

THE SCHOLAR VERSUS THE PAGAN ON GREENCRAFT TREE WALKS: ATTUNEMENT, IMAGINATION, AND INTERPRETATION

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This article offers an ethnography of a tree walk ritual of the Belgian Greencraft Wicca movement. The description is employed to discuss the notions of reflexivity, reactivity, and the double hermeneutic. By interpreting the data, the author concludes that the double hermeneutic is a problem of different contexts rather than between different groups. Attunement and suspension of disbelief are singled out as means to overcome misunderstandings between the scholar and the researched.

Keywords: contemporary Paganism, Greencraft, double hermeneutic, reflexivity, reactivity

Članek predstavi etnografijo rituala hoje okrog dreves belgijskega gibanja Greencraft Wicca. Opis služi kot pomoč za razpravo o pojmih reflektivnosti, reaktivnosti in dvojne hermenevtike. Na podlagi interpretacije podatkov avtor ugotovi, da je dvojna hermenevtika problem različnih kontekstov in ne toliko različnih skupin. Prilagoditev in razrešitev dvomov sta izpostavljeni kot načina preseganja nesporazumov med raziskovalcem [scholar] in raziskovanim. Ključne besede: sodobno poganstvo, Greencraft, dvojna hermenevtika, reflektivnost, reaktivnost

*“Use human means as though divine ones didn’t exist,
and divine means as though there were no human ones.”*

St. Ignatius of Loyola

INTRODUCTION: TO SEE THE WOOD FOR THE TREES

When I was discussing possible approaches to the theme of what ultimately became the “Researchers and Performers Co-Designing Heritage” conference with the organizers, the mere mention of the place of the scholar in fieldwork set me off in the direction of Ronald Hutton’s (2004) discussion of the reflexivity/reactivity dichotomy in his own work on the history of modern Pagan witchcraft. Somewhat later, in an e-mail correspondence with Emily Lyle, the president of the Ritual Year Working Group (personal communication, 30 July 2010), I was asked to follow up on my brief remarks on the notion of as-if worlds that I made in the context of my research on religious creativity in contemporary Paganism (see Van Gulik 2011). Automatically assuming that I would combine the two, I quickly found myself at loggerheads as to how I would string together a theoretical exercise with my empirical research, and my personal and professional concerns as a scholar with the transitional world from which I understand the identity-driven motives and actions of the participants of my studies.

My big break came with participating in the so-called tree walks that are held each month by a Belgian Wiccan organization named Greencraft. Not only were neither Greencraft nor their tree walks as yet documented in the academic literature, the walks included meditations that required me putting the notion of transitional (or as-if) worlds to good use and, most importantly, were very insightful to my take on the reflexivity/reactivity dichotomy. This article, then, serves three interrelated goals: (1) to contribute to the discussion on the mutual influence between the researcher and the researched from my own perspective as a fieldworker, (2) to offer an overview of Greencraft and a short ethnography of the tree walk, and (3) to briefly introduce the concept of the transitional world that will act as a theoretical backdrop to support and help interlink these aims. In a future article I will treat the notions of the transitional and as-if worlds more fully.

Before moving on to the ethnographic material that is at the heart of this article, I must explicate the concepts associated with what Andrew Sayer (2010: 49) has termed “the interpenetration of the frames of reference of observer and observed.” Let me then set off from a brute fact of the natural sciences that any measurement changes the observation. Putting a thermometer into a beaker holding a liquid will, as far as the temperature of the thermometer differs from that of the liquid, have a slight impact on that of the liquid, and thus result in a minor error of measurement. Depending on the required precision, one may need to correct for this.

THE RESEARCHER

Analogously, as a psychologist by training, I am conditioned to be aware of *reactivity*—a term that, after all, originated in psychology: the often unacknowledged impact of one’s presence in a research situation. Ranging from the well-known but contested Hawthorne effect, where workers under study increased their production by merely knowing they were observed,¹ to the emotional entanglements in psychotherapeutic settings called countertransference, reactivity has caused the psychological researcher to try to recede from the scene of his own studies altogether. This attempt can be observed in the practice of removing as much of one’s identity as possible from written reports too (cf. Wolcott 2009: 16–17). The written accounts of psychological studies are phrased in a manner that any scholar could have undertaken them, and would have arrived at the same conclusions had he done so.

¹ The Hawthorne effect was named after a factory where a series of studies were conducted that are most often remembered as seeking to establish the relationship between productivity and lighting conditions. During each of the studies, productivity briefly went up as soon as any alteration to the working condition was made (in addition to lighting, other variables were also manipulated). Yet productivity dwindled to the old level as soon as the observation ended. A generation later, when other psychologists started to reassess the studies, they concluded that the mere presence of the scientists in the experiments had caused production to rise simply because, knowing they were studied, the participants improved their performance. Later, doubts arose whether the effect really existed (see, e.g., Adair 1984), but the Hawthorne effect has proven to be too good a story to burden with such reservations.

Replicability in terms of reproduction is considered a criterion of sound reporting, whereas replicability in terms of results adds to the reliability of the initial study's findings.

Conversely, as a fledgling anthropologist conducting fieldwork, I gradually became aware of the influence of the researched on the researcher—and, after I starting doing deskwork, of the influence of the reflective turn in the humanities! Even if I feel that due to the reflective turn some studies escalated in rampant relativism, anti-naturalism, and favoring political correctness over rigorous scholarly enquiry and a sound methodology, trying to understand cultural expressions from the inside out is bound to have an impact on one's personal system of convictions, beliefs, and interpretational habits. The gradual shift of literally coming to terms with a new cultural environment ought to be monitored closely in order to be able to sufficiently appreciate the tension between two sense-making systems when one returns home from the field. Reflexivity as a deliberate introspective effort, then, is an indispensable activity to appreciate this inherent complexity that has been referred to in the literature as the double hermeneutic.

THE FIELD

First coined by Anthony Giddens (1987), the double hermeneutic refers to the idea that in the social sciences the scholarly interpretation of a specific field is doubled by the interpretation of the field itself (Sayer 2000: 17). That is, laypeople make assumptions about their motivations, beliefs, cognitions, and so forth, and these may be different from the scholarly understanding of these. I would like to note, however, that there is a subtle difference between the *scholarly interpretation of observable cognitions and behaviors* on the one hand, and *the scholarly interpretation of the lay interpretation* of these cognitions and behaviors on the other. Whereas the (what I would call) weak version merely suggests an alternative explanation of the unreflected data, the strong version explicates the “why” of the laypeople's different interpretation. Even if the double hermeneutic proper has always been considered to be about issues of the interpretation of interpretation (see, e.g., Hollis 1994: 146), the weak version needs to be taken into consideration as soon as scholarly interpretations start to become known in the field studied. As observed by Gildemeister (2001), for instance, the analytical tools with which scholars understand specific behavior are slipping into the language and self-understanding of the researched.

This “proto-professionalization” is especially evident in Wicca (or most contemporary Paganisms for that matter) because many make active use of Jungian psychological theory in their practice and rationalizations thereof (for prominent emic sources see, e.g., Crowley 2003; Farrar & Farrar 1981; Starhawk 1999), or at least put the more eclectic psychological strands and techniques to good use, not unlike what happens in various New Age traditions (Hanegraaff 1998: 482–513). In turn, the formation of the Wiccan movement is also much indebted to both academic works of history (e.g., Leland 1899; Murray 1921) and anthropology (e.g., Frazer 1922). Refutations of these classical studies and newly proposed alternative interpretations of both history (e.g., Hutton 1999) and practice (e.g.,

Luhmann 1989) have rendered the relationship with the contemporary incarnations of these disciplines highly ambivalent (Tully 2011). In fact, even more than ten years after its publication Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon* received a very critical response in the form of the book *Trials of the Moon*, written by amateur historian and Alexandrian High Priest Ben Whitmore (2010). These continuous tensions go to show that, even if the academic world and the Wiccan world sometimes share the same the ideas, they hardly ever do so for long or at the same time to begin with.

As a fieldworker, then, I have to tread a fine line. Yet I am in good company. The complexities that come with fieldwork among Pagans have not gone unnoticed, and thus already culminated in the book *Researching Paganisms* (Blain et al. 2004). A belated response to the concerns raised by some of its contributors, my story here is an impressionist tale in John van Maanen's (2011: 101–124) rendering of the term: sketching introspective material attached to tangible episodes in the fieldwork that mark transformations in the self-understanding of the scholar. The tree walks I walked with Greencraft were the impetus for just that. In my presentation of this fieldwork, then, I emphasize my personal experiences and reflect on their meaning in terms of the observer versus the observed.

A SLICE OF ETHNOGRAPHY: GREENCRAFT WICCA

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES

Greencraft Wicca originated in the Alexandrian tradition: a branch of Wicca that emphasizes ceremonial magic. Its “spiritual leaders”—for lack of a better term, given its democratic nature—Arghuicha and Hera were the high priest and high priestess of Greencraft's mother coven, Corona Borealis. Greencraft soon became the dominant form of Wicca in Flanders after Arghuicha and Hera moved from Amsterdam to a small town near the Belgian border. Established 21 years ago, and acquiring legal status as a foundation only six years later, Greencraft Wicca became a tradition in its own right, and eventually branched out to the Netherlands and the U.S. (Greencraft Creations 2012a). In the U.S. they are best known for their association with Sacred Well, a Wicca organization with the formal status of a church and strong presence in the U.S. military (Adler 2006: 119–121). Even if Greencraft is sparsely mentioned by the chroniclers of Wicca (Adler 2006 and De Zutter 2003 are rare examples), it developed steadily into a large movement, while also introducing various new elements to its version of Wicca that set it apart from the rest.

The most important impulse of renewal was born out of Arghuicha's perceived lack of nature—both cosmologically and in basic awareness—in the Alexandrian tradition. In one of my interviews with him, he stated:

Frankly, the aspect of nature religion was limited to the fact that [I and other traditional Wiccans] all liked to watch those terrific documentaries on National Geographic. [W]hen we wanted to do something in

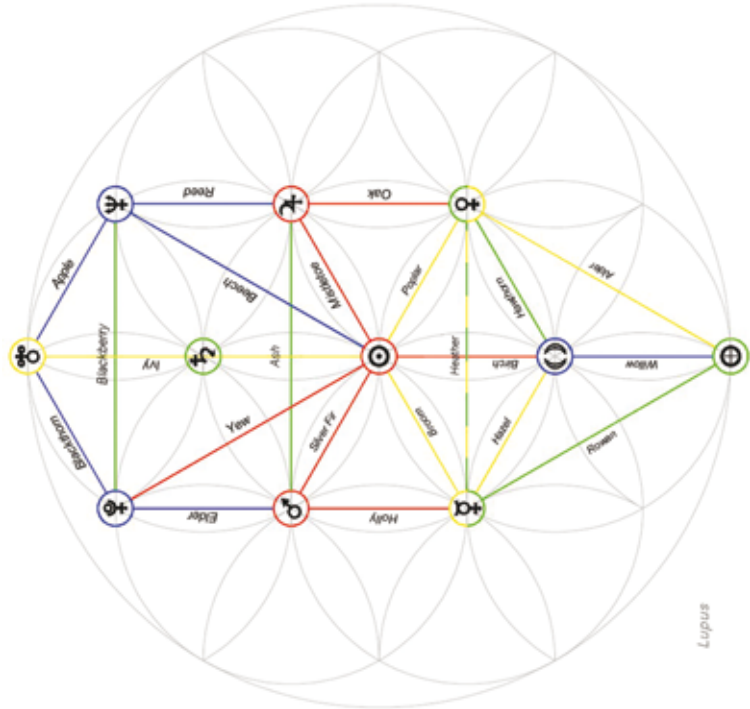
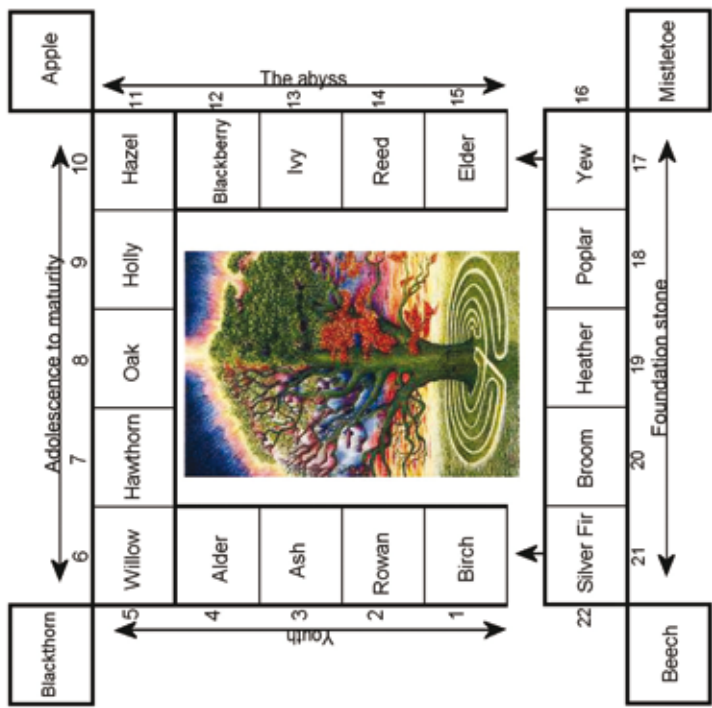


Figure 1. The tree calendar represented as a triliton (left), and superimposed on the Qabbalistic Tree-of-Life (right). Source: Adapted from *Greencraft: Handling boomwandelingen*, © Greencraft Creations, 2005. Used by kind permission.

nature—because everyone wanted to do a ritual in nature—off we would go, packed like mules to do exactly the same as we would have done in a temple. We had to haul along all our attributes and paraphernalia. I thought that all was very weak and unsatisfactory. . . . Light[ing] torches at Ruigoord (an artistic colony near Amsterdam) with a force nine wind is not always successful, but rather than sitting behind your TV set, at least you're in the middle of a storm and experience something [first hand]. But there was no structure If [Wicca] really is a nature religion, then there have to be elements of that very nature embedded in the tradition itself. . . . From [those thoughts] Greencraft emerged.

Dubbed the “ecological principle” (Greencraft Creations 2012b), Greencraft seeks “to build a religion in which respect and care for Nature are central.” Even if this first part of the “third aim” of the Greencraft Manifest pretty much echoes well-known Pagan ethics concerning nature, the second part hints at the intimacy with nature that Greencrafters seek, and set it apart from the other traditions: “Humans, plants, animals and megaliths are all Gaia’s children and the Sacred Landscape is Her body.” The interconnection between Gaia’s children and the adherents of Greencraft are worked out along two lines: one cosmological and one experiential.

Greencraft’s most notable addition to the Wiccan cosmology is the Celtic Tree Calendar. This element originally was constructed with obvious poetic license by Robert Graves (1948) in his book *The White Goddess*. In the calendar, the year is divided into thirteen months of twenty-eight days each which each are ruled by one tree. The consecutive months can be projected onto a representation of a trilithon. The year is broken down into three periods of four, five, and four “months” that correspond in terms of a human life with youth, adolescence to maturity, and the abyss (Hera et al. 2005; see Figure 1, left side). When one adds a foundation stone to the trilithon, and counts the corner stones as doubles (that is, count the sides of the blocks of the trilithon, rather than the blocks themselves), one ends up with the twenty-two trees that make up the Greencraft alphabet. The tree calendar can thus also be related to the Sepiroth—the system of spheres that make up the Qabbalistic Tree-of-Life—where the trees correspond with the twenty-two paths between the sephirah (Delaere 2010; see Figure 1, right side). The thirteen-month tree calendar is also featured in the experiential aspect of Greencraft’s quest for reconnecting with nature: the ritualistic tree walk.

THE TREE WALK

Various groups in Greencraft have their own walks, which are open to both members and nonmembers. In most cases, the participants in the tree walk will gather at a pub half an hour before the walk starts. The walks I have participated in ranged from five to fifteen persons. I noticed that, the open invitation notwithstanding, most participants are already members of Greencraft, but there are always the odd few people that are either guests of

one of the participants or even complete outsiders that want to learn about the tree walks. Regardless the status of newcomer, old hand, or even participatory observer, the welcoming is always very warm. No hands are shaken, but everyone is instantly hugged and kissed, irrespective of gender. Strictly at eight o'clock the party will leave the pub and soon a column of cars will be on its way to nearby woodland—which may be the edge of a village—where enough trees of the particular month grow.²

On my first walk, which is featured here, this was the alder. After arriving at the edge of the woodland and parking all the cars, we are all asked to take a pebble from the trunk of the vehicle of one of the elders and carry it with us. Like experienced hikers, most attendants have furnished themselves—literally—with walking stools and small backpacks. And thus, with the elders leading, we set off for our stroll. The first bit of the route is typically filled with small talk, until we are told by the leader that from a certain point the walk will continue in silence. We are also asked to attune to the natural environment, perhaps starting to ponder the significance of the esoteric meaning of the tree of the month. The alder, the featured tree, stands for self-realization.³ Briefly mentioning this fact, our guide makes our minds wonder with the possible scenarios of how this characteristic is meaningful in the here and now, and without having a reference at first.

After some five to ten minutes, we stop at an open area. Here we settle on the ground. Some open their stools and others take blankets from their backpacks. The leader of the tour starts talking about the biological properties of the alder, and during his talk slowly changes from fact to traditional uses, and to folklore and fiction: what legends are attached to the alder. To give an impression of the multitude of facts and fictions: we hear of the linguistic relationship between alder and bee, of Goethe's Erlkönig, of Bran the Blessed, of scarecrows made of alder twigs, about its protection against witches, but also learn of its prevalence near water, its white wood and blood-red sap, and the fact that male and female fruits grow on the same tree. To the average participant, all of this information is undoubtedly too much to process in a coherent way, but this overkill seems to be exactly what the leader is aiming for.

After finishing his lecture, our guide asks us to find a nearby alder and try to make contact with it. This is perhaps the main episode on the ritual tree walk: to meditate on the tree. Some will try to find its aura, others just sit still underneath. Some have their

² From the descriptive account of my specific fieldwork onwards, I use the present tense as a mode of presentation. Although its usage has been criticized (see Sanjek 1991), I feel that my emphasis on the tree walk as a lived experience of a particular episode warrants the present tense. The tree walk is also a practice that exists in my own culture, and owes its very existence to being an attempt to distance oneself from one's social role, to partake in another. So, the problems of conventionality, predictability, and being rule-determined are, at least at this micro-level of observation, less relevant.

³ Given the fact that in the Celtic Tree Calendar of the Greencraft Tradition the Alder belongs to the first pillar of the trilithon, which corresponds with youth, self-realization refers to what Corsini (1999) has described as "a process or a goal of fulfilling personal potentialities, including aptitudes, goals, and capacities" (p. 879) and should not be mistaken for understanding as the attainment of the 'higher self' that the act of realization ideally strives towards.

back against the tree. Others embrace it. Some sit, some stand. Quite quickly I find “my” tree. My mind starts to race. Here I am standing near the water’s edge at a double-trunked alder. Why did I pick this tree—or did it pick me? I feel there is a significance to the double trunk: it seems to resemble my double agenda. Am I self-realizing myself as a scholar? Or am I getting involved in this particular group as a Pagan? Arghuicha’s words ring in my mind: “Beware that you might be self-realizing someone else’s self.” So integrity is an issue. Are the unwary people in the group actually pawns in my academic power game? It takes quite some time to release my thoughts, but slowly I feel more at ease with the trees. My consciousness now seems to slowly drift from these fears clad as rationalities—towards appreciating the feeling of being there, of standing against a tree, embracing it, feeling embraced by it. In my mind the rational thoughts recede and I start having hypnogogic experiences: first phosphenes emerge, and then geometric shapes in shifting colors. Eventually, moving pictures of great detail appear, of which an image of a pulsating cloud that switches between photo-negative and positive particularly strikes me, especially as it changes into an opening white rose that seems to slowly turn around its axis. Although less and less effort is required to stay in this trance-like state, there always seems to be the ability to return to the waking world.

After an unspecified period of time, I am called back to the group. Apparently I took more time than the rest, but in fact one can decide for oneself when one’s meditation is finished. The group now settles down in a circle, in the middle of which a fire is burning in a small cauldron. In the next episode, called the talking stick, we are all invited to disclose the contents of our meditation: what we saw, felt, experienced, or learned. Each in turn tells his or her story, while the others listen in silence. Now some of the elements of the myths and folklore told about the trees resurface in specific relation to certain aspects of the personal lives of the participants. One witch stated that she felt that the particular shape of her very crooked tree resembled her feeling of having to bend over backwards to avoid some negative issues that threatened her normal life. On another walk, dedicated to the oak, which stands for contracts and commitments, one attendant spoke of signing a contract that very week for his new job, while another spoke of dedicating herself to the craft. In turn, the High Priestess of another coven called Eburon, which offers its own walk, emphasized that contracts should not only be made or signed as an act of intention, but need to be lived up to as well. Seeing contracts as a social engagement, the message in her meditation was apposite to her position as the coven leader, who seeks to safeguard the collective interest.

After the stick has gone round the circle, the second “stony” leg of the tree walk starts. The various walks I participated in all varied with respect to the next episode: sometimes this will only start after another stroll, sometimes it will start directly. All participants are now asked to produce the pebble they received at the beginning from their pockets and form a standing circle. The pebbles are to be kept in the left hand, with the palm facing downwards, while they need to keep their right hand open, with the palm facing upwards,

as to be able to receive the stone from their right-hand neighbor. Then the leader starts singing the song “Faya Siton,” and soon everybody sings along.⁴ The rhythmic accents are accompanied by handing over the stone with the left hand, while simultaneously receiving another stone with the right hand. The passing of stones is briefly interrupted each time the song comes to the refrain. Then each participant will hold the stone between the left and right hand, which are held together as if in prayer. With each stressed vowel, the participant briefly and slightly bows, as in paying respect. After that the handing-over of stones is resumed. The whole process is repeated indefinitely, but will always result in one getting one’s original stone back. “The magic has worked again!” someone will typically exclaim. Still it is common knowledge among the Greencrafters that the number of attendants is always counted beforehand, so that the required number of refrains can be sung for the stone to return to its original bearer.

Directly after “Faya Siton” we start the episode of stone singing. Each participant brings the stone to his or her mouth and starts vocalizing a single tone, altering the pitch and the distance between pebble and mouth, until the stone starts to reverberate, and the sound is no longer ours. Now the stone sings using our bodies as a resonance box. Together with this reversal in direction all the individual sounds start to attune to each other, until an undulating group intonation emerges. Arghuicha later told me that the spiritual significance of this practice is establishing contact with all the stone circles across the globe, of which the present circle now in effect is a portable version. It dawned on me that people in a circle holding stones literally *are* a stone circle. In addition to relating people to trees, then, people are also related to stones. All are thought to be the living children of the Earth Goddess, with stones being the firstborns, but the people are their midwives who delivered them from the womb and gave them their individuality.

After the stone singing, the party starts walking again, and after some fifteen minutes we reach a spot on the very edge of a residential area, where for the last time we form a circle to dance around the fire singing chants very similar to what traditional covens would do,⁵ and eventually settling down and sharing food and drinks that pass through the circle. After an hour or so, the party heads back to the cars. The stones are returned to the leader and, after saying goodbye to each individual participant in much the same way as we were welcomed, everyone goes off into the night. Tree walks often last until after midnight!

⁴ The original lyrics of this Surinam children’s song are as follows: “Faya siton no bron mi so, no bron mi so. Ayden Masra Jantje kiri suma pikin” (‘Glowing stone, don’t burn me, don’t burn me like that. Again Master Johnny is murdering the children’). Although the lyrics reflect the slave history of the former Dutch colony, in Greencraft the song was merely adopted because of its rhythmic quality and the fact that the lyrics are nonsensical to the average Dutch-speaking person, merely keeping one’s conscious engaged, without offering specific content. The song might have been available for adoption because it is used in some anthroposophic schools in the Netherlands, and thus known by the odd Wiccan.

⁵ Chants like “Earth my body,” “Horned one, lover, son,” “Isis, Astarte, Diana,” and so on.

HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF MAKING SENSE: BEATING ABOUT THE BUSH

The tree walk can best be understood as a ritual with both an *oversized and underdetermined* spatiality compared to the average Wiccan ritual, where all the action takes place in a magically drawn circle. The routes of the walks may differ given the conditions of weather and terrain, and even the location depending on the prevalence of the trees of the month. In addition, the tree walk's extraverted activity is alternated with introverted⁶ activity more than once, while separately the focus is shifted back and forth from the natural to the social. I take the stone-singing as social-introverted, and the themed meditation as natural-introverted. The former is performed in (or better: supported by) the group, but the exclusive focus is on the personal relationship with a stone and the changes in awareness that come with the singing. The thematic meditation is performed alone and constitutes the establishment of a personal link with a tree in terms of which some of the mentally represented aspects of one's life are reassessed, reconstructed, and/or reformulated. The tree, then, acts as a transitional space between the mundane and the otherworld. For the participant, this encounter is embedded within a framework of cosmological meanings and religiously inspired codes of conduct. For me, it was a place of instant reflexivity.

THE PLACE OF THE RESEARCHER IN THE FIELD

My musings at the water's edge, then, present a lived-through and mentally represented double hermeneutic. Somehow the meditation triggered I-positions⁷ of both my role as a researcher and as a performer, and alternately identified me as being a researcher and doing the performance, and vice versa. This self-encounter can be contrasted with an experience of a similar ambiguity, but this time between myself as a participant observing my inner self, while knowingly being observed by outsiders. The happened on another tree walk that was radically different from all the others in terms of it being held in a built environment, and focusing on a tree not present in the calendar. In June, the month that roughly coincides with the oak, Arghuicha chose the bastions of Hulst (a Dutch town near the border with Flanders) as a very specific location for our walk. Rather than with oaks, the bastions were all lined with linden trees standing along the paths that are laid out on these bulwark's very edges. Bound to these paths, our route took an angular shape, while the pointed projections of each consecutive bastion made us face the parts we had already passed before once again turning away while walking towards the next bastion until eventually we ended up where we started: we had literally made a full circle. The juxtaposed centripetal and centrifugal movements in our walk coincided with both outlooks of myself: first as

⁶ I understand introverted/extraverted here in the original Jungian sense as referring to attentional preference to inner, subjective states and the outer, objective world of fact, respectively (Jung 1971).

⁷ The term "I-positions" refers to the affect-laden perception of oneself in a specific context (see Hermans 2001), whereas "social role" merely refers to the behavioral pattern that a given situation with others requires.

my own observer and then as the observed by others. Socially, I alternately turned from scholar to Pagan and back.

Even if linden trees have a similar folkloric meaning to oak, related as they are to justice (see, e.g., Thorpe 1852), and often could be found in the center of villages as the places where contracts were made, rather than following that thread of the story as a way to enter the introspective state, the notion of gossip took hold. Even if I once again had trouble focusing, that trouble in turn became a motif around which my story spun itself. Although certainly not entering in the trance state I had experienced with the alder, my rather effortful contemplations produced a feeling of exposure. Because the linden trees originally stood in the hearts of the villages and were present at all the happenings and dealings of importance, they were bound to know a lot. At times when they would have been “out of office,” merely affording shade to the villagers, they would undoubtedly overhear many stories of broken vows, adultery, petty theft, and other dirty little secrets. When a new contract was to be sealed at their trunks the next time, would they raise their proverbial eyebrow? Analogously, perhaps again my integrity as a scholar eavesdropping on these Wiccans became active in my mind again. However, for the first time seeing myself being observed by others, it then dawned on me that I had crossed a line. If there was a conflict in interpretation, it was a conflict between the tree-walkers and the locals from Hulst. The barrier was a social one—one’s role determined one’s perspective, and obviously social roles were as much cast by others as appropriated by oneself. Eventually, mainly because of the constantly alternating perspective between observer and observed, and extraverted with introverted action, my self-exposure turned into this feeling of belonging. Here I was, perhaps not going native altogether, but still rather enjoying these tree meditations, that incidentally culminated in a barbeque that day – a social-extraverted activity if ever there was one—the invitation to which felt like being accepted as a congenial spirit.

Two notions that come to mind here are Graham Harvey’s notion of guesthood, and the idea of method of compassion as coined by Jone Salomonsen (2004). The first refers to a “third” position between the dichotomy implicit in the term “participatory observation” (Harvey 2004, p. 253):

“[G]uesthood” can label a truly phenomenological approach, acknowledging that the researcher engages with particularities, makes a difference by just being there, and should accept the responsibility entailed in dialogue and relationships. . . . It recognizes that while guests are not “natives” (or “family,” “insiders,” etc.) they are already involved and will be expected to say something respectful. . . . Guesthood research, then, does not “walk in the shoes” of the “other”; it sits across a fire and engages in mutually enlightening conversation.

The barbeque setting provided me with the opportunity to talk about my research activity, but also stressed the commonality between fellow countrymen and neighbors, not in the least because I speak the same language. Outside the ritualistic setting, then, the differences

between my outlook on the world and theirs seemed smaller, even if I experienced differences in social distance between myself and some core members of the group to each other. In terms of sociability, then, I succeeded in the base requirement of Salomonsen's method of compassion: genuine social interaction. Resembling Harvey's take on one's position among informants, Salomonsen argues that "[c]ompassion in this context does not refer to a wholesale positive embrace, nor to passionate criticisms and arguing, but somewhere in between: to honesty. It designates an attitude in which belief is taken seriously, both cognitively and emotionally" (p. 50). In contrast to Harvey, Solomonsen advocates full magical involvement, although she states that both engagement for understanding and holding a distant view for recording are equally important.

CONCLUSION: BARKING UP THE RIGHT TREE

Because they deal with the integrity of the researchers, these propositions suggest that the fieldworker needs to come as close as possible to the people he or she observes, without "going native." Furthermore, they call upon the responsibility of the researcher after the return from the field. Implicit in these commentaries on fieldwork is the belief in continuity of perspective, hermeneutic preference, and theoretical rigor. Although I sympathize a great deal with these reflexive outlooks, I feel that they neglect the intra-individual heterogeneity of perspective of any one person moving from one social setting to the other, and back. By sketching two impressions of my fieldwork with Greencraft—the hypnogogic experience and the feeling-of-being-watched experience—I suggest two interpretations of requirements in the tree walk setting, which seem to hold for Wicca in general and are informative regarding the character of the mutual relationship between the observer and the observed, both in the immediacy of the fieldwork experience and the ensuing relationship between the scholar and his or her informants.

TOWARDS ATTUNEMENT AND THE SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

First, I would like to draw attention to the *need for attunement*. The tree walk is full of exercises and tacit rules that help make the shift from our mundane, profane, troubled, and professional selves to our sacred, cleansed, lifted, and spiritual alter egos. These techniques are hardly exclusively Greencraft's; in Wicca the ceremonies are nearly always preceded and succeeded by ritualized procedures of grounding and centering, and in a broader sense acts of secrecy and initiation obtain their significance by demarcating the sacred world within from the mundane world without (Van Gulik 2012). Wicca, then, is as much about connecting as it is about dividing and transformation. What sets the tree walks apart from the traditional rituals—in which Greencraft also engages—is that attuning to the Otherworld and returning to the mundane sphere happen two or three times during the walks. In my own case of attuning, I experienced the last vestiges of rationality receding during

my meditation at the waterside alder tree. In a sense, then and there I became “my own informant” in the words of Salomonsen (2004), even if I would argue that the associated “method of compassion” was triggered by the specific environment and helped mostly by adopting a passive, receptive stance, rather than actively pursuing honesty. In fact, the extent to which integrity became an issue equaled my initial incapacity to follow suit. Eventually, when integrity was sublimated as detached learning material resurfacing in the meditation, I was able to come to grips with it.

Attunement here touches on the second requirement, the *need for suspension of disbelief*. Although such suspension may be argued to be integral to the attunement process, I feel its significance warrants a separate discussion. A complex term, the exhaustive explanation of which is beyond the scope of this article, suspension of disbelief in the specific context of the tree meditation refers to the willingness or motivation of any participant to accept that engaging in tree meditation may produce a conversation with the tree, or with an external agent by means of the tree. More broadly, I take the term to refer to the uncritical acceptance of an interpretation as being the truth, either born out of repressing critique or not reflecting on that interpretation. The notion of the suspension of disbelief has an interesting connection with Ludwig’s Wittgenstein’s “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,” in that logic has no place in domains of value and the meaningful (1922: 90). That is, not the truth of stories, in terms of the relationship between them and the realm of fact is important, but the message they convey. We may read Nietzsche’s (1983) “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life” on a similar note. In this essay, Nietzsche argues that history needs to have instructive quality for one’s present life, rather than suggest objectivity or a true rendering of how things originally came to pass.⁸ Analogously, the happenings at the tree trunks, then, serve a purpose of gaining insight in one’s own life. Neither the technicalities behind communication nor any naturalistic explanation are in the interest of the meditating person; any critique such as “trees can’t talk” misses the point. Just as Terry Pratchett’s term “lie-to-children” describes, teaching is aimed at creating a basic understanding of what is happening in terms of the religious outlook, and that is eventually sufficient, in turn, to explain the technique to others, without standing in the way of remaining receptive to experiencing communication (Pratchett et al. 2002).⁹

THE DOUBLE HERMENEUTIC

Where does all this leave the problem of the double hermeneutic and the mutual influence between the researcher and the researched? In retrospect, I feel the double hermeneutic poses less of a threat than is often suggested. When studying religious groups in a Western context, the researcher and the researched have gone through comparable enculturation

⁸ Such a take on history as a discipline can be linked to the justification of poetic myth (see, e.g., Graves 1948).

⁹ The use of Pratchett’s work to understand Paganism in general, or trace some of its sentiments, beliefs, and practices, has been noted earlier (see Harvey 2000).

processes. Even if they do not share all cultural values, rules, and tacit knowledge, their sensitivity to these is arguably similar. These commonalities are often seen as a methodological threat to proper ethnographic observation, in that one is likely to miss potentially important details that are too easily taken for granted (Wolcott 1994: 177–178). Yet the very embeddedness in a common culture of both researcher and informant makes divergent subcultural characteristics and contexts all the more notable, especially when these contexts are elaborately set apart from mundane life. That is, both the participating researcher and the adherents are going through the same phase of transformation each time one partakes in ritual activity. Reservations, reluctance, and perhaps even concentration problems are part and parcel of the stubborn nature of the postmodern individual, so overcoming these are not uncommon tasks for any high priest or priestess. The double hermeneutic, then, may be a tension between social roles, which is theoretically present in both researcher and adherent, rather than primarily between them.

Tanya Luhrmann (1989) was the first to observe this tension, when she asked herself why rational westerners would believe in magic. To answer the question, she used Leon Festinger's (1956) cognitive dissonance theory. This theory states that people seek to reduce the incompatibilities between one's attitude and one's behavior. Even if she appreciates the fact that adherents seem to offer different explanations of the experiences and magical results, depending on their audience (Luhrmann 1989: 270–271), she misses the point that these people on the whole will not always look upon themselves as “magicians.” By exclusively relying here on data in which Wiccans are talking among themselves about the borders between the mundane and the magical, she introduced a level of self-consciousness that is the exception rather than the rule. She thereby muddled the internal heterogeneity of individuals in terms of the differences in cognitive styles, beliefs, motives, and so forth, depending on the demand characteristics of the social setting in which they are embedded.¹⁰ The only place where the double hermeneutic may rear its ugly head is when the suspension of disbelief extends to the world outside, where others do not agree with the belief system. The clashing worldviews there, however, need not be those of the researcher and the researched—that is, as long as the scholar is neither aimed at reductionism to explain away the system of belief, nor is going native and turning the research process into an apologetic exercise. The only way to avoid these dangers is to adopt a stance of *radical methodological agnosticism*, which might be considered the deskwork version of the *suspension of disbelief* that is required during fieldwork.

¹⁰ It should be noted that some social settings require more than one role being played at a time. This is sometimes referred to as “divided consciousness,” which for instance allegedly occurs in trance states, where there seems to be an inner self that remains vigilant. In one of my interviews, a high priestess told me that even when the Goddess is invoked in her she would keep an eye on all the participants to see if everyone was concentrating and if anybody needed any help.

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ZNANSTVENIK PROTI POGANU PRI OBRAVNAVI HOJE OKROG DREVES V OKVIRU POGANSKE TRADICIJE »GREENCRAFT«. SPOZNAVANJE, PREDSTAVA IN INTERPRETACIJA

Avtor v besedilu poskuša: (1) prispevati k razpravi o medsebojnem vplivu med raziskovalcem in raziskovanim s perspektive raziskovalca; (2) ponuditi pregled Greencrafta in oblikovati kratko etnografijo njihove ritualne hoje okrog dreves; (3) na kratko predstaviti koncept tranzicijskega (ali kakor-da-bi) sveta. S tem avtor zasnuje teoretsko ozadje za podlago in pomoč pri povezo- vanju naštetih ciljev. Pojma reflektivnost in reaktivnost, skupaj z dvojno hermenevotiko, nas – še posebej v kontekstu religioznih študij – opozarjata na vprašanje, kako naj se raziskovalec poveže z raziskovanimi. S pomočjo impresionistične pripovedi, ki raziskovalca umešča v polje med akademskim in poganskim svetom, poskuša avtor prikazati, kako je dvojna hermenevotika bolj težava posameznika in ne toliko obeh skupin. Ritualna hoja okrog dreves, njen opis je jedro raziskave, prikaže, da se tako raziskovalec kot pripadniki vsakokrat, ko se prestopijo iz posvetne v sveto sfero in nazaj srečajo z enako tranzicijo. Avtor reflektira svoja doživljanja in občutja; o razmerju med raziskovalcem in raziskovanim so prav ta doživetja največ povedala. Ob primerjavi svojega dela z delom drugih raziskovalcev poganstva razpravlja o pojmu gostovanje in postaja sam svoj informator. Ob upoštevanju lastnih izkušenj meditacij ob drevesih avtor sklene, da sta prilagoditev in razrešitev dvomov nepogrešljivi zahtevi, ki veljata tako za raziskovalca kot za raziskovane, tj. pripadnike gibanja.

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Leon van Gulik - Narrating the Dutch migration of Wicca through an in-depth interview with Morgana Sythove. Plovdiv 2012. (photo: j. Filčák)