbols. Women reflected on the course and

on how what they had learnt was influencing their lives. It is the final part of the ritual which is significant for this chapter.

The ritual ended with a "Women's Mysteries Initiation". Lea had brought for each woman a little pot containing a pansy seedling. The pot sat on a circular mat cut from silver cardboard on which was written "Women's Mysteries Initiation 5:8:91". The seeds had been planted six weeks earlier during a session focussing on Demeter's nurturing quality. (See chapter nine under Enactment.) The seeds had represented something we wanted to "plant" and nurture in our lives.

For the initiation we sat in a circle. Women had brought from home symbols of their sense of the sacred, of the Goddess within, or of their spirituality. After the first woman had spoken about her symbol, Lea took one of the seedlings and gave it to her, greeted her with a kiss on each cheek and whispered in her ear "Thou art Goddess". Then another woman talked about her symbol after which the first woman took a seedling to her and initiated her in the same way. Thus the message "Thou art Goddess" was passed from one woman to another until all twenty five had been initiated. Here, women were explicitly claiming the identity "Goddess" for themselves and were also acknowledging each other as Goddess.

I quote below from a tape ("Inner Woman", Denise Linn, 1983) used in a guided meditation in a ritual I participated in shortly before Summer Solstice 1991. The extract illustrates two key points I have been making in this chapter.

> And in this dark and sacred place, let the silence fill and penetrate you. And know that you are Isis as are all women, and that within you her power manifests. You are now in the outer darkness, the darkness before the beginning. Within this darkness you are the creator, the sustainer, and the destroyer. You have entered a vortex of power, a place beyond imagining, where birth and death,

> dark and light, joy and pain, meet. You have stepped between the worlds, beyond time, outside the realm of human life. Be aware as your old self and ideas and opinions and judgements die. And feel yourself reborn.

The first point is that in this extract Linn encourages each woman to self-identify (to "know" herself, to be reborn) as Goddess and powerful. Secondly, women are told that in their new place of power the familiar pairs of oppositions -- birth/death, dark/light, and so on -- are brought together where they can be seen, it is implied, to be parts of a single cyclic process or processes.

In this chapter I have explored the ways women self-identify as witch and as Goddess. I would argue that the dismembering of the witch and the Goddess by male-dominated society is a violence against "woman" which has provided a model at the symbolic level for all violence against women. Because the witch and the Goddess have been ruled out of bounds to "ordinary" women, women have been denied access to both the sacred, strong (Goddess) and the dark, dangerous (witch) aspects of themselves. Most importantly, the witch and the Goddess are symbols of women's independent power; their inaccessibility has meant women have been cut off from this power. It is these aspects of woman which are a threat to male-dominated society -- the other two phases of the Goddess, the sexually attractive maiden and the nurturing mother, are much more acceptable. As Trinh T. Minh-ha says (1989:132):

> They would like to order everything around hierarchical oppositions. They would like to cut her power into endless opposing halves or cut herself from the Mothers' powers -- setting her against either her mother, her godmother, her mother-in-law, her grandmother, her daughter, or her granddaughter. One of them has to be wicked so as to break the network of transmission [of stories, knowledge]... Divide and conquer.

By choosing to self-identify as witch/Goddess feminist ritual-makers are re-membering themselves again and connecting with the power that these symbols offer them. They are deconstructing the witch/Goddess dichotomy and creating a new symbolic system based on holism. They are going back beyond the stereotype of the wicked witch created in the fourteenth century. In part they are peeling off the negative elements superimposed by the inquisitors, demonologists and judges at the start of the witch-craze in order to recover the much older myth concerning women, "the Ladies from Outside", who met together at night to contact the Goddess and participate in pagan rituals and ecstatic experiences. In part they are creating a new myth: one that fuses the archaic pre-Christian myth with new elements: late twentieth century feminism, New Age thinking, "Green" practices, alternative healing and alternative spiritualities.

Chapter 13

Conclusion

> [T]he most we can do, according to Jung, is "to dream the dream onwards and give it a modern dress".
>
> From The Myth of the Goddess by Anne Baring and Jules Cashford (1991:xv).

> In my trance the Goddess became very old and turned into a Crone before my very eyes.
>
> In my trance the Goddess gave me a book. It was the story of my life, and it was only half written. It was for me to write the rest.
>
> In my trance I saw the Goddess, and she was me.
>
> Women's responses to a guided meditation, Lammas 1991.

> Now is the time to reclaim our wandering parts....
> Listen to the fairy-tale knock at the door of the deep female psyche which comes with the deep memory embedded in our woman bones. It can be evoked by the sight of a lake at dusk or a baby's toes, the beat of a drum, the echo of a song, the words of a poem. The wild woman is our Self, our centre, our self-esteem, our witch, our Goddess.
>
> From "Witches" by Jill, Women's Spirituality Newsletter, Spring Equinox 1993.

In this thesis I have argued that at the symbolic level the witch and the Goddess represent opposed images of womanhood, images which have been designated undesirable or inappropriate, above all illegitimate, as models for "normal" women. Concluding chapter seven I contrasted the symbolic meanings of "witch" for men and women. For men, I argued, the witch has always been "other", loathsome, dangerous and voracious, or, more recently, pitiable or ridiculous. For a woman, the witch is the "other" within, an image of her own dark, dangerous

power which she must fear; an image of her old age, her aloneness, her sexual undesirability, her woman's knowing trivialized as "women's intuition" by a male-oriented and dominated intellectual tradition. The witch symbolizes what she can become and will be damned for becoming.

The Goddess, on the other hand, represents the symbolic opposite of the witch. For men, she combines the perfect mother -- wise, powerful to provide, beautiful -- and the nubile maiden -- the epitome of sexual desirability. For a woman, the Goddess symbolizes unimaginable power and the eternal youth and beauty she is doomed to strive for and to fail to achieve.

The women who have been the focus of my research challenge both the dichotomization of the witch and the Goddess and their designation as illegitimate images of "normal" womanhood. They see the witch and the Goddess essentially as symbols of independent female power and knowledge. By self-identifying as "witch" and as "Goddess" they symbolically claim right of access to this power. In pre-Christian Europe, they claim, the witch was one aspect of the Goddess, the Crone, and represented her dark, destructive side. By self-identifying as "witch" and as "Goddess", these women are symbolically re-membering the witch and the Goddess, embodying the power which the two symbols offer, and thereby re-membering themselves.

In their self-conscious construction of a woman-centred spirituality, feminist witches are not simply putting up a challenge to the dominant Christian belief system which has played a fundamental role in the development of Western patriarchy. By creating an alternative, and by drawing attention to its constructedness, they intend

to draw attention to the constructedness of all religious belief systems, especially to the constructedness of the Christian one with which we are most familiar in Western societies. By bothering to construct an alternative, women are drawing attention to the critical role religion plays in any culture. In short, "religious symbols shape a cultural ethos" (Christ 1982:72). A religion in which divinity is imaged exclusively as an omnipotent, omniscient God -- not to mention one who is also jealous and punitive -- serves to legitimate men's power and knowledge: "[r]eligious symbol systems focussed around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent" (Christ 1982:73). The symbol of Goddess, with the meanings I discussed particularly in chapters three and eight, Christ (1992:248) argues, "legitimates and undergirds the moods and motivations inspired by feminism just as the symbol of God has legitimated patriarchal attitudes for several thousand years".

All the women I worked with see themselves as feminist. For most, their feminist self-identification and activity preceded their involvement in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality, sometimes by decades. They see their new -- newly created and newly discovered -- spirituality as providing a framework of beliefs which complements their feminist political ideals, gives a spiritual dimension to their feminism, and provides a source of personal strength in their daily lives. Other women were less clear about their feminist position when they first became involved in the movement: they liked the idea of a woman-identified spirituality, but were equally attracted to Goddess spirituality because it emphasizes strong connections with nature and the immanence of the

sacred, and because of its flexibility and lack of rules or dogma. Their political awareness increased as a result of their involvement.

I have emphasized in the thesis that while Goddess spirituality is a phenomenon constructed from a variety of ancient and contemporary elements -- beliefs, practices, preoccupations and concerns -- as a movement it is also part of a broad and growing contemporary movement or mood in Western societies which essentially challenges all social and political institutions founded on dominance and oppression, based on what witches call "the principle of power over" and what philosophers call Cartesian thinking. In terms of their broad social and political goals, witches have the same goals as other feminists. With respect to their concerns for the planet, witches have the same goals as people in the ecology movement. Witches frame their way of being part of this broader movement by making connections with pre-Christian pagan societies which, they say, had a more holistic world view. Witches choose to frame their rhetoric in spiritual terms, most basically by using "the Goddess" as symbol and metaphor for the inter-relatedness of all life on the planet and for the planet it/herself. Some members of the ecology movement have demonstrated a tendency in this direction by invoking Lovelock's "Gaia hypothesis", named after the Greek earth goddess. Starhawk (1988:4) talks about the connections amongst the many individuals, groups and movements which are challenging the principle of power on which social and political institutions in Western societies are based:

> To reshape the very principle of power upon which our culture is based, we must shake up all the old divisions.... The questions are broader than the terms religious or political imply; they are questions of complex connections. For though we are told that such issues are separate; that rape is an issue separate from nuclear war, that a woman's struggle for equal pay is not

> related to a black teenager's struggle to find a job or to the struggle to prevent the export of a nuclear reactor to a site on a web of earthquake faults near active volcanoes in the Phillipines, all these realities are shaped by the consciousness that shapes our power relationships. Those relationships in turn shape our economic and social systems; our technology; our science; our religions; our views of women and men; our sexuality; our Gods and our wars. They are presently shaping the destruction of the world.

In this quotation Starhawk states that the terms "religious" and "political" falsely separate a diversity of issues. In chapter four I stated that while feminist witchcraft can be seen to share certain characteristics with New Religious Movements, feminist witches themselves resist the compartmentalization of religion in a category separate from the rest of life -- this is against the holistic thinking which is essential to their world view. While it is true that other religious or spiritual movements, including Christianity, seek social change, in these movements such goals are secondary to religious goals such as worshipping a deity and winning converts. Witches in New Zealand do not worship any deities[1] and do not seek to convert people to witchcraft. They do not believe that witchcraft per se will change the world.

At the level of belief, then, feminist witches have much in common with a number of other contemporary groups. At the level of practice, however, feminist witches' ritual activities are quite distinctive and, in New Zealand, are on the whole privately conducted by individuals or small groups. These rituals, even when they are celebrating the pagan calendrical festivals, almost always deal with women's personal psychological processes, with issues which need addressing in their lives, with changes which are occurring in their lives. Rituals are about

self-understanding, self-healing, self-empowerment, and supporting other group members in these processes. When challenged about what some outsiders see as self-obsession, witches say that they cannot be effective in their own lives, or work effectively for social change, until they first heal and empower themselves. Some women are attracted to ritual primarily for this reason. Lea Holford said in my interview with her:

> I see some women come in and do this work for long enough until their personality's healed, and then suddenly they don't need to do it any longer. It's integrated and becomes a part of them, and so they may not have to keep doing it long term, but that doesn't mean it's not valid.

In the introduction to her annotated bibliography Goddesses and Wise Women (1992:1), Anne Carson says that one of the more recent (over the past six years) trends in the movement "is a strong interest in healing of all kinds: indeed, it may be said that the essence of feminist witchcraft consists of healing the female self". Other women remain in the movement and use the group as what Lea calls a "watering hole where you come back and get your springs of creativity freshened again and go out". The ritual group acts as therapy group, support group, consciousness-raising group and spiritual community. In these respects it is similar to women's "spirit possession cults" in Africa (such as the zaar) and other parts of the non-Western world.

This pattern of rituals being almost exclusively private affairs distinguishes the movement in New Zealand from the one in the United States, judging by what people like Starhawk write, and by what Lea Holford says. When Lea compares New Zealand with the United States, her comments imply disappointment that in New Zealand the Goddess

spirituality movement has not so far had the political impact as a movement that it has had elsewhere:

> Women's spirituality has the potential of doing extremely deep healing work for the culture. Some places it's actually done that and had a huge impact. Other places it's just been yet another thing to do that passes. I've had the most exposure to the Bay Area in San Francisco. There I was thrilled with the way it went into political things, doing things like "Take back the night" marches, and really helping women who'd been attacked and publicizing this, and trying to get social movements to not be complacent in relation to things like that. I saw tremendous ritual work turn into tremendous political work, very positively empowering communities and challenging power structures. There was all the anti-nuclear stuff and also going into jails.
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> That's what I really admire -- when people really face the depths of their fears and do the depth work it takes to empower them to feel like they can heal. Women can't do that unless they actually go down inside themselves, go through those depths of feeling that they're unlovable, that they're unworthy, that they're powerless. They've actually got to get through that and find their source of empowerment inside. Some women do that and some don't. I think the women who do become very powerful and they then have the capacity to take that beyond the little group.

I discussed above the fact that where feminist witches are working for change, they are doing so as part of larger movements such as the ecology and feminist movements, and not as part of the feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement per se. Part of the reason for this undoubtedly lies in the fact that there are far fewer women involved in the movement in New Zealand and there is little contact between ritual groups, making it difficult to co-ordinate any large-scale activity. The Women's Spirituality Newsletter is intended to help women network, but this only comes out four times a year. Secondly, the climate of the 1990s is different from that of the 1970s -- large street protests and demonstrations of any kind are now much less common, and they were always less common in New Zealand than in the United

States. In the United States Starhawk describes hundreds of women coming together to stage an anti-pornography ritual or an anti-nuclear demonstration. The movement there, with an estimated eighty thousand adherents, is more vigorous and open and has a public profile which, in places like the Bay Area, is quite high. Luhrmann (1989a:5) says that in 1985 there were at least fifty major pagan festivals in America, and that "[t]here are hundreds and hundreds of groups, stores, journals, and events".

In New Zealand the difficulties of low numbers and no centralized organization could, however, be overcome if women were sufficiently determined to mobilize the movement for a particular cause. As Lea says, this has not happened; ritual activity has been largely introspective and private. Looking at New Zealand society as a whole, feminist witches are virtually invisible; the great majority of New Zealanders has never heard of the movement. This does not appear to bother witches. Within particular sections of the New Zealand community, for example, lesbians, those interested in alternative healing, those interested in New Age therapies and philosophies, feminists, or the "Green movement", however, it is likely that people will know of feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality and may know someone involved. It is in these sections of the community that the movement is spreading.

While feminist witches' ritual activity is largely private and small-scale in New Zealand, it is not the "secret otherworld" that Luhrmann (1989a:48) describes in relation to the English covens she studied. Aspiring witches in New Zealand do not have to go through a third degree initiation process taking several years; there is no body of

esoteric knowledge; covens very seldom do rituals in the nude; few witches have a set of regularly used ritual tools such as an athame (dark-handled knife) or special cups and platters; there are no secret chants or word-forms; and improvisation and spontaneity are encouraged during rituals. Most ritual groups I know of, however, are "closed", meaning that only members of the group may attend rituals unless the group decides to hold an open ritual. The reasons given for this are that trust and familiarity are built up more easily in a closed group and women develop greater commitment to the group and one another. It is also said that "the energy changes" when group membership is constantly changing, making women feel less relaxed and less able "to go deeper" during their ritual work.

New Zealand witches' sense of connection with a witchcraft tradition stretching back over centuries is very vague compared with English witches'. While New Zealand women like to think of themselves as part of a long tradition of "women meeting like this", unlike English covens they trace no specific genealogical links with covens of the past. Luhrmann (1989a:44) writes of English witches: "Witches speak of a secretive tradition, hidden for centuries from the Church's fierce eye, passed down in families until the present generation". While New Zealand witches know that the basic ritual structure they use is derived from the Wicca tradition, I did not meet any who believed that their rituals had been passed down through the centuries. It would, in any case, be impossible to make such a claim since the various parts of a ritual are "made up" or adapted from suggestions in various manuals by the women responsible for organizing it. For English witches the authenticity and authority of their rituals depends on a claimed

connection with witches' rituals in the past. In New Zealand, women quite happily acknowledge that they invent their own rituals. Proving a connection with an historically continuous witchcraft tradition is not seen as necessary in terms of legitimating contemporary feminist witchcraft. Indeed, the fact that witchcraft is historically discontinuous has been turned in to a political point by feminist witches: the point is made that the reason there has been no continuous history of witchcraft is that hundreds of thousands of European women were burnt to death or hanged because of their societies' fear of witches. While New Zealand women do not trace genealogical links with witches of the past, some nonetheless see themselves as the spiritual descendants of the Goddess-venerating wise women who came to be labelled "witches". Their "witch" identity in part derives from a sense of spiritual, if not biological, connection.

Here we can draw a comparison between the feminist witchcraft movement and what is known as the "Maori renaissance" in New Zealand.[2] The word "Maori", which in the Maori language meant "local" or "ordinary people", was used by Europeans to name a racial/cultural category which included all the native inhabitants of New Zealand irrespective of their tribal affiliations. The first substantial European accounts of New Zealand, those of Banks and Cook written in 1769, gave broad topical, rather than regional, descriptions of Maori life, and "[i]t was on the basis of such generalizations that the category 'Maori' eventually emerged out of the stuff of tribal life" (Salmond 1991:266). During (1990:31) writes: "'Maori' is a metonymy -- it was an adjective meaning something like 'usual' before the Pakeha arrived -- the locals having no identity as a group at all".[3] Knowledge of this does not,

however, prevent Maori today from claiming Maori identity: Maori encourage one another to claim this identity in order to re-own their "traditional" pride, strength and pasts. Claiming Maori identity gives Maori a place and a voice in New Zealand society and a basis for self-empowerment. Similarly, feminist witches are aware that "witch" was originally a label and not a term of self-identification, yet they see their claiming of "witch" identity as a way of proudly connecting with an ancient women's spiritual tradition. Self-identification as "witch" constitutes a basis for self-empowerment.

Both the feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement and Maori renaissance have been self-consciously and deliberately constructed by those who belong to them. As part of their rhetoric, both claim connections with past cultures. In some quarters of both movements there has been an evocation of a mythologized utopian past, while in other quarters the point has been made that it is unnecessary to romanticize the past in order to claim legitimacy for the contemporary movement. The impact of both movements begins with the self-empowerment of those who belong to them, with their learning to re-image themselves with pride and confidence. Claiming the name "Maori" or "witch" asserts a personal and group identity, creates a basis for solidarity; it is about boldness and strength, visibility and publicly being one's commitment. There is an emphasis on "partnership" in both movements: Maori speak about wanting a partnership with Pakeha;[4] witches speak of wanting to replace the "dominator model" of society with a "partnership model" (see chapter eight). In both movements the impetus for this call for partnership comes out of an experience of oppression.[5] Essentially, Goddess spirituality and the

Maori renaissance share a central preoccupation with cultural regeneration and reconstruction.

In terms of my focus of enquiry and modes of research and analysis and my own self-identification, I see my research as belonging within the domain of feminist anthropology. On the evidence of recent decades, however, feminist spirituality is a topic unlikely to hold much appeal either for anthropologists or for most feminists. More than twenty years ago Lewis (1971:11) pointed out that "most of the present generation of British social anthropologists have studiously avoided paying much attention to anything that could be called spirituality". This is still true. Feminist scholars on the whole, with the notable exceptions I have discussed in this thesis, especially in chapter three, have not addressed women's spirituality as a topic for serious investigation presumably because they, like many feminists, see involvement in any kind of spirituality as a self-indulgent diversion from political work (Spretnak 1982:xxii), and as counter-productive in relation to the feminist struggle to end women's subordination. Having exorcized the Godfather (Daly 1979:1) from their own hearts and minds, they see no need to replace him. Even if they recognize the role of patriarchal religion in legitimating patriarchal society, unlike spiritual feminists they do not recognize any need to substitute a different system of beliefs which could legitimate a different way ordering social relations.

Anthropologists who study religion prefer to study belief and ritual, neglecting spiritual experience, what Lewis (1971:11) calls the greatest "corner-stone of religion" at least so far as those who consider

themselves religious are concerned. Beliefs and rituals are easier to describe and analyse; they are easier to collect data about and objectify. The reason spiritual experience has been neglected by most anthropologists, I suggest, is that it is difficult for the anthropologist, as an outsider, to describe. Spiritual experience is essentially a subjective experience, and any proper attempt to understand it requires that a researcher first listen to the person who has the experiences describe and explain them. Anthropologists have demonstrated a marked lack of interest in doing research which emphasizes insiders' subjective accounts of their spiritual experiences.

While spiritual experience has been an unpopular topic for study amongst anthropologists interested in religion, witchcraft has enjoyed considerable popularity as a research topic. As I argued in chapter two, however, the academic study of witchcraft beliefs has not been the study of witches' beliefs but rather the study of beliefs about witches. The study of witchcraft has been a study of "the other", not of the subjective experiences of witches themselves.

Moreover, on the whole, witchcraft has been a legitimate topic for study only so long as it has been witchcraft in an "other culture". I think the reason for this relates back to the nature of the traditional academic approach to the study of witchcraft as the study of witchcraft beliefs not witches' beliefs. Witchcraft beliefs are simply not seen as important in informing the lives of adults in Western societies today -- they may be the stuff of children's stories and nightmares, but they are grown out of during primary school; for adults witches are "not true" and witchcraft beliefs are silly. Given this, a study of witchcraft beliefs would, in short, be seen as fairly pointless.

One of my goals has been to deconstruct the study of witchcraft as being the study of the exotic and bizarre "other", where "other" refers both to the witch in relation to her own society, and to the society being studied in relation to the anthropologist's own society. My study differs from most in that I have focussed on witches in my own culture and on the descriptions and explanations witches themselves give about their beliefs, values, ritual practices, goals and experiences. In contrast with anthropological and historical studies which have treated witches as pathetic victims of labelling, I have focussed on self-identified witches and tried to place their subjective understanding of witchcraft at the centre of the ethnography -- to present a "Hag-identified vision" (Daly 1979:216). The point of witches self-identifying as such is to reverse the process by which the "other" is made exotic and rendered mute and powerless by virtue of this status -- this was what happened during the European witch-craze. As Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen write (1989:30): "[T]he 'other' too easily can be reconstituted as an exotic in danger of being disempowered by that exoticism". By calling themselves witches, feminist witches are trying to discharge the witch of her status as exotic "other". Ironically, it is perhaps partly the "ordinariness" of feminist witches which has meant they have not attracted much research attention from social scientists. New religious movements and spiritual groups with what seem to outsiders very unusual, possibly bizarre, beliefs and practices, including groups ranging from Scientologists, Spiritualists, Theosophists, and Satanists through to the Aetherius Society and Flying Saucer Clubs, have attracted plenty of sociologists' attention. It is also ironic that the relative invisibility of New Zealand witches and their concern to rid the witch of her exoticism

is in direct contrast to the movement's beginnings in the United States (see chapter three) where the witch label/image was deliberately exploited by feminist activists because its exoticism gave it the ability to attract public attention to feminists' protests.

My purpose in emphasizing witches' subjective understandings has been to achieve one of my research goals as a feminist researcher -- to assist the women who have been the focus of my study to achieve their goals. These mutual goals include:

* to draw attention to a feminist reconsideration of the European witch-craze and of the women who were its victims;

* to explain the connection between the pagan Goddess-worshippers of pre-Christian Europe and those labelled and murdered as "witches" between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe;

* to explain the connection between the witch and the Goddess and the process whereby the former became a diabolized version of an aspect of the latter;

* to deconstruct the stereotypical image of the witch as being a malevolent, terrifying or ridiculous figure, and to re-invent the witch as a symbol of woman as possessor of independent power and knowledge, especially healing knowledge;

* to advance the argument that the witch and the Goddess have potent symbolic value for women as images of independent female power, and that by self-identifying as "witch" and as "Goddess" women can symbolically claim, or reclaim, their right to this power;

* to promote a model of gender relations based on partnership rather than dominance of one sex over the other;

* to promote a world view which sees the sacred as immanent and which emphasizes "Green" philosophies and practices;
* to promote a world view which emphasizes holism as an alternative to the dominant Cartesian model;
* to draw attention to the role that religious belief systems have in legitimating and perpetuating social systems, to point to the constructedness of all such systems, and to demonstrate that women can consciously construct a belief system which is psychologically and politically useful to them;
* to demonstrate the value of ritual as a tool which can assist a person in marking and processing transitions in her life; in making decisions and acting upon them; in achieving self-understanding, self-healing and self-empowerment.

My goals as an anthropologist have been:

* to locate the origins and boundaries of the feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement in New Zealand, and to understand the process of its constitution and development;
* to give an overview of the movement: the demographic characteristics of participants, the range of their activities, their goals, and the issues which chiefly occupy the movement as a whole;
* to understand why practitioners are attracted to witchcraft; to discover the processes by which they come to self-identify as witches and the common and unique features of these processes; to examine the paradoxes of such self-identification;

* to understand the function and value of feminist witches' rituals in their lives and to examine these rituals in the light of the anthropological literature on ritual;

* to understand the purpose and implications of women's self-identification as "goddess"; to understand the relationship between the symbolic importance of "the Goddess" and witches' world views;

* to compare feminist witchcraft with women's cults, millenarian movements, and new religious movements (NRMs).

* to contextualize the New Zealand movement in relation to its parallels in other Western countries, notably the United States and England (these being the only countries about which there is a body of published material that was accessible), and to make comparisons amongst these different expressions of the movement;

* to contextualize the movement in relation to New Zealand society as a whole and in relation to other social movements with similar goals.

I made it clear in chapter five that my position/perspective in relation to feminist witchcraft is partial in both senses of the word: this is so inevitably as well as by choice. I chose to focus particularly on witches' world views and on ritual practice because these areas interested me especially and because by exploring them I could support women's consciousness-raising objectives and emphasize what they regard as most important about the movement. Choosing to focus on these particular aspects has meant neglecting others which could have been fruitfully examined and could become the focus of future research. In some cases I was aware of these at or near the beginning of my research, but I chose not to pursue them because they were large areas

which could easily have become the main focus or taken up a substantial proportion of the thesis. One such area is that of ritual group structure and the dynamics involved in the operation of groups: a closer examination of this aspect of the movement could include research on interpersonal relationships amongst members; group self-regulation, administration and decision-making; the social life of groups; initiation and departure procedures; recruitment; and the life cycles of groups. A second issue which became apparent early in my work and which deserves further investigation is the attraction of the movement for lesbian women in particular -- I noted that probably one third to one half of witches are lesbian. Thirdly, the personal, private, ritual lives of witches could be explored in depth. I chose to focus on rituals performed by witches in groups, but witches also do rituals alone at home, in gardens, on beaches, on mountains, in the bush. The relationship between the ritual life of the group and the personal ritual lives of individual members could be investigated.

Other possibilities for further research became apparent in the course of my work. One such area concerns discovering the relationship between feminist witchcraft and the range of other individuals, groups and movements in New Zealand who are involved in what might be called "spiritual alternatives" -- those interested in the New Age, in shamanism, in expanding human potential, in men's neopagan groups, and so on. As yet these groups have not attracted research interest, and the precise inter-relationships and overlaps amongst such groups is unknown.

The relationship between the overwhelmingly white, middle-class Goddess spirituality movement in Western societies and parallel

movements in non-Western societies or amongst women with different ethnic backgrounds within Western societies, if indeed such parallels exist, also needs investigation. Aroha Yates-Smith at the University of Waikato is currently writing a doctorate on Maori goddesses. She laments the fact that as the result of the Christianizing of Maori much knowledge about some of these goddesses has been lost, their names surviving only in chants, in old library manuscripts, or in the memories of some old people (pers. comm.). Knowledge of others, like Papa-tu-a-nuku, Hine-nui-te-po, and Mahuika, however, has survived in well-known myths. Aroha sees her work as involving both the retrieval of knowledge about Maori goddesses and the dissemination of this knowledge amongst contemporary Maori, especially Maori women. She believes that learning of the significance of goddesses in traditional Maori spirituality, and of the importance of the principle of balance in the Maori cosmology, will have a positive psychological effect on Maori women along the lines described by Christ (1982) in "Why Women Need the Goddess" (see chapter three).

Another area which has important research potential is that of the use of ritual in healing by health professionals, "alternative" healers, and individuals. During my research I met a general practitioner who used ritual in working with rape victims and heard of several others who regularly use ritual in treating patients; ritual is used by a growing number of psychotherapists in their practices; I heard of ritual being used in rehabilitation centres for those with drug and alcohol addictions and in training programmes for women who work in Rape Crisis centres. This trend would seem to be related to the increasing call in

society for a more holistic approach to healing. The applied use of ritual in numerous areas of healing warrants further research.

What will become of late twentieth century witches and witchcraft? There is no doubt that the feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement is growing in New Zealand and in the Western world generally. With this growth comes an increased visibility, although, as I have pointed out, this is happening much more slowly in New Zealand than, for example, in the United States. In Britain it seems that the traditional secrecy surrounding witchcraft is beginning to give way. The March 1993 issue of Woman's Journal, an English magazine which targets middle-class women, includes a "special report" on witchcraft by Jessica Berens which describes festivals attended by hundreds of people, explains who witches are and what witchcraft is about, and includes a witch's (Dee Pilgrim) account of "how she discovered she was a witch". The account strongly echoes those of the New Zealand women I interviewed (included in chapter seven). Pilgrim describes her dissatisfaction with the Catholicism she grew up with despite her attraction to the "incense, candles and chanting" connected with Catholic rituals; she describes a growing interest in "herbal remedies, old country ways, ancient sacred sites"; she tells of how she began to "devour books on Wicca", tune in to the moon's phases and perform rituals: in all this she feels "a powerful sense of 'coming home'". The Journal article says that Mother Beth Gurevitch, "spiritual leader of witches and pagans in Britain", has built up a database of pagans and estimates that there are eleven thousand witches in the country. Her estimate for the number involved in the broader category of New Age thinking and paganism in England is one hundred thousand.

I would estimate that in New Zealand self-identified feminist witches may number five hundred with several thousand others who have or have had some peripheral involvement in feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality. An increasing number of workshops on Women's Spirituality and ritual is offered in the main centres each year and a few women are now employed either full-time or part-time in organizing and facilitating these workshops. In 1993 a major series of workshops is being run through the University of Auckland's Centre for Continuing Education. The series is called "Making Connections" and includes sessions on Maori women's spirituality, Pacific Islands women's spirituality and women in Judaism, Buddhism and Christianity, as well as Goddess spirituality.

Along with the growth and increasing visibility of the movement, there are indications that witchcraft is becoming commoditized in the way that other religions have. There are no witches' supplies shops in New Zealand yet as there are in the United States and Britain, but amongst the designer shops on the newly redeveloped Devonport wharf on Auckland's North Shore there is "Divine", a store specializing in massage oils, scented candles, meditation tapes, incense, wands, crystals, jewellery, goddess posters, greeting cards, and other fairy/witch/New Age nic-nacs. When I visited, the shop was doing a brisk trade. A "Fairy Shop" has recently opened in Ponsonby, one of Auckland's trendy inner suburbs. Women's bookshops and university bookshops in New Zealand now sell not only a range of books on Women's Spirituality, but are increasingly selling incense, candles, tapes, posters, T-shirts, and so on.

I noted in chapter two that so far little has been published about feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality as a result of anthropological or sociological research. It seems that this is set to change, and the area is beginning to be considered a legitimate area of academic study. Introducing the second volume of her annotated bibliography of literature on the movement, Goddesses and Wise Women (1992), Anne Carson writes:

> In the six years since the publication of Feminist Spirituality and the Feminine Divine [the first volume of Carson's bibliography], a river of books, articles, magazines, newsletters, and audiotapes touching upon women's spiritual experience and the renaissance of interest in the Goddess has flowed quietly but steadily. The movement has attained enough academic respectability that doctoral dissertations are being written about it...

As I complete this thesis, a Master's thesis on Wicca in Dunedin has just been completed by Helen Macdonald at Otago University, and Roberta James has arrived in New Zealand to begin her doctoral fieldwork amongst New Zealand pagans.

The feminist witchcraft/Goddess spirituality movement in New Zealand is amorphous, non-institutionalized, loosely-structured, and unbounded: women drift in and out of the movement and around its ill-defined edges. For this reason, the movement is unlikely to become institutionalized as a religion with fixed dogma and rituals. For this reason it also seems unlikely that the movement will mobilize as a distinctive force for social change. It seems more likely that, as at present, witches will continue their participation in the higher profile feminist, ecological, and peace movements. The major influence of the movement in New Zealand will continue to be its impact on individual New Zealand women who, through remembering/inventing a woman-

centred spiritual tradition, are re-membering themselves, discovering their power, and inventing new lives.

Notes

1. In the United States witches/women involved in Goddess spirituality are quite frequently referred to as "Goddess worshippers". I have never heard anyone in the movement in New Zealand self-identify in this way or refer to other women in the movement in this way. When I referred to women this way myself early in my research, Elaine Dyer said to me, "We do not worship the Goddess. We do not want to worship anyone". As I have discussed in the thesis, the Goddess is not thought of singularly or essentially as a transcendent, anthropomorphized deity who is to be worshipped. Witches may "invoke the energy" of a particular goddess, by which they refer metaphorically to the qualities with which she is associated, or they may "invite the Goddess to be present". In the latter case they may be thinking of her as some kind of spiritual entity who may join them, they may be fostering a sense of connection with Goddess-worshipping peoples of the past, or they may be simply invoking a sense of the sacred, particularly the sacred feminine.

The closest witches come to "worshipping" the Goddess is to celebrate her expression in people and the natural world. A state of ecstatic trance achieved during private or group meditation may also resemble what other religious traditions call "worship". Witches do, however, talk about "honouring the Goddess", but this is always contextualized. For example, "I honour the Goddess in you" means "I acknowledge and respect your sacredness, strength, wisdom, beauty (etc.)". The meaning of such "honouring", however, may be well removed from what is commonly thought of as "worship" -- "honouring the Goddess" in a difficult or unpleasant situation means something like finding the positive value or lesson to be learnt in the situation, not fighting the process, and respecting the integrity of all concerned.

2. Of course Maori can, in a way that witches can not, trace direct genealogical and cultural connections to the earliest settlers of New Zealand. In my comparison of the two movements here, I am dealing only with the issue of labelling/self-identification.

3. While I have argued that "Maori" was constructed as a racial/cultural category by the European colonizers to refer to the native "other", it should be noted that "Pakeha" was a construction of Maori used to refer to all "others" -- that is, all non-Maori.

4. The emphasis on partnership with Pakeha is much stronger now than it was a decade ago when some of those most active and vocal in the movement, e.g. Donna Awatere, author of Maori Sovereignty, and Atareta Poananga, were calling for Maori separatism.

5. Feminist witches do not claim they have been oppressed personally as witches, they are concerned about the oppression of women generally in patriarchal societies. But they also draw attention to the persecution of those labelled "witches" during the European witch-craze.

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