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CONTEMPORARY PAGAN AND NATIVE FAITH MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE

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berghahn
NEW YORK • OXFORD
www.berghahnbooks.com

Contents

Published in 2015 by
Berghahn Books
www.berghahnbooks.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A C.I.P. cataloging record is available from the Library of Congress.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78238-646-9 (hardback)
E-ISBN: 978-1-78238-647-6 (ebook)

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Hot, Strange, Völkisch, Cosmopolitan Native Faith and Neopagan Witchcraft in Berlin's Changing Urban Context

Victoria Hegner

Introduction

This chapter is about Neopagan witches in Berlin (Germany) and the complex ways they make use of the Germanic or Norse pantheon and Teutonic alphabet within their religious practice.¹ The focus is the role of the immediate urban context and how this inscribes interpretations of witchcraft, mythology and symbolism, and thus gives shape to a Native Faith – a faith based on a specific idea of belonging to a certain territory and ethnicity predicated on history and ancestry.²

Studies of Neopaganism, witchcraft or (new) religion are usually framed by a national context and the contingencies this produces for the development of religious practices and cosmologies. This approach can be highly informative because it makes explicit the fact that in times of intense globalization, the category of 'nation' still holds strong discursive value, particularly in view of what 'native' and 'indigenous' in different areas of social life are supposed to (or can be made to) mean (Magliocco 2004; Rountree 2004, 2010; Strmiska 2005). By narrowing the focus further, the individual city can be seen as an emblematic site as well as an important laboratory for the development of religious movements. Cities – with their cultural openness, diversity, highly individualized residents and accessibility to niche lifestyles – give impetus to religious innovations which may later manifest more openly and diffuse into wider social settings (Cox 1984; Greverus and Welz 1990; Orsi 1999; Livezey 2000;

MetroZones 2011; Becci, Borchardt and Casanova 2013). The specificity of the city, its cultural and historical singularity, surely leaves its imprint on religions and, in the case of Berlin, on Neopagan witchcraft. As an American scholar of religious studies, Robert Orsi, has pointed out (1999: 46): ‘What people do religiously in cities is shaped by what kinds of cities they find themselves in, at what moments in the histories of those cities’.

In order to reveal what kind of city Berlin is and how its unique context and history are inscribed in Neopagan and Native Faith practices, the chapter is divided into two parts. The first gives an insight into the beginnings of the Berlin Neopagan witch-scene during the early 1980s. It will be shown that the story of Neopagan witchcraft in Berlin is clearly a tale of a divided city. Hence, it is significant that Neopagan witches started off in *West Berlin*. Arising from the unique situation of being ‘locked in by the Wall’, the question of space and a place for worship became critical. For modern witches the celebration in and of nature is central; such religious practice is seen as pre-Christian and an important ideal. The goal is to deepen their connection with every natural thing, with community, and thus with the divine overall. However, ‘surrounded by the zone’ – as Neopagan witches now describe the situation of the early 1980s – they seldom performed their religion ‘in nature’ away from the city. Instead they remained within the urban confines and made use of Berlin’s prehistoric sites for their rituals. In relation to the practice of a Native Faith, therefore, some central questions emerge: What religious significance did Neopagans and Neopagan witches ascribe to those sites? How did they reflect upon the local, German and European past and thus construct an historical continuity, with all the ambivalence that carries within the German context? Finally, which impulses from the larger (national and global) Pagan movement reached and became influential within this political island?

Following the historical analysis, the focus of this chapter will shift to the contemporary period. More than twenty years after the Berlin Wall came down the city had changed tremendously, and so had the witch-scene. Even so, the historical beginnings left their mark on Neopagan witchcraft in Berlin and are well remembered collectively. Using ethnographic data and concentrating on a particular group of Neopagan witches, this section will describe how Native Faith practices changed specifically in relation to the altered urban context. Like the historical section of the chapter, this concentrates on the sites of rituals. Where are they situated nowadays? How do witches today find out about sites, or – to be analytically more

precise – how do they construct them? What kind of understanding of history comes into play? And last but not least, how do different strains of Pagan traditions worldwide become reinterpreted within the urban setting of Berlin? By combining an historical analysis with a contemporary ethnography of witchcraft and Native Faith in the city, the chapter aims to draw a complex picture of Neopaganism in relation to the urban. It asks to what extent Neopaganism in itself becomes an expression of the urban.³

Neopagan Witchcraft and Native Faith in the Frontier City: An Exception to the Rule

Since the early 1980s Berlin has developed into one of the centres of Neopagan witchcraft in Germany. The term ‘witch’ refers to a variety of manifestations of Neopagan religiosity. It comprises neo-Germanic groups as well as practitioners of a feminist spirituality (often termed ‘Goddess spirituality’). Some witches are followers of Wicca – a specific interpretation of Neopagan witchcraft first created by the British occultist Gerald B. Gardner (1884–1964) during the 1950s (Schnurbein 1993; Hutton 1999: 205–40; Bötsch 2005; Rensing 2006). The basic organizational principle of Wicca is the coven – a circle of witches into which one has to be ritually initiated (Gardner 1959).

When self-acclaimed Neopagans and Neopagan witches first appeared in Berlin – in West Berlin – they were part of the boom in ‘alternative’ forms of religiosity the city was witnessing at that time. Throughout West Berlin various groups were being established that based their religiosity on sources which ventured far beyond the dominant Christian theology and practices. New Age centres began opening their doors, teaching tantra and Buddhism. Esoteric bookshops sprang up and occultists of diverse strains seemed to reach more people than ever before. Encircled by a socialist and officially atheist state, this urban democratic island seemed to intensify spiritual or religious experimentation. Some activists within the emerging spiritual scene even declared Berlin ‘a spiritual Mecca’ and published what they claimed was ‘The First Esoteric City Guide of the World’ (*Berlin Okkult: der erste esoterische Stadtführer der Welt*). This rather boastful title reflects the dynamics felt at that time. The publishers stated: ‘Berlin is the secret capital of esoterics and occultists. Clairvoyants, fortune-tellers, astrologists, seers, mystics, dervishes ... fairies and magicians work in this metropolis.... In no other

European city do we find so many different religious communities and groups. Indeed, Berlin is a spiritual Mecca' (Scharna, Flamm and Lux 1985: 7).

In this 'spiritual Mecca' one can locate the various beginnings of Neopagan witchcraft. A small advertisement posted by the then 24-year-old student of graphic design Géza von Neményi could count as one of the initial sparks. The advertisement appeared on the noticeboard of an esoteric bookshop called 'Yggdrasil' (the 'world-tree' in Norse mythology). The name of the shop suited the content of the note well. Handwritten in Gothic lettering, it read (Figure 8.1):

Germanic Mythology! Interested members wanted for the purpose of founding an association. The association's mission: spreading mythological knowledge. For that purpose we will celebrate together the old festivals (i.e., Yule, solstice ...) and cultivate old customs; we will also engage in Runology, travel to the gods of Asgard or to the elves of Alfheim. A get-together for real witches (*Hag = Idisen*, Valkyries, wise women ...). Maybe folkdances, folksongs ... (Autumn 1982, author's translation)

As Géza explained during my interview with him, he had tried to be a devoted Christian but always felt something missing in Christianity. 'I missed nature', he said, and went on to describe how he discovered he was actually a Pagan: 'Well, for me there was simply too much desert [in descriptions in the Bible]... I started to buy books about runes and ... the Eddas⁴ as well ... These things spoke much more to my soul. It was the descriptions of nature which I found more interesting... I need nature; it was ... missing in the Bible. Regarding my spiritual feeling, I was a Pagan' (interview, 22 October 2012). In saying there was 'too much desert' in Biblical descriptions, Géza takes up the topos of Christianity as a 'desert religion' – a topos which has its roots in nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism and which became more manifest in the *völkisch* orientalism of the early twentieth century (Wiedemann 2007: 126).⁵ As a 'desert religion' – it was and is argued – Christianity is spatially, culturally and racially alien to Europe and Germany. Géza illustrated this point with an allegory: 'Religion is like a jacket', he said, 'and the jacket Christianity is not really made for our climate. We fixed it, we mended the holes ... but it is not ideal. The jacket is not a made-to-measure suit... Paganism is our made-to-measure suit, congenial to our nature' (interview, 22 October 2012).

As he began to practise as a Pagan, Géza looked upon the Eddas as the basis of his religious cosmology and an inspiration for ritual performances. With a group of like-minded people he hoped to

Germanische Mythologie:

Handwritten
1982

Für einen entsprechenden Verein werden
interessierte Gründungsmitglieder gesucht.
Vereinsziel: Verbreitung mythologischen
Wissens. Dazu z.Bsp. gemeinsame Kultfeiern
(Jul, Sonnenwende zc.) mit alten Bräuten,
RITM+YHTNM (Runenkunde), Reisen zu
den Göttern nach Asgard oder zu den El-
fen nach Alfheim, Treffpunkt für echte He-
gen (Hag=Idisen, Valkyren, weise Frauen
zc), vielleicht Volkstänze, Volkslieder zc.
Naturverbundenheit-Geselligkeit. Keine
Politik.

Géza von Neményi Tel.: 823 20 99 (vor 20 Uhr)

Fig. 8.1 The 'initial spark': handwritten advertisement for the purpose of founding an association to practise and cultivate 'old customs'. Image used with the kind permission of the photographer, Géza von Neményi.

meticulously reconstruct, as he called it, 'our faith' – a faith based on territory, ethnicity and ancestry. His goal was to revive a 'Germanic priesthood' – the so-called *Godentum*.⁶ In line with this kind of reconstructionist approach, Géza refused and still refuses the term 'Neopagan', because for him there is nothing new about 'our faith' and the *Godentum* (see Strmiska (2005: 18–22) for an instructive discussion of definitions of 'Reconstructionist' and 'Eclectic').

After publishing some more advertisements in journals and city magazines a small group of women and men gathered together. They all called themselves Pagan. Only the female members also adopted the term 'witch'. The identification as a witch was based on an image which again went back to the nineteenth century and was introduced mainly by the folklorist Jacob Grimm, who reinterpreted the figure of the witch as a 'wise woman' of pre-Christian times who knew the 'art of healing' and worshipped the Germanic pantheon (Wiedemann 2007: 60–70). As the group started to meet, they were keen to learn more about the Eddas, read them together and begin to celebrate the 'old festivals' and perform rituals as their predecessors supposedly did. Some of them hoped to finally become a *Gode* or a *Gydja* (priest or priestess), going through an initiation process designed by Géza and a friend. The process comprised an oral and written examination on pre-Christian German history before being ordained into the priesthood. The worship of nature as a divine force was, overall, central to the group.

But how does one worship nature within the city, a place often envisioned as the opposite of nature, where nature is diminished and people often described as 'rationalized', 'intellectualized' and detached from the sacred (Simmel 1903; Weber 1994 [1919])? How does one get away from a city like West Berlin – walled in the heart of the Eastern Bloc – to worship in nature? Undoubtedly one *could* leave West Berlin and access the nearby Marc of Brandenburg with its legendary forests, but doing so entailed a strenuous bureaucratic procedure. One had to apply for a temporary passport (*Passierschein*) two to three days in advance. For each day spent in the German Democratic Republic, one had to pay a mandatory fee of twenty-five Deutschmarks. Once in East Germany, visitors from the West had to register with the socialist authorities, leave a visitor's address and sometimes explain the purpose for their visit. Ritualizing – perhaps 'skyclad' (naked) with no valid address – in the forest and worshipping gods and goddesses would probably have sounded degenerate (at best) to the socialist regime and politically too problematic to serve as a legitimate reason for a visit. 'You could get out', Matthias

Wenger, one of the first group members, emphasized. 'However, it was troublesome. That's why we hardly got away from the city, and if we did, we went straight to West Germany.⁷ But this rarely happened – only three or four times a year' (field notes, 13 January 2010).

Instead of trying to retreat from the city, the group, and particularly Géza, turned to history and started to thoroughly study Berlin's Slavic and Germanic past in search of 'ancient cult-sites'. In doing so they drafted a Pagan spiritual topography of the city, which they hoped to revive. As Géza proudly noted, 'I found out about more than forty ancient cult-sites in Berlin. We surely had no undersupply of ritual places'. The rationale underlying the use of these sites for worship, and thus of this spiritual topography, was that 'our predecessors used these holy sites ..., because there are specific forces there'. Géza further explained:

Esoterics would call them ... 'cosmic forces' ... 'magnetism' ... whatever. We say: these are ... divine forces. Germanic and Celtic people simply knew, felt, where the gods live, where the divine forces are particularly strong. At those places they performed their cults. In doing so, they intensified the forces ... Today we can use them. When we go to these places, the forces are still there. (Interview, 22 October 2012)

As the group began to celebrate their rituals at these sites, they tried to use only those which were, at least to some extent, withdrawn from the city's hustle and bustle and located in recreation areas within the urban setting, like spacious parks or lakes on West Berlin's outskirts. All those places were public spaces – officially designed to be open to all city dwellers for recreation and taking time out from hectic urban life. In this sense such places were deeply urban.

It did not take long for city officials to notice the group and its rituals. Local journalists were alerted and began reporting on these 'Pagans and witches', aligning them with religious groups like Jim Jones's People's Temple. The Berlin city magazine, *Tip*, for example, opened an article about Géza von Neményi saying: 'after the most spectacular mass suicide in history in Jonestown, sects have not lost their appeal. Berlin is no exception.... Fun [German: *Heidenspaß*, literally 'heathens' fun', an idiom for 'great fun'] must stop somewhere' (Herrmann 1988: 240). Such rhetoric has to be seen within the context of the anti-cult movement and its heyday during this decade. In West Germany, and particularly in West Berlin, however, it was strongly politicized. Because the group apparently founded their religious practice on Germanic roots and territory, they were immediately suspected of being neo-Nazis or neo-fascists. Use of symbols

like the Teutonic alphabet and the claim of, and pride in, German(ic) ancestry reminded political activists and church and media representatives painfully of the National Socialist regime and its references to Teutonism as well as its 'blood and soil' ideology. In Berlin, as the former political centre of the Nazi regime and with its post-war division, the West German collective memory of the Nazi period was particularly intense and always physically (in the most literal sense) present. Conflicts between Pagans, the church and the media were accordingly unique in their fierceness.

Public interest in this small group grew enormously. In the view of the national West German media, Géza, Matthias and the other group members became probably the most famous Pagans in the German context. Some of the most popular dailies, including *Der Spiegel* and the widely read national tabloid newspaper *Bild-Zeitung*, wrote about them, warning against a religion apparently based on Nazi ideology (*Bild-Zeitung*, 24 February 1984; *Der Spiegel*, 7 January 1985: 71, 74). When the group began to hold rituals at the Teufelsberg (in English, the Devil's Mountain), which is not an ancient cult-site but a rubble mountain, and by that time rather secluded, the *Bild* sensationally headlined: 'Beer and Rune-Oracle: Sacrificial Feast at the Teufelsberg'. West Berlin's evangelical advisor on sects⁸ lamented: 'These neo-Germanics are starting to become a firm association, preaching the call of blood and pure-bred ancestry. Our society cannot be neutral when occult groups abuse the people in our city's need for religion'. Sharply, he concluded, this practice of 'Divine knowledge ... can be interpreted as a ... canonization of Nazi ideology' (*Bild-Zeitung*, 24 February 1984: 4). (Quotations in this paragraph are my translations from the German.)

It is important to note that the group of Pagans and witches, which later became a non-profit association calling itself the *Heidnische Gemeinschaft* (Pagan Community), in fact did contain a few people who were under the surveillance of the regional intelligence service because they were right-wing extremists (Schnurbein 1993: 42; Wiedemann 2007: 210–14). Furthermore, the group and its later rival offshoot, the *Gemeinschaft für heidnisches Leben* (Community for Pagan Life), were in contact with *völkisch*, racist neo-Germanic associations in West Germany like the *Armanen-Orden* or the *Artgemeinschaft* (field notes, 13 January 2010; interview with Géza, 22 October 2012; Schnurbein 1993: 36–45). Nevertheless Géza vehemently tried to distance himself and the *Heidnische Gemeinschaft* from all racism, fascism and Nazism. He made it explicit in the association's statutes that only those people who 'repudiate Fascism or

racism' could be accepted as members (quoted in Schnurbein 1993: 40). He made use of runes carefully: for example, basing their use on literature which was 'unstained' by the National Socialist period. Time after time, Géza appeared at public events in the city, trying to explain Paganism.⁹ Because the *Heidnische Gemeinschaft* grounded its religion in territory and ethnicity, however, it remained highly problematic for the German public. Furthermore, Géza could never satisfactorily show politicians, academics and other Neopagans that he was not a member of the *Armanen-Orden*.¹⁰

For several years to come the political debates about this group of Pagans and witches and its Germanic practices maintained their intensity. For the media in particular, the *Heidnische Gemeinschaft* and subsequently the emerging Neopagan scene in Berlin often served to represent the growing Neopagan and Native Faith phenomenon in the whole of West Germany. And yet, at the same time, it was a special case. Reports and essays on Neopagan groups in the national context almost exclusively turned to West Berlin, where important issues seemed to catalyse.¹¹ However, in its intense political dynamics, the Berlin Neopagan scene remained an exception to the rule. Berlin being a characteristic yet different site of Neopaganism in West Germany, Berlin's Pagans and witches mirrored the city as a whole – a city which on the one hand functioned as 'a window display of the West', and on the other hand appeared to be an island of incomparable political and socio-cultural conditions. In short, Berlin's Neopagan witchcraft and the city alike worked as an unrepresentative case of representation (Lindner 1993: 105).

Considering the context of the entire city, it is significant that the decade before the Berlin Wall came down was politically and culturally highly dynamic in general. Isolated from the West, Berlin became a space for experimentation and a laboratory of social fantasies (Lindner 1993). City guide books of that time – which always condense and fashion the cultural characteristics of a city – described Berlin as *the* place to be, as 'strange' and 'hot' (Schweinfurth 1986: 39), and as a place that 'was ahead of all the smug West German cities' (Rosh 1986: 37). 'This is mirrored in the city's music, art, writing, theatre, fashion, off-scene, punks', as one author explained and went on: 'Every detail taken by itself might be found somewhere else as well.... Still, nowhere else all those things come together' (*ibid.*). The emerging witch-scene was a product and part of the city's socio-cultural dynamics. It depicted a further 'spiritual' expression of Berlin's walled hot-and-strangeness.

The practice of witchcraft and ideas on Native Faith proliferated accordingly fast in the city, particularly during the second half of the 1980s. Within this context, 1986 and 1988 became important years. In 1986 Starhawk – the internationally famous author of *The Spiral Dance* (1979) and founder of the ‘Reclaiming Tradition’ of witchcraft in the United States – travelled to Berlin. (The German translation of *The Spiral Dance* had been published in 1983.) ‘Reclaiming’ originated in San Francisco and is a form of witchcraft that puts emphasis on feminism, the Goddess and the political aspects of magic and ritual (Salomonsen 2001). Two years later traditional British Wicca arrived in the city. Vivianne Crowley, one of the best known and mostly widely read British Wiccans worldwide, visited West Berlin in 1988 and began to initiate people into this tradition of witchcraft.

Like Starhawk, Vivianne Crowley clearly had an impact on the local Neopagan witch-scene. Due to the city’s isolation, the community remained tightly knit. Almost all of the scene’s activists met up with these two internationally well-known witches. However, Géza and Matthias were greatly disappointed. From their Reconstructionist approach they looked upon Wicca and Reclaiming witchcraft as forms of ‘fantasy religion’ with questionable historical grounding (interview with Géza, 22 October 2012). Remembering his conversation with Starhawk, Matthias stated: ‘I had read a lot of pre-Christian sources and I gained the impression that this ... witch-cult was too generous in its interpretation of these sources. Everything [different historical sources] was lumped together. I did not like that’ (interview, 10 November 2011). For him, as well as for Géza, Wicca and Reclaiming did not ‘fit’ the German territory and ethnicity, and thus the idea of ‘our faith’, because they were highly Eclectic (see Strmiska 2005: 19). Not least, the feminist interpretation of the witch as an emancipated modern woman did not work for them and in their view seemed to be without any historical base. Ancient matriarchy, as it was particularly advocated by the Reclaiming witches, depicted a myth to them. Other Pagans in the city, however, were excited. As Natol, a close friend of Matthias Wenger during the 1980s and a regular guest of the *Heidnische Gemeinschaft* and later the *Gemeinschaft für heidnisches Leben*, even claimed: ‘It was Starhawk ... and Vivianne. It all started off with them, when they came to Berlin in 1986 and 1988’ (conversation with Natol, 24 February 2011).

Considering today’s practice of witchcraft in the city, one might share this perspective. Reclaiming and Wicca have become inspiring

sources for Berlin witches, and the dominant Reconstructionist approach has gradually been superseded by a rather Eclectic understanding of Neopaganism. Völkisch elements are however still present. The following section provides insight into this contemporary conglomerate of ideas on witchcraft and Native Faith in the city. The ‘ancient cult-sites’ of Berlin are long left behind. When witches choose ritual sites today, it is no longer important for them whether their ancestors might have already worshipped there; instead the decisive question is to what extent they want to perform ritual in public, or should rather remain secretive in the city.

The ‘Old Wisdom’ in the United City: A Practice with Cosmopolitan Flair

Today the German capital can apparently claim numerous superlatives. According to *Körper, Geist, Seele* (Body, Spirit, Soul) – one of Berlin’s two major esoteric magazines – this is also true for the city’s Neopagan witch-scene. Hence Berlin is not only one of the centres of witchcraft in Germany, but it possesses ‘the highest concentration of witches in all of central Europe’ (Schäfer 2010: 32). There are no official statistics available which could confirm this statement. Careful estimates range from three hundred to four hundred Neopagan witches who live in the city (Perschke 2003: 525). In view of the figure for the whole of Germany, which ranges from two thousand to eight thousand (Rensing 2007: 99; interview with Natol, 24 February 2011), the number of witches in Berlin appears comparatively high. Overwhelmingly they are ‘solitary’;¹² some are Wiccans. They mainly get to know each other via the Internet these days. Facebook appears to be one of the most relevant sources. These groups of self-acclaimed witches and Neopagans advertise regular face-to-face meetings, called *Hexenstammtische* (‘witches’ round-tables’). Currently three of Berlin’s *Hexenstammtische* are active and well attended. They take place at restaurants, corner-bars or neighbourhood cafés and thus become an expression of urbanity and urban lifestyle in themselves.

At these get-togethers, people talk about their spiritual experiences. Some let others read the tarot cards for them. Someone might want to discuss a newly published book on witchcraft. Some simply want to talk about their everyday life, their work, vocation or their children while having a drink and a meal with like-minded people. In other words, people get to know each other better. A basis of

trust is created, which witches see as necessary to celebrate religious festivals, organize rituals together and open up to the individual experience of ecstasy and trance. Although most groups do not constitute an exclusive coven, it is essential to them that nothing that happens during a ritual becomes known – unauthorized – to the ‘world outside’, to people who are not part of the witch-scene. This form of enclosure provides, not least, protection against social discrimination – a common experience of Neopagans worldwide. Significantly, in Germany witches are particularly careful about the people they ritualize with when they want to employ Norse or Germanic mythology and symbols for their religious performance and advocate the idea of a Native Faith. As a result of the German National Socialist history, Native Faith continues to be highly controversial more than sixty years later, and in particular since unification and a thus reinvigorated German nation. Ideas about what ‘native’ means in terms of faith and what kind of historical references are legitimate to constitute the discursive field are again being contested, especially in the united Berlin, a central place and strong symbol of the united – new – Germany. The resulting new dynamics of the practice of witchcraft become particularly obvious in one of the most active groups of witches in the city: the Moon-Women, whose leading figure is Xenia.

When I first met Xenia she was watchful when she explained witchcraft and her ideas of an ‘old wisdom’, as she calls her form of Native Faith practice. Xenia is a professional actress, but since the beginning of the new millennium has worked as a ‘full-time witch’. She opened a centre called *Löwenmond* (The Lion’s Moon) in the apartment building where she lives. There she offers her spiritual healing abilities to interested people. Most importantly, she organizes the eight Neopagan festivals of the year and exclusively invites women to celebrate the moon as a symbol and the embodiment of the Great Goddess. The group is accordingly called the Moon-Women. One of Xenia’s main sources of spiritual inspiration is Starhawk. *The Spiral Dance* (Starhawk 1979) was a revelation to her. ‘Right away I was caught by her [Starhawk’s] ideas’, she once exclaimed to me. ‘I knew. That’s it. I had done some tarot before. But Starhawk described what I really wanted to be: a witch’ (field notes, 22 October 2010). Xenia is particularly fascinated by Starhawk’s radical feminist and socialist interpretation of witchcraft. She intertwines it with her ideas of the ‘old wisdom’. The old wisdom, as Xenia explained, has been transmitted genetically through the generations via DNA and is inscribed in our ‘blood and bones’. It is thus a deeply physical experience and

part of our subconscious, something we cannot always express verbally, yet our body knows and moves and reacts accordingly. Most importantly, it belongs to a certain territory.

When Xenia introduced me to these ideas, she paused in the middle of her speech and right away felt the need to refer to the Nazi times as well as to the 1980s in Berlin and the era of the *Heidnische Gemeinschaft*. ‘Well, parts of the wisdom – the runes in particular – were deeply misused during Nazi times and then again during the 1980s, as we all know’, she said.

It was discredited. Thus it is a thorny issue to bring up. However and despite that, these are real energies, forces. They are connected to this area, the trees, to the stones. The Christian god is imported from the desert. It does not belong here. We have our Hulda [Germanic Goddess of the Underworld]. Our ancestors did not suffer from the heat but from the cold. I have to say, it is such a beneficial experience for the whole body as well as for your own cultural identity to remember Germanic mythology. (Interview, 30 September 2010)

The use of Germanic mythology and the Teutonic alphabet is seen as an act that ‘purifies’ them from their misuse during the Nazi period, returning them to their ‘original, authentic meaning’. For Xenia and her group, this does not mean thoroughly reconstructing the ways people in pre-Christian times apparently worshipped the pantheon, or the magical significance they ascribed to the runes. As Xenia says, you should know about these things. But most important for a ritual, as well as for choosing sites for rituals, is your intuition. Your individual feeling, experience and need are significant and always prior to any religious reconstruction.

Hence the group’s favourite ritual site, the lake Krumme Lanke in one of Berlin’s public parks, is not an ancient cult-site, as would have been preferred for rituals by, for instance, Géza and his group back in the 1980s. Instead it is a place where Xenia used to go swimming during her childhood. Over the years Xenia has sensed a growing ‘interconnection’ with the lake, which makes it for her an ideal place for ritualizing (Figure 8.2). She and the other Moon-Women feel that the lake is sometimes calling them to tidy the site up when it is (again) littered with cigarettes and beer bottles. It almost ‘cries out’ for a ritual. When the Moon-Women gather and invoke the Germanic goddesses or perform runes, they interpret it as a ‘beneficial experience’ not only to themselves, but to all Berlin residents. Such performances constitute what Xenia calls ‘super signs’ within the urban context. They are created, she explained, ‘in order to evoke ... within



Fig. 8.2 Xenia casts the circle and invokes Germanic deities at the ritual site at *Krumme Lanke*, thus creating a 'super sign' in the city of Berlin. Image used with the kind permission of Xenia and the photographer, Manuela Schneider. Copyright 2013.

the archaic consciousness of people the feeling of reconnection with the earth' (interview, 30 September 2010).

However, references to runes and calling upon Germanic gods and goddesses as well as ideas of a wisdom that is in 'our blood and bones' remain problematic. They always necessitate intense reflections upon Germany's specific history of racism and nationalism. Xenia and her group are aware of the historical and political ambiguities and tensions their spiritual performances still evoke. For rituals within the city's confines, the Moon-Women thus came up with the rough and ready rule: in private, when the Moon-Women do rituals at night by the *Krumme Lanke* unseen by other Berlin residents, they prefer to call upon their (female) ancestors, invoke the Germanic pantheon and dance and sing the Teutonic alphabet. Those rituals are hidden, secretive and exclusive. In public places when they want to be seen, when they do not avoid being seen, or when there is a chance of being seen, they simply 'switch' the code of religious performance and become highly Eclectic. They call upon Hindu and Buddhist deities, such as Kali, perform yoga or sing songs from North- and Latin-American indigenous peoples. Those rituals are open and inclusive.

This 'switch of code' and its peculiar interplay with the urban context of Berlin, its culture and history, were catalysed when Xenia was playing with the idea of organizing a ritual at an historically highly sensitive place in the city: the Topography of Terror. The Topography of Terror is one of the central memorials of the horrendous crimes of the National Socialist regime. It represents the historical site of the Gestapo headquarters, with its so-called house-prison, as well as the Reichsführung SS, the SS Leadership's Main Office. Today the memorial includes a newly built documentation centre which presents an exhibition on the Nazi security apparatus. The Topography of Terror is one of several monumental memorials to remember the Nazi period and the Holocaust, which were to be built and prominently located in the government district. They symbolize Germany's commitment to 'accept the burden of German history' and to enact the signal that the unified state and – as its symbol – the new capital, the city of Berlin, avow peaceful cohabitation and cosmopolitanism (Till 2005: 177).

When I asked Xenia why she wanted to do a ritual at the Topography of Terror, of all the other possible sites, she explained: 'When you drive by the Topography of Terror it makes you tremble. It is horrifying.... [W]e should do a ritual for the poor people who died there [in the house-prison] and whose energies are still there and can be felt. We should send them some peace and lay them to rest' (interview, 30 September 2010). For her it represented 'a healing ritual' which would be 'great and beautiful'. Poignantly Xenia concluded: 'Somehow we have to heal the past'. When I asked her what such a ritual to 'heal the past' would look like and whether one could use the 'old wisdom' in such a case – that is, calling upon the Germanic pantheon – she replied: 'Well, certainly not. To invoke Germanic deities in this place, at the "Topography", would be a no-go. It could easily be misunderstood and it does not suit the place'. Then she paused for a moment and went on: 'In general it should be a quiet ritual. No spectacle. No pranksters. The best way to do it would probably be to sit there like a Buddha, in silence. One could do a yoga exercise and get to feel the energies there and develop and bring one's own energy of an inner and outer harmony and happiness' (telephone call, 15 March 2012). This process would be equivalent to 'healing' for her and it could not be achieved through ritual practice that is bound to 'blood and bones' and ancestry. The latter might be appropriate at some geographical sites, but would seem antagonistic to 'harmony' and 'happiness' at this specific historical place.

According to Xenia, Buddhist or Hindu practices are not only suitable for the Topography of Terror because they appear historically 'unstained'. Interestingly, Xenia looks upon them and their underlying spiritual and philosophical cosmologies as belonging here – to the area of Berlin – like the 'old wisdom'. Within this context, she takes the city's international migrants into account. When people come from abroad and make their home in Berlin, Xenia explained, they bring their spirits, ghosts and divinities along, which gradually settle down here too. 'They came with the people', she said to me. 'Through fragrances, joss sticks and different ceremonies, people established their gods, goddesses, divine forces – whatever you call it – here. Those forces we can use. . . . The city and this land are now home to them'. To a certain extent, she thus makes migrants' religious practices 'native': they might not (yet) be part of the 'old wisdom' but they already 'fit' the territory.

Although the Moon-Women have still not realized the healing ritual at the Topography of Terror, this does not mean that they would rather stay away from urban public places for ritual practice and thus from potentially becoming visible to other city-dwellers. On the contrary, they want to gain publicity. For example, they organized a witch-demonstration against the Pope in 2011 (Hegner 2013) and hold regular weekend rituals in the Tiergarten – Berlin's second largest urban garden – during the daytime. However, when witches go public, they still mostly avoid elements of the 'old wisdom'. Yet sometimes the Moon-Women bravely introduce the latter into a public performance – like calling upon Freya – and thus slowly and publicly make it legitimate within the urban context of Berlin. Sporadic references to German(ic) roots at carefully chosen spaces appear less problematic than wholesale attempts at reconstruction. The united Berlin with its urban culture of tolerance and cosmopolitanism, as well as its staged sensitivity towards German national history, opens a space for spiritual experimentation with forms of Native Faith.

Native Faith and the City: A Summary

It has long been acknowledged that today's cities are headquarters for a wide range of religions and their practitioners. Still religious developments in the city remain a marginal field within qualitative social research. This is particularly true in regard to Native Faith movements. Most research focuses on the national context and

how it gives shape to specific concepts and practices. However, in times when national images, identification and boundaries are not only becoming more fundamental, but also apparently crumbling fast, it appears to be the postmodern city, with its staged (national) history and urban culture, that becomes more and more significant in forming, practising and spelling out ideas on Native Faith. This chapter has tried to bring the category of the urban to the fore by focusing on Neopagan witchcraft in Berlin and offering an historical analysis as well as a contemporary ethnography. It becomes obvious that as radically as Berlin changed, so too did the practice and the concepts of Native Faith.

In the 1980s it was a small group of Neopagans and witches in West Berlin who started to follow – as they called it – 'our faith' by being very Reconstructionist in their approach. Their search for religious identification has to be read within the context of a boom of alternative forms of religiosity in the city. West Berlin during this decade in general developed into a social laboratory. Self-acclaimed Pagans and witches were part of this. Their practice of a Native Faith was largely confined to the city's territory due to its political status. Out of this peculiar situation, they creatively designed a Pagan spiritual topography of the city. Practising at 'ancient cult-sites' and preaching a faith bound to the land produced a highly controversial expression of ideas about Germany's national past, about German(ic) tradition, ancestry and ethnicity. Since the end of the Second World War, German national identity had been a highly contested discourse of guilt, which made spiritual references to Teutonism and Germanic gods and goddesses problematic. This was particularly the case in West Berlin – one could argue – because the divided city with its Wall presented the very emblem of Germany's difficult past and burden of history.

Today the once dominant Reconstructionist approach has been superseded by a rather Eclectic way of practising and thinking about Native Faith. As was shown in the case of the Moon-Women and their idea of an 'old wisdom', völkisch elements are still present, for example, by thinking of their religious practice as bound to 'blood and bones' and declaring Christianity a 'desert religion'. Yet those historically sedimented thoughts intermingle intensely with a very new understanding of what 'native' might mean. By declaring, for example, Buddhist and Hindu practices at 'home' in the city, because 'they came with the people' from abroad, Xenia and the Moon-Women reflect on an urban experience par excellence – international migration – in terms of which Berlin today is a hotspot.

Although it still appears problematic to make reference to German(ic) ancestry and territory in one's spiritual practice, some socio-cultural spaces that carefully establish the legitimacy of such references within the urban context are beginning to be ritually created. The united Berlin, as a created symbol of the new Germany that accepts, rather than negates, the Nationalist Socialist past as an integral part of German identity and fashions itself as cosmopolitan, playfully opens the way to this process.

Notes

- 1 Norse and Germanic mythology overlap considerably. They have the same origin; their basic source is the Eddas, comprising the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda. The Prose Edda – or Snorri's Edda – is a collection of poems containing tales of Norse mythology claimed to be Icelandic in origin and originally written in Icelandic in the thirteenth century, apparently by Snorri Sturluson. During the eighteenth century the Edda began to be interpreted as the basis of the Germanic pantheon.
- 2 In his study 'Belonging in the Two Berlins', Borneman (1992: 28–35) discusses concepts of belonging. He sees the category of the nation/national as central.
- 3 This chapter uses the terms 'Neopaganism' and 'modern Paganism/witchcraft' synonymously. In doing so, it follows the usage common in academic literature. The terms 'Heathenry' and 'Heathens' are seldom used here. Some researchers reserve these for religious practitioners who worship the Norse/Germanic/Celtic pantheon(s). This form of worship was predominant during the 1980s in Berlin, but is not any longer. For reasons of clarity, all strains are summarized under one term here. However, in the first part of this chapter the term 'Pagan' is used, complying with the protagonists' own terminology. See Strmiska (2005: 6–9) on the issue of terminology.
- 4 Runes are letters of the Teutonic alphabet, which was used to write European languages before the introduction of the Latin alphabet. In Norse mythology runes are of divine origin and help one do magic. See endnote 1 regarding the Eddas.
- 5 The word 'völkisch' refers to an ethnonationalistic ideology. There is no direct English equivalent. The German word 'Volk' (noun of the adjective völkisch) refers to a metaphysical entity and implies a common language, culture and the idea of a genealogical bond through blood (Wiedemann 2007: 119). Völkisch orientalism is decisively shaped by anti-Semitic sentiments. As a religion originating in the Semitic Orient,

Christianity is seen as Jewish at its roots. It thus represents the emblematic 'other' within this ideology.

- 6 In 1991 he was elected head of all *Goden – Allsherjargode* – in Germany by the *Goden* assembly. The assembly is an organisation that brings together representatives of *Goden* and *Gydjas* from the whole of Germany. It is difficult to provide a definitive meaning for *Gode* and the *Godentum*. Depending on the sources one consults, assumptions and historical references vary. Géza defines the *Godentum* as an old-Germanic priesthood and interprets several written sources, among them Tacitus, accordingly (<http://www.allsherjargode.de/>, link: 'Goden und Gydjas'). The so called *Goden-Order*, founded in 1957 in Germany, defines the *Godentum* as a 'religion with a racial base'; although anticlerical, the *Goden-Order* still acknowledges Jesus as one of its prophets: 'the ever returning incarnation of the Aryan Christ, the most beloved creature of the divine' (Schnurbein 1993: 48, my translation). The *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* (Hoops 1913: 262–63) defines *Gode* as an Icelandic 'temple-owner', who is the spiritual and political leader of a community called the 'Goðorð' (first attested in written sources in the thirteenth century).
- 7 They left West Berlin, drove through East Germany (GDR) with few stops along the so-called 'transit route' to the West (because they were only permitted to stop at a few designated sites), and arrived in West Germany.
- 8 An advisor on sects was employed either by the Church (both Protestant and Catholic) or by the state. He or she kept religious and spiritual groups outside the dominant monotheistic religions under intense surveillance. Such advisors are still employed today, though often under different names, as a 'contact person for questions on worldviews (*weltanschauung*)'. Presently, the focus is on Scientology.
- 9 On Géza's home page (Allsherjargode 2013) he lists dates of his public appearances on television and radio. He regularly gave lectures at the city hall of Berlin-Schöneberg.
- 10 Schnurbein (1993) provides data that he was a member of the Armanen-Orden. Géza repudiates Schnurbein's sources.
- 11 Géza von Neményi became well known to the extent that Neopagans of later years composed a satirical pop song about him: <http://www.rabenclan.de/attachments/Magazin/gezablues.mp3>. Accessed 30 October 2014.
- 12 A 'solitary' is the term commonly used within Neopaganism to describe an individual who chooses to practise their spirituality or religion privately, rather than belonging to an established coven or group. Solitaries are likely to take inspiration from books (some Pagan literature is specifically directed to the solitary practitioner), online resources and other Pagans, and they may participate in some communal activities.

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