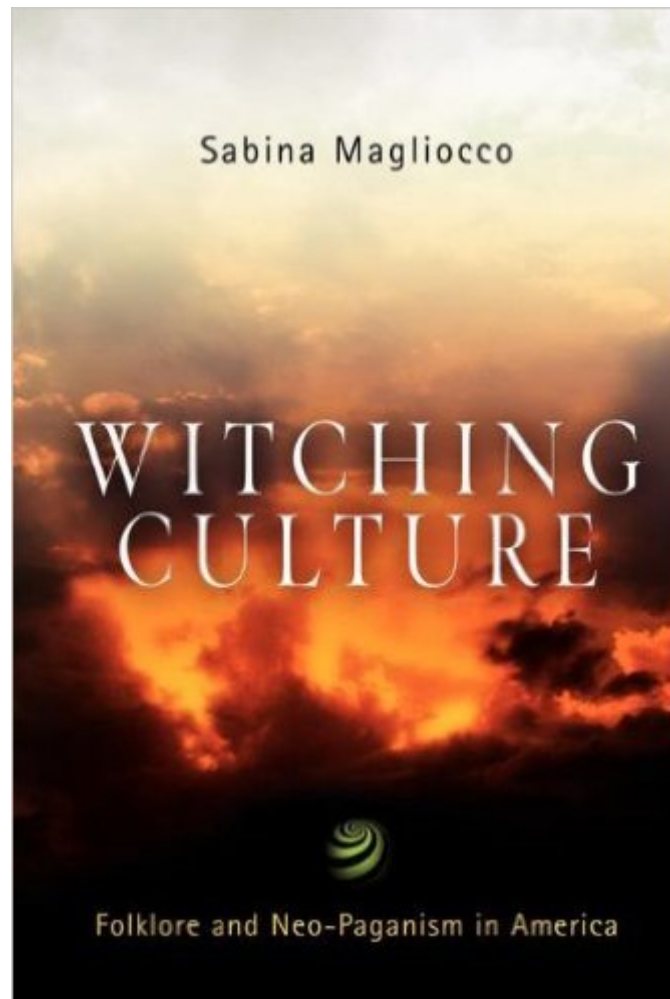


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# Witching Culture: Folklore And Neo-Paganism In America (Contemporary Ethnography)



## Synopsis

Taking the reader into the heart of one of the fastest-growing religious movements in North America, Sabina Magliocco reveals how the disciplines of anthropology and folklore were fundamental to the early development of Neo-Paganism and the revival of witchcraft. Magliocco examines the roots that this religious movement has in a Western spiritual tradition of mysticism disavowed by the Enlightenment. She explores, too, how modern Pagans and Witches are imaginatively reclaiming discarded practices and beliefs to create religions more in keeping with their personal experience of the world as sacred and filled with meaning. Neo-Pagan religions focus on experience, rather than belief, and many contemporary practitioners have had mystical experiences. They seek a context that normalizes them and creates in them new spiritual dimensions that involve change in ordinary consciousness. Magliocco analyzes magical practices and rituals of Neo-Paganism as art forms that reanimate the cosmos and stimulate the imagination of its practitioners. She discusses rituals that are put together using materials from a variety of cultural and historical sources, and examines the cultural politics surrounding the movement—how the Neo-Pagan movement creates identity by contrasting itself against the dominant culture and how it can be understood in the context of early twenty-first-century identity politics. *Witching Culture* is the first ethnography of this religious movement to focus specifically on the role of anthropology and folklore in its formation, on experiences that are central to its practice, and on what it reveals about identity and belief in twenty-first-century North America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Sabina Magliocco's "Witching Culture" is quite possibly the most significant volume on Contemporary Pagan Culture to have been written in several years. Magliocco, author of an earlier volume on Neo-Pagan Art and Altars, has filled in several gaps left by Ronald Hutton and Sarah Pike, authors of important recent works in their own right. The real strength of Magliocco's approach lies in her combined historical and folkloric approaches to cultural formation. Nods to other theoretical approaches are made, especially in her discussion of Paganism as a culturally oppositional discourse (James Scott, Todorov, Gramsci) but for the most part her own theoretical approaches are interwoven with her content so as to produce a seamless integration. As I noted, her attention to the categories of the Other, both as conceived from Christian heritage and the Enlightenment's 'God of Reason,' are set up as the early framework of the book, along with valuable summations of early Hermeticism, medieval ritual magic, Renaissance Humanism, and 19th C. Romanticism to show the contributions of each era to contemporary Paganism. In this she avoids Hutton's obsession with the British 19th century and yet misses much of Hutton's focus on cunning-folk and those more vernacular traditions. Magliocco's work is more concerned with those who wrote on those traditions, and how those writings (Leland, Murray, Gardner) were used as a crucible to create contemporary Paganism. Excellent portions of the book also focus on energy, magic, naming and ritual, as well as the historical and folkloric contributions to the formations of these much-used categories by contemporary Pagans. In addition, this is the first volume I am aware of to treat music and song in such depth. Two main aspects of song are treated--ritual uses (echoing her earlier scholarly articles on the subject with Holly Tannen) and educational uses--that is, teaching modes of thought and interpretation common to Pagans. While these are not the only important functions of Pagan song, these are the most important aspects for her work, for she concentrates on community identity and maintenance. Partly because of her concern with boundary formation and maintenance, her work engages little with New Age religiosity, and instead concentrates on flash points such as cultural appropriation issues with indigenous peoples, especially Amerindians. Again, given the existing literature, this is a plus, rather than a minus. If there are drawbacks to her work, they are similar to other important works in the field. Most of the book concentrates on Wicca, witchcraft, Feri, Reclaiming and New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn (NROOGD), all closely connected with dominant structures in the Eastern part of the U.S. Other facets of contemporary Paganism, such as Druidry, Pagan Vodoun, Church of All

Worlds, and Asatru/Vanatru, draw significantly less attention. But as these are numerically proportionately less of the wider community, their comparative marginalization is understandable in a study like this.

I lent this book out immediately after finishing it, so I don't have it on hand to reference for specifics. For someone who has an interest in the history of the neo-pagan movement as well as its contemporary practice in America, this is a great book to start with. Personally, I'm an academic/analytic type and although I had an interest in this spiritual movement, I couldn't get past certain preconceived notions and stereotypes that I held. Wicca's dubious origins, i.e. invented by some dude in the 1950s, detracted from its validity in my mind. Magliocco explains the origins of Wicca and argues that it follows a tradition of human exploration and practice of "magic" that long predates the term "Wicca." From her explanation of tradition that pre-dates Gardner, it seems as if he simply synthesized his own magical research into a standardized practice. Magliocco explains that although many follow Gardnerian Wicca, as he laid it out, there are many who reinterpret it in their own way. This leads me to another common criticism of neo-paganism that Magliocco helped clarify. Many critics, both within and outside of the movement, find that the trend of picking and choosing various aspects from different magical practices in various cultures, ages, and traditions somehow discredits neo-pagan practitioners. I also felt that the ability to choose your religion à la carte seemed rather indulgent and invalid. However, through this book, and research I've done subsequently, I now understand that all religions have historically been influenced by and have borrowed from neighboring religions. This is true of Christianity as well as pre-Christian native pagan religions. There are numerous examples of people practicing hybrid religions, especially in the early years of European Christianization. Look at it like this, if people who were exposed to two or three influences fused them into a hybrid, then it makes logical sense that in our age of multi-culturalism, the internet, and inexpensive books on any topic you can think of, we are exposed to WAY more influences than our ancestors, and so our own personal hybrid religious practices will be more diverse. Magliocco explains examples of this. Again, without the book on hand to reference, off the top of my head comes to mind one woman she discusses who was drawn to Wiccan practice but felt no connection to the Celtic pantheon as it did not resonate with her Latina roots. She felt drawn to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Now, when we consider that the Virgin of Guadalupe is herself a hybrid of indigenous South American religion and Catholic domination, is it really such a stretch for a Latina woman living in America who is surrounded by Caucasian people practicing paganism with a Celtic pantheon to bridge her adopted practice with a goddess from her own cultural

heritage? Another subject that Magliocco explores that really answered my own questions and helped bridge my understanding was on Magic. What is it? Why do pagans and "witches" use it? It is simply silly people playing dress up? I envisioned practicing witches akin to LARPers (role-playing gamers running around in the woods with capes and druid staves). Magliocco helped break that stereotype in my mind. Practitioners of magic believe that there is energy in everything in nature, including human beings. Magic is an attempt to harness that energy and manipulate it. Whether or not some of these ideas can be PROVEN or not, is besides the point. Magliocco is an academic with solid credentials. She explores these topics in an academic way citing both research conducted by others as well as her own field research. As a practicing Wiccan herself, she understands the movement in a way that a researcher on the outside looking in cannot. As a non-practitioner myself, I do not think that she is overtly biased by her own immersion in Wicca. Certain aspects of neo-paganism CAN be proven. Such as a long history of human dabblings in magical practices and historical research on pantheons, charms, herbal "potions", rituals, etc. Magliocco's research is excellent when it comes to these things. She is, after all, an anthropologist. For the things that are up for debate, such as whether or not magic is real, Magliocco chooses her words carefully with phrases such as "pagans believe." She never asserts that magic is something that can be scientifically measured. She does, however, cite psychological studies on the effects of magic and ritual on the brain. She explains that there is no doubt that SOMETHING goes on in the human brain when they experience phenomena such as trance and visions, based on solid research. I would not recommend this for people looking for a step by step guide to practicing Wicca or neo-paganism. As others have mentioned, it does not provide in-depth info on every branch (or "tradition") of the neo-pagan movement. Some, such as the Germanic Heathen tradition, are simply mentioned but not expounded upon. However, this is meant as an overall introduction, not an in-depth encyclopedia. This book gave me a really good spring board for further reading. Highly recommend googling authors on neo-paganism before purchasing as there is a lot of fluff out there by people apparently pulling stuff out of their arse.\*\* Other recommended titles with solid academic scholarship behind them are: Our Troth: History and Lore - edited by Kveldulf Gundarsson (pen name of Stephan Grundy) who holds a PhD. His dissertation was on The Cult of Odin, per Wikipedia. He is a practitioner of Germanic Heathenry. The Troth is an organisation that rejects the racism that can sadly be found in some other Heathen groups. Recommended for people with an interest in Germanic paganism, pantheon, and history. Looking for the Lost Gods of England - by Kathleen Herbert, a former student of the great medievalist, J.R.R. Tolkien. She discusses Anglo-Saxon paganism and explains where info on their religion comes from. It expounds upon

ideas discussed above as it explains that Lapp/Sami shamanic paganism may have exchanged ideas with the Norse, and that early English Christians retained strong elements of paganism in their regular practice (hybridism).

This is an excellent examination and introduction to the study of the Wiccan culture. Combining personal tales with more traditional folklore techniques and commentary she crafts a compelling exploration of many of the questions that those who are not primarily interested in belief systems per se are interested in. If you want to have insight into what Wiccans are interested in and how they relate this is the book. If I have any criticism it is that she tends to narrow her focus to a few specific traditions. I was left wondering the changes that might be seen as the population of Wiccans changes from a tradition or coven centered to that of the more eclectic solitary population, and how are the "traditionalists" reacting to the changes. This however is an easily overlooked concern as she covers the her topic well and with obvious relish as well as with the eye of the trained observer. Very Well Done.

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