Consumption and the Authentic Pagan

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Abstract

The commodification of the religious impulse finds its most overt expression in the New Age movement and its sub-culture neo-paganism. These movements thrive through the production and consumption of images, symbols and artifacts that shape contemporary spiritual sensibilities. Because of this, they are an apposite case to study the way consumption meanings are generated and negotiated in a strongly postmodern consumption context. This paper examines discourses in the Brisbane pagan community, in Queensland, Australia. Brisbane pagans network through electronic mail discussion lists and chat forums as well as through local and national offline gatherings. In this paper we explore the community building and boundary defining communications employed in these discourses. In particular, we examine interactions that reveal the mobilisation of pagans’ concern with consumer capitalism, consumer lifestyles and media representations of the ‘craft’. A common theme that emerges in these deliberations is the notion that certain self-identified pagans may not be the ‘real thing’. Our analysis reveals a series of tensions in pagan’s representations of and engagement with consumer culture that has cultivated an ‘authentic pagan’ sentiment. This sentiment is symbolically encapsulated in the widely used expression ‘fluffy bunny’ that intimates, or signals the presence of, inauthentic pagan practice.

Introduction

Neo-paganism, a sub-cultural variant of the New Age movement (York, 2001: 364; Hanegraaff, 1998: 79) can be considered a post-modern religion par excellence, characterised by organisational fragmentation, plurality in beliefs and values and participation in the production and consumption of popular culture (Lyon, 2000: 74-79). In the Australian context, the features of neo-
paganism have been characterised by a desire to be attuned with nature and natural forces and to revalue the divine feminine. Neopagans may appropriate cross-cultural images of goddess as the creative force and invoke the dual divinity, the god and the goddess in ritual workings (Hume 1997). The concept of ‘magic’ is central to modern witchcraft and neo-pagan practice (Hanegraaff, 1998: 70). It is particularly this ‘magic’ aspect of the craft that lends itself to media imagination, capitalist production and consumer desire (Clark and Hoover, 1997: 27).

The multiplication of New Age shops purveying all manner of healing crystals, oils, talismans, books and ‘spell kits’ provide commodities designed to cater to a renewed social interest in things esoteric (Hanegraaff, 1998: 514-524). Self-identified pagans participate in consumer capitalism advertising their wares in all available mediums, from web-pages to face-to-face interaction, producing communications systems (like virtual rituals on the internet), books, artifacts and workshops. However, Ezzy’s comparative examination of three wiccan webpages and an unpublished manuscript written by another witch signals the possibility that neo-pagans occupy an ambiguous position vis-à-vis consumer capitalism, consumer lifestyles and media representations of the witchcraft (Ezzy 2001). In this paper we explore this uncertainty. We identify the ways consumer values and media representations of witchcraft are used as foils for the discursive construction of an authentic pagan sentiment.

Reconciling identity, commodity and community

A principal dilemma for theorists’ conceptualisation of consumption practice, and consumerism as a cultural ethic more broadly, has been understanding the extent to which individuals are able to generate personal and communal meaning from the goods they consume. To understand such dilemmas in contemporary consumption settings such as that accompanying the popularisation of witchcraft we trace two threads of literature relevant to such questions: theories of postmodern consumption, and the new anthropologies of consumption.

The essence of the postmodern claim is that consumption has been aestheticised and semioticised by recent processes of hyper-commodification. Emergent forms of religious association and practice, of which neo-paganism would be an instance, could be understood as examples of these aestheticising and semioticising processes (Appadurai 1996: 2-7; Beckford 1992: 121). The contrast made commonplace in commentary on consumption processes is that if consumption could ever be broadly characterised in historical perspective as predominantly utilitarian, then by contrast it is now characteristically constructive: identity-forming, reflexive, expressive, and even playful. In such formulations consumption is a reflexive practice, rather than one dominated by the power of capitalist or corporate ideology, and at the individual level has become associated with constructing identity through making distinctions. The problem of individualising processes and mass con-

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1 The ‘craft’ is a shorthand expression for the practice of witchcraft which includes the conduct of magic spells to facilitate the realisation of people’s everyday intentions.
consumption is relevant to the current study. Theorists of religion have shown how modernity, as part of its momentum, rationalises process, crumbles tradition, and demagicalises phenomena (e.g. Erikson 1995: 69-88; Weber, 1963). In ideal form, the New Age individual is the primary social atom indulging in ‘privatised’ religiosity (York 2001: 366). The modern pagan’s situation may be summarised by the Nietzschean sentiment that there are no states of truth as such, only interpretations. Such an existential quandary has parallels in the consumer’s world - there are a multiplicity of styles and tastes to choose from; a proliferation of subjectivities. But, is any taste or style acceptable? Does participation in a market of religious styles guarantee success, let alone genuine authenticity, of lifestyle? Furthermore, how can one’s spiritual sensibilities be reconciled with the postmodern commodification of such sentiments?

We turn now to consider the emerging body of anthropological theory on contemporary consumption in addressing this dilemma. Douglas and Isherwood (1979[1996]) argued that, as something for making sense of the world, consumer objects assist in demarcating social categories, and thus assigning worth and value to things and people (Douglas and Isherwood 1979[1996]; Douglas 1996). Miller’s (1987) program for material culture studies argues similarly for studies of consumption that acknowledge meaningful relationships between people and goods in industrial societies. By switching the frame of analysis from the economic realm of objectification, to the process of consumer objectification, one of Miller’s significant arguments centres on the important work consumers do in creating meaning from goods in industrial modernity, and in particular he emphasises the semiotic and cultural labor involved in, and after, the purchase of commodities. Miller’s approach enables us to explore the use of religious symbols and artifacts that both Beckford (1992: 166) and Lyon (2000: 33) claim now function as cultural resources available for general consumption.

A primary assumption of these new anthropologies of consumption is that individuals make investments in objects, styles and materials that have a semiotic and emotional capacity to confirm, bolster and assure the boundaries of self. Michele Lamont’s program of research into symbolic boundaries (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Aksartova 2002) is a related conceptualisation of this idea. For Lamont symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions that we make to categorise objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont 1992:29). The process of exclusion is based on a person’s judgement that he/she refuses to associate toward certain people because of particular cultural or moral reasons. Such exclusions are commonly founded in simple assessments that another person is ‘not like me’. Symbolic deployments of material culture become mediators for such processes.

An important and original extension that we make of Lamont’s finding that moral outlook is a key resource for social differentiation is the idea that consumer goods and material culture have become integrated into systems of ethics, and have come to acquire a moral quality. What makes consumer judgement so powerful as a source of differentiation is the way that consumption has become fused with the moral and ethical project of the self and community identity. Objects act as material boundary markers which
suggest things people wish to cultivate about themselves and exclude polluting aesthetics. Miller’s (1987) point about the creative work of consumption occurring during and after purchase rings true here: through the course of their trajectory as material components of human existence, objects offer continuous opportunities for managing the boundaries of self, non-self and community in a process which fuses aesthetics with ethics. We could add, that in an exchange where the purveyor and consumer of an artefact are both pagans, the creative work of meaning making through consumption also serves to connect one with others of similar tastes.

Images presented in the media provide storylines associated with the appropriate consumer items which people may use as cues for the construction of pagan identities and associated desires. Popular culture mediates images of paganism or ‘the craft’ through television series like ‘Buffy’ and ‘Charmed’, and films such as ‘Harry Potter’. Some students of religion puzzle over this polyandrous marriage between religious activity and consumer capitalism, consumption and mediated representations of spirituality. They question whether these circumstances signal the demise of religion or whether in fact we are witnessing its emergence in new forms (e.g. Lyon, 2000: 9; York 2001: 362). Put simply, this secularisation thesis which has informed the study of religion since the days of Durkheim and Weber, suggests that religion is losing its position as an efficacious moral force in society. The secularization thesis spawned theoretical approaches which essentially separated the study of religion into substantive theories which focused on aspects that emerged from its affective dimensions about belief, practices and doctrines, and functional approaches that focused on its role in facilitating social cohesion generally. When religion is theorised from either of these perspectives what one arrives at are ‘rupture’ theories of New Age spirituality such as those proposed by Heelas (1996) and York (1996). These theories describe neopaganism as eclectic in belief and practice, dispersed into small groups and pursuing individualistic values.

Greenfield and Droogers (2003: 33) recommend that the study of syncretic processes in the development of new religions should seek to understand both rupture and continuity. In a similar vein, Clark and Hoover propose a definition of religion that eludes the dichotomous impasses created by the secularization thesis. They suggest religion may be defined as “the site of the synthesis and symbolism of culturally meaningful belief systems” (1997: 17). But the task of understanding how modern individuals manage to share culturally meaningful belief systems in consumer society remains to be undertaken. In order to explore how pagans reflexively engage with consumerism and negotiate spiritual meanings we adopt a communications approach (Hoover and Lundby, 1997: 10; Wuthnow, 1987: 51-52), examining particular instances of verbal interactions between pagans in which they discuss and debate issues related to capitalist production and consumer lifestyles. Such liminal states of being are characterised by the negotiation of truths, values and ‘the good’, the latter being “intrinsically religious matters” (Clark and Hoover 1997: 8). In other words we are examining what Miller calls the semiotic and cultural labour involved in translating images and signs into worlds of meaning.
Brisbane pagans frequently discuss participation in consumer capitalism, consumption and media representations of the craft particularly when differences between pagans affect the practical issues of fostering community. When pagans discuss their own practices they reveal how meaning is generated at the interstices of media, commodities and the individual. In this paper we explore pagan’s negotiation of truths, values and the ‘good’. We demonstrate that in everyday dialogues Brisbane pagans are creating a generally felt sense of the ‘authentic pagan’ identity which distances itself from overt capitalist practices while at the same time producing and consuming objects around which pagan identities are mobilised.

The Pagan Scene in Brisbane

Our observations here have emerged from Angela’s three-year ethnographic study of the Brisbane pagan community. The larger work looks at the role of information and communication technologies in shaping this community. Structures of communication in the South-east Queensland pagan community are emblematic of the spatial reconfigurations brought about by the new information and communication technologies. Communications and conversations take place via email discussion lists (BrisbaneWitch@yahoo.com (BW), begun in late 1998 and BrisbaneWitches@yahoo.com (BWS), which broke away from BW in 2000) and locally constructed web-pages as well as in geographical settings ranging from one-stop shopping malls to out of the way bushland retreats. These are the sites where values are debated, moral stances are challenged and renewed, knowledge shared, emotional and physical support proffered, plans cooked up and ‘newbies’ (new members) welcomed.

My ethnographic approach included participation on the BW and BWS lists, attendance at the many kinds of offline gatherings, including public and private rituals to which I was invited. Over the three years there were many informal chats with pagans from all levels of social structure. In the light of characterisations of post-modern spirituality as fragmented, individualistic and isolating, I have been particularly interested in understanding if and how pagans consciously construct themselves as a community. It has been possible to identify and follow the development of several significant processes in neo-pagan discourse which signal the emergence of a pagan ethos. One of these themes is their semiotic engagement with the relationships between consumer culture, capitalism and spirituality. An examination of discussions and interaction characterised by these themes revealed a variety of tensions which we argue signal the ways pagans reflexively create meaning-structures that bind them as a community. In the following I provide brief examples of situations in which these tensions were debated.

Indications

I first heard the expression ‘fluffy bunny’ at a gathering early in 2001. About twelve people were present. In his response to a question from another participant, Peter concluded his comment by saying “... and not all the fluffy bunny stuff”. This expression drew comment from the gathering who wanted
him to clarify what he meant. He said, “oh you know people who watch ‘Charmed’ and ‘Buffy’ and ...”. The ensuing exchange signalled to me people’s concern with consumer culture and pagan identity.

The discussion that followed suggested that images and symbols presented in witchcraft type television programs were sentimental and skimmed the surface of ‘real’ magic - ‘there’s more to it than waving a wand around’. People felt the craft was trivialized by, for example, the talking black cat in ‘Charmed’. Privately, a few people confided to me that they were Buffy fans, they thought she was ‘okay’. Other public figures come under attack for the same reasons. Notably Lorna Horne and Deborah Gray were named as promoting and selling warm fuzzy ideas about the craft through their many publications and web pages. Misrepresentations of the craft and surface meanings they generated were seen to be exacerbated by some people’s involvement in selling products like spell kits and fairy wands that were perceived to promote those interpretations. The naming of offenders included two young females in the South-east Queensland region who conduct magic workshops and sometimes post to the e-lists. These exchanges between individual pagans revealed a questioning of the authenticity of media representations of the craft and of some pagan’s use of advertising, late capitalism’s primary vehicle for promoting consumerism, as a means of promoting their pagan beliefs and practices.

Analysis of many conversations and encounters with pagans in which they discussed issues of pagan identity, commercialisation of the craft and capitalist enterprise revealed a set of five semiotic tensions between:

1. surface and deeper meanings of the craft,
2. practices that were judged to be peripheral or central to community identity (for example the peripheral, ‘pagan type’ Harry Potter movie),
3. naïve and experienced practitioners of the craft,
4. playful and serious engagement with the craft,
5. media representations of witchcraft and pagan reality.

A long thread of discussion took place on the BWS list during 2002 in which participants debated and discussed what it meant to be a ‘fluffy bunny’. Analysis of the various contributions revealed that a ‘fluffy bunny’ would exhibit the kinds of characteristics illustrated by the first terms in the tensions listed above, superficial, peripheral to community, naïve, playful and using multi-media to further their capitalist enterprises. Some voices (a minority) argued that being a fluffy bunny was as legitimate a position as any other as not all people come to the craft with experience, for example. Such practices as buying spell kits or viewing ‘Charmed’ on TV could serve as an entrée to more authentic engagement with the craft (also Porter 2003: 20).

It should be stressed at this point that whether there is such a being as an inauthentic pagan or not is not the issue. It is the participants’ reflexive engagement in these discussions that gives them a sense of belonging. They are able to weigh their values and judgements against those of others, perhaps renegotiate them, and maybe develop shared values as members of a

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2 These were also the focus of Ezzy’s study of the commodification of Witchcraft (2001).
community that calls itself pagan. E-lists enable them to do this on a daily basis – often several times a day. During these discussions it became clear that the expression ‘fluffy bunny’ was one that most people wished did not apply to them. One person’s mail in a semiotic play of meaning humourously exemplified this concern. After someone else had mentioned that they ‘pretend’ to be a fluffy bunny in contexts where people would find a ‘real’ pagan threatening, they posted:

Oh this is good, it’s hard enough keeping up with the Fluffy Bunny discussion, are we now going to have one on TRAINEE?/FAKE FLUFFIES? Fake fluffies? Is that like the difference between fake fur and real fur, how am I going to know the difference between a real fluffy and a pretender to the throne? Has anyone got any ideas on this? I can’t believe it’s not a Fluffy! When is a Fluffy not a Fluffy? A new breed of Fluffy? Do you mean like a Hybrid? or is a Fake Fluffy some type of genetically engineered being that has been created in a lab (or read circle if you prefer)? Just when I thought I could safely recognise a Fluffy, now I read that there are Fake ones out there, oh I think I need a BEX! This whole Fluffy discussion is a riot, keep it up............regards (name removed).

The expression ‘fluffy bunny’ has come to be used as a shorthand way of signalling people’s inauthentic engagement with witchcraft. It is used at all levels of pagan social interaction from interpersonal telephone conversations to discussions at national gatherings and beyond. There are now dozens of web pages dedicated to the discussion.

Conclusion

As exemplars of post-modern spirituality pagans are eclectic in their practices and belief systems, and identified as small groups or solitary individuals pursuing privatised religious practices. However, unlike the New Age which both York and Heelas have described as the spiritual arm of capitalism, neo-paganism’s engagement with late capitalist values is ambivalent. Pagans produce and consume commodities generated through capitalist interests and media representations. At the same time, they engage reflexively with these values and practices betraying a tacit agreement that spirituality is not a commodity that can be wholly mediated by materialistic values (c.f. Heelas 1994: 110). This examination of pagan discourse revealed a continual negotiation of pagan identity in relation to consumer values and practices. We have argued that such an identity is negotiated as authentic in relation to what are perceived to be the superficial, playful and naïve features of consumer lifestyles. The widely used and understood expression ‘fluffy bunny’ serves as a trope to signal these notions and therefore serves to invoke a generally felt collective consciousness of an ‘authentic pagan’ identity.

References


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