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# Accusing witches in the twenty-first century
## Locating appropriation

There is little about globalized modern magical-religious Witchcraft that isn't borrowed. It is well established that it is a creative response to modernity rather than an ancient continuous practice. Its inventiveness also makes it ripe for charges of religious appropriation. Complaints are compounded by claims that Nature Religions and New Age are consumerist movements, shaped by principles of alienated capitalism, fostered by ethnocentric views and coloniality. For British practitioners, anxieties about ethical practices mean they have recently turned to scrutinizing their own practice, but their questions focus on whether the entangled colonial histories of modern Witchcraft mean it is an inherently appropriated practice. In part this reflects changing political conditions, but it is also informed by the alignment of history with formal accounts over twenty years ago. I consider whether Liz Bucar's (2022) valuable advice – to borrow more and better – will help shine some light on these debates.

MANY OF TODAY's forms of Witchcraft have roots in the 19th century occult revival. During this period, European intellectuals took religious inspiration from several sources, including the religious practices of other cultures. These individuals shared the Imperialist worldview prevalent at the time … The Imperialists took without thought, and these teachings have trickled down and have been watered down over time (*Mumbles & Things* blog, Haseman 2019a)

## Introduction: accusing witches

Magical-religious Witchcraft[1] is one of several traditions under the broader umbrella of modern Pagan Nature Religions. Often styled as an 'Old Religion' that aims to revitalize spiritual values and practices of pagan ancestors, it has been shown by historians to be a synthesis of disparate pantheons and beliefs. It is celebrated as a creative *bricolage*, that emphasizes a sense of living in a spirited world (Greenwood 2005). Practitioners draw on folklore and accounts of classical paganism, combined with Earth mysteries, a spirited cosmology, and New Age principles that focus on personal transformation through creative rituals (Harvey 1997; Pizza and Lewis 2009).

1  Multiple witchcraft traditions (for example Wicca, Traditional, Solitary) claim distinct structures and trajectories to the past. In the United Kingdom in the early 2000s I found 'Wicca' and 'witch' used interchangeably. More recently 'Wicca' has come to define organisational practices that trace direct lineage to Gerald Gardner's covens in the mid-twentieth century. The terminology is not as fixed as it appears (Doyle White 2010).

Consequently, they have sometimes found themselves accused of religious appropriation from different fronts: their peers, academics and the general public.[2] Scholarly explorations take up folk tradition (Magliocco 2009), Earth mysteries (Doyle White 2014), environmentalism (Clifton 2009), historical trauma (Bovenschen 1978), Celtic history (Gallagher 1999) and prehistory (Rountree 2001) as examples of borrowing.

Appropriation is defined as 'the taking – from a culture that is not one's own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artefacts, history and ways of knowledge' (Writer Union of Canada 1992, see Ziff and Rao 1997: 1). It is usually cast as an accusation; groups seldom identify themselves as at fault. Witches have often been accused of unethical use of specific rituals or sacred objects which have prior claims as the religious property of an indigenous people. In the 1990s Helen Berger argued in the context of disembedded modernity that 'Witches can borrow rituals, deities, and magical practices from around the globe', and indigenous practices are close to hand (Berger 1999: 35); and Sarah Pike explored the 'smorgasbord' of workshops that encouraged cultural appropriation through diverse borrowed rituals and practices and warned of careless theft (Pike 2001: 125). More recently, the use of white sage, a scarce indigenous resource, was under the microscope, where anxieties were exacerbated by intense interactions generated through social media sites and internet posts (Berger 2023; Miller 2022).[3]

Questions about ownership and cultural property are highlighted in uneasy debates about the commodification of religion and spirituality under the conditions of capitalism (Ezzy 2001; Waldron 2005; Possamai 2003). In general, it has been witches in settler societies, rather than in Britain, who have faced criticism for possible theft of indigenous practices through proximity (Magliocco 2009). However, modern Witchcraft is global, and practitioners over the world face queries about structural injustices on an uneven playing field, that identifies white supremacy and relative privilege as key concerns.[4] British Witches have long been attuned to accusations of borrowing, although they have recently taken the unusual step of suspecting their own heritage has unethical roots and may be an inherently appropriative practice. These anxieties are posed across social media and internet blogs (Fitzpatrick 2018; K 2018; Haseman 2019a; Garcia 2020; Joho and Sung 2020). Over the last couple of years I have been asked direct questions about appropriation at public talks about how magical-religious practitioners have navigated the past. This has been food for thought.

Liz Bucar (2022) considers cultural appropriation to be overused and polarizing, but with the potential to be reclaimed. She proposes that a useful way to approach these contested and heated situations is be fully aware and responsible: to face up to challenging histories and build reciprocal

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2    The high proportion of practitioner-scholars in pagan studies means there is some overlap.

3    The inclusion of sage in the Sephora Witch Kit was much discussed on the internet. See for instance K 2018 and Goodwin 2021.

4    Despite its global profile, Witchcraft has remained a predominately white movement (Gallagher 1999). Recent valuable discussions include Blanton *et al.* 2015, and Askew and Tarbuck 2022. In Britain, the *The Afro Animist Podcast* set up by Nicola Roffe and Jay Percy in 2022 offers some welcome perspectives on magical-religious themes.

relationships by borrowing more, rather than less. This is an inspiring proposal and invites a recognition of cultural flows and creativity. It also raises questions about how historical accounts might be treated as stable and fixed. Like appropriation, history-making is always active and situated, and depends on the agendas and views of those who are looking and telling (Hastrup 1992; Trouillot 1995).

In this article I examine how some practitioners are anxious that the historical sources and inspirations used to legitimize contemporary Witchcraft were appropriated, and are complicit in perpetuating imperial practices. I do not aim to assess the actions of today's Witches nor those of their predecessors. Instead, I propose they are partly informed by a sustained reassessment of Witchcraft historicities over twenty years ago, when experiential elements were disentangled from empirical histories and recontextualized as shared, pan-human senses of spirit (Cornish 2005, 2019). These re-evaluations have contributed to new contradictions and discussions about the historical record. Exploring nuanced and complex issues around how contemporary magical-religious Witches are entangled in allegations of spiritual appropriation spans coloniality, globalism, shamanism and indigenous religions. It is not possible to do these subjects justice in one article, but I trace some interconnected themes that highlight how current anxieties are manifested. I follow this with a sketch of alternative approaches to history and magical consciousness (Wilby 2005; Greenwood 2005, 2023) that help focus on more experiential and creative elements while keeping an eye on structural inequalities (Askew and Tarbuck 2022).

## Accusations in context

At the turn of the millennium, British Witches were critical of New Agers who engaged in Sun Dance workshops and sweat-lodges. They considered it unethical profiteering and extraction of sacred knowledge, while they saw their own traditions as authentic. Knowledge was passed down lineages orally in closed covens or written in secret handbooks (Book of Shadows), or sought through Celtic, Nordic or English mythology and folklore. The formulation of modern Witchcraft in mid-twentieth century Britian relied on mythopoetic accounts that entangled history and practice. Founding practitioners such as Gerald Gardner proposed it traced an unbroken continuity all the way back to a pan-European Neolithic fertility cult (Gardner 1954). This view is now considered implausible, at best a valuable foundation myth, revised perspectives recognize Witchcraft as a modern phenomenon, creatively borrowing from diverse traditions, practices and beliefs (Hutton 1999; Magliocco 2004). However, a more empirical approach to historical knowledge has created the conditions for a different kind of evaluation. It opens questions about appropriation based on its history rather than the use of materials and rituals in the present. Furthermore, revised histories were navigated alongside claims that the deep past remained accessible through more experiential and spirited means, or through the practical techniques of folk magic and cunning skills. These have provided cause for ethical concern alongside the ritual use of, say, drums, rattles or herbs.

A globalized and internet-saturated world has provided a platform for intense and heated discussions about spiritual appropriation and Witchcraft. A brief survey of blogs, podcasts and websites with a global reach now sketches a problematic

history (Fitzpatrick 2018; Haseman 2019a; Garcia 2020). As Jess Joho and Morgan Sung (2020) reflect: 'the allure of modern Witchcraft lies in the promise that anyone can reclaim their power through a hodge-podge of spiritual mysticism'. That mysticism, they explain, is borrowed from 'various oppressed peoples'. Megan Goodwin (2021) offers advice on 'how to be a Witch without stealing other people's culture' with a list of things to avoid, such as certain clothing, language or writers. Writers interrogate the colonial legacies and inspirations of those co-created Witchcraft traditions in the mid-twentieth century, and suggest they were stolen from colonialized territories and shaped by imperialism, while paganism, magic and folklore were explained by nineteenth century evolutionary theories (Lupa 2008; Askew and Tarbuck 2022; Anchor and Star 2017). In part these allegations map an expanding progressive political movement, that amplifies an individualized sense of moral responsibility that can be manifested through personal actions. These questions are also predicated on reliable empirical histories of Witchcraft origins and history. More experiential approaches that seek to ground practice in senses of universal 'shamanic' spirit risk being perceived as Eurocentric in the light of these debates. These are somewhat different from earlier concerns that modern Witches appropriated from medieval or Neolithic times. For British Witches and Pagans, this is the start of complicated conversations about coloniality and folklore as they are reimagined as part of their 'own heritage' (Fisk 2017: 27).[5]

5 Public conversations about colonial legacies in Britain have been downplayed. Valuable new debates and publications are emerging in the popular domain. See, for example, *Empireland* (Sanghera 2023), *Insurgent*

Joho and Sung (2020) recommend that allegations can be avoided by halting borrowing altogether, and this is echoed across public discourses. In contrast, Bucar's (2022) advice is to borrow more rather than less, but in an active and responsible manner, to face complicated histories and ask ethical questions. Evasion does not resolve the problems and disregards how religious practices are consumed in the globalized twenty-first century. She sets out the need to understand structural injustices and existing power relations to generate responsible and respectful practices. This is helpful in considering examples of direct appropriation. It is less clear how this works for accusations that modern witchcraft is inherently problematic because of the actions and inspirations of its mid-twentieth-century British founders.

## Modern Witchcraft: navigating histories and practices

What counts as history of Witchcraft among practitioners has been a variable and shifting territory. While interests in esoteric and occult traditions were established by the nineteenth century (Hale 2021; Hutton 2022; Heselton 2003), it was not until the mid-twentieth century that modern Witchcraft surged into the public eye. Gerald Gardner introduced his initiatory covens, later known as Wicca, which he claimed to have stumbled across in the midst of the New Forest several years earlier (1954). He proposed it was the remnants of an organized ecstatic religion that proved Margaret Murray's (1921) theories that an ancient pan-European fertility cult led by initiated priestesses had survived persecution by the Christian church but was

*Empire* (Gopal 2019), *The Brutish Museums* (Hicks 2020), and *The Whole Picture* (Procter 2020).

forced underground. By the time Gardner shared his news, Murray's arguments were dismissed by scholars as outdated and based on poor scholarship (Simpson 1994). However, it remained a persistent and popular perspective, partly owing to its sustained presence in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for more than forty years. It was also informed by processes of European modernity and Enlightenment principles, in particular those of nineteenth-century evolutionary theorists such as Edward B. Tylor (1871) and James G. Frazer (1922), whose model of survivals continued to shape definitions of magic, science, religion and witchcraft. Booming folklore studies identified these remnants in rural festivals and customs (for an overview of these themes in Cornwall, see James 2019). For mid-twentieth-century practitioners they offered legitimating narratives that combined history and practice in unproblematic ways. It appeared an authentic account of the Old Religion: the original religion of Europe. Gardner's initiatory witchcraft was not the only tradition flourishing in the mid-twentieth century, but his arguments about continuity were central to later arguments about the status of history.[6]

Modern Witchcraft incorporated far more than the outdated theories of earlier writers. Gardner, along with close associates such as Doreen Valiente, took up spiritualism, occultism, Eastern philosophies, Masonic rituals, mythic narratives and diverse ideas about magic to form a richly patterned theology and ritual practice. Gardner was vocal about his experiences in Sri Lanka and Myanmar (colonial Ceylon and Burma), where he befriended 'witch

doctors', who shared their occult knowledge. These were not marginal experiences. It was common for practitioners, including those who had inspired Gardner, to be immersed in colonial networks (Oakley Harrington 2022; Patterson 2014).

By the 1980s modern forms of Witchcraft, increasingly known as Wicca, had spread across the English-speaking world. New influences and inspirations expanded the scope of practice and belief, and were reintegrated into established practices. For example, The Californian Reclaiming Collective deployed an empowering history in open rituals that drew on ecological and political activism (Starhawk 1989 [1979]). These flowed back to Britain and contributed to challenges to established certainties around coven structures. A boom in publications introduced Witchcraft to new audiences, and by the 1990s offered practical advice for solitary practitioners (Cunningham 1990; Green 1991; Beth 1990). These created a fertile ground to question the status of history and the reliability of Gardner's account of the past. Did his claim to have revitalized an ancient and pan-European fertility cult work as an empirical history or valuable foundation myths? Were the sources used reliable? As Witchcraft gathered strength and visibility over the second half of the twentieth century, practitioners struggled to find new foundations that acknowledged the empirical history of a modern movement while embracing experience, the imagination and ritual practices.

The extent to which these debates were reported by scholars differed. In the 1980s Margot Adler (1986) asserted Witches had long known the craft had a mythic rather than factual past, while the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (1989) considered that London Witches unthinkingly blurred distinctions between myth and history, and a

6    Competing accounts show a more fragmented and contested territory with alternative lineages and claims to authority (Doyle White 2018).

decade later Susan Greenwood (2000) proposed that they preferred to honour a past rooted in myth. By the turn of the millennium, the historian Ronald Hutton's *Triumph of the Moon* (1999) brought these threads together. He explained how Gardnerian orthodoxies were unreliable, as were his sources. Crucially, he offered a carefully plotted trajectory of the multiple inspirations that provided a rich foundation for the emergence of modern Witchcraft as the 'only religion that England had offered the world' (p. ix). This text was studied and discussed intensively by British pagans and witches. The need to have a realist history was not just personal; Pagans and Witches had sought a more public presence through interfaith programmes and chaplainry, and to have a voice in governance issues such as the new religious question in the 2001 UK Census. A reliable history was essential in order to be taken seriously in these domains.

Over the first decade of the twenty-first century practitioners gradually arrived at new positions that celebrated experiential elements of magical-religious ritual while at the same time acknowledging that it was a modern phenomenon.[7] Gardnerian accounts were considered by many to be inauthentic. Nevertheless, the rich intellectual and artistic threads offered by Hutton were rarely employed. Instead, engagement with the past centred on practice rather than the documentary record. Practical guidance offered through coven training or open groups was emphasized as a way of sharing knowledge orally or via informal notebooks. Practitioners celebrated experiential

and sensory approaches, through walking, dancing, the landscape, soundscapes, and magical consciousness. They traced magical ancestry through European cunning skills, Celtic mythology or ancient Egyptian techniques that emphasized communication with a spirited cosmology, and seemed to elide the need for historical verification (Cornish 2019). These are all varieties of historical experience, where experiential and sensory ways of apprehending the past are taken as seriously (but not taken *for*) as documented evidence (Stewart 2016; Palmié and Stewart 2019).

Privileging experiential perspectives was not new. Prior to revising historical positions, Witchcraft was already situated as a creative magical-religious practice led by experience. Sabina Magliocco offers an analysis of ritual, creativity and folklore amongst witches (2004), and shows how New Age and pagans share a sense of 'participatory consciousness' (2015). Michael York (2004: 18) considers 'Paganism' in the widest possible sense when he describes it as a 'root-religion', a sensory and immersive 'spiritual outlook that reaches into the earth to draw its fundamental nourishment' with an 'animate environment'. For British Witches, wise women and cunning folk were found in Gardnerian histories, while Doreen Valiente described Witchcraft as a return to European Shamanism (1989: 193). The difference is that authenticity is positioned through experience rather than the archive. Connections to the past are mapped in cross cultural and historical ways through expanded temporalities in the present (Parmigiani 2019).

### Rethinking spiritual appropriation in global contexts

There numerous examples that share techniques drawn from Nature Religions, New Age and alternate spiritualities that

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7  David Waldron (2001) argues the 1990s saw a philosophical shift from foundational to post-modernist histories, which are also shaped by late capitalism and romanticism, but this ignores the opportunities for more experiential histories.

explicitly draw on indigenous practices as universal methods for altered states of consciousness and personal transformation. Michael Harner's *The Way of the Shaman* (1980) is an indicative example. This handbook for Western practitioners sold as 'self-help' proposed that following shamanic practices would tap into an ancient state of mind, and enable healing through reconnecting to a sacred earth. Similar perspectives on Witchcraft, Wicca, Druidry and Celtic practices followed, that presented Shamanism as a shared primal system that 'cuts across all faiths and creeds, reaching deep levels of ancestral memory' (Matthews 1992: 1). An equally prolific scholarly literature criticizes these guidebooks as profiteering appropriation that shatters and fractures holistic indigenous practices as they are uprooted from local to global contexts (Vitebsky 1995), 'culture free' and abstracted (Blain 2001).

Sociologists of religion in the 1990s were enthusiastic about the expanding scope of syncretic spiritualities as a form of globalism. York (1995) explored how they arose against a backdrop of increased secularization and anxieties about a disenchanted world. Responding to a commodified world, new religious movements are individualized and celebrate the modern self (Heelas 1996), and favour the concept of a 'spiritual supermarket' (Bowman 1999). These key characteristics helped scholars locate new religious movements and the New Age as responses to modernity and capitalism rather than tradition. For example, when Paul Johnson analysed Michael Harner's reimagined forms of Shamanism, he considered it a therapeutic technique that enables access to a 'primordial Ur religion' that exemplifies 'radical modernity'. Sources of authority and sacred power are found in states of mind and relationships with abstracted deities, rather than in specific sites (Johnson 1995).[8] Similar formulations are arrived at through the literature on 'new animism' (Harvey 2013).

With regard to New Age principles, the combination of historical inequalities, continued oppression and extracted profit drives the discussions of appropriation, but it remains a knotty subject, as Christina Welch (2002) set out in her discussion of dijeridus and sweat lodges. British Pagans and Witches have often been positioned slightly differently, as they look to the European past rather than to indigenous peoples (Magliocco 2009). But this, as I show, is no longer the case.

It is necessary to track some of the legal frameworks that protect indigenous property. Like other categories of universal rights, appropriation as a legal-political protection for collective rights was constituted through international debates and institutions in the post-Second World War period. In 1972 tangible cultural heritage such as material culture and historical sites were protected. By the mid-1980s international copyright discussions mapped expressions of folklore and intangible cultural heritage (Logan 2017). To be effective, beliefs and practices needed to be conceptualized as property, while to ward off theft, the same principles of ownership must be assimilated and deployed by indigenous peoples.

Allegations of theft can incorporate religious beliefs, practices, actions and anything that can be taken or has been made use of by someone else: 'a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture' (Rogers

8   Greenwood (2005: 90) notes that Johnson follows Vitebsky's concerns that Western variations of shamanism are of lesser value.

2006: 474). The taking of things, actions or beliefs can result in potential and actual harm that includes 'profound offense' and readily expands beyond legal-political definitions to moral reasoning and responsibilities (Feinberg in Young and Brunk 2012). This is amplified by the recognition that religious practices and ideas cannot be copyrighted. Religious communities have porous boundaries and permission is often difficult to establish. Accusations often pivot on more subjective senses of moral responsibilities: which is partly why this is such a contested and intense topic (Bucar 2022).

Appropriation is always an active process (Rogers 2006: 476). These discussions navigate assumptions about essentialist ideas of ownership as well as historical extraction and degradation to colonized cultures. Ambiguous boundaries between trans-cultural exchange and selling and appropriation complicate matters. Cultural processes are always relational, while objects and ideas flow through globalized networks that appear de-territorialized and neutral. The taking of tangible or intangible ideas or materials always takes place through unequal relations of power (Arya 2021: 1). From this perspective, appropriation is always the re-inscription of colonial systems, values and power structures, the task being to make them visible (Root 2018 [1996]).

Perpetuating the legacies of colonialism is shown to be a seriously harmful outcome of indigenous appropriation. A broad literature addresses New Age practices as a significant consumerist movement, where big businesses generate lucrative careers out of indigenous practices. Lisa Aldred describes the impact of profit-motivated consumerist New Agers on indigenous people's lives through nostalgic 'white shamanism' or 'plastic shamans'. Proprietors and customers fetishize spirituality but lack any understanding of history or their continued complicity in oppressive practices (Aldred 2000). It is this commercial element that causes harm, in the 'making of a thing private property …; taking as one's own or to one's own use', distinct from sharing or experiencing cultures as a 'rich part of human experience' (Young and Brunk 2012: 2). Elizabeth Povinelli (2000) concludes that New Agers' are deluded in their belief that 'primitive romanticism' through indigenous communities is a route to higher personal meaning. She argues that these relationships are always alienating and lack accountability. They co-opt practices and beliefs into commodity markets while obscuring real-world transactions.

On the other hand, Christina Welch suggests that accusations of 'neo-colonialism elide the complexity of indigenous agency' (2007: 98). It perpetuates inaccurate dualisms such as the 'bad Western alternative spiritual appropriator' versus the 'good native victim' which exacerbates Eurocentric and neo-colonialist perspectives of passive indigenous peoples and dominant Westerners. It can play to reductionist arguments that present the 'West' as monolithic and static. The attribution of ownership risks smaller and narrower definitions that close down opportunities for any kind of reciprocity, or the recognition that some practices are associated with a multitude of people and places (Waldron and Newton 2012).

York considered anxieties between Pagans and New Agers' appropriation, a contest between universal rights and specific identity. He noted that while there are differences, they are 'natural allies'; as privatized religions, both foster individual choice as a key element, and are 'intimately tied to the ethical question of spiritual appropriation' and commodification

(York 2001: 365). But he considers New Agers carelessly borrow in a 'willy-nilly and profit-motive manner' (p. 369) while Pagans are 're-claiming sacred truths from the past'. He concludes that given the conditions of rapid technological changes and global commodity capitalism, it may be more useful to reject ideas about parochial ownership and embrace the open global exchanges as opportunities – an 'unimpeded flow rather than private claims' that would encourage the rapid exchange of spiritual practices and beliefs (p. 371).

Scholars who enthusiastically support claims that universal practices move freely through open global exchanges mirror the claims made by witches that refocusing on practice rather than history is a solution. These universalizing approaches can flatten out local distinctions, and may fail to recognize historical inequalities and political hierarchies. Deeply embedded European assumptions can be disguised under the gloss of universality. The claim to universal spirit begins to look like much like another example of Eurocentric imperialism. This is akin to Juan Eduardo Wolf 's (2021) critique of attempts to decolonize folklore; it easily parallels assumptions about a universal modernity, regardless of local specificities and historical conditions.

The boundaries between New Age and Paganism are not always clearly marked (Waldron and Newton 2012). For modern witches in North America and Australia these debates are well entrenched, as their use of trance, burning herbs, or use of crystals is often considered akin to that of New Agers, and far too much like indigenous practices (Berger 1999; Pike 2001; Magliocco 2004; Ezzy 2001). For British Witches, there are no extant indigenous traditions to invite these accusations, although the objects and techniques are readily available in the global marketplace,

and they are immersed in the debates about appropriate behaviour. These discussions never take place in a moral vacuum: the 'spiritual is political' and embedded in social concerns (Berger 1999: 8).

These concerns do not readily map Witches' anxieties about their historical legacies. As Sally Engle Merry (1998) points out, the language and structure set up by international courts and institutions considered cultural heritage as property to be protected in the future, but not for reparation of historical violence. Today's Witches are concerned with political justice and moral responsibility. They recognise the legacies of historical violence, colonial extraction and the protection of indigenous property. Moral anxieties are compounded through established Western anxieties around religion and capitalist consumption, as well as ambiguous territory around relations of borrowing, cultural transmissions and global flows.

Bucar (2022) addresses the use of religious practices (pilgrimage, yoga, hijab) in North American secular contexts. She considers it necessary to call out harmful and exploitative practices and systems, while recognizing that appropriation can be a divisive and polarizing term that is often overused. Bucar says the borrowing itself is not the issue, in particular given the ambiguities around copyright and permissions, but problems are generated out of partial borrowing where practices are delinked from communities, their integral histories and webs of meaning. She does, however, suggest it can be recuperated for ethical work: 'I don't think the solution is stealing less religion, but stealing more' (p. 189). Bucar makes three recommendations. Firstly, to step back from tendencies to frame us/them and reject claims that any religious or spiritual practice might have any universal meaning. Secondly, to

acknowledge connections between people, places and meaning. Thirdly, to shift attention away from individuals (the liberal emphasis on personal sovereignty) to communities. In total, she suggests that sitting with discomfort and confronting difficult situations is a 'hallmark of ethical learning' (p. 195).

These fit somewhat clumsily onto witchcraft. Witches are not a secular group who reject religious effects. To the contrary, it is precisely sacred power and potential that they seek. While the suggestion of thinking more collectively rather than individually sounds inviting, modern magical-religious practices, such as the New Age, are often predicated on personal transformation and the sacralization of the self. Despite the noisy emphasis on unethical practices, there is a well-established record of collaborative and reciprocal relationships between indigenous communities and New Age practitioners (see e.g. Welch 2007). Nevertheless, these recommendations are valuable and help us to think through existing systemic inequalities and to enable good future practices. It is less evident how it helps British Witches resolve questions about their founders.

## Unravelling accusations in the present

While the onus in discussions about appropriation is on what people do, understanding the historical context of each instance is significant. It is perhaps obvious to state that solutions to appropriation include recourse to sound empirical histories that set out distinct trajectories of ownership and extraction. This is implied in Bucar's (2022: 14) recommendation to develop 'religious literacy'. This is not as straightforward as it sounds. It is well established that official histories of settler societies are part of the problem, while accounts that take up indigenous and colonized experi-

ences, or evaluate imperial actions, are few and far between, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) set out in his analysis of the silenced histories of Haitian revolution. These are complex and entangled histories. In terms of direct appropriation, untangling is an ongoing project. The question of reliable history takes on a different shade when the focus is on histories of British Witchcraft. However, it is worth following three themes: the challenge to better understand the role of some of the key founders in bigger histories of coloniality and magical understanding; to find a place for histories of European folk magic; and to return to the question of creativity and magical consciousness.

There are valuable accounts of the changing shape of concepts of magic in Europe that take up interconnections between colonialism, the Enlightenment and evolutionary theories (Gosden 2020; Jones 2017). But there are gaps in the literature that traces modern Witchcraft movements and their entanglements with imperialism. Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh (2022: 15) celebrates how Hutton's detailed research offers insights into nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century cultural politics, and provides a methodological and theoretical alternative to the conventional 'historiographical arc of Christian triumphalism'. There is plenty of literature that addresses how European occult practices were maintained in the American colonies (e.g. Cummins 2016). Yet, there is room to the sources that inspired earlier generations of magical practitioners or of their journeys through colonial routes, colonized places and imperial ideas. Alongside Hutton's detailed histories, the recent anthology collected by Christina Oakley Harrington (2022) of European and non-European works of literature, poetry and non-fiction aims to show the eclectic ranges of sources

available in the early twentieth century, and might provide a useful starting point for practitioners today in search of more complex histories.

The place of folk magic in European history occupies an interesting space in this debate. While the colonial dimensions of British folklore collectors and collections also offer further food for thought (Briggs and Naithani 2012; Wingfield and Gosden 2012), it is how folklore sources are entangled in Witchcraft histories that matters here.[9] Historians have shown that while folk magic is part of the rich sources that inspired the emergence of modern witchcraft, cunning folk do not offer a direct lineage; they are not predecessors (Davies 2003; Hutton 1999). Nevertheless, they are situated as practical ancestors by many practitioners, and some propose they offer a heritage distinct from that of modern Witchcraft and Wicca. This kind of heritage have seen as relatively benign in terms of questions about unethical sources as part of rural British folk history, even viewed, mistakenly as Magliocco (2009: 223) points out, as an original source.

Realignments around history and practice saw contemporary Witches turn to more experiential approaches to the past found valuable material in the realm of folk magic and cunning expertise. Cunning folk take up a role as European Shamans, walking between the mundane and spirit. This fits neatly inside the claims that modern Witchcraft is a contemporary manifestation of universal spirit practices, but also risks criticism that it is yet another form of

cultural appropriation through the folklore of rural Britain (Semmens 2010).

These perspectives resonate with Carlo Ginzburg's suggestion that the Italian archive contains traces of visionary folk traditions from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries (Ginzburg 1983). In her account of cunning folk and familiar spirits in early modern Britain, Emma Wilby (2005) uses the theme of 'core shamanism' to examine accounts of bewitchment, magical work and spirited encounters that had previously been overlooked. She works backwards and forwards between the archives, anthropological accounts of shamans and modern nature religions and alternative spiritualities to examine more experiential dimensions of Britain's 'native spiritual heritage' (p. 6). Wilby argues these are not simply elite fictions by learned prosecutors, but rooted in folk beliefs and visionary experiences. She offers a sense of historical authority to the kind of guidance offered by magical practitioners to step into the world of spirit in a manner that follows European ancestors, rather than those of distant and colonized places. Wilby aligns her arguments with 'new animism' (Harvey 2013). Anna Fisk (2017: 27) raises concerns that it is simply imperial appropriation in a new form: it takes the prejudiced labels created by European ancestors to describe the 'other' and makes them respectable while simultaneously failing to engage with global political conditions.

This sets up the final question: is it possible to approach the celebration of more experiential perspectives that do not fall into the trap of refashioning inequalities and imperialism? Fisk suggests not. On the other hand, the anthropologist Susan Greenwood has argued that when it comes to investigating magical and spiritual experiences, they are usually tested against rationalist criteria that are doomed to

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9 Some of the more complex and nationalistic motivations of nineteenth-century folklore collectors are well understood by many practitioners, some of whom align this with coloniality and nineteenth-century evolutionary theories.

failure. Instead, she suggests that magical consciousness is a form of imagination, a very different and analogical knowledge. In turn, Greenwood suggests that rather than see nature religions as counter-cultural or as the expression of some kind of global knowledge, they are an 'expanded form of consciousness': experience must always be local, specific and participatory, whether individual or social (Greenwood 2005: 4). Her approach illustrates Bucar's recommendation to challenge any binary divisions between 'us and them', and reject universal meanings. Furthermore, Greenwood explores ways of building bridges of communication between European and indigenous peoples. She compares the eighteenth-century visionary artist William Blake with Paddy Compass Namadbara, an indigenous Australian 'clever man'. Their very different lives share similarities through magical consciousness as 'pan-human participatory' (Greenwood 2023: 2). These are valuable suggestions for thinking through these more experiential dimensions. This way of looking at the past echoes the kind of reciprocal cultural borrowing that David Waldron and Janice Newton (2012) describe that incorporates political dimensions, diversity and agency. But allegations of appropriation are often made through accusations that people's behaviour *looks* unethical from the outside, regardless of individual intentions. Being an ethical practitioner is complicated. Nevertheless, these examples bring in some alternative perspectives on how to think through Bucar's suggestions of more awareness and more borrowing that do not always start with documentary histories.

## Concluding thoughts

Allegations about modern magical-religious Witchcraft and appropriation are complicated. It is not merely the accusation of directly appropriating other people's things or ideas that is under the microscope. There are other challenges: individual experience and how to navigate the unethical practices of people in the past who have informed the shape of Witchcraft and Paganism in the present. These are not easily rectified by the application of Bucar's three recommendations to take up more aware positions. Many practitioners who are working through these nuanced and complex questions. The recent collection edited by Claire Askew and Alice Tarbuck (2022) tackles some of these themes about Witchcraft ethics head on. A diverse range of contributions explore class, race, sexuality, gender and environmental politics, where questions about appropriation arise through discussions of decolonization and the sources that inspired British Witchcraft, but the onus is on more experiential ways of being an ethical Witch. In 1989, Starhawk, the founding member of the Californian Reclaiming Collective, reflected in the twentieth anniversary edition of *The Spiral Dance* that while shamanism has become a 'trendy word' and popular practice for Witches, real power comes with real responsibilities. In exchange for dancing, drumming or other practices, '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' (Starhawk 1989 [1979]: 232).

I began this article with an extract from Maggie Haseman's blog *Mumbles & Things* in which she makes a strong stand, setting out the entangled colonial history of modern Witchcraft and making a list of trigger points to consider when thinking about appropriation (Haseman 2019a). There is a follow-up post that takes a more nuanced perspective (Haseman 2019b). Crucially, she suggests that what is really being

argued over is not the conflict over 'whose ancestors owned what', but the bigger problem of oppression. This, Haseman considers, is particularly pertinent for Witches, who have a history of discrimination and even today may be mocked for their practice, or considered quite delusional. A focus on the bigger picture would help challenge 'systems of oppression that harm the disenfranchised' rather than hedging around distracting emotive terms: 'there are some things involved in the conversation of cultural appropriation that we should just call them what they are: racism, or sexism, or homophobia, or classism' (*ibid.*). Haseman continues to urge her readers to learn history and respect the experiences and traditions of other cultures, and concludes that Witchcraft is ultimately creative and full of potential.

While there is an evident need for further research that will flesh out the details of early British Witchcraft's colonial entanglements, it is also possible that the concept of appropriation may not help elucidate the challenges. Nevertheless, the turn to realist histories amongst practitioners more than twenty years ago was part of a collective need to take on uncomfortable tasks. As such, it is an illustration of Bucar's recommendations for more ethical perspectives. What counts as history – and appropriation – for today's Witches remains unstable and subject to agendas in the present. ∎



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