

Victoria Hegner – Neopagan Witchcraft in Berlin

Abstract:

The article focuses on a contemporary group of Neopagan witches in Berlin (Germany) and the highly complex and reflexive way to make use of the *Germanic* pantheon and Teutonic alphabet within their spiritual/religious practice. Out of history and the remembrance of the Nazi time, a wholesale and un-problematized embrace of “indigenous” symbolism and mythology does not represent a legitimate option for the group since it carries notions of dangerous nationalism and neo-Fascist-ideology.

In order to show the shifting dynamics of Neopagan`s use of Germanic symbols and myths and to bring about their national, political and historical contingencies, the article first provides an insight into the history of Neopagan witchcraft in Germany and in particular in Berlin - as a representative of as well as an exceptional case to the Germany. As it will be shown, the “story” of Neopagan witchcraft in Berlin is clearly a tale of a divided city. Locked in by the “wall”, first groups of self acclaimed Neopagan witches and Wiccans in West-Berlin of the 1980s hardly worshipped within “nature”, but rather made use of “prehistoric sights” within the city`s confines for their religious practice. The paper draws the focus close in describing the religious significance of those sites for Neopagans at that time as well as the public controversies that the latter`s practices raised. There, the Neopagans were confronted with the issue of (Neo)-Nazism and developed several strategies to subvert this peculiar public perception.

From the historical contextualization of Neopagan witchcraft in Berlin/Germany the paper shifts to contemporary times. Based on ethnographic data, the article shows that the history of the 1980s clearly left its imprint on the local Neopagan witchcraft scenery. Witches are very careful in using and referring to Germanic symbols or the Teutonic alphabet, remembering not only the “Nazi-times” but also the controversies of the 1980s. The ethnographic thick description will draw attention to the following questions: When do witches use the symbols and runes and in which way? Which symbols seem to be “allowed” within worship and which symbols are totally forbidden and *tabu* as “nationalist” and “fascist”? And, what role does the idea of “reclaiming” an ancient religion plays in it?

By combining a historical perspective with the analysis of contemporary ethnographic data, the article aims to bring about, how much locality with its particular past, political situation and cultural context matters within the practice of a new religion.