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Modern Witchcraft: Tradition Re-invented and Renewed

Modern Witchcraft is both the product of evolution and invention. For a thousand years, traditional witches had to remain underground for fear of persecution, torture and death. Whilst many books were published on the topic of Witchcraft during the Middle Ages, the content was without exception, aimed at sketching the Craft as an evil, maleficent practice. The grotesque image of the Craft was fed by unadulterated lies and fabrications by those who claimed to be experts. These self-proclaimed experts also happened to be lackeys of Rome and supporters of that genocidal period labeled the 'Burning Times' today.

The first well researched and impartial study of Witchcraft was undertaken by Egyptologist, folklorist and anthropologist, Margaret Murray, who published "The Witch-Cult in Western Europe" in 1921. She was also a close friend of Gerald Gardner, who is seen to be the founder of Modern Witchcraft together with Doreen Valiente. Whilst Witchcraft started re-emerging from the proverbial broom closet in the 1930s, it was only after the repeal of anti-Witchcraft Acts in the 1950s that a notable resurgence started taking place.

Sadly, Traditional Witchcraft was all but completely lost. Hence, only some of the original practices survived. Where practices lacked, these had to be reinvented or borrowed and amended. The subsequent additions and changes saw the birth of a new pagan movement: Wicca – a modern form of Witchcraft. Perhaps an overview of the differences will show that there is not that great a difference between the Old Ways and the New Ways after all.

Learning the Craft

Traditional Witchcraft is an oral tradition. Knowledge and practices were transmitted in person from one generation of witches to the next. Nothing was ever documented: perhaps out of fear, perhaps because of illiteracy or perhaps a little of both. Modern Witches can study the craft in a coven setup





or on their own as solitaries. The book stores and the internet offer a large variety of high quality information to those wanting to learn the Craft.

Gardner developed the Book of Shadows concept. The Book of Shadows will typically contain the Creation Myth, the Rede, the Coven's Laws, a herbal grimoire, correspondences, recipes for potions, oils, brews and incense, correspondences, a list of tools, ritual descriptions and Spells, amongst others. Considering the vast amount of wisdom and knowledge lost during the Burning Times, this is most appropriate practice – one that the vast majority of Wiccans diligently adhere to.

Deity

Traditional Witches worshipped Nature as an all-powerful force instead of worshipping Deity. Wicca is polytheistic: Modern Witches worship a single Goddess and a God as female / male polarity, a single Goddess and God containing multiple aspects, or multiple Goddesses and Gods. The multiples can be derived from a single pantheon or from multiple pantheons in some cases.

Days of Power

In Traditional Witchcraft, Sabbats were celebrated at the full moon. The Solstices, the Equinoxes, Samhain and in some instances Beltane, Yule and Ostara, were purely viewed as festivals. In Wicca, the full moon is celebrated as an Esbat and the full moon celebrations were the Sabbats. The days now celebrated by Wiccans as Sabbats are the Solstices, the Equinoxes, Samhain, Beltane, Yule and Ostara.

Magick

All traditional Witches practiced Magick albeit a shamanic type of folk Magick. They basically only used that which nature provided in their spells, such as herbs, stones, water, sand, twigs, fruits etc. No ritual, circle casting, calling guardians, invoking deity and other formalities were involved. They simply called forth as spirit to aid with the spell and would use their own personal power to manifest the required change. Their Magick was neutral and the traditional Witch has to use their own judgment to decide on when to curse and when to bless, when to create and when to destroy.

Modern Witchcraft or Wicca by comparison, has very strict rules around the use of Magick. It is governed by the Wiccan Rede and several other universally accepted rules stipulating that Magick may never be used for harm. Many Wiccans do not practice Magick at all. Wicca is ritualistic. It is prerequisite to conduct all ritual within the sacred, safe space afforded the Witch by the Circle. As a rule, ritual work is preceded by cleansing, a Circle is cast, quarters are called and Deity invoked. During the ritual, magickal





workings are done by means of energy raising. The energy is grounded afterwards and a ritual is followed to clear the energy and to open the circle again.

Conclusion

These differences are not really as great as one would have initially thought. Even the Traditional form of the Craft evolved from the way it was practiced 5,000 years ago in keeping with the times in which it was practiced. Viewed against this backdrop, Wicca is perhaps not really a 'new' Craft, but a renewal of the 'old'.

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