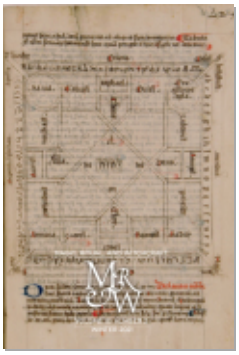
Fashioning Magic, Fashioning History: The Past and Present of Modern Witchcraft



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Helen Cornish is an anthropologist with a long-standing interest in modern witchcraft traditions and how they are historicized. She argues that new conceptions of history are pivotal to understanding how contemporary British witches engage with the past within an inspirited universe.

1. MAGICAL HISTORIES AND HISTORICAL MAGIC

Definitions of magic are often circular and limited to rationalist parameters. They tend to embrace a set of beliefs about the irrational possibilities of control over unseen and supernatural sources, succinctly described by Keith Thomas as "the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxieties."[1] For more than a century, foundational anthropological theories mapped magic against religion and science to explain the "prevalence and persistence of occult beliefs and practices"[2] as a functional social or psychological category in which "no action is inherently magical."[3] But magic remains complicated and often ambiguous. It is used to classify anything that cannot be explained by supposedly testable scientific principles, from sorcery and witchcraft to illusion. Yet this also points to the circularity of these definitions. As Peter Pels noted,

I am grateful to Jan Machielsen and William Pooley for their editorial guidance; thanks to all contributors for such stimulating discussions on magic and disenchantment.

1. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 668.

2. Graham M. Jones, *Magic's Reason: An Anthropology of Analogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4; Peter Pels, "Magic," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Michael D. Bailey, "The Meanings of Magic," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1–23, 233.

3. Michael D. Bailey, *Magic: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 4.

magic as the unscientific other makes no sense outside of the "complex discursive field that makes up magic, science and religion in the nineteenth century," which continues to shape our current understanding of magic.[4] My starting point is Pels's observation that definitions of magic are thus always historical and contextual—the product of the "whims of history."[5]

Scholarly histories of magic have been shaped by principles of rational modernity. Borrowing from Trouillot's advice in *Silencing the Past*, I argue that we should consider how magic "works" rather than what it "is."[6] This is not an invitation to test its practical efficacy but to consider how it "works" as a more experiential and less logical set of processes and conditions. Such an approach may help dislodge magic from the rationalist restraints in which claims of a disenchanted modernity appear self-evident, an inevitable decline of magic in the face of secular reality.[7] Scholarly histories of magic have been shaped by the principles of rational modernity. However, ethnographies of modern Western witchcraft[8] offer opportunities to investigate how magic might "work," situated in ritual practice, dreaming, and engagements with an inspirited world that is shaped and produced over time.

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4. Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels, *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

5. Pels, "Magic," 233.

6. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 25.

7. Weber's disenchantment thesis continues to be influential, despite arguments that disenchantment is a rationalist myth, or alternatively evidence that shows the world has become re-enchanted through new forms of "occulture." Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: English translation by Talcott Parson, 1930 [1905]); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971); Michael Hunter, *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2020); Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Secularization, Popular Culture and Occulture*, Vol. 1 (London: T&T Clark International, 2004); Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

8. I use "witchcraft" as a generic term but recognize that classification is complex and contested. In twenty-first-century Britain, Wicca tends to describe initiatory forms of witchcraft that follow broadly Gardnerian practices. In America this is usually described as British Traditional Witchcraft. In Britain, Traditional Witchcraft mostly refers to those who claim histories distinct from Gardner. See, for example: Ethan Doyle White, "The Meaning of 'Wicca': A Study in Etymology, History, and Pagan Politics," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12, no. 2 (2010): 85–207: Ethan Doyle White, "The Creation of Traditional Witchcraft: Pagans, Luciferians, and the Quest for Esoteric Legitimacy," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 18, no. 2 (2018): 188–216. These are shifting categories. When I started my research, Wicca and witchcraft were often used interchangeably, and some American practitioners now claim a Traditional Witchcraft traced to lineages other than Gardner.

In particular, I draw attention to alternative perspectives that researchers have been able to find among contemporary Western magical-religious witches. For example, Margot Adler states that "magic is a convenient word for a whole collection of techniques, all of which involve the mind . . . including the mobilization of confidence, will, and emotion brought about by the recognition of necessity; the use of imaginative facilities, particularly the ability to visualize."[9] Susan Greenwood offers "magical consciousness" as a "type of imaginative associative thinking" that differs from "more abstract analytical modes of thought." Typically marginalized in Western cultural history, she reframes the imaginal as a "legitimate source of knowledge" and challenges empirically informed anthropological theories of magic.[10]

Within this context, the use of history by modern practitioners of magic is particularly worthy of consideration, especially given history's role in the construction of rationalist definitions of magic. Far from being an obstacle, such rationalist histories have provided a further spur for the construction of magical histories. Modern witchcraft falls under the broad umbrella of contemporary eclectic Pagan Nature Religions.[11] It is made up out of diverse spiritual, religious, and magical thriving and growing traditions that have undergone significant changes in ideas and emphases since first emerging into the Western occult and esoteric scene in the 1930s as "Wicca." Gerald Gardner, a retired civil servant, claimed that he had stumbled on surviving fragments of the "old religion," an ancient pagan fertility witch-cult.[12] Gardner proposed that witches worked in closed initiatory covens, although, as the movement has gained momentum, many practice in more solitary and informal ways.[13] Central polytheistic principles revere nature as sacred, and

9. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), 8.

10. Susan Greenwood, "Magical Consciousness: A Legitimate Form of Knowledge," in *Defining Magic: A Reader*, eds. Otto Bernd-Christian and Michael Stausberg (New York: Routledge, 2013); Susan Greenwood, *The Anthropology of Magic* (Oxford: Berg, 2009).

11. Graham Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism: Religions of the Earth from Druids and Witches to Heathens and Ecofeminists* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); James R. Lewis, ed., *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft: A Scholarly Study of Neopaganism in the 90s* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1996).

12. Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (London: Rider, 1954). In line with re-enchantent debates, contemporary witchcraft has been considered a postmodern response to a disenchanted modernity. See Adrian Ivakhiv, "The Resurgance of Magical Religion as a Response to the Crisis of Modernity: A Postmodern Depth Psychological Perspective," in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), 237.

13. Ethan Doyle White, *Wicca: History, Belief and Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2016).

for many practitioners the world is perceived as fundamentally inspirited, animated, and alive.[14]

Since the latter years of the twentieth century, many self-identified British witches have been re-evaluating the historiography of the modern movement. They face contradictions posed by the recognition that it has a relatively shallow history while simultaneously desiring to make connections with the deep past. Some strategies are found by distinguishing histories of the movement from histories of magical techniques, which are entangled with otherworldly experiences. Both are often complicated and ambiguous, as more poetic facets of historical consciousness are threaded through realist historical accounts. It provides a useful counterpoint to consider intersections between histories of magic, histories of witchcraft, historical experience, and how magic might "work."[15]

2. LOOKING FOR MAGIC: FROM IRRATIONALITY TO THE IMAGINATION

It is worth sketching some of the ebbs and flows in anthropological theories of magic over the last one hundred fifty years to demonstrate how firmly concepts are rooted in a realist rationality, which cast magic as an inferior alternative to both religion and science. This concept of magic was crucial to the production of modernity, providing a foil of irrationality against which secular modernity and rationalist science could be constructed.[16] As a "primitive" concept, magic was put to use by Victorian scholars to explain cultural evolution through a historical narrative of progress, in which Eurocentric narrative structures justified imperialism and the alleged superiority of Western civilization. Edward Tylor and James Frazer, both skeptics, produced theoretical rationales that demonstrated how European folklore and African religion were irrational when measured against secular rationalism.[17] While

14. Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Susan Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

15. Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart, "Ethnographies of Historicity: Theme issue," History and Anthropology 16, no. 3 (2005); Charles Stewart, "Historicity and Anthropology," Annual Review of Anthropology 45, no. 1 (2016): 79–94.

16. Meyer and Pels, *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*; S. J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures: 1981 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Jones reveals how illusionists and stage magicians contributed to the construction of these categories in the nineteenth century as they revealed the trickery of charlatans: *Magic's Reason: An Anthropology of Analogy*.

17. James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1922); Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development*

now considered untenable theories, unscientific and ethnocentric,[18] these perspectives have enduring popular appeal through the continued currency of concepts such as animism, sympathetic magic, and survivals. For example, Frazerian theories inspired Margaret Murray to seek evidence of remnant traces of ancient fertility cults, which in turn were adapted by Gardner to help shape modern Wicca.[19] Murray and Gardner provide but one early instance of the way magic has been fashioned out of history, and vice versa.

The functionalist accounts that replaced social evolutionism in the early twentieth century rejected teleological accounts of progress, yet continued to embrace Tylor and Frazer's polarizing rationalist legacies with regard to magic.[20] As a social phenomenon, magic was found in the absence of practical knowledge and situated as a preliminary form of Western rationality and an inferior kind of science.[21] Evans-Pritchard explicitly rejected the relevance of scientific rationalism in his influential work with the Azande and maintained that their practices should not be confused with Western-centered New Age mystical occultism. Nevertheless, he remained concerned with the limits of reason and logic,[22] and magic continued to be located as a counterpoint to modernity.[23] While twentieth-century ethnographies of

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of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom (London: John Murray, 1871).

18. Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (London: University of California Press, 1982); Bernard McGrane, *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

19. Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921); Gardner, *Witchcraft Today*. Gardner was inspired by a wide range of writers such as Aleister Crowley, and Dion Fortune, as well as Murray. See, for example, Chas S. Clifton, "A Goddess Arrives: The Novels of Dion Fortune and the Development of Gardnerian Witchcraft," GNOSIS 9 (1988): 2211–2222; Leo Ruickbie, Witchcraft Out of the Shadows: A Complete History (London: Robert Hale, 2004).

20. Bruce Kapferer, "Introduction: Outside All Reason: Magic, Sorcery and Epistemology in Anthropology," *Social Analysis* 46, no. 3 (2002): 1–30.

21. Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005 [1902]); Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Illinois: Glencor, 1948).

22. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937).

23. There are significant critiques of the internal logic of this construction. See, for example, Meyer and Pels, *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*. Numerous valuable ethnographic accounts explore more experiential appraoches to magic in non-Western contexts, such as Katz, Richard, *Boiling Energy: Community Healing among the Kalahari Kung* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), although these arguments may also amplify distinctions between Western and non-Western concepts. See Bruce Kapferer, ed., *Beyond Rationalism: Rethinking Magic, Witchcraft and*

magic have predominantly focused on examples outside Europe, Tanya Luhrmann's theory of "interpretative drift" builds on established rationality debates in an urban, Western context as she explains how otherwise "rational" London occultists in the 1980s took up illogical beliefs.[24]

Some recent theorists have expressed skepticism as to whether modern magical-religious discourses can contribute anything useful to debates on magic at all, given that they are all formed in the same Christian-influenced intellectual climate of the nineteenth century.[25] While such skepticism again highlights the role of history in the fashioning of magic, the method suggested here—concerned with how magic "works," rather than what it "is"—is based on more experiential approaches to contemporary Euro-American magical-religious subcultures, which have embraced more embodied processes. David Abram suggests that the key to understanding magic is through sensuous knowledge as a "heightened receptivity" to the natural world and the ability to "alter one's consciousness."[26] Sabina Magliocco sidesteps conventional hierarchical models when she considers the concept of magic among "New Age and Neopagan movements" as a "set of techniques for altering consciousness and bringing about personal transformation" rather than "surreptitious or irregular ways of controlling the natural world," shaped through creative and emotional ritual practices.[27] As Greenwood argues, "magical consciousness" as a mode of thought engages with different criteria, emphasizing the imagination, the senses, and the emotions.[28]

These more poetic accounts of magic sit alongside research that challenges dominant objective accounts of Western thought. For example, Tim Ingold

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Sorcery (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003). This work suggests that the study of magic and sorcery exposes key assumptions at the heart of anthropology.

24. Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

25. Pels, "Magic," 234; Kapferer, "Introduction: Outside All Reason: Magic, Sorcery and Epistemology in Anthropology," 4. It may also be part of a modern intellectual problem to see categories as limited by their Western histories. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

26. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 9.

27. Sabina Magliocco, "New Age and Neopagan Magic," in *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David J. Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 635; "Ritual Creativity, Emotions and the Body," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 1–8.

28. Greenwood, "Magical Consciousness: A Legitimate Form of Knowledge," *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

suggests the imagination might help reconcile "scientific inquiry with religious sensibility as ways of knowing in being," observing how the imagination has been "cut adrift" as authoritative science seeks to disclose what is "really there."[29] Wouter Hanegraaff reflects on normative histories of rationalist science as he traces how romantic philosophies underpin natural laws shaped by scientific realism. He observes how the imagination, as a creative and dynamic force, has been continually present and consistently excluded from Western intellectual thought.[30]

Magical consciousness as a sensory and imaginative process can also help situate ongoing revisionist historiography by modern witches themselves. It offers a shift in emphasis that the shallow history of contemporary witchcraft at the same time as they seek continuities are sought through senses of timeless magical practice. Just as importantly, the study of historical praxis also provides spaces for alternative approaches to understanding magic as well as the multiple ways in which histories are produced.

3. THINKING THROUGH MODERN WITCHCRAFT

Modern academic histories of witchcraft manifest the extent to which, like magic, witchcraft's history has been shaped as a rationalist and empirical form of scientific knowledge.[31] Since the nineteenth century, scholarly history has been embedded in a mythic realism.[32] More complex senses of historical consciousness add layers and nuance toward understanding of the past. Alternative anthropological approaches to an expanded historicity can be found in Michael Lambek's analysis of spirit possession in Madagascar and Charles Stewart's ethnography of dreaming in Greece.[33] These offer models for thinking through how imaginal approaches to the past can contribute to, rather than undermine, rationalist accounts toward more dialogical processes.

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29. Tim Ingold, "Dreaming of Dragons: On the Imagination of Real Life," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 4 (2013): 734–52.

30. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Religion and the Historical Imagination: Esoteric Tradition as Poetic Invention," in *Dynamics of Religion: Past and Present*, eds. Christopher Bochinger and Jörg Rüpke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017). Elsewhere Hanegraaff shows how much the Enlightenment and Protestant rejection of magic contributed to the current understanding of science and disenchantment. See *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

31. Kirsten Hastrup, ed., *Other Histories* (London: Routledge, 1992).

32. Elizabeth Tonkin, "History and the Myth of Realism," in *The Myths We Live By*, eds. R. Samuel and P. Thompson (London: Routledge, 1990).

33. Charles Stewart, *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness in Island Greece* (Department of Classics, Harvard University, 2017); Michael Lambek, *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

Recent reappraisals of history among modern witches have pivoted on criticisms that witches have mistaken myths for history.[34] Professional historians have constructed realist histories that show a richly documented history for contemporary magico-religious movements. They demonstrate how modern traditions produced through eighteenth-century romantic philosophers, nineteenth-century scholars of comparative religion, folklorists, practitioners of new spiritualities, and occult organizations, rather than ancient fertility cults or surviving traces of folk magic.[35] On the whole, practitioners have taken up these intellectual challenges and re-evaluated their historiography. Where Gardner constructed deep histories based on folklore and (real or invented) oral testimony, today's magical-religious witches produce new modes of historical consciousness that weave together realist and magical approaches to the past.

One strategy has been to distinguish between the history of a movement and seemingly timeless accounts of magical practice. This enables a recognition that the twentieth-century witchcraft movement is a shallowly rooted bricolage, while simultaneously forging connections to the deep past through more creative and less logical means. At the same time Gardnerian legacies are discarded and views aligned with those of academic historians, modern witches continue to find new ways to connect to the deep past. Experiential accounts of magical techniques and encounters with an inspirited world cannot be measured against rationalist criteria and take the place of concerns about the lack of documentary evidence. They do not seek new "origin stories" that explain deep roots for modern witchcraft. Rather, they locate it as one manifestation of transformative esoteric practices, a Pagan inspired "root religion,"[36] that draws on timeless and universal magical processes. The past is apprehended through imaginal, sensory, and emotional processes, which draw historical consciousness out of singing, inspirited landscape,

34. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*; Cat Chapin-Bishop and Peter Bishop, "Embarrassed by Our Origins: Denial and Self-Definition in Modern Witchcraft," Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies 12 (2000): 48–54; Juliette Wood, "Margaret Murray and the Rise of Wicca," *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 15 (2001): 45–52.

35. Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ronald Hutton, The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Chas S. Clifton, "Leland's Aradia and the Revival of Modern Witchcraft," The Pomegranate 1 (1997): 2–27; Magliocco, Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America.

36. Michael York, "Paganism as Root Religion," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 6, no. 1 (2004): 11–18.

animated materiality, dreaming, ritual, and trance states, as new accounts are fashioned out of esoteric and embodied approaches to the past.

New historical accounts are thus fashioned out of more imaginal approaches to the past. Continuities with the working practices of the European cunning-men and wise women are offered as ancestral sources.[37] While there is much documentary evidence for the reality of cunning-folk as experts in magic, historians reject claims that they are literally direct ancestors for modern witches.[38] However, this heritage looks different from the perspective of practitioners who focus on esoteric and embodied expertise rather than realist histories.

4. REFLECTIONS ON MAGIC AND HISTORY

More imaginal concepts of magic help expand notions of historical consciousness and provide ways of drawing in alternate forms of evidence as modern witches navigate their histories. In this way, connections to the past that draw on forms of evidence outside of conventional methods can be seen to thread through realist accounts without contradiction. In turn, opening out the concept of magic away from established rationalist oppositions that test its efficacy helps dislodge magic from the circularity invoked by Western cultural history and anthropological theorizing. The turn toward magical consciousness as one thread in approaching the past offers more expansive forms of historical consciousness woven through rationalist histories. It reveals how history and magic work in more processual ways, continually made and remade according to different needs and agendas. Long-standing debates about the relationship between science, religion, and magic continue to harbor shadows of evolutionary and functionalist explanations, always dependent on the limits of rational scientific possibilities, and therefore always contingent on present understandings of the past. Breaking away from this model provides a more meaningful approach to the ebbs and flows of magical processes and practices, as questions are framed around how magic might work as an imaginal and experiential form of knowledge.

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37. For further elaboration see Helen Cornish, "The Other Sides of the Moon: Assembling Histories of Witchcraft," in *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West: Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of "The Triumph of the Moon,"* eds. Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (London: Palgrave, 2019).

38. Owen Davies, Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2003).