

## *Reflecting on Reflecting in the Study of Contemporary Pagan and Magical Ritual*

KAMILA VELKOBORSKÁ\*

Reflexivity was a revolutionary idea in the 1970s and 80s but over the years it became an intellectual dogma which, as I have noticed several times, is often used simplistically by scholars facing diverse methodological problems. In these cases, reflexivity is understood simply as being conscious of the self in a given situation and it seems to be a solution and cure-all for most troubles encountered in the field. The last time I came across this was when a scholar studying Christian music was asked how she could study Christianity ‘objectively’ being a Christian herself and therefore involved. The answer was: “I need a great deal of self-reflexivity,” and the answer was accepted. In this sense, it would seem that being reflexive helps towards being objective.

In the sense most pronounced in academia, reflexivity expresses the awareness of anthropologists engaged in fieldwork of the epistemological, political and ideological forces, as well as the emotional and intellectual setup and personal preferences of the researcher, that influence his or her research and writing. Acknowledging this, scholars have come to the conclusion that ethnographic writing is not and cannot be objective.<sup>1</sup> A general trend appeared toward “a *specification of discourses* in ethnography: who speaks? Who writes? when and where? with or to whom? under what institutional and historical constraints?”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will ignore the well-discussed constraints imposed on the researcher from the outside (institutional and historical) and focus on in-

---

\* I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers of this text for their helpful comments.

1 For a discussion on objectivity and reflexivity in anthropology see Dell Hymes (ed.), *Reinventing Anthropology*, New York: Pantheon 1972; James Clifford – George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1986; George E. Marcus – Michael M. J. Fisher, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1986; Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing against Culture”, in: Richard G. Fox (ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press 1991, 466-479; Judith Okely – Helen Callaway (eds.), *Anthropology and Autobiography*, London – New York: Routledge 1992; Paul Rabinow – George E. Marcus, *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*, Durham: Duke University Press 2008.

2 James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths”, in: James Clifford – George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1986, 1-26: 13.

fluences less tangible, such as emotions, thoughts and impressions that are produced by the interaction between the unique personality of the anthropologist and the field – in my case, contemporary pagan, witchcraft and magical rituals. The researcher will then appear as entangled in a complex web of reflexivities. Using personal fieldwork accounts I will show that the researcher, apart from reflexively participating in the rituals, has to constantly reflect not only on his or her reflecting in the rituals but also on the practitioners' reflecting in and on them, as well as on the anthropologist's presence in them.

This paper has been written from the perspective of a lone anthropologist who is a participant observer in a field that demands him or her to open up not only intellectually and cognitively but also intuitively and emotionally; of a researcher who believes that "anyone who has not experienced will not understand"<sup>3</sup> and is willing to take the risk of "selling my soul by excessive involvement",<sup>4</sup> to take the participation even further and exercise *engagement*, described by Jone Solomonsen as vivid participation,<sup>5</sup> and accept its inevitable consequence, which is that it might change him or her.<sup>6</sup> By this programme, Jone Salomonsen critically refers to the work of Frits Staal, whose presupposition is that it is possible to take an experiential position in the study of mysticism without going native. As expressed by Solomonsen:

Staal's scientific belief in the possibilities of learning to be a mystic by the same will and mental equipment one uses to learn to cook seems to be put forward by somebody who has been some kind of an "outsider" throughout the process. He does not consider what compassion and the contract to be willing to change – which are both required conditions to actually be able to learn from a mystical path – will actually do to him and his study.<sup>7</sup>

The main goal of the present text is to suggest that reflexivity, when identified as a multi-layered phenomenon and understood as a problem, can become an important tool in dealing with the anthropological dilemmas and fears mentioned above as well as in writing insightful ethnographic texts – not that it will avert all the perceived dangers of deep involvement, which prevent many anthropologists from taking the path of

3 Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), quoted in Jone Solomonsen, "Methods of Compassion or Pretension? The Challenges of Conducting Fieldwork in Modern Magical Communities", in: Jenny Blain – Douglas Ezzy – Graham Harvey (eds.), *Researching Paganisms*, Walnut Creek – Oxford: Altamira Press 2004, 43-58: 49.

4 Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform <sup>2</sup>2010, 12 (first ed. Washington: University Press of America 1982).

5 J. Solomonsen, "Methods of Compassion...", 51.

6 *Ibid.*, 53.

7 *Ibid.*

full participation. Nevertheless, I argue that there is a twofold profit from using participant observation hand in hand with systematic and conscious reflexivity. First, it will diminish the risk of “losing one’s soul” (which usually implies somehow ceasing to be a scholar) while going native, because by reflecting on all levels of the research – i.e. from the entry to one particular field (case study focus) to working in a number of different fields (multi-site research perspective) – the fieldworker will be able to develop a distanced view, side by side with engagement, of what he or she experiences, and that without unethical pretence or what Ronald L. Grimes aptly calls “scholarly voyeurism”.<sup>8</sup> Second, the final product – ethnographic writing – will be more accurate and faithful to the field as well as more insightful<sup>9</sup> as regards the inner workings of the ritual and the experience it mediates for its creators and participants than when “safer” strategies like non-participatory observation or the interview method are used.

### 1. The field

My fieldwork data come from long-term research (since 2007) among contemporary Pagans, Witches and magicians practicing mainly in the Czech Republic, but I have also witnessed several rituals in Slovakia and Poland. Since 2011, I have been researching a Wiccan coven located in Vienna, Austria. I have conducted longitudinal fieldwork in several other groups (Native Faith, Brotherhood of Wolves), by which I mean that I have been regularly participating in rituals and other events organized by these particular groups, and in two cases I have undergone full training and have been initiated. In addition to this, I have participated in a large number of rituals of various kinds and sizes, ranging from rituals organized for a wider pagan community to private magical rituals performed by two or three individuals, including myself. I intend to be as open as possible in order to offer the reader a clear idea of what the researcher faces and undergoes in this unique field, with the exception of testimony from cases in which I am bound by an oath of secrecy.

All the practitioners and informants I work with are informed about my role as an academic researcher prior to the commencement of cooperation. Moreover, after several years of participation and given the fact that the Czech pagan scene is rather small, my identity as a participant observer is usually well known even before entry into the field.

8 R. L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies...*, 12.

9 In the sense of reflexive writing as “not only about representation or even evocation but a way to generate insight” (Kim Fortun, “Foreword to the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition”, in: James Clifford – George E. Marcus [eds.], *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2010, vii-xx: xi).

## 2. Layers of reflexivity in the field

In *The Anthropology of Performance* (1988), Victor Turner states that when reflexivity is at play,

the same person(s) are both subject and object, violence has to be done to common-sense ways of classifying the world and society. The “self” is split up in the middle – it is something that one both is and that one sees and, furthermore, acts upon as though it were another.<sup>10</sup>

For the anthropological participant in pagan and magical rituals, apart from the reflexivity within the ritual he or she shares with other participants (to be discussed in detail in the following subchapter), several more layers of reflexivity are added; consequently his or her self splits several times. Drawing on my own field experience, there are at least three different selves taking turns and reflecting on each other during the ritual. In intense magical rituals, or intense magical parts of a ritual when perfect focus is required, two of them are suppressed (e.g. during invocation or when accumulating healing energy and sending it outside the circle), but, in less intense rituals or their parts, they speak. Apart from the ritualist self, which splits into the everyday and mythical selves, there is also the self of the researcher. For example, during a lengthy ritual on a cold day, when the researcher is paying attention to whatever might happen, the ritual self might become bored and the everyday self might comment: “I’ll freeze before the chalice is passed round three times.”<sup>11</sup> To offer another example, the following conversation took place in my mind at a ritual to which several inexperienced ritual performers were invited.<sup>12</sup> The everyday self (also, a teacher) became annoyed and judgmental: “Can’t they just learn their lines properly?” The anthropological self tried to take control: “You are not supposed to judge, you are here to observe, so do it.” The everyday self, wishing strongly to finally turn into the ritualist self, raised its voice: “You’d better pay attention to the ritual or you’ll muddle up your own lines.”

The measure of reflexivity differs from ritual to ritual and is influenced by two main factors: first, the type of ritual, and second, the level of immersion of the anthropologist in the field; moreover, these two factors overlap – the level of immersion largely depends on the type of ritual. As regards the type of ritual, the researcher chooses his or her field on a scale

10 Victor Turner, *The Anthropology Of Performance*, New York: PAJ Publications 1986, 25.

11 Jare Gody Ritual, Sobótko, Poland, 21 March 2009. About 100 participants.

12 Ritual of the communion with the spirits of the place, Žďár at Rokycany, 30 April 2012. Five participants.

that ranges from public rituals open to anyone, numbering tens to hundreds of participants (most of whom are more or less passive) to secret rituals accessible only after initiation and numbering two to twenty fully-involved and active participants – priests and priestesses. At different positions of this scale, different measures and kinds of reflexivity are required. The general rule is that the further one goes on the scale towards the imaginary realm of experience (i.e. from one to six), the more urgently he or she deals with reflexivity.<sup>13</sup>

- 1) The researcher's first time in the field; his/her first ritual; probably an open public ritual.

The anthropologist only becomes familiar with the basic patterns – with the appearance and manner of the people, the outer form of the event, and its atmosphere. Everything is new and confusing.

Question: *What are the people doing?*

- 2) Other public rituals, pub moots, and social events.

The researcher starts to become involved in social exchanges, observing and being observed, becoming more familiar with the people and letting the people become more familiar with him or her.

Questions: *How should I behave? What should I do? How should I speak? What should I wear? Do I feel comfortable with this?*

- 3) The first semi-public ritual; on personal invitation.

The researcher starts to become familiar with the community and establishes a rapport with certain individuals. As a result he or she is invited by them to non-public rituals.

Questions: *Should I go? Wouldn't they require too much involvement? Wouldn't it change me? What are the requirements? Would I be able to perform well? What if I spoil things and they won't ask me again?*

- 4) Other semi-closed rituals and assuming more active roles in them.

The researcher is starting to become an insider and is dealt with as such by other practitioners. They openly speak about matters meant only for insiders' ears and expect the same from the researcher. Close friendships are developed and bonds created. Being active and involved creates an atmosphere of trust; the anthropologist is no longer visible and, as a result,

---

13 This scale is exemplary. It by no means reflects the experience of researchers in general and it only partially reflects my own experience. Being interested in large-scale public rituals only marginally, I attend these rarely and my first was a semi-public on-invitation ritual (Native Faith ritual, Mokošín, 2005). Other anthropologists may choose to focus on public rituals and face problems I am unaware of.

he or she begins to gather valuable data. Around this time, other practitioners may be taken by surprise when they discover the researcher in the corner quietly writing up his/her field notes.

Questions: *Should I remind them of my role here? Is it OK for someone in my academic position to become so actively involved? Am I not influencing the group too much? How far and deep may I / do I want to go?*

#### 5) Rituals of closed or secret groups or with individuals.

At this point, the researcher is expected not only to be trustworthy but also to exhibit certain skills essential in the ritual process, otherwise he or she might be perceived as liturgically useless and therefore not invited.<sup>14</sup> Testing, training or preparation for initiation and then initiation itself might be required. The anthropologist faces two problems: the risk of failure as a practitioner and the dilemma concerning one's commitment to being a scholar.

Questions: *Should I try to get in? Wouldn't it be too much? If I do, should I allow the fact to be known in my particular academic milieu? What if I have no skills and perform badly in the role of a magician or priest/priestess? What if I fail and lose access to the field?*

#### 6) Closing the circle.

When approaching other groups or individuals, the whole process of familiarizing oneself with the field is made easier. The anthropologist has been verified within the larger (pagan, magical, witching) community and is invited to closed rituals without being tested; he or she assumes key roles and is even asked to lead a ritual. At the same time, he or she might be acknowledged as a researcher and asked to offer academic lectures to the community.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, this is also the time when rumors about what the anthropologist is doing are spread.<sup>16</sup>

There is a large divide between levels 1 and 2 on the one hand, and 3, 4 and 5 on the other. In levels 3, 4, and 5 there is no space for mere observers. In 1 and 2, distanced observation is possible as well as a measure of objectivity, limited only by the researcher's point of view, both metaphorically and physically/spatially. No special skills are required. In levels 3, 4 and 5, the researcher is a full participant and gaining precious data, much of which might, however, be unpublishable due to the requirements of the group, an oath of secrecy, or the need to follow the so-called four

<sup>14</sup> I have access to several groups and work with several individuals, but I have also been refused access once.

<sup>15</sup> I have given lectures on topics such as Paganism and landscape, and magic and science.

<sup>16</sup> For example, I learned recently that some of my students spread the suggestion that I practice Satanism. In fact, I have never conducted research among Satanists.

hermetic virtues: to know, to dare, to will, to keep silent. Maintaining a scholarly position is possible only with a great deal of reflexivity, which, however, the researcher has been trained to engage in since the initial stages of the process.

### 3. Layers of reflexivity in the ritual

After discussing the layers of reflexivity in the field in general, we shall turn our attention to the deeper set of layers – those which are confronted when the anthropological observer becomes a participant and has to face the same reflexivity layers as the other participants, i.e. in the ritual proper. To be reflexive, Victor Turner claims, “is to be at once one’s own subject and direct object”.<sup>17</sup> A performing group does not merely “‘flow’ in unison at these performances, but, more actively, tries to understand itself in order to change itself”.<sup>18</sup> This does not happen automatically or habitually; on the contrary, it is “highly contrived, artificial, of culture not nature, a deliberate and voluntary work of art”.<sup>19</sup> Rituals seem to provoke reflexivity. In other words, people tend to perform rituals in order to act out a role by living it and then to reflect on, and subsequently incorporate the experience into the new post-ritual personality and life.

The idea that rituals are reflexive performances whose intended goal is transformation is confirmed by my fieldwork among contemporary Western Pagans, magicians and Witches. In the following, I will discuss three important features common to all the rituals I have witnessed:

- 1) Knowing what one is doing;
- 2) working with structure: “acting it out”,<sup>20</sup> to gain a specific experience or avoiding it to open oneself to any experience;
- 3) struggling to achieve workability: effervescence, power raising, emotion, ecstasy.

#### 3.1. Knowing what one is doing

The idea of rituals as a “mute” form of practice is still sometimes supported by researchers in folklore studies. Folklore scholars study rituals, allegedly performed for centuries, whose original meaning has been for-

17 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, New York: PAJ Publications 1982, 100.

18 *Ibid.*, 101.

19 V. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance...*, 24.

20 Michael Stausberg, „Reflexivity“, in: Jens Kreinath – Jan Susek – Michael Stausberg (eds.), *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, Leiden – Boston: Brill 2008, 627-646: 627.

gotten and the sole reason for their performance today seems to be keeping the tradition as part of an intangible heritage. It is the researcher's supposed task to analyze the ritual and thereby discover its "original" meaning, completely unknown to the practitioners.<sup>21</sup> However, even in this context, this statement is debatable as there are two kinds of knowledge: experiential and academic. A lack of academic knowledge does not necessarily imply that people do not know what they are doing and that the researcher equipped with scholarly knowledge knows more.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in the area of pagan studies and the anthropology of magic the situation is completely different. The people I work with are not only participants but also the creators of rituals, which they construct with a clear purpose in mind. The rituals are built on the basis of a combination of literature (including scholarly texts), knowledge gained in training, experience from other rituals, and unverified personal gnosis; in fact, the process of building a ritual does not differ much from the preparation of an academic lecture. That this is the case when studying rituals in "self-conscious, educated societies" has been observed by Ronald Grimes: "The differences between theoretical and indigenous vocabulary for discussing rituals are not so clear as when one does a field study of village rites in exotic cultures."<sup>23</sup> Contemporary Pagans and magic practitioners know very well what they are doing and this knowledge is both experiential and academic.

### 3.2. Working with structure

Acting out a given structure is aimed at raising power in the ritual with the goal of gaining experience and/or knowledge and consequently transformation within a previously given frame of ideas; e.g., a fire ritual may be aimed at learning by experience and internalizing various attributes of fire and spiritual beings connected with this element with the ultimate goal of gaining inspiration (or another corresponding "fire" quality), i.e. to be transformed into an inspired personality. Similarly, a seasonal ritual such as Samhain<sup>24</sup> may be connected with death and death attributes and aimed at the experience of death, decay, darkness, and rebirth. The ritual either

---

21 Being a member of The Ritual Year group working under the SIEF (International Society for Ethnology and Folklore), I have witnessed this approach a number of times.

22 That this is a significant feature of this field I realized when supported in my enterprise by an academic colleague from the area of folklore studies: "As soon as you acquire their knowledge you'll be above them as you also possess the academic one." In my experience, e.g. when communicating or working with an elderly experienced magician and Free Mason, the asymmetry tends to be reversed.

23 R. L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies...*, 9.

24 Originally a Celtic ritual, traditionally marking the end of harvest and the beginning of winter, the dark part of the year.



works or it does not – the successful achievement of the goal is in no way guaranteed. The experience is reflected on by the participants after the ritual.

While many rituals have a given structure, many others do not. Either the structure is loose or there is no structure and the practitioners “push the locomotive, jump in and let it carry them”, as I was told by two experimental magicians after engaging in a ritual with them.<sup>25</sup> Unlike with structured rituals where the script is written beforehand and distributed to the participants in order for them to learn their parts and internalize them, experimental magicians prefer to state the intent, open the ritual, see what happens, and experience whatever there is to experience. To give the reader a better idea, the intent of the above mentioned ritual was “creating a strong astral whirl and thickening the energy in the circle with the goal of supporting the visions and materializations in further practice”. The astral whirl was planned to be sent, first, to the outer world, to ensure that the visions, people, books, and situations would come from there, and, second, to the water in the cup in the ritual circle to provoke the rise of personal gnosis. The leading priest opened the ritual by reading a text in Esperanto,<sup>26</sup> slowly at first and then faster and faster; his voice gradually changed and he seemed to transform into a sorcerer/conjurer, creating very hypnotic effects in the other two participants<sup>27</sup> with the result that all three participants began to see shapes, colours and images with their inner sight. Then one of them took up a drum and began drumming, another one took up a cup with a movement to suggest the pushing of energy into it and drank from it, each joining to perform other spontaneous actions. The ritual continued for an unspecified length of time and then stopped. The visions and perceptions were carefully reflected on still within the circle.

As I was told later by one of the participants, the intention in these kinds of rituals is to share ideas which are understood as subjective and expected to differ from person to person. When coincidence occurs, this is understood as a possible archetypal vision and “one is pleased by that because something happened that had an impact on deeper levels of the human mind”.<sup>28</sup> Reflection thus serves as an examination of the current style of magical work. It tests its workability, to which we shall now turn.

---

25 Prague, 10 August 2012.

26 When asked about the choice of the language, the priest replied: “I wanted to try and see how that will work; whether the reading in an unknown language is able to create an appropriate setting for the following ritual” (text message, 17 April 2013).

27 Including myself.

28 Male, experimental magician, aged 32.

### 3.3. Struggling for workability

The most common precondition of contemporary pagan and magical ritual practice is not authenticity in the sense of historical evidence but authenticity in the sense of workability. The rituals must work; they are done with the goal of achieving something. The requirement of the workability of the practice demands reflexivity: the effects of the ritual must be checked. Discussing whether the ritual worked or not and why is just as important as the performance itself.

How is workability achieved? First, the rituals contain self-referential statements declaring the purpose and directing the attention of the participants towards the goal. Second, there are elements in the ritual that make the practitioner turn back to him/herself and become the object of him/herself. This happens especially when the ritual performance is based on, or contains aspects of mystery drama. Acting out a mythical story is a kind of “role playing” which differs from theatrical role playing in that it is supposed to bring permanent change or a change or effect in the world beyond the ritual time-space. As expressed by Richard Schechner, rituals are “systems of performative transformations”.<sup>29</sup> Third, the transformation is frequently achieved via altered states of consciousness reached by various power raising techniques, such as chanting, drumming etc.<sup>30</sup> Again, the desired result is not certain and seems to be only partially in the hands of the participants, as reported by one of my informants: “We rehearsed the ritual before the actual ritual and it was powerful and when we did the actual one we realized that the ritual had already been done.”<sup>31</sup>

Transformation of some kind is indeed the ultimate goal, but it does not come about automatically; sometimes it takes time, sometimes it does not happen at all, or it happens only for some participants while others remain in the “as if”<sup>32</sup> stage (they play their roles aware that they are mere roles) or even in the original “as is” stage, not even *playing the game*, but merely observing. To illustrate the point, invocations of divine beings are often included in rituals of different kinds, the success of which plays a crucial role. The roles of the invoking priest/priestess and the priest/priestess to be invoked demand certain skills and experience. When the role is taken by a ritual beginner, the invocation might not be successful. These are the reflections I recorded after a ritual that contained the invocation of the Three Norns:

29 Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, London – New York: Routledge 1988, xviii.

30 Not all Pagans follow this rule but most groups I work with do.

31 Female, eclectic Witch, 23 years old.

32 More on the “as if” and “as is” e.g. in William E. Smythe, “On the Psychology of ‘As If’”, *Theory and Psychology* 15, 2005, 283-303.

I didn't really feel much, I think the goddess did not really enter me but I felt I should hug everybody... I felt the presence of the goddess intensely, my senses changed, I could see everything very clearly, I knew everything about you [i.e. the other participants] but synchronically, all knowledge at once...<sup>33</sup>

Many groups I work with use mystery drama, in which the participants are expected to experience the emotions connected with the story enacted. The drama experience is then reflected on. An example of a traumatic experience may be that of the Lammas ritual, which in some traditions dramatically reenacts the sacrifice of the corn king. The person acting out the role of the king tends to have ambiguous feelings concerning the ritual: excitement, because it is a celebration, and, on a deeper level, panic, as a sacrifice is going to take place and he – the king – is going to die. Other performers – the mourners – experience and then witness a feeling of deep sadness. At Beltane, one might observe otherwise serious people literally dance around and leap with joy, wearing flower crowns (including men), embracing, and kissing each other<sup>34</sup> spontaneously. The reflexive discussion afterwards tends to be somewhat hushed in the first case while the merry spirit continues in the second.

The demand for workability is implicit in the philosophies of contemporary pagan and magical groups and seems to correlate with the lack of historical continuity of these traditions. Contrary to folklore rituals based on traditions going back for centuries, even reconstructionist Pagans<sup>35</sup> have very little to rely on in terms of historical evidence. On the other hand, this deficiency opens space for creativity and invention. Many contemporary traditions, however, began as ones allegedly continuing in an ancient tradition. A good example is Wicca, founded by the anthropologist Gerald Gardner, who claimed to have been taught the craft by the “leader of a surviving witch coven of the ancient religion”<sup>36</sup> in the late 1930s. Wicca also drew heavily on the works of Margaret Murray,<sup>37</sup> an anthro-

33 The Three Norns ritual at Spring Equinox, Všeruby, 20 March 2012.

34 Kissing on the lips includes women kissing men and women kissing women. Men embrace tightly. Only rarely in very LGBT inclusive and emotionally intense events have I seen men kissing men on the lips.

35 Mainly ethnic Pagans (Slavic, Germanic, Celtic), whose aim is to reconstruct the tradition as close to how it appeared when practiced by their ancestors, while trying to make it vivid and compatible with contemporary lifestyle; not a “museum exhibit” (more on this topic in Kamila Velkoborská, “Pagan Identity and Tradition Today: The Conception of Identity and (Re)creation of Tradition among Contemporary Practitioners of Slavic Religion in the Czech Republic”, *Cosmos: The Journal of the Traditional Cosmology Society* 24, 2008, 75-89).

36 Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, 206.

37 Especially Margaret Murray, *The Witch-cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1921.

pologist and Egyptologist, who also claimed the continuity of the witchcraft tradition in Europe until modern times. When these claims were dismissed later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it did not undermine the tradition; on the contrary, most practitioners of Wicca embraced the idea that their tradition worked despite the lack of deep historical roots and further promoted (and still do) creativity and invention in developing their ritual practice.

The most extreme attitude to workability – in the sense that nothing else matters – can be found with the practitioners of Chaos Magic. Chaos Magic practitioners set themselves apart from all traditions, relying solely upon the individual practitioner, who is encouraged to utilize anything that would serve as a tool to achieve his or her goal. Using the motto “nothing is true, everything is permitted”<sup>38</sup> they claim to liberate themselves from “limitations imposed on the apprentice magician which can be acquired by reading too many ‘authoritative books’”.<sup>39</sup> Thus, “[i]n practical work ... [the individual practitioner] will choose to believe in whatever system that will allow the effect he wants to take place”.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Reflections of the performers

We have discussed various ways in which the practitioners engage in reflection within the ritual and on the ritual after the performance. They also reflect on the anthropologist’s presence in the ritual. As this makes an impact on what is going on in the field, this must also be taken into account by the anthropologist. The nature of this reflection shifts with the length of fieldwork and the position of the anthropologist in the field. When having an anthropologist participate at a ritual for the first time, reflection of this fact by the practitioners might change their behaviour. This is impossible to detect unless the researcher has a reliable informant in the group already. For example, when I participated in one Samhain ritual<sup>41</sup> I was already knowledgeable about the members of the coven thanks to my informant. Thus, I learned that one of the priests, being very casual by nature, usually called the elements in a rather rudimentary manner: “Fire come!” When I took part, however, he called the element in a very elabo-

38 More about Chaos Magic to be found in the excellent publication by Dave Evans such as Dave Evans, *The History of British Magic After Crowley: Kenneth Grant, Amado Crowley, Chaos Magic, Satanism, Lovecraft, The Left Hand Path, Blasphemy and Magical Morality*, [Great Britain:] Hidden Publishing 2007, and in books published by the Chaos magicians themselves (e.g. Phil Hine, Peter Carrol).

39 D. Evans, *The History of British Magic...*, 364.

40 A quote of Lionel Snell *ibid.*, 364-365.

41 Starý Plzenec, 3 November 2012. Seven participants.

rate and dramatic way. When asked, my informant told me: “Oh, the boys just wanted to show off when you joined...”<sup>42</sup>

Sometimes reflection leads the practitioners to deliberately give false information to the researcher when they are interviewed. As the history of anthropology shows, some “scientific facts” are based on stories told by informants who simply had fun fooling the researcher.<sup>43</sup> It seems that colonial scholars with an asymmetrical approach did not realize that their informants might also cherish asymmetry. I naively thought that this does not happen anymore until I received a text message from my key informant: “To be sincere, inspired by Native Americans, we sometimes tell the esoterics-hungry total bollocks that reflect what they want us to be☺, the best in this is W.”<sup>44</sup>

### 5. Emotions in the field

Emotions in the field occur on two distinct levels: first, emotions as reported by the practitioners and experienced by the researcher (and these again are twofold: felt as a practitioner and as an observer) and, second, emotions as deliberately employed in the ritual to secure its effect and those arising inadvertently.

Emotion is not the insider expression. The ritual performers rather speak about tuning up to what is coming, to what they want to achieve, to the spirits and gods. Some traditions do without it completely; for example, the Chaos magician Peter Carroll claims that the interest in emotion belongs to the fourth – atheistic – aeon of humanity’s progress (the fifth is about to come), has replaced spirituality, and will be replaced in the future by psychic powers in the finding of solutions to problems. In the atheistic aeon, the “existence of spiritual beings is considered to be a question without any real meaning. Men look toward their emotional experience as the only ground of meaning”.<sup>45</sup> This corresponds to the idea that, out of the four philosophical conceptions of magic,<sup>46</sup> the psychological one is most compatible with science and therefore used most commonly by academics

42 Female, 23 years old.

43 Apart from the famous story of Margaret Mead being hoaxed (as interpreted by Derek Freeman, “The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research”, in: Penelope Schoeffel [ed.], *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 108/4, 1999, 436-438), see a discussion on “gullible ethnographers” in: R. Schechner, *Performance Theory...*, 280.

44 ... whom I interviewed the week before. Male shaman, 39 year old, Brotherhood of Wolves.

45 Peter J. Carroll, *Liber Null & Psychonaut: An Introduction to Chaos Magic*, San Francisco – Newburyport: Weiser Books 1987, 88.

46 Summarized in Josef Veselý, *Magie*, Praha: Nakladatelství Vodňář 2008, 20-26.

writing on magic,<sup>47</sup> while the other three – the demonological, energetic and information conceptions – remain largely unused by scholars. To put it simply, the psychological conception means that the worlds inhabited by spirits and gods do not have a separate and independent existence (which characterizes the demonological conception) but exist only in the human psyche.<sup>48</sup> Despite being aware of other elements that are at play in rituals where magic is performed, I will stick to the strategy mentioned above, as it still creates the most convenient bridge between the world of academia and the world of ritual magic. Both practitioners and non-practitioners understand the expression “emotions” in the same way.

Although they would not use the term in their conversations, all my interviewees agreed that emotion plays the key role in the rituals, and that either emotion comes about naturally or is provoked intentionally. Emotion is the mediator of ritual dynamics and, according to many practitioners, rituals without emotions do not work. Further questioning revealed the fact that raised emotion brings about ecstasy, and ecstasy is essential for communication with the gods. The effervescence of emotion in the sense described already by Émile Durkheim, as the situation when the crowd is “moved by a common passion [and] we become susceptible to feelings and actions of which we are incapable on our own”,<sup>49</sup> is valued highly; as I was told repeatedly, the more people share the emotion and then ecstasy, the better for the ritual: “The more people sit on the hedge, the better.”<sup>50</sup>

Emotion is raised in a variety of ways. Diverse power raising techniques are used, such as drumming, singing, dancing, and howling. The leading priest is sometimes responsible for raising the emotion in the participants by means of ritual speech, gestures, or phatic cries.<sup>51</sup> This behaviour has also been well described by Émile Durkheim: “And as passions so strong and uncontrolled are bound to seek outward expression, there are violent gestures, shouts, even howls, deafening noises of all sorts from all sides

47 For example Susan Greenwood, Viviane Crowley.

48 More on the philosophical concepts of magic in J. Veselý, *Magie...*, 20-26.

49 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001, 157 (first French ed. 1912).

50 Male shaman, aged 39, Brotherhood of Wolves. Personal interview 21 March 2014. He refers to the term *hagazussa*: one who sits on the hedge. The hedge here means the boundary space between the world of physical reality and the spirit world. See also Claude Lecouteux, *Trpaslíci a elfové ve středověku*, Praha: Volvox Globator 1998, 127 (French original: Claude Lecouteux, *Les nains et les elfes au Moyen Âge*, Paris: Imago<sup>2</sup>1997).

51 For example the invocation may end: “... we are calling the She-Wolf, the Great White Wolf, our mother... we are calling the She-Wolf, grey and beautiful, [pause] to be with us on this day, oohhh gods... aarrhhaaaa ...” (participation in Ostara ritual, Kovčín, 30 March 2013).

that intensify even more the state they express.”<sup>52</sup> Recently I was introduced to a very similar idea in the form of an instruction for contemporary practitioners:

The emotions must be employed... they shoot you up somewhere and then the gods are in control and when they spurt out, madness and frenzy comes, there is no other way, the person loses self-control... it's another dimension... it's ecstasy... it's like when the demon possesses a person and makes him rave – that's what it's all about...<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, this observation, when applied to the practice of contemporary Pagans and magicians, is rather more wishful thinking than a reflection of reality, as I understand from occasional laments of ritual leaders: “People are stuck, no big emotions really... people need to stop thinking and they can't do it...”<sup>54</sup>

This problem is resolved in two basic ways that correspond to two different kinds of ritual. The first is the kind led by the main priest and perhaps one or two helpers, the others present being participants with no specific roles who are “merely” expected *to go with the flow* of the ritual. In this case, emotion is raised in less active participants by the example of the leaders or other participants, for whom reaching a heightened state of emotion or even ecstasy, trance or other types of alternative states of consciousness is easier.<sup>55</sup> The second is the kind performed by a close-knit group of initiated members who have been carefully selected and trained to fit the emotional setup of the group, which solves the problem beforehand.

Needless to say, not all groups demand that the effervescence be so intense as to lead “to unpredictable behaviour”,<sup>56</sup> but emotion is always supposed to be felt sincerely and not merely acted out. This is hard to test; a change in the pitch of the voice or the trembling of the hands or body may betray heightened emotion, but the core is intangible and usually understood by its effects and reflected on in the following way: *It was a great invocation, I could really feel the presence of the goddess... I felt something was going on in the circle... your voice really affected me... but the shadow of the horned one in the midnight forest was divine, wasn't it? ... [T]he invocation worked well for me... you were absolutely stunning as a goddess...*

52 É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms...*, 163.

53 Male priest, aged 40, Brotherhood of Wolves.

54 Male priest, aged 40, Brotherhood of Wolves.

55 Contemporary Pagans tend to favour the excitation modus in reaching alternative states of consciousness, inhibition modus is used rarely.

56 É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms...*, 163.



The fieldwork anthropologist is placed in the middle of this diversity of emotional expressions, needs, and evaluations with his or her unique emotional setup. In ritual studies this emotional setup may influence the field and the choice of it. I decided not to pursue the research in two groups I had been interested in, solely on the basis of not being able to connect with the people; I was unable to *tune up*<sup>57</sup> with them either in or out of the ritual. I was not willing to pretend and even if I had been, I might not have been able to gain access to valuable data or might have misunderstood some data. By contrast, in other more numerous cases I have been able to tune up with several practitioners to such a degree that I was invited to unscheduled and sometimes spontaneous ritual actions involving only one or two other people.<sup>58</sup>

The requirement of heightened emotion and ecstasy poses an especially difficult problem for the anthropologist – since how can one be an observer when one is supposed to switch off thinking and fully submerge oneself into the shared madness? Pretence is not an option for ethical or moral reasons and also because the requirement imposed on the participant (either implicit or explicit) tends to be love and trust. Such pretence might be recognized and have a disturbing effect on the ritual. Moreover, there are cases of events which raise such strong emotions in the anthropologist that he or she has no time or capacity to even consider remaining an observer. Good examples are healing rituals in which the participants are supposed to accumulate energy to be sent to a personal acquaintance who

---

57 By tuning up I understand connecting with the people on several different levels. For the rituals containing the aspect of shared ecstasy or ritual nudity, emotional and physical unison (in the sense of interpersonal chemistry) are important. In other cases people should be harmonized intellectually and cognitively; they might come into dissonance due to the use of different god's names, for example. And yet another example is the practitioner's preference as regards the very style of ritual performance. To offer a personal account, I find extensive improvisation in the ritual (e.g. using speech tools in the form of phrases like: "... and what shall we do now?" or "could you, please, invoke the fire now") disturbing while I know some practitioners find it relaxing in the sense that they do not have to worry about forgetting the text.

58 Two examples: One included the invocation of a god and goddess, the nature of whom the two practitioners (including myself) wanted to explore. The work was preceded by studying the deities by secular means (books, internet, discussions) and the ritual proper began with tuning up to these deities in meditation, which was to be followed by spontaneous action and interaction ruled by the lead of the deities. In contrast to this well planned action, another began without any clear purpose and was initiated by the urgent need of one of the practitioners "to do something spiritual", being exhausted by the troubles of daily life. The three practitioners (including myself) then abandoned the group feasting at the campfire and departed to the woods with a candle, herbs for incense (*Melilotus officinalis*), and drums, and at a spontaneously selected place performed the ritual which included drumming and tuning voices together, to the atmosphere of the forest and the deities of that particular group.



is seriously ill or dying. I experienced such healing rituals three times. In all cases, my “observer mode” switched off automatically and I focused fully on the work in hand, and only when the ritual was over did I recollect and reflect on what had happened.

Another emotion that may influence the anthropologist’s presence in the field is fear. Sometimes the ritual situations cross the boundary of what is considered safe by the fieldworker. Being alone in the middle of the woods at night, having to spend a freezing winter night out of doors or in a derelict house without heating or electricity, and being a witness to a serious fistfight which included dog bites are some of the examples from my own fieldwork. These are fears connected with the safety of the body. There are, however, situations which test the researcher’s mind and these are encounters with what is commonly called the supernatural, which might even prevent the researcher from participating – if, that is, withdrawal is possible, which, often, it is not. An example is a winter solstice celebration in Chaos magical and Necronomicon<sup>59</sup> style, which consisted in a walk through Prague on the night of the solstice, an element of which was to observe the place from the position of the dead. To achieve this, the participants were cloaked and masked and ritually slain by the symbolic (but very suggestive) cutting of throats in the course of an incantation in an artificial language called Cthuvian.<sup>60</sup> After a several-hours-long walk in the company of their dead ancestors, the participants were finally devoured by the Necronomicon entity Hastur.<sup>61</sup> Needless to say, fear is one of the emotions appreciated as a useful tool in raising energy.

Another kind of fear is fear of the unknown and this kind of fear is experienced commonly before initiation. As the initiatory experience must not be revealed (and is also believed to be intransmissible), all I may share with my academic colleagues is that it was an experience as powerful as it is for anyone taking the matter seriously; which is a necessary precondition of the initiation.<sup>62</sup> Taking the matter seriously is tested during lengthy training. To put it simply, during both initiations my mind and body were too engaged to let the anthropological observer in. Initiation itself, as well as being a sign of acceptance by the group, is an emotionally overwhelming experience.

---

59 A fictional grimoire appearing in the works of the American horror writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937).

60 Or R’lyehian, created by Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who used the language in some of his stories.

61 I participated in this ritual (organized by the now inactive group Blasphemion and called The Feast with Harlequin) in 2009 and I have described it in Kamila Velkoborská, “Winter Solstice Ritual Today”, in: Mare Kõiva (ed.), *The Inner and the Outer: The Ritual Year Conference 6*, Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press 2011, 43-56.

62 I have only been initiated twice, therefore I cannot generalize.

Another emotion the anthropologist studying pagan rituals might face is feeling certain inhibitions. Some Pagans enjoy practicing nude, which is commonly referred to as practicing *skyklad*,<sup>63</sup> or enjoy a *skyklad* ritual bath in a stream or lake. This might create a serious dilemma for some researchers – go with it and experience what there is to experience, or stay clothed, observe the others, and, thus, paradoxically, be exposed to them as an outsider and perhaps risk not being invited again. If the decision is in favour of full participation, the experience, at least for the first time, might be overwhelming.

## 6. Sitting on the hedge

The researcher in ritual studies learns to sit on the hedge with other practitioners and, due to being an observer from the outside, he or she becomes the *sitter on the hedge* par excellence. The other hedge – the one dividing the world of the practitioners and that of the academic world – is the one he sits on alone. These two hedge levels loosely correspond to what Ronald Grimes presents as two tasks an anthropologist studying rituals must face:

Both kinds of tasks – the intersubjective and the analytical – are necessary for understanding ritual. The first calls for self-knowledge. The second demands suspension of self-interest and requires concentration on actions and values that are not one's own.<sup>64</sup>

63 *Skyklad* ritual as an established practice is predominantly a Wiccan matter. According to Wiccans, sexual energy thus heightened leads to more effective magic, an idea having roots in the origins of Wicca and its creator, Gerald Gardner (for detailed information see Joanne Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic*, London – New York: Routledge 2007, 87) and with the key expression of Wiccan spirituality as embodied in the so called “Charge” (originally a Masonic expression): “... And ye shall be free from slavery, and as a sign that ye be really free ye shall be naked in your rites, both men and women, and ye shall dance, sing, feast, make music, and love, all in my praise” (Gardner’s wording, rewritten by Doreen Valiente, in Aidan A. Kelly, *Crafting the Art of Magic I: A History of Modern Witchcraft, 1939-1964*, St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications 1991, 53). Other Czech pagans, rather than using nudity systematically, experiment with it, either relying on warm weather or taking it as a challenge when it is cold; such experiments are frequently spontaneous and private. Recently a new closed Facebook group *Pagan naturism* was established, and there the members exchange experiences and photos containing nudity as connected to their pagan worldview. Although not established as a part of ritual, nudity seems to be understood by many Czech practitioners as a key natural element in Paganism. As regards the terminology, the Czechs who practice some kind of Western eclectic Paganism like Wicca or Druidry, or are active internationally, know and use the term *skyklad*, but it is not a rule. The Slavic Pagans, for example, would never use an English expression and speak about *purification bath* with the implicit meaning of bathing naked known to the participants.

64 R. L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies...*, 19.

I have hopefully offered the reader a sufficient number of examples to convey an accurate picture of the field and the researcher's work in real-life situations. Now we may turn to the second task of the researcher and that is to cut one part of the split self out of the data collected and look at it as if from a distance. I have identified two complementary ways to achieve this; they may be called *inner* and *outer*. The first is the one that makes up the main theme of the article – reflexivity. The precondition of a successful reflexive evaluation of data is, of course, very detailed note taking, which also includes the recording of sensual perceptions, impressions, feelings, and uncontrolled thoughts. These are supplemented by structured and unstructured interviews with informants. The more I become familiar with the field, the more questions I ask, and I ask a further set of questions during the writing process. This is obviously because, with the gaining of knowledge, new, more insightful questions always arise, but asking such questions also helps greatly in reflecting on what one already knows well, though only experientially. Asking questions at this stage of the fieldwork differs significantly from conducting interviews before or during the initial stages of the fieldwork. From trying to glean basic information and orientate oneself in the field, the researcher here paradoxically moves to asking questions that he or she already has answers to. This is perceived as somewhat strange, as the informants know very well that the interviewer knows the answers – he has been doing and experiencing the things he is asking about with them. As an example, while writing these paragraphs I asked several of my informants/co-ritualists how they use emotions in rituals. This is a useful way of achieving the distance necessary to evaluate the data; moreover, the answers are revealing and illuminating and bring new information or at least new perspectives. Here, I go one step further than Malinowski, who states that “[y]ou cannot rely on what they say they do, instead you must rely upon yourself, watching and seeing what they do”.<sup>65</sup> In ritual studies in which the anthropologist is fully involved, “watching and seeing” is complemented (or replaced) by doing and experiencing; it is essential to attentively listen to *what they say they do* and, when one has done it with them, ask again. Needless to say, the practitioners also engage in reflection and ask questions, making the researcher think about things he or she did not consider before.

Asking the second set of questions and answering the informants' questions also serves as a reminder (for both the performers and the researcher) of the person's position as an academic observer in the group. Taking

---

65 “Malinowski”, in: *Tales from the Jungle* III, BBC Four, 2006, 2:23-2:32. Available online at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-sBtFJMNrA&index=3&list=PL-D00AA5F940FCCA89>>, [12 December 2014].

notes also works as a good reminder, as well as continually taking photos and sharing the outcomes of the research with the group. Once, when found in a remote corner of the room, busily taking notes, I received the comment: “Oh, I almost forgot you are actually studying us.”<sup>66</sup>

The outer way of keeping a bird’s eye perspective on one’s field is multi-site ethnography. This may be time consuming and also logistically problematic, as the major pagan holidays follow the astronomical year and therefore the rituals tend to fall on the same dates, but it serves as an excellent way of looking at the groups one is a member of from a different perspective – for example, to look at the ecstatic rituals of the Brotherhood of Wolves with Wiccan eyes, or, conversely, to look at highly structured Wiccan rituals from the perspective of those who practise in the woods and howl during their rituals.

In the case of anthropological research done in one’s home country, yet another level of reflexivity may be achieved by conducting (albeit small-scale) research abroad, if possible on another continent, where the researcher is clearly distinguishable from his or her field (i.e. the people have a different ethnic, cultural and social background) and religious practice is set in a frame of patterns the researcher is unfamiliar with. For example, during my visit to Cuba, I visited a working Santeria shrine in the company of the leading priest of the local Santeria community.<sup>67</sup> The experience influenced not only my perception of European pagan/witchcraft/magical rituals but also the nature of ethnography done at home. In short, I reconsidered the significance of locality in fieldwork.

By participating in different kinds of rituals performed within diverse traditions, the fieldwork anthropologist gets a chance to see things invisible to insiders as well as to anthropologists focusing on a single tradition.

## Conclusion

---

66 It was a friendly comment suggesting at least two kinds of feelings: pride at being studied by a researcher and appreciation of the researcher’s ability to fit in the group. Needless to say, this raised a variety of uncontrolled feelings in myself too – pride at achieving this kind of acceptance being the strongest.

67 I had substantial theoretical knowledge of Santeria prior to my visit to Cuba and had an accurate idea (as I thought) of how this religion is practiced. I wanted to ground this knowledge with some authentic first-hand experience and see “the real thing”. And that is also what I got. The pride at managing to achieve the almost impossible (the Santos are not really open to tourists) turned to panic when entering the shrine with the priest, whose behaviour was beyond everything I had experienced before. The huge ancient knife he used in the operations, the feathers everywhere, and the blood on the earthen floor and the worn-out statues of the Orishas was too much for me and as soon as I saw an opportunity I politely explained I had seen enough, thanked the priest, bowed low to the statue of the saint of that particular group (and left a rich offering) and, trembling, abandoned the place.

Moving up through the layers of reflexivity from that experienced when participating in a particular ritual to the reflection on rituals as practiced in a diversity of traditions – from a case study focus to a multi-site research perspective – the researcher cannot escape the subjective perception and presentation of what he or she has experienced; the fieldwork does not stop being positioned, situational, and partial,<sup>68</sup> but reflexivity certainly prevents him or her from getting stuck in this situatedness.

The goal of the paper was to show reflexivity in its complexity and to suggest ways of transforming the “reflexivity muddle” into a workable system generating both insight and perspective. To successfully climb the reflexivity ladder when facing various problems in the field, the anthropologist needs to take into account forces that influence his or her understanding of that particular field situation, one of the most significant being emotions.

By recognizing reflexivity and the constant interplay of emotions as a problem, these can then be used as tools in producing ethnographic writing which reflects the perspectives of both the insider fully engaged in the processes played out in the field and the outsider watching and seeing the processes as if from a distance, including those going on in his or her head. Last but not least, writing itself generates insight and, as such, it can be seen as yet another layer of reflexivity. I have come to many of the conclusions presented here only when trying to express in written form my previously held conclusions and critically reflecting on them. In other words, this paper would not have been written... without writing it.

---

68 For a discussion on positionality, situatedness and partiality of fieldwork see L. Abu-Lughod, “Writing against Culture...”.



## SUMMARY

**Reflecting on Reflecting in the Study of Contemporary Pagan and Magical Ritual**

Reflexivity, once a revolutionary idea and now an established dogma, can become a vital tool in anthropological fieldwork only provided that it is considered in its complexity and not simply as being conscious of the self. Such a tool is especially important in research conducted in the area of lived religion, which requires intellectual and emotional commitment on the part of the researcher and has, therefore, a possible impact on the researcher's life beyond the time-space of the research proper. Drawing on my longitudinal fieldwork and my participant observations among contemporary pagans and witches in order to demonstrate this point, I selected mainly examples of situations that can be seen as endangering the quality of the research due to the fact that they are connected with the researcher's personal propensities and emotional setup and therefore difficult to control. The goal of the article is to show how reflexivity, combined with a multi-site research strategy, can effectively deal with such situations and help the researcher produce ethnographic writing which reflects both the outlook of the insider fully engaged in the processes played out in the field and the perspective of the outsider observing the processes as if from a distance, including those going on in his or her head.

**Keywords:** reflexivity; contemporary ritual; pagan; magic; witch; emotions; multi-site research; engagement; insider and outsider perspective.

Saga Studio  
Na Vrchu 510  
330 27 Vejprnice  
Czech Republic

KAMILA VELKOBORSKÁ

kamila@sagastudio.cz