

The New Pagans

By Glenn Oakley

In 1782 in Switzerland a woman accused of being a witch was burned at the stake.

She was the last of up to 9 million people, mainly women, who were tortured to death after being accused of witchcraft. The exact numbers killed are disputed by scholars, notes Boise State history professor Phoebe Lundy. "But the point is," she says, "a helluva lot of people got burned."

Whoever the real witches were and whatever the real practice of witchcraft was centuries ago has been obscured, although several different interpretations have been presented by modern scholars.

Still, the common perception of witches today remains that set forth by Dominican priests Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger in 1486 in the *Malleus Maleficarum* — the Hammer of Witches. *The Malleus Maleficarum* was a guidebook for the identification and interrogation of witches. The book ignited a holocaust that lasted two centuries and has largely gone unchallenged. Ask any child today, 500 years later, what a witch is, and you will be told of evil women who ride through the air on broomsticks, mix evil potions in black cauldrons, eat babies and cast spells.

But to many people today, accepting that view of witches is like accepting the Nazis' propaganda version of Jews. The perpetrators of the witch holocaust remain victorious.

Yet witchcraft — or at least a modern version of it — is undergoing something of a revival. Most cities in America,



A witches' altar includes incense to purify,



elements from the earth and a goddess figure.

The new witchcraft combines feminist ideology, environmentalism, Native American spirituality and goddess worship.

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including Boise, have several witch covens.

Peggy Guiles, a BSU adjunct English instructor, helped found a group of witches four years ago. Guiles says the five members of her women's spirituality group call themselves witches "because it's taking back a strong female image that's been used to terrify people." Guiles says she perceives witches as "wise women. They are the healers. I am rejecting society's image of a witch as an evil, ugly woman. The eating of Christian babies is a myth not so far in the past. Satanism spooks people."

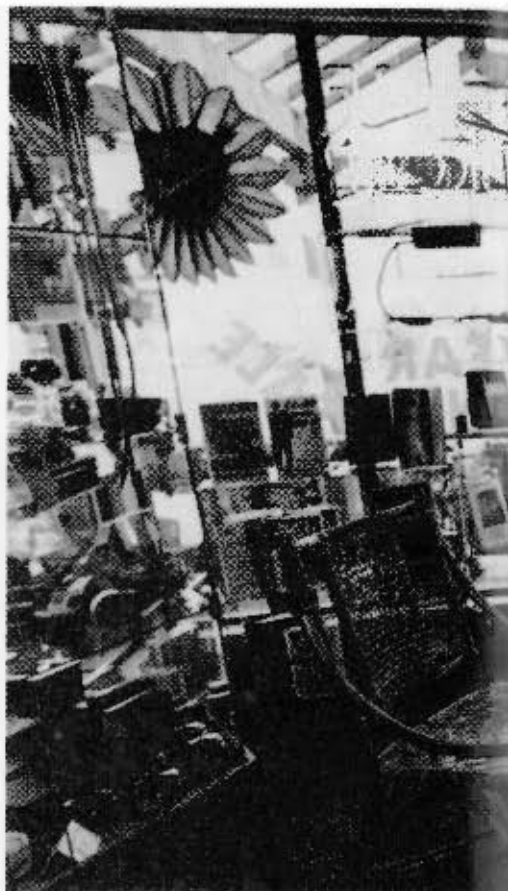
But, says Guiles, "witches I am involved with don't believe in Satan. That's part of the Christian world and we're outside that." Guiles' group, which they refer to as "circle," meets once or twice a month and includes women from a broad range of occupations — from computer specialists to child-care workers.

The new witchcraft is an amalgam of feminist ideology, environmentalism, Native American spirituality and goddess worship. It is one of several spirituality movements which harken back to what is known as the old religion — the pagan religions originated by Neolithic people. Several current groups refer to themselves as neo-pagans.

Lundy, who is currently in Spain teaching the history of witchcraft, says, "There are lots of different traditions in the old religion," including Native American, Celtic, Druid and ancient Greek religious traditions. "Each one of those traditions leads you in a different direction," she says, "but they do share some things in common. The old religion is found worldwide because its origins are with hunter/gatherers. It's tied in with that human connection with nature."

Lundy says the old religion, "divides the wheel of the year into major festivals — holy days — by the two solstices, the two equinoxes." The wheel of the year is further divided by festivals which fall between the equinoxes and solstices — Halloween between the fall equinox and summer solstice, and the Day of New Beginnings between the winter solstice and spring equinox, for example.

"The equinoxes and solstices are holy days for pagans," says Guiles, "because



Eliah Stetson, a Blue Unicorn employee, uses drums

they're important in the cycle of the year, which is a microcosm of the cycle of life."

Many of these pagan festivals still exist, says Lundy, although they have been transformed into Judeo-Christian holy days or into nearly meaningless observances such as Groundhog Day, which was the Day of New Beginnings.

Lundy says the old religion also follows the phases of the moon and views them as metaphors for the lives of people — waxing/growing, full/maturity, and waning/decay. Significantly for neo-pagans, the moon is seen as female, with its 28-day cycle corresponding to the menstrual cycle. The waxing moon is the maiden, the full moon the pregnant woman and the waning moon the crone — the Halloween hag whose secrets are contained in the cauldron.

Many of the neo-pagans incorporate the goddess religion into their practice. A host of books have been written about the early goddess religions, notable among them, *When God Was A Woman* by Merlin Stone. The premise is that Neolithic people of Greece and the Middle East worshipped female deities — goddesses such as Isis, Athena, Gaia and Demeter. The Acropolis in Greece, for example, is the site where Athena was worshipped.

Women in the goddess religion societies are believed to have been at least equal to men and were often the rulers and high



in her spiritual practice, which is an eclectic blend of Native American religions.

priestesses. However, the theory goes, the patriarchal Hebrew Levites began attacking the goddess religion, denouncing it as evil. The Garden of Eden story is seen as a deliberate attempt to undermine the goddess religion by casting the woman Eve as the one who brings the downfall of man by tempting him with fruit from the tree of knowledge. The creation story of Genesis is perceived as a political ploy to further subjugate females by having God create woman from man's rib for the sole purpose of serving men.

Through these Biblical writings and other subterfuges, Stone and others argue, women lost their autonomy and spent the next few thousand years subservient to men. Thus, feminists are often drawn to the goddess religion as a reaffirmation of their power.

Lundy says the neo-pagan religions appeal to "women seeking a spirituality that has a strong place for women. The ecology movement has used it as a way of healing the Earth. The peace movement has used it because it is seen as balanced."

Guiles says people usually join a pagan group after reading and studying independently. She says she came to embrace witchcraft after losing her faith in Mormonism. "I was brought up as a Mormon," she says. "I was an atheist for 10 years — I was so angry. I thought I'd been lied to. I was very skeptical about anything that didn't have a scientific seal of approval on it."

Her change of heart came, she says, "when I realized religion didn't necessarily have anything to do with spirituality. I think of religion as dogmatic and structured and punitive. I think of spirituality as reverence."

The neo-pagan groups are nothing if not eclectic and autonomous. "We don't have a pope," says Guiles. "There's no hierarchy. Some are pagans, neo-pagans, wiccans, witches, spirituality groups, goddess groups. We call ourselves witches. We are our own authorities."

The environmental aspect of the neo-pagan spirituality movement is especially strong among those who see the roots of the environmental crisis in traditional Judeo-Christianity. Says Guiles, "We don't believe people are here to dominate the Earth. To us, strip mining and pollution are a sacrilege."

Elijah Stetson, who practices an eclectic blend of Native American spirituality, says her practice is "very Earth-oriented. Traditional Christianity is pretty much focused on sin and suffering. The focus of my spirituality is to make people aware of our impact on the Earth."

A number of contemporary books are used as reference guides for such groups to establish their own rituals. Perhaps the most commonly referred to book is *The Spiral Dance* by a writer named Starhawk.

Such books, as well as candles, drums, incense, crystals and more, are sold at New

Age bookstores like the Blue Unicorn in Boise. Stetson, who works at the Blue Unicorn, says the neo-pagan movement in the area is, "big — bigger than most people think." She says the Blue Unicorn mailing list includes 4,000 people, although not all are neo-pagans. A celebration of the winter solstice held along the Boise River attracted 60 people by word of mouth alone, she says. The individuals who came to the evening celebration lit candles and welcomed the return of the sun.

Stetson says the number of men participating in neo-pagan groups is increasing. "It used to be maybe one man in five women," she says. "At the last solstice celebration it was half and half."

Stetson notes that rituals such as the solstice celebration are "symbolic." By and large, neo-pagans do not believe in casting spells or what would normally pass for magic. But she says many goddess worshippers do in fact believe in the physical reality of the goddesses. And they do believe in the power of energy.

Guiles held an impromptu ceremony at the ruins of the Elusian Temple in Greece — known as "the womb of the world" in the goddess religion — "honoring the energy that exists there."

Her group uses incense, "to clear the air of negative energy." And, she says, "Our group has sent out healing thoughts to the Earth during the Exxon oil spill."

"We don't practice what is traditionally considered witchcraft. We work with herbs and do guided meditation, do dream analysis. One night we made clay models. It's sort of arts and crafts." The rituals, says Guiles, are "a way of praying."

Some might call that magic.

Posed with the question of magic among neo-pagans, Lundy responds, "Do you believe in the power of prayer? Then you believe in casting spells. Do you believe in miracles? Then you believe in magic. It's all the language that you use."

Similarly, she says, the historical roots of the goddess religion and the practice of witchcraft may not be so important. "The scholars can debate all they want. The people don't care if it works for them." □