

Reimagining Gender Polarity in the Gardnerian Tradition of Witchcraft

Polly Springhorn
Cherry Hill Seminary
July 15, 2023

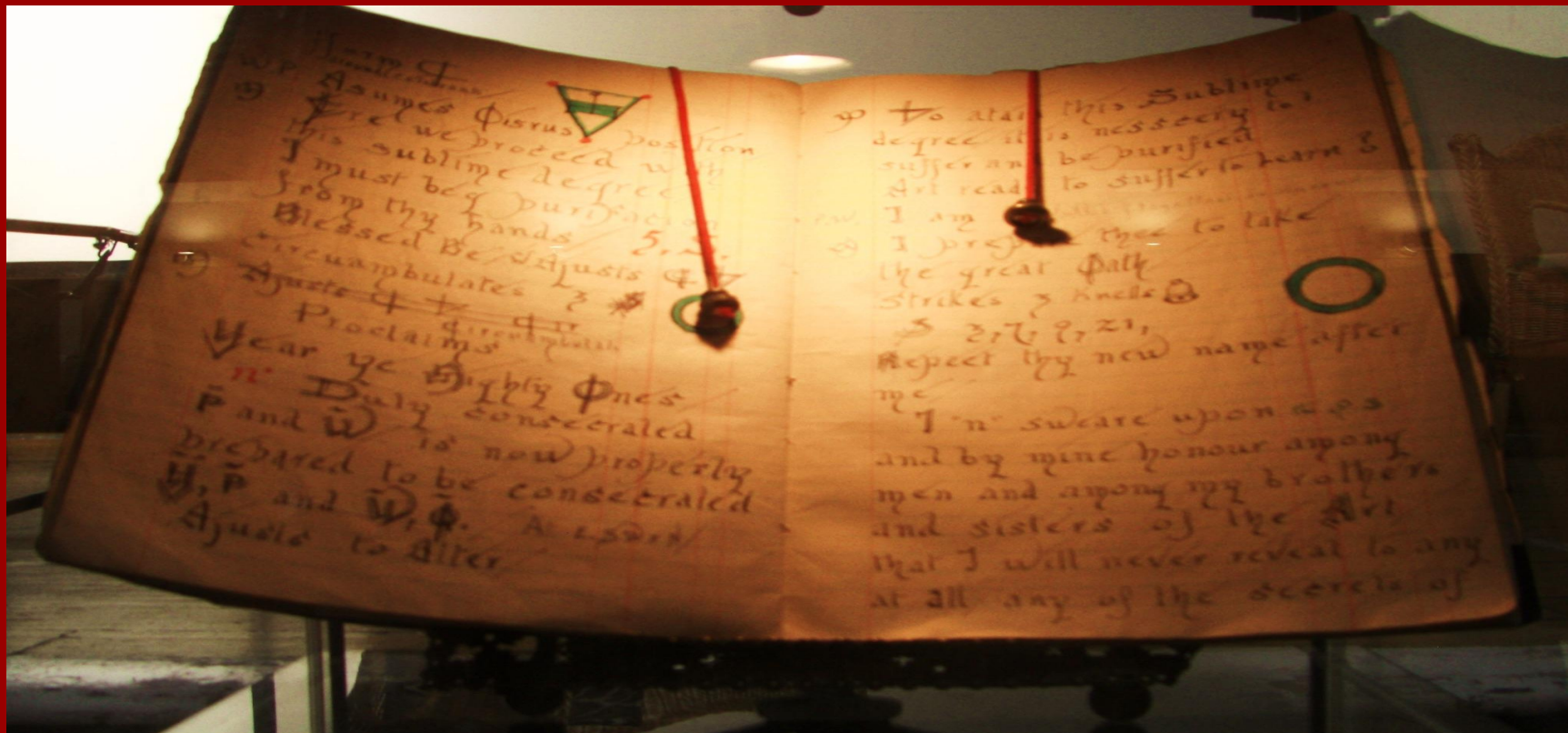
Land Acknowledgement

As a visitor from the land of the Lisjan Ohlone people, also known as Oakland, California, I would like to acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the first people of Atlanta, the Mvskoke (Muscogee) people past and present and honor with gratitude the land itself and the Mvskoke people.

Possible Biases

I would also like to acknowledge that my identity and lived experience as a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman of Generation X may limit my insight into the topic of this paper. I have made every effort to overcome these biases and will continue to do so.

Introduction



A Declaration of the Traditional Gardnerian Wica

<https://www.docdroid.net/DmZb1mC/a-declaration-of-the-traditional-gardnerian-wica-pdf>

A Declaration of the Traditional Gardnerian Wica

As we enter a challenging time for the greater Gardnerian community, it has become necessary to make clear the principles relating to Traditional Gardnerian practice. We, as a community, wish to clarify our beliefs, duties, practices, and vision to the esoteric community as a whole.

This document represents a schism in the tradition related to the 21st-century transformation in the Western conception of gender.

Gardnerian Liminality

- GBG'S rituals date from the 1930s
- Victor Turner: "all genuine ritual is transformative"
(Turner/Grimes, 2002)
- Gardnerian liminal space: post-patriarchal, post-rational
- Informed by lived experience of gender as interchangeable with biological sex, with only 2 options: male or female
- TGW seek to define "Traditional Gardnerian" ritual practices as those which generate *only* a binary-gendered, heteronormative liminal space.

Gardnerian Liminality

- Can TGW practices still meet Turner's definition of genuine ritual?
- Ritual that is no longer subversive and creative but maintains the status quo ceases to be ritual and becomes ceremony
(Turner/Grimes, 2002)
- Liminality has a way in and a way out
(van Gennep/Grimes, 2002)

Group Unity and Egregore

- “A symbolic fusion of ethos and worldview” dating from the 1930s to the 1970s
- Re-creates a social order from the 1970s informed by second-wave feminism
- All covens are autonomous, and each defines what is right, natural, and Gardnerian

Group Unity and Egregore

- Presence of queer Gardnerians opens the BOS to re-examination and innovation
- Some believe the impact of queer Gardnerians makes their practice something other than Gardnerian:

“It is...necessary to practice biological female to biological male and vice versa, within a Traditional Gardnerian circle. We acknowledge that anything other than this is not Traditional Gardnerian practice, and will lead to different currents of power and different mysteries.”

(Anonymous, 2022)

Group Unity and Egregore

- Alternatives to binary gender polarity may seem *ultraliminal* - threatening to the social order:

“This unruliness itself is a mark of the ultraliminal, of the perilous realm of possibility of "anything may go" which threatens any social order and seems the more threatening, the more that order seems rigorous and secure.” (Turner, 1979, p. 478)

Gardnerian Identity Formation and Ideology

- In an orthopraxic tradition, coreligionists identify deeply with what they *do*.
- Identity dissolution and reassembly through ritual is critical to their religious identity formation
- TGW make religious identity dependent on gender identity
- LGBTQI bodies ritualized as as biological female or male, something other than their true selves
- Real possibility of psychic, mental, and emotional harm to non-cisgender, non-heterosexual participants.

Gardnerian Identity Formation and Ideology

- “Ritual is the means by which beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, experienced, and affirmed as real by the community”
(Durkheim/Bell, 1992, p. 20)
- TGW have ascribed a negative meaning to the difference between themselves and non-cisgender, non-heterosexual people
- Jenny Blain suggests that Heathen seidhworkers reclaim *ergi* and use it to mean “walks between worlds” when referring to themselves
- Maria Antonina Czaplicka wrote in 1914 that shamans belong to neither male nor female, but a third gender

Proposed solutions

“But ultimately, for me at least, polarity transcends sexuality completely. Sex can be a manifestation of it, but it is not inherently based on sex, or even on deity in an anthropomorphic sense. If I had to choose one image that most embodied, for me, the primal act of creation I see embodied in the wine blessing, ... That moment of lightning striking the primordial sea to create the first living organism is what I see when the athame touches the wine.” (Landstreet, 1993)

Proposed solutions

- A new understanding of “Witch” as a third gender, composed of those who carry the knowledge of primordial polarity
- Those LGBTQI folk who are already part of the Gardnerian tradition should lead this effort so that their perspective can be uplifted in the community
- An ideal of gender fluidity would expand Gardnerians’ ability to shift consciousness among genders
- Use of existing shape-shifting skills to effect gender-shifting

Proposed solutions

- Ritualizing multiple genders and orientations can fuse, integrate, and imbue these with sacredness
- A ritual specifically exploring the liminality between and among genders
- Learning from transgender people about their experience of living “between the worlds”

Conclusion

“If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change. In my view, science and Buddhism share a search for the truth and for understanding reality. By learning from science about aspects of reality where its understanding may be more advanced, I believe that Buddhism enriches its own worldview.”

(The 14th Dalai Lama, 2005)

Conclusion

The third planet from the sun, our own earth, came into being about 4.5 million years ago.

The ground then was rock and crystal, beneath which burned tremendous fires. Heavier matter like iron sank to the centre, while the lighter elements floated to the surface, forming a granite crust. Continuous volcanic activity brought up a rich supply of minerals, and lifted up chains of mountains.

Then, about 4 billion years ago, when the temperature fell below the boiling point of water, it began to rain. Hot rain slowly dissolved the rocks upon which it fell and the seas became a thin salty soup containing the basic ingredients necessary for life.

Finally, a bolt of lightning fertilized this molecular soup and an adventure into biology began. The first cell was born. You were there. I was there. For every cell in our bodies is descended in an unbroken chain from that event.

Through this cell, our common ancestor, we are related to every plant and animal on the Earth. (Seed, 1988, p. 46-47)

Conclusion

If the Gardnerian tradition is to survive in a World of Form where cisgender heterosexual female and male are only two of myriad possibilities, and where inclusivity is the norm, fundamentalism and a literal reading of GBG's words is not the answer. Rather, it is time for a new chapter in the history of the Gardnerian tradition, a new understanding of polarity, and a new identity for the Witch.

THANK YOU!

References

47 Gardnerians of the 3rd and autonomous 2nd. (2022, July 18). A Declaration of the Traditional Gardnerian Wicca.

<https://www.docdroid.net/DmZb1mC/a-declaration-of-the-traditional-gardnerian-wicca-pdf>

Aburrow, Y. (2014). All Acts of Love & Pleasure: Inclusive Wicca. Avalonia.

Bell, C. (1992). Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice. Oxford University Press.

Blain, Jenny. 2002. Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism. London: Routledge.

Grimes, R. L. (2002). Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage. University of California Press.

Identity formation. (2022, July 18). In Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_formation

Landstreet, L. (1993). Alternate Currents: Revisioning Polarity (Or, what's a nice dyke like you doing in a polarity-based tradition like this?) <http://www.wildideas.net/temple/library/altcurrents.html>

Liminality. (2022, August 5). In Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality>

Religious identity. (2022, July 14). In Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_identity

Religious conversion. (2022, July 13). In Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_conversion

Seed, John, with Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess (1988). *Thinking Like A Mountain: Towards A Council Of All Beings*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988

Tedlock, B. Ph.D., (2005). The Woman in the Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine (First Edition). Bantam.

The 14th Dalai Lama. (2017, January 18). Our Faith in Science. <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2005/our-faith-in-science>

Turner, V. (1979). Frame, flow and reflection: Ritual and drama as public liminality. Japanese Journal of Religious Studies, 6(4).

QUESTIONS?