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***Connecting With the Great Mother, Regenerating Us: Environmental Activism, Gender Relations and Power Dynamics in Contemporary Paganism in Portugal***

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CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS  
E HUMANAS

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*Ó meu amor se me queres amar, se me queres amar, Labuta!*

*Nada na vida se alcança sem dar, sentido e amor à luta!*

*Vira de Quatro, Canção Tradicional Portuguesa*



*Para todas as pessoas que labutaram e lutaram,  
para estarmos aqui.*

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## Resumo

No contexto de incerteza e crise socioecológica que a contemporaneidade atravessa, vários grupos religiosos e espirituais envolvem-se com questões ambientais e de género no espaço público português, nomeadamente o Paganismo Contemporâneo, um movimento que tem como princípios centrais a veneração da natureza e a igualdade de género.

A partir de uma etnografia presencial e online, com Pagãos Ecocêntricos Portugueses, esta tese pretende mostrar como estes participam no espaço público através da negociação de dinâmicas de poder ligadas a relações de género e a reivindicações e preocupações ecológicas enquanto vivem as suas experiências religiosas e espirituais. Para tal, é analisado o contexto sociohistórico e religioso português, a história do movimento, e a sua relação com o movimento internacional, nomeadamente a influência do Reino Unido. De seguida, é analisado como através do ritual e do ativismo, negoceiam, contestam e exploram os seus papéis de género, e as suas preocupações ecológicas. Aborda ainda a forma como dinâmicas de poder internas e externas influenciam estas relações e mobilizações. Por fim, analisa os impactos das restrições da COVID-19.

Assim, argumenta-se que através da mobilização de narrativas sobre cura, cuidado e regeneração, enquanto se engajam individual e coletivamente com formas espirituais, religiosas e políticas de estar no mundo, os Pagãos Ecocêntricos procuram soluções e sentido para as crises que atravessam. Em suma, esta tese demonstra como os Pagãos Ecocêntricos Portugueses se engajam no espaço público combinando implícita e explicitamente questões políticas e religiosas e espirituais, fazendo parte de uma mobilização geral por reencantamento que se observa nas sociedades contemporâneas; contribuindo ainda para a reduzida investigação sobre estes movimentos em Portugal.

**Palavras-Chave:** Paganismo Contemporâneo; Religião; Género; Ambiente; Poder, Portugal





## Abstract

In the context of the contemporary socio-ecological crisis and uncertainty, several religious and spiritual groups engage in environmental and gender questions in the Portuguese public space. Contemporary Paganism, a movement that holds nature as sacred and gender equality as central principles, is one of the religious and spiritual movements that most engage in these questions.

Based on presential and online ethnography with Portuguese Ecocentric Pagans, this thesis aims to show how they participate in the public space by negotiating power dynamics related to gender relations and ecological revindication and worries, while living their religious and spiritual experiences. It analyses the Portuguese sociohistorical and religious context, the history of the movement, and its relationship with the international Pagan movement, particularly the influences of the United Kingdom. Then it is analysed how through ritual and activism, they negotiate, contest, and explore their gender roles and their ecological worries. It approaches how internal and external power dynamics influence these relationships and mobilisations. Lastly, it analyses the COVID-19 restrictions impacts.

Therefore, it is argued that through the mobilisation of care, healing and regeneration narratives while engaging individually and collectively with their spiritual, religious, and political ways of being in the world, Portuguese Ecocentric Pagans look for meaning and solutions for the crises they face. In sum, this thesis demonstrates how Portuguese Ecocentric Pagans engage in the public space implicitly and explicitly combining political and religious and spiritual questions, being part of a general mobilisation in contemporary societies for re-enchantment; contributing to the reduced scholarship about these movements in Portugal.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Paganism, Religion, Gender, Environment, Power, Portugal



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## Glossary

In this glossary I present a broad definition of some names, terms, and abbreviations that appeared during the fieldwork. It consists mostly of names of gods and goddess, and particular terms that are mobilized by Contemporary Pagans in their lived religious and spiritual lives. It does not consist of a linguist discussion or definition, mobilizing the most accepted definitions.

**Altar** – it is usually where the ritual and ceremony are focused on. It holds objects with symbolic value for the ceremony. Usually holds candles, incense, water, statues, offers, among other objects.

**Aphrodite** – is the Goddess of love and sexuality in Ancient Greek Mythology.

**Ataegina** – pre-roman Iberian deity associated with fertility and protection.

**ATDL** – Assembleia da Tradição Druídica da Lusitânea. Portuguese Druid group.

**Athena** – is the Greek Goddess of war, reason and handcraft. It was understood as the city protector, her cult, like the majority of the Ancient Greek cults, was a highly urban one.

**Avalon** – is a mythical island that appears in Arthurian legends. It is the name given to Glastonbury.

**Beltane** – One of the festivals of the contemporary pagan ritual calendar, mostly wiccan. It is usually celebrated in the beginning of May and connected with fertility rituals.

**COP26** – The United Nations Climate Change Conference - 2021

**Diana** – is the Roman goddess connected with animals and hunting. She is also a fertility deity.

**Doula** – It is a trained professional, not necessarily formed in health care professions, which accompanies and supports a person physically, emotionally and informational during all the process of pregnancy, birth, post-partum, breast-feeding, or abortion. It is usually connected with birth, but there are also death doulas that provide the same support but in the end of life.

**ECC** – European Economic Community

**Endovélico** – is an Iberian deity, usually associated as the God of health, healing, protection (life and death), and wisdom.

**EU** – European Union

**Fellowship of Isis** – also known as FOI. Is a multi-faith and multi-cultural spiritual and religious organization, focused on Goddess-oriented trainings.

**Gaia** – in Greek mythology, the Goddess Gaia is the personification of the Earth.

**Gnosis** – it means religious and spiritual knowledge.

**Goddess Spirituality/Movement** – One of the paths of Contemporary Paganism. It is a movement that sustains the existence of a Great Goddess manifested through the earth and the goddesses of several mythological pantheons. It is highly influenced by feminism.

**Hekate** – is a goddess from the ancient Greek mythology. It is usually represented having three bodies. It is associated as the goddess of magic, witchcraft, the night, moon and necromancy.

**Hellenic** – it is a contemporary pagan reconstructionism practice based on the worship and cultic practices of Ancient Greek mythology and religion.

**Hespérides** – In Greek Mythology are nymphs associated with the spring, guardians of the sacred garden of Hespérides, located in the West, and represent the transition between the day and the night.

**Horned God** – is the male entity in Wicca, consort of the Goddess.

**HP** – High-Priest/Priestess, the higher priesthood level in the wiccan structure.

**IMF** – International Monetary Fund

**Inanna** – Ancient Mesopotamian Goddess, mostly worshipped in Sumer (actual Iraq), perceived as the Goddess of love, war, protection, and power. She is one of the most mentioned deities in Mesopotamian mythology, from what could be gathered by the archaeological vestiges found. Is later known as Ishtar for the Sumerians, Babylonians, Akkadians, and Assyrians

**Isis** – it is the Egyptian Goddess of magic, death, healing, and love. Is a major deity in the Egyptian pantheon.

**Melissa/s** – The Goddess Conference instead of using ‘volunteer’ use the Greek term ‘melissa’. Melissas are the “worker bees” that serve the queen bee. In Greek mythology, Melissa was a nymph that served Zeus known for being the one that discovered and taught the uses of honey. The Goddess Conference instead of using ‘volunteer’ use the Greek term ‘melissa’. In this context the volunteers are the worker bees – Melissas – that work, help the participants when needed and sustain the big hive – the conference.

**Moot** – it is the name given to an informal pagan gathering/meeting, that usually takes place at a bar and other public space where Pagans can meet and get to know each other.

**Morrigan** – is supposed to be a Celtic deity, related with war and death. She is particularly popular in Contemporary Paganism.

**MotherWorld** – it is a spiritual and political vision created in the Glastonbury Goddess Temple, which proposes a society based in the values of care and mothering.

**OBOD** – Order of the Bards, Ovates and Druids.

**Pantheism** – it is a worldview that considerer that everything in nature is divine.

**Persephone** – it is a Greek Goddess, the Queen of the Underworld, Hades' wife. It is commonly connected with the spring circle and worshipped as a deity connected with the agrarian cycle: she arises from the underworld bringing with her spring and life. And she returns to the underworld, taking with her life, arising then the winter cycle.

**PF** – Pagan Federation

**PFI** – Pagan Federation International

**PFI – Portugal** – Pagan Federation International Portugal – Congregação Politeísta

**Polytheism** – it is the belief in several deities.

**Samhain** – it is one of the main contemporary pagan festivals, happening on 31 October/1 November. It marks the beginning of the winter cycle. It is also celebrated death and the ancestors. It is understood as the Halloween or All-Hallows-Even in Anglo-Saxon settings. In Portugal, it holds the same importance that *Dia de Todos os Santos* holds in terms of remembrance and connections with the ancestors and all those that died.

**Spiral Dance** – A form of ritual dance. People hold hands and start spinning. In a moment part of the circle breaks and start moving to the center of the circle, creating a spiral.

**Sumerian Reconstructionism** – A contemporary pagan path that worships the ancient Sumerian Deities, reconstructing the cult based in archaeological vestiges, adapting it to the contemporary moment.

**Templo de Inanna** – It is an informal spiritual and religious Portuguese pagan group dedicated and inspired by Goddess Inanna, Astarte and Iberian deities and territory.

**UN** – United Nations

**Wheel of the Year** – It is the name given to the pagan seasonal festive calendar. It is composed by eight festivals. Each path gives their own denomination, but the most known is the wiccan structure: Imbolc, celebrated in February, usually marks the beginning of the spring circle; Ostara, commonly known as the Spring Equinox,

celebrated between 19-22 March; Beltane, 1 May; Litha, the Summer Solstice, celebrated between 19-23 June; Lammas, celebrated in August, marks the beginning of the harvest period; Mabon, or Autumn Equinox, celebrated around 21-24 September; Samhain, 1 November; Yule, or Winter Solstice, 20-23 December.

**Wicca** – Also known as traditional witchcraft, is one of the most influential contemporary pagan paths. Was created in the 1950s, and commonly duotheistic, worshipping the God and the Goddess. It works in groups, names covens, and is an initiatory tradition.

**XR** – Extinction Rebellion.

# Introduction

Relationships are complex webs of intertwined threads, connecting beings and objects through time and space, creating a fluid dance of existence. This research results from a web of relationships negotiated and creatively disputed in the context of Contemporary Paganism in Portugal. It echoes ways of being in the world in constant transformation, uncertainty, and crisis.

Contemporary Paganism is an umbrella term used to describe a heterogeneous groups of religious and spiritual movements that consider nature as sacred and find inspiration in pre-Christian religious traditions. This thesis discusses how in this context of complex relationships and socialites, Ecocentric Pagans – contemporary pagans ecologically-oriented – participate in public and political space by negotiating internal power dynamics related to gender relations and ecological and environmental demands in Portugal. To do so, besides the fieldwork in Portugal, it also mobilizes information gathered in some events conducted in the United Kingdom. There is a clear connection between these two territories that needs to be taken into account.

Considering the broader sociocultural and environmental crises that are affecting people of different backgrounds and the environments to which they belong due to issues such as social inequalities, the economic and financial crises that affect livelihoods, hunger, war, sexual violence, persecution, pollution, deforestation, and epidemics, to name a few, that threatens the future and continuity of life, several people and groups are calling for transformation and reconnection. Contemporary Pagans, in their understanding of Nature as sacred, are among the voices that call for this change, offering different worldviews to those that hold humans as separate from other beings and the planet and understand the planet's resources as a commodity that is explored, destroyed and exchanged. For them, the planet, and all the life it holds, are part of a big family to which humans belong. In their lived religious, spiritual, social and political experiences, they are creatively contesting, reinforcing and negotiating their place in the world and their action towards the possibility of the future.

However, in this process, they also reinforce several dichotomies and hierarchies, some of which they, in theory, contest and try to overtake but that emerge in their lived experiences. While calling for gender equality in recognition of the sacredness of the feminine and the masculine, and for inclusivity, they reinforce the gender binary in the lived ritual practices imputing female and male characteristics to several dimensions of life. In doing so, they exclude

those not identifying or reviewing themselves in this binary. Besides, this also relates with the relationship they create with Nature. First, Nature is gendered, usually understood as female, reinforcing the idea that women are closer to it due to several physiological processes, reinforcing gender roles and heteronormativity. Besides, Portuguese Contemporary Paganism lacks, mainly in the older generations, some reflection about its power, place, and privileges. They propose an essential transformation of the way we live; however, in some cases, they do not reflect on the systemic issues that they reproduce in sociability, like their privileges in a country with a deep colonial past or their privileges for being part of a middle, upper or intellectual class.

These inconsistencies are part of the power relations and of the lived religious and spiritual lives of Contemporary Pagans that I propose to analyse with this research. Therefore, how Contemporary Paganism's principles and practices are lived, transformed, and expanded considering its impact – while being impacted by social and political practices – becomes a central research question. Another question that guided this work relates to understanding how their ecological and environmental concerns and gendered lived experience inform and is informed by their political and public participation in the public space. How are social and political problems introduced in their lived religious and spiritual involvement worldwide?

Before explaining the research methods and further aims, it is essential to state that this research arose from previous work conducted about Contemporary Paganism in Portugal, for my Master's degree (Martins 2017), in 2016. I already had contact with books about Wicca in the United Kingdom and knew some groups were teaching Wicca courses in Portugal. Besides that, OBOD (Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids) and PFI (Pagan Federation International) have representatives and local coordinators in Portugal. With the growing popularity of holistic and esoteric fairs, historical recreations with artisans showing their allusive pagan products, and the popular women's circles working the sacred feminine, Contemporary Paganism was growing visibly in Portugal. I started questioning how and why the visibility of these groups was growing in the Portuguese context, considering Catholicism's religious and cultural influence and prevalence, and despite religious plurality (Dix 2009; Roussou 2016; Mapril, Blanes 2013; Saraiva 2010).

Furthermore, I found particular interest in the Anthropology of Religion and Witchcraft and Magic during my undergraduate studies in Anthropology, as well as a growing interest in ontological views regarding human beings and their engagement with Nature besides the prevailing one based on Judaeo-Christian and Scientific dual approaches (Abram 1997; Greenwood 2005; Ingold 2000). Thus, combining these dimensions, I decided to focus my

Master's research on how, in the context of Contemporary Paganism, the celebration and ritualization of the seasonal festive and natural cycles are spaces where Contemporary Pagans create meaningful relationships with human and non-human beings, and places of sociability and to share worldviews; as well as places where they express moral and ethical concerns regarding environmental issues.

From this previous research, I concluded then that 1) the celebration of the seasonal cycles, although following a calendar, is not conditioned by it since it acts as a symbolic referential, marked by time and space, where people can express and reflect on their individual growth and the life processes by which each species goes through – birth, growth, ageing and death – and negotiate the uncertainty and instability of life and death; 2) time and space are central dimensions for the ritual celebrations conducted by Contemporary Pagans, since it is considered sacred. All the days and places are sacred; thus, it is as legitimate to conduct a celebration in the countryside as it is in a temple in an urban setting. What is important is the meaning and intentions given and taken by the people; and 3) the creation of a hierarchical system formed by three entities: Human Beings, Nature, and Deities. At rituals, Deities, Elements, and other beings are invoked. Nature, composed by several beings, acts as the bridge between the evocation and wishes of human beings and the Deity. It is through Nature that questions and answers are symbolically communicated. Besides, it is in Nature that the mutual fragility of existence can be understood. On one side, Nature is fragile and vulnerable to the exploration and destruction of ecosystems conducted by human actions; on the other, human beings are frail when confronted with predators, conflicts, and natural disasters.

The celebration of the seasonal cycles, as that study has shown, is a way through which Contemporary Pagans express a complex relationship with Nature and other beings, which, when transported to human life, function as a symbolic language which gives meaning to human fears, concerns, frailty, and desires (Martins, 2017). However, the question of how they engaged in public space, both socially and politically, and by which means, was not approached in this previous research, and neither was the questions of how internal power relations were at play and how gender, a central dimension of the Contemporary Paganism, was perceived and interacted directly with their environmental engagement. Since it is a constitutive dimension of their lived experience, I considered these questions relevant to understand Contemporary Paganism and contemporary society.

Their focus on the environment and its protection, as well as the call for gender equality, align with debates taking place in several social domains, from political activism to governmental policies and agendas. The need to further explore these questions was the reason



why I decided to continue working with Contemporary Paganism in my Doctoral degree, and why these dimensions became my main research questions. Besides the abovementioned motive, I also decided to pursue this research to contribute to research on contemporary religious and spiritual movements, particularly on Contemporary Paganism from an Anthropological frame. Moreover, if one considers the growing socioenvironmental crisis (Apostolopoulou, Cortes-Vazquez 2019) in contemporary society, it becomes even more relevant to understand movements proposing other forms of engaging and understanding human relationships with the more-than-human world.

In Portugal, few anthropological studies (Fedele 2013a; 2015; Cordovil 2020a; 2015; 2020b; Martins 2017; Duarte 2020; Velloso 2020) have been conducted about this movement despite its growing presence in public space, both physical and online. Besides, when looking at the qualitative and quantitative research about religious groups, movements, or expressions on Social Sciences in general, it is possible to notice that this particular expression is rarely present or considered in Portugal. A recent study about religious identities in Lisbon's Metropolitan Area (Teixeira, Vilaça, Moniz, Coutinho, Franca, Dix 2018) exemplifies how scholarship disregards these movements' presence in Portuguese society.<sup>1</sup>

The choice to widen the research to the United Kingdom had two reasons. First, the movement has been established there longer, which led to the institutionalization of some of the currents and paths, and, consequently, to the growth of research about this territory. And second – relating to the first one – the main groups and currents I worked with in Portugal were connected with organizations that were born in the United Kingdom, such as the Pagan Federation International and the Goddess Movement. I want to stress that this choice of these two countries was not made with a comparison in mind (Gingrich, Fox 2002). I intended to understand, from a genealogical lens, how the movement is connected and came to arrive, and to be lived, in both territories. And since most of the research was conducted online, the borders of this physical settings were even more fluid, as will be seen further ahead.

In 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak and the travel and health restrictions impacted the fieldwork period in the United Kingdom. The initial research plan was to go and attend some events and spend one or two months as a visiting researcher at one British University, but due

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<sup>1</sup> This study demonstrated that most religious plurality is concentrated in Lisbon Metropolitan Area. Among the number of people that answered the study, the authors identified those that were believers in non-Christian religious expressions. In 2019, during a conference where this study was presented, I had the opportunity to ask which religions that were considered under this label. They included adherents of AfroBrazilian religions such as Umbanda and Candomblé, and other smaller religious groups, however they did not consider pagans as one religious' groups among these numbers.

to these restrictions, this plan had to be abandoned, and therefore the insights from the United Kingdom are fewer and less in-depth than the ones from the Portuguese context. This is why the prevalence of data and analysis is focused on the latter. But it was still relevant to analyse the data that I could gather through online events and relate it with the data collected in Portugal to present a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of Contemporary Paganisms that are arising throughout Europe – besides British Paganism, highly analysed and developed – and how they interrelate.

Therefore, studying Contemporary Paganism in Portugal provides an in-depth insight into the creativity and heterogeneity of these movements. It is relevant to understand the contemporary lived spiritual and religious lives of people, and their complexity and creativity in contexts characterized by religious and cultural catholic backgrounds. Moreover, the relatively recent presence of these movements in Portugal is an example of a broader phenomenon that is taking place worldwide, by which people feel drawn to more heterodox religious and spiritual movements given the perceived freedom they provide when compared to hegemonic and orthodox forms of institutionalized religion.<sup>2</sup> Finally, although sharing the broader sociocultural values and morals, these movements offer alternative forms to approach questions related to the environmental crisis and gender equality and equity, thus contributing to more general discussions about these questions in the public space (Fedele and Knibbe, 2013).

### **Research Questions and Aims**

I will now clarify the research questions and proposals of the Doctoral research resulting in this thesis. As already mentioned, the celebration and protection of Nature, as well as recognizing the need for gender equality through the celebration of both gods and goddesses, are central dimensions for the lived spiritual and religious experience of Contemporary Pagans. These are, then, the foundations of this research. I had four main research questions when I began the research in 2018: first, how Contemporary Paganism's principles and practices are lived, transformed and expanded, considering its impact in social and political spaces in Portugal?; second, how is their social and political participation in the public space, informed by their perceptions of environment and by their gender relations and identities?; to what extent does this relate to the internal power dynamics and negotiations?; finally, how does this movement

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<sup>2</sup> The common view of institutional religion is criticized by the lived religion approach that I follow, that demonstrates how the institutional can also be a place of agency and freedom. This Approach will be explored later in this Introduction.

contribute – and is part of – to the debates around contemporary social and environmental issues and gender equality?

These questions are relevant because they provide an insight into issues relating to gender equality and environmental and ecological actions that are being debated by several movements and political agendas; besides, it translates a broader social process of re-enchantment that is being observed worldwide as a response to the obsolete capitalist system (Federici, 2019).

In 2020 the SARS-CoV-2 virus – which caused the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) disease – changed the course of the research<sup>3</sup> and required these questions to be revised. Social isolation and lockdowns, the health risks posed by the virus, and the impossibility of being physically in the field, both in Portugal as in the United Kingdom, impacted the way the “traditional” fieldwork took place, and the use of online and digital methods to keep that contact became central. Thus, I added a fifth research question: how were their practices affected, changed, and adapted due to the Covid-19 virus, and what were their contributions during these and future uncertain times?

Given the turn that the research took due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, it became clear that the dimensions I propose to analyse – the dynamic between power, gender and Nature – were connected, in this context, with three key concepts which informed about their participation in public space: “regeneration”, “care” and “healing”. This gained visibility precisely as a result of the situation we were living in, as a collective confronted by uncertainty, change and death, but they are too relevant for possible upcoming crises and the environmental crisis already happening. These dimensions were already crucial for their lived spiritual and religious lives; however, they took new meanings and centrality in their discourses. Through this language of healing, care, and regeneration, I propose that the contributions of Contemporary Paganism to the future shall be considered.

This being said, this research aims to clarify which internal power dynamics related to gender relations, and to environmental issues, are relevant in the context of Contemporary Paganism in Portugal. Despite these dimensions being central in their lived experience, showing the agency and creativity of the practitioners, these can reproduce the same hegemonic structures that they criticise and try to overcome. Besides, it proposes to elucidate who are these groups and people, which factors were central to their adherence to the movement, and what are the reasons behind the growing visibility in the last two decades in the public space. It proposes as well to clarify which social, political, and cultural questions are raised by their work

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<sup>3</sup> I will dedicate a full chapter (Chapter 6) to the detailed impacts of the virus for the research later on, as well as the different phases of it in Portugal.

for the recognition of their claims of Contemporary Paganism as a valid religious and spiritual expression. Consequently, it aspires to show the movement's heterogeneity. It also aims to show how different power dynamics are at play, and how they engage with the political space through the negotiation of these dynamics; and to clarify which arguments were used as cause for the world pandemics, and the impact it had in their ritual practices and engagement with the pagan community, and which alternatives arose; finally, it aims to understand how, from this context, is possible to think about contemporary society and contribute to the debate on gender and environmental issues, central in social and political agendas nowadays, and provide solutions for an uncertain future.

### **Ways of Doing in a Complex Field**

Despite the fields chosen to work on being the metropolitan areas of the countries' capitals, it is necessary to underline that the research field is much more complex than the focus on a particular country/ies. During the research, it became apparent that the fieldwork was broader than the physical borders of the city or country. First, the people whose stories are the threads of this research do not live only in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon or London. I interviewed people living in the north, centre and south of the country that could attend events in those metropolitan areas, but their everyday lives and spiritual connection with a given place were elsewhere. This leads me to the second reason for the field being broader than expected: contemporary pagan practices are flexible and deeply connected with sacred spaces that are built and found. Therefore, these are not bound to a specific city or area. They are widespread. The fact that there are very few physical temples – most not visible in the public space – also contributes to a broader understanding of the spatial awareness of the lived contemporary pagan experience, and to a myriad of possible locations that are constructed as temples: a room in a house, a table in a bedroom, an apartment, a field, a property, an online group, or the symbolic temple that arises from the relationships of a group and their intentions as a collective.

These viable sacred spaces transcend the concept of the field as a stable dimension. In addition, the Contemporary Pagan movement is characterized by an interconnectedness that applies to how the community<sup>4</sup> is created. Some groups and solitary practitioners contact online those close to their city; however, the majority, at some point in their lives, contact national and international movements through online communities found on forums, social media, or

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<sup>4</sup> “Community” is not used here as an analytical concept, but contextual one to define a group of people that share the same interests.

discussion groups. With COVID-19, online interactions have grown<sup>5</sup>, and therefore the field of research also broadened beyond the proposed one. I will analyse the importance of online communities before and during COVID-19 in Chapter 6 at greater length. However, it is one of the reasons that had an impact in the field delimitation of the research. Moreover, due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the research that could already be considered “Fieldwork at Home” or a form of native anthropology (Narayan 1993; Tuhiwai Smith 2005), became literal fieldwork inside our homes. The COVID-19 restrictions had methodological impacts that, until then, were not part of the researcher’s social imaginary, thus forcing the development of several strategies to conduct the fieldwork experience:

Working in the context of religion and spirituality mobilizes our cognitive and analytical abilities and bodies. The embodied, sensorial and emotional responses are sources of information, mostly during ritual moments and active parts of the relational process. Usually, this contact and exposure happen in a specific space created for these interactions, away from our houses, families, partners, friends, pets, and daily routines. We focus on the field, immersing ourselves in that almost magical setting of research fieldwork experience, different from our personal daily lives. Now, new meanings are given to places and spaces and to how we position ourselves in the field. We are not going to the field, leaving behind our everyday and personal lives. The field is entering our homes, our most personal and unattainable spaces.<sup>6</sup>

As expressed in the fieldnote above, our social imaginary of what fieldwork is, even in more reflexive and engaged methodological approaches<sup>7</sup>, sustain a clear distinction between the “field” – the place where we work and meet our interlocutors – and the “home” – our haven, from where our work is absent. Historically, Anthropology has theorized deeply about the separation between “field” and “home” (Amit 2000). During fieldwork, participating and being there is a profoundly sensorial, relational, and vulnerable experience, even more so in the context of Contemporary Paganism, in which the senses are crucial to understand these practices and connections (Blain, Ezzy, Harvey 2004). Relationships of intimacy and

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<sup>5</sup> Today, in 2023, two years after most of the restrictions were raised, the contemporary pagan spaces created online during the 2020 and 2021 for community support have diminished, and some, even if still online, have had no activity.

<sup>6</sup> Fieldnote written on 28 July 2020 while preparing for the 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference 2020

<sup>7</sup> I highly recommend a very influential book for me regarding reflexive ethnography, Charlotte Davies’ *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (1999). The author demonstrates how reflexivity while doing ethnographic research takes several forms and affects the research process in all its phases. It focuses on how the relationships between researcher and interlocutors are central to understand the sociocultural context we propose to study. For another overview about Reflexivity see Nazaruk (2011).

familiarity with the people we work with are created and cultivated in search of insights and dialogues (Amit, 2000).

For this research, and because I worked in the same social and cultural context I belong to, and in a religious and spiritual movement that I adhere to, “field” and the “home” were usually intertwined<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, belonging does not mean an automatic understanding of everything about the context I was working on, since there are several factors, such as education, class and gender, which emerge and provide clear distinctions despite sharing the same cultural identity. This discussion became relevant because these constructed spaces, the “home” and the “field”, were one during the COVID-19 restrictions period.

First, the fieldwork at home, in the sense of fieldwork done in the city or country of the researcher, becomes fieldwork inside our own homes, entering private spaces. We are not going to the field; the field is entering our privacy and mingling with other people’s personal space but without a physical contact of bodies and energies. The field and the home became unbounded spaces since “the field actually extends over time and space through mobile phones, the internet, and social media” (Cocco, Bertran 2021). Second, the impossibility of being in the field engendered a sense of loss, even with online and digital methodologies, because the sensorial experience was missing. Some information can only be gathered through the senses, experiences, emotional responses to certain rituals or conversations, and full participation in the ceremonies. However, to bridge these issues, some strategies were followed, such as becoming part of social media groups<sup>9</sup>, following all the events, engaging with them online, and trying to reproduce the ambience of the field: burning incense, candles, essential oils, dimming lights, building altars to feel part of the field, drawing, meditating and dancing like I was physically in the field, echoing Evolvi’s statement that “the important part of the ritual is mental visualizations, but material objects help practitioners to imagine a physical presence that risks being lost in computer-mediated communication.”(Evolvi 2020, p. 6). But also Jone

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<sup>8</sup> Narayan (1993) deconstructs the idea that the native or insider ethnographer will automatically understand his/her own culture. Applied the notion of situated knowledge (inspired by Donna Haraway), the author calls the attention to how education, gender, sexuality or class are present while one does fieldwork, and that one or the other becomes more relevant in the process than the others. In some cases, it becomes even more important than belonging to the same cultural and territorial context, since we all belong to several communities at the same time. For the author “the loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux. Factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider and outsider status. Instead, what we must focus our attention on is the quality of relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts: are they viewed as mere fodder for professionally self-serving statements about generalized Other, or are they accepted as subjects with voices, views and dilemmas – people to whom we are bonded through ties of reciprocity and who may even be critical of our professional enterprise.” (Narayan 1993, p. 23)

<sup>9</sup> The use of these tools is central when doing digital ethnography, as explored on Sarah Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. (2016)

Salomonsen’s insight that “in the practice of modern mystery religions, you are either in, or you are not there at all” (2004, p. 50). Even if to be fully in, there is the need to reform and adapt our practices in online settings.



*Image 1 - Altar created for Online Fieldwork in 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference*

Before the COVID-19 restrictions, I conducted a more “classical” ethnography, observing and participating in rituals, demonstrations and other events and conducting some interviews and informal conversations (Brinkmann 2018). To summarise, the primary method adopted for this research was the long-duration ethnographic method (Bloch 2017; Ingold 2017; Robben, Sluka 2007; Shah 2017), from September 2018 until December 2021, attending to occasional rituals and events both in person and online; it was based on participation and observation of the activities, events and rituals in articulation with the same approach used by several researchers that worked with Contemporary Paganism (Pike 2004a; Salomonsen 2004; Blain, Ezzy, Harvey 2004). This approach is characterized by a full participation in rituals, an embodied experience that helps to reach a deeper understanding of what is being experienced and use our senses as part of the research. I followed the “Compassion Method” proposed by Salomonsen (2004; 2002), which is an approach that takes beliefs seriously, both cognitively and emotionally, overpassing a focus on the veracity and legitimacy of the belief. This method can help us reach a deeper understanding of the reality we are researching, since it is essential for a full engagement and embodied experience in the context of religious and spiritual research.



*Image 2 - Photography taken during fieldwork in Sintra, Equinox Celebration, 2018*

In this sense, I conducted fieldwork in several events and rituals. I also accompanied demonstrations in which some of my interlocutors participated, one in 2018 and the other two



in 2019; I participated in the first Portuguese Goddess Conference, which took place over three days; participated in one Autumn equinox, one ritual to celebrate the animal day in 2019; a one day pilgrimage to a pagan sacred site in Alentejo; and attended several minor rituals and events. During 2020 and 2021, I accompanied several online events, rituals, workshops, and conferences, including the 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference online.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, I conducted semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann 2018; Denzin 2001), a relevant and essential method to gather information and establish bonds with the people with whom I worked. I conducted fourteen interviews<sup>11</sup>, of which four took in person place during 2019, one of which was in the form of a focus group; and ten were online in 2020 a 2021 – one of which via email, and two in the form of a focus group, with two people. The interviews were based on the life stories approach (Atkinson 2002; 2012), and all started with the question of how and when my interlocutors arrived at Contemporary Paganism. This approach provides in-depth information about the personal, social, cultural, and historical context of the people we work with. Besides, it brings the people we are working with to the narrative, overcoming translation issues and allowing their voices to be heard (Fedele 2020a). Moreover, I kept being in contact with some of these people, accompanying them throughout the research and not just in the interview moments. Some more directly, engaging in ethnographic conversations (Madden 2017) via text message or in-person, others indirectly following their work and what they shared in social media.

Finally, Digital Ethnography became a central methodological tool due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Given the relevance that digital and online tools have in contemporary society, it was already a methodological approach widely used (Horst, Miller, 2012; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis, Tacchi, 2016; Sloan, Quan-Haase, 2017). During this period, this methodological approach provided a guide on how to use social media and reconsider how we understand the field. During the process, the fieldwork ethics, already a central issue in the research (Caplan, 2003; Lester, Anders 2018), needed particular attention. Following what was proposed by the authors of *Digital Religion* (Campbell, Tsuria 2021), I decided to share only general information based on my autoethnographic experience<sup>12</sup>, to hide names, and use data that was shared in public groups or public commentaries. Naturally, this always raises the

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<sup>10</sup> I was going to attend the 2021 Online Glastonbury Goddess Conference too however it was impossible to do so, since it happened in the same period my father died, and I was in mourning leave.

<sup>11</sup> I conducted nine interviews on the Portuguese context (in person and online) and five interviews (online) in the British context, due to the transformations that fieldwork suffered due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

<sup>12</sup> The use of the autoethnographic method will be explained on the Chapter 1, on the section about my positionality.

question of how public and private the shared information is understood by the people that share it in online spaces (Segata 2020; Márquez 2014); however, I did my best to maintain ethical standards in the practice of the research process. Despite the transformations in routines and social interaction, which called for the transformation of methods, to an adaptation to new configurations of the field, and in the ways by which we can create meaningful relationships with those we work with. The contact with Pagans was strengthened since staying at home gave them more time to engage online, allowing me to feel closer to their daily lives than while meeting them just during the rituals, and engage in new temporalities and spatialities (Damsholt 2020).

All the methods used in the research provided in-depth understanding and the creation of strong relationships of care and respect, of reciprocity between me and the people that took their time to share their life stories with me. Research on religion and spirituality is complex due to the multifaceted and layered dimensions of those engaged in these lived experiences. All the methods used here were essential to reach and to understand all the layers explored in these pages.

Focusing my work on one group, while very fruitful, did not give me enough of an overview about Contemporary Paganism in Portugal or the United Kingdom. It is, notably, a heterogeneous religious and spiritual movement, with different views and practices, and I realized that having a broader set of testimonies would be better in order to reach a more profound knowledge about this reality and how it is lived. Therefore, I contacted not only groups but also solitary practitioners. I contacted and worked with people in leadership positions in the United Kingdom given the above-mentioned issues that rendered my fieldwork in the country impossible, namely with representatives from The Pagan Federation, The Pagan Federation International and the Glastonbury Goddess Conference. In Portugal, I worked with people in leadership positions, belonging to smaller groups and solitary practitioners.

Contemporary Paganism's heterogeneity led me to delimitate which interlocutors to choose. What unites the people with whom this research was conducted is their ecologically and environmentally inclined lived pagan religion and spirituality and their political positioning towards left-wing ideals. In that sense, when referring to Contemporary Pagans and Contemporary Paganism, in this thesis, I am considering forms of Ecocentric Paganism and Ecocentric Pagans<sup>13</sup>, as proposed recently by Michael York in an issue of the *Ecological Citizen*

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<sup>13</sup> The author understands that the main contemporary pagan principals are essential to "form a Pagan Ecocentric understanding"(York 2019, p. 39), in which the eco in the form of nature it is at the centre of their religious and spiritual worldviews.

*Journal* (2019). I am applying it as an analytical concept that, while broadening and including all the different approaches of my interlocutors, does not universalize them, since there are several Contemporary Paganisms, and I cannot approach and study them all. In these pages, when the terms “Pagans”, “Paganism”, or “Contemporary Pagans/Paganism” appear, I am referring to this Ecocentric approach followed by my interlocutors.

Besides, these interlocutors were chosen for four more reasons: first, I knew some of them from my Master’s research, people with whom I had worked or created ties beforehand. Second, these people held essential roles in the organization of events in Portugal and/or were engaged in the movement in person, or online, with some visibility; thirdly, they had some implicit or explicit environmentalist and/or ecofeminist stand; and finally, their trajectories and age, since I intended to include people from different backgrounds, classes, genders and ages, to better illustrate the heterogeneity I mentioned before. Some of them were contacted because I accompanied their work, others I met through a snowball effect, through some of the people I already knew. I believe this sample of people will provide an essential and representative insight into Portuguese Contemporary Paganism and its connections with British Paganism.

Following this note, I would like to introduce the voices that create this web.<sup>14</sup> First, I will start with my Portuguese interlocutors. We have Mariana (she), a Portuguese pagan and witch born in 1987, which grew in the centre of the country, in a parish near Fátima, with a degree in Education and Religious Sciences, that has been involved in several initiatives of interreligious dialogue. She is a Priestess of Templo de Inanna<sup>15</sup>; then Alexandra (she), a Hellenic pagan with a History degree born in 1993, that grew up in the centre and north of the country, whose devotional work has a vital educational component and is engaged with several online circles. Mariana and Alexandra were my central interlocutors throughout this research since they participated in the Portuguese Goddess Conference. Besides, we share a friendship bond that results in a degree of familiarity and in-depth collective reflection. Sofia (she/they), a witch with a History degree, born at the end of the 1990s and from Lisbon, has a solid political approach to Contemporary Paganism, and is one of the youngest people interviewed, just like Mora (she/they), who was born at the beginning of the 2000s, also from Lisbon and is a pagan

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<sup>14</sup> All the interviews were recorded with the oral consent of those involved, adhering to the ethical guides of the Iscte Anthropology Department and CRIA. All names in this thesis are pseudonyms to maintain to the maximum the anonymity of those involved and their protection, despite knowing the limitations of anonymity in the research process, even more in a small context in which everyone knows each other. The only exceptions are Mariana and Luiza that wished their names to be maintained and signed the consent statements.

<sup>15</sup> Templo de Inanna at the time that I conducted fieldwork is different from what the Temple is today since there were some internal transformations in its structure. Templo de Inanna is a Portuguese Pagan religious and spiritual group dedicated to the study and devotion of Sumerian Reconstructionist practices.

and witch with a degree in Communication that creates pagan contents in social media.

Margarida (she) is a Pagan and witch born in 1975, which grew in Lisbon, has a degree in Anthropology, and works with shamanism, sacred feminine and goddess spirituality, while engaging with environmental actions and Earth healing circles, like Magnólia. Magnólia (she) also from Lisbon Metropolitan Area, is a doula, pagan, herbalist and artist, was born in the 1980s and was educated in contemporary literature, theatre and contemporary dance. She strongly advocates for the Earth, participating in direct actions and magical healing for – and of – the Earth, including in her spiritual path environmental ideals.

Moving to the more institutional interviewees, we have Dália and João as representatives of the PFI-Portugal and the Congregação Politeísta, the first registered pagan group in Portugal which has been engaging with several environmental actions along the years, celebrating the Earth Day with rituals and participating in several demonstrations for the climate and animal rights. Luiza (she) was born in 1952, has a degree in Modern Languages and Literature and is a Priestess of the Goddess, as well as part of the Goddess Conference team in Portugal.

From the United Kingdom, we can count with the voices of Mary (she) and Kate (she), both born in the Netherlands, but finding a home in Glastonbury, and both members of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, one of most the significant Pagan events taking place in the United Kingdom. We also have Rosemary (she), a member of the Pagan Federation, who, besides being a pagan, is a witch and healer, highly passionate about what she believes; by the end of our online interview, we both had tears in our eyes. Daphne (she) is a member of the Pagan Federation International; while born in the Netherlands, she spent much of her life in the United Kingdom. She has been representing the PFI in several interfaith events and is engaged with environmental actions.

Although I wished to work gender relations as a broader approach, most of the people I worked with while doing this research identified themselves as women. Only two of my interviewees identified themselves as men, and only one was gender-fluid. As can be perceived from the brief introduction above, the age of my interlocutors varies from twenty to seventy years old. Some belong to what can be called a middle class, but most are part of a lower-middle to lower-working class, mainly in Portugal. The great majority had to combine their working and family lives with their spiritual ones, holding professions such as assistants, call centre operators, booksellers, professors and therapists, just to give some examples. Few could find their source of income in their spiritual and religious activities; when they can, it is primarily through teaching courses and workshops, tarot readings or therapeutic services, or, for extra income, as artisans and artists.

All these people have different sociocultural backgrounds, different approaches to Paganism, different experiences with this religious and spiritual movement and their own opinions regarding what it can be and what it has to offer. However, all agree that relationships with the wider-than-human – which includes Nature, other living beings, and deities – must be cared for and regenerated towards a possible future. They all provided extraordinary contributions to this research, as will be seen.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

Two major theoretical lines of thought guided and inspired my research. The first is the Lived Religion approach<sup>16</sup>, which focuses on how people live their religion and spirituality in their everyday lives. Meredith B. McGuire, in her book, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, proposed that lived religion is how people express and experience religion and spirituality in their everyday lives, capturing “how multifaceted, diverse, and malleable are the beliefs, values and practices that make up many persons’ own religions.”(McGuire 2008, p. 5). This approach provides an understanding that goes beyond the affiliation and institutional religion, focusing on the embodied experience of people, even in their contradictions. Similarly, Nancy Ammerman states that “looking for lived religion does mean that we look for the material, embodied aspects of religion as they occur in everyday life, in addition to listening for how people explain themselves. It includes both the experiences of the body and the mind.” (2014, p. 190).

In this sense, researching lived religion and spirituality, as the author continues includes attention to how and what people eat, how they dress, how they deal with birth and death and sexuality and nature, and even how they modify hair and body through tattoos or dreadlocks. Lived religion may include the spaces people inhabit, as well—the construction of shrines in homes or in public places, for instance. And it includes the physical and artistic things people do together such as singing, dancing, and other folk or community traditions that enact a spiritual sense of solidarity and transcendence (ibid, 190-191).

Since Contemporary Paganism is a non-institutional movement and is so heterogeneous,

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<sup>16</sup> In the same line, arose in the field of Religious Studies the use of the Vernacular Religion Approach, which is based in Leonardo Primiano propose to study the religious lives of people, focusing especially on the verbal, behavioural and material expressions of religious belief, therefore, how religion is lived by humans and how they encounter, understand, interpret and practice it (Bowman 2014). I opted to use the Lived Religion Approach since it is more straightforward theoretical approach than Vernacular Religion. For more on Vernacular Religion approach see the edited book by Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (2014).

understanding it as lived religion, like other scholars of Contemporary Paganism have proposed (Pike 2001; Fedele 2015; Anczyk, Malita-Król 2017), provides a deeper understanding of how it is lived, enacted, felt, practised and embodied while in rituals, in everyday lives and, in political and activist moments, as will be analysed in the following chapters. Besides, some of the lived dimensions that people hold as sacred, religious, or spiritual cannot be perceived as such; however, they are so to them. One example is the activist and political engagement of contemporary pagan groups with environmental and feminist issues that will be analysed in this thesis.

Secondly, the “Dark Green Religion” approach proposed by Bron Taylor was the second theoretical approach that inspired this work. Taylor defines “Dark Green Religion” as a form of religious and spiritual approach that considers Nature sacred and revered, holding intrinsic value, and that combines environmental politics at its centre. As he points out, it is a religion that is becoming increasingly important to global environmental politics, motivating both individuals and movements engaged in the environmental struggles in the contemporary world (Taylor 2010). I argue that Contemporary Paganism can be understood as a form of Dark Green Religion since, throughout the research, the motivations of my interlocutors to engage with the environment and protect it arise from spiritual, religious and political stands about what and how human beings should engage with in the world they live in, and with Life as a whole.

Applying these two approaches provided an understanding of how the dimensions I proposed to analyse – Gender, Nature and Power – appear in the research field. Through the lived religion approach, I accompanied some of my interlocutors in their everyday practices. I understood the motivations behind their engagement with the environmental causes and discourses, the negotiation of their gender roles, and the power dynamics that appear implicit and explicitly in their lived religious and spiritual lives.

### **Where This Research is Situated: Anthropology of Religion, Ecology, Gender**

This work is also a contribution to the scholarship of Religion in Portugal, adding its information to an already long and fruitful research conducted by João Leal (2017), Clara Saraiva (2010), Marina Pignatelli (2017), Anna Fedele (2013a; 2015; 2020b), José Mapril (2012), Raquel Carvalheira (2020), Inês Lourenço (2010; 2021), Eugenia Roussou (2021; 2016), Anastasios Panagiatopolous (2022), Pedro Pereira (2021), João Vasconcelos (2005), Ramon Sarró (2015) and Ruy Llera Blanes (2008; with Sarró, 2010; with Mapril, 2013) to name a few, raising questions that may contribute to the epistemological and methodological

discussions inside and across fields, about contemporary religion and spirituality in Portugal, as well as to the discussions regarding the approaches and definitions we use on Social Sciences.

It also contributes to the discussion that arose at the beginning of this century about Religion, Spirituality, New Age and Secularism (Heelas 1996; 2008; Houtman, Aupers 2007). People started identifying themselves as spiritual but not religious (Ammerman 2013), wanting to draw away from the stereotyped view of religion as oppressing, and looking for ways to express their identities. The Spiritual Revolution thesis (Heelas, Woodhead 2005) marked the discussions about religion and spirituality in social sciences, which has been deeply theorized, discussed and contested by academics (Harvey 2016; van der Veer 2009; Fedele, Knibbe 2020). The Secularization Thesis that proposed the decline of religion in contemporary society has also been contested (Asad 2003), and people are creatively creating their lived spiritual and religious experiences.

I understand Contemporary Paganism as a form of religious and spiritual movement, following what is proposed by Fedele and Knibbe (Fedele, Knibbe 2013). While doing so, I am not disregarding the valid need to discuss the analytic use of the word “spiritual” or “religious” as separate approaches, nor am I ignoring that this approach is contested, as Palmisano and Pannofino have analysed in their recent book (2021). I recognize the discussion and its importance. However, in the context I am working with, and based on the fieldwork conducted and the ways in which people identified with and spoke about Paganism, the religious and the spiritual are not distinguished and interact in their lived experience, being used in different contexts with different purposes. The same holds true for the discussion about the New Age (Shimazono 1999; Heelas 1996; Wood 2003; Roussou 2016) that has been theorized by sociological and anthropological scholarship. Even though some Contemporary Pagans dwell in the same spaces as other alternative spiritualities also falling under the “New Age” label, they do not identify with it, which informed my option not to include Contemporary Paganism under that label. I recognize the academic theory around this theme but do not engage with it since my interlocutors do not define themselves in those terms.

When approaching categories such as “spiritual” and “religious”, one must remember that these are not outdrawn from reality and mean different things for those applying them while living their lives and dwelling in the world. The testimonials of my interlocutors will demonstrate how these categories are applied in different moments to serve different goals and wishes. This research also contributes to Anthropological research on Ecology and Environment in Portugal (Frazão-Moreira, Fernandes 2006; Frazão-Moreira 2022; 2010; Mendes 2013; Martins 2018; Sá Rego 2021; de Pinho 2021) focusing on religious

environmentalism and engagements with the environment and ecological issues. Finally, it contributes and is situated in field of Anthropology of Gender (Vale de Almeida 1995; Lima 2004; Fedele 2019; Lourenço 2011), offering perspectives to understand how people live their gender identities based on their religious, spiritual and political approaches and beliefs, as will be explored in Chapter 4.

Religion and Spirituality are alive and well, as Contemporary Paganism illustrates, gaining relevance in a period of uncertainty in which human beings need comfort, explanations and tools to deal with their anxieties. This research contributes to understand how people engage and make sense of the world through spiritual and religious worldviews, approaching and negotiating relevant issues such as gender, ecology and power.

### **2030 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda**

This research was founded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, whose financing and evaluation policies follow the 2030 Agenda, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2015). Therefore, it contributes to the following Sustainable Development Goals: the Third Goal which promotes Good Health and Wellbeing – it approaches a religious and spiritual movement highly engaged in promoting and caring for the emotional and spiritual well-being of people, and had a relevant role to play during the COVID-19 Restrictions in providing support during times of uncertainty and crisis, as shown in the following chapters.

It contributes to the Fifth Goal, which relates to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, and in the case of this research, that can be seen in the knowledge gathered and the dialogue about gender in the context of Contemporary Paganism; it contributes to the Tenth Goal, which proposes that inequality within and among countries is reduced – in the context of Contemporary Paganism, this is seen in the engagement with religious freedom and equality, as well as in the support and work towards social equality; it contributes to the Twelfth, Thirteenth and Fifteenth Goals, relating to actions towards climate, which Contemporary Pagans promote due to their engagement with environmental causes and their focus on the environment and the planet as a sacred entity; finally, it contributes to the Sixteenth Goal, which promotes fair, peaceful and inclusive societies, a central issue for Contemporary Pagans, since they strive for peaceful relationships between all beings and concrete and direct actions for inclusive and healthy planetary societies.

Despite the contributions of this research to the abovementioned goals – by demonstrating possible dialogues with public policies, and showing how analysing a religious and spiritual



movement such as Contemporary Paganism is much broader than just look at the spiritual and religious lives – I write these paragraphs well aware of the discrepancies between these policies and the actual lived experience of the people. Although it is not the focus of this research, and being beyond my scope of knowledge and analysis, it is crucial to refer that many of these policies are inadequate, even if relevant.

### **Navigating the Web**

I decided to conceive this thesis as a spider web. Each Chapter is a sustaining thread, and each subsection, the remaining threads that connect and intertwine in the structure of that web. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the socio-historical and religious Portuguese context approaching some of the most significant social processes that occurred in the Twentieth and Twentieth-first centuries: the impacts of the dictatorship and of the post-revolution period; approaches to gender and social roles of women during that totalitarian regime and the fight for equal rights; and the importance and impact of the catholic background for contemporary lived religious and spiritual groups such as Contemporary Paganism. These socio-historical and cultural processes are illustrated in the second section of this chapter, in which I explore my biographical path, inspired by an autoethnographic approach, to reflect on these processes and my positionality in the field.

In Chapter 2, the contextualization continues, offering an overview of what Contemporary Paganism is, discussing its roots, inspirations, paths, principles and main themes explored in the literature about Contemporary Paganism. Then, I will demonstrate what it means to be a Pagan to my interlocutors based on their life stories. This chapter ends by demonstrating the differences between Portuguese and British Contemporary Paganism based on the events I attended and discussing the work towards the recognition of Contemporary Paganism as a religious and spiritual movement in both countries.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explore the primary research axis and are the most ethnographically dense chapters. Chapter 3 explores how Contemporary Pagans engage with ecological and environmental issues through participation in political actions and ritualization. It starts by presenting an overview of the literature about religion, spirituality and environment/Nature. The second section approaches nature's different meanings, from broader definitions to contextual ones<sup>17</sup>, followed by the discussion of ethnographic cases that demonstrate Pagans engagement with environmental issues through personal and collective actions. This chapter

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<sup>17</sup> When I refer to “contextual definitions of Nature” I am referring to the definitions provided by my interlocutors.

closes with a reflection about issues that the contemporary pagan approach to Nature can raise.

Chapter 4 analyses gender in Contemporary Paganism, focusing on the influence of feminist spirituality and ecofeminism in their lived religious and spiritual experiences. First, a brief overview of gender and feminism in Anthropology will be provided; followed by contemporary pagan approaches to gender; and the third section will offer a discussion of how the Goddess is understood and Its importance to the reconnection and re-enchantment narratives and experiences of Ecocentric Pagans; the fourth section analyses the importance of individual and collective rituals for empowerment; the fifth section of this chapter offers an analysis of the differences between the Portuguese and the Glastonbury Goddess Conference (UK). The last section will discuss issues related to the gendering of Nature, to identity, and to economic access that arise in Contemporary Paganism.

Power dynamics are the focus of Chapter 5. Starting with an analysis of how power has been discussed in anthropology, it then approaches and discusses the different ways by which power appears in the lived experiences of Contemporary Pagans, from structural power to leadership and rights, and finally, to empowerment. The third section approaches the different understandings of politics by Contemporary Pagans, discussing how Paganism can be political, the activist approaches of the movement, and the final section, the perils of the political far-right in Contemporary Paganism.

Chapter 6 offers an account of how the COVID-19 restrictions impacted lived religious and spiritual experience of Ecocentric Pagans, discussing how they adapted during this period and provided the emotional and spiritual care needed, while facing the uncertainty and the positive and negative responses found in the field. It also discusses the rise of conspiracy theories on Pagan online spaces during the COVID-19 restrictions.

Finally, Chapter 7 analyses the intersection between healing, regeneration and care as the forms through which Contemporary Pagans look for transformations towards the future. It also approaches the contributions of religion and spirituality for a future facing crisis and uncertainty. In the Conclusion of the thesis, an overview of the main results of the research will be presented, as well as a discussion of what was not approached and considerations for the future.

Now that the research web is presented, it is time to close your eyes and take a deep breath. Imagine the soft breeze that enters your home through the open window, caressing your skin. Attune to the sounds of the birds chirping outside the window, smell the burning sandalwood incense. Take another breath. Please, open your eyes and step into the circle to be guided through how Contemporary Pagans in Portugal live their religious and spiritual experiences in

a world of intricate connections and ways of being.

## CHAPTER 1

# **Beginning the Weaving: Contextualization and Researcher's Positionality**

Imagine a spider building Her<sup>18</sup> web. The silk threads released and fastidiously waved to create the home and sustenance She needed. Thread after thread give birth to that strong, patiently and beautifully woven web. Like a web, this research comprises intertwined threads that give it meaning and beauty. Every step leading us along this path connects with the strides we have taken and the ones still to take. Connects us also to newly discovered and unexpected ones. This web mingles and intertwines, building new knowledge and life lessons. My own experience has threads connecting Academia, biographical experience, sociocultural background, contemporary pagan circles, online space, gender, environment, power and activism.

I may speak of a web, but we can also imagine a circle being cast, with everyone and every dream, desire, perception and interpretation holding hands and spinning. This is research. Every small issue matter and has an impact. That is why I must explain how I arrived at this place, and the pages resulting from my doctoral research. It informs the theoretical and methodological options undertaken when the research took place, which were stated before. Besides, the context in which it took place is too relevant and needs to be discussed. I want to state that I will only focus on the contextualization of the Portuguese space due to three reasons: first, the COVID-19 restrictions mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis led to a change in the research calendar, and the fieldwork in the United Kingdom was cancelled and replaced by online fieldwork, which resulted in a lack of depth to understand to what point it influenced British Contemporary Paganism. I could do a literature review as I did in the Portuguese case; however, it would be a pointless exercise since the data collected through interviews or online rituals were not enough to establish the background's influences and make a proper analysis. Secondly, the study of British Contemporary Paganism is long and well documented. Thirdly, and as a consequence of the aforesaid reason, the reality of Contemporary Paganism in both countries led me to define the field as an unbound space where people interact, create relationships and mobilize.

On the other hand, research about Portuguese Contemporary Paganism in Anthropology is

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<sup>18</sup> Referring to the spider as feminine and with capital is a very common among Contemporary Paganism. I am mobilizing this metaphor in the thesis to transpire the idea of interconnectedness present in the field. Besides, it is also mobilized by Contemporary Pagans in the form of mythology, in which Arachne, weaves the fates of the gods and humans in Greek Mythology (Maya 2019).

scarce, and the phenomenon behind it – and its particular context – needs to be looked at in detail and emphasized, since it makes a significant contribution to the study of Contemporary Pagan movements in Europe. In addition, it is the first Doctoral research conducted over Contemporary Paganism in Portugal by a Portuguese researcher. Therefore, this chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, the Portuguese sociohistorical and religious background will be analysed, focusing on three particular dimensions: the Estado Novo dictatorship, its social and political impacts and the 25 April revolution and following period; the approach to gender and social inequalities and fights for equality; and the catholic religious and cultural background that had moral impacts on Portuguese Society. In the second section, I will approach my presence in the field through an exercise of biographical recounting that engages with the methodological and theoretical choices made and with the relationships with my interlocutors, since I share the same sociocultural and religious referential that they do, and given that I conducted my fieldwork at home.

## **1.1. Contextualization: The Portuguese Sociohistorical and Religious Background**

When one observes a spider web, a central core where all the sustaining strings converge is distinguishable independently of the resulting design. This core, and central threads, provide the stability and resistance of the web. Transporting this metaphor to this thesis, each chapter approaches a critical theme that, on one side, sustains the argument and, on the other, informs and illuminates the lived experience of Contemporary Pagans in Portugal and how the central axis in this research analysis takes place. In this section, the Portuguese sociohistorical, political and religious background will be approached, since it informs about the differences, tendencies, issues and particularities of Contemporary Paganism in Portugal. Therefore, I will only focus on the period of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and its main social processes.

### **1.1.1. Dictatorship, Repression, and Social Unrest**

Portugal is at the far West edge of Europe with 10.343.066 inhabitants, according to the 2021 national census (Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2022a). The Twentieth century, and the beginning of the Twenty-first century, were periods of transformation, but with too many inequalities, crises, and instability. Ten years before entering the European Economic Community (now European Union), the country had just come out of a dictatorship, with high levels of analphabet population living in poverty. In this section, I will approach the crucial events in the country that impact the social life of Portuguese Pagans and some of the issues

they face regarding recognition, gender equality and ecological practices.

As stated, Portuguese 20<sup>th</sup> century history is marked by turmoil and instability. Five forms of government took place: the last years of the monarchic power, which was overthrown in 1910 and gave place to the First Republic; The Military Dictatorship that arose in the midst of social and political unrest from 1926 to 1933; this dictatorship paved the way for Estado Novo, the authoritarian regime that left deep marks in Portuguese Society and ruled from 1933 until 1974, the year of the Carnation Revolution that overthrew the Regime and brought Democracy to the country. Despite the importance of the First Republic to the country, I will focus on the impacts of Estado Novo and the Revolution since these events in Portuguese History profoundly influenced the socioeconomic and cultural fabrics of Portuguese society in a way that is still felt. It is still present in the memories of most of the population, be it because they lived it or because it is part of the oral stories shared through generations.

In 1910, the First Republic was implemented in Portugal, and this was the first echo of democratic governance that the country had. Democracy, Education and Laicization were the three crucial axes of the Republican ideology in the years it prevailed, having applied changes that are still in place today: first, the educational reform, mainly at the primary and university levels – founding of important Universities (Lisbon and Porto), Institutes (Instituto Superior Técnico and Instituto Superior de Agronomia), and Faculties (such as Porto's Faculty of Engineering); Second, significant civic and democratic reforms such as the separation between State and Church – the first echoes of Divorce Law and the mandatory civil registry, breaching even more the relationship between State and Church since it removed the responsibility for registering the population from the Church and the Parishes, until then the ones responsible for that management. Those reforms were made amongst political, financial, and governance instability that hindered the total modernization and democratization the Republicans hoped for (Rosas 2020).

According to Rosas (2020), five factors led to the fall of the republic to a dictatorial regime: first, it arose in an urban and bourgeois context, in a rural country divided by properties controlled by the clergy, low wages or unpaid workers, poverty and illiteracy to name a few, living realities utterly distinct from the urban and bourgeoisie class; second, despite implementing the right for voting, the governing class did not wholly democratize the political system, since not everybody could vote and certain social groups such as women and illiterates, could not; third, the First Republic was unable to adapt the social policies to the reality of the working class, what resulted in conflict with worker's struggles and in syndicates; fourth, the conflict with the Church; and finally the participation of Portugal in the Great War which lead

to a significant economic and social crisis that opened the door to the Military Dictatorship in 1926 and to Estado Novo in 1933.

For 48 years, Portugal lived under a dictatorship that was an authoritarian, nationalist and corporative regime under the influence of Salazar, who had control over the nationalist and anti-liberal right wing. The Military Dictatorship, during which Salazar rose to the position of Finance Minister in 1928, controlled any possible exterior and internal opposition the new regime could face. Therefore, it overthrew and repressed the military resistance, the radical republicans and the worker's movements with communist and anarchist bases, thus reducing the communist opposition to an underground movement, mainly in the areas of Greater Lisbon and Tejo's south margin. Moreover, the majors of the army and navy were mainly Conservative Republicans and were allies of the Republican right-wing. Exploring the myth of the "Finances mage" due to his work in stabilizing the public finances – what could be translated as saving the nation – and the support of the President of the Republic, Salazar and his supporters wanted to implement a "National Revolution" – that is, authoritarian, anti-liberal, nationalist anti-parliamentary and anti-communist regime (*ibid* 2020) called "Estado Novo", which was institutionalized in 1933.

This regime created institutions to control physically and ideologically the population, installed in primary sociability levels such as the family, school, work or recreation, creating an ideal of a "new man", the rural family chief, ignorant, devoted to God and the authority, happy and satisfied in his poverty. It lasted 48 years due to six factors that Rosas (2020) resumed: first, the violence that it applied to maintain the moral control of the population and repress the echoes of opposition or displeasure. This violence was preventive, from the most omnipresent and invisible type, exerted by the State surveillance institutions via censorship, and by the ideological institutions that were responsible for monitoring the family, the schools, workplaces and places of recreation, pushing forward the ideals of the "family-men" and of women as "fadas do lar" that should serve their husbands and their families. It was a type of violence installed by the socialization of fear and a clear message of submission. But it was, also, a punitive type of violence, when applied to those rebelling, carried out by the political police (*ibid* 2020, pp. 49–51); second, the political control over the Armed Forces; third, the support of the Catholic Church, which despite the 1933 Portuguese Constitution declaring the laicization of the State, integrated the ideological objectives of the regime – with this union the legitimacy of the regime was reinforced, as part, and tool, of the divine providence; four, the use of corporativism as a regime, since, on one side, exerted social control in repressing strikes, syndicates actions, political parties' freedom of expression and even rendering rural and fishing

syndicates illegal, on the other side, as an economic regulator; fifth, the influence in the primary sociability institutions already mentioned, since it disseminated the moral of the regime “Deus, Pátria, Família”<sup>19</sup>, reinforcing the fact that these institutions cannot be questioned, and served to create a “docile citizen” under the regime, while aided by propaganda and political and educational institutions responsible for it; and finally, the sixth factor, the imperial and colonial power notions disseminated by the regime, in which an idea of the glorious past of the country was exalted, and the power of the white man to evangelize and control was defended. According to the author, this created a form of popular colonialism, first due to the economic activities that depended on work in the African continent under colonial governance, followed by the acceptance of these values. An anticolonial positioning arose late in Portugal, in the early 1970s – despite its echoes of rebellion coming from the “colonies” much earlier – from the radical left and the catholic resistance that associated anti-colonial struggles with anti-fascist struggles.

Meanwhile, the great majority of the Portuguese population lived in poverty and with high levels of illiteracy, not only in the rural backcountry but also in the metropolis. In 1960 there was a tremendous demographic movement with social and symbolic consequences: the rural exodus that led the majority of the rural workers of the backcountry to coastal cities, such as Lisbon, Setúbal and Porto, and the emigration to other European countries, such as France, when there were not enough space and work opportunities in the metropolitan areas mentioned above. Today, it is possible to see the impact of this demographic movement, mainly from the backcountry to the coastal cities, with a significant concentration of services and work opportunities in these areas and an abandonment of the country's interior. This distinction between urban and rural areas also transpired in class differences mapping the country: the urban centres congregates the middle-class population and small bourgeoisie that existed, while in the rural space, the proletarian class (Lopes 2020). This exodus was, then, at the origins of the social reconfiguration of the country.

Rosas (2020, p. 77) stated that “the political democracy does not exist in Portugal *despite* the revolution, but *because* there was the revolution”. The instability, discontentment, and toil felt due to the colonial wars that were taking place since 1961, and to the general situation of oppression, led to social unrest and the rise of a movement from within the military forces. Unlike other military coups, this movement was organized by young officers, captains and majors that had seen the spoils of war first-hand, not by the generals, admirals or colonels. It was a movement that started in the middle and low ranks of the Armed Forces and spread to

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<sup>19</sup> Can be translated as “God, Nation, Family”. It was the Estado Novo propaganda motto and moral structure.



the people, leading to a mobilization of the masses, quickly taking control of factories, unoccupied houses, landowners' lands, and, self-managing, called for the nationalization of several services from the economic and financial sector, created collective units of production for the agrarian reform, established cooperatives and residents commissions from the north to the south of the country. Without the Armed Forces Movement and the military coup, the people would not have had the strength and means to overthrow the regime on 25 April 1974. But from that moment on, freedom was at arm's reach of the people, it was “O dia inicial inteiro e limpo/ Onde emergimos da noite e do silêncio /E livres habitamos a substância do tempo<sup>20</sup>”. The conquered political democracy “was not bestowed by the power. It was a popular conquest imposed to the power” (Rosas 2020, p. 70).

In 1975 the first free elections took place. In April 1976, the new version of the Constitution was institutionalized, and is in place until today, pending some alterations. This document institutionalised the rights, freedoms and political and social demands since April 1974. Since then, the governing forces of the country have been either the Left-Central Socialist Party or the Right-Central Social Democrat Party. Several economic and social crises affected the country since then, with six recessions between 1980 and 2020 and three interventions from the International Monetary Fund (1978, 1984 and 2011). In 1985, Portugal signed the adhesion treaty to the (then) CEE – Portuguese initials for European Economic Community, which would change into European Union in 1993. The decades of the 1980s and 1990s were the consolidation of a democratic Portugal, despite several progresses and setbacks in the economic and social areas, depending on the government that was in place at a given time. The decade between 1985 and 1995, despite the economic recovery of the country and its financial capital in the 1990s, was one of social unrest and disregard for the majority of the Portuguese population, one of favouring some social groups, over others. In this decade, with an authoritarian governance style, the elected Party disregarded communication with the Parliament, controlled the public media, allowed brutal police responses to strikes and protests organized by syndicates and student struggles; adopted a neoliberal model of economy and society, privatizing most services, liberalizing markets, ending the agrarian reform initiated in the post-revolutionary period, trying to review the legislation concerning strikes and salary ceilings in order to lower them; and an intervention of the IMF<sup>21</sup> lead to unemployment, precarity and cuts on wages, among others. The discontentment of the population and the

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<sup>20</sup> Sophia de Mello Brayner Anderson, poem *25 de Abril* freely translated as “The initial day full and clean/where we arise from the night and the silence/ and free we inhabit the time substance”.

<sup>21</sup> International Monetary Fund

resistance of the President of the Republic ended the right-wing Social Democratic government in 1995 (*ibid*).

Several economic and financial crises affected the Portuguese society; however, I highlight the 2008-2015 crisis, which significantly impacted the majority of the people with whom this research was conducted. During these years – and beyond – austerity and instability marked their daily lives, while the Portuguese Government of the time, a right-wing coalition, was signing in 2011 a four-year agreement with the Troika<sup>22</sup>, leading to significant tax increases, high unemployment rates and increase of precarious jobs, characterized by a narrative of constraint and a focus on private sectors substituting the State in its own (Alves de Matos 2021a; Alves de Matos, Pusceddu 2021). The majority of the Portuguese population was struggling just to maintain their livelihoods, and the impacts of this financial crisis and austerity measures can still be felt nowadays in Portugal, with people still struggling to re-configure their lives.

Since this research focused on the gender dimension and was primarily conducted with women, it is necessary to look at the social place of women and LGBTQIA+ people in Portuguese society, what will be explored in the next section.

### **1.1.2. Gender under the regime**

It is relevant to approach women's social place in Portuguese society during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, since they were among the most oppressed prior to the Carnation Revolution and are still fighting until now for respect and security in a patriarchal society. If you were a woman in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Portugal – and a woman from a lower class – you would feel a double oppression and disregard. Besides, the gender approach directly relates to the religious and spiritual movement discussed in this research, since it was within the freedom gained with the Revolution that the women I have been working with saw as the opening of a space them to freely practice and share their religious and spiritual lives today, as will be shown throughout the chapters by the voices of the pagan women I worked with.<sup>23</sup>

For a significant part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women in Portugal were considered second-class citizens, to whom fundamental rights were denied – such as the right to vote – and certain professions forbidden.<sup>24</sup> When married, they were under their husband's tutelage, to whom they

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<sup>22</sup> The name given to the intervention of the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank.

<sup>23</sup> The importance of the women's liberation after Estado Novo, and their freedom, is something that will be seen in some cases, in explicit ways, others more implicit, when my interlocutors speak about the need to maintain this freedom while living their religious and spiritual lives.

<sup>24</sup> The image on the next page illustrates some of the inequality that women faced during Estado Novo. It is a photograph from the Temporary Exhibition Women and Resistance – “New Portuguese Letters” and other

were expected to obey, and from whom they could expect several forms of violence, since that was institutionalised as part of the marital relation. They were financially dependent on their husbands, and divorces had no existence. Only in cases of adultery the Statute of Legal Separation was applied, with heavier legal repercussions for women. Back in 1910, with the First Republic, the Laws of Divorce and the Law of Family were instituted, and divorce was made possible by mutual agreement. But in 1940, the Estado Novo regime signed an agreement with the Holy See stating that couples married under the Catholic Church could not divorce or separate. Estado Novo disseminated in its propaganda the importance of women in the domestic sphere and their work in the service of their houses and their husbands. They were not understood and recognized as social and political agents with opinions, freedoms and inherent to self-expression. Their purpose was to care for the family and the house, being unworthy of work in certain professions; or if they worked, they had to do so authorized by their husbands and the State. During the Estado Novo regime, women could not be magistrates, work in public prosecution, hold diplomatic positions or work in law and military forces. While single they were allowed to be, to an extent, nurses, flight attendants, telephone operators or primary school teachers – in this last case, if they wished to marry they would need an authorization from the Education Ministry (Peniche 2020).

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struggles, at Museu do Aljube – Resistência e Liberdade, that was patent in 2021. I chose it because it resumes what rights and what professions were denied to women during that period. It translates as follows: “Divorce was forbidden in Catholic Marriage”; “Salary Discrimination in the law”; “Women could be arrested for aborting”; “The majority of women did not have the right to vote”; “Professor, Judge, Nurse, PSP/GNR, Lawyer”; “Leave the country only with husband’s authorization”; “Different school curriculums”.



Image 3- Inequality during *Estado Novo*, Museu do Aljube - *Resistência e Liberdade*, Temporary Exhibition "Women and Resistance – "New Portuguese Letters" and other struggles", 2021

Despite these restrictions and the regime's ideology, women always worked. In the proletarian classes, women always accumulated household and care work with agricultural and artisanal activities, factory jobs, cleaning jobs, and as handmaids, to name a few. In the 1960s, with the number of men leaving the country to fight in colonial wars or to work abroad, women had to occupy activities that were considered a male domain, stepping up as the economic and power sources of the household (*ibid*). However, this does not mean that they lacked social power. Several ethnographies conducted in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s in Portugal<sup>25</sup> revealed the social importance of women as nurturers and managers in the community, and the complexity of gender roles and relationships (Pina-Cabral 1989; O'Neill 1984; Vale de Almeida 1995; Cole 1994).

With the new Constitution, every citizen had the same rights and was equal before the law. The 13<sup>o</sup> article of the Portuguese Republic Constitution states that "All citizens possess the same social dignity and are equal before the law" and "No one may be privileged, favoured, prejudiced, deprived of any right or exempted from any duty for reasons of ancestry, sex, race,

<sup>25</sup> For a deeper understanding of the history of Portuguese Anthropology and Ethnography, see Viegas and Pina-Cabral (2014); Bastos and Sobral (2018); for the impact of the Carnation Revolution in the discipline see Vespeira de Almeida (2014).

language, the territory of origin, religion, political or ideological beliefs, education, economic situation, social circumstances or sexual orientation” (Constitution of the Portuguese Republic 1976 art.13).

Another essential dimension to anchoring democracy and equal freedom for all citizens is universal suffrage. In 1911, suffrage was given by the newly instituted Republic to all citizens above 21 years old that could read and write and were family chiefs, without specifying the gender. The women's suffrage movement saw this breach in the law as an opportunity, and Carolina Beatriz Ângelo, as a widow and family chief, was the first woman to vote. The law was quickly altered, specifying that voting was a right of male family chiefs only. In 1931, Estado Novo changed the legislation, and any family chief, regardless of their gender, could vote. Plus, women separated<sup>26</sup> from their husbands, and women with dependents and assets in their names, could vote, as well as widows and women whose husbands were abroad. In 1933 this right was extended to emancipated and out-of-age single women and women with higher education.

Nevertheless, the illiterate could not vote, as well as women not fitting those categories. The Suffragist Movement in Portugal was a bourgeois movement, given the social origins of the women composing it, and what they demanded. Universal suffrage was not demanded, what was demanded was the right for educated women to vote. Only in 1976, with the new Constitution, universal suffrage was declared (Peniche 2020).

As for the right over their bodies, it has been an arduous struggle until today. Contraception was forbidden in Portugal, what had already been legislated in 1929 and reinforced in 1942. Despite the contraceptive pill being approved in 1960 in the United States of America, in Portugal, it started to be shyly distributed in 1962 as a method for regulating the menstrual cycle, but not as a contraceptive method. In 1968, the Church accepted natural contraceptive methods, but not chemical or barrier methods such as contraceptive pills or male condoms.

During an interview with the Priestess from the PFI – Portugal, she shared how transforming was the introduction of the contraceptive pill in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s in Portugal. She is a daughter and granddaughter of *parteiras*<sup>27</sup> and has accompanied closely how difficult was to women, particularly to women from lower classes, the access to contraceptive pill, which were extremely expensive at first. For her,

The right to the pill, almost free, you have no idea how good it was. The personal freedom to have medicine when one is poor and cannot pay for it was essential. I

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<sup>26</sup> Separated, not divorced since it was forbidden during Estado Novo.

<sup>27</sup> Translated as Midwives

consider that a unique right because people suffered a lot. And the *parteiras*...it was a black market. You have no idea what the black market of the *parteiras* was. As a *cartomante*, I had that market next to me, and people appeared and asked, ‘Do you know someone?’. How many pills I offered to the girls from *Casal Ventoso*,<sup>28</sup> me and the pharmacy owner...Fortunately, it was possible.<sup>29</sup>

The first echoes for the call to decriminalize abortion and make it accessible and free to every woman were heard only in 1974. However, this was a struggle of organized civic and social movements in the streets with the support of the left, although not the parliamentarian left. In 1984, a Decree was approved that decriminalized abortion, but only in certain situations, not implying the women’s right to make decisions about their bodies: only when women’s lives were put at risk, when there was a foetus malformation, or in cases of sexual assault. Fourteen years later, in 1998, another proposal was put forward and approved by the Parliament, one that considered that women could abort until the 12<sup>th</sup> weeks; however, the leaders of the two major Parties - the Prime Minister from the Socialist Party, António Guterres, now the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and the leader of the Social Democrat Party, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, the President of the Portuguese Republic since 2016 - both outspokenly Catholic and against abortion, united and halted the proposal. It had to be subjected to a referendum to take the pulse of Portuguese citizens. This proposal was not approved by the referendum, with 68% of the population voting against. The Catholic Church was one of the louder intervenors in the debate and a social and moral narrative was disseminated that painted as criminals the women that had aborted (Peniche 2020).

In 2004 the Left-wing parties in the Parliament proposed another referendum, which was denied, only to happen again in 2007. However, the President of Republic at the time raised some obstacles which are still in place, since the law has not been reviewed since then: women could abort but had a mandatory three days period of reflection before the procedure, and the health professional could claim the right for conscience objection to exclude himself from the procedure (*ibid*). Today, although the request of an abortion to the National Health Service is a right, in practical terms, it is an arduous and psychologically exhausting task for women, finding bureaucratic and professional obstacles in their path.

With the rise in visibility of feminist movements in Portuguese public spaces – since before

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<sup>28</sup> Casal Ventoso was a *Bairro* in Lisbon that during the 1990s was under scrutiny due to drug trafficking. It was dismantled in the beginning of the 2000s. See the ethnographies produced by Miguel Chaves (1999) and Luís Vasconcelos (2003).

<sup>29</sup> Interview conducted in person, in Lisbon, on 26 October 2019.

the revolution<sup>30</sup> - in dialogue with the international feminist movement, the patriarchal approaches to sexuality, society and conjugality started being contested.

Women fought for the right to their sexuality, not as a means to procreate but as part of their self-expression and of their rights over their own bodies. LGBTQIA+ people also started mobilizing after the revolution, and 1982 homosexuality was decriminalized. More than ten years later, the first Pride *Arraial* (1997) was organized, and the first Pride March took place two years later. Those are events that have been growing since then and expanding from the capital and are now taking place in other Portuguese cities. In 2001 the law was approved for non-marital partnerships between people of the same sex; also in 2010 the law was approved for the civil marriage; in 2015, the adoption of children by same-sex couples was given green light under the law; in 2016, the law was approved for medically assisted reproduction for lesbian couples; and in 2018 the right for gender self-determination became a reality (Peniche 2020).<sup>31</sup>

This being said, it becomes evident that the rights that women and LGBTQIA+ people fought for, and the social transformations that happened in Portuguese society, relate directly to the religious and spiritual freedom of the people since this freedom can be translated into possibilities for these spaces to exist; this freedom can lead to the creation of narratives adapting both sociocultural and religious elements without the fear of reprisals; freedom to exert their political rights in religious and spiritual spaces, and to connect with them; and finally, the right to decide over one's own body, what is being approached, transformed and reframed in religious and spiritual spaces such as Paganism with new meanings about their social roles. All this happened and happens still in a country with a Catholic religious and cultural background, which will be analysed in the next section.

### **1.1.3. “Avé Maria, cheia de Graça” - The Portuguese Catholic Background and Law for Religious Freedom**

As has been alluded to, despite the transformations in the Portuguese religious and spiritual milieu (Teixeira, 2019), the Catholic Church still holds an important place in Portuguese Society. First, the majority of the population identifies as Catholic, even if church attendance

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<sup>30</sup> One of the episodes that marked the Portuguese feminist movement was the Três Marias Case. Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Isabel Barreno and Maria Velho da Costa wrote in 1972 the *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, a book that once was published was censored by the Political Police of Estado Novo, which interrogated the authors several times, that were accused of the crimes against the State and were put to trial. It raised an international mobilization, and the book was translated in several countries. Its critic of the colonial and patriarchal powers is still relevant today and this book is one of the most important in Portuguese literary story due to its political impact.

<sup>31</sup> For the history of the LGBTQIA+ Movement in Portugal see Vale de Almeida 2021

has decreased (Dix 2009; Vilaça, Oliveira 2019); second, it is the major religious institution present in the Portuguese public space, if one takes into account the number of churches; and third, it is integrative of the religious identity and referential of Portuguese people, even those that adhere to Contemporary Paganism (Fedele 2015) and to New Spiritualities (Roussou 2016). Besides, from the perspective of the Vernacular Religion (Bowman, Valk 2014) and Lived Religion approaches (Ammerman 2014), identifying oneself as catholic is diving in a complex reality, an amalgamation of layered beliefs, practices, worldviews, and inspirations, like any other religious and spiritual confession. The institutional, in the figure of the Church, is not the lived Catholicism of the people; therefore, from this point of view, it remains influential in Portuguese society.

As mentioned above, the 1940 *Concordata* was signed between the Portuguese state and the Holy See. In this document, the Portuguese State recognized the autonomy and juridic personality of the Catholic Church; was guaranteed that the Catholic Church could freely exercise its authority; the State recognized and reinstated the properties and assets belonging to the Church that were under the State's protection; it was declared the tax exemption of all ecclesiastical buildings and properties. With this document, the Catholic Church was given autonomy and power similar to those of the State. The motto "Deus, Pátria e Família"<sup>32</sup> translated this relationship during Estado Novo. Moreover, the Sanctuary of Fátima and the Apparitions were used by Estado Novo as part of the propaganda.

Our Lady of Fátima is relevant in Portuguese society's socio-cultural and religious milieu. During the Military Dictatorship and Estado Novo, She was elevated and made a symbol of the country, as the Mother of the Nation; despite the abovementioned transformations since Estado Novo, Fátima's Sanctuary still holds significant importance.<sup>33</sup> The annual pilgrimages to the Sanctuary still mobilize hundreds of people today, both catholic and non-Catholic (Lourenço, Cachado 2018; Fedele 2020c; 2021; Cavallo, Fedele 2020).

Catholicism is then a cultural reference to Contemporary Pagans, even if it is treated with disdain. It is recurrent in the narratives of Portuguese Pagans the creation of an opposition between an 'us' and a 'them'. First, in the sense of the majority that oppressed, converted,

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<sup>32</sup> Translated as "God, Nation and Family".

<sup>33</sup> The Apparitions in Fátima were revealed in 1917 by three shepherds. In 1916 they relate that they saw an angel three times while pasturing their sheep. On 13 May 1917 they relate that they saw a lady dressed in white appear in what is now the Sanctuary, was later identified as Our Lady of the Rosary. In the following months, they related other apparitions of the Lady. In the last apparition, 13 October 1917, happened the "miracle of the sun" in front of a several people, legitimizing the apparitions related by the three shepherds (Fedele 2020c).



destroyed pre-Christian Pagans during the process of Christianisation of Europe<sup>34</sup>, and adapted their practices in order to fit the new organization; second, due to the supposed demonization of Pagans done by Catholicism, and the general discrimination they feel while being associated with satanic practises, practises that have a Christian root, not pagan. However, there is a movement, mainly from the part of the Goddess Movement, to analyse certain Saint Cults, mostly Marian ones, and find continuities between the idea of the Goddess and these sociocultural and religious references.

In 2001 the law for religious freedom was approved, a significant step towards recognising the religious and spiritual presence in Portuguese Society. The 1976 Portuguese Constitution had already secured constitutional protection regarding personal freedoms. Article 41, related to “Freedom of conscience, of religion and of the form of worship”, stating first that the freedom of conscience, religion and worship is inviolable; second, that no one can be persecuted, deprived of their rights or exempted from civic obligations or duties due to their religious convictions; and third, it is stated that “no authority may question anyone concerning their convictions or religious observance, save in order to gather statistical data that cannot be individually identified, nor may anyone be prejudiced in any way for refusing to answer” (Constitution of the Portuguese Republic 1976, art. 41).

The law for religious freedom was approved by the government of António Guterres, the current Secretary-General of the United Nations, and includes sixty-nine articles covering personal and collective freedoms and obligations for the collective religious people. Since 2001, it remains the only legislative document in Portuguese Democracy to approach and recognize the needs of religious and spiritual communities and movements; and since then, several initiatives for inter-religious dialogue have been promoted. For Teixeira (2019, p. 95), the creation of this law can be understood as the culmination of the construction of Portuguese Democracy. This thesis contributes to this democratization, offering an account of a religious and spiritual movement that is growing in Portuguese society and needs to be taken into account

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<sup>34</sup> One can understand this opposition discourse influenced also by the European Witches Hunt in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries thesis, which is central in contemporary pagans’ narratives about the persecutions that their pagan ancestors suffered at the hands of Christianity. Keith Thomas (1971), Julio Caro Baroja(1966) have provided important historical accounts of the European Witches Hunt contesting some romanticized views of this process; Recently pagan studies scholars such as Loretta Orion (1995), Sabina Magliocco (2004) and Jone Salomonsen (2002), have shown how the demonization of paganism was part of a process of power affirmation of the majority that was being established, and its use in the context of Contemporary Paganism provides a historical basis for some of the issues that they identify as problematic in their relationship with the hegemonic religious power. More recently, Silvia Federici (2020 [2014]; 2018) has analysed how the persecution of women as witches was mainly related with the power and social roles, in which women with relevant social roles or particular knowledge were persecuted due to the threat they presented to the established *status quo* of the main religious and social power. João de Pina-Cabral (1992) also recognizes this process in the Portuguese territory.

alongside all the other religious and spiritual confessions, to understand contemporaneity.

After providing the sociocultural, historical, and political background to which this research belongs – essential dimensions to understand the approaches and social realities of the Contemporary Pagans with whom I worked – it is time to share what led me here, and the methodological choices that guided my research. I consider this to be essential because I am also part of this context, just like my interlocutors, and it is possible to see through my biographical path, the social processes and transformations that happened since the dictatorial regime in the lived experience, besides my approaches to the research. The choices that were made are based in this positionality, as we will proceed to see.

## **1.2. Belonging and Making Fieldwork – Methodological Choices and Bias**

Before proceeding with the discussion of the actual results of this research, I would like to leave a short biographical note that is deeply connected with the choices taken and is situated in the context explored above. You may be asking why I am writing about myself in an academic thesis, risking the scientific legitimacy of the work since this is a scientific production and not a biography. Knowledge production is a web of relationships in which I, like my interlocutors, participate actively. Contrarily to what was the standard approach of science, the one that the researcher is an abstract, uninfluential element that cannot contaminate the object of the study, I believe that our biographical paths and life experiences impact our choices, the reason why this personal introduction is necessary. Furthermore, while this is not a biography, I am consciously affirming my voice and positionality as a researcher, and owning the choices made during this process. I am part of this context; I share the same sociocultural referential of my interlocutors, the same religious and spiritual beliefs, and the same embodied experiences while in the field. However, as an anthropologist, I have the tools and “lenses” to approach the reality I am researching, reflecting upon, analysing and trying to understand without my personal beliefs affecting it, having the intellectual honesty to affirm my place and the bias that this can entail, and without forgetting the purpose of why I am in academia, producing knowledge with people I work with.

I grew up in a small village near Arrábida Mountain, around 40 minutes from Lisbon. It was a suburban area, and in the last half of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, it still had enough unurbanized areas and woods where a child could play freely. I grew up playing freely in the street, walking in the woods with my sister, riding my bicycle in the area, and playing in the yard of the house, where I used to build a tent and spend hours playing with my dolls, drawing and painting, and playing and petting the dogs and cats that always cohabited with us.

Besides, being the daughter of a father that worked in construction, gaining the minimum wage, and a mother that was a self-employed hairdresser, most of my time was spent in kindergarten, with my older sister or in my grandparent's house that was in the same neighbourhood, while they tirelessly worked to provide for us. In kindergarten, they always had activities outside, so it was common for us to run and play in the playground next to it and at the garden in front of the building. While with my sister and grandparents, I could spend time outside, with attentive eyes watching but letting me play with the earth, mix water and earth to make potions, observe the insects and trees and the small vegetable garden my granddad had, and a favourite of mine, picking up wildflowers. I could breathe freely; I still smell the pine and cork trees, the freshly cut grass which map my muddled memories. When I was with my dad, I played with his work tools – I had my small hammer - or went with him to his friends' farms, where I loved to pet any farm animal that they would let me. The woods and fields, the non-human animals with whom I contacted and seeing the majestic and beautiful mountain every day, were part of these years and my nature's experience.

In addition, I come from a modest and lower-class family from both sides. My father's family was from this same village, and with few possessions. My mother's family comes from Alentejo<sup>35</sup>, in the Southeast of Portugal, and were rural workers, working in cereal fields from dawn to dusk, having migrated from Baixo Alentejo to the littoral in the 1970s, like so many others, part of the migration process from the interior to the coast described in the previous section – since my granddad was offered a job of caretaker in a farm with better working conditions and financial stability, then the one that agricultural work offered.<sup>36</sup>

I grew up amid stories about the hardships both my parents and my grandparents went through, and about how life was in Alentejo, or stories about later periods, while working for upper-class families or to the municipality – my granddad was for a time the gravedigger on one of the cemeteries of the village. However, I also grew up with tales about the beauty of those lands and visiting family there, seeing those endless golden plains and feeling the dry air of the interior and the warmth of the sun on my skin. My sister and I grew conscious of the existence of social and economic differences, and even if I lived in a time when my parents were economically more stable than in the time my sister was born – in the 1980s – it was clear

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34 – José Cutileiro's *Ricos e Pobre no Alentejo* (1977) describes the life of a rural parish in Alentejo in the 1960s, analysing among other things the differences between social classes and their relationships, and the disputes about the land. It is one of the most important monographies written about a rural parish Alentejana. Despite the parish analysed being in another area of Alentejo from which my grandparents were born and lived in, Cutileiro's description provides an accurate analysis of cultural, social and historical processes that they went through.

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, my maternal grandparents left Alentejo in the beginning of April 1974, some weeks before the Carnation Revolution.

to me that we came from a particular context that not every colleague I had in school shared.

This village I grew in was and still is very heterogeneous, with upper-class families established in – and from the region, some connected with the wine production industry – and generations of middle and lower-class groups of people. My sister and I were educated to be hardworking and respectful of every person, no matter their status, and of each other, aware of the difficulties of working life and of how inequalities were at play, and having the freedom to discuss politics at home, and express our opinion, since my dad was for a time member of the Portuguese Communist Party. These discussions were not based on academic knowledge, or on knowledge obtained from books and tools that others from more privileged classes had. It was based on the lived, embodied experience of these inequalities, economic difficulties and a life of work. I was part of that, and it remains something that I carry with me, and the seed that led me to be an Anthropologist, aware of the role my parents and family had and of the hardships they had to endure to offer me the opportunity and privilege to enter a space they could not access or even dream of setting foot on: I carry the privilege of being the second one in the family to graduate and the first completing a Master's degree and working towards a PhD.

Like most Portuguese families, Catholicism was the religious system in our household while I grew up. Even if my parents did not go to church frequently, they had their own lived experience of Catholicism and followed the Catholic Sacraments. My parents married in the Church, and my sister and I are Baptized and have completed Catechesis and the First Holy Communion. We used to attend the church only when someone got married, which usually was followed by a trip to Fátima (about Fátima, see Fedele 2020, 2021). We had statues of Our Lady at home, and my parents had private rituals that they did not impose on us, not influencing us by any means. Despite these moments, my dad's criticism of the Church – due to his life experiences and being part of the Communist party for some years – and my mum's busy working life, contributed to a lack of focus on institutional and lived religious experience at home in our daily lives. Nevertheless, the traditional Sacraments were maintained, and my experience may have differed from those of my generation, whose parents did not baptize or direct them to Catechesis.

Years passed, and that shy child became a pre-teen and teenager, still shy and introverted, but a critic person, and easy to rise when perceiving injustices. Those were the years that I started questioning and confronting the teachings of Catholicism shared in Catechesis classes, becoming a firm believer in Scientific Thought and identifying myself as an atheist. As a teenager, the secular approach to Religion guided my imaginaries and narratives. I felt a remarkable disregard and disrespect for its institutional dimension and was sometimes quick to

criticize – as any teenager that feels like the holder of all knowledge – the lived religious experience that those closest to me felt and shared. At that time, I became aware of the number of spirituality books in the living room bookcases.

In those years, I spent my days sitting or lying on the couch reading fantasy novels, barely leaving the house. I grew up reading and re-reading to the point of exhaustion the Harry Potter saga<sup>37</sup>, dreaming of a magical world that could exist somewhere, that I could access and find there, or in any other fantasy, fiction, science-fiction and historical romance books – as well as fan fiction – my refuge. I looked for movies and TV series – now with the help of the Internet connection – that was too from these genres, something I already felt drawn to, like the enchantment I felt when I was a child with the Disney Movie Pictures that came out for my generation, like *Beauty and the Beast*, *Mulan* and *Pocahontas*, to name a few. The last one, the one that I identified as the first source of inspiration in pop culture, was the one that contributed the most to the way I perceive the world. In the pages of books and with the power of my imagination, I tried to hide from some family conflicts, the collective and personal grief due to the precocious death of family members, from the economic problems due to the years leading to – and after – the 2008-2015 crisis and the anxieties and difficulties it brought to the family. As I am writing this words, those books are in the bookcase next to me, and looking at them brings me a sense of comfort and clear memories; their worn out covers are a testimonial of the time lived, of the time that passed, of a time that woke in me the curiosity to know what could exist beyond what we perceive. It was in them that words like “pagan”, “Paganism”, “magic”, “witchcraft”, “witch”, or “Wicca” started to appear. Words which gained other meanings when I started my undergraduate studies in Anthropology.

The timeline is fuzzy, the years mingling, but I believe it was around the time I was finishing preparatory school and going to secondary school that, on the one hand, I returned to being attuned to nature’s cycles and feeling peaceful while I looked at the moon and perceived its changes through the cycle, or spent hours looking at the rain falling; on the other, my mother and sister started attending alternative spiritual events, and I started to have contact with them too. Some holistic spaces started to appear in the village, and due to my mother’s work as a hairdresser and owner of the space, some facilitators of Reiki, Aura Reading and Mesotherapy began using a free room in the hairdresser to offer their services. As a teenager that perceived herself as very secular – even if not fully understanding what that meant – I felt contempt for these practices just like I did for religion and criticized their legitimacy. However, that did not

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<sup>37</sup> That it one of the contemporary pagan’s literature inspirations, mostly for the younger generations.

detain me from feeling curious to experience some of them, so I could present an informed opinion and criticism, as I used to say to my mum and sister. My academic education in anthropology, a discipline with which I fell in love the moment I discovered its existence in a philosophy class, gave me more humility and tact, made me get out of my pedestal and approach different religious and spiritual expressions through time, thus becoming intellectually engaged with them and, later, starting to explore some of them personally.

Eleven years ago, I enrolled in university for my undergraduate studies. All these years have been full of intellectual, personal and spiritual growth, the consolidation of the experiences I have had throughout my life, and my affirmation as a woman. In those years, I also started getting closer to Paganism as a spiritual and religious movement in my personal lived experience, even if only in the last years could I identify myself with the word; and it entered my academic interests. In the last year of my undergraduate studies, in the course of Portuguese Ethnography, several classes discussed the importance of cyclicity in the Portuguese territory based on the work of several influential Portuguese Ethnographers like Leite de Vasconcelos (1905), Rocha Peixoto (1990) or Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira (1984). From there, I started to combine my knowledge about Contemporary Paganism with the Portuguese vernacular religion<sup>38</sup>, and learning about it, which led me to pursue my research interests in this area<sup>39</sup>.

My intellectual, religious, and spiritual connection with Contemporary Paganism arose from what I have shared with you so far. I can distinguish in my biographical path key moments and circumstances that fed the reason why I was interested in the theme and in pursuing research about it: my family roots, as a rural working and lower class family that gave them the knowledge about the rhythms and cycles of nature in the stories they told me while I was growing up; my connection with nature through the experience of playing, something that kept growing throughout my life until it became a space where I could find a refuge; my love for fantasy and science fiction novels, movies and series, that provided an escape for imagination; breaking with the institutional religious context I was brought up in, and the influences of family members that were exploring holistic practices; the illness, pain, grief and conflicts in family life and finally my academic path. When I started interviewing several people which identified with Paganism for this research, and asked them how they had arrived at Paganism, I noticed similarities with my biographical path, with ruptures or realizations guiding the narratives,

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<sup>38</sup> I am applying the vernacular religion term proposed by Bowman and Valk (2014) to overpass the discussions about 'popular religion' and 'folklore' that are contested terms in the study of religion. For a discussion of other contested concepts see the recent book edited by Chryssides and Whitehead (2023).

<sup>39</sup> I have to thank my co-supervisor for being the one introducing me to these works and encouraging me to pursue these reflections.

much like I wrote my own. This exercise offers insight into the social processes that happened for the generations of people present on these pages and their differences.

For instance, when you attend certain pagan events, in the generation of Pagans born in the 1950s and 1960s and even 1970s of the last century, it is possible to ascertain their roots in a family of the middle class, given their dress code, economic power and focus on the questions and ways of doing things that usually enter into conflict with the ones the generations born in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s have. On the other hand, these generations, which I belong to, come from different social contexts that benefitted from the democratization of the public education system, which provided access to public higher education for all, regardless of their social, economic and financial backgrounds (Almeida, Marinho-Araujo, Amaral, Dias 2012; Cabrito, Cerdeira, Nascimento, Mucharreira 2020; Pascueiro 2009). The questions they approach are different, and their criticisms of the movement are signs of belonging to a generation that went through social processes different from the ones of the previous generation.

Contrary to the long discipline's tradition of researching social and cultural groups drawn from the researcher's sociocultural context, since the 1980s that this has been transforming, and my research field (Narayan 1993) in my sociocultural context. The same social processes that affected and transformed the lived reality of the people I worked with are the ones that affected me. We share a set of cultural references that inform the way our values are at play in the broader picture. As a researcher, I am integrated into the broader sociocultural reality I am studying and cannot be separated from it. I am speaking from a country situated in the Global North, member of the European Union and that, in a broader sense, is economically and financially below the average. However, its history is marked by colonialism, oppression, and exploitation. Besides, the fact that I have a personal connection with the religious and spiritual movement I am working with calls for a reflexive stand on how knowledge is created. This is why, considering the abovementioned reasons, the methodological discussions about Native Anthropology (Narayan 1993) and Anthropology at Home (Mascarenhas-Keys 1987) that were presented in the Introduction of this thesis were essential while conducting the research.

As it had been shown, my biographical story is directly connected with the choices that were made to conduct this research. It is, therefore, a reason as to why autoethnography has become an imperative methodological tool during research. This methodological approach is a form of research and writing method that approaches the researcher's personal experience in order to understand the sociocultural experience phenomena. It recognizes the importance the personal experiences of the researcher have over the research topic itself, over the methods, over the theoretical approaches, over the emotional responses and over the relationships

sustained, since all these arise from the intersectional experience of the researcher based on her gender, age, class, race, sexuality, ability, education, and religion and spirituality (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011; Ellis 2007; Hume 2019).

I want to state that the autoethnographic approach I followed is not grounded in my omnipresence as a researcher sharing the personal experience throughout the text, risking – as several criticisms of this approach show (Denzin 2006; Atkinson 2006) – to produce an autobiography. Except for some examples that I considered valuable to illustrate my argument, the focus on my life story is only present in this chapter. First, I used this approach due to the fieldwork experience as part of the sociocultural context. I am working in a field with relevant ritualistic practices that called for embodied participation, and consequently for me to attune my own sensorial and embodied experience in order to understand what was being shared with me, through co-created dialogues with the people I worked with. Second, and correlated with the first, the previous personal experience I had with conducting and experiencing rituals gained through the work I have been producing provided a sense of familiarity with these practices and the sensorial responses to them that rendered the process of understanding more accessible. And third, this methodological tool was used out of necessity.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the Covid-19 restrictions lead to transformations in how research was conducted. The strategy I found to counteract this challenge was to focus on my responses during the online events or synchronic rituals I attended during this period. Lacking the social interactions, relationships in the field and shared experience with those I was working with, it was the only tool I could resort in order to keep the work I was already developing. Therefore, the focus on my autoethnographic experience will be present only on these pages because I believe that the voices of those who shared their experiences, feelings, life stories and thoughts must be heard. My presence will appear in the ethnographic descriptions and analysis but as a participant, not as the focus – as in this presentation – although my presence cannot be erased. All the relationships and engagements with the field are embodied in me, or *encarnada* as Luz Esteban describes her autoethnographic reflection (2004), and many were the times in which I felt vulnerable and was brought to tears and allowed myself to feel the fieldwork experience, as Ruth Behar (1996) invites any researcher to be.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, all that have been shared, resumes my positionality in the field and who I am, which cannot be silenced while producing research. I come from a lower-class background,

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<sup>40</sup> Ruth Behar (1996) called for the centrality of emotions during the anthropological writing process. It was an influential work for several researchers that followed and that combine and influence her approach in relation to other feminist anthropologist and ethnographies (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Davis, Craven 2016; Walter 1995).



daughter and granddaughter of working-class people with primary education, contrary to most of the people I worked with and most of my colleagues in academia; this provides an insight about the way I look at the issues that can be found in the field, mainly the ones related with power. I am a woman, a young one, without children, which is also a factor that comes into play in the interactions that happen on the field. There was a maternal way of treating me in some interactions since I was the same age – or closer to the age – of their children. Moreover, in a context where motherhood is sacralised, and the symbolic nature of care reinforced in women was present in the narratives and practices, the fact that I was not a mother left me uncomfortable because I did not review myself in these narratives.

Adding to the above, I am a feminist; therefore, my analysis includes a feminist approach that was transported to the theoretical choices I took and that, in this particular context, also appears in a field in which the number of women is prevalent, and where an affirmation and movement to take back the power that structural dimensions like patriarchy and capitalism took from women is strong. I am also a Pagan, which provides familiarity with the lived experience of those with whom I am working and a common verbal and embodied language to communicate. I am an environmentalist, therefore, my focus on this theme in the research context is directly connected with my respect for the planet, all forms of life, and the possibility of a future. I am a social rights and equality defender, which causes me to respond when some issue that affects my ethical and moral code regarding these issues is called into question and influences the choice of themes to focus on during research, such as the one of gender equality. My political stance is on the Left, believing in equal social, economic, and financial access to what is fundamental for health, education, housing, and respect for – and between – everyone. Due to these facts, I could not approach, for instance, the far-Right Paganism that has been arising throughout Europe, even if some light echoes in Portugal may become openly established. It would be intellectually engaging, though. However, it would take a toll and go against my values. Moreover, I am an anthropologist, which directly influences how I look at the world and provides the tools for serious and unbiased approaches to the research and to some of the narratives and hypotheses found in Contemporary Paganism.

Nevertheless, there is always some bias when researching so close to home. Being ingrained in the context, I may miss subtle interactions and processes. I could also disregard questions such as power dynamics, so I would not contribute to the stereotypes associated with Contemporary Paganism. As Fedele and Knibbe (2013) noted, many of the questions that are not approached in Contemporary Paganism research, such as power relations, are due to the fact that most of the researchers in this field are themselves Pagans or had some particular

affinity with the movement. Many were the concerns of my mentors and those that taught me during my whole academic path that my closeness to the field I was researching would render difficult an objective approach. This research was conducted considering all the issues that my positionality in the field could raise. I consider that admitting our bias, limitations, vulnerabilities and the place we come from, instead of being a hindrance in the process of knowledge-making, is a rich possibility to engage in other forms of knowing and understanding the world we live in and the relationships that we, as anthropologists study. Besides, it is simply a sign of intellectual honesty. We exist in relation to others.

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This chapter presented an overview of the Portuguese sociocultural and religious context in which this research took place and an explanation of my positionality in the field before the research was conducted in relation to this context.

The late and long dictatorship in Portugal affected the Portuguese social fabric and its consequences can still be felt today. It conditioned freedoms, demarcated social roles, abandoned the majority of the poor and unalphabetized population in the country's interior and marginalized areas in urban centres. The internal migration process from rural areas in the interior of the country to the littoral reconfigured the urban space; women who during the regime were considered second-class citizens have been regaining their rights; however, they still face today a great resistance as to having the right to control their own bodies or equal salaries and labour rights. LGBTQIA+ people have been mobilizing and fighting for their rights, but they are still facing prejudice. Several economic and financial crises have weakened Portuguese society and put a tremendous strain over the lives of most people, even those considered part of the middle class.

The importance of the Catholic Church in the country is such that catholic moral values, map of the Portuguese sociocultural fabric and Christian holidays and events are of great importance in the secular social space. Besides, this catholic cultural and religious background is of great importance to analyse how Contemporary Paganism arises in Portugal, that even when presented as an opposition, it is present in the life stories of my interlocutors, as will be seen next, and in my biography.

Through an autoethnographic exercise, I present my biographical path to demonstrate my positionality in the research field and the choices that were made: I come from a family that experienced first-hand much of the social transformations that took place during and after the dictatorship; from lower class family, with primary education, that abandoned the Portuguese backcountry to look for employment in the littoral. I have experienced first-hand the importance

of the democratization of education and access to graduated education. Besides, I am part of the context that was analysed in the research, due to the nationality and adhering also to Contemporary Paganism as the religious and spiritual confession. Through this analysis, I have shown how my path and the one of my interlocutors' cross, and why I chose to follow some methodological and theoretical approaches here.

It is in relation to others that I will now proceed with the analysis of our web, with the clarification of what Contemporary Paganism is, its principles, and what it means being a pagan for my interlocutors given their biographical paths.

## Opening Sacred Space: Contemporary Paganism

*I wouldn't be me without it. It is who I am. It is integral to my core.  
It runs through every one of my core beliefs and every one of my core values. It is me.*

- Rosemary<sup>41</sup>

The spider keeps building her web. We are now witnessing another of the core threads being released to sustain her realm. Without it, the web would collapse and its purpose unattained, since Contemporary Paganism connects all the voices that will be heard in these pages and the relationships cultivated throughout the process. This thread then represents the elucidation of what Contemporary Paganism is, its historical roots, influences and inspiration; the main currents, scholars, approaches and themes; and what it means to be a pagan, as the above excerpt of Rosemary's interview transpires.

The chapter is therefore divided into four sections. The first one explores the historical roots of contemporary Paganism, presenting an overview of the meaning that the word "Pagan" took throughout the centuries and its uses, and the influences and inspiration that it drew from. The second section will be dedicated to the main principles of Contemporary Paganism, the main paths and themes upon which scholarship has been focusing. Then, the third section will deal with what it is to be a Pagan, focusing on the arrival stories to the movement and what Contemporary Paganism is for them. The fourth and last section will explore Contemporary Paganism today, focusing on the differences between Portuguese and British Contemporary Paganism, as well as on its legal recognition as a religious movement, that some groups are engaging with in both contexts. We may now accompany our spider in her laborious task.

### 2.1. Historical Roots of Contemporary Paganism

The images and narratives surrounding what was the Pagan past are multiple. However, most agree that it was the religious and spiritual expression that was transformed by the widespread influence of the Monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam – mainly Christianity, as will be seen in the narratives shared by Contemporary Pagans – and the post-Christian humanism, throughout Europe. However, these cultic forms remained, having been transformed and syncretized through time but surviving until the present, where it is being restored and

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<sup>41</sup> Quotation from Interview conducted with Rosemary, the member of the Pagan Federation, on 17 December 2021.

revived (Jones, Pennick 1995). Contemporary Paganism is these revived forms of Paganism, an “umbrella term” used to define a broad movement of heterogeneous groups, currents, paths and individuals reviving and recreating pre-Christian religious traditions and adapting them to present times. However, what does it mean to state that Pagans are recreating and reviving pre-Christian religious traditions? What kind of traditions and contemporary needs call for these religious and spiritual expressions of the past? Furthermore, what does it mean “Pagan” and “Paganism”? What inspired Paganism as it is now practised? These are some of the questions that will be answered in this section. The meaning that the word took through time will be discussed first, based on the literature, followed by a discussion about the influences and inspiration of these movements.

### **2.1.1. Pagan and Paganism**

The meaning of the word “pagan” has changed over time, and sometimes, it means two different things simultaneously. The word has origins in the Latin *paganus*, which means those from the countryside, a *pagus*. The religious use of the word can be traced to the Roman Empire Christians, used by Roman soldiers to denominate the followers of non-Judaic religions, mainly civilians that did not convert to Christianity. The word “pagan”, with lower-case ‘p’, was used to designate, in a derogatory way, all those that were “non-Christian” and therefore “uncivilised”, much in the same way that the word “heathen”. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE<sup>42</sup>, it was used to describe those that followed the old religions, worshipping the local faith or spirit of the *pagus* (Jones, Pennick 1995; Harvey 2010).

By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and during the 18<sup>th</sup>, the echoes of Paganism in European intellectual classes started. Megalithic sites became popular and studied, and a narrative surrounding the ancestral British heritage as Celtic and Druid<sup>43</sup> was widespread with the publication of books about this theme. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the erudite class connected the word to “country dweller”, conveying the romanticized view of nature of the time as a pure, untouched, and majestic place. The Roman pagan was imagined as living in the countryside,

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<sup>42</sup> I will follow the Gregorian calendar denomination of time that implemented the CE (Common Era) and BCE (Before Common Era) around the 1700s and which was widespread in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, instead of the AD (Anno Domini – the year of our Lord) and BC (Before Christ).

<sup>43</sup> Marion Bowman (2004; 2014) in her researches about Glastonbury, have analysed the influence of these narratives for contemporary spiritual and religious groups, like the Goddess Movement. For more on the Celtic past, of Celticism and Celtitude in Europe and a perceived Celtic identity see Michael Dietler (1998; 2006). For the mobilization of the Celtic identity discourse in Portugal and Galiza see António Medeiros (2006) and the edited book by Susana Moreno-Fernández, Salwa Castelo-Branco and António Medeiros (2022).

attuned to the rhythms of nature, practising fertility rituals<sup>44</sup>, and being governed by the changing of seasons, being the holders of ancient pagan teachings. Those ancestors were, therefore, closer to the purity of nature, unlike those of the industrialized city (Harvey, 2010), but at the same time, backwardness was inputted to them for not having the intellectual and cultural status that elites from the city had.

According to Ronald Hutton (1999; 2011), this association with the countryside and the natural world led to the creation of four different discourses on Paganism in British society between 1800 and 1940. The first discourse understood Pagans as people that worshipped specific Gods, offered blood sacrifices and were the representation of religious barbarity and human ignorance. This image was found in the Old Testament, and spread by the representatives of the Catholic Church, to describe those that did not adhere to Christianity. This image shifted to serve the Imperialistic and Colonialist enterprises of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which started to apply that term to the people of colonized territories in the African, Asian and American Continents, as seen in the literature produced by the missionaries of the time.

In the second discourse, Paganism was understood to be a religion connected with art, philosophy and literature; however, it failed to reach the status of Christianity because of its ethics and lack of divine revelation. In this sense, it did not refer to different cultures or pre-historic societies but “to the familiar, beloved and respected world of Ancient Greece and Rome.” Since “the literature of the classical ancient world remained the basis for European culture, and its deities, now regarded as allegorical or mythical figures, were regular components of written world, paintings and sculptures” (Hutton 1999, p. 33).

These two discourses were conservative approaches aiming to defend the established religious power. However, at the same time, two counter-cultural discourses about Paganism arose. The third and fourth discourses are therefore presented as challenges to the religious and cultural norms of the time. The third is based on the notion that an effective global spiritual system existed, based on divine revelation, of which every religious practice had traces. This approach questioned the Christian claim of a unique relationship with the divine, putting it on the same level as ancient Greek and Egyptian Paganism. And finally, the fourth approach, which understood the traditions of ancient Greece and Rome as liberating, deeply connected

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<sup>44</sup> This idea was retrieved by Egyptologist Margaret Murray in the *Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) that postulated that fertility cults survived in Europe due to the continuity of a witchcraft cult throughout the centuries. As it will be seen, despite the inaccuracy of her thesis, it was one of the major influences of the Contemporary Pagan movement, mostly the Wiccan path (Magliocco 2004; Cusack 2009; Morris 2006; Lewis, Pizza 2009).

with nature and the spiritual creativity of human beings (Hutton 1999):

Like the language of syncretic religion, it was a modern phenomenon with long antecedents, in this case, the literary tradition of pastoral poetry, itself an ancient form, which visualized an idealized rural landscape in which the human, natural, and supernatural worlds co-existed in a state of tranquillity and bliss. To this, the Enlightenment added themes which would be incorporated into a genuine modern Paganism (*ibid*: 44).

These two approaches lauded the basis of Contemporary Paganism: the development of a contemporary movement based on an idealized image of the countryside, and therefore of nature, where the human, natural and supernatural worlds cohabited in harmony (Harvey 1997; 2010; Blain, Wallis 2007). Ken Dowden (2000) stated that Paganism's end is directly related to the dawn of Christianity. Pagans were the pre-Christian worshippers of the natural rhythms. The use of the term is directly connected with the dissemination of the Christian Roman Empire that applied the word; therefore, what those people called themselves is unknown. As has been shown by the different approaches to the word, in general, it seems that those who identified themselves as Pagans were intellectuals that held this idealistic image of the past and of Nature and were politically positioning themselves against the hegemonic religious system that held power in Europe. Paganism and Christianity appear on two opposite margins, but both have a robust urban constitution, contrary to the romantic idea of Pagans as country dwellers and holders of natural knowledge. The conversion to Christianity was more effective in urban areas than rural ones, and was necessary for an overall narrative of demonization to assert the newly established power that transformed pagan celebrations and festivities in workdays, banned sacrifices and the domestic cult, or closed and demolished Temples. However, the supposed pagan vestiges remained despite these social, cultural, and religious transformations being incorporated into Christian practices.<sup>45</sup> These were revived during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by movements such as Romanticism and Occultism, to name a few, which became the influences and inspiration that Contemporary Pagans draw from today.

Contrarily to the approach developed in the early first millennium C.E., the contemporary

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<sup>45</sup> Regarding the opposition between paganism and the Catholic Church, and the demonization of paganism from the church, Pina-Cabral writes about the Portuguese context "Pagan gods are demons only because, whilst different from our own god, they are recognizably divine. They lack reason because (...) they do not conform to the law. Once their 'reason' is denied, however, their persistence becomes mysterious and powerful. (...) But it must also be understood that the ascription of 'paganness' to these beliefs, practices, and rituals was an *ex post facto* phenomenon. What was different became anterior. Thus, pagan survivals are the products of a struggle for power between the religious creativity for the masses and the Church's need for control." (1992, pp. 58–59). The idea of pagan survival and what is a pagan vestige is directly related with the Church's [Catholic] power.

use of the word “pagan” or “Paganism” denotes notions of freedom, affirmation and pride in self-identification. It is used to define a form of European indigenous<sup>46</sup> Nature Religion, which draws from the original image created by Paganism and searches for a harmonious connection between human life and the cycles of the rhythm of seasons, combined with several teachings and inspirations. The way that the Contemporary Pagan discourse was established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century draws directly from a discourse produced during the previous century that combined the admiration for Ancient Greece and its myths with the nostalgia felt for a past that had already disappeared, and the desire for the organic and harmonious connection between humans, Nature and culture (Hutton 1999) of the romantic movement.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by esoterism, occultism, and hermeticism<sup>47</sup>, Contemporary pagan groups started organizing themselves. Gerald Gardner's *Traditional Witchcraft* was a significant influence and inspired the way contemporary pagan rituals were conducted, as will be seen in the next section.<sup>48</sup> Besides, feminism and environmentalism were also influential movements, developing alongside Contemporary Paganism (Magliocco 2004).

This genealogy is relevant for Contemporary Paganism today because it first provides an understanding of the movement's history and the discourses and sources from which legitimacy is drawn, and, second, it explains how it is integrated into a particular cultural and social phenomenon so characteristic of modernity (Morris 2006). Although not all Contemporary Pagans agree with this genealogy, most, in their lived experience, reproduce the same hopes shared by the 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals for a re-enchantment with Nature and for a perceived pristine past in which the answer for the future could be found. It is here that most Contemporary Pagans draw a line. For instance, even if looking at the past provides continuity – mostly when approached through the lenses of the ancestors; through the connection with the land, in which a relationship is recognized; through the celebration of the knowledge and

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<sup>46</sup> The use of this concept is problematic, used to denotate a notion of pureness, of belonging unchanged to a particular place, with clear boundaries, as opposed to the notion of the Global, which is seen as unbound circulation and impureness (Whitehead 2018); However, in some of the paths that are part of the contemporary pagan movement, they are looking for the roots in which to support their approaches and worldviews. As Amy Whitehead, in her research among Goddess oriented groups argues indigenizing is a form of relating to a bounded territory and to the community that situates itself in and among it. As she notes this “includes the creativity involved in the design of rituals and performances, newly created religious artefacts, and the re-interpretation of myths and legends to create new Goddess-oriented spiritual and environmental narratives.”(Whitehead 2018, pp. 216–217)

<sup>47</sup> See Broek and Hanegraaff (1998) and Walter J. Hanegraaff (2012) for discussions on Hermeticism, Esotericism and Occultism. I decided not to engage in the literature about these movements because, despite the influence on Contemporary Paganism, it is outside the scope of the research conducted for this thesis.

<sup>48</sup> Gardner, besides being inspired by Murray's work, was also inspired by esoteric and hermetic traditions, among others, the folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland, which wrote *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899) and the occultist Aleister Crowley (see Marco Pasi, 2014 for more on Aleister Crowley).



lessons that these ancestors left through the connection with the land in which they walked on, that ritualistically and even scholarly is established – most recognize that the way these ancestors lived is not compatible with the sociocultural reality of today. What served these ancestors does not serve them anymore. Therefore, this overview was provided to show both the continuities in the themes explored in the next pages and chapters and the ruptures with the sources experienced in the lived participation of Contemporary Pagans worldwide.

## **2.2. The main Principles, Paths and Themes found in Contemporary Paganism**

### **2.2.1. Main Principles and Paths of Contemporary Paganism**

Heterogeneity is a crucial component of Contemporary Paganism. As it has been discussed along this work, there were different meanings to the word that were interpreted by Contemporary Pagans differently according to their paths; furthermore, the different social, philosophical and religious movements that inspired Contemporary Paganism today also influenced the types of Paganisms that were developed and are experienced today. No group, approach or path is alike. However, the research conducted on Contemporary Paganism has shown that some principles are transversal in the different currents and paths. Some are more consensual than others, but others were part of the lived experience of Pagans in some moments of their lives while they explored their paths.

The primary and transversal principle we can consider as defining in Contemporary Paganism is the belief in Nature as a sacred and sentient entity that sustains and guides our lives. In Nature's cycles, Pagans recognize the rhythm and compass of life and, therefore, developed a seasonal festive calendar based on these cycles. The celebration of this festive calendar can be considered the second common principle in Contemporary Paganism.<sup>49</sup> Despite cyclicity or circularity not being something exclusive to Contemporary Paganism, being found in several contexts, as Oneto (2020) explores, for Contemporary Pagans it is central to make sense of the transformations that they go through in life and to establish a relationship with the more-than-human, that promotes, in most cases a language of kinship (Rountree 2012). The

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<sup>49</sup> This calendar is formed by eight festivals that mark the turning of the seasons: the Summer and Winter Solstices, the Spring and Autumn Equinox and four other festivals that are the midpoints between the equinox and solstices. Every current and path has its own form to celebrate and name these festivals, adapting them to the place where they live both in terms of area (urban, semi-urban, or rural) and country, the deities they venerate, in the case they are polytheists; and the energies they want to explore. Each festival has associated to it symbolic attributes that are explored ritualistically and personally. For more on celebration of the festive calendar among Contemporary Pagans in Portugal see Martins (2017).

planet, non-human animals, insects, spirits, elements, and deities form a great family that needs to be cared for, nurtured and protected. The planet is commonly called “Mother Earth”, reinforcing these ties. Since Pagans are part of this big family, they must protect and engage in actions towards this end, as will be explored later.

Secondly, Contemporary Pagans accept the Divine as Feminine and Masculine, drawing away from the monotheistic androcentric view of the Divine. This relates directly with the third principle, which is a tendency to be polytheistic, with some paths and groups venerating several gods and goddesses of different pantheons; deistic, focused on the figure of the God and the Goddess; pantheistic, believing in the sacred immanence of life and Nature; or animistic.<sup>50</sup>

Then, the use of magic – even if it is not mandatory, and depending on the group or path – is present in their lived practices. Magic has different meanings in different Pagan denominations, and is more important to some than to others. As resumed by Magliocco (2015), some Pagans define magic as

“the ability to change consciousness at will”, drawing on the definition of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century English ceremonial magician Aleister Crowley. This definition does not require any transformation outside of the individual’s own perception, and it is in harmony with the anthropological definition of magic as participatory consciousness. Other NeoPagans prefer a definition that allows for the possibility that magic can also transform material reality. For them, magic is the ability to harness natural forces in harmony with one’s will in order to bring about a transformation. As heterodox as they are, modern Paganisms nevertheless share a view of magic as a natural force and an organizational principle for the cosmos (*ibid* 654).

Therefore, magic is perceived by Contemporary Pagans as an inherent force in Nature, in every living being, and in the elements. It can be raised, manipulated, used, and directed with specific objectives. The art and work with the energy is magic which can bring the practitioner closer to the sacred and transform reality, leading to changes in the self and the wider world. It involves a change in consciousness, not just attitudes, thus being a participatory change in the world (*ibid*).

This being so, to determine if a group or person is a Contemporary Pagan, I consider the following elements: the reconstruction, revival or inspiration in pre-Christian practices or non-

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<sup>50</sup> See Harvey (2014) and Astor-Aguilera and Harvey (2018) among others for the discussion of animism in the context of Contemporary Paganism. Animism is a major theme discussed in Anthropological history, and some Contemporary Pagans draw inspiration from it. However, I will not engage in this discussion, since it is outside the scope of this thesis.

Abrahamic cults, as well as following any polytheistic, pantheist or animistic practices. Even though not all Pagans include in their practices the veneration of Nature or the use of magic, these are exponentially relevant in the lives of the great majority of Contemporary Pagans encountered in Portugal and the United Kingdom and those with whom this research was developed with. Therefore, it is the second of the significant elements I consider determining that the group is Pagan since I understand the veneration of Nature to be broader than just the practices that entail a direct cult in Nature or practices that take place in the countryside, in beaches, mountains or forests. I consider it in a broader sense of veneration of life and the rhythms of life that can be perceived in the changes that take place in the environment one lives in, engages with, and belongs to, as well as in the sense of belonging to a broader socioenvironmental place – interconnected and interdependent – that must be respected, cared for and regenerated. And finally, and even if it is clear, the last element considered is the recognition of the identity of groups and people as pagan. From the moment this identity is made clear, the other elements that can be used to define a group as pagan is a background element of determination. All my interlocutors have used this identification, or at least recognized in their paths.

It was mentioned that the principles above have more or less relevance according to the practitioner's path. Several paths can be included under the label of Contemporary Paganism. All of these can interact and borrow from each other, and people, throughout their lives, can identify with one or another or accumulate them: we have Witchcraft, the Goddess Movement, Reconstructionist Paganism (Hellenic, Roman, Sumerian)<sup>51</sup>, Neo-Shamanism<sup>52</sup>, Druidry<sup>53</sup> or

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<sup>51</sup> Non-witchen Paganisms developed as parallel to Wicca and is mainly marked by Reconstructionism. Can be Sumerian, Heathenism (Norse and Germanic), Celtic, Druidry, Hellenic, Kemetic. Some of these reconstructionisms have taken a nationalist turn, being sometimes appealing to New Right elements. However, what they do is “attempt to re-create the religious practices of pre-Christian people with as much accuracy as possible even as they adapt those practices to modern times. Reconstructionists base their practice on surviving texts from the cultures and historical periods they emulate, as well as on archaeological and historical scholarship.” (Magliocco 2015, p. 653) I have worked mostly with Sumerian reconstructionism, followed by Templo de Inanna.

<sup>52</sup> For Neo-Shamanism see Harvey and Wallis (2010). For considerations about shamanism in Portugal see Lazzarini (2019).

<sup>53</sup> Druidry is of great relevance in the Contemporary Pagan milieu, with a great majority of people identifying as such in the United Kingdom and to some extent in Portugal. However, it was not followed by the people I worked with and therefore will not develop what this path entails. In Portugal, there are two major druid groups: the local office of the OBOD (Order of the Bards, Ovats and Druids) and the ATDL (Assembleia da Tradição Druidica da Lusitânia), both owning lands in which their temples were build. For instance, the First Portuguese Goddess Conference in 2019 took place in the same grounds of the OBOD headquarters. In the United Kingdom, there is several druid groups and groves (OBOD, The British Druid Order, The Glastonbury Order of Druids, just to name a few).

Heathenry/Azatru<sup>54</sup>.

Witchcraft, or the Witches' Craft, is one of the most popular forms of Contemporary Paganism and has several branches. The one focused here is that of Gardnerian Witchcraft, or Wicca, since it is the one some of my interlocutors follow. This path was created in the 1950s by Gerald Gardner, and "portrayed Wicca as a fertility religion, and its year-cycle rites are grounded in metaphors that are linked to natural processes of birth, growth, maturation, reproduction, death, and regeneration" (Magliocco 2015, p. 652). It entails a focus on the figure of the God and Goddess, operated in covens, and is an initiatory path. It is one of the significant paths among Contemporary Paganism and was the first path that the majority of my interlocutors encountered, using it as a basis for the religious and spiritual lived experiences they followed throughout their lives. There were feminist wiccan groups that later became goddess-oriented paths and contributed to give birth to the Goddess Movement. It was so relevant because it offered a structure that could be followed by these emerging movements, that recognized female sacredness as emancipatory.

The Goddess Movement sustains that there is a Great Goddess, a divinity immanent in the world that can be found on the Earth, on the landscape – like the mountains – on the seasonal cycles, on the Moon, on the cycle of life and death, and the human body, and on the different stages and ages of women (Luhmann 1993). The Goddess has three phases: the maiden, the mature, and the crone, the oldest. Different female deities are the representation of this Great Goddess, which is found and felt in Nature: deities like Isis, Aphrodite, Diana, Athena, Ishtar/Inanna, Yamaja, or even Our Lady, can be a representation or personification of the many faces of the Great Goddess. It is common to find a reference to the Myth of the Matriarchal Past in these groups.

The Myth of the Matriarchal past is based on the idea that somewhere in human history, there were matriarchal societies, inspired by Marija Gimbutas' work (1921–1994), an archaeologist and scholar of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who supported the thesis of the existence of an original Goddess worshipped by Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures of "Old Europe", and concluding that these peaceful societies were led by women that practised a goddess-based religion. This thesis influenced several feminist spirituality groups in the 1960s and 1970s<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> In the case of Asatru there is also informal groups but have been encountering mostly solitary practitioners. For more on Asatru see Blain and Wallis entrance in the *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism* (Lewis, Pizza 2009).

<sup>55</sup> Magliocco notes that "Feminist interpretations of Craft arose from the broader movement of women's spirituality that sought to reinterpret facets of mainstream religion in a feminist vein and provide more opportunities for women to access liturgical roles and spiritual authority, be it in mainstream or alternative religions. (...) Although some forms of Goddess Spirituality embraced the word "witch," reclaiming it as an index of women's power,

looking for religious traditions that could be an alternative to the androcentric and institutional ones (Zwissler 2018a; 2018b). This approach placed women in the centre of the narrative, empowering them, but it has been contested by the academy due to the lack of historical, archaeological and anthropological data to prove the existence of these matriarchal societies (Eller 2005; 1991; 2000; Ruether 2006). However, it is still recurrent to find references to Gimbutas and her work among Goddess spirituality adherents.<sup>56</sup> For instance, when I conducted my fieldwork at the Portuguese Goddess Conference in 2019, one of the presentations was about Gimbutas and her work.

The Goddess Movement has been one of the contemporary pagan paths which have grown in the last decades. In Europe, the centre of the Goddess Movement is Glastonbury (Bowman 2004; 2009; 2006; Trulsson 2013; Whitehead 2018), in the United Kingdom. In there the Goddess Conference is organised every year, an event that attracts people from several countries, and that was implemented in other countries such as Italy, France, Spain and Portugal. It is particularly appealing to those that identify as women, since it offers a sacred space to make sense of – and work on – issues that usually are not approached in daily lives, relating with their gender roles and their presence in society. The academic literature about “Pagan Studies” reveals that several of these paths were analysed, in the works and themes that will be resumed in the next section.

### **2.2.2. Main Themes**

During the 1990s and beginning of 2000s, a research line under the label of “Pagan Studies” has developed, primarily in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, but also growing in Europe. Most of the research and literature produced about Contemporary Paganism has approached relevant themes to the lived religious lives of Contemporary Pagans. From the literature review conducted for this thesis, I mapped the following scholarly themes and relevant references that contributed for – being breakthrough accounts of Contemporary Paganism – and inspired my work.

The first theme approached by the Pagan Studies scholarship is the history of the contemporary pagan movement, mainly the currents and paths that can be included in this

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others avoided it, preferring instead to align with the myth of prehistoric matriarchal religions.” (2015, pp. 652–653)

<sup>56</sup> Besides Gimbutas, in the decades of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s other authors contributed greatly to the development of the Goddess Movement. I highlight Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance* (1979), Riane Eisler’s *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987), and Carol P. Christ’s *Rebirth Of The Goddess: Finding Meaning In Feminist Spirituality* (1998).

broader label and its influences. As well as introductory works. The works of the historian Ronald Hutton are essential sources of information for scholars and Contemporary Pagans since they provide an account of the British Pagan past and sources (Hutton 1999; 1996; 1991; 2013). Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979 [2006]) was one of the first introductory works about Contemporary Paganism in the United States, being a source of inspiration for later scholars, such as Graham Harvey (1997; 2010) that produced important introductory works on Contemporary Paganism.

The second theme I identified relates to sacred sexuality and embodiment, feminine and feminist spirituality, and gender relations. Among the works produced on the theme, the pioneering work of Tanya Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (1989) offers one of the first ethnographic accounts of the Contemporary Pagan and Christian practitioners of magic in London, approaching questions such as sacred sexuality and Goddess worship. Another relevant work is Loretta Orion's *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revisited* (1995) providing an anthropological account of Wicca and Witchcraft groups in North America, and combining her experience as a practitioner with her anthropological knowledge to explore how relevant is the narrative of the witches' hunt to the birth of Contemporary Witchcraft; and Helen Berger's *Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States* (1999) analyses how gender is lived and perceived among wicca practitioners in North America. The ethnographic work produced by the anthropologist Jone Salomonsen among the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco (2002) provides an account, through a gendered approach, of the life of the Reclaiming community established by Starhawk, a relevant figure in Feminist witchcraft and Goddess Spirituality. Sarah Pike's *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (Pike 2004b) also provides insight into Contemporary Paganism through the lenses of gender, healing and ritual as the aspects that draw most people to these movements.

The focus on ritual and the celebration of the ritual year and festivals is the third theme I identified in Pagan Studies. Among several works, Sarah Pike's *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (2001) offers an ethnographic account of several pagan festivals and their importance for constructing a community and an identity – a sense of belonging. Sabina Magliocco's *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (2004), provides essential insights about the ritual creativity of Contemporary Pagans and their use as a form of resistance and identity affirmation. These works also approach one of the key themes explored in Paganism: identity. Among the scholarship produced Jenny Blain's *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and neo-shamanism*

*in North European Paganism* (2002) needs to be mentioned, providing an ethnographic account of Northern Europe's shamanism focusing on identity affirmation and the practices of *seidr*; the two books organized by Katheryn Rountree, *Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses* (2015) and *Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and Modern Paganism* (2017) include contributes from several scholars that conduct ethnographic work in different contexts and discuss issues of identity affirmation, nationalist predisposition and how pagan are adapting their practices considering the cultural and social contexts they live in, and the international and global relationships that exist in the movement. Rountree's book *Crafting Contemporary Pagan Identities in a Catholic Society* (2011) examines these identity movements in Catholic Malta. On this theme, the work of Jenny Butler about Irish Contemporary Paganism is a breakthrough account of how contemporary Pagans in Ireland express their identity in relation with ritual practices and based on an idea of a Celtic past (Butler 2024, forthcoming).

More recently, a discussion about indigeneity has arisen in Contemporary Paganism, in which contemporary Pagans look for a European indigenous religion. Graham Harvey edited *Indigenizing Movements in Europe* (2020), a book in which several scholars, among them the abovementioned Jenny Butler, approach the theme in different contexts and movements that can be included under the umbrella term of Contemporary Paganism and examine how these movements include the term in the process of identity construction.

The fifth theme identified is Pilgrimage, Heritage use and relationship with the past. On the topic of Pilgrimage, one needs to highlight the work of Anna Fedele on *Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimage and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in France* (2013b), which offers an ethnographic account of how pilgrims with a catholic background in Southern Europe, interpret catholic elements and practices through the lenses of alternative spiritual practices and Contemporary Paganism; and Laurel Zwissler's article *Pagan Pilgrimage: New Religious Movements Research on Sacred Travel within Pagan and New Age Communities* (2011) provides an overview of pilgrimage studies and different pilgrimage sites with which pagan and new age communities engage and the importance of those communities; other relevant work on pilgrimage is the one of Adrian J. Ivakhiv (2001) that analysis several pilgrimage sites in Glastonbury and Sedona with relevance for several religious and spiritual groups. On the relationship of Contemporary Pagans with heritage and the past, Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis' *Sacred Sites: contested rites/rights* (2007) is a mandatory reading to get a deeper understanding of how Contemporary Pagans engage with the heritage and with the past, since these are considered a source of legitimacy of their religious and spiritual lives.

And finally, the last theme I identified relates to their engagement with Nature in a magical and ritualistic way. This theme is vital for my research since it is one of the main lines explored in it, and because research conducted about it inspired and informed my approach. Susan Greenwood's *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (2000) and *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness* (2005) were the first works that inspired me to explore the relationship with Nature found in Contemporary Paganism and explore other worldviews regarding the human engagement with in the planet. Both explore the relevant place that magic has for the Pagans' engagement with Nature, and both provide a phenomenological approach to explain this engagement; Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010) and Sarah Pike's *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism* (2017) offer accounts from an environmentalist perspective, of how Contemporary Pagans – among other groups in the case of Taylor's work – combine their political and activist views with their spiritual and religious approaches in order to construct a possible future; and how usual it is for people involved in environmental activism to find and adhere to Contemporary Paganism. These were highly relevant to my work since they inspired and aided my analysis of this phenomenon in my fieldwork.

While separating these relevant references by themes, it is necessary to keep in mind that most of the themes mentioned here are articulated in the scholar literature cited, since they are of significant relevance in the lived experience of Contemporary Pagans. For this research, these works inspired and provided insights from other contexts; however, there is more scholarship of relevance in the context of Pagan Studies that will be articulated with the themes explored throughout this thesis. Nevertheless, one has to stress out that most of these works are Anglocentric, particularly from the United Kingdom and the United States of America, leaving other contexts out. From an inventory of literature review I conducted, one realizes that there is relevant research being done in Eastern and Southern Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South America, demonstrating not just the wider scope of Paganism worldwide – and outside the origin countries where it developed – but the particularities of those contexts thus contributing to a broader understanding of the phenomenon. Those inspired my research, and I believe they also contributes to research production on Contemporary Paganism outside of the anglophone world.

When analysing the differences between Western/Central and Eastern European Contemporary Paganism, the most recurrent difference are related with the political approach of the people, which in Western Paganism is postulated as more Left-wing oriented and focused on individual liberation, being Eastern Paganism mapped by Right-wing oriented people,



deeply involved in nationalist and ethnicity-oriented discourses. Carina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson edited the book *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (2014) that counts with contributions from several scholars from – and about – Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Czechia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Hungary or Armenia that offer a deeper analysis of the reality of these movements marked by a particular historical and social phenomenon, highly influenced by 1930s nationalism and communist suppression. The editors of this book call our attention to the need of understanding Contemporary Paganism as a broader and more complex phenomenon, one that goes beyond the separation between Left-wing/individualistic and Right-wing/nationalist approaches, depending on the context, and understand Paganism as “a broader spectrum of overlapping sets of ideologies, practices and communities that share a family resemblance. (...) They are rather like siblings who have taken different paths in life but still retain many visible similarities” (2014, p. s.p.).

The proposals of the authors of this book provides food for thought when researching Contemporary Paganism in Europe. Can the Contemporary Paganism lived in Portugal and other Southern European countries be compared to contexts like the British or Northern American, despite being a country included in the broader category of the “West”? From the contributions from Southern Europe, we can see that Paganism lived in countries such as Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Malta – to name a few – despite their relationship with the Anglophone world, is mapped by the catholic religious milieu and the syncretic transformations and incorporation of these cultural practices in their lived Contemporary Pagan or/and New Age practices. The abovementioned Fedele’s *Looking for Mary Magdalene* (2013b) looks at this syncretism in Spain, Italy and Portugal; Stefania Palmisano and Roberta Pibiri have researched Goddess Spirituality in Italy (2020), and Giovanna Parmigiani (2019) gave her attention to Contemporary Paganism. Angela Puca (2018; 2019) has also researched witchcraft, *stegheria*, shamanism and folk magic in Italy. Rountree (2011) has been researching Contemporary Paganism in Malta, contributing significantly to the literature about the movement in Southern Europe.

Besides, if one focuses only on the dialogues produced in Europe and North America, one incurs in the error of leaving out the contributions from the Global South, reinforcing the old dichotomy of North vs South in which the latter was historically disregarded. Not wanting to perpetuate this, and despite not being central in my analysis of the Portuguese and, to some extent, the British Paganism, I consider it essential to mention the scholarly production being developed in South America, mainly Latin America and Brazil on religious and spiritual movements that relate with Contemporary Paganism: René de la Torre (2018), María Cristina

del Refugio Gutiérrez (2020), Belén Hermosillo (2016) in Mexico. Daniela Cordovil (2015; 2020a), and Karina Oliveira Bezerra (2019) – to name a few – in Brazil.

This research, as already mentioned, proposes to contribute to the non-anglophone knowledge produced about Contemporary Paganism focusing on the Portuguese context (although also approaching the British context), a context barely touched and explored by international social sciences research in general, and Portuguese scholars in particular, despite its growing importance in the Portuguese society. Furthermore, this research also addresses a theme that has been left unexplored: that of Power. Ten years ago, Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe (2013) discussed the intersections between gender and power and called our attention to the fact that despite the topics of religion and power were not new in social sciences research and were being discussed by the people with whom social scientists work, they are “rarely thematized from an analytical point of view” (2013, p. 13). The way that power is analysed in this thesis will be explored later in Chapter 5; however, it is from this stance that Power is used and examined here: how is it applied, discussed and reflected upon on the field in relation to ritual, politics and activism<sup>57</sup>; how it goes beyond notions of empowerment, and is at play in several social and internal dynamics. This topic is not new, and in the last ten years it has been discussed by several colleagues, among them the abovementioned ones working in Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, it is not a breakthrough what I am proposing with this research, but a contribution to a growing academic interest.

After discussing and presenting the main principles, currents, paths and themes in Contemporary Paganism, it is time to proceed to the next section, in which the voices of contemporary Pagans I worked with will be heard to provide insights about what it means to be a Contemporary Pagan in Portugal and the United Kingdom. First, biographical accounts will be analysed to identify the most relevant reasons that led Ecocentric Pagans to the path of Paganism; then, I will proceed with a discussion of what Paganism is and what being a pagan means to the people I worked with.

## **2.3. Being a Pagan**

### **2.3.1. Paths of Becoming - Arrival Biographies to Paganism**

What does it mean to be a Contemporary Pagan in Portugal and the United Kingdom? What paths lead people in both contexts to this religious and spiritual expression? How do they create

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<sup>57</sup> For accounts of how ritual, politics and activism are at play in several contexts, see among others, the contributions found in Pike, Salomonsen and Tremlett (2020) and Harvey, Houseman, Pike and Salomonsen (2021) edited books.

their spiritual and religious way of being in the world when sociocultural influences push them towards other forms of being? These questions map the thread that will be analysed in this subsection, focusing on the biographies of the Ecocentric Pagans that co-created this research and how they identify themselves with what it means to be a Pagan. After interviewing several people along the years, being part of Pagan circles and rituals, reading blog entries and social media posts, and engaging in conversations for several moments, a pattern could be found in Portugal and in the United Kingdom. All the experiences that lead people to where they are now are different; however, some similarities can be found in the themes that people mention when asked about what led them to this religious and spiritual path – their childhood and teenage years attuned to playing in the nature; books and pop culture that introduced them to the theme; their sense of not fitting in the mainstream social norms and inquisitive minds that challenged the religious and social norms they grew up with. These are some of the themes found in the biographies of Pagans that we will look next.

Alexandra (She/Her) is a young Portuguese woman, born in 1993, that lives in Northern Portugal. She identifies herself as a Hellenic Pagan<sup>58</sup> and Priestess of Hekate and Persephone through the Fellowship of Isis.<sup>59</sup> She understands the blog she created and all the knowledge she shares as a form of devotional work to her “Ladies”, as she fondly calls them, and to the pagan community. She shares information and resources through her blog and even created a pagan directory, so people can find and contact other Pagans from their residences. She is an example of the younger generation of Portuguese Pagans, with a solitary practice but finding her community online. But she is also an example of her generation, coming from a lower-class context, spending her adult life conciliating her academic formation in History with a job, a job which, like for so many young people, is merely a means of survival and not what they wished to be doing.

We met through a friend we have in common and attended the Portuguese Goddess Conference<sup>60</sup> together in May 2019. Despite both being members of the PFI-Portugal, our paths had not yet crossed. Before the conference, we started talking through Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. When we met in person in May 2019, it was like we had known each other for

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<sup>58</sup> At the time we met and have been working together, she identified too as witch. However, a few months ago she mentioned that she does not identify anymore with this word due to some issues that arose in the community and the way that the word have been appropriated on the online communities by young witches. The change in identification is an interesting process to approach, however, it was outside the scope of this research.

<sup>59</sup> Fellowship of Isis (FOI) is a fellowship created in 1976, dedicated to honouring the Goddess. According with its website, it is a “multi-religious, multi-racial, and multi-cultural organization (...) dedicated to honouring the religion of all the Goddesses and pantheons throughout the planet.” (Isis [no date])<http://www.fellowshipofisis.com/>

<sup>60</sup> Will be analyzed in the following chapters.

some time, being the same age and sharing similar interests. During the days we spent on the Goddess Conference a friendship bond was created and strengthened, and when I travelled to Northern Portugal in November 2019 to participate in a Conference, I took the opportunity to arrange a meeting with her so we could have lunch together, catch up and I could interview her. After lunch, she drove to the woods near the city. She told me that it was a special place for her and that she conducted some of her rituals there, in the past. It was a cold, misty day, and a soft drizzle fell. The woods seemed out of a Tolkien book: high trees covered in vines, rocks dressed with green moss that was shining with the rainwater and was soft to the touch, caressing the skin of my fingertips when I grazed it; the path we walked on was surrounded by high vegetation, and orange, brown and yellowed leaves covered it, while mushrooms grew freely next to the trees.



*Image 4- Woods described in the text, November 2019*

We walked in silence through the slight mist, the chatter from the birds, the rustle of the leaves and crushing of our feet filling the air, the smell of the wet earth and eucalyptus trees filling our lungs, the cold wind caressing our faces. We walked, respecting the silence, only speaking softly to each other occasionally, sharing both happy and darker memories, protected by the space that called for this *togetherness*. After that shared companionship, we returned to the city.

Sitting in a bookshop with a coffee area and a teapot of camomile tea, I asked Alexandra how she arrived at Paganism. She laughed, mentioning that this was the story every pagan never grew tired of recounting. For her, the key moment was around 2005/2006, at 12/13 years old, due to her interest in a series broadcast on Portuguese open channel television, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.<sup>61</sup> One of the characters, Willow, was exploring Wicca, which caught her interest. In the same period, she went with her parents to a bookstore in a shopping centre in Lisbon, where she spent the day sitting in front of the Esoteric bookcase to choose a book. She settled with the book of Scott Cunningham, *Living Wicca*, which was her first introduction to Wicca. From there, she started buying more books on the theme, and about one year later, she joined online communities. At the time, there was a portal of Witchcraft, Wicca, and Paganism in Portuguese with a forum in which she participated before creating, with other Pagans an MSN group. In those years she created her first blog, which she maintained from 2008 to 2014. During those years, she spent her free time helping at an esoteric shop, engaging with online communities and meeting people with the same interests, doing her rituals, and exploring. In 2016 she began another blog and one year later started her training as a Priestess.

Similarly, for Mariana, a Portuguese Pagan and Witch born in 1987, literature introduced her to Paganism. Mariana graduated in Education Sciences and post-graduated in Science of Religions and has been involved in several pagan networks and projects, being the Interfaith coordinator of the Pagan Federation International. She is a Priestess at Templo de Inanna. We met in 2016 when I was at the beginning of my research for my Master's thesis. I attended the PFI-Portugal Samhain/Halloween event, dragging one of my closest friends to my first fieldwork incursion because I was too nervous. I spent most of the afternoon engaging with people, mostly with those who directly spoke to me. I saw Mariana moving through the room, excitedly speaking with everyone, engaging in the rituals that were taking place. I felt that she was someone I needed to speak to for my work, but I was too shy to approach her. By the end of the afternoon, she sat next to me, and I gathered enough courage to tell her that I was writing a thesis about Paganism and asked if I could speak with her, to which she answered positively and excitedly. Since then, we have developed a close friendship and see each other almost on a monthly basis. Mariana's biographical path illustrates the Portuguese pagan experience, as it

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<sup>61</sup> *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was an American TV Series created by Josh Whedon that was on air from 1997 to 2003. One of the major characters, Willow, following the rise of Wicca and its popularity in the United States, started practicing witchcraft and became a great witch through the seasons, aiding Buffy on her quests with her powers. Besides being one of the first characters in American entertainment to follow a wiccan paths, it was also one of the first lesbian characters. For teenagers at the time, it was a major representation. In Portugal the series were broadcasted in TV open channel until the 2010s. In 2017 a cable TV channel rerun the show to celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> year anniversary.

will be shown.

In May 2020, we organised an online conversation during the first months of Covid-19. Each in our own houses' bedroom, and living room as background, we spoke from 11 PM to almost 1 AM, among other things, about how and when she arrived at the path of Paganism. Two books, in particular, were life-changing. On the day she turned 15 years old, her mother gave her a book about a story of a girl that went to visit her relatives in Northern Spain and on that trip the character discovers in herself several powers as a woman<sup>62</sup>, "something very witchy, but without being witchy. At a given moment, she is harassed and howls like a wolf. Clearly, female empowerment is there. It was a teaser. Later I understood that it was the first stone on the pond."<sup>63</sup> In the same year, one month after she did the Confirmation Sacrament<sup>64</sup>, a book by Silver RavenWolf<sup>65</sup>, was given to her by a friend that had bought it thinking it was about illusionism: "I thought it was very enigmatic, it was something different, I had never seen something like that. I read it. I avidly drank that book, and it was amazing to me." But at the same time, that was when significant transformations happened in her life, making it possible for her to start exploring the book and her practice. First, it was the time of her parent's divorce, and in that book she found emotional support; second, she lived in a small village near Fátima<sup>66</sup>, attending catholic school, which did not make sense to her; and third, the installation of internet connection at her home, allowing her to connect with the pagan online community:

My case was a bit different from that of other people. Usually, it is the parents that show new paths or teach those paths to their children. In my case, I brought that book home, and it was my mother who read it after me and also sailed to the Goddess theme. I got my first tarot deck, and she got hers after. There is the need to understand that in terms of family chronology, this was the time my parents separated. In a way – and this is a reading after many years have passed – I realized that since they started splitting and everything was in turmoil, I focused there [on her magical practice]. It was my ground. And it kept being my ground until today. Because when everything else fails, it is there that I guide myself. It is from there that shelter and comfort call.

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<sup>62</sup> Mariana is referring to the book by Xosé A. Neira Cruz, *Vale de Mulher*.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Mariana conducted online, on 12 May 2020. The excerpts of Mariana's interview that will appear in this thesis are from this interview, unless indicated otherwise. It was translated from Portuguese to English by me.

<sup>64</sup> The Confirmation Sacrament is one of the seven Catholic Sacraments that "'confirms' a baptized person in their faith." (Petruzzello 2018)

<sup>65</sup> The book that Mariana refers is *Manual Completo de Magia para Adolescentes*, edited in Portugal in 2000 by Editorial Estampa. The Original is *Teen Witch – Wicca for a New Generation* (1998).

<sup>66</sup> Fátima, as stated in the previous chapter, is the parish where the major Portuguese Catholic Shrine is located, and several schools there and in closer parishes are managed by Catholic institutions.

Besides, she lived in a small village, where no one from her age knew what Paganism was, and there was no space or context to talk about the subject and meet people who thought along the same lines as she did. That allowed her to freely explore the theme, without outside influences of imposed structures. She was a bubble of creativity and willingness to explore as she defined herself. Eventually, she met two other girls in the Catholic College she attended. That was her first group, in which they did their rituals behind the school's sports pavilion. In 2007, when she went to Lisbon to University, she met other people with similar interests, although different from those she used to know in the village and formed her second group. With this group, she could spend a whole day preparing a ritual, have houses to do it in, and have the liberty to do it at the beach if she wanted to.

In 2009, she drew a ritual which she called The Gift, because "I felt that between 2002 to 2009 I had already done a solitary work, which grew into group work. And in that group, I wanted to mark that ritual as a turning point, in which I assumed the will to work more than a group for the community. It was a ritual turned into Macro and Eco levels". It was the turning point in her spiritual and religious work, and something that she had been doing until today: a spiritual and religious work highly turned to the collective.

In the voices of Alexandra and Mariana, we can see literature's impact on their arrival to Contemporary Paganism. The Religious Studies scholar Graham Harvey (1997; 2010) shows that literature is one of the sources of inspiration for Paganism, which goes beyond the books written by Pagans to Pagans. Historical, archaeological, and anthropological sources, as well as books on Ecology, Feminism, Folklore or Herbalism, are of significant influence. But, also, fiction and fantasy are sources of inspiration for creating their paths and practices. While history, folklore and archaeology provide the bases for the creation of identities and their legitimacy, as well as the bases for their rituals, fiction and fantasy offer re-enchantment and other possible forms of relating and conceiving the world. For instance, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) is recurrently referred to among Pagans, mainly those that follow the path of the Goddess, since it offered a model for understanding the Goddess, provided a model of the Priestess that could be followed, and a women-centred recounting of the tale of King Arthur (Harvey 1997). This work was deeply inspirational for The Goddess Movement, which arose in Glastonbury, where several mentions of Avalon<sup>67</sup> - the lost city – mark the movement and the city. Or the books by Terry Pratchett, J. R.R. Tolkien or, more recently, the Harry Potter Saga or Neil Gaiman books, all providing provided characters,

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<sup>67</sup> Marion Bowman has been researching how the narratives about Avalon have been mobilized in Glastonbury. See Bowman (2009; 2006; 2007).

imaginaries and a first contact with the Pagan world. The religious studies scholar Graham Harvey mentions that

fantasy and fiction can allow people to find a vision and a voice and bring the whole of themselves to fuller participation in life, rather than merely intellectual or emotional political engagement. It does not offer facts for consideration but truths to inspire or beauty to appreciate, and thus subverts the dominance of the modernist idea that everything is given, set and bounded. Fantasy says that things are not always as they seem and can change, and that is especially true for readers and hearers of these tales (Harvey 1997, p. 180).

Besides, this literary genre is connected with other forms of pop culture, like movies, series or video games, which call for imagination and construction of ways of seeing the world, sometimes presenting the world of witchcraft, Paganism, folklore and mythology, as Alexandra narrated. Sarah M. Pike (2001), in her research among Contemporary Pagans in festivals, found science fiction and fairy tales to be the most referred sources of inspiration for the Pagans she worked with during her research at neopagan festivals since in those forms of fantasy and mythological literature, they found comfort and a world as they wished, in harmony with what they found later in Contemporary Paganism. The author mentioned that connecting an “imagined past into present ritual life has been an important aspect of NeoPaganism since the first American Neopagan groups took shape during the 1960s” (*ibid* 2001, p. 171), which explains the interest that many Pagans have for medieval re-enactment, fantasy and role-playing games because of their imagination possibilities, allowing the improvisation of a world fitting their wishes. For instance, with the increase of Medieval Fairs and Historical recreations in Portugal in the last ten years, it is common to find several Contemporary Pagans participating, both as artisans, traders, organizers and visitors, and in some cases, those events are starting points for people to explore their pagan paths because they feel drawn to some symbol, to some aesthetics or to the myths and stories shared in those spaces.

However, this is not the only means of inspiring and leading people to Paganism. Mariana mentioned her Catholic background and how she questioned the narratives shared in school and church. Similarly, Margarida’s approach to Paganism – a 46 years old Portuguese woman – is also related to not feeling herself represented by the Catholic religious background she grew up in. On a Friday night in November 2021, we met via Zoom for an interview. I had met her some years before at an event of holistic therapies near to where I live, and have since followed her work on social media. She provided several Shamanic, oriental dance, divine feminine and



female empowerment courses, circles and workshops, and was one of the Priestesses of the ceremonial group of the Portuguese Goddess Conference. When I asked her how she arrived at Paganism, her answer was:

How did I arrive? I believe that I arrived like everyone does: I did not know that I was arriving at the path of mysteries. I never fitted the Christian box in the sense of accepting everything said to me without questioning it. That was my freedom, which allowed me to explore the Self Knowledge. From a very early age, it allowed me to have intense and profound conversations with my parents, my grandmother, my high school colleagues, and my philosophy teacher that came from theology...it is where it starts. There was not a time when I started. Like everyone that lives in Portugal, we have Greek-Roman and Judaeo-Christian traditions. We are of God, and we have that root stressed. Few people arrive at childhood without being sent to Church – Today is not like that, we have more freedom, but those were the times our parents knew – I used to go to Church with my grandmother to sing. I used to fall asleep during the sermons and remember being very observant when the Priest came with the incense. And to the candles. I thought that that part was lovely and exciting. But the sermons and that feeling of “all of us as the same sheep” made me fall asleep. But I loved to sing. And with my grandmother, I went to sing.<sup>68</sup>

For Margarida, the connection with spirituality was promoted by her grandmother’s lived spiritual and religious influence more than the institutional religion in which she grew in. Besides all the external influences that she encountered in her life, this relationship was a key element because

The way that my grandmother talked about the spirit was through the music. It was always through the music that she carried much information. I loved learning about Christianity with my grandmother. Not with the Priests. With the Priests, I hated every bit. I learned much more about the roots and values of Christianity with her through the songs she sang and invented and through the way she enchanted the story. (...) I questioned my grandmother, and she returned [the answers] with wisdom, recognition, and the light of “well, I didn’t even think about it like that”. I did the First Holy Communion with the Priests and did not want to do the Confirmation. (...) I remember the Priest giving candy to those who said what he wanted to hear. I, for each question

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<sup>68</sup> Online interview with Margarida, 12 November 2021. All the excerpts of Margarida’s interview the follow is from this interview.

he had, had another. And we fought. It was not pretty. One day I arrived home sad, and my grandmother said, “This is not for her. Forget it.” And I told my mother that I did not want to go there anymore (...) that “I prefer a thousand times to look to the bible books with grandma, and talk to her, then go there!” I did not recognize authority in them.

Besides her grandmother, her mother also had a significant influence on her arrival to Contemporary Paganism since she taught her that more than the name, and the way it is organized, it is the meaning the spirituality and religion provide personally and in connection that is important:

my mother was too a “little pagan”, as I like to call her. She believed in Saints and had the saints' culture. She used to say to me, “I believe in God in the sense that it is a Spirit that looks after us. Now, the name that you give it does not matter. It is your name.” She understood, and very early, I started exploring spiritism, Wicca, buying books, seeing what this thing was called the “Goddess Religion”, and thinking, “This has more to do with me.” (...) At those times, I started reading many things and questioning others, and I began slowly – I believe, like everyone in Portugal at those times – practising alone. Or with the best friend. Or with the mother. Smoothly, that is how I arrived. (...) In Wicca, I found peace. I found recognition.

There is the narrative of breaking with the hegemonic religion, in this case, Christianity, like several authors state in their research among Pagans (Salomonsen 2002; Pike 2004b) and usually during their teenage years. Besides, the narratives focus on the importance between the institutional religion and the lived or vernacular practices (Sutcliffe, Bowman 2000) of the people, which are praised and hold deeper meanings and relevance in the life stories of the Pagans I worked with. But there are also cases of people that arrived at these paths later, in adult life, some with grown-up children, that look for religious and spiritual paths that can provide answers to their current needs and offer ways of understanding and making sense of several life processes they are going through, criticising the religious background where they live. Luiza, the lead organizer of the Portuguese Goddess Conference, joined a pagan path, more concretely the Goddess Movement, later in her life.

In April 2019, I boarded a bus from Lisbon to Óbidos, a small medieval village in the district of Leiria, one hour from Lisbon, and known, among other things, for its annual Medieval Fair that mobilizes hundreds of visitors. It was a chilly Spring Day, with white clouds providing a contrast against the blue sky and the brownish hues of the castle's stones. Walking through

narrow streets, I arrived at the Goddess Temple, Jardim das Hespérides. A Bridgit Cross was hanging over the door, and some painted eggs could be seen through the window. I approached the door and heard some mumbling. My knock on the door had interrupted Luiza, who was opening the Temple's sacred space to receive me and others wishing to visit it. She opened the door and quickly resumed invoking the Iberian Goddesses that frequented the Temple.

Prostrated in front of the altar that was decorated with green, yellow and brown cloths, with sculptures of hares, bears, nests and eggs, feathers, fruit and wildflowers, and the statue representing the Goddess at the centre, there she stood, with open arms, calling for the Goddess, mainly in the Maiden form, that started at the Imbolc and was transported to the Spring cycle. She was requesting blessings and prosperity. Then she turned to me, and it was time to be purified, passing a burning rosemary smudge stick around me and then fanning a feather to drive away any foul energy that I could be carrying into the sacred space. We sat to start our conversation, I on a pillow on the floor and Luiza on the usual small chair she occupied every time she was in the Temple. I started by asking her what led her to the Goddess's path.



*Image 5- Goddess Altar described in the text, October 2019*

It started in 2009 when she was in the United Kingdom working on Sacred Feminine and visited Glastonbury for the first time. In the introduction of her book (Frazão 2017), with the

title “I am, before anything else, a daughter of the Goddess”<sup>69</sup>, she mentions that the Goddess was always a part of her life, and without knowing she was a pagan since she was born due to her love and dedication to nature. After reading the book by Jean Shinobu Bolen, *Crossing to Avalon* (1994) and taking that trip to Glastonbury, she felt she had returned to the Temple, and through her gnosis she already knew she belonged in her past lives (*ibid*: p.19 – 20). In 2011 she began her training as Priestess of the Goddess, and from there until 2016, she participated actively in the Glastonbury Goddess Temple and Goddess Conference, researching the presence of the Goddess in the Portuguese territory. Although always recognizing the sacredness of Nature, as she mentions, and connecting her love for adorning to past lives as a Priestess of the Goddess in several periods of history, it was in her late fifties that she found a religious and spiritual path in Paganism that provided the identification for her worldview, and an alternative to the Western androcentric, patriarchal religious and cultural system, as she mentioned several times in the conversations we had, in her books and in talks she gave on the Portuguese Goddess Conference 2019.<sup>70</sup> Her narrative marks a discontinuity, despite the use of female saints from catholic backgrounds as expressions of the Goddess<sup>71</sup>, like the stories of Alexandra, Mariana and Margarida. But this is not always the case with processes of discontinuity, as Mary’s life story illustrates.

Mary is a Priestess in Glastonbury and one of the members of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions I could not meet her in person, so we had to arrange a conversation through the Zoom platform. When I asked her how she had arrived at the path of the Goddess, the first thing she mentioned was that her path was slightly different from the usual *arrival to Paganism* stories that one hears:

I was born spiritual. Everybody is born spiritual (...) I moved town, and I kinda decided, because you really don’t fit in, when you do that, is like you live in this magic realism and you really don’t fit in. So, when I moved town, I decided “I am going to fit in here”, I was 8 years old. And I focused on the church, and in my case, it was the Catholic Church, in the Netherlands, and it was a very open-minded catholic church, very alternative. Which stand from the 60s in the Netherlands was this small stream of very alternative way of being catholic. And I was in the children’s choir in the youth’s choir, then I got involved in organizing the services and then even went all the way until I had children and was still very much involved with the church. I had done pastoral

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<sup>69</sup> Free translation from the original in Portuguese “Sou antes de mais nada uma filha da Deusa”

<sup>70</sup> A deeper analysis of the goddess movement and this narrative will be provided later on Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>71</sup> See Fedele (2015; 2013b) for analysis of this syncretism among the Goddess Movement in Southern Europe.

school, and I was laid Priest in a Church where I organized all the family services for the Church. I also had my family, my life, and at one point went to Glastonbury festival...no, that's not completely true. I got ill, I got a hernia, and I started to read about Wicca, Druidry, Shamanism because I had to lie down for six weeks; and that sparked my interests and linked back to when I was a child, and then I started to go to witches moots<sup>72</sup>. But that was not really my path.<sup>73</sup>

Mary's path does not imply discontinuity. She was very much involved in an institutional context, as can be seen by her description that her religious and spiritual path has been directed towards community and collective work. How she discovered Contemporary Paganism through books reinforces the importance of literature for the growth of the movement, even if her relationship with her previous lived religion was not one of discontinuity but of continuity, as she shared when she discovered the Goddess Movement and was involved in it:

I went to Glastonbury festival<sup>74</sup>, and I picked up a leaflet from the Goddess Conference in Glastonbury. And I kind of knew immediately that's where I wanted to go. So, the next year, in 2003, I went there, and I just came home. Really, to this way of Goddess. And I was still active in the church, and at the same time, after the conference, I started my training to become a Priestess, and for me, those two don't bite each other; they never did because I have been brought up, as I said, in alternative catholic ways. And I was taught from childhood: Goddess loves. And everything that comes through that pathway of Christianity comes from love. It was like quite a different way from the way some people have experience Christianity. So, for me was like, "okay, that's the path, but in that path there's no space for Nature, there's no space for magic"; and then the Goddess was really grounding me in Nature, in myself, in my body. That was also not in Christianity, the body thing, so, at one point I had to choose because I didn't have the time. I had a job, I had a family, and then I was a Priestess, and I was still in the church, so I said "okay, I've done 35 years of church, it's enough". So, I chose to become a really full-time Priestess, and that consequently led to moving here to be a full-time Priestess, it's my only job now.

Mary found in Goddess Spirituality a path that grounds her in Nature. It is in Nature and with Nature that Contemporary Pagans connect, immerse themselves in, and find a sense of

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<sup>72</sup> A Moot is the name given to an informal Pagan meeting/gathering. Usually takes place at a bar.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Mary and Kate, 19 November 2021.

<sup>74</sup> She is referring the Glastonbury Music Festival

belonging, as Mary describes. It is, therefore, the relationships that Contemporary Pagans create with nature, which are another source of inspiration, narrated in all the stories above. Ever since they were children or teenagers, they felt attuned to Nature, perceiving it as a live entity, with and in which they played, explored, observed and where they found refuge. Mary mentioned that “from as long as I can remember, I wasn’t fascinated with anything other, and as a child, it manifested very much in the fairy tales, but also Nature where I recognized elementals and worked with all the elements” and since she lived in a time and place where she could freely play outside, she used to play “dancing with the wind, running with the wind and the water” a very elemental way of being, also integrated “in the magical world.”

Mariana also recognizes this connection. In her own words

What taught me to be a pagan, more than a book, was the land I grew up in. Only later did I understand that the name I could give to that relationship was “Paganism” (...) when you are born, or when you are brought up in a land like the one where I had the privilege to grow up in... I heard other Pagans using this expression: the natural world that surrounds you, and what you feel when you are in the natural world, is the kind of veneration that you should feel when you are in a mass. I understood this from an early age. I grew up in the woods (...); the street was all ours. We lived in a time that, unfortunately, my daughter will not enjoy. (...) I found in Paganism the word that was missing to convey what I already felt.

Experiencing the land and the natural places is central to affirming Contemporary Paganism. In all these years that I have been contacting and researching Paganism, this idea that Mariana shares – Paganism as the word that translates the feeling of being in and with Nature – has been shared by several Pagans during conversations, in texts and in videos. Paganism provides the language that translates the connection with Nature and the tools to dwell in it, celebrate, and venerate it. Rosemary, the Pagan Federation member, starts narrating her arrival story to Paganism from her childhood memories in contact with Nature, reinforcing that the connection that Paganism translates has been present in her from the moment she could perceive it and make sense of the feelings and emotions sparked by that contact, which makes her affirm that she has been pagan all her life:

I was just drawn to it as a kid. I was never happier than when I was in my garden. When I was little, there was a park behind my house, and there were lots of different kinds of wild grass and wildflowers in the Summer and out there. And I used to pick grass and flowers to make my own medicine cabinet and make my own magic with them. The

answer [to when she was drawn to Paganism] is I have been pagan all my life.

From these first introductions, they start creating their religious and spiritual paths, following several traditions, and integrating teachings from several social, cultural, personal and mystical experiences, becoming a never-ending path of discovery. From some contemporary Pagans I interviewed in Portugal and in the United Kingdom, one can find some important trends regarding arrival stories and early practices.

First, literature, both academic and non-academic, pop culture, role-playing games, and historical re-enactments – as already mentioned – have particular relevance in the arrival of Contemporary Paganism, inspiring and providing an image of the world as wished for that plays a role in the rituals conducted and intentions set. Besides literature, friendships, family and other close social ties are meaningful while gaining knowledge and creating one's practices, both in the cases of positive influences as in cases of rupture. Friends with similar interests are the first spaces where they explore how to work in groups, create and conduct rituals, and engage in discussions. Some of these become the first religious, spiritual and magical groups Contemporary Pagans attend, as Margarida and Mariana mentioned. As for family influences, some can be found in the sense of continuity and others in a sense of rupture: a rupture in drawing back from the religious affiliations of their families, exploring alternative religious and spiritual lives, and continuity, where some grew up in homes where their parents gave them the freedom to explore their paths, or their lived spiritual and religious lives were following the path their children wanted to lead; and finally, a family member like a grandmother being already a practitioner of folk magic and religion that was transmitted to them, like in the case of Margarida.

In the last twenty years, the internet became another source of information and influence. The generation that in their teenage years grew with the establishment of home internet connection, and the younger generation of Pagans that are arriving to the movement, found in this tool the needed information and community they were looking for. I will focus on this trend in Chapter 6, about the impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions, due to its importance for the understanding of the growth of online communities in the last few years. However, it provided not just an easier access to the information but also a sense of a widespread connected community that trespasses borders; and new ways of conducting rituals using these digital and online tools.

The second trend is the connection with Nature, as has been shown. The earlier experiences in Nature, or sensibility and attuning to its rhythms and beings are recognized as the first forms

of Paganism, even if, at the time, they did not know the word or recognize it. Most spoke of a feeling of belonging and found a refuge in the moments spent there playing, walking, or simply being in Nature, as shown in some of the testimonials above. Sarah M. Pike (2017) found a similar approach in her work with environmentalists and Pagans. This connection will be explored in the next chapter.

Furthermore, the arrival of Contemporary Paganism is marked by ruptures: personal, familiar or religious ruptures, social and cultural ruptures, which I identify as the third trend in the biographies shared. Some people mentioned that they did not fit in with their peers during their childhood and teenage years, and it was in the exploration of Paganism that they found their refuge; others mentioned that some important disruptive events in their family lives, like the divorce of their parents, change city, or personal ones, like a disease, lead them to find Paganism in some cases and others find refuge in their practices, like Mariana, Alexandra e Mary shared. The rupture with the Christian hegemonic religious background is visible mainly in the narratives of the Contemporary Pagans in Portugal and the United Kingdom with whom I spoke. They started questioning and challenging the religious principles of Christianity, not recognizing authority in the religious leaders, like Priests, as Margarida mentioned, or finding the Christian teachings oppressing, patriarchal and misogynist as is usual in these types of movements (Fedele, Knibbe 2013). However, this opposition is imperative for the creation of their pagan identities. By criticizing and drawing away from Christian beliefs, they establish both what they are and what they are not, reinforcing the historical opposition between Christianity and Paganism mentioned at this chapter's beginning. Sarah Pike (2001), in her research among Contemporary Pagans in festivals in North America, notes that Contemporary Pagans were creating a spiritual space by rejecting and opposing meanings and rituals proposed by the culturally dominant Christianity. Christianity is then essential to establish a contemporary pagan identity – it is what is rejected and rejects them. They turn to the wilderness or to Nature, establishing a contrast with churches, in which

The woods function as a sacred locale where men and women take their hearts and bodies to be made anew in what they see as an uncivilized and virgin wilderness. Certainly, successful revivals were held in ordinary buildings as well, but by setting the camp meeting next to Neopagan festivals, the religious importance and creative power of wilderness sites emerges more clearly in itself, as does the process by which the wilderness experience is made different from other domains of life (2001, p. 19).

The fourth and last trend I identified relates to the practices of Paganism. First, Wicca had



a vital role in the exploration of pagan paths since it was the first tradition explored in their teenage years, leading them to other practices during life. For Alexandra, it was a book on Wicca that introduced her to Paganism, and from there she started exploring other paths according to her interests. The Wiccan ritual structure is Paganism's most used form of ritual organization. Some keep working with Wicca, while others abandon it or create an eclectic and/or mixed practice where their experience with Wicca is included. Second, solitary practice versus group practice. Most start exploring through a solitary path, researching, creating rituals, meditating, attuning to their spirituality, and from there, can follow three possible modes of practice: keep on the solitary practice, communicating with the community and attending some rituals, celebrations and festivals; others join groups, mainly working collectively and others a mixed path, where in some periods they prefer the solitary work, and in others the collective ones. Nevertheless, they keep developing their personal and solitary paths, meditating, do the devotional work to the Deities and elementals they are connected with. The heterogeneity, fluidity and liberty of practices that characterise Contemporary Paganism allow all these forms of practices to cohabit without significant tensions for the practitioners and groups of practitioners<sup>75</sup>.

From the biographical stories shared and the trends identified, it is possible to understand that the arrival stories to Contemporary Paganism are key-moments in the construction of their identities. While sharing their arrival stories, they draw meaning and knowledge from their experiences, connecting the past and the present, as also noted by Pike (2001), who mentions in her work that "childhood plays a dynamic role in Neopagan self-making; the childhood self is created through stories about the past. At the same time, childhood stories are used to constitute the adult self. Narrative both constructs a coherent self and heals wounds, and narratives of the self are not static; once told, they continue to be shaped by experience." (*ibid*, p.180). Besides, these offer an understanding of the lived spiritual and religious experience of those that identify as Pagans, contributing to the social and cultural processes that influence how human animals perceive the world they live in and construct and how identity processes take place.

The fascinating stories shared in these pages were the motto and opened the path for exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of Contemporary Paganism. No wonder some questions emerge, primarily related to identification and identity. After all, what does it mean to be a Pagan? What does it mean to follow the path of Paganism?

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<sup>75</sup> These trends are too identified by authors such as Pike (2001), and Magliocco (2004), among others, that have been researching Contemporary Paganism for some time.

For most of my interviewees, being a pagan is part of their identities, and Paganism is a way of life above all. As some of the testimonials above have shown, a feeling of having found their place and of familiarity exists. Rosemary stated that her first recognition of Paganism in her teenage years “was like going home. I’d found my place, if you like.” This idea of “going home” or “homecoming” is recurrent in Contemporary Pagan arrival narratives, but also in the literature. As Anczyk and Vencálek (2013) conclude, the homecoming hypothesis that Contemporary Pagans mention is influenced by the academic production. However, in this process, it became part of their religious and spiritual identities, translating the feeling of reaching a place where they feel seen, comfortable and cared for.

Besides, it is not just the sense of “coming home” that can be found in the experience of Paganism. It is, too, recognizing a reality that is being lived and felt through an embodied engagement, like the statement given by Magnólia shows: “I never had another path. One of the things that I believe is that Paganism and shamanism are not intellectual conditions; their experiences are my experience of this time. There was never a moment in which I read a book or had contact with the idea of Paganism and had thought, ‘Ah, that’s it!’.” That is, they are intrinsic to her identity. Being a Pagan is therefore recognizing a place in the world in interconnection, extremely attuned to the sensorial and embodied experience. In this process, they recognize themselves as having reached a place where they are at home, in kinship with nature and all the beings. Before exploring these experiences in the following chapters, it is necessary to present a short overview of the state of Contemporary Paganism today. By doing so, I will provide a short comparison between Portuguese and British Contemporary Paganisms in order to highlight the differences and continuities between the movements since it was from the United Kingdom that most Portuguese groups found inspiration, as will be seen throughout this thesis. The following section will also discuss the mobilization towards recognition, which is taking place in both countries.

## **2.4. Contemporary Paganism Today**

Throughout the last section, it was presented the people that dance in the circle of Contemporary Paganism were presented, and what it is. Their voices came from two different contexts but provided an example of how the people live this religious and spiritual movement. However, it did not look at the broader presence of the movement in both contexts nor their particularities, differences and connections between the Portuguese and British Contemporary Paganisms. These will be approached in this section.

### **2.4.1. Differences and Connections between Portuguese and British Contemporary Paganism**

In order to acquire a broader understanding of the Contemporary Pagan movements, one needs to look at the presence of the groups and people in the public space. As mentioned, the presence of Contemporary Paganism in Portugal is relatively recent when compared to the United Kingdom. From the inventory I conducted online – both in social media and search engines – I found out that most Portuguese Temples and groups are informal or unregistered. From the information available on the official websites and social media pages of the groups, I could only identify four groups/associations formally registered as collective person under Portuguese legislation: Congregação Politeísta – PFI Portugal, as a collective person and non-profit organization; ATDL – Assembleia da Tradição Druídica da Lusitânia as a non-profit organization; Templo da Deusa do Jardim das Hespérides as a cultural association; and Wicca Celtibera, that is registered as a religious confession in Portugal, but also in the Spanish State.

The other groups are informal, or if they are registered as a collective person or association that information is unavailable. Despite this, some have major visibility, such as the case of the OBOD – Ordem dos Bardos, Ovates e Druídas, due to the public events they organize. Its headquarters are at Casa do Fauno, a medieval pub that organizes and receives several workshops, discussion groups, courses and thematic events, which contributes to its stronger visibility, even if most of the events are private and closed to the public.

In terms of events, the great majority are closed ones, accessible only to members of the groups or by invitation. Nevertheless, some groups like PFI- Portugal organize public celebrations, usually Equinoxes and Earth Day celebrations. In the case of the Wicca Celtibera, they have been conducting solstice events and presentations at Alandroal, a municipality in Alentejo, with the support of the municipality. In the last five years, the event with the most visibility in Portugal was the Goddess Conference which took place in 2019 and organized a second conference in 2022. Despite these public events, the majority of groups and people gather in small Temples and Covens; and the majority are solitary practitioners.

The Contemporary Pagan presence in the public space is, therefore, seen on specific calendar moments (solstices or equinoxes), or in events that are not specifically religious and spiritual or Pagan, but in which pagan elements appear, such as in Medieval and Recreation fairs. In these spaces, Pagan symbols are sold, identified and experienced in combination with other forms of involvement with the past. With the spreading of recreation fairs – and the interest they have for people –, there was also an increase in restaurants and bars with a

“medieval” theme, most presenting references to pagan symbols and names in their decoration and menus. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know the number of Pagans in Portugal, since the official State instruments, such as the National Census, do not include these minoritarian movements.

On the other hand, the number of events and groups in the United Kingdom is more significant due to the movement’s longstanding presence in the public space. Given the transformations of the research agenda due to COVID-19 restrictions – already mentioned –, I focused only on the cataloguing of the most influential groups and events. If in Portugal proliferated small groups, temples, and covens, in the last two decades, one must deduce that their number is much higher in the United Kingdom<sup>76</sup>. The Census of 2021 informs that from the 405,000 citizens that answered the field “any other religion”, 74,000 identified themselves as Pagan, 13,000 as Wiccan, and 8,000 as Shaman (Office for National Statistics 2022). In terms of events with public relevance, the Glastonbury Goddess Conference mobilizes hundreds of people every year, as well as the Summer and Winter Solstices organized at Stonehenge, which count with the support of the English Heritage (Blain, Wallis 2007; Rountree 2021). The Pagan Federation organizes several events throughout the year, usually public and accessible to members and to the wider public. Furthermore, the Witchfest event that takes place annually in London and its sibling event Witchfest Midlands also aggregates the community. If one types “pagan events in the United Kingdom,” several websites and social media pages appear announcing conferences, moots, workshops and courses, among others, a testimony of the widespread presence of the movement in this context.

Besides, in both countries, a movement towards recognition is taking place, even if it is not consensual for all the contemporary pagan groups and people to see Contemporary Paganism recognized as a religion. However, this shows an essential mobilization for public and political recognition from a movement that usually presents itself as counter-cultural. This mobilization will be analysed in the next section.

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<sup>76</sup> Vivianne Crowley (2014) analysed Contemporary Pagans responses to the 2011 Census in the United Kingdom, conducting a questioner among the Contemporary Pagans in this context. The author concluded that these censuses were extremely important for the Pagans. However not all were willing to answer the census due to fear of ostracization. As the author notes “Although census data should be private, not everyone was convinced that giving out personal information on the census forms was safe. In deciding whether or not to ‘stand up and be counted’, Pagans were making individual judgements about the importance of being confident and proud of their Paganism, and the potential benefits for themselves and the wider Pagan community in doing so, against the potential negative impact on family, social and workplace relations.” (14). Ten years earlier, Berger, Leach and Shaffer (2003) conducted a study about the presence of Pagans in the United States, using too the information gathered in the 2001 census.

### **2.4.2. The work for recognition as a religion**

In Portugal and in the United Kingdom, groups have been mobilizing to have Paganism recognized as a religious movement with the same rights, support and legitimacy as other religious groups and movements. This mobilization and search for recognition are not consensual since some groups and people do not want to be associated with religions or politics, while others want this recognition to legitimize their presence in public space. I will develop this based on interviews conducted with Pagan leaders and solitary ones.

I met the Congregação Politéista - PFI Portugal at the March for Animal Rights in October 2019 in Lisbon. We were gathered at Praça dos Restauradores, waiting for the March to begin. While talking with the High-Priest and another member of the Association about how the research was going, the theme of the process for recognition arose. The High-Priest stated that the process has been on hold but that they need to resume it now with the help of other institutions. While in the United Kingdom, Paganism is recognized, in Portugal, it is much more challenging to have it recognized at judicial and legislative levels. For instance, one of the times that the process was submitted for recognition, the request was denied because they were not monotheistic. The other Association member that was participating in the conversation asked how that was possible since, for instance, Hinduism is polytheistic, and they are recognized. The High-Priest mentioned that this is due to cultural questions and because Hinduism<sup>77</sup> is already recognized as a religion in the countries of origin of the diasporas, what is not the case for Paganism. Following this logic, this member asked why not use the figure of Nature as the single Deity of Paganism. According to the High-Priest, this was already suggested by one of the Candomblé<sup>78</sup> leaders participating in the Interreligious Dialogues with the PFI – Portugal. However, it is impossible to use the Great Mother as a single Deity because She is not individualized like the Gods and Goddess of the Polytheistic system, in which every deity has specific functions and attributes and is a patron of specific issues and requests. The Great Mother, on the other end, will not respond individually.

Following this episode, I met with the High-Priest and High-Priestess later that month and inquired about the work they had been doing to that end. As the first group registered as an Association in Portugal – and one that represents in Portugal an international network – their presence in the public space has been growing at the time, from their participation in demonstrations for climate action and animal rights to their participation in the Interreligious

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<sup>77</sup> For more on Hinduism in Portugal see the works of Inês Lourenço (Lourenço 2021; Lourenço, Cachado 2018) that has been conducting exhaustive and implicated research with the Hindu diaspora in Portugal.

<sup>78</sup> For more on Candomblé in Portugal see Bahia (2015) and Ferreira Dias (2020; 2018).

Dialogues, and tight relationships with several Universities and Research Centres<sup>79</sup>. For twenty years they have been trying to register as a religious collective person and to be recognized as a religious group in the Portuguese legal system. From this perspective, it has been a very tiresome process due to issues of acceptance. As mentioned by HP João, one of the times this request was put forward it was via regular mails, including twenty years of work they had been doing and several responses to requests for clarification; the last answer declared that their organization was hard to understand, also mentioning the lack of a Single-God, “because there was not a central deity, therefore they could not see where was the unity point because there was not one deity. And how did we organize ourselves in terms of associativism? Namely, the functioning strategies of the groups. Since there was no centrality like the one that the Catholic Church has. (...) was this letter that we still need to answer. But it will need to be with a lawyer’s help. And the process is not to be dealt with by IRPNC<sup>80</sup> but by the Commission for Religious Liberty<sup>81</sup>.” I asked if their participation in the Interreligious Dialogue brought no advantages for the recognition process, to which they responded negatively. They explained that the Inter-religious Dialogue was important and helped to prove their existence, while reinforcing their freedom of worship, but that it did not give them the same rights and conditions the other official religions have.

Similarly, Luiza, the Goddess Movement’s Priestess that organized the Goddess Conference in Portugal in 2019, realized that the process for religion recognition or for the creation of a religious movement is a burdensome and arduous work, extremely bureaucratic. And considering the dimension of her Temple and of the Goddess Movement in Portugal, there were not enough people to aid with the recognition process. She, therefore, chose to register the Temple as a Cultural Association under Portuguese law. Also, the connection with a religious movement, most notably a new and smaller one, can raise misunderstandings due to its connection with cults<sup>82</sup> or sects and the understanding of the word:

For me, it is a little straining because of everything... because we give that weight of “the sect will deviate, will take, will do, will eat children...” it is heavy. One is more comfortable with “culture”. And religion is culture; somehow, it is integrated into

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<sup>79</sup> Mostly with Universidade Lusófona e Universidade de Lisboa.

<sup>80</sup> Registo Nacional de Pessoas Coletivas (National Collective People Registry)

<sup>81</sup> The Commission for Religious Liberty was an organism that was created in 2003/2004 after the creation of the Law for Religious Freedom to protect the practice of religious freedom and maintenance of the law.

<sup>82</sup> I did not engage on the discussions about ‘cults’ since it is outside the scope of this research. For a discussion of these terms see Lorne L. Dawson edited volume *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader* (2003) and the chapter on Cults in George D. Chryssides and Amy R. Whitehead edited book *Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion: A Critical Exploration* (2023).

culture. But create a religious movement; I think that, yes, in time, we will go from a spiritual movement to be registered as a religious movement.

The two testimonials above serve to show the issues contemporary pagan groups in Portugal can face in their affirmation in the public space as a religious movement. First the association of words like “religion”, “cult” or “sect” with something negative and stigmatized. Second, the unfamiliarity with what Paganism is also functions as a hindrance in this process, since the automatic association that is done, in the ordinary sense, when the word “pagan” is mobilized in the Portuguese context is with Satanism and with the demonization that was the norm throughout the history of the Catholic establishment in the Country. This enterprise is not consensual for all Pagans due to their inherent disregard for hierarchies (despite maintaining them) and the misunderstandings and stereotypes associated with the word usage. Some prefer to understand the movement as a way of life, connected with personal choices and identity affirmations; others want recognition, so they are heard, recognized, protected, and equally considered in public, political and legislative domains. This problem is far from being solved, and from being a unifying factor for them inside the movement in Portugal. One of the reasons it is so results from a perception of self-importance, and the power dynamics that arise with the establishment of certain leaders and lack of communication, as well as with a need to protect their space of action. Besides, being under a central organization also legitimates hierarchies and limits the scope of action and practice.

The lack of recognition, at the moment, results in a lack of knowledge about the movement, about its needs, about its duties and rights, about the number of people engaged with it and about their rights and support, just like any other religious groups. The absence of the option “Paganism” in the Census, inquiries and studies contribute to its disregard, thus not providing accurate information about the movement in the Portuguese public space. Therefore, a double issue arises, rooted in the process of affirmation as a religious and spiritual movement: an internal one, with the lack of consensus inside the movement and between the groups, therefore, only isolated groups move in this direction; and an external one, related with political and legislative approaches. This is far from being resolved, despite the aid that the religious freedom law offered in terms of protection and the transformation in terms of acceptance of the population<sup>83</sup>. This is something that needs to be accompanied in the years to come in Portuguese society.

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<sup>83</sup> In the interview with PFI they mentioned that what changed in the last twenty years regarding the view of paganism in the public space was the acceptance from the general Portuguese population, contrarily to the state services.

On the other hand, the work for recognition has been taking place in the United Kingdom for some years. However, they still feel that they are being discriminated, as the account of Rosemary, the Pagan Federation member, shows:

We still do not get, I wanna say, the respect that a lot of the other faiths and religions get. I think, although we do not suffer the same level of discrimination as some of the Pagans across the world, it is still alive and well. What we get more than anything, we still get othered, just like we always have. We are mocked, we are immediately seen as easy to blame for things that go wrong.

One of our main goals is advocacy. Our advocacy officer is very busy with things like, social services doubting Pagans' abilities to be good parents; the court system not seeing Paganism as valid, and workplace discrimination against Pagans (...). I think a lot of people think it does not exist. Even quite a lot of Pagans will say, "Well, I don't get that". But it does still, with the sensationalism of the press and the media and things like that, it does still. It just still happened. I've dealt with at least half a dozen cases since I became president. Of the press sensationalizing Paganism in one way or another, and making it look like a bad thing, when what happened wasn't anything to do with Paganism. They just happened to be pagan. (...) Our festivals aren't taken that seriously and we get the mick taken out of us a lot. (...) We don't fear for our lives like we used to, so things have moved on, but it is still alive and well. On the flip side, we do have a seat at lots of important tables. We do take part in the Religious Education Council; we have quite a large presence there. We have quite a large presence within faith work. There is a balance. Yes, we still get discriminated against, but on the flip side, we also still get recognized and respected in places [that they participate]

What I find to be the significant differences in this movement for legal recognition in both countries relates to the number of years that the movement has been organized in the respective societies and the engagement of the general groups and associations in the process. The fact that this movement has been organized in English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish societies since the 70s of last century (Harvey 1997) gave them the time to organize, engage and affirm their presence. Also, the use of the past as a legitimate factor for their existence, supported by several archaeological sites throughout the United Kingdom, gave them legitimacy. Scholars such as Ronald Hutton, who conducted extensive research on British pagan records, contributed to their affirmation. We may surmise that the social composition of British society, from religious diversity and the presence of several cultural and social groups established from



migration movements, aids with this legal recognition.

On the other hand, in Portugal, its public presence is recent, and the lack of consensual identity affirmation is not organized in a way that is beneficial for the recognition process before the Portuguese legal system. However, both face resistance from institutional forces and, in some cases, from the population, primarily due to misunderstandings and stereotypes. The work, on their end, for accurate information about what they are and do is therefore central to the agendas of most of the registered and organized groups with any public impact or presence.

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This chapter has presented what Contemporary Paganism is, from the meanings of the word through time, to the analysis, in particular, of the influence of the Romantic Movement from the 19<sup>th</sup> century's development. Contemporary Paganism, while advocating the connection with an ancient pre-Christian past – central in its goals towards recognition and legitimacy – is contemporary precisely because it is a relatively recent movement that developed as a response to specific contemporary anxieties, such as the environmental crisis, disconnection, the free expression of gender identity and the freedom of choice that previous religious affiliations did not provide.

The main principles that are transversal in Contemporary Paganism were also discussed, such as Nature veneration and adhering to a festive calendar that marks its rhythms, recognition of a divine feminine and masculine, the creative use of ritual and myth, and a tendency to be polytheistic, pantheistic and use magic. The primary contemporary pagan paths we also enumerated, focusing primarily on Wicca, the Goddess Movement and Reconstructionist movements. This contextualization section ended with an overview of the major themes that Pagan Studies scholarship has been analysing, to demonstrate the myriad of questions that can be discussed over such a heterogeneous movement.

The most enriching part of this chapter starts with the analysis of my interlocutors' arrival stories to Paganism. Through these biographies it was possible to identify some common characteristics among Contemporary Pagans and justify why they adhered to this movement in Portugal and in the United Kingdom. As was illustrated by the life stories of Mariana and Margarida, two Portuguese women, they felt disconnected from the hegemonic and institutional religion (Catholicism) in which they were raised; however, some Pagans do not go through a rupture with their religious past, as Mary's story demonstrates, since they integrate the cult (mostly in cases of Marian Cults) in their current religious and spiritual lived experience. Another tendency I identified relates to the influences leading them to Contemporary Paganism.

Most of my interlocutors stated that it was through books, movies and series, as well as the influence of friends or family, and – in the cases of new generations of Pagans – the internet, that they first had contact or discovered Paganism for the first time. Most of them also stated that Contemporary Paganism was their anchor in times of personal instability and family conflicts. While most Contemporary Pagans have had contact with Contemporary Paganism in their teens, among my interlocutors I also found people that adhered to it later in their adult life. As described by several authors that researched Contemporary Paganism, my interlocutors also defined Paganism as a way of life, apart from being a religious and spiritual movement, and have shown the different ways by which they understand Paganism and what it means to them.

The final section looked at the current presence of Contemporary Paganism in Portugal and the in United Kingdom, demonstrating that it is much easier to have specific numbers and social definition in the UK than in Portugal, where it is still unorganized and young. It also approached one of the ways by which Contemporary Pagans are currently participating in the public space in both countries. This political participation in the public space takes the form of mobilization and working towards the recognition of the movement as a religious and spiritual confession before the State and before the broader social and religious milieu. This mobilization is not consensual among Contemporary Pagans and is a very tiresome process; however, it is relevant that Contemporary Pagans are doing it. If they will succeed or not, or even if it will be a continuous process, is something to be seen in the future.

To continue demonstrating the different forms of participation in the public space, I will analyse in the next chapter the influences of environmentalism in the Contemporary Pagan movement, the narratives about Nature, and their strategies for participation in the public space through a combination of ritual and activism.



## **We are Nature in Self-Defence!**

### **Between Ritual and Environmental Activism**

*Nature is the Creation. She is the beginning and the end of everything. To the rhythm of her cycles, everything and everyone are. Inside her, every plan. In her, the divine. Humanity and Deities are all part of Nature because we are all as natural as tree leaves. As a witch and a pagan, this is my worldview. Likewise, as a witch and a pagan, Nature, besides being everything and all, is the pattern I observe and repeat, using it in my practices. The druid adage says, “When in doubt, ask a tree”, and for me, this is the revelation of Paganism: the knowledge that continuously renews itself in Nature’s cycles. – Mariana, when asked, “What is Nature for you?”*

In Mariana’s answer, one can understand how the rhythms of Nature and the knowledge that can be gained from observing it guide the Contemporary Pagans’ presence in the world and map their imaginaries. From this love and connection with Nature, they develop their religious and spiritual practices and mobilize politically in its defence. The way they do it and the importance given to political action varies, depending to the path and personal beliefs of the person we are talking with; however, the majority agree on one thing: humanity must reunite with Nature and work towards sustaining a future presently facing the peril and uncertainty of a bleak and worrisome fate. Therefore, the worldview and movement for action from Contemporary Pagans is another central web thread that our spider is weaving.

This chapter will be divided into five sections, consisting in a dialogue between the literature and the ethnographic data. The first section provides an overview of the current debates that combine Religion and Spirituality and environmental concerns; the second entails an overview of the literature on Religion, Spirituality, and Nature. Then, Contemporary Paganism’s engagement with Nature will be analysed, from their definitions and narratives on Nature to magic, ritual, and activism’s engagement with it. The fourth section will examine environmentalist’s influences on Contemporary Paganism by analysing several case-studies demonstrating how my interlocutors combine their political concerns with their religious and spiritual experiences. After this exposition, a reflection will be made about the problems that the approaches and discourses found in the field of environmental issues and activism may present. Finally, the conclusions that can be taken from the chapter’s analyses will be listed.

### 3.1. A Look at Mother Earth and Her Children

In the last decades, debates have arisen about the impact of capitalism and neo-liberal<sup>84</sup> policies on the environment and how certain philosophical schools of thought influenced Western society (Eriksen, Stensrud 2019; Harvey 2006; Greenwood 2005). These impacts and influences transformed the way by which people connect to their surroundings (Abram 1997; Taylor 2010; Harvey 1997; Apostolopoulou, Cortes-Vazquez 2019; Sponsel 2007). A sign of that is the growing degradation of ecosystems, with an increase in deforestation, flows, pollution levels, water contamination, species extinction and new epidemics, as well as all the social consequences that come from this degradation, like climate refugees and famine, to name a few. Therefore, climate change<sup>85</sup> debates call our attention to the global perils that environmental degradation presents. The environmental crisis<sup>86</sup> is one of the significant challenges that humanity faces now and will face in the future. Environmental issues are at the centre of political agendas, with governments delivering laws and motivating people's ethical and moral positioning throughout all social classes. The last years, in particular, have been ridden by controversy and calls for action from international and local contexts.

The United Nations is one of the major international institutions that included climate change in its agenda, and signed pacts with several leaders towards this objective. Despite signing agreements and subscribing to laws and actions, governments not always live up to their commitments (Apostolopoulou, Cortes-Vazquez 2019). Parallel to these governmental positions, people from different social backgrounds – and different biographies – are mobilizing in search of new ways of being in the world and keeping alive the possibility of a future. Social engagement at a local level has gained relevance, and is proving to be a source of mobilization that neither political agenda nor governmental action can warrant. What mobilizes people?

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<sup>84</sup> For an overview of the history of the engagement of Anthropology with neoliberalism, see Ganti (2014). David Harvey (2005; 2006) have been a very influential scholar among the discussions about capitalism and neoliberalism. I do not engage in the long scholarship on neoliberalism because I consider it to be outside the scope of this research. It is here mobilized in descriptive terms, in which “neo-liberal policies” refers mostly to the policies that directly impact the environment, and mobilized by politics, ideologies and values with a neoliberal influence.

<sup>85</sup> The scholarship about climate change is long and engaged in discussions about the Anthropocene (see, among others, Jason W. Moore edited book (2016) and Bonneuil and Fressoz (2016)). I decided not to engage in this scholarship because it would draw the attention from the ways that people are engaging creatively in their lived spiritual and religious experiences with the world, they live in. Besides, none of my interlocutors referred to these concepts, holding a broader definition of climate change as the phenomenon produced by the rapid transformation and impacts of human activities (Eriksen 1995). See Tsing (2015) and Tsing, Swanson, Gan, Bubandt (2017) , and Erikson ([2021] 2023) among others, for discussions about these themes.

<sup>86</sup> Gottlieb (2006b, pp. 2–3) has systematize eight dimensions of the environmental crisis: global climate change, the accumulation of chemical, biological, nuclear and heavy metal wastes; soil degradation and erosion due to intensive agricultural practices; the crisis of biodiversity; the loss of wilderness; the devastation of indigenous peoples; the unsustainable consumption practices; and finally genetic engineering.

What can be learned from this social movement for action? How incongruent can the politics and the local needs of people be?

The United Nations (UN) General Assembly of 25 September 2015 adopted a Resolution, implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015). This agenda has 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 measures to be implemented by 2030 by all the countries and stakeholders under the UN Accords, combined with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter, and other legislative instruments related to human rights and international law. The agenda was created as a “plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” in a moment of crisis in which “the survival of many societies, and the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk” (United Nations 2015). The engagement of these mechanisms have inherent notions of development and progress, in which environmental degradation is seen as an hindrance to these ideas (Amorim 2022).

At a social level, the UN is “determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and a healthy environment”. For the planet, the document pleads to “protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations”; and for prosperity, they wish to “ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature”. On the Resolution, they state that they are “resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet”. Besides, they also stated that they were “determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path” (United Nations 2015).

On the vision shared several times, there is a call for shifting the relationship with the environment, at the global level, and envisioning a world in which “development and the application of technology are climate-sensitive, respect biodiversity and are resilient. One in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected.” Besides, they “reaffirm that planet Earth and its ecosystems are our common home, and that ‘Mother Earth’ is a common expression in a number of countries and regions.”; For them, “The future of humanity and our planet lies in our hands. It lies also in the hands of today’s younger generation, who will pass the torch to future generations. We have mapped the road to sustainable development; it will be for all of us to ensure that the journey is successful and its gains irreversible.”

The claims and vision shared by the UN in the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals illustrate a type of language and narrative found in several milieus, from politics to activism, and in religious and spiritual settings, becoming a hegemonic narrative about these issues. How these narratives are constructed is an exercise for a common language. The meanings it takes and the motivation that draws people to use it vary. The way that the UN uses expressions such as “Mother Earth”, which we can assume was implemented due to the pressure of activists and other social agents, varies in meaning and importance when compared with how environmentalists and Contemporary Pagans use it.<sup>87</sup> However, it provides a common ground for agreeing on a pressing issue: the planet is the only home that humanity has; therefore, for the survival of humanity, one must protect, heal and transform the relationships we all have with it.

The motivations vary. For instance, to activists, progress is a tool of the capitalist and neoliberal systems. For this reason, it is impossible to consider a harmonious form of combining progress with Nature, since the basis of economic and technological progress – as we understand them – are in those systems. A transformation of meanings is necessary, and to create new ones. While for political agents progress is a necessary tool, it needs to be turned “sustainable” or “green”.<sup>88</sup> Despite sharing a common language, the outcomes are different. On one side, the way that politics are implemented is linked with several factors, and usually these do not agree with local needs. For instance, one of Portugal’s goals was to “build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation” (Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2022b), in which energy has a crucial role. However, when looking at the major fracking and mining projects, we identify economic interests that overlook and dismiss the social and environmental impacts they should consider. They are being contested by people from several fronts, as seen in the participation of activists and Pagans in direct actions against those industries.

The Ecocentric Pagans with which I am working, when calling for the healing of the planet and the human relationship with it, recognize that the planet has the power and will to sustain itself without humans. Even if sometimes a narrative of Humans as saviours may arise, for

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<sup>87</sup> Krenak, about these approaches, reflect about “the myth of sustainability, invented by corporations to justify the assault they make to our idea of nature. (...) We were alienated from the organism that we are part of, the Earth, and we started thinking that we are one thing, and it another: the Earth and humanity. I do not understand where something is that is not nature. Everything is nature. The cosmos is nature. Everything that I can think of is nature”(Krenak 2020b, p. 9-10).

<sup>88</sup> Heather Rogers (2010) discusses how these words become ‘buzzwords’, applied mostly to call for a form of consumerism that is ‘green’ but that in fact still serves the capitalist accumulation and consumerist project and not a transformation of actions and relationships towards the environment.

them, the sacredness of Nature is superior and self-regulatory without human involvement. Human action should be controlled so these mechanisms work correctly and do not hinder nature's power for survival. At the same time that these narratives are mobilized, they also affirm that humans are still necessary to maintain the balance of the planet, and therefore, they need to understand that they are neither above nor below but *in* and *with* this complex system. While doing so, they are also mobilizing and being influenced by the UN environmental agendas that was exposed above, in the sense that their understanding of what is sustainable or ecological or not, is based in these hegemonic narratives.

As we can see, in all these approaches, different motivations are at play, from economic and financial ones to more personal relationships perceived as environmental or ecological actions. From this perspective – and in the context of this research – environmental issues are entangled with ways of being in the world and, therefore, are entangled with religion and spirituality. Religion and Spirituality offer a referential for how to engage with the other-than-human world, different forms of relating and speaking about the environment, as well as providing values, “ethics of reverence, respect, redistribution, and responsibility for formulating a broader environmental ethics that includes humans, ecosystems, and other species.” (Tucker 2006, p. 4). It also provides stability when facing a crisis, and the rituals that arise in the milieu of political and religious actions provide the space in which “as people engage in such activities, they build new conditions for political engagement and action, acquire and demonstrate novel competencies, and continuously renegotiate social identities, thereby transforming the cultural and political processes that constitute society:” (Pike, Salomonsen, Tremlett 2020, p. 1). It is, therefore, significant that several religious groups are now including ecology and environmental issues as a major concern. Gottlieb affirms that “coming to grips with the environmental crisis has meant that religious people have had to become *political and ecological activists*. (...) as religions become ecologically oriented, they are at once theologically revitalized and politically energized” (2006a, pp. 5–6).<sup>89</sup>

For instance, Pope Francis's Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si* on “Care for our Common Home” significantly impacted the advent of Christian environmentalism and transported to Catholicism the importance of ecological issues. Its significant impact can also be seen in the fact that it recognized the planet not just as a tool that was created by God and needed for human sustenance and existence, but recognized also that the “common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us” and that “This

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<sup>89</sup> Italic in the original.



sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her” (Francis 2015).<sup>90</sup>

Animistic religions and spiritualities, Daoism, Buddhism and Hinduism, focus on the sacredness and divinity of nature and the recognition of interconnectedness (Gottlieb 2006a; Taylor 2010; Pike 2017). What differentiates Contemporary Paganism from these other religious and spiritual movements is the fact that they are not just worrying about ecological and environmental issues and have been speaking about these recently; they were among the first in the Western context combining environmentalist approaches at the core of their religious and spiritual practices and lives, and some of its paths arose from environmental movements. As mentioned, Contemporary Paganism sacralises Nature, which is essential to these groups and individuals’ practices, beliefs, and moral and ethical approaches. The connection with Nature stimulates them to protect and care for the environment and the beings and landscapes that compose it, which is done through their seasonal ritual and ceremonial celebrations, magic and participation in demonstrations and other environmental actions.

Besides, as shared by Daphne – the Pagan Federation International member with whom I spoke and that has been involved in the Interfaith initiatives in the United Kingdom and other countries – it is in the ecological and environmental issues that several faiths find common ground to discuss and collaborate: “there are so many aspects of the environment, and certainly within the Interfaith, this has become something like a common goal. Because it does, it encompasses virtually everything.”<sup>91</sup>

Thus, environmentalism’s key debates and ideas are present and intertwine with the discourses and narratives of Contemporary Paganism and its practitioners. At the same time, environmental agendas such as the one proposed by the United Nations, are also influential and articulated in the lived religious and spiritual experiences of my interlocutors, particularly for those that adhere to these hegemonic agendas. However, it is undeniable that activism and Contemporary Paganism are mutually influenced by each other (Pike 2017) since these movements arose in the same period of contemporary history. Therefore, it is significant to understand how Contemporary Pagans engage with Nature, both spiritually and through public and political participation. A review of the narratives and definitions of Nature and environment produced in Contemporary Paganism’s contexts and the influences and connections with Environmental approaches will be addressed next.

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<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, the Encyclical letter was released in the same year that the UN released the 2015 Resolution with the 2030 Sustainable development Goals.

<sup>91</sup> Online interview with Daphne, member of the Pagan Federation International, 7 December 2021.

### **3.2. Religion and Spirituality and Environment/Nature – “Green Spirituality” in Overview**

Spiritual and religious lived experiences are deeply connected, experienced and influenced through their engagement with the environment. The anthropological analysis of Religion and Nature’s relationship with each other have been part of the research agenda since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sponsel 2011; Anderson 2012)<sup>92</sup>. However, since the 1950s, the focus on the interactions and influences of religion on humans and its relationship with the environments they live in (Sponsel 2007) has become part of a growing discussion that is still alive today. A discussion stemming from those pioneering – although narrow-minded – works from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and accompanying increasing ecological concerns<sup>93</sup>, since “Anthropologists can document the complexities of situations where different interest groups are involved with sacred places in nature such as those associated with conservation, government, community, and religious organisations” (Sponsel 2011, p. 135).

Several scholars then explored the role of religion in conservation and ethnobiology; the role of emotion in human ecology; and its connection with political ecology<sup>94</sup>, an approach which – focusing on the influence of structural and power relations – led to “much greater awareness of outside influences – especially colonialism and global capitalism – but also to continued emphasis on religion as a social organiser and environmental regulating mechanism.” (Anderson 2012, p. 28)

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, the academic fields of Anthropology, Religious Studies and Environmental Studies intersected in a mutual interest on: a) how the interaction of humans with the environment, influenced by religious motivations, takes place; and b) on how religious experiences are affected and change with the environmental changes (Jenkins, Chapple 2011). Several approaches arose with academic research, focusing on ecological worldviews. The Series edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim *Religions*

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<sup>92</sup> Anderson (2012) notes the importance of anthropological work in the field of religion and ecology, since “anthropologists have learned, on the one hand, that religion often encodes ecological wisdom, teaches sound resource use, and constructs good environmental practice as a spiritual duty. On the other, they have learned to deal with other-than-human people, vision quests in the wild, symbolic and structural aspects of nature myths, humans-in-nature views of the cosmos, and traditional classification and knowledge systems that do not separate ‘science’ from ‘religion’ in the ways modern Europeans and Americans may do. All this has produced new respect for traditional systems of thought and spirituality.” (Anderson 2012, p. 30)

<sup>93</sup> In this genealogy, is necessary to highly Gregory Bateson’s work *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) pioneered in the field, proposing non-dichotomic approaches to the universe and considering human minds as integrated parts of a network of interactions in which the sacred was a valid form of knowledge as science. Therefore, the system’s health was interconnected with the equilibrium between humans and Nature. (Sponsel 2011)

<sup>94</sup> For more on the approach of Political Ecology see Campbell (2018) and Bryant (2015).

*of the World and Ecology* (1997) presented works on how religious worldviews shape the environment and how global crises represent religious crises. It leads, therefore, to an understanding of religious traditions in connection to ecological concerns and how more sustainable worldviews can arise. The editors create a research setting in which religion is imbued with ecological value and is conceptualised as an action-shaping worldview; at the same time, ecology is conceptualised as a crisis between the environment and society (Jenkins, Chapple 2011).

Another approach arose from Religious Environmentalism, to which Roger S. Gottlieb's works (2006a; 2009; 2010) are influential. In *A Greener Faith* (2009), the author understands that religious resources reinforce political environmentalism as a "diverse, vibrant, global movement" of ideas and activism that "roots the general environmental message in a spiritual framework." (Jenkins, Chapple 2011, 444 - Cif. Gottlieb, 2009, p.215 and 231). In a period of growing environmental crisis and uncertainty, more people are drawn to Nature-based religious and spiritual traditions, and "looking for the religious dimensions of everyday environmental practices and popular affinities for nature may illuminate relations of religion and environment." (Jenkins, Chapple 2011, p. 444)

Catherine Albanese (1991) proposed the concept of Nature Religion to approach all the spiritual ontologies that share the view that the universe is sacred and connected. For Susan Greenwood, what connects all these different ontologies is the appreciation and connection with Nature that is experienced through a form of magical consciousness, which is, for the author, a form of participation in the world concerning the "awareness of the interrelatedness of all things in the world" (2005, p. 7). In her reading of Albanese, Greenwood states that "the centrality of nature provides a language to express cosmology and belief; it forms the basis of understanding and practicing a way of life that supplies material for ritual symbolism, as well as drawing a community together." (ibid: p. 3)

Bron Taylor offers a distinction between Nature Religion and Green Religion that can be understood as synonyms but needs to be understood as two separate approaches. The author defines Nature Religion as "religious perceptions and practices that, despite substantial diversity, are characterized by a reverence for nature and consider nature to be sacred in some way. (...) involves the feeling some people have of being bound, connected, or belonging to nature". While Green Religion "refers to the religious sensibilities that consider environmental concern a religious duty, regardless of whether nature itself evokes reverence or is considered sacred" (2010, p. 3). All these approaches recognize the inherent connection between religious and spiritual worldviews that hold Nature as a sacred entity, and a connection with it that goes

beyond the utilitarian view of Nature postulated by capitalism.

Two other approaches were and are influential for studying religious and spiritual movements and their connection with Nature: the approach of Religion and Nature, of which Bron Taylor is one of the advocates, and that of Ecofeminism. The first will be discussed shortly in dialogue with ethnographic data. The latter will be analysed in the next chapter since it is highly influential to the Goddess Movement and to how Nature and Women are perceived in this Contemporary Pagan tradition. This approach calls our attention to the impossibility of considering ecological problems as being separate from social problems, focusing on how gender injustices – and other social injustices – are connected with the exploitation of the environment. Since the scholarly discussions on the field of Religion and Environment have already been addressed, it is time to proceed with the fundamental analyses of how Contemporary Paganism dialogues with these theoretical approaches and to present the emic narratives on Nature. Nature is a locus of interactions, re-enchantment and imagination, a central referential for devotion and political participation. However, what do Contemporary Pagans mean when they mention that Nature is sacred? What influences and guides their relationship with the more-than-human world? How does this relationship manifest itself in practice? These are some of the interrogations that will guide the following sections.

### **3.3. Contemporary Paganism Engaging with Nature: Environmentalism's Influence**

Nature is entangled with the lives of human beings worldwide. It provides resources for their sustenance, the land where they settle, the conditions for their survival, and inspiration for their enterprises. It draws curiosity, feeds creativity, and offers relationships. It marks what humans are as a referential through which inherent features or qualities of a person are expressed. A person's essence, character or quality are said to be the Nature of a person's being. Moreover, it is a mirror reflecting several non-human animals with different characteristics from human animals, landscapes, and organisms. Nature had several definitions and approaches that mapped how human beings engaged and related with it through time. In the scholarly milieu of anthropology, it was one of the most debated concepts, together with that of "Culture", translating a deep divide and dissociation between humans and their environments, since it gains meaning only in opposition to human creations and organisations (Descola 2013); and the reification of differences and characteristics mapped the form through which human groups outside the Western domain were treated and seen by the colonial enterprise. These approaches

to Nature will be analysed next.

### **3.3.1. The Meaning of Nature Through Time**

Nature is a profoundly complex concept with several definitions and approaches. I do not intend to give a closed definition of what it is first, because what Nature means to me as a concept certainly diverges from what it means to other researchers, to what it means in the context of Western religion and spirituality, and to what it means to several groups from the Global South; and, second, because I believe that it is in the intersection of different approaches, and through dialogues between several sources, that we can construct the meaning of such concept. I propose that it is valid – more than defining what it is – to approach the different uses of the word and subsequent meanings it gained throughout Western history, and what can be learned from past and present indigenous attitudes towards Nature. This genealogy provides an understanding of what Nature meant to people at different times and places, and the influences of this history on what we find in contemporary religion and spirituality. Raymond Williams (1980) states that these changes in definition throughout history reflect human perceptions of themselves and their world and environments. The concept is therefore constructed and contextual.

It is a concept embedded in the Western imaginary and referential; however, one must not take for granted that the same meanings are to be equally found in other contexts.<sup>95</sup> For this analysis, I shall focus on the Western definitions of Nature since the Contemporary Paganism discussed here arose in the Western European context, despite drawing influences from other settings. The term is being applied not as a universal concept that we take for granted, stripped of meaning, but as a historical, cultural, and contextual concept. As stated by Descola,

the modern West's way of representing Nature is by no means widely shared. In many regions of the Planet, humans and non-humans are not conceived as developing in incommunicable worlds or according to quite different principles. The environment is not regarded objectively as an autonomous sphere. Plants and animals, rivers and rocks, meteors and the seasons do not exist altogether in an ontological niche defined by the absence of human beings.(Descola 2013, p. 30)

The called Ontological Turn in Anthropology profoundly affected how academic research is conducted, and human relationships with the other-than human world are understood and considered. With the growing and impending ecological crisis and environmental struggles

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<sup>95</sup> For other examples see *Nature Across Cultures* edited by Helaine Selin (2003)

faced worldwide, as well as the changing relationships with the other-than-human world, the discipline lacked conceptual tools to make sense of these transformations. Therefore, the Ontological Turn<sup>96</sup> in the discipline is a response to these conceptual problems (Kohn 2015). But what does Ontological Anthropology mean? According to Kohn, it is “the nonreductive ethnographic exploration of realities that are not necessarily socially constructed in ways that allow us to do conceptual work with them. I see this as a response to a conceptual, existential, ethical, and political problem – how to think about human life in a world in which a kind of life and future that is both beyond the human and constitutive of the human is now in jeopardy”(Kohn 2015, p. 315).

Many linguists trace the meaning of word “Nature” to Ancient Greece, originating in *phusis*, an inclusive concept that could mean the general sense of being. Aristotle developed this concept, defining it as the “essence of things”. Later, it developed into four definitions such as “the generation of what grows (as a process), the primordial element from which things grow (as a principle), the principle of movement (a spontaneous cause), and the matter from which things are made (substance)” (Ducarme, Couvet 2020, p. 2). Nature, therefore, becomes a model to follow, in which the laws that organise Life in civilisations are natural, contrary to what can be found in Ancient Rome, in which *natura*, meant what was outside human influence and remained pristine and enchanting. With the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, new meanings arose, and in the Middle Ages, the concept of Nature was connected to that of creation and an attribute of an Omnipresent God that transcended Nature, contrarily to the Greek and Roman approach in which Deities were seen as part of it. From this perspective, humans are also above Nature – since they are created in the image of God – which becomes a tool to be controlled and transformed by humans and by God’s hands, a view highly influenced by Plato’s dualism (*ibid*).

On the other hand, Descartes, also influenced by Plato in his known statement on the separation between the mind and the matter, contributed to the view of Nature as a system to be controlled by humans. Similarly, a utilitarian view of Nature led to its appropriation and exploitation until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which Protestant Capitalism was established, and this is perceived as one of the reasons leading to the ecological crisis we now face (Ducarme, Couvet 2020) since it provided the image of Nature as a commodity and a resource to be explored

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<sup>96</sup> Among the most influential scholars of this line is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996), Philippe Descola (2013) and Bruno Latour (2013; 2017).

(Greenwood 2005).<sup>97</sup> These two views profoundly affected how humans relate to Nature, feeding a long tradition of disconnection.

However, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a counter-current view of Nature arose in several industrial cities, which was given the name of Romantic Movement, a movement that looked at Nature as idyllic and sacred, “a pastoral landscape and immanent mysticism” (Greenwood 2005, p. 3); and as the “exaltation of the natural and irrational, qualities that had conventionally been both feared or disparaged and characterized as feminine” (Hutton 1999, p. 60). Rousseau is probably the most influential name in this movement, considered the first Romantic due to his writings on finding solace in Nature. For Greenwood, the “romanticism movement drew on esoteric correspondences linking different aspects of nature – human, natural, celestial and supercelestial worlds – in a universal interdependence whereby all was connected through concealed forces forming a dynamic web” (Greenwood 2005, p. 40). As Chris Klassen (2013) points out, with the changes that industrialization brought to 19<sup>th</sup> century society and the emergence of conservation movements, Nature as the wilderness, untouched by humans, led to an understanding of Nature as innocent, contrasting with the malefic activities developed by human beings.

Based on the overview done by Greenwood (2005), contemporary understandings of Nature are divided into four discourses inspired by the different meanings it has had throughout the centuries. The first connects with the natural sciences, in which Nature is approached as a dynamic set of processes by objective and abstract standards, which can measure and transform; secondly, as an economic resource perceived as a source of wealth and value that can be commodified. The last two forms are connected with Nature as a source of emotional identification and tradition, with which relationships can be created and with nature mysticism, which recognises Nature as possessing a spirit, and, therefore, apt to be revered and sacralised. These last two inspire what can be called Nature Spiritualities, or forms of Dark Green Religion (Taylor 2010), a religion that considers Nature sacred and revered, with intrinsic value. It is “dark” due to the emphasis on the depth of its connection to Nature and alludes to its shadowing dimension, which can mislead, deceive, precipitate, or exacerbate violence. As he points out, it is a religion that is becoming increasingly important in global environmental politics, motivating both individuals and movements engaged with the environmental struggles of the contemporary world.

Besides, considering global communication and circulation, new understandings of

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<sup>97</sup> Polanyi (2001) has been very influential to the contemporary debates about the relationship with nature, due to the introduction of the debates about the commodification of Nature.

Nature<sup>98</sup> in the Western domain have arisen in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by worldviews from different contexts and groups (Harvey 1997) and from an idea of Nature inspired by the Romantic Movement that has arisen in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The conjugation of definitions and worldviews, as well as the worldwide environmental struggles that are affecting the people and environments, and consequently the future, inspired several religious and spiritual groups to derive their practices from a view of Nature as a living and sacred being to be revered, respected, protected, healed or regenerated, in which Contemporary Paganism is included.

### **3.3.2. One with Nature: Defining Nature on Contemporary Paganism in Portugal and the United Kingdom**

As I have indicated, Nature is at the centre of the Contemporary Pagan worldview, inspiring and giving sense to its existence. Their religious and spiritual narratives and practices translate a deep understanding of Nature as an entity that nourishes and inspires those with whom they connect and exist in the world. However, destructive powers, predators, dangers, and hopelessness also maintain Life's equilibrium. Nature is the home that provides and grants safety. Using Nature as a reference draws meaning, understanding, and comfort for their existence. However, what does "Nature" mean to those who identify with the Contemporary Pagan milieu? Since heterogeneity is a crucial element of this religious and spiritual expression, the definitions exposed may vary depending on the tradition followed or on the inspirations they draw from. However, all agree that being attuned to Nature's cycles warrants an understanding of their own life processes that inspires and guides them in their pursuits, while providing a referential through which ethical choices (Klassen, 2013) about how to be and how to act in the world are followed in order to protect the environment.

On a private Facebook group<sup>99</sup>, I decided to ask directly, *what is for you, as a pagan and a witch, Nature?* It did not warrant many answers, but all reflect the widespread view of Nature in Contemporary Paganism, focusing on the double approach to Nature as Goddess and sacred, from which humans are not separated. One woman who identifies as a hereditary witch mentions that

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<sup>98</sup> For these approaches see Ivakhiv (2016).

<sup>99</sup> In the post it was identified the use of the answers and respected all the ethics of anthropological work. This method was applied because during the Covid-19 restrictions period was impossible to meet people personally for interviews or conversations and going to the field was restricted. Social media provided then an alternative form of engagement and maintaining the contact. In this Facebook group in particular, people were aware of my double identity, as a pagan and as a researcher. Besides, I knew the administrators of the group, that are also two of my main interlocutors in this research.



I cannot differentiate my existence from Nature. Even living in the city and with everyday routines, I breathe and feel the wind, the sun, the rain. My heart beats, and I am nourished. I get sick, I heal. I may not know precisely what moon phase I am on or be hopeless at planting or cooking, but it is not disconnection. It is me as I am naturally. I cannot think of myself as something which is separated from Nature. Therefore, I cannot think of a deity that is not and is reflected in that complex biophysical system that enables Life to exist. Moreover, because of this fusion of Life and Nature, religion is honouring my ancestors. I live because they lived and live through me. That is why breaking a plant without a reason to do so or stepping on it to arrive quicker is like assaulting my mother. I was taught not to seize more than necessary, avoid waste and be thankful for the sacrifice of all that dies for me to live. That means eating everything on the plate and doing what is possible to ease our society's pressure on Nature. I feel real pain when seeing the misfortunes falling over biomes and communities. I cry like a child watching news and documentaries. I did not build that emotional bond; it always existed.

As illustrated, for this woman, Nature is at the centre of her very being and works as a referential for her actions, providing the space for being *with* and *within* the world. It is also the medium through which she can connect with the ancestors that came before her, both in the sense of personal bloodline and cultural ancestors, which were the roots of a way of Life. A deep emotional connection is recalled through spiritual and religious connection – since it already existed – in which what is provided shall be respected, and the pains and wounds of the Earth are mourned in equal parts. Besides, in this connection, ethical choices and behaviours are created and followed. Klassen (2013) explored how Nature plays a role in the construction of ethics, having a variety of roles in the Contemporary Pagans' process of moral reasoning. The author argues that four images of Nature arise in the context of Contemporary Paganism: first, Nature as divinity, which plays the role of authority, requiring respect and care, calling therefore to morality, since human actions will affect the divine; second, as a living organism that gives life, including interdependence with other beings, and support since one cannot live outside this organism – from this perspective Nature is the motivation and the location of morality; thirdly, as season cycles, in which nature has the role of organizer, providing the seasons where sustenance can be found and life regulated; and finally, as the cycle of life and death, since it is both important to preserve life – and consequently, moral obligations to do so arise – and to recognize death as inevitable and also a part of life. These four images presented

by the author “provide, again, context, but more specifically they sketch out boundaries that can be used to determine where and when more concrete actions are appropriate. As such they also provide direction or general strategies and guidelines for ethical action.” (Klassen 2013, p. 62)

Several Pagans with whom I worked described their connection with the Planet as inter-relational and nurturing, drawing from the image of the nurturing mother, provider to her offspring and bearer of Life. However, at the same time, they recognise and respect that She<sup>100</sup> is, too, the entity that rules the realm of death. From Her, they were born, and to Her, they shall return in death, as the hereditarian witch above continues sharing:

It is who I am, and I am part of Nature. I only exist because Nature allows me. I must return my borrowed body by the end of my journey when my death feeds Life.

I need that loan to be here and grow while living with the diversity of energy (several types and levels). When it is not necessary anymore, I will return the air I took when I arrived in this world through my last breath.

Death is outside the limits of Nature, and both feed each other. Unity and diversity, fleeting and dense, swift and slow. These are qualities mutually exclusive that refer to the same dynamics.

Nature is everything to me because it is what I know. Beyond her, there is death. Furthermore, because I am alive, death smells of longing. I know it is also freedom, but knowing her while I am alive is impossible. Therefore, Nature is everything. It is not just respect or faith. It is everything. I cannot conceive anything beyond that concept.

Besides, Nature is also represented as a Great Goddess or the Mother Goddess. In one of the other answers to the social media post I mentioned above, we can see the focus not just on the aspect of Nature as a Mother, recognising the continuum between herself and Nature, but also as a Goddess, something widespread in several of the Contemporary Pagan’s currents, both in Portugal and in the United Kingdom, but most prevailing in the Goddess Movement:

It is said that Nature is the mother...I wonder why? Because it is from her that we are born, we live from her. Without Nature, our existence would be impossible. We then worship Nature like a Goddess and the divine being, being natural (part of Nature). I am Nature, and Nature is in me. We are the reflection and a piece of each other. Therefore,

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<sup>100</sup> It is common for Contemporary Pagans to refer to the Earth and Nature with the feminine personal pronoun.

she is sacred. That is why I deeply respect all her creatures, animals, plants, water, air or soil. If I love and respect myself, I love and respect Nature and the Goddess. If I love and respect Nature/ Goddess, I love and respect myself. It is unity, and it is communion; it is a partnership.

Similarly, for the co-organisers of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, a significant event in the Goddess Movement, when they worship the Goddess as the Earth Mother archetype, they recognise that She is the home, Life and a form of belonging, in their words, “our absolute Ground of Being”. Also, through Her body, she is the giver of Life, both inanimate and animate life forms, a loving entity that gives birth, receive back in death and renews Life. Furthermore, to the human beings, she has given “the deep knowing of sacred connection to Her, and a kinship with all of life, as well as a sacred responsibility to be guardian to all of life”<sup>101</sup>.

From what have been seen, Nature holds several facets for my interlocutors. It is divine and sacred *per se*, but also the manifestation of a Great Goddess, and a mother that nurtures all the beings for whom she is responsible. Through the seasonal cycles<sup>102</sup>, changes are perceived and understood to draw meaning to make sense of human life. Life and death are part of a balanced and harmonious wheel that spins eternally. It is in the understanding of life and death not as opposed but as necessary, that Nature is understood as holding the double facet of nurturer, but also as wild or predatory, in order to maintain the balance. This difference is recurrent among radical activists, as noted by Pike (2017) and Taylor (2010) in their research about radical environmental activism, but also in Contemporary Paganism, as Fedele (2013c) has discussed when analysing the 2012 apocalyptic theories.

The views of Nature that are shared by the Ecocentric Pagans with whom I worked are influenced by the Romantic Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>103</sup>, already mentioned and referred to before as a source of inspiration to the views that Nature held, which is based on an idolized view of Nature as pristine and nurturing, versus the industrialized world. Besides, Earth, from this perspective, lives in tension between the Earth as a nurturing entity, a mother concerned with her children, and as a force untamed, unconcerned (Hutton 1999; Pike 2019). The same tension is found in environmentalist groups, as Pike demonstrates in her work:

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<sup>101</sup> Excerpts from the 2020 Online Glastonbury Goddess Conference opening letter in the event’s program.

<sup>102</sup> See Martins 2017 for the engagement of Portuguese Contemporary Pagans with the seasonal cycles.

<sup>103</sup> This view followed by Contemporary Pagans relates with what Martínez- Alier calls the ‘cult of the wilderness’, one of the clusters of activism and environmental concerns that the author identifies (Martínez-Alier 2002, p. 15). This approach argues that other species have the right to exist, that needs to be conserved, being and environmentalist view that is particularly attractive to religious and spiritual movements. As the author notes, this view has been mostly disseminated by the Deep Ecology movement, that supports a biocentric instead of anthropocentric attitude towards nature. (Martínez-Alier 2002, pp. 2–3)

if Pagans inherited this view to some extent [opposition between the untouched past and modernity], it found full expression in eco-activist communities influenced by Paganism, where a struggle between good (the wild) and evil forces (capitalism and industrial civilisation) is the context in which most eco-actions take place. Activists and some Pagans share this sense of being at war with the broader culture and finding better models for the future in fiction and the past. (Pike 2019, p. 145)

However, despite the importance that the past holds in constructing narratives about Nature, and therefore re-enchanting the relationship with a wider-than-human world, my interlocutors do not wish to erase the human presence nor destroy what has been positively built since the industrial revolution. They wish for a harmonized and respectful relationship between the sacred Nature, and the human and more-than-human world. The way they choose to do it varies according to the path, influences, and approaches they follow; however, ritual and magic are central in this engagement and, in some cases, engaging with environmental actions, as will be explored in the next section.

### **3.3.3. Engaging with Nature through Ritual, Magic and Demonstrations: Individual and Collective Actions**

As seen, Nature holds a key position in the lived religious and spiritual experiences of Contemporary Pagans, both in Portugal and in the United Kingdom. But what does this relationship mean in practical term? How is it seen in their everyday lives and collective events? And most importantly, is it only relegated to the field of religiosity – private – or also translated into political action? These are some of the questions that will guide the following section.

On one side, it is a clear personal experience, but on the other, it holds collective strength. Personal experiences create a relationship with Nature, such as walking, reading, meditating, or through rituals or ceremonies that celebrate the seasonal cycles for instance, or even personal rites and personal ecological and sustainable practices. As a collective dimension, it can be developed through ritual, magical practices and participating in activism.

Contemporary Pagans' involvement with environmental and animal rights activism can be traced to the beginning of those movements since both arose simultaneously in the countercultural movement of the 1960s with the same focus and purpose: the Earth. Those movements mutually influenced each other. The roots of Radical Activism can be found in the Nature Religion (Albanese 1991) and Dark Green Religion (Taylor 2010); secular environmentalism of the 1960s; Deep Ecology; antiwar movements, feminism, and

LGBTQIA+ rights; Contemporary Paganism; Indigenous cultures and Anarchism. Contemporary Paganism is also influenced by deep ecology, environmentalism, feminism and indigenous cultures. The *Earth First!* Movement was influenced by Paganism, and in the United Kingdom, Pagans have been involved in anti-war, anti-nuclear and anti-road activism since the beginning of those movements (Pike, 2017). Taylor (2009: 2) states that it was religious perceptions and practices that have shaped environmentalism in America.

Besides, the Reclaiming Movement – and Starhawk's influential figure – has been extremely important in this milieu. Starhawk is an American witch and Pagan that has been involved in anti-war movements and environmental and feminist direct actions since she was a young woman. She is a “founder of Earth Activist Training, teaching permaculture design<sup>104</sup> grounded in spirit and with a focus on organizing and activism”, being “deeply committed to bringing the techniques and creative power of spirituality to political activism”(Starhawk [no date]). Starhawk is also one of the co-founders of the Reclaiming Community,<sup>105</sup> which intertwines in its practices radical environmental activism, feminism and Paganism, having influenced several groups, including the Goddess Movement. Several Reclaiming witches, like Starhawk, have been participating in direct actions since the 1980s, employing rituals and magical work during protests (Pike 2019).

The following section will therefore explore these forms of collective engagement through these forms, drawing from three distinct fieldwork moments in Portugal and in the United Kingdom: the participation of the PFI–Portugal in the March for Climate in 2018; their participation in the March for Animal Rights in 2019; and the participation of some of the Priestesses of the First Portuguese Goddess Conference in the Demonstration Against Lithium Exploration in 2019; and in the United Kingdom, with the engagement of Contemporary Pagans with Extinction Rebellion actions and other Pagans contesting the COP26.

### ***We are Nature in self-defence!* – The 2018 March for Climate in Lisbon**

That Saturday afternoon, the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2018, was a warm one, with a slight breeze making the tree leaves sing. Leaving Santa Apolónia's Underground station in Lisbon, I walked along the river to Cais do Sodré, with the sun kissing my skin and accompanied by tourists,

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<sup>104</sup> Permaculture was coined by Bill Mollison, meaning ‘permanent agriculture/culture’, is “the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people — providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way. Without permanent agriculture there is no possibility of a stable social order.”(Permaculture Research Institute [no date])

<sup>105</sup> For more about the Reclaiming Community see Salomonsen ethnography *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San-Francisco* (2002).

couples, and children running and screaming, excited by the sight of the nearby seagulls. It was the meeting point where I would encounter the people from the PFI-Portugal. However, it was not the usual meeting to proceed to a celebration. They were there to participate in the Rise for Climate March.

The Rise for Climate March<sup>106</sup> was organised worldwide to demand climate action from leaders and governments. At the time, there was a great discussion about the exploration of fossil fuel off the Portuguese coast. Environmental associations, activist groups, and some Left-wing Political Parties started mobilising to contest and apply pressure over the Government to stop the process and call for the use – and investment – in renewable energy resources.



Num contexto de utilização massiva e indiscriminada de recursos naturais não renováveis, em que todo o ecossistema da nossa Terra-Mãe está a dar sinais de desgaste, acreditamos que a sociedade em geral, e os Pagãos em particular, necessitam de, cada vez mais, cultivar e desenvolver uma consciência ecológica aguçada e muito própria.

Uma atitude proativa na defesa de um presente que proporcione um futuro sustentável, livre de combustíveis fósseis, onde as gerações futuras possam usufruir de um planeta regenerado e estejam inseridas numa sociedade transformada, mais justa, equilibrada, onde os lucros não justifiquem os meios utilizados para obtê-los.

Enquanto para um cidadão ecologicamente responsável, a Terra é um espaço a proteger para que a nossa sobrevivência enquanto espécie seja assegurada; para um Politeísta, a Terra-Mãe é muito mais: é um local sagrado que nutre a Vida e perpetua os seus ciclos, é um templo vivo que deve ser preservado para que o frágil equilíbrio entre a Vida e a Morte, mantenha-se.

De facto, pretendemos participar na Marcha Mundial do Clima, promovendo a importância de reduzir a pegada ecológica desta sociedade, atuando de forma cada vez mais consciente e ecologicamente responsável, dizendo um NÃO claro, inequívoco, aos promotores da construção de infraestruturas de combustíveis fósseis e um SIM à utilização das energias renováveis.

Sobretudo, pretendemos dar voz a um Planeta que sustenta uma humanidade que a 47 anos ultrapassa o limite do uso sustentável de recursos naturais disponíveis anualmente.

Enfim, recusamo-nos a perpetuar este cenário desolador! - Acreditamos que esta mudança é possível e que passa por todos nós!

Um gesto, se repetido por muitas pessoas, pode tornar-se essencial para que a vida continue...

Por um Planeta melhor, por um Futuro sustentável!

PFI – Associação  
Pagan Federation International Portugal  
8 de Setembro de 2018

*Image 6- Statement done by the PFI Portugal for the participation in the March for Climate*

The PFI–Portugal joined the March because they believed that as citizens and Pagans, they should build and share an ecological consciousness. As they explain in the open letter, they shared with their members they would participate because “for a citizen, the Earth is a place that needs to be protected, so the species’ survival is secured. However, for a polytheist and pagan individual, the Mother-Earth is a sacred place that nurtures Life, ensuring the cycles of Life and the equilibrium between Life and Death.” In their own words, the Earth is a Temple that is alive, that must be preserved. They participated not just because of their environmental responsibilities but also to give the Planet a voice.

<sup>106</sup> For more on the Rise for Climate March and movement consult <https://riseforclimate.org/>.

For two hours, they joined their voices with those of other activist groups, political Parties and associations walking the streets of Lisbon while carrying posters with allusive images and slogans like:

“Do not Spoil the Sea! End the Exploration of Fuel Oil on the Portuguese Coast”;

“Do not Spoil the Sea! Here, there is Life and nourishment”;

“Bet on a better future for them. Say yes to the Future! No to drilling!”;

“No to drilling! Do not spoil the Earth and the Sea!”;

“Fresh air so we can breathe. Clean Waters, so there is Life. LIVING EARTH. Say no to transgenics.”.

Their presence in the March was evidence of a dual position: on one side, their position as devoted to the planet and the continuity and community of life, worried with the local impacts of industries in the Portuguese context; on the other, their stand as a religious and spiritual expression engaging in political participation, claiming in the public space and visibility. When listing the organizations present<sup>107</sup>, they were the only group with a religious and spiritual focus, sustaining the argument that environmentalist concerns have a central importance in their lives. Among environmental groups and organizations, unions and political Parties<sup>108</sup> they were participating “to give voice to the Planet which sustains humanity (...) Ultimately, we refuse to perpetuate this heart-breaking scenery! – We believe that this change is possible, and that is the responsibility of all of us!”

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<sup>107</sup> On the March participated activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Climáximo, Zero, Tamera, to name a few.

<sup>108</sup> On the March were present left wing political parties, including their youth branch: Bloco de Esquerda (Left Block); PAN – Partido dos Animais e Natureza (Party of Animals and Nature); PEV – Partido Ecologista os Verdes (Ecologist Party Os Verdes); PCP – Partido Comunista Português (Portuguese Communist Party); and central left like PS – Partido Socialista (Socialist Party).



*Image 7 - March for Climate, Lisbon, September 2018*

A few weeks after the March for Climate, the usual PFI – Portugal celebration of the Autumn Equinox took place in Sintra. On a warm September Saturday, I joined the members of the Association for this celebration, followed by a picnic. The place, part of a megalithic complex and private property, was used yearly by the group to celebrate the Spring and Autumn equinoxes, as well as other events. When we arrived, it looked like the wilderness had taken over. The elements of the place took control of the space, the grass had grown, tangled and untamed. We walked through opening trails accompanied by the chirping of the birds and the singing of the cicadas and the Sun illuminating the path, and later cleaned the ritual space.





*Image 8- Equinox Celebration, Sintra, September 2018*

Previously, an email with the chants to be sung during the celebration was sent to everyone present. One was a chant commonly sung during their celebrations; the other was a mix of phrases said during the March for Climate, and, wrapping up the ritual, a chant that was meant to gather the energy and magic produced in that ritual and send it back to the Earth – the place they wanted to heal and protect.

The circle opens, and the ritual begins.<sup>109</sup> The beings of the quadrants are invoked to illuminate the rite, followed by the prayer “That the Power of the Ancient Ones is renewed, and in the World new Life arises!” in which the circle spins and works the magic. After Ataegina<sup>110</sup>, the Mother Goddess of the Place was invoked, an offering was presented to her. With it, the phrases said during the March for Climate were intoned. The voices of the circle raised and sang, “We are Nature in self-defence!”, “Negotiate what? There is no Planet B!”, “No to drilling! Yes to the Future!”, repeatedly, to connect and protect the Earth, to heal it with the aid of the magic generated by those present, and the energy already raised during the March. Holding hands, the circle kept spinning, giving place to the Dance of the Great Serpent, a spiral dance, and their voices rose. All as one they sang

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<sup>109</sup> Ritual studies in Anthropology have a long genealogy, with different approaches (among others Turner 1969; Geertz 1973; Bell 1992; Rappaport 1999; Grimes 2000). I do not engage directly with this literature, however, most of the scholars with whom this research dialogues with were inspired by some of this works.

<sup>110</sup> Ataegina is an pre-roman Iberian deity understood as a fertility and protective Goddess worshiped by Iberian settlements of the time (Lopes 2014).

*From the Earth to the Sun,  
From the Sun to the Earth,  
Night and Day, the Earth Spins,  
Spins, Spins always Creating,  
That in the human minds, our wish shall appear:  
Save the Earth!*

This last prayer was said while hands were touching the Earth, thus sending its intention to the ground: Life and magic for the cycle to continue, and Life – that in that moment of the seasonal cycle started entering its dormant period – that can awake in the Spring cycle. This last prayer also asked for everyone strength, to protect and to guide Life's existence.



*Image 9 - Print screen from video of the Ritual for Healing, the moment the participants touch the earth, September 2019*

Sarah Pike (2019) wrote that spiral dances, like the one described above, are a transversal practice in Contemporary Paganism in different contexts. This form of ritual dance has been used in different cases and contexts as a tool to raise energy for the healing and protection of those in the circle, of the planet or other living beings, and particularly in moments of environmental action. During my research, I have seen and participated in several spiral dances in ritual settings, all sharing the purpose of raising energy and casting it towards a desire for protection, healing, connection, or regeneration.

Despite the engagement of PFI-Portugal with climate action, their continuous celebrations of the Earth Days, and the creation of prayers that appealed to the protection of the planet, it was the first spiral dance and ritual – from all those I've seen – with an environmental purpose so clearly stated: they were dancing to connect with and protect the land (or Earth) they belonged too. Similarly, Pike has noticed in her work with several Pagans and environmentalists that “the spiral, drawn or danced, connects these ritualists to the land they hope to protect and at the same time inscribes their protective intentions on the land. (...) Environmental protection rituals work to affirm Pagans' and activists' connections to the earth and construct the earth as

sacred and of value.” (Pike, 2019: 133).

Besides, the use of magic in these moments, as noted by several authors, among them Magliocco, should be understood “as an art form” since “like art, the goal of magic is to bring about a set of emotional, affective responses that cause a change in consciousness – that allow participants to switch to a more participatory view of the world.” (Magliocco 2012, p. 18)

Similarly, Greenwood stated that magic was understood by the Pagans with whom she worked as an expansion and transformation of the self, in which the magical worldview represents the connection to the universe and all that is part of it, in which “it is the development of this type of expansive awareness – one that actively develops the imagination in making connections between other beings both seen and unseen – that constitute the basis of magical practice. Above all, magical consciousness concerns the awareness of the interrelatedness of all things in the world.” Therefore, it is “not primarily individual nor can it be divorced from the wider social or environmental context – it is a participatory and holistic way of thinking.” (2005, p.7)

This case study is an example of explicit participation in the public space of a contemporary pagan association or group based on environmental and ecological worries and combining them with clear religious and spiritual practices and motivations. However, is not always as explicit as in the example above. Some Pagans can participate in direct actions without being identified, as demonstrated in the following section.

### **No to Mining! Demonstration Against Lithium Exploration on the Portuguese Coast**

It was a grey and rainy day in the capital on that Autumn Equinox of 2019. I travelled to Lisbon that afternoon to participate in the “Manifestação Contra a Febre da Mineração em Portugal” because some of the people I was accompanying since the Portuguese Goddess Conference – with whom I was working – would attend. The movement “No to Mining!” was born in Northern Portugal when several open-sky lithium mines started to be explored, risking the biodiversity and health of the populations living in those areas.<sup>111</sup> The local population arose, contesting and denouncing the mining projects adjudicated to those areas. Several marches and demonstrations had been taking place locally, and on 21 September 2019, a March was called in for the capital. Several buses with people from associations, activist groups, or citizens to whom the cause was dear came to Lisbon to call for the end of this exploration.

Both Margarida and Magnólia – whose testimonials were already shared in the last chapter

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<sup>111</sup> For the proposes of this thesis I will not explore the legislation, actions and debates around Lithium Mining controversy. See among others, the master thesis done by Shandra Menendez (2022).

– are members of an informal environmental group. Since 2017 this group have been supporting the areas and communities affected by wildfires and deforestation. Besides, they are well informed about the risks entailed by fracking, mining and oil exploration activities in Portugal. This group signed the manifest and was one of the groups present in the protest.

Even if the pagan presence in the demonstration was not clear, I decided to attend since the environmental worries expressed by some of the Pagans I worked with, and were going to participate in the demonstration, were aligned with the claims expressed by the whole movement against mining: the environmental risks, with the focus on water contamination and, therefore, the risks for Life as a whole, human and non-human. A few hundred people had spread across the Rossio Square, holding posters with messages against mining, calling out words of order like “Water yes, lithium no!”; “Yes to the Planet. No to mining”, or “Mined future! No Thank you!”.

Amidst the posters from the groups, there were two being held by members of environmental group that Margarida and Magnólia belong, that called my attention: one was a big ribbon saying, “Yes to the Planet”, and the other, a cardboard where it was seen written:

*I arrived. The green mountain greeted me.*

*From the blue river throat, a call of freedom came out.*

*I woke up. The dying mountains agonised before my eyes.*

*From the dry river, throat comes out a rebellious scream.*



Image 10- Poster abovementioned, "No to Mining!" Demonstration, September 2019

This message transpired the view of Nature that environmentalists and Pagans hold as a live agent with anthropomorphic qualities and actions – the mountain greeted them when they arrived and felt pain; the river had a throat with vocal cords to let transpire what it was feeling and calling for. They are both agents and fragile beings before the interests of the mining industry. Besides, this sense of kinship that transpires while they connect before and after the destruction is similar to the relationship that Pagans and environmentalists create with other beings, such as trees. The environmentalists with whom Pike worked (2017, 2019) also shared the same position as those in the Demonstration. The personal relations created with these beings help to reinforce their commitment to environmental action, as stated by the scholar. Furthermore, a tension between the recognition of both its strength and its vulnerability is visible, which increases this commitment:

this tension exists throughout many environmental campaigns: reverence for sacred beings alongside a sense of their vulnerability. Such vulnerability is most clearly expressed through images of absence and desecration (...). It is these images of desecration that contribute to the sense of being in an important struggle against the forces of an out of control industrial civilisation. (Pike 2019, p. 144)

In the aftermath of several campaigns against the mining activities, the Zine “Portugal Livre de Minas: Pela Terra livre, Soberana e Sagrada”(2021)<sup>112</sup> was released. Among artists and activists, Margarida and Magnólia, contributed with texts that approached the environmental and social impacts that mining activities had brought to the lands – and people – where it was being conducted. They call for a regenerated, intertwined and cooperative approach to the land, one that recognizes the interdependence of human beings with the earth and for possible and alternative ways to engage with it, opposing the utilitarian and capitalist way of being and engaging with the world that is behind the growth of these activities. And, above all, it was a call for the future – for the possibility of a future.

The two case-studies presented above are directly connected with Pagans’ engagement with direct actions for the environment, particularly the ecological impacts of an economic activity (the mining industry) that was at the centre of the Portuguese political and social agenda; and, in more general terms, the impacts that human action and climate change have on the environment, and, therefore, the call for an action, for a transformation and for a regeneration favouring the planet. Besides, these two ethnographic cases have shown two approaches to Nature in the speeches. One, Nature is fragile and in need of humans “to give it voice”, as seen

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<sup>112</sup> Translated as “Portugal Free of Mines: For a Free, Sovereign and Sacred Earth”

in the case of the March for Climate; on the other hand, as capable of acting and rising on its own to rebel and revolt, as seen in the second case. However – and in counter-current – both transmit the recognized sacredness and wilderness of Nature implicitly, as an entity capable of self-regulatory structures that are independent from human beings.

However, this is not the only front where some of Ecocentric Pagans I work with engage in Portugal. In 2019, the PFI-Portugal engaged in the animal rights campaign and movement, providing an example of how environmental actions are vast, a “definition” in which several social movements with different objectives interconnect; corroborating the view sustained by Pagans that all beings, and in this case, in particular, non-human animals, are a part of the web of life they uphold. In the milieu of radical action several social movements interconnect, and usually the animal rights movement is included in the broader environmentalist struggle. However, radical environmentalism and Animal Rights movements have different, even if intertwined, histories of working together, as Pike (2019) and Taylor (2010) discussed and summarized.<sup>113</sup>

### **Marching and Celebrating Non-Human Animals**

That 14 September 2019 was a warm September afternoon, the weather stuffy and hot, with the sun burning the skin. I travelled to Lisbon to meet and participate with the PFI-Portugal on the March for Animal Rights organized by several Animal Rights Associations. The meeting had been set to 3:30 PM in front of the D. Maria II National Theatre, but I arrived fifteen minutes earlier to observe the mobilization of people. When exiting the Underground station, I noticed

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<sup>113</sup> I decided not to engage and explore the long discussion about Animal Rights and human and non-human animals’ relationships, since it would be outside the scope of the research. Besides, it would not be properly analysed due to lack of time and space to engage in this discussion properly. For an overview of this engagement see the two authors cited and Humberto Martins (2018) for introductory notes, in the Portuguese context.

that some people were congregating in Restauradores Square, doing a performance in silence.

Accompanied by the sound of the traffic and the smell of fuel, the chatter of the tourists in different languages went hand-in-hand with the slight warm breeze that was passing; I walked to the meeting point, where I was quickly joined by one of the PFI-Portugal members. We waited for the coordinator of the Group, making small talk. A few minutes later they joined us, Dália, João and one of the Priestesses from their coven. When I hugged Dália and asked her how she was doing, she mentioned that she was not very well since the animal cause worried and affected her deeply. While we waited for the march to start, we talked a little, and the coordinators explained why they were participating. As Demeter's Priestess<sup>114</sup>, she received the message that they needed to work towards animal well-being, which was a fundamental cause. Since then, she and Dália have been working for that cause privately, but now it was time to call on more people to join in. They knew that only a few people would come to the march, and that only those that needed to be there would be. Only five gathered and represented the Pagan Association in that demonstration, myself included.



*Image 11 - Animal Rights March, Lisbon, October 2019*

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<sup>114</sup> Demeter was worshipped by Ancient Greeks as the Goddess of the Harvest, Health and as protector of the people. For more on Demeter see the entrance on Encyclopaedia Britannica (2023).

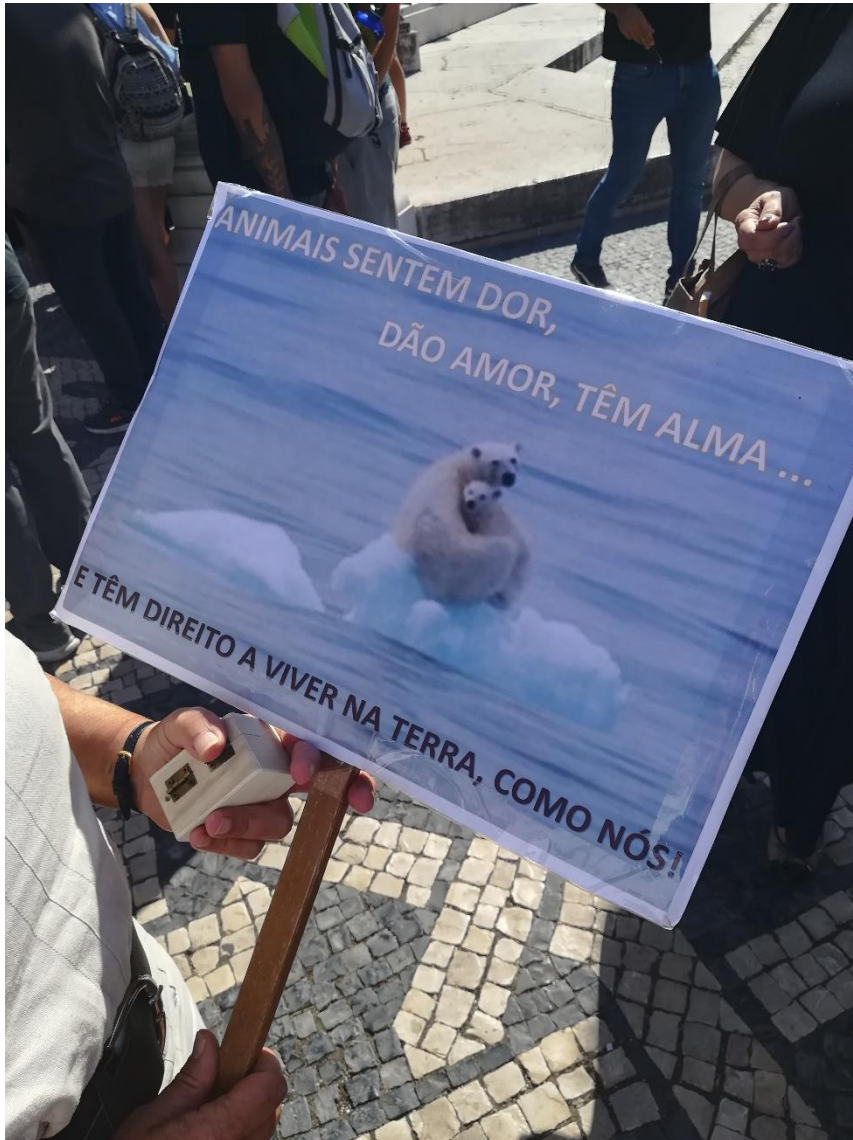
Dália told me they would use the energy produced by the march to do magical work. They had a little box with four cotton squares and a small animal sacrifice (an ivory elephant) and would focus the energy there. When it was over, they would go to the Temple to give the box as an offering to Demeter and Circe and make their magic work. They were there not just as members of the Pagan Federation International but as witches. While she spoke, shivers ran down my spine, recognising the dimension, strength and intention of the words being spoken.

Since I came from the south [living south of Lisbon], she asked me to take one of the energetically charged cotton squares and release it there, when I arrived home. These cotton squares represented the four cardinal points, and the purpose was that the energy originating in the march could get through to human minds everywhere and at all times for them to change their actions and become aware of the importance of protecting and respecting non-human animals: for humans to change their actions and to put an end to animal abuse. I told her I would be honoured to do so and hugged her.

The march started with only a few hundred people, despite the news mentioning a participation of around 500 people. PAN was the only political Party present in the march, unlike in the March for Climate the year before, attended by several political Parties, from Bloco de Esquerda to PCP and PS – besides PAN – were present since environmental issues have more weight in political agendas than animal rights do. Some people gathered on the sidewalks to observe the demonstrations. Some with mocking looks on their faces, others were interested or indifferent. They laughed and took pictures, an illustration of how difficult it is to conceive the notion of animal rights and agency in Portuguese society.



While the chants were being said, Dália and the Priestess were doing magical work, saying, after each chant, “So be it”, usually words said ritualistically after any request to the Gods. I had to leave early, but the march continued to São Bento Palace. After that, the PFI-Portugal went to their headquarters to finish the rite had they started during the march.



*Image 12 - One of the Posters done by PFI- Portugal to the March for Animal Rights, 2019*

On 4 October 2019, the continuation of the after-Animal Rights March Ritual was conducted by the *Bonadea* Neoclassic Group for the Polytheistic Congregation, PFI- Portugal. As Dália mentioned, they would go to the Temple after the march to conduct a ritual. However, after the rite, they decided to open it to those who could not be present on the march, in order to continue producing and expanding that energy.



*Image 13- Poster produced by PFI-Portugal for the Animal Rights March, 2019*

I arrived at the headquarters of the Association slightly late; six members were already gathered and waiting for Dália and the Priestess, which were preparing the Temple for the Rite. We waited around one hour, chatting and eating until they joined us to explain how the rite would occur. They mentioned that it was essential to work with – and protect – the fauna if one considers all the abuse suffered at the hands of Human Beings. Also, they explained that they used the energy produced during the march to do some powerful magical work and that at the same time the rite would end, a vigil for Animals would be starting at Praça do Comercio, organised by the same associations that organised the March on September 14.

They also described how the march and the ritual they conducted after it took place, reporting two situations that translate the results of the magical work. First, one week after the march, the most significant Ivory apprehension in recent times happened. This was important to them because it was seen as an answer to their work during the march. After all, they took a little box with a symbol representing an animal sacrifice, a small ivory elephant. And, secondly,

Dália mentioned that when she released the cotton square, after the march, she saw a man beating a dog, which she viewed as a message to be attentive to that situation and call the authorities.

Before the ritual, Dália explained how the ritual would be conducted and why they embraced that cause. According to her, it was essential to work for and protect the fauna due to the abuse they have suffered at the hands of human beings. To do so, they would use the energy produced during the march, as well as some of the slogans spoken while marching, to call for the aid of deities relating to the animals in order to generate more energy, and then release it, so that the Power of the Word could reach the human's mind in order to end the mistreatment, exploration and violence over animals.

After being purified by water, we moved to the Temple. We were received by Dália, who welcomed us and asked for us to gather in a semi-circle around the oil lamp in the middle of the room, taken from the altar dedicated to the Neo-Classic Greek Pantheon, and marked by Greek-inspired columns embracing a fixed altar and two iron bowls where incense was burning.

The Priestess that would also be conducting the ritual with Dália, came to each of us with essential oils, that we rubbed in our wrists using our fingers. After that she came again with water with which we splashed our faces and then our bodies, releasing the rest on the floor, thus, finishing the purification.

The sacred space was opened, calling for the great Winds of the East, West, North and South; each time one of them was invoked, the Priestess played the Triangle, more precisely the *Ferrinho*, a traditional Portuguese scraped idiophone made of a metal bar producing an acute sound that resonated all over the small room, causing some chills on our bodies.

The lights were left on up until then although they mentioned that usually rites were conducted inside the Temple with them off. When it was time to light up the oil lamp and call Demeter, the High Priestess made an insistent sign to turn off the electric light. When total darkness embraced us, she called for the Deity. The light provided by the oil lamp was very dim, but it transmitted power. And when the Dália opened her arms to call upon Demeter, her shadow was seen amplified by the light of the flame on the wall behind her. It was a brutal and powerful image, and chills travelled through my spine. It was a Sorceress and Witch working in her domain.



*Image 14- Sketch done after the Animal Day Rite illustrating the image of the Priestess.*

We then held the candles that would symbolise the deities connected with the animals – that would be invoked during the ritual – and started spinning around the oil lamp, with a lit candle on our right hands and saying the exact words we said during the march, and with the same tone we then used. We chanted:

“What do we want? Animal Rights!”

“Animal Rights are fundamentals!”

“We will give our voices to those that feel like us.”

The candles would be passed to the person in front of us whenever we were told to do so. In the end, they were put in the candlestick held next to the altar. Before leaving the Temple, the Dália mentioned again the Power of the Verb – of the Word – to change something in the world, to stop the exploration, violence and mistreatment of the fauna. She also mentioned that in three to five years, we would start seeing the results of the work we did in that Temple, and that she hoped that the situation would improve.

We were given cotton squares to be released up to three days after the ritual, holding what we wanted in our minds, so that the words we said would reach every human being. She mentioned that it was a solemn rite since it was a neo-classic one, but that it could be hard to leave the warmth of the Temple, that we could stay there a bit to ground ourselves. We would be responsible for spreading the message. I felt that they were worried, and that they cared for how we felt in that space, since we were not used to that magical and ritual work or had seen how they worked privately in the Temple before.

To leave the Temple, we should get in front of the altar in a way so as to have the smoke of the incense embracing us, hold our hands crossed in front of our chests, and bow in farewell, giving a step back and leaving the space. Outside the Temple, silence reigned. Everyone was affected by the energy produced during the ritual. We sat, putting our shoes back on and trying to recover. I felt my head heavy and fuzzy. I left, saying goodbye to everyone, relieved when the fresh air hit my face.

Since the March for Animal Rights, several demonstrations and direct actions have occurred in Portugal. Some focused on general animal rights and treatment; others focused on particular issues, such as *Touradas*<sup>115</sup> or the implementation of the law against animal abuse. Through some of its members, PFI- Portugal has been active in the fight for animal rights, participating in demonstrations and celebrating Animal Day through ritual ceremonies or rites mobilized online during the Covid-19 restrictions.

All these examples illustrate how Ecocentric Pagans in Portugal can engage with direct actions – mainly through magic and ritual, in explicit and implicit forms. On the other hand, in the United Kingdom the history of the engagement of Contemporary Pagans to radical environmentalism is much older when compared with Portugal. As radical environmentalism was expanding in the United Kingdom, so was Contemporary Paganism, mutually influencing each other and with people trespassing the imaginary frontiers between one movement and the other, both counter-cultural forms of affirmation. Despite the hindrance of doing fieldwork in

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<sup>115</sup> Translated as bullfights.

the United Kingdom due to the Covid-19 restrictions – this not being a comparative research between both contexts – it was possible to identify some influences of environmentalism in specific events that could be accompanied from a distance, which will be discussed next.

### **Echoes from the United Kingdom: Contemporary Paganism, Extinction Rebellion, and COP 26**

The fourth day of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference 2020 Online<sup>116</sup> followed the same pattern as the previous days. Outside it was a warm August day; the social life of my village was following its usual course: the soft summer morning breeze entering the room, the birds chirping outside my bedroom window, the neighbours greeting each other, dogs barking, and my cats playing in the yard. The desk was set for another day of online fieldwork: my notebook open, pen ready; the earphones already plugged, some snacks, the full teapot with cold tea, and the incense already burning. On that morning, after the usual yoga session, the sacred song opening and the message from the ceremonial Priestesses took place, followed the pre-recorded presentations. However, one of the presentations on that day piqued my curiosity: it was about Earth Activism.

Four women, most of them young, shared their experience as goddess-loving women and activists, and about their engagement with environmental actions. They participated in different moments in Extinction Rebellion actions, and in the case of one of the women, she had been engaged with grassroots movements and direct actions for thirty years, with campaigns of *Earth First!*, for instance.

*Earth First!* was created in the United States of America in 1980, then spreading to other countries. In 1991, the movement was established in the United Kingdom. The website of the Earth First! UK states that “the general principles behind the Earth First! are non-hierarchical organization and the use of direct action to confront, stop and eventually reverse the forces that are responsible for the destruction of the Earth and its inhabitants.”(Earth First! [no date]).

This woman’s participation and presence in direct action camps strengthened her connection with the Goddess. There, she could “be a warrior for Her [Goddess], and for Her Nature”, and she felt that it was the most important thing she had ever done. During the recording, these women shared songs<sup>117</sup>, their wishes, awareness of actions taking place in the

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<sup>116</sup> A deeper description of the fieldwork on the Conference will be done in the next chapter and on the chapter about COVID-19.

<sup>117</sup> The lyrics of one song was “Hear us when we say, it is a Climate Emergency / Stand up for the Future / Stand Up Sons and Daughters / This Planet is our Home / We do not stand alone.”

United Kingdom, and their own experience, including when arrested several times during demonstrations and other direct-action initiatives. They mentioned that they felt the call to protect the Earth, which was why they got involved in these actions. At some point, one of the women declared that she was arrested for the crime of loving and wanting to protect the Earth. Apart from the danger of being arrested, it was clear to them that they needed to act and rise to fight, because it was clear that the health of the planet was being transported into the human health, and that Capitalism and Patriarchy were responsible for the destruction of the Earth since they “waged war on Nature”.

Besides, their involvement with those actions is related to a sense of community that is created in the milieu of environmentalism, but also of urgency. In the words of one of those women, she was sympathetic with all the other “Earth Warriors”<sup>118</sup> fighting for the lands, seas and rivers, and it was the time to make a stand.

Extinction Rebellion has gained relevance and presence worldwide. It arose in 2018 in the United Kingdom when six thousand people converged on London after some British activists shared a Declaration of Rebellion in front of the Parliament. This assemblage of people led to peaceful protests, bridge blockage, artistic performances and tree planting. This first movement became an international call for rebellion, with mobilizations throughout Europe, South and North America, Asia, Africa and Oceania. It is, therefore, a decentralized, international movement, politically charged (but non-partisan) that uses direct action and civil disobedience to demand responses from governments to climate and ecological emergency, for social justice, and to hinder social and environmental collapse (XR [no date]).

A piece written on the *Wired* website in September 2019 (Varghese 2019) points out that the growth of the Extinction Rebellion movement was helped by the creation of several lines and groups of interests inside the broader movement, as well as local and international groups. Besides the communities of Lawyers for XR, Doctors for XR, XR Families, XR Youth, and XR Scientists, several religious community groups were created, such as the XR Buddhists<sup>119</sup>, XR Muslims and XR Pagans, more particularly XR Druids, Witches and Pagans were organized and mobilized. A Facebook group<sup>120</sup> was created “to share information for druids, witches & other Pagans involved with Extinction Rebellion”, including rituals, ceremonies and actions.

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<sup>118</sup> Some of Pike’s interlocutors (2017) also used the identification as “Earth warriors” to describe their engagement in environmental and other activist forms.

<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, when researching all these XR groups on the Internet, I noticed that the XR Buddhists have their own website, while most of the other groups only have social media pages.

<sup>120</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/XRpagans>. However, this page had not had much activity. Accessed 3 February 2023.

Those communities may be less active now than before the COVID-19 outbreak, if we take their communication pages as an indicator; however, there are still significant movements for climate action in the United Kingdom and the contacts between people are already established. Participating in a Direct Action with the support of a net with similar interests provides more confidence and a better sense of belonging, as opposed to joining these actions alone. From what I could gather<sup>121</sup>, the XR movement is still active and mobilizing for major demonstrations and direct actions in the UK.

In November 2021, during COP 26, they were doing several direct actions outside the Congress Centre in Glasgow. At the same time, the Pagan Federation was also accompanying the Convention. During that week they would publish news and manifests and conduct online rituals, while some members were onsite accompanying environmentalist groups and citizens contesting the lack of actions and urging for the respect of agreements from world leaders and holding vigils. The first vigil took place on Samhain night, the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, by the PF President and the PF Environmental Officer, and was shared in the official Facebook page of the Association and the by the Facebook event created for that occasion.

They started by explaining the goals of COP 26, and what they wished would come from the Summit. They called for the need to stop the coal exploration in the UK and find alternatives for electric energy, which means the creation of more wind and solar farms, and for the more prosperous countries and leaders to be held accountable for the responsibility they have towards the environment. After, they shared a prayer for “the Great Mother” while lighting a candle:

*Great Mother Earth of the Land, Sea and Sky,*

*We thank you for all the wonders you share with us*

*Forgive us for the pain we are causing you.*

*Help us protect and nurture you once again.*

*We ask the leaders from all countries*

*Are able to work in harmony*

*Towards this common Goal.*

*We ask that those leaders,*

*To give you the time you need to heal yourself*

*Let us help heal your wounds*

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<sup>121</sup> I checked the website and general social media pages of XR on 3 February 2023.



*With our love, thoughts, deeds, actions*

*In our daily lives.*

*We light a candle not to mourn the dying Earth.*

*But to light the path of Her healing*

*And a beginning for a better world.*

This prayer exemplifies how rituals and magical currents for the environment take place<sup>122</sup>. Most of these prayers are calls for protection, healing, hope and transformation. They are also the most common form of action among Contemporary Pagans with ecological concerns, since they do not require much logistics and people to put them into practise. They can take place in any room or space; the only necessary objects are a candle, a lighter, and the person connecting with that energy.

Pike (2017) states that by the time she was conducting fieldwork in the 2000s, the pagan influence on radical environmentalism and animal rights was implicit, more than explicit. For one of her interlocutors, the pagan influence is more cultural than religious. For the author, Paganism “has helped to shape the radical milieu in which many activist place themselves, even though it is often an implicit and unacknowledged contributing factor in activists’ commitments” which leads them to live a “more implicit Paganism instead of participating in established pagan communities.” (Pike, 2017: 69) Similarly, Taylor (2001) found that on the milieu of radical environmentalism several Earth-Based spiritualities and social movements influence each other.

In the case of the Pagans with whom I worked in Portugal, they engage with environmentalism; however, the focus is religious and spiritual, and environmentalism is implicit, at least to a point. Some engage in direct environmental and animal rights actions, but the great majority show their activist stand through personal actions and choices, campaigning and writing, and religious and spiritual practices and rituals. The case-studies discussed here are examples of explicit ways by which Contemporary Pagans combine their spiritual and religious lives with direct environmental actions.

In a conversation with Dália, the PFI – Portugal member, she stated that

We should be present in these demonstrations to show what we think about the cause.

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<sup>122</sup> Sabina Magliocco (2020) as analysed how Contemporary Pagans and witches have used magical currents for political ends. Her interlocutors have been engaging since 2016 in magical currents against Trump since his election in the United States. Another illustrative work of the magical participation of religious and spiritual groups in political actions, is Egil Asprem’s article (2020).

For now, it is to show what we Pagans think and why we should be there. Besides, all the Power produced through activism, on demonstrations... We are Priests, and it would be a shame wasting all that Power and not channelling it in a ball that will fall on the Assembly – it can work or not, but it works, because if it did not I would not do it – it will release that tension created by the people that went to the demonstration. When people go, they mark their place and say to the Gods, “We may be just five here, but we want this to happen”. When we elevate our voices through a ritual, we strengthen our position, not just before the world we live in but also before the Creation, the astral world.

We always had an activist stand. We always have been activists, at least concerning Earth Day. The first ritual we had in 1996 or 1997 was Earth Day. The Pagan Federation in Portugal started with Earth Day after we did collective cure rituals for the Earth. We will not organise a demonstration because our system is religious; however, we will be present when there are public and civic demonstrations where we can be present.

As the above case-studies demonstrate, Contemporary Pagans in Portugal and in the United Kingdom are engaged with several dialogues between political agendas, environmental politics, activist work and personal choices that go beyond the demarcated frontiers between political and activist work and the religious and spiritual. Therefore, I state that religious and spiritual trends are influenced by specific issues and worries shared by people in their daily lives, mainly when perceiving a threat as the one that the environmental crisis is creating. The narratives used, the ritual practices adopted, both political and religious, and the strategies implemented demonstrate how the lived experiences of people have no clear boundaries demarcated. Rituals provide transformation and form for Pagans to enact their freedom and democratic participation (Pike, Salomonsen and Tremillet 2021)

The ritual forms are used with the purpose of transformation and have perceived specific consequences. Magliocco (2015) states that Contemporary Pagans search for the transformation of the world and the way that individuals connect to it. As the author puts it, peace, social justice and ecological renewal are yearnings that Contemporary Pagans share for the future. For the author

Global transformation generally begins at the individual level with a transformative spiritual experience – one that forces the individual into a more participatory mode of consciousness. The insights gleaned from this participatory consciousness are then used to transform material aspects of life – for example, the adoption of new dietary practices

– that promise to eventually effect broader changes in culture. (ibid 641)

All the Pagans with whom I worked found in rituals those transformations, at these three levels: personal, in which an experience in a ritual triggers the awareness towards (and development of) the work for a specific environmental cause, such as the personal work of the Dália and the Priestess from PFI – Portugal that started actively engaging with the Animal Rights cause and activist movement; collective, engaging both the collective (of Pagans involved) and the community (the broader human community) towards change in the way of being in the world; and finally, concrete transformations that are seen in the law changes, or events such as apprehensions, releases, projects that are stopped or lands that are regenerated after a major wildfire or intensive exploration. However, some issues arise amidst this process, as will be analysed next.

### **3.4. Well-Meant Narratives, Issues in Participation: Contemporary Pagans’ Inconsistency**

Throughout the chapter, several examples of how Ecocentric Pagans engage with environmental issues were shared. At the same time, the discourses that are shared and integrated into their lived experiences and transpire when they discuss their motivations and concrete actions integrate several complex concepts such as “sustainability” and “climate change” having turned into “buzzwords” anytime that the environmental crisis is mentioned. While being a movement from the Global North, they are aware of the impacts that the Global North have in the degradation of the environment, however, the tendency is to use these words without reflecting on the more profound questions that underlay them, can be problematic and disseminate a very superficial environmentalist and ecological approach. How these impact the broader discourses and the concrete ecological actions of Contemporary Pagans needs to be considered. More than having ecological and sustainability-informed actions, it is necessary to reflect deeply on the perils these narratives pose.

For instance, when Ecocentric Pagans subscribe to a romantic view of Nature as pristine and suffering at the hands of human beings, that can easily be led into two directions: on the one hand creating a “eugenic” discourse, in which the notion Nature does not need humans is defended, and therefore would be best if they were to be destroyed.<sup>123</sup> On the other, the same

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<sup>123</sup> These approaches arise from a neo-Malthusian approach, that defends that one way to solve the environmental crisis is the control of the population. See Martinez-Alier (2002) for more on this discussion.

hierarchical influences that are understood to be absent from Contemporary Paganism are in reality reinforced, and can be seen in discourses such as the ones in which humans are the only possible saviours of the planet – that hopeless being in need for healing – contradicting the understanding of Nature as powerful and self-regulatory.

Despite the involvement of contemporary Pagans in environmental narratives and actions, there is always the need to understand if and how their personal actions can be considered ecological or sustainable. During the fieldwork I could perceive that their religious and spiritual beliefs are embedded and embodied in their lived experiences, and this translates not just into respecting and venerating Nature, the environment and all its beings as sacred and alive, but also into most pragmatic and specific ways, seen in their personal actions. I cannot affirm that all Pagans in Portugal or in the United Kingdom<sup>124</sup> follow ecologically informed practices, but basic ecological actions can be found among those I worked with. Recycling is the most widespread form of ecological action, which in Portugal was implemented only at the beginning of the 2000s; some are vegetarian or vegan, but those that are not try to look for ethical meat and fish practices or to buy from local producers; some may not worry about this ethical market choices and just buy what they can; others practice permaculture or organic productions, trying to exclude from their food, health, cosmetic or cleaning products any chemical products, preferring to do their products at home.

However, essential issues to consider when analysing whether personal actions are or are not ecological in Portugal are economical and class factors. Several sustainable practices can be adopted, and organic services are available; however, in the last ten years, most of the Portuguese population started to be aware of these issues and choices and businesses targeting these issues started appearing. But access to those was and still is dictated by socioeconomic status. Most of the first businesses, programs and shops offered organic and sustainable products at prices beyond the reach of the majority of the population. Even today – at a time when one can find ecological cleaning products, for instance, in supermarkets – there is a huge gap between the prices of these products and the “un-ecological” ones.<sup>125</sup> In a country where by the end of 2021 the unemployment rate was 6.6% (Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2022c), the poverty risk was 16,4% (Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2022d), and the minimum wage was 665 Euros, a great part of the population cannot adhere to some of the ecological actions

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<sup>124</sup> I will not present data about the United Kingdom because I do not have enough information about personal ecological actions due to the transformation’s fieldwork suffered already explained in the beginning of this thesis.

<sup>125</sup> This can be understood as part of the Eco-capitalist consumerist approach, in which the ‘Green’ and ‘Eco’ in the products are what is called ‘green washing’ appealing to ecological worries of the population, but that in reality are still harmful for the ecosystems and its inhabitants (Rogers 2010).

that are commonly called for. Facing this reality, implementing sustainable practices and politics raises the question of what is sustainable and for whom.

The mainstream sustainable and ecological choices are directly related to the socioeconomic status that encompasses the lived experiences of Ecocentric Pagans, questioning the idea that most of the people that are part of these groups belong to the middle class. This can be true in some of the paths of Paganism and in some generations, but as for the great majority, maybe they are not as bad as to be included in the poverty rates, but the truth is that their wages are only enough to encompass a stable life, one that may not answer the demands of what are the great sustainable and ecological trends also informed by the markets (Eriksen, Stensrud 2019).

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In the face of the environmental crisis, several fronts are mobilizing, from governments to social movements and religious and spiritual movements. These are mobilizing with the intention of transforming relationships with the more-than-human, and for the possibility of a future. Therefore, environmental issues are entangled with religion and spirituality since they offer an “ethics of reverence” (Tucker 2006) that can serve as a guide on how to engage in the world and with ecological and environmental questions. Contemporary Pagans were among the first in the Global North to include environmental questions at the core of their religious and spiritual lived experiences. Throughout this chapter, apart from an overview of literature about the combination of religion and spirituality with ecological and environmental questions, and the meaning of the word “Nature” through time, how my interlocutors perceive nature and engage with it during their lived experiences was at the core of the discussion. I argued that through ritual, magic and participation in direct political actions, they engage with Nature and that this engagement is both individual and collective since the intention may arise from personal motivations but the strength for transformation comes from a collective work. At the same time, they engage in these actions, some issues arise, namely, if their personal actions adhere to the ideals they share when calling for sustainable transformations.

This chapter has demonstrated how Ecocentric Pagans’ ecological and environmental concerns, ingrained in and combined with their spiritual and religious lives, expand their visibility in public spaces, mainly when they participate in specific political actions.

When speaking of Nature and activism, one must look at another essential and intertwining dimension that usually appears: the gendering of Nature and personal empowerment. The next chapter will explore the ways in which Nature is given meaning through a gendering of its

existence and how women find forms to express their personalities and feel empowered. Drawing from Ecofeminism, they develop healing rituals that are, at the same time, personal actions for being released, and emotionally and spiritually healed, from structural constraints such as patriarchy, which influenced their social roles and personal expression, but also collective ones, since the exploration that women bodies suffered was the same imposed on Nature. This next chapter will therefore focus on the dynamics of gender in these movements; empowerment and healing; the gendering of Nature; and the feminist influences (or denial of that influence).



## **The Earth Mother Goddess: Contemporary Paganism, Gender and Ecofeminism**

I decided to take the time to observe the rest of the groups while I waited for the end of the activity. One group of women sat in a circle near me, near the entrance of the hot tent, to receive the cool breeze that entered. The group started chatting and reflecting on the importance of being in a safe space like the Goddess Conference, considering all the violence, misogyny, and attacks on women worldwide. “We have to be strong about our convictions” was a statement that stayed with me.<sup>126</sup>

The spider is releasing the other central thread. She fastidiously spins in a slow dance that creates sustainability in her piece of art. Slowly, she unveils how the issue of gender is approached in Contemporary Paganism. Gender is a central dimension of contemporary Religion and Spirituality. Religion influences, reinforces, or challenges real and imagined gender roles followed by individuals, and hints how they should act (Fedele 2019). Since Religion is essential in their lives, shaping both narratives and practices, individuals look for religious and spiritual paths in which they find that gender identity is recognised, accepted, and respected. Therefore, if one wishes to approach how Contemporary Paganism engages in the public sphere through a set of power dynamics, the gender dimension is vital to understand how it is done. These two dimensions, gender and power, are indivisible (Fedele and Knibbe, 2013 and 2020), as demonstrated by the statement I heard in the Portuguese Goddess Conference that opened this chapter.

Besides, I can add that the issue of representation is also related to it. When mentioning “gender”, it is usually related to women. However, the category of gender implies and includes a multitude of representations and identities much broader than women. I aimed to approach gender beyond those identifying with women in this broader spectrum. Nevertheless, in the field, most were indeed women who identified themselves as such. Representation or lack of it is an issue of power dynamics and relations that must be considered in a milieu that tries to be inclusive and empowering for those that spiral dance in it. Besides, tensions between Female and Male, Nature and Culture – and so on – also arise in the field of contemporary religion and

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<sup>126</sup> Fieldnote, Portuguese Goddess Conference, 17 May 2019



spirituality in general, and in Contemporary Paganism in particular.

This chapter will be divided into five sections, where literature will be articulated with ethnographic data gathered from four years of working with and attending contemporary pagan events and discussions. The first section consists of a literature review of Gender, Feminism, and Religion and Spirituality in Anthropology, and its influences on Contemporary Paganism; the second will analyse how Contemporary Pagans understand the Earth as a Goddess and the importance of this identification for their lived experiences; then, based on the fieldwork in the Goddess Conference, how ritual is central to personal and collective transformation and empowerment will be analysed; the fourth section will explore the differences and continuities between the Portuguese and the Glastonbury's Goddess Conferences; the last section will include a debate on what type of issues are present in the approaches to gender in the context of Contemporary Paganism, from the naturalised approaches to the reification of the gender binary.

#### **4.1. Gender and Feminism in Anthropological Circles**

Gender has been a critical feature in the anthropological milieu since the 1970s and 1980s, accompanying the rise of the second wave of feminism and its influence in the discipline, and, therefore, the rise of Feminist Anthropology. Besides the importance that the pioneering works of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead had in the discipline – both in providing new understandings of how gender is culturally and socially constructed and not biologically defined, and in being the first women anthropologists establishing their space in an (until then) androcentric field – only in the 1970s female anthropologists began looking more closely to the issue of gender and theorizing about it, influenced by, and including a feminist lenses on their approaches, and moving beyond the statement made by Benedict and Mead<sup>127</sup>. As Henrietta L. Moore (2010) states, gender has been re-conceptualized as “the performance of a set of regulatory practices, as something constructed in practice” which provides the understanding of several gender identities that “cannot be considered as a straightforward matter of socialization into a cultural system which is a concomitant model of gender. Within any social setting, there are multiple discourses on gender which can vary both contextually and biographically, and some of these discourses may be contradictory and conflicting.” (Moore,

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<sup>127</sup> Some of the most important works on gender: Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974); Ortner and Whitehead (1981); Starthern (1990); Martin (1987; 1991); Butler (1990); Behar (1993); Behar and Gordon (1995); Abu-Lughod ([1993] 2008); See Harris and Young (1979) for compiled texts written by several Feminist Anthropologists; Moore (2010) entrance on Feminist Anthropology; and Mahmud (2021) for an overview.

2010: 286)

Besides, the construction and affirmation of gender identity is a form of “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988) based on an intersectional experience of sexuality, class, ethnicity and religion. However, religion and spirituality have been disregarded when analysing gender. They were understood to be incompatible and incongruent with the enterprise of gender liberation and empowerment, due to the influence of the secularization thesis and the second wave of feminism that influenced the view that religion was oppressive to women and LGBTQIA+ people. Scholars have shown that instead of hindering the emancipation and revindication process, it provides spaces for a creative expression of their identities, liberation from hierarchical structures and empowerment (Fedele, Knibbe 2013, 2020).

The secularization thesis<sup>128</sup>, both a historical process and project, lays in three central premises: the supposed decline of religious beliefs in the North American and European contexts; the privatization of religion; and, finally, the differentiation of the secular spheres, like the political, from the religious ones (van der Veer 2009). The historian Joan Wallach Scott (2009) discusses another premise of the secularization thesis, one in which secularism encourages sexuality’s free expression and therefore leads to the end of women’s oppression. When removing transcendence as the basis for social norms and offering and recognizing people as autonomous, with the power to create their own destiny, emancipation is enabled, and secularism is understood as a universal project of human emancipation, primarily for women that are released from religious restrictions. However, for the author, when analysing the history of the secularism process and project, in practical terms these ideological statements are not in place. For instance, equality between men and women was not one of the significant concerns of those that propelled the separation between State and Church, since women were not considered politically equal to men, nor does this project solve the difficulties that sexual differences pose to social and political organizations.

Scholars have been calling our attention to the need to go beyond the feminist statement that religion oppresses women (Hawthorne 2014), discussing how Contemporary Religion and Spirituality offer alternative views to the Androcentric approach to Religion; as well as space where individuals, primarily women and LGBTQIA+ people, feel connected, seen and understood in terms of gender identity and sexuality, in a society marked by the gender binary, androcentrism, machismo, and patriarchy. Women’s agency in religious settings, even in those considered oppressing, like Catholicism and Islam, has been approached and contradicted by

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<sup>128</sup> For discussion on the secular in relation to religion and its critiques see among others, Asad (2003; 2018); Cannell (2010); Connolly (2011).

this statement. For instance, Saba Mahmood (2001), in her work with Egyptian Mosque women involved in a mosque movement in Cairo (Egypt), shows how these women organized to provide lessons, teachings, and study Islamic scriptures in public meetings in the mosque, accessing materials that until then were only accessible to men, changing, therefore, the engendered social roles inside the hierarchical structure of the Mosque. The author proposes that “we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood 2001, p. 203).

Rosi Braidotti (2008) called our attention to the fact that the post-secular turn<sup>129</sup> challenges European Feminism, since it clarifies that agency or political subjectivity can be transported and supported by religiosity, and can even include significant levels of spirituality. Besides, people’s political agency does not need to be positioned as opposed to something, in this case religion and spirituality. For the author, subjectivity is a complex ontological process that involves complex and continuous negotiations with values and norms from the dominant social and cultural forces.

I believe that it is in the process of negotiation that the most valuable and creative responses arise. As I have been finding in the context of Contemporary Paganism and have already mentioned, the religious and spiritual beliefs and lived experiences of Ecocentric Pagans inform their ethical choices, leading to creative political and public engagement in several actions and fronts. Similarly, Laurel Zwissler (2009; 2012), in her work with catholic women, has shown how young feminists combine their spiritual, religious and political convictions, negotiating the role of religion in civic discourses, by incorporating spiritual and religious elements in political demonstrations, and in creating rituals in spaces of protest and political revindication. The groups with which the author worked intend that their personal religious practices, and those of their congregation, participate and worry about the world, promoting the incorporation of their religious practices in public actions.

The disconnection between forms of religion and what can be called secular feminisms is therefore based on a division between the secular and the divine that, in practice, does not operate since the embodied experience of religious and spiritual practices can be “sites of transformation and empowerment for women” (Llewellyn, Trzebiatowska 2013, p. 255). These spaces can reinforce the power dynamics and hierarchical structures that are criticized (Fedele, Knibbe 2013), what will be analysed later in this chapter and the following one, based on the

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<sup>129</sup> For more on postsecular turn see McLennan(2010) and Butler, Habermas, Taylor, West edited book (2011).

case of Contemporary Paganism in Portugal and in the United Kingdom to some extent. However, in my view, to focus only on the apparent patriarchal oppression of religion is to dismiss the creative, complex and embodied experience of people in those contexts and, therefore, dismiss rich dialogues that can lead to social transformations in the long run while dealing with the environmental, economic, and social crises being faced today.

Aune (2015), in her proposal to conceptualize feminist spirituality as a form of Lived Religion, mapped how the feminist approach to religion took place. First, a feminism that was connected with secularism and the secularization thesis, which considered religion as a patriarchal impediment to the liberation of women, an argument that connects with the secularist assumption that gender equality is incommensurable with religion, and religion should not have the power to control women's lives in the public sphere. This approach is connected with the second wave of feminism that arose<sup>130</sup>. Some social and feminist scholars influenced by this approach believe that the construction of modernity, as opposed to religion, brought democracy, freedom and equality. However, this view has been criticized, as shown before with the example of Mahmood's (2001) work, since secularism is a product of modernity and people in different contexts have been showing their agency through religion.

The author identifies the second theme of a feminist turn to spirituality, in which the wane of Christianity's influence in the public space opened a place for alternative spiritualities like the New Age movement, complementary medicines, and holistic spiritualities. These, despite being criticized as individualistic, narcissistic, and creating and serving a spiritual marketplace that reflects the consumerism of capitalism, are also relational, since a focus on the self can make it possible to change traditional notions and roles associated with gender, for instance. And thirdly, religious feminisms, which the author understood to be those feminist groups that use religious sources to defy gender inequalities inside their religious and spiritual traditions in their daily lives and in societies.<sup>131</sup>

In Contemporary Paganism, these three themes or trends can be identified explicitly and implicitly in dialogue with the environmentalist approach and the centrality of Nature discussed in the last chapter. In the case of feminist spirituality, it is the most explicit form of religious feminism, highly influential for the path of the Goddess Movement. Sarah M. Pike states that in the 1980s feminist activists<sup>132</sup> started to be involved and to feel drawn to the theories of pre-

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<sup>130</sup> For more on the different feminist waves see Redfern, Aune (2010).

<sup>131</sup> As an example, see Chris Klassen (2009) edited book *Feminist Spirituality: The Next Generation*, in which several researches show how feminist engage with Christian discourses.

<sup>132</sup> During this decade, mostly in the United States, arose several groups directly influenced by feminism and Goddess Spirituality. The already mentioned Reclaiming Community, with Starhawk as the central figure, and

Christian matriarchal goddess-worshipping cultures, which “shaped their commitments to environmental issues as part of radical feminist magical politics. They invoked a feminized nature and divinized Earth in response to the eco-feminist critique that oppression and exploitation of nature and women go hand in hand.” (Pike 2019, p. 135). Starhawk’s *Spiral Dance* (1979) has been highly influential since its release, providing inspiration and resources for Pagans and activists interested in eco-feminist and environmental approaches that recognize the sacredness of the environment and all its inhabitants.<sup>133</sup> This leads to the other feminist trend that can be identified in the domain of Contemporary Paganism, that of Ecofeminism.

### **Ecofeminism**

As mentioned above, the awareness of the risks and impacts that capitalism and patriarchy had on the environment led feminists to turn to an approach in which the environment, the “eco”, is interrelated with feminism. Olga Caro stated that “feminist theology has also wanted to answer to this reality from its own principles by means of the current known as ‘ecofeminism’, intending to address the environmental issue from the categories of patriarchy, care, sexism, domination, gender, and the ruling economic system.”(Caro 2015, p. 65).

Ecofeminism was a term coined by French feminist Françoise D’Eaubonne in the 1970s<sup>134</sup>, and since then several ecofeminists have been questioning how ideologies of injustice connect with ideologies of environmental exploitation (Eaton 2001; Mies, Shiva 2014; Saave 2022) given that

Violence against women, from battering and rape to exclusion from education and health care, is supported by patriarchal ideologies that devalue women by identifying them with their bodies and identifying their bodies as the rightful property of men. Violence against nature runs by a similar logic, identifying the rest of Earth as property subject to the disposal of the powerful (...) transforming societies toward sustainable human-nature relations includes a task of social transformation toward social justice (Jenkins, Chapple 2011, p. 446).

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Dianic Witchcraft were the most influential to contemporary pagan goddess and feminist oriented groups. As Feraro notes, despite the major influence of feminism in the north American paganism, and the perceived idea that it was less in the United Kingdom, there was a major “cross-fertilization between British Traditional Wiccans and Goddess Feminists did exist during this period and contributed to the shaping of contemporary British Paganism,” (Feraro 2019, p. 47).

<sup>133</sup> For more on the influences of radical feminism in Starhawk’s feminist spirituality and witchcraft see Feraro (2017).

<sup>134</sup> In the same decade Reuther, wrote *New Women, New Earth* (1975), becoming an influential work to following ecofeminists.

Considering this connection between Women and Nature as property, Silvia Federici ([2014] 2020; 2018), in her thorough analysis of the Witch-hunts in Europe, takes into account the social environment and motivations that lead to the accusations, focusing in two themes: first, the relation between witch-hunting and the process of land enclosure and privatization, because this was not just an economic change, it influenced and transformed people's life, realigning social norms, values and priorities; second, the relation between witch-hunting and the enclosure of the female body through State control over women's sexuality and reproductive capacity. As she affirms, "*the new violence against women is rooted in structural trends that are constitutive of capitalist development and state power in all times.*"(2018, p. 47 italic in the original). She notes that capitalism developed and began with a war on women, which threatened the accumulation of the workforce and discipline of labour. Thus, naming them "witches"<sup>135</sup> confined women to unpaid domestic work, legitimizing their subordination to men and giving the State control over their bodies and reproductive capacity.

Therefore, from the ecofeminist stand, capitalism's effects on women and Nature are inseparable. Besides,

environmental problems are an expression of a crisis of society-nature-relations. (...) it does not make sense to consider social and environmental problems as independent of each other. Since the 1970s, ecofeminists have emphasised this by critically describing relations between the individual, society and nature, showing that gendered and racialised society-nature-relations underlie the sustainability problems we experience today. (Saave 2022, p. 343)

Ecofeminist approaches have provided the basis for the liberation and transformation of relationships (Caro 2015; Ruether 2012; Eaton 2009) and their influences in Contemporary Paganism, given the development of both movements in the same period and the importance they holds in the field for those that identify as women to feel heard and understood<sup>136</sup>. As Shai Feraro notes, there "exists a clear and direct correlation between Contemporary Paganism and goddess feminism, as both milieus call for 'restoring' the connections between human beings, the natural world, and the sacred feminine." (2019, p. 46). In the same period that this cross-fertilization was happening, ecological concerns were being adopted and environmentalist

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<sup>135</sup> Feminism has appropriated to use of the term 'witches' as political revindication and affirmation. It also acts as remembrance and confrontation with misogynist stands towards women.

Today, in several demonstrations, social media posts and manifestos the phrase "We are the Granddaughters of the witches you couldn't burn" stands out. This phrase first appeared in Tish Thawer fantasy book, *The Witches of BlackBrook* (2015) and have since then be part of feminist protests (Toon 2021).

<sup>136</sup> For more on the influence of Ecofeminism in British Contemporary Paganism see Shai Feraro (2021).

influences were entering the pagan milieu, therefore “ecological concerns coalesced with feminist discourse, and ecofeminist campaigning groups with a significant Pagan presence began to emerge” (*ibid*: 47).

It is, therefore, significant to approach Ecofeminist influences in Contemporary Paganism today, since they impact and dialogue with the lived experience of Pagans while in religious-spiritual and political rituals. How do these feminist approaches operate in the lived experience of Contemporary Paganism, and influence their participation in the Portuguese and British public spheres? How is gender expressed and reflected in this context? I will proceed now to this discussion through the analysis of the Goddess as a key element to attain liberation. The figure of the Goddess in the context of Contemporary Paganism will then be explored through ethnographic data gathered onsite and online, and using other materials, in articulation with the literature.

#### **4.2. The Goddess as the Living Earth – Reconnection and re-enchantment**

Contemporary Paganism, the focus of this thesis, particularly the Goddess Movement, draws inspiration from the feminist movement to legitimise the importance of feeling empowered and fighting for equality. Several individuals approached these movements due to the perceived freedom offered to express their gender identity and sexuality. The recognition of divine feminine and masculine is one of the central principles of the movement. Moreover, it is a re-enchantment of the world since individuals feel their identities are represented by the divine. Therefore, this section will focus on the approaches to gender found in Contemporary Paganism, exposing the importance of analysing this dimension, as well as how feminism impacts and appears in the lived experience of Ecocentric Pagans since it was the influence of feminism<sup>137</sup> and Goddess movements that informed much of the pagan magical and ritual engagement with political action (Feraro 2019).

The Earth is commonly understood in the context of Contemporary Paganism as a Mother and a Goddess. This image was highly influenced by James Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis (1979), named after the Greek Goddess Gaia which sustained that the earth’s ecosystem is living, self-regulatory organism. In this hypothesis, it was argued that “the Earth is understood better as a living being than as a machine. Rock, sea, cloud, tree, animal are in continual and complex relation, with each affecting and subtly altering the others. Thus, the exchange of

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<sup>137</sup> Similarly, Kathryn Rountree (2004) analysed the influence of feminism in the ritual lived experience of New Zealand practitioners, focusing on the images of the ‘witch’ and the ‘goddess’.

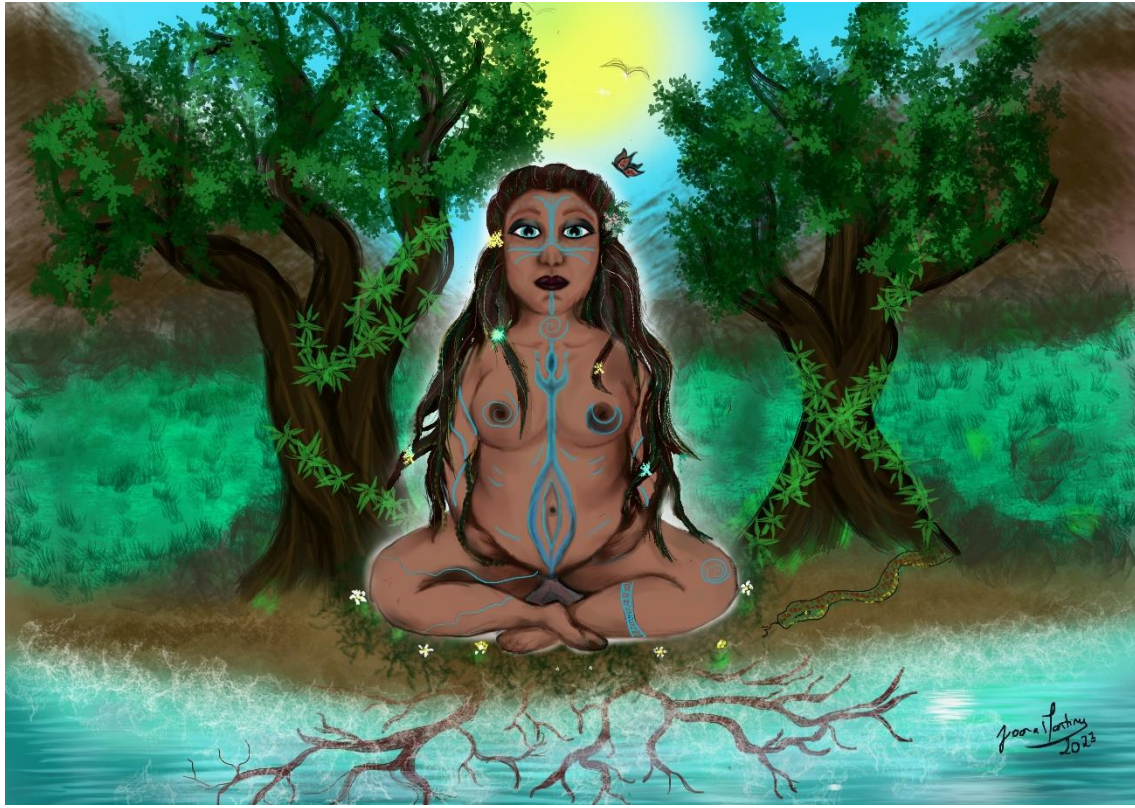
planetary atmospheric gasses can be compared to an individual's breath, the water system to the circulation of blood, the ozone layer to be the skin" (Monaghan 2005, p. 679). While the scientific world debated the legitimacy of this hypothesis, and also embraced and has been transforming and enriching this approach (Haraway 2016; Latour 2017), several religious and spiritual movements appropriated it. Contemporary Paganism is one of the most active in drawing this connection of the planet as a Goddess. In this milieu, it is commonly represented as a woman, flowing long hair like vines, sitting cross legged, heavily pregnant with the Earth.



*Image 15 - A common representation of Goddess Gaia*



How it is mobilized in the field of Contemporary Paganism, will be analysed next through the ethnographic example of the Goddess Conference.



*Image 16 - Illustration of Goddess Gaia, done by me.*

### ***Earth Mother Goddess: The Glastonbury Goddess Conference celebrating the Earth***

Understanding the Earth as a Great Goddess is central to how the Goddess Movement leads their lived spiritual and religious experiences, as shown. During the time that the research took place, the main event organized by this movement took place using these premisses as its theme. The 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference took place online from the 30<sup>th</sup> of July to the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August with the theme “Celebrating the Earth Mother Goddess”. It was supposed to be a presential Conference like all the previous ones; however, with the Covid-19 Restrictions<sup>138</sup>, instead of cancelling it they transformed it into an online event, the first ever online Conference in 25 years.

The opening letter of the program mentions that the focus of the Conference is the facet of the Goddess as Earth Mother, that is, all the lands the participants feel a connection with “by blood; by birth; by choice; by soul; by spiritual resonance and by love”<sup>139</sup>. This facet is understood to be the home and feeling of belonging, a source of life that becomes the “absolute Ground of Being”. Furthermore, it is through Her body that She is the giver of life, both to

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<sup>138</sup> The impacts of the Covid-19 will be analysed in Chapter 6.

<sup>139</sup> Opening letter of the program of the 2020 Online Glastonbury Goddess Conference.

inanimate and animate life forms, She is a loving entity that gives birth, receives the lives back in death and renews life. Likewise, she also offered to human beings “the deep knowing of the sacred connection to Her, and a kinship with all of life, as well as sacred responsibility to be the guardian to all of life.”<sup>140</sup>

Here, the Goddess and the Earth are the same and only entity, where She<sup>141</sup> is the Mother, the provider and the nurturer, with whom Humans are in kinship with. But this is a common narrative shared by several currents in Paganism. For instance, this is one of the principles of the Pagan Federation, and later of the Pagan Federation International and its local offices: “Love for and Kinship with Nature. Reverence for the life force and its ever-renewing cycles of life and death.”<sup>142</sup> Rountree (2012) states that Pagans find a sense of kinship in Nature, just like the one described above, and as one of the principles of Contemporary Paganism discussed in Chapter 2. Through the work she did with Contemporary Pagans, the author claims that the kinship with Nature is significant for the great majority of Pagans in the domain of their religious and spiritual beliefs, rituals and recreational activities, but does not determine their daily lives, as it is lived in other animistic settings. This means that when they engage with the environment or with Nature through ritual or gardening, they are reunited with their family. The recognition, celebration and embodiment of nature and all its inhabitants, present and past, is a form of kinship relationship. Because:

calling other-than-human beings “kin” could be seen as Pagans’ attempt to instantiate rhetorically a sense of shared identity, the awareness that, fundamentally and inescapably, we are connected and share a common fate; therefore, we should work together for the common good. (...) Promulgating the idea of kinship with nature could thus be viewed as a useful strategy in working for the sustainability of the planet (Rountree 2012, p. 316).

In the conference, the Earth Mother was represented by what the organizing team of the Conference called the nine Continental Plate Mothers, which represented the continents, lands, waters and forms that have existed for millions of years. Each of the Ceremonial Priestesses embodied one of these “Mothers”, or expression of the Goddess in the ceremonies that took place during the conference. These, as described in the opening letter,

bring you their medicine of love, of remembering, of healing and of belonging. They are the continental dance of becoming, transformation, re-invention, the power of

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<sup>140</sup> Opening letter of the program of the 2020 Online Glastonbury Goddess Conference.

<sup>141</sup> I am using the capital S because it is how goddess spirituality adherents refer to the Goddess.

<sup>142</sup> <https://www.paganfed.org/constitution/> consulted on 22 February 2023.

mountains to rise from the seabed. They are wild unexplored places that replenish and call us to dance. They are Earth Mother, on who's skin the story of the land and life is written as living lines of song and mystery. Timeless, She is unstoppable Earth Activism awakening, magnetizing and standing firm with fierce courage and soft compassionate power.<sup>143</sup>

Resuming the discussion brought up in the last chapter, the connection between activism and Nature is also called for the Earth. Or, in this narrative, the Earth itself calls for action and transformation. Therefore:

As Earth Mother Goddess awakens us, we feel the greater urgency to open to receive the medicine of Her message, that She would like us all to retune and resonate with. (...) she tells that we cannot heal our relationship to the land, to the body and being of Earth Mother Goddess, until we hear Her stories. We need to drop into a connection that is restorative, and not just for nature, but for us as humans, and our place within Her nature. (...) Knowing that our species' children and grand-children will inherit the world we leave behind, how can we listen more to the spiritual and physical re-story-ation of Earth Mother Goddess?<sup>144</sup>

The letter keeps appealing to reconnect with the Earth and calls our attention to the devastation of the environment, understood as a consequence of the disconnection from the Earth. Therefore, the lesson that needs to be learned, according to them is that "She tells us, we are never above or disconnected from, but deeply rooted in Her great circle. She reminds us we never have 'ownership of', but are part of 'belonging to'. Her ways are never power over, but power with. (...) From all directions of the world, She has called us to Her great Temple, to remember, to reconnect."<sup>145</sup>

In this process, one must embrace the sense of belonging to the Earth because:

She is sweet Mother of belonging; the rooted warmth of nurturing presence that allows the soft unfolding of all Her children into their beauty and empowerment. She is our home, and our responsibility to Her is awakening. She is our intiatrix, calling Her human children to step up into remembering what love would do, into living awareness, and into Her embrace. (...) Here She calls us to remember our connection to Her as Great Earth Mother, are Her body, Her Temple, as Mother Goddess of the Earth (...). She

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<sup>143</sup> Opening letter of the program of the 2020 Online Glastonbury Goddess Conference.

<sup>144</sup> Opening letter of the program of the 2020 Online Glastonbury Goddess Conference.

<sup>145</sup> Opening letter of the program of the 2020 Online Glastonbury Goddess Conference.

awakens us to choosing Love-in-Action and is our heartbeat, the heart's-dance interdependent and in harmony with all our kin on and of this Earth.<sup>146</sup>

Following the theme of the Conference, the four days were organized around a dimension that the ceremonial and organizational team of the Conference wanted to work on in the process of reconnecting to the Earth. The first day was “Grounding in Her presence”; the second “Growing in Her Nourishment”; then “Blossoming in Her Embrace”; and, finally, “Seeding in Her Magnificence”.<sup>147</sup> The days of the Conference followed the same structure. The mornings were dedicated to the pre-recorded talks and presentations. Then, after lunch, there were the Earth Circles, in which participants were divided into groups and accompanied by a Priestess or Priest to meditate, share their feelings and experiences, and be prepared for the main ceremonies<sup>148</sup>. Then, the workshops would take place via Zoom. The evenings were dedicated to the Ceremonies, usually via Zoom and unrecorded. But in all these moments, the focus was on a call to connect with the Earth through the facet of the Goddess as Earth Mother.



*Image 17- The main image of the Live Facebook videos on the 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference*

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<sup>146</sup> Opening letter of the program of the 2020 Online Glastonbury Goddess Conference.

<sup>147</sup> I believe these can be interpreted as the different stages of seeds developing, therefore, a call for symbolic connection with the rhythms of nature, mostly the life cycle. First, it is necessary to ground, to go below the earth, to the darkness to be fed and nourished by the soil and water, which is the base for the growth. Second, with nourishment the growth will start, the plant will break the soil, going towards the light and grow, blossoming after this process. And finally, it will release the seeds of the plant to continue the seeding and growth of the vegetation. Since the whole theme of the conference is the Earth Mother Goddess, this metaphor is fitting. It is about growth, connection, care, and nurturing.

<sup>148</sup> For a description of how the in-person conference is organized see among others Trulsson 2013.

In the call to connect, it was necessary to do the work of care and regenerating the lost relationship with the Earth, and to be aware of the pain inflicted due to human actions. In the Conference's opening ceremony, the organizing team prepared a video in which the Earth Continental Plates mentioned above were presented and represented, since each of these lands have specific attributes and could offer some transformation and inspiration. After this presentation, the narrative of the video shifted. The sound of crying was in the background, and images and photographs of destruction started rolling. Polluted lands, seas and rivers; deforested and burnt areas; industries for the mass production of livestock with suffering animals; images of war with bombed cities, crying and maimed children; famine; refugees' boats crossing the Mediterranean; violence against women and children. Besides the suffering environment, the Children of the Earth, as humans were called, were also suffering. This video was produced to trigger the emotions and sensitivity of the people and invite them to feel those emotions, to feel the grief and pain, to weep for the Earth and Her human and non-human children.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, it was a message of awareness to protect and care for the entity that was the condition for the continuity of humans.

During this ceremony, it was also asked for the participants to have a plant, a bowl for pouring water into and a vessel with water. It represented life and a cleansing process because it asked the participants to feel the grief, pain, guilt, and hopelessness while pouring the water and imagine that the flowing water was cleansing all the pain they were feeling – and therefore that the Earth herself was feeling – and transmuting it into love and beauty, healing and care. Then, the water was poured into the plant to manifest the intention. After, it was asked of everyone to connect to their Heartland, the place and land where they felt most connected emotionally and spiritually. From that connection, the energy manifested could be guided to the Earth from the several geographical points people were in, enhancing it.

This was the narrative that could be heard during the whole Conference, from the lectures to the workshops: connect and celebrate what the Earth offers, and work towards a transformation of actions and approaches that include a respect for other beings and a possible regeneration of the Earth and the human connection to Her. We can conclude that most of the rituals and events in Contemporary Paganism have a relationship between the personal – the participants' needs, intentions, and emotions – and the collective, the wider community formed by the planet and its beings, which are nurtured, and it is from the personal embodied experience

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<sup>149</sup> Emotions are extremely important in the context of contemporary spirituality and religion, mostly in connection and embodied in ritual practices. See the Special Issue *Ritual Creativity, Emotions and the Body* (Magliocco, Fedele 2014) for some examples of how emotions are mobilized in contexts such as Goddess-oriented groups.

that specific actions towards the transformation of relationships are created. Earth gives and takes, and humans can surrender to Her the problems that they face, as seen in the Ceremonial Embodiment Evening.

On the third day of the Conference, under the theme “Blossoming in Her Embrace”, the main ceremony was the Embodiment Ceremony, in which the Ceremonial Priestesses embodied the Goddess and offered messages to the participants. It became an intense ceremony. After all, it called for deeper emotional involvement, even online, because people would need to create a spirit doll, a rag doll that represented themselves and focus on it all their wishes and intentions, and what they wanted to give birth to. This doll would be created with some fabric the size of a handkerchief; some material to create the head such as cotton, wool, and seeds; thread to tie; a stick to form the back-bone; a paper to put in the head of the doll with the intentions and anything else we wanted to adorn the dolls with, such as pens, needles and thread, beads, leaves, or crystals. While the ceremony took place, the doll was created.



*Image 18- Rag doll done during the Ceremony, August 2020*

Looking at the screen, we could see each other working at the same time on the spirit doll, a shared experience, geographically apart. On the paper that would be put inside the head of the doll, we would have to write the intentions and wishes that we wanted to receive and give to

the Earth. The rag doll worked as a charged physical reminder, to focus on the growth of the seeds that were being planted with the intentions everyone brought to the ceremony.

The focus on intentions and on the materialization of these in practices such as the creation of the rag doll, pouring water in a plant, or planting a tree are examples of how Ecocentric Pagans look for ways to materialize and manifest their wishes for themselves and the wider-than-human. These actions are charged with meaning and can also be considered as ritualized forms of engagement with the world, besides the most common ones, such as rituals and ceremonies or activist engagement, as has been approached throughout these pages.

The focus on the Earth as the Goddess and the Mother was also present in the Portuguese Goddess Conference 2019. One year earlier, I attended the first Portuguese Goddess Conference, which took place in May 2019, and the Goddess as the Earth was reinforced by Magnólia, who was already introduced in the last chapters. In her talk, she affirmed that while working with and talking about the Goddess, one must not forget that the Goddess is the Living Earth, and therefore, humans are not above her. We are with, between and are the Earth, the home, a path and the nurturer. Moreover, while one works with the Goddess, with the Great Mother, one remembers how it is to live genuinely complete and meaningful lives. For her, the Earth is urgently connecting to humans, looking for channels through which She can cry, looking for people that can care for the wounds she carries and be dazzled by her.

This section has analysed the way the Goddess Movement understands the Goddess as the Living Earth and has shown the narratives that promote the engagement with the sacredness of the Earth through the celebration of the Goddess, a relationship that entails personal availability to be, to feel and to be shown what is needed for the future. It also promoted the activist stands towards protecting the Earth discussed in the previous chapter, which are mobilized in combination with feminist and ecofeminist ideals. The next section of this chapter will approach the way through which Goddess Movement practitioners, primarily women, resort to rituals as a way to transform relationships, work on emotional traumas or issues, and, from that, look for empowerment. It is through finding in the Goddess an enlightened and emancipated representation of their condition as women that they make sense of their existence, and heal several issues related to their bodies and emotions, to their roles in society, and to their agency. In rituals, all these dimensions are worked; however, the work done during those moments goes beyond the personal. They relate also to political stands regarding gender roles and with feminist and environmentalist approaches, as will be seen.

### **4.3. Ritual, Transformations and Empowerment**

The ritual creativity of Contemporary Pagans and the impacts that those forms of ritualization have on the people have already been alluded to in the previous chapters and in the above section. The way people can celebrate Nature cycles and make sense of life processes gives meaning to their lived personal and communitarian expression. Above the political implications of these rituals were discussed, while this section will be dedicated to the analysis of personal engagement of the people – primarily those that identify as women – with those events for healing, transformation and empowerment.

The ritual creativity of Contemporary Pagans has been highly debated among scholars of Contemporary Paganism (Pike 2001; Magliocco 2004; Fedele 2013b), but it is something that is not exceptional for these movements. Ritual creativity marks the lived experience of contemporary religious and new religious groups, in which they actively craft new rituals and transform pre-existing ones to bring about change (Magliocco 2014; Grimes 2000). This ritual creativity is mainly found among women who, through biomedicine's approaches to the body as something mechanic and controlled by their tools and given the demonizing of women's bodies in several religious settings, felt disconnected from their embodied experiences. Therefore:

The creation of new, creative, situationally specific rituals becomes necessary, both as a form of protest – a reclamation of women's symbolic authority over their own selves – and because old rituals, developed in a different social and historical context, simply cannot provide the sorts of healing and empowerment necessary in today's world (Magliocco 2014, p. 1).

Moreover, rituals are deeply sensorial experiences, filled with emotional responses expressed through tears, singing, yelling, or physical demonstrations of affection, as have been alluded to in several ethnographic descriptions throughout this thesis. Emotions in rituals are not “appendages to or end products of practices and representations, dedicated to enhancing memorization or reinforcing belief. Rather, they are constitutive aspects of ritual interactions themselves, both reflecting and inflecting the latter's course in a variety of sensory, expressive, moral, and strategic ways” (Berthomé, Houseman 2010, p. 69).

In May 2019, the First Portuguese Goddess Conference was organized, and ritual creativity and centrality of emotions and re-imagining and reconnecting with women's bodies were subjects that were present. The Conference was held in Sintra, on the outskirts of Lisbon, a mystical place (Saraiva, De Luca 2021) where most Portuguese Contemporary Pagans congregate and are drawn to. For three days, people would, as stated on the website of the



Conference, “immerse in the other side of the veil, of profound communion with our ancient Celtic heritage, recover the almost lost traditions of celebrating the Lady in our way, keeping the sacred space so women’s spirits rise high again in the world, strong and free from all the patriarchal conditioning...”.<sup>150</sup> It was an international gathering for all those that loved the Goddess, both women, men and children, and in that first edition, they would “honour the Goddess in Her Maiden facet. She is the Lady of the new beginning, celebrated on Imbolc, the moment that nature awakes after the hibernation that winter invites us.”<sup>151</sup>

I arrived at the venue where the Conference would take place on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May, the first day of the conference. It shared the space with the Medieval Pub of Sintra and the Temple of OBOD. The light and the cold breeze of the morning carried a sense of excitement. Around me, people, mostly women, dressed in white, flowing fabrics dancing around and behind them, flowers in their heads, and a myriad of Goddess and Pagan symbols adorning their necks, hands and wrists. Emotional reunions were taking place around me while I was strategically leaning on a balcony to observe those interactions while talking with Alexandra, the Pagan and friend with whom I shared lodging and this experience.



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<sup>150</sup> Portuguese Goddess Conference Official website, Home Page, accessed 4 April 2019, translated by the author.

<sup>151</sup> Portuguese Goddess Conference Official website, O que é Page, accessed 4 April 2019, translated by the author.

*Image 19- View to the market and exhibition area described, May 2019*

People smiled at each other, even at strangers, all united by the same energy, by the Goddess<sup>152</sup>. They were there to share that sorority and the energy of the Goddess. On the clearing was an art exhibition, set up in a circle, each representing one of the sabbats, made with reused and recycled materials, and a small market was set up, selling candles, incense, Goddess-inspired jewellery, statues, herbs or clothes made of reused fabrics.

To arrive at the tent where the ceremonies would take place one had to walk along an uneven and narrow rock path, surrounded by cork trees and pine trees, by several bushes dressed in white from the pollen and dust by dandelions and by trees that had fallen on the path. It was almost a fairy-tale path, drawing us from civilization and into the magical woods inhabited by several beings. Far away, the sound of cars passing, birds singing, and crickets. And in the middle of the path, people with flowing robes were chatting animatedly.

When we reached the clearing, we saw that a white dome tent was built, framed by the trees and vegetation, waiting for those transforming this multipurpose space into a sacred one. It was the place around which the Conference would revolve. From the lectures to some workshops and to the ceremonies, the epicentre of the sacred was being called upon and worked on in that tent.



*Image 20- The Ceremonial Tent of the Portuguese Goddess Conference, May 2019*

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<sup>152</sup> This idea was present throughout the whole event. In the last day, while I was walking to the venue with Mariana and Alexandra, a group of women passed by us, walking in the same direction, and shouted a “God Morning, Goddesses!” to us. After three days, even if not knowing names, people recognized faces and the type of clothes, usually billowing skirts, dresses and robes, in white or light colours, that marked each other as belonging to the same event, and therefore, were sharing a common language and working towards the same.

The main altar was built inside, and there were also chairs, audio-visual equipment and a screen. A handmade banner – done by one of the Priestesses and depicting the Goddess in Her Maiden form, dressed in white and pink, with flowing hair and a white dove, and with fire on her feet – was above the statue of the Goddess, also handmade by another Priestess. The altar was simple, with few elements composing it; however, throughout the conference it gained new elements, from the offerings of people and from elements belonging to the altars that were created for each ceremony.



*Image 21- The Maiden Goddess Altar, Portuguese Goddess Conference, May 2019*

The banners done by Lydia Rule were hanging from the ceiling, the very same that were present in each Glastonbury Goddess Conference and other Goddess Conferences, and are part

of the sacred space of those events.<sup>153</sup> For the organizer, a true Goddess Conference has to have these banners hanging.<sup>154</sup> Along the walls smaller altars representing the Goddesses could be found, invoking the Wheel of the Year created by the Conference organiser, and the seasons.



*Image 22- Lydia Rule's Banners, Portuguese Goddess Conference, May 2019*

As mentioned, this space would embrace the people during the three days of the Conference. As the theme of the Conference was “Heal the Feminine, Heal the Earth”, all the workshops, lectures, ceremonies and rituals were organised around this subject. It was the opportunity to embrace, to work and to heal perceived wounds, and for women to empower themselves individually and collectively. Those events were extensively focused on the physiological and biological aspects of being a woman, mentioning the need to embrace the relationship with menstruation, pregnancy, birth and fertility, and own their sexuality and pleasure, dimensions that for a long time were controlled or seen as something too shameful to speak about or experience, connected with oppressing patriarchal, misogynist and capitalist

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<sup>153</sup> The Banners were created by Lydia Rule, depicting interpretations of several Goddesses from different contexts and pantheons.

<sup>154</sup> The 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference, even online, also had the presence of the Banners, that travel from the United States to several countries for Goddess Conferences. In the case of this conference, every morning, Lydia Rule's niece gave a short talk about her aunt's work and the banner that she chose to speak about on that day.

structures and narratives. Therefore, this was the place for women to heal and empower themselves and, through it, also heal the planet, as stated on the conference website<sup>155</sup>:

For three days we will merge with this dimension, in the other side of the veil, in deep communion with our past Celtic heritage, reclaiming our almost lost traditions of celebrating the Lady in our way, holding space for allowing women's spirit to rise again in this world, strong and free from all the patriarchal conditioning...<sup>156</sup>

On the first day of the Conference, this feeling was already being shared and explored by the women in the event. One of the key moments of the Conference was called the "Blessing of the Elements", a small ritual moment in which the Melissa responsible for the group she was allocated to blessed everyone with the power of the elements – water, fire, air and earth. The Melissa from the group I was on called each one of us individually and asked us to think about what we wanted to release and wanted to receive from the elements with that ritual. The tent, under the afternoon sun of May, was stuffy and hot, filled with the mingling smells of incense, perfumes and sweat, and I felt the need to look for a fresher spot to sit while I waited for the rest of the group. I found it by the tent's opening, where a soft but fresh breeze came through. I observed the dynamics of the groups around me and noticed that one of groups the outside moved to sit near me. They talked and reflected on what it meant to be there and how they felt. Gratitude, liberation, and connection were some of the things they shared. One of the women spoke of the importance of being in contact with the Goddess, in a safe space, due to the attacks that women suffer worldwide, violence, misogyny, and patriarchy. There, they could be, rise, and "be firm in what we believe in".

This empowerment was spoken about by the various speakers attending the conference and could be seen and experienced during ceremonies and rituals. In one of the presentations, the speaker mentioned that creativity can lead to empowerment. According to her, they could find the growth and empowerment they were seeking at the Conference. It was the start of their journey. During the ceremonies and rituals, participants were invited to heal the wounds they carried through several means. Those wounds could be inherited from their ancestors,

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<sup>155</sup> As the website stated during those three days women were invited to "to dive deep into the Goddess mysteries of the Graal Maiden; Her Womb where the blood of life is contained, under the power of the Moon Goddess, awakening our cellular memory, receiving Her divine wisdom and inspiration, rescuing the innocence, the hope, the joy, the power of our inner child; bearer of the Goddess brightness and light, initiating rescue paths, dreaming and visualizing that world of sweetness, beauty, abundance, inclusion and meaning, which once was called the Hesperides Garden." <https://portuguesegoddessconference.weebly.com/what-is-it.html> (accessed 28 February 2020)

<sup>156</sup> Homepage of the Conference Website, accessed 28 February 2020: <https://portuguesegoddessconference.weebly.com/>

connected with a difficult relationship with family members, with traumas, and so on. In there they could connect with their bodies, and their emotions, good and bad, embracing themselves and the Earth, freeing themselves from oppressing structures that condoned their participation in the world, like patriarchy or capitalism (Aune 2015; Pike 2001; Zwissler 2009). Like in the majority of the contemporary religious and spiritual movements, the participants of this Conference were primarily middle-class women, from thirty to sixty years old. It is important to mention that we cannot take this as a universal feature, as already stressed before, since not just women or men from these age-groups look for these spaces. At the time, Alexandra, one of the youngest attending the conference, told me that the experience had an impact and transformed her:

First, I had two people there that made me dance. [Laughter] That made me do things that I usually would not do. I have become freer and different. With a new vision of the way I should express myself and be. Without a doubt, I left the conference changed. Not necessarily by what was organized at the Conference, but by my experiences there. The workshops, for instance... that one I cried my eyes out... so yes, without a doubt I came home changed. And with a different energy.<sup>157</sup>

As seen by the excerpt above, these moments are intense, they are transforming experiences for those participating in them. All the senses are engaged, what is only possible when there is a feeling of safeness, sacredness and community.<sup>158</sup> And it can transform the way the lived spiritual and religious lives of Pagans are perceived and felt. Mariana was also present in this First Portuguese Goddess Conference. I interviewed her almost a year after the Conference, and she revealed that the Conference was a key-moment in her Pagan life: first, because of the way the Priestesses combined the model developed in Glastonbury with the Portuguese *Bruxaria*<sup>159</sup>, and how this worked at the same time that the Feminine sorority and the feminine mysteries were explored; secondly, due to the rhythm the Conference took, since it had a ritual space open for seventy-two hours. She said:

I know how my hangover was, and of those that went with me but all those women...for sure that they could not be the same when they arrived home. They couldn't. None of

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<sup>157</sup> Excerpt from interview with Alexandra, in-person, November 2019.

<sup>158</sup> See Longman (2018) and her research on Women's Circles for similar discussion and descriptions. As Pike (2001) notes regarding the creation of sacred spaces for rituals at Neo-Pagan festivals, "participants expect that sacred space will make it possible for them to both go deeper into the self and to act more powerfully on the surrounding world." (2001: 24).

<sup>159</sup> Unfortunately, due to the constraints that affected the research, it was impossible to explore what *Bruxaria* entailed for my interlocutors, its specifications and differences regarding the Glastonbury Goddess Conference Model.

us were! (...) I had to go to my Temple and had to do grounding in my Temple. I was completely blazing. All that was missing were sparks coming out of my fingers! That was brutally triggering. Because the women that were in front of that – not from the Goddess Conference, but the ceremonialists – were consciously working the *Bruxaria* part. (...) They were not very worried about the model of Avalon [Glastonbury Goddess Conference Model]. Maybe because they knew that it wouldn't work very well there. Or what they would bring would serve much better the Conference than the Model. And they did it. And it was incredible. I have never seen Paganism being worked like that. I have never seen *Bruxaria* being worked like that. And it did not just show us that it works, but also that it is possible.

The experience in the Conference, is individual, lived and experienced with their bodies and senses; however, it is also collective, shared, and embodied as a group, physically and online, drawing awareness, appreciation, and connection to the natural world. But it also goes beyond the group connection. It implies the presence of an entity that is perceived to have an agency that goes beyond human boundaries. But it is connected with it and manifests itself. Mariana felt this presence and shared with me, after I asked her what were the main differences she felt after the conference, that

I do not say this innocently. I feel that the beings that awoke in that Conference, and that move under the Telluric Mantle of this tip of European Land, woke up somehow. And that all those women that work in that space in particular, and in that frequency, opened the doors to that power. I often feel her glued to the walls of my psyche, pressuring me. And I know it is not my Sumerian Pantheon. I know it is not Inanna. It is a power that comes from the Earth and pressures me to do things and not forget she is here. I believe this is one of the reasons that I look for in the Glastonbury Goddess Temple [Facebook] channel, to hear them talk about those things. Because I feel that it somehow appeases that power.

Mariana identifies that this power she could not name was awakened somehow and gained a much bigger presence because of the collective work that enhanced that power. As demonstrated in this chapter and previous ones, the collective movement towards transformation is inseparable from the personal. Or the personal from the collective, even more, when there are spaces that promote both personal and collective action. When it is done in different spaces, through different rituals and political actions, in different countries, but all the while working with a common goal: transformation and re-connection with the Earth Mariana

uses a fascinating metaphor to explain what she perceives to be the impacts of this international movement – that of acupuncture:

I have some doubts about this power. For instance, I do not know if this force is a force that is being awakened...let us imagine that the Glastonbury Temple is a form of acupuncture. It is like an acupuncture service. And you have all over the world points where someone is opening the doors for this force to manifest itself. I do not know if while they open these doors for Her to manifest itself, they are recreating Her... because I believe they are. I believe She is being recreated in this new format; and that She is going beyond that ideology thinks She is. Because one thing is talking about the Goddess of Avalon, about the Cale, Morrigan, Morgens, Santa Quitéria or Germana, or whatever. Another is to understand that She is a raw power! Because She is a raw power that glues itself to you. That wants your body. Wants your energy. Wants you to do things. Wants you to move. Wants you to give something. I believe that this voice is only one. [pause] I feel it. It is easy for me to tune in with Her... or it is easy not to ignore Her. She is not far away. Especially when in natural environments, She becomes louder.

While this power is being awoken, she believes it is much bigger than its expression in deities and people using the archetypes of goddesses to speak about it. It goes beyond human perception, but at the same time, it is felt. What Mariana states can be translated as a power that the Earth is manifesting and being heard by those attuned to it, which is something that several Contemporary Pagans have shared with me, and in some cases, were transported to the pages of this thesis. As she states, this power is louder and pressing in contact with nature. In this sense, it is not just a specific space but the whole planet that is manifesting, as she continues:

But I cannot localize Her only here. I do not think She belongs only to this land. It is a bit strange...if the goal was to wake up the Goddess of the Ancient Lands of Portugal, I believe that by doing that everyone, and in the same way, is waking something older than all these lands. (...) I believe that a part of our psychic work as a human collective shape... our anxieties shape the way the Gods appear to us. By which these forces appear. And the messages they bring and the learnings they bring. And one that is clearly being structured in a consistent and organized way by this [Glastonbury] Temple Movement, which is a movement that profoundly values the ecosystem and tries to guarantee our future. And this is a very, very real anxiety of the human collective. Let us imagine that this anxiety births a power. And this power unites itself to the natural



pattern we work in. It will have a message to give you: "either you take care of me, because I am literally your surviving spirit, or you die". And with this, you are plastered to a pattern you belong to, because it is natural.

Mariana's statement illustrates that some of the reasons that mobilize people to adhere to these religious and spiritual movements are related to personal and collective anxieties cultivated before the uncertainty and the unknown that the present and the future bring. In narratives about the Goddess, as a power that simultaneously provides a place for people to connect and promotes personal transformation and liberation, they find meaning and a language that translates these anxieties. As demonstrated at the beginning of the chapter and in Chapter 2, many of these narratives look to the past to provide a reference from which they may act. Mariana's understanding of this ancient past, where the Goddess was the main deity and societies were matriarchal, is inaccurate, illustrating that not all those following a goddess-oriented practice adhere to this myth. For her, what is important is what must be done today, and to find a way to answer the anxieties that are urgent for the continuity of life and to guarantee the future:

We are speaking about Ancient Goddesses with an understanding that has nothing of Ancient. Because today, we have a global consciousness of the dangers of the global that people did not have in those times. And I do not enter the romanticization because believing that "no, we were better a long time ago with matriarchy" is dangerous. There is no proof that it has happened. And it is not relevant! (...) Matriarchy will not save me. Not the one from the past. It will have to be a deeply aggressive and violent work today, here and now. And no one back there will be able to help me because no one knows what I am doing here, nor what forces I have to manage. Therefore, it has to be a work localized on today. But I do not doubt that this power is feeding on what was done in the past. I believe that what is being created by that [Goddess] Movement is being dressed in the Goddess narrative, but it is much more the human survival spirit than the Earth gaining a voice and speaking to us. [Pause] I can accept both. I accept that it is our survival instinct to gain a voice and legs and focusing us onto what the Earth is. But that there is an entity that we woke and that glued itself to us since we came from the Conference, we cannot deny. I have some difficulty to give it a name (...) maybe the only thing that it is enough to know about this power is that She exists, that She is here, and that She is pressing, pulling our hair and [saying] "come on, do something. Guarantee the future, come on. Guarantee the future". And I accept that.

And She does not need to be masked with antiquity. Even so, it is beautiful. It is simple [the narrative of the Goddess].

As has been shown through the example of the Portuguese Goddess Conference, Contemporary Pagans use rituals as a means to work and give meaning to personal and collective anxieties and uncertainties. Through them, they find empowerment and transformation, but also a space where they can be with like-minded people that provide security and legitimacy about what they feel before the social and structural pressure they feel about their gender roles. At the same time, the narrative of the Goddess provides a way to explain and work with these anxieties. Even if not all those that do so adhere to all the ideas like Mariana illustrated, they recognize the importance of the Goddess Movement in promoting a spiritual and religious space where life is sacralised, and where the need to rescue and care for the future is of paramount importance. The following section will approach the significant differences between the Portuguese and the Glastonbury Goddess Conferences, since the first was inspired by and followed the latter's structure. Illustrating the differences and continuities offers a deeper understanding of how Portuguese Contemporary Paganism is being created and developed in Portugal in relation to international settings; in this case with British Paganism, which was a significant influence on the movement in Portugal.

#### **4.4. The Differences Between the Goddess Conference in Glastonbury and in Portugal**

As discussed, the Goddess Conference is a relevant event for Contemporary Pagans, both to Goddess Movement practitioners and to those that follow other paths, mostly with Goddess-oriented approaches. This event becomes a space of gathering, socialization, embodied sacredness and collective ritualization. The fact that it follows a ritual and organizational model that works and is applied worldwide helps to disseminate its importance and the growing participation locally and internationally. However, based on the ethnographic experience I had with this event, both in Portugal and in the United Kingdom, and on the feedback, I received from those that participated in the event, there are apparent differences relating to how this model is implemented in specific locations. It is a fact that my ethnographic experience with the Glastonbury Goddess Conference was a particular one due to the COVID-19 restrictions. The online and digital experience differs significantly from the embodied and sensorial one – of being in the field. Therefore, I cannot fully compare my embodied experiences in the Glastonbury and the Portuguese conferences. What I can do, however, is to discuss the

differences I saw in terms of organization, narratives, rituals, and contributions of those participating in the Conferences. Throughout the contributions above, some of the voices in this written web have already hinted that the Portuguese Conference was different. We will now see how.

The Glastonbury Goddess Conference is based on a model created by Kathy Jones in 1996. Besides this Conference, Kathy Jones offers courses on Priestesses of Avalon that receive people from several countries. The women and men are therefore encouraged to look for the Goddess in their countries and lands, and are given a set of tools to provide, if they so wish, courses for Priestesses. The Portuguese Goddess Conference came from this genealogy. Luiza, the organizer, was taught by Kathy Jones in one of these courses and then started her work in Portugal. This led her to organize the conference. However, despite following the model created by Kathy Jones, she demarcates the Portuguese Conference and the Portuguese Goddess Movement as different from the Glastonbury one, due to specificities of the Portuguese land and traditions.

Other anthropologists studying the Goddess Movement in several countries recognize the implemented model. In Portugal and Spain, this movement was studied by Anna Fedele, which demonstrated how the particularities of the Iberian Contemporary Paganism are related to tensions that arise between local forms of Goddess veneration and the pagan paths and traditions that are imported from Anglo-Saxon countries. These groups adapt the imported ideas through cultural and religious mediators that transform them for the Southern European public. Through the analysis of the movement in Spain, the author demonstrated that there was a process of religious colonization and resistance at a moment when Contemporary Paganism was gaining public visibility, in which they adapted these imported traditions through a translation process that takes into account their catholic past, a need for secrecy and the fear of criticism and stigmatization. Fedele then demonstrates how people from Goddess oriented-groups negotiate tensions between local, cultural or national identities and their international and global influences, in which we can see a double movement between the construction of local and authentic forms of Paganism and their connection with the broader global movement (Fedele 2015). I agree to an extent with this statement since I also found this dimension during my fieldwork. However, at the same time, the Portuguese Goddess Movement wishes to affirm itself before the international movement as autonomous. If they can attain it is something that needs to be seen in the Future. For participants, the Portuguese Goddess Conference presents a clear difference from the model being implemented in Glastonbury, at least the First

Conference.<sup>160</sup> Even to those that were experiencing the Goddess Conference for the first time.

As mentioned above, the Conference's space belonged to a "Medieval" Pub. During breaks, it was usual for people to go there to drink and eat something and speak with each other, even without knowing the other person. On two different occasions, I ended up talking to one of the speakers at the Conference. She was American, a retired history professor and specialist in women's spirituality, and had attended the Glastonbury Goddess Conference several times. On the last day of the Conference, while we waited for lunch, I asked her if the Conference differed significantly from the Glastonbury one. She told me she enjoyed the conference very much, that it was a beautiful space and a well-organized event. However, it was different from Glastonbury. The ceremonies and rituals were very different from what she expected due to the Priestesses' background in *Bruxaria Tradicional*<sup>161</sup>, which brought a different energy to the ceremonies.

This different energy was also felt by Alexandra and Mariana, despite never having attended a Glastonbury Goddess Conference in person. Both thought that the Conference would be like what they had read about. On that November afternoon, while we sat in a bookstore with a cafeteria, drinking our tea while the rain poured outside, Alexandra told me that she went to the Conference because it was the first one, and she wanted to be there; she always wanted to attend a Goddess Conference:

It was not as I expected. Obviously, some of the things that were said ideologically do not agree with me; however, the Conference opened to me the doors to new approaches, mostly at the level of the Portuguese *Bruxaria Tradicional*. It was the entrance point for something I wanted to research. (...) It ended up being better than I was expecting, and I brought from there several teachings, mainly the Portuguese *Bruxaria Tradicional*, and that way of working. As for the Goddess worship...I did not learn anything that I did not know before or learn anything that I agreed with (...); however, I recognize its value and how important it is for the people. (...)

We kept talking, and at a particular moment, she mentioned that

To be honest, I was expecting something more...formal. I believe that what influenced

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<sup>160</sup> The second Portuguese Goddess Conference was organized in May 2022, since it was postponed two times due to the Covid-19 health risks and restrictions. It was scheduled for May 2021, then postponed to August 2021. They had to postpone it again due to the restrictions and the risks of infection. It finally took place in May 2022. I was unable to attend this second conference due to the project schedule and writing time of this thesis.

<sup>161</sup> For more on *Bruxaria* in Portugal see among others Paiva (2002[1997]). See Rodrigues (2004) for oral representations of these practices. For how *bruxaria* was mobilized in rural settings related with healing see Bastos (1985). For witchcraft in Europe see among others Rowland (1996) and Favret-Saada (1980; 2015).

a lot [how the conference was felt] was the presence of *Bruxas* there, instead of just Priestesses. That influenced me a lot, no doubt. The work of a witch is completely different from the work of the Priestess. (...) It is the same person doing something, but it is two different facets, doing different chores. (...) The *Bruxas*' work ended up raising the energy a lot, and the way it was being done. And also, personally, I did not go prepared because I thought I was just going to listen to lectures, people talking, and a little more points. I was not expecting to have rituals and exercises, and workshops and things like that. Therefore, that surprised me a lot. And it was worth it.

For Mariana, the Portuguese Goddess Conference was something unparalleled:

The Goddess Conference was organized in the international model, prepared for a great number of people and a great event. It started first by the fact that the great majority of women that made it happen knew what they were doing because they had already seen it happen. They were replicating a model that works practiced in Portugal, and it was fun. Because I do not know how it is in England, for I do not live there, and the cultural and mythological fabric of the social narratives escape me. But, for instance, I know that the majority of Portugal, in esoteric ways, does not miss the Mother Goddess so much. Not in the sense of maternity. Because for that you have Fátima. (...) What was mostly worked there was not the Mother Goddess, it was *Bruxaria*. *Bruxaria* and the feminine sisterhood and the feminine mysteries united women; it was not maternity. It was not the Mother Goddess holding them all. The frontal clash was with "So, will you join here around the broom and the cauldron, or not?" That was the most extraordinary thing of the Conference.

As was demonstrated, for those that were experiencing the Portuguese Goddess Conference, it was a unique moment that, despite following the Glastonbury model, was a manifestation of the strength of the local Portuguese practices and influences. While I focused here the on positive opinions of the Conference participants, in the next chapter, which is about power, I will provide a more critical analysis of these narratives, mainly related to the issue of authenticity. The following section will also focus on some of the issues and differences between the Portuguese and British Contemporary Paganism, which were unfolded during the research and need to be looked at in-depth to accurately describe Portuguese Contemporary Paganism while it is being lived.

## **4.5. Challenges Amongst Movement Towards Transformation<sup>162</sup>**

Despite the perceived equality, empowerment, freedom, and inclusivity found in Contemporary Paganism, several issues must be taken into account while analysing them. Several scholars have called our attention to the fact that the practitioners of these types of spirituality, despite advocating for horizontal and equal communities in gender relations, have at the same time reproduced gender stereotypes and power inequalities (Fedele, 2019). Therefore, I analyse these issues positioning myself as adhering to what Fedele proposes

adopting a gender lens to study spirituality and religion implies that we cannot take for granted the discourses of spiritual practitioners criticizing established religions and striving for gender-equal, non-hierarchical forms of spirituality, but need to verify if their claims have positive, verifiable results. Contemporary spirituality should therefore be studied along with other religious phenomena with an approach that tries to go beyond a theoretical and text-based analysis that does not take into account how spirituality is actually lived and performed in everyday life. (Fedele, 2019: 137)

During the course of the research, several were the conversations, narratives, online commentaries and online discussions that transpired about the perceived gender equality and acceptance offered by Contemporary Pagans. At the same time, they reinforced gender power relations and stereotypes that affected the supposed inclusivity of these groups. For instance, the gender binary is usually reproduced in the discourses and ritual practices of the groups, emphasising biological and physiological aspects. This excludes those not identifying with this binary approach to gender and sexuality. Following this tendency, it is common to connect these aspects with Nature, attributing natural qualities to gender characteristics and branding what it means to be a woman and a man. The naturalisation of gender – or a gendering of nature – takes place. Due to these issues, the danger of these movements becoming inaccessible spaces, both identity and economically- wise, is real. In the following section, these issues will be approached based on what was observed and analysed in the field, and on discussions I had with the people I was working with.

### **4.5.1. The Gendering of Nature: The Focus on Binary Energies, Physiological Aspects and Identity Access**

This chapter presents several examples of the Gendering of Nature, primarily those that equate

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<sup>162</sup> The issues identified in this section will be mobilized too in the next chapter about Power Dynamics.

women with the Earth and the understanding of the Earth as a Goddess. Therefore, Nature is seen as a female entity since it is the Goddess, and women are connected to Nature. This association reaffirms a historical and stereotypical view of women as connected with Nature, and therefore separated from Culture, while men are more connected with Culture. Even though these movements tried to change these perceptions and provide a continuing relationship between Nature and Culture as part of the same system of life, the use of these images reinforces the gender roles, images about what it means to be a woman, and the focus in physiological and biological aspects. It also reinforces the focus on binary female and male energies with distinct attributes and archetypes. However, despite recognizing the risks of these approaches, I also agree with Becci and Grandjen when they affirm that essentializing can “at times be a strategy of resistance in order to denounce in a more effective and emotional way the denigration of the environment and of women” (Becci, Grandjean 2018, p. 34), and that

Ecospiritualists *gendering* nature, or integrating gender roles and values into common theological interpretations, can be seen in a similar way as performers claiming *queerhood* or *queerness* and challenging heteronormativity through arts, texts and rituals such as those that scholars tend to observe and analyse in the field of contemporary spirituality movements and in *gendered spiritual ecology*. Though, as our ethnographies illustrate, no emancipatory agendas accompany the observed practices. (ibid, p. 35)

Another issue arises when the focus of the narratives is on physiological processes and biological ones. These are connected with several societal roles, such as women as mothers, nurturers, providers and carers since this is natural. In this view, women are naturally more empathic, worried for their children, and connect with their emotions, despite deconstructing this view and trying to transform the meanings attributed to it, in the process of empowerment and drawing sense from the processes, looking for alternatives, influenced by the feminist approaches that have shown the patriarchal conditioning in the construction of social roles. I propose that these difficulties relate to an issue found in semantics: the words they use have meanings that are hard to be drawn from, and have an associated history. It raises the question of whether they are really trying to give new meaning to these words and consciously using them, aware of the issues they present, or not.

For instance, at the beginning of May the Beltane Festival is celebrated, one of the eight festivals that integrate the Pagan Wheel of the Year. It is considered a fertility festival<sup>163</sup> that

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<sup>163</sup> About fertility festivals and agrarian festivities in May in Portugal see Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira (1984).

celebrates life, abundance, love and sexuality, since it is seen as the union between the Goddess and the God in Wicca and the feminine and masculine in other currents. This discourse can become highly heteronormative and shows the incongruency of Paganism when advocating for gender equality and accepting all sexualities and gender identities while reaffirming the gender binary in their lived religious and spiritual lives. Biological attributes are the basis for ritualist interactions and creations, reaffirming the feminine/women and the masculine/men binary. In this interaction, there is no space for those who do not identify with it, therefore, excluding community members with this rhetoric.

Besides, the focus on fertility that this pagan festival introduces is also based on heteronormative approaches, which the Wiccan path translates as the union of the God and the Goddess, and therefore of the Priest and Priestess. In other paths, this focus is less present, such as the Goddess Movement, but it is still held as a symbolic force, mainly when it also connects with the notions of motherhood – fertility equating with reproduction, excluding those that do not want to be mothers, or cannot be.

After the Beltane of 2020, I saw a workshop that was part of the Scottish Pagan Federation Online Conference about “Gender Diversity in Paganism”. In this workshop, the person in charge mentioned that it was necessary to change this approach; even if there is nothing wrong with doing so, there is always a search for other ways to become more inclusive during rituals because, besides people, there are also animals, elements and vegetation that do not adhere to these gender norms. If all forms of life are present in rituals, there is more than a gender binary to be taken into account in those spaces.

This workshop made me question whether this issue was debated in the Portuguese Pagan Movement. In this sense, I decided to publish in the Facebook group mentioned in the previous chapter a question regarding the theme, requesting their opinions and how the binary can be worked and re-analysed in the context. Most of those that answered shared that Paganism was inclusive and that they knew trans people, homosexual and heterosexual people that felt included. In their opinion, what is present is the energetic issue of the “female-male” energy, and not gender questions, because the energetic and biological function is “natural” and Paganism is based on what is found in Nature, and therefore classifications created in social domains have no space in ritual. Some answers were considered transphobic, defending that Transgender people wanting to access women’s spaces is problematic and dangerous. This was contested by most. Others agreed that it was heteronormative, and that Paganism should reconsider the binary approach. Every time this question arises in the Portuguese contemporary pagan milieu, there is some discomfort, I believe, because of its presence being new in the



Portuguese sociocultural and religious arenas. For instance, some issues being negotiated now in Portugal among the movement were discussions already debated in the United Kingdom a decade earlier.

However, it is debated in several contexts and is an issue that needs to be negotiated among Contemporary Pagans (Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Longman, 2020). While focusing on symbolic energies, not approaching the social questions that are interrelated with their lived experiences, they keep promoting a unique narrative that incurs in inaccessible and excluding spaces.

As was mentioned before, the gendering of Nature, understood as a female entity, and the focus on binary energies and opposition as female/male, maps the narratives of Contemporary Pagans. This creates an access barrier for those that identify as non-binary or Transgender, mostly the MTF<sup>164</sup> transitioning. Therefore, the equality that Contemporary Pagan groups advocate, in practical terms is not always encountered. Usually, the defence of the continued use of binary language is shielded on a symbolic value, as seen in the description above, related to the discussion of the gendering of Nature already presented and the evolutionist and biological approach that does not consider the myriad of identities. Since, in Nature, a primary distinction between male and female can be found, with associated energies, these energies are called upon when invoking the male and female attributes during a ritual, therefore working with a pattern that exists. When looking at these reasons, the barrier of semantics is present. Words and concepts have established semantic value as well as social and cultural value. These words and concepts are associated with several characteristics, which raises difficulties when it comes to finding another word or finding another concept that can be applied.

This issue is being discussed inside the movement, however far from being consensual. Some important people, such as Starhawk, have reviewed their works to become gender-neutral. The Glastonbury Goddess Conference started to apply gender-neutral language in their communication strategy, preferring to use “goddess-loving people” instead of women and men. Others mentioned that the creativity and heterogeneity of the movement provide the creation of spaces specific to LGBTQIA+, usually created by queer people, and therefore, they can have women-only or men-only spaces and groups. Others want to transform their rituals and rites in gender-neutral spaces, but they do not know how to do it because they cannot find the words, concepts, and symbology to sustain it.

In Portugal, Mora (she/they), a 23-year-old pagan and *bruxa*, despite the perceived gender equality and openness to LGBTQIA+ people in Paganism, does not feel that it happens like

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<sup>164</sup> Male-to-female transition.

that:

It is definitely a much more open space than other religious spaces, but it is still very much affected by the prejudices taught to us since we were young. Something that I have always found important in my devotional work is to create a safe space for LGBTQ+<sup>165</sup> people and racialized people<sup>166</sup> that are frequently marginalized in a community that is itself marginalized. Paganism's modern perspective does not include LGBTQ+ people from the moment that it works with a heterosexual and cisnormative spectre. Ideas such as the Sacred Feminine and Sacred Masculine are a double-edged sword in the sense that they stop being a form of empowerment and ends up being a form of identity exclusion of LGBTQ+. Some people use these ideas, the idea that have always existed, or a God and a Goddess, which are always paired in heterosexual couples, to deny a religious space to people that do not fit those ideas. (...) I know of LGBTQ+ people that were rejected from pagan circles for "complicating the dynamic" or having "other ideologies". These are not innovative ideas. LGBTQ+ people, when connecting with the Gods, have always seen these perspectives. Only now are they starting to be heard, and change always brings rebellion, unfortunately. Further, one of the most beautiful things about Paganism is its constant evolution, and not allowing it [the evolution and transformation] is a disservice to what the Gods teach us.<sup>167</sup>

She kept writing, sharing her view, and making a truly relevant point, which was already approached at the beginning of this thesis, when I mentioned the history of the LGBTQ+ movement. The socio-cultural background cannot be totally erased, even in a process that focuses only on the spiritual and religious dimensions. As she/they/him notes

The Portuguese pagan space reflects Portugal regarding these themes. The LGBTQ+ people are entirely rejected or are a reference mark. For me, non-inclusive Paganism is not Paganism at all. Pagans honour their ancestors. And those ancestors that had gay relationships, racialized ancestors, ancestors that did not feel well in their body, ancestors that suffered from sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia? A Pagan honours Nature. Why distort Her, and say that it is "against Nature" what is natural in

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<sup>165</sup> Mora uses in her answer the form LGBTQ+ instead of LGBTQIA+.

<sup>166</sup> I will not approach racial issues in this thesis, because it was outside the scope of my research questions and did not appear in the field until this interview. The fact it is invisible in the field it is an issue, and mirror of Portuguese society colonial wounds, and can be itself a research topic. For this research, I did not have the time, means and space to approach in depth as it should be. I note however the people with whom I worked and encountered in the field are Caucasian. For a discussion of the issue in the context of Contemporary Paganism see Maya (2019).

<sup>167</sup> Testimonial given by Mora via email, March 2023.

all beings, when the true thing that they do not see in Nature are the divisions we build to decide who deserves to live or die? A pagan honours celebration. What is more beautiful than celebrating who we are, living each moment looking for our own “self”, and letting it exist, accepting those around us, and sharing happiness among us?

Until the day that LGBTQ+ identities are approached in the same way inside a religious community, that community is not truly safe and equal. We have to talk about these issues, take active measures to balance the scales and protect the people who already suffer for being who they are and do not need to suffer with whom they should share a common passion.<sup>168</sup>

It is not only the lack of inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ people that is an issue in these spaces, mainly in the Goddess Movement, despite the transformations to this end. When the Portuguese Goddess Conference was announced, stating that the event would be open to women and men, there was great controversy from the part of women that understood that the Goddess Conference, and the celebration of the Goddess, should be a women’s only space, that men already held enough space in society. But the organizers maintained that they would welcome everyone, and men were well received during the event because it is necessary that they also have contact with the Goddess in order to change and be participants in societies’ transformation. At the end of the event, every woman joined hands above their heads, created a tunnel, and the men would pass through it like they were born again. Similarly, in Glastonbury, the presence of men was contested in the beginning, but in both cases, the organizers kept the event open. As Mary and Kate, the members of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference affirm:

We include all genders and all that because we definitely changed the target, we say “all goddess-loving and curious people”, you know? So, it’s not just for women. We make that very clear. It’s not just for women and men, it’s for all genders and also how you identify sexually. We are actively promoting that (...) bringing men to the place that is most seen, the Priestess Circle (...). The overall reaction to that was positive. For us, it was beautiful. It was beautiful to create that deep space of ceremonial work and sitting in circle with men and creating together.

For the participants in the Conference, it was well received. In the talks given by men, several synchronous and asynchronous commentaries were shared stating how good and

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<sup>168</sup> Testimonial given by Mora via email, March 2023.

necessary it was to see men following the path of the Goddess and embodying Her. As Kate said, “I am interested in a world of equality and inclusivity, and I think that is the way of the Goddess, or that is certainly the way of the Goddess to me.”

As well as the issues that arise from the focus on the gendering of Nature during Contemporary Pagan’s lived religious and spiritual experiences, there are also economic and financial inaccessibility issues that must be taken into account when analysing these movements. Due to their visibility and impact, the Goddess Conferences are important events from which we can perceive these economic access issues, as will be seen.

#### **4.5.2. Inaccessible Spaces: Economic Access**

The issue of economic and financial access is also a pressing issue in this context. Walking hand-in-hand with the social class marker, approaching these through the gender lens unveils several discrepancies. The first challenge is structural. As has been shown, the majority of people that are drawn to Contemporary Paganism are those that identify as women. In these movements, and particularly in specific paths like the Goddess Movement and the Reclaiming tradition, they find a safe place where they feel heard, included, nurtured, understood and empowered; however, to attend the social dimension of these spaces, during the lived experience of the group, it is necessary to find financial and economic resources and time. Yet, women are structurally conditioned by two issues: on the one hand, they are the ones receiving less income due to unequal salaries. In 2020, in the European Union, women’s hourly earnings were 13.0% below men’s. In Portugal, this difference was 11.4% in the same year, while in the United Kingdom, in 2018<sup>169</sup> was 19.8% (Eurostat 2021). This difference is aggravated in the life course of women since the gender pay gap may increase as a result of career interruptions women may experience due to motherhood, care and support for ascendants and descendants, incapacity, and health issues<sup>170</sup>; on the other, and related with the first, women are the ones most affected by the double working responsibilities (Carrasco Bengoa 2018; Tronto 1993; Comas-d’Argemir 2017) what results in less time and availability for themselves and to attend events.

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<sup>169</sup> I am considering the data from 2018 for the United Kingdom since, due to Brexit, it was the last year it entered the European statistics.

<sup>170</sup> According to the 2021 Eurostat statistics on gender pay gap by age, the difference in Portugal between women and men with less of 25 years is of 7.8%, but between 25 to 34 years old it raises to 9.3%; 35 to 44 years old to 11.5%; and 45 to 54 years old is of 15.0%. In the United Kingdom, in 2018 the difference in the difference life stages: less 25 years old is of 5.3%; 25 to 34 years old - 10.0%; 35 to 44 years old – 18.6%; 45 to 54 years old – 27.5% (Eurostat 2021). The data here used is done with the awareness of the limitations of this form of quantitative method, mostly because it does not consider several factors like class, health, gender identity, variances in life course, among others.

Therefore, the claim that these spaces are inclusive and accessible can be questioned when looking at them through these lenses. It is so for everyone that wants to occupy these spaces, and it is common for women to look for these movements to find the support that their partners, society, and State do not provide them during their lives. However, even if not consciously, these spaces are for those who can, but not for everyone. And from this, a clear class distinction is perceived since the financial capacity and the support at home facilitates their involvement. This marker is also seen in embodied ways of being, from the clothes, narratives and how they conduct themselves or who has the means to invest in the apprenticeships and courses. It is true that anyone that feels drawn to these movements but does not fit these markers can find ways to participate. But it is also true that when people are worried if their income is enough to sustain them until the end of the month, or are struggling to provide basic needs, this overlaps any spiritual, therapeutic and social movement.

For instance, to attend the Goddess Conference in Portugal you had to pay a ticket for the three days, ranging between 130 to 200 euros, depending on how soon you bought it. In 2019, the minimum wage in Portugal was 600 euros per month (Pordata 2022). If we consider another 150 to 200 euros for accommodation, transportation, and food, going to one of the events costed around half the minimum wage at the time. In the case of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, a ticket costs between 400 and 600 euros. For those not from Glastonbury, or from abroad, it also implies great costs with accommodation and transportation. Attending can have a total cost of more than 1000 euros. This implies and reinforces that those attending these events come from a middle to upper economic class with the means to cover this investment. Or if they are not, it requires time to gather the financial resources to go or a great sacrifice.

Some scholars have criticized these movements as part of a marketplace at the service of capitalism (Carrette 2005; Wood 2003; Dawson 2011), and that although these movements criticise the system – in this sense and practice – they may be reinforcing it; they are also attuned to the issue. Most organizations try to develop strategies to bridge these issues and work towards a more inclusive event through strategies such as lower price tickets for unemployed, single parents, or people with lower resources. The Glastonbury Goddess Conference in 2020 and 2021 created several ticket typologies for participants; or payment modalities for those requesting them. Besides, the fees requested for big events such as the Goddess Conference, or solidary values for smaller events, are understandable and legitimate. There are costs with venue rental, organization, audio-visual, materials, and speakers that in some cases need to be supported and paid. Many of the groups and associations do not have financial resources besides quotas paid by their members, or profits from selling merchandising or organizing events and

courses. We live in a capitalist system difficult to get away from; therefore, even if this reinforces the access discrepancy and conditions of the people that create these spaces, which does not mean that they are not aware of these issues.

Another issue that arises in terms of access has to do with knowledge. Contemporary Paganism, despite being a Nature-based religious and spiritual movement – as it has been developed in the last one hundred years – is highly scholarly, based on historical, archaeological, anthropological, and sociological knowledge. Accessing this knowledge is necessary to better understand certain books and information, which is easier now than it was in the last century. Besides, there is knowledge gained from the embodied, sensorial, and spiritual engagement, or based on the local experience, or even vernacular knowledge. Some of the issues pointed out here may not be relevant to the personal lived experience, and they do not imply that this is transversal for all people since Contemporary Paganism is so heterogeneous; however, these issues emerge and need to be addressed when analysing Contemporary Paganism, particularly in its social and public dimensions.

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One cannot state that all Contemporary Paganism is feminist. It is a too heterogeneous movement to make that affirmation. Some people identify as feminists and transpose that to their spiritual and religious lives, others dismiss feminism completely. It will depend on their choices, paths followed and understanding of what feminism is. However, the influence of the political movement as a whole to Contemporary Feminism is undeniable and needs to be taken into account when analysing gender in Contemporary Paganism. I started by discussing the academic literature about gender, religion, and spirituality, discussing the relationship between feminism, religion and spirituality and the secular. I have demonstrated how feminist spirituality and ecofeminism are of great importance to the Contemporary Paganism's engagement with gender and emancipation. The first is more explicit since it directly influences the Goddess Movement, and the latter because it combines ecological concerns and feminist calls for liberation for women and the earth. These movements legitimized the importance of feeling empowered and liberated and fighting for equality while being part of a lived religious and spiritual movement that recognises these calls.

Through the analysis of the Goddess as a living entity and in its Earth form, celebrated during the 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference and the first Portuguese Goddess Conference, I demonstrated that while engaging with the Goddess as the Earth Contemporary Pagans are reinforcing how the personal and the collective – already approached in the previous

chapter – is of great importance for their presence in the public space. While working on the personal – participants’ wishes, needs, emotions – and the collective – the broader community in interconnection – through ritualized forms of engaging with the world, they participate in the public sphere and promote forms of caring for themselves and for the planet. These ritualized moments are mapped by references for transformation and personal empowerment, which ultimately have collective impacts. I argued then that one should not take for granted the distinction between the personal and the collective since, when analysing the lived experiences of Ecocentric Pagans, it encompasses complexity and the trespassing of these analytical borders.

While it is a positive thing that they are mobilizing to assert their social place and reconsider their gender roles, at the same time they reproduce several issues that can become harmful. I demonstrated that while engaging with the Goddess, they reproduce several gender essentialist views. While making the connection between women-Goddess-Earth or a gendering of Nature, they do so focusing on physiological and biological dimensions that exclude other forms of identity affirmation that do not adhere to a binary and heteronormative understanding of the world or their identities. Besides, many Goddess-oriented spaces have access issues, not just the abovementioned identity ones, but also financial ones, since the fees to go to some of these spaces are not supported for the majority of the population from the Contemporary Pagan milieu, as I demonstrated through the example of the two Goddess Conferences analysed. This access issue is even more relevant in Portugal, with an impoverished middle class and the majority of the contemporary pagan movement being very heterogeneous, as discussed.

These issues, mostly related to financial and economic access, will be approached in the next chapter, in which I will analyse the several power dynamics that emerged during the research. I will approach the influences of structural power, leadership and rights’ relations, and empowerment as being central to the discussion of power in Contemporary Paganism. While negotiating these power dynamics, I will also present their different understandings of politics and a short overview of the rise of far-Right-inspired movements inside Contemporary Paganism in Europe, in relation to what could be gathered with the fieldwork in Portugal and, to some extent, in the United Kingdom.

## **“Being a Pagan is Fighting for the Rights of all the Sons, Daughters and Children of the Gods”: Power Dynamics at Play**

This web is almost finished. Now is the time to look at the last sustaining thread, which symbolizes Power. Power relations has been a constant in how human animals organize and perceive the world, manifesting itself in different forms. Analysing this dimension provides a deeper understanding of the complexity of the lived experiences of people and shows that this dimension, besides always being present, also goes beyond the notion of power as a ruling force where there is an oppressor and the oppressed.

In the case of Contemporary Paganism, this dimension has different meanings and dynamics pending on the angle one looks at it. Power may be related to magic and the capacity to transform reality through this tool; it can also be related to empowerment; at the same time, it relates to leadership roles, and contesting this leadership in a movement that defends the freedom of cult and criticizes the hegemonic Judaeo-Christian religious model for the presence of leaderships; it also appears in the form of structural powers like capitalism and patriarchy, to name a few of the ways by which power dynamics are at play in the field.

This chapter will analyse these dynamics, and is organized into four sections: the first one consists of an overview of the discussions about power in Anthropology, particularly in the field of Religion and Spirituality; the second is a discussion about the different forms of power dynamics at play in the context of Contemporary Paganism, based on the data gathered during fieldwork; and finally, and since it is impossible to speak about power without speaking about politics, particularly when one is analysing a movement deeply influenced by political and social movements, the third section will consist of a discussion about the different meanings and understandings that politics have for the Contemporary Pagans with whom this research was conducted. And finally, it will be approached the echoes of the far-right ideals in the European Contemporary Paganism.

### **5.1. Brief Notes about Power, Anthropology and Religion**

Power is a widespread dimension and one of the key elements analysed in Social Sciences. As Eric Wolf put it, “power is implicated in meaning through its role in upholding one version of



significance as true, fruitful, or beautiful, against other possibilities that may threaten truth, fruitfulness or beauty” (1990, p. 593). Since the dawn of Anthropology, power and politics have been central but contested concepts in the discipline.<sup>171</sup> Power was analysed through the State-centric (or Stateless and anti-State) top-down approaches related to governance<sup>172</sup>, as well as in relation to social stratification, gender and racial identities, institutions, colonialism and imperialism (Kingsolver 2010), postcolonial and decolonial critique (Asad 1973; Abu-lughod 1990; Mignolo 2011), and its symbolic impacts (Bourdieu 1991), just to name a few.

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus on power has shifted to the contradictory, differentiating and creative ways by which power is lived in the everyday lives of people and found in different dimensions of social life that go beyond the State (Victoria 2016), much influenced by Foucault’s approach to power. For this author, power was not something static, but was in constant creation, being produced and reproduced during social interactions in different forms, times and places, while “power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (Foucault 1980, p. 39).

Pierre Bourdieu’s approach to power is another influential approach in anthropological theory, understood “as engendered through language and everyday practice. Cultural symbols and practices embody social distinction and serve to shape hierarchies of power – with culture acting as a form of capital, a limited good that provides those who are able to concentrate and control it with access to influence and advantage in relations of domination” (Niezen 2018, p. 5, analysing Bourdieu’s approach). These social hierarchies and power relations are therefore reproduced and embodied in people’s daily lives and are not just enforced by external political and economic structures that control people.

One way through which power has been deeply analysed in its embodied dimension is that of religion and spirituality.<sup>173</sup> Power is discussed and contested among religious and spiritual

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<sup>171</sup> There is a long discussion about power in the discipline. Niezen (2018) provides an overview that resumes some of these approaches.

Wolf (1990) distinguishes four modes in which power can be analysed: as a potency, capability or attribute of the person; the interpersonal dynamics; the one that controls the settings where people move; and the structural power. All these types of power have been analysed in anthropological scholarship. For the propose of this thesis, I will analyse how power dynamics are articulated in religious and spiritual milieus, particularly Contemporary Paganism, looking at all these levels.

<sup>172</sup> See Scott (1998; 2009) for more on the discussion about power and the State.

<sup>173</sup> Bandak (2018, p. 5) presents and overview of how religion and politics/power have been approached in Anthropology. The author presents the different ways that these axes interact: religion as politics, in which religion is used to forge alliances; religion in politics, in which religious sentiments are expressed through the political; religion out of politics, is the one translated by the secularization thesis, for instance; and religion not politics entails the separation of these too spaces to affirm a space for religion

contemporary movements, mainly amongst spiritual and religious groups that contest institutional religious forms. However, as identified by Fedele and Knibbe (2013), that has been seldom thematised analytically in the scholarship about these movements. The authors identify two perspectives that have been applied to these movements. The first relates to the proposition that spirituality empowers the people, aiding them in resisting the dominating social structures that affect their lives. It is therefore thematized in terms of personal empowerment through these practices. The second approach is based on the proposition that contemporary religion and spirituality are at the service of capitalism.<sup>174</sup> In this approach, as noted by the authors, “spiritual practitioners appear as pawns in the hands of their spiritual teachers, even while describing themselves as empowered human beings that follow the whispers of their innermost self” (*ibid*: 14).

In the ethnographic accounts gathered in the volume organized by the authors, they propose to look beyond the dichotomy of being empowered versus being a pawn in the capitalist system, focusing on the self-understanding of people and their agency, and on how, through embodied practice, spirituality is culturally reproduced and socially organized. They show how authority is challenged, maintained, claimed and contested and how viewpoints and voices are permanently silenced in this power process (*ibid*: 15).

Another way used by scholars to discuss power is related to the proposition that the processes of secularization behind the separation of the religious power from the State led to a perceived autonomy of these two dimensions, and that religion had lost its place in society, as have been discussed before in this thesis.<sup>175</sup> Religion and Spirituality are relegated to the private, domestic domain, while politics and power are public.<sup>176</sup> However, at the level of the daily lives of the people, this division is contested and several authors, such as Handelman and Lindquist, asserted that even in “secular States including those that formally separate church and state, religious institutions actively and influentially take part in the life of political and civil society, and groups and individuals inspired by ‘religious’ values change cultures and societies in ways that few could have predicted” (2013, p. 2). Therefore, religion, spirituality, politics, and power cannot be understood separately, being part of a globalized and relational

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<sup>174</sup> This approach was presented by Carrette and King (2005) that aimed to discuss how spirituality can be released from the big business power, and people can resist.

<sup>175</sup> On the Introduction and Chapter 4.

<sup>176</sup> This has been contested by those critics of the secularization thesis, such as Talal Asad (1993), that calls the attention to the fact that what is perceived as religion and the secular are historically and socially constructed and transformed through time, subjects and institutions. Besides, authors such as Saba Mahmood (2001) have shown how religion and spirituality can be forms of affirmation and liberation, not oppressing dimensions. People constructed their empowered selves through the engagement with religious processes.

process (*ibid*).

Moreover, recent scholarship has contested this separation between the personal/private and the political, showing how these dimensions can also be political. In *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves* (2020), Fedele and Knibbe argue that when studying contemporary spirituality, the division public-private must be problematized since, as informed by feminist scholarship, this division relates to gender as well as with the division between the religious and the secular.<sup>177</sup> The private has been the place of most of the reproductive work and, therefore, of social reproduction, done mainly by women.<sup>178</sup> As a gendered space, the concerns of women have been dismissed and enclosed in these spaces. Therefore, personal, spiritual, and religious choices are perceived to be private. These only become public when certain religious people perceive that sexual morality is being questioned and bring to the public sphere campaigns against abortion; dimensions are mobilized to condemn abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights to marriage, adoption, and conception. Feminist scholarship has been showing how this opposition between the private-public is problematic, given that

keeping “women’s concerns” out of the public domain and confining them to the private sphere is a way of depoliticizing these concerns, which second-wave feminism successfully resisted through the slogan that the “personal is political”. (...) Taking seriously what goes on in the private domain also means recognizing that the personal and the private are intricately lined with the political arrangements of our societies. (Fedele, Knibbe 2020, pp. 12–13)

While Contemporary Paganism is not changing cultures and societies, it is undeniable the influence that power and politics<sup>179</sup> have in what motivates them and is motivated by their religious and spiritual approaches, as well as in these mobilizations of the personal as political, even if sometimes they do deny that what they are doing is political. Furthermore, Contemporary Paganism is an example of how pluralized and creative religious and spiritual expressions are today, since it combines “the esoteric and the popular scientific, and religious discourses, ideas and practices (...) putting together hybrid practices and beliefs.” (*ibid*:42-43).<sup>180</sup> This is why I agree with José Victoria when the author states that “power relations could

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<sup>177</sup> This distinction is central in the scholarship about religion, with several approaches. For an example, see the dialogue between Butler, Habermas, Taylor and West (2011).

<sup>178</sup> See Carrasco Bengoa (2017), Salleh (1995) and Dowling(2021), among others, for a discussion about reproductive work.

<sup>179</sup> Politics is here understood the same way that Handelman and Lindquist propose its use as “the mundane games of power, struggles for access to and the right to manage material and symbolic resources that give prestige and satisfaction, including those of safe belonging and a secure identity in a mobile and fragmented world.” (2013: 22)

<sup>180</sup> Following this affirmation, the authors call the attention to the fact that these international and global webs of interrelatedness, and the amalgamation of cultural forms, “symbols and practices, disengaged from their referents

be understood as differential capacities and strategies to make society, in a range of mutually constituting scales and contexts” (2016, p. 156). Power dynamics in the context of this thesis are therefore used to understand how society’s power structures influence the life of Ecocentric Pagans, how they reproduce it and how they are co-creating society through their spiritual, religious and political approaches to the world, and through their particular focus on gender relations and environmental approaches that inform both personal and collective actions; to summarise, through their embodied experiences. Hannah Arendt understands power to be the language that arises when action is mediated in the world (Victoria 2016, cf Arendt). This language translates the relational nature of the several processes of being in the world. How contemporary Pagans do it differs from situation to situation, and include several scales they engage with, are influenced by, and use to seek this power. This will be analysed in the next section with specific ethnographic examples.

## **5.2. Contemporary Paganism and Power: Different Forms of Power Dynamics at Play**

This research has shown that there are different power dynamics at play in Contemporary Paganism. Some of these dynamics are perceived at the level of embodied and relational experiences; others connect with broader power influences and have been addressed in the previous chapters by the ethnographic descriptions, conversations, and narratives shared. More concretely, this section will analyse these dynamics by dividing them into three groups: the impacts and engagement with structural power; the power related to leadership and rights; and empowerment.<sup>181</sup>

### **5.2.1. The Structural Power**

Structural power touches every dimension of social life, shaping “the social field of action as to render some kinds of behaviour possible while making others less possible or impossible” (Wolf 1990, p. 587). Furthermore, analysing the structural power, as Wolf states, “is useful precisely because it allows us to delineate how the forces of the world impinge upon the people we study” (*ibid*: 588). I consider structural power to be those organizing structures embedded

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and circulating around the globe, provide raw materials for creating identities, supporting local and regional voices earlier quelled by grand narratives” (44)

<sup>181</sup> I will not include those dynamics related with gender relations and with their engagement with nature, since they were already approached in the previous chapters.

in society that influence a person's life. I include in these Patriarchy, Capitalism and Markets, Neoliberalism and Class division, which will be analysed next. Despite separating these dimensions for the analysis, all intertwine and are understood as part of the structural, organizational social system.

### **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy is a form of male dominance, based on the figure of the patriarch, with “a particular organization of relations of power that involves not only men over women, but also men over other men”, and that is “intertwined with other structures of power: colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, racism, and so forth” (Ortner 2014, p. 534). It is used here in the same way Ortner proposed it, as a term that invokes the idea of social and political formation, including several processes such as “male dominance”, “male superiority” or “sexism” (*ibid*: 533). It encompasses then patriarchy as a system of social power but also as a system of cultural categories and personal identities. As a cultural classification system, it is based on the concept that the world is divided into two genders, "women" and "men", which are both defined as different and unequal (*ibid*: 534). As the author states, “it is a ‘structure’ in the technical sense; it is a set of relations between relations” (*ibid*: 535).

For those Pagan groups and people I worked with – that had a feminist influence – patriarchy is one of the structural powers most criticized, and is pointed out as the cause for women's oppression. It has been discussed by the participant of the Portuguese Goddess Conference that I overheard affirming that women need to rise and fight; and by the Extinction Rebellion women that gave the talk at the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, when they stated that patriarchy affected the planet's health. It was reinforced in workshops, talks, informative materials and events descriptions in several moments of the fieldwork I conducted among women. Behind many of these narratives are two theories that, despite being important for Contemporary Pagans, have no scientific proof or backup: the first is Margaret Murray's theory of the survival of fertility cults, women-centred, throughout the centuries; the second, Marija Gimbutas reading of the myth of the matriarchal past.

In 1921 Egyptologist Margaret Murray wrote the controversial book *Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*, in which, through her analysis of European witch-trials transcripts, she postulated that those that were on trial were members of an underground religious pagan fertility cult that worshipped the Horned God, that still existed at the time. Her thesis influenced Gerald Gardner's studies on modern witchcraft, who despite worshipping the Horned God, also worshipped the Goddess, organized in covens with a High Priest and Priestess

and passed through initiation (Cusack 2009). This thesis had been contested, and Murray was accused of fabricating the information. Anthropology has shown no proof of a European fertility cult that prevailed throughout the centuries. The same can be said about women-centred and goddess-worshipping, and matriarchal societies (Eller 2005).

As mentioned in Chapter 2 and in the last chapter, the Myth of the Matriarchal Past was highly explored by Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994), an archaeologist that supported the thesis of the existence of an original Goddess worshipped by Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures of the “Old Europe”. During her excavations she found several feminine figurines which she understood to be religious icons, concluding that these societies were women-led, were peaceful societies and practised a religion based on the Great Goddess.<sup>182</sup> It influenced spiritual feminists and the already established Contemporary Pagan groups that engaged and combined feminist spirituality with their practices, and presented an alternative to the idea of the male God. Worshipping the Goddess was “no longer historical and theoretical; it was contemporary, and it quickly captured the hearts and spirits of numerous women who decided to give it a try, to see what difference it might make to address and envision god as female.” (Eller 2005, p. 7)

Murray’s and Gimbuta’s Theories, even if unsustainable, were significant influences on feminist spirituality and gained relevance in the contemporary pagan milieu. They influenced several feminist spirituality groups in the 60s and 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, including Wicca and the Goddess Movement (Zwissler 2018b) because they proposed an alternative to the androcentric narrative and patriarchal organization of society. “Goddess religion particularly seeks healing from wounds created by the patriarchy and worshippers of the Goddess, male and female, view themselves as revitalizing a decadent and dying Western society, and as participants in a revolution that will save the environment and assure a better future for humanity” (Cusack 2009, p. 336 cif Rountree, 2002: 486). As Eller points out, the creation of these sacred stories consists in a revision of Western history, consisting in a reconstruction of a perceived past of societies that were once women-ruled and matriarchal. The creation of this sacred history “is an effort to deal religiously with a challenge faced by all feminists: that of finding an adequate explanation for the existence and persistence of male dominance.” (Eller 1991, p. 281) As the author stated, some years later,

spiritual feminists added to the already clear feminist appeal of matriarchal myth – that

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<sup>182</sup> As Eller (2005) states the attention that Gimbutas gained during the 70s and 80s from spiritual feminists, lead her to “grew progressively bolder in her claims, believing she had decoded the religious symbolism of Neolithic times. She found epiphanies of the Goddess in everything from female figurines to wavy lines and chevrons incised on pottery.” (Eller 2005, p.8)

it limited male dominance to a brief historical phase – a more powerful and more timeless attraction: that of conducting ritual, sharing sacred time with others, and asking favours and being blessed by the Goddess, who is both idealized self and idealized feminine. With its openness to religious creativity and its profound acceptance of female being – whatever its participants perceived that to be – feminist spirituality went well beyond treating matriarchal myth as a helpful idea. (Eller 2005, p. 7)

The mythological and social value of this opposition between patriarchy and matriarchy provides an alternative language that gives meaning and legitimacy to the anxieties and inequalities that women in these movements feel. They recognize the influence of this structural power in the way society is organized and how life in the world is perceived, but also look for ways to confront these same structures, contesting them through their religious, spiritual and political embodied lives.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, patriarchy is intertwined with other power structures, among them capitalism. The influence of capitalism will be analysed in the next section, as we will see.

### **Capitalism and Markets**

Capitalist power, as well as market relations, influence the way that society is organized. As Tsing states, “imagining the human since the rise of capitalism entangles us with ideas of progress and with the spread of techniques of alienation that turn both humans and other beings into resources. Such techniques have segregated humans and policed identities, obscuring collaborative survival” (2015, p. 19). We have been organized around ideas of progress, value, accumulation, resources, and wealth, using them to justify oppression, segregation and inequality. It is ingrained in how some of our social relationships take place as forms of transactions in Western society. It also impacted the relationship with Nature, which was looked upon as a means to an end, to be explored and extracted. Contemporary Paganism, like other environmentalist movements, looks for ways to overcome these issues, contesting and looking for re-connection and stability. However, Contemporary Pagans cannot flee the impact of capitalism in their lives and being part of this system. Affirming this does not mean I share the idea that we are pawns at the hands of these structures, and that there is nothing we can do. I believe that while still under the influence and impact of these structures, human beings have the tools to contest and creatively reframe and navigate the seas of capitalist power.

The impacts of capitalism are more implicit than explicit when we compare them with the role that patriarchal power holds on the embodied experience of people. But they are relevant,

mainly when one looks at the critique that is done to these movements as individualistic and serving the marketplace, focusing on market relations and profits, as Carrette and King (2005) postulated, and as was exposed by Fedele and Knibbe (2013) – which was discussed in the previous section as one of the ways academics have been looking at the issue of power in contemporary religion and spirituality.

While this criticism can be made – and is legitimate to an extent, mainly when it points out that the access to the spaces is conditioned by economic and financial power – one must keep in mind that these movements cannot be drawn away from the organizational system based on capital exchanges and market demands for subsistence. Therefore, besides the profits that may be connected with these activities, some costs must be sustained: for events, in which a room or space must be rented, with materials and suppliers. For instance, both the organizers from the Portuguese and the Glastonbury Goddess Conference wished that they could lower the prices of the tickets but could not do so because the costs associated with the organization of the events were unsustainable without that fee. In the case of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, they created several ticket typologies: one for unemployed people, students, lower incomes, or single mothers.

Besides, most people with whom this research was conducted do not dedicate themselves fully to activities in the contemporary pagan milieu, holding nine-to-five administrative jobs for their subsistence. Some of the institutions and groups depend on membership fees to survive. Other groups with informal status develop strategies for self-financing through the contribution of all those involved or through symbolic exchanges.

Contemporary Pagans are then conditioned by forms of social organization that are widespread, not being particular to these movements. I defend that focusing on the critic of individuality and market service leaves out more complex forms of engagement and creative strategies to integrate these power structures, the liminal power dynamics that are at play in society as a whole, and the strategies people create to face these structures. There are specific issues related to subsistence and survival while inserted in a system like capitalism that have to be safeguarded. This leads to the following structural power dynamic identified during the research, which was already approached in previous chapters: that of class division and access.

### **Class Division and Access**

As has been shown, access to some contemporary pagan events is conditioned by social status, which walks hand-in-hand with economic and financial capacities. Most of the research about Contemporary Paganism and similar religious and spiritual movements has pointed out that



most people attending these spaces come from the middle to the upper classes. In this research, I have been showing that even if this was true for a previous generation now the access to these spaces is much more egalitarian when we consider a younger generation, born in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, that do not belong to an intellectual and economic elite.

However, some differences must be considered. First, the path discussed – in which are situated paths such as the Goddess Movement – mapped by significant events such as the Goddess Conference in both countries here analysed, and courses and workshops, where there is a clear class distinction in, for instance, the Pagan Federation (and International) members. However, this should not be considered at face value, since solitary practitioners not belonging to this social stratification may be Goddess Movement and spirituality's adherents. Second, knowledge plays a crucial role in the question of access. Contemporary Paganism is a highly intellectual movement in which practitioners are avid readers of academic scholarship produced in the Social Sciences, like Anthropology, Archaeology and History. The entrance into any Pagan path implies research more or less accurate, nonetheless, it implies a capacity to learn from dense resources and access materials that people with less studies will find difficult. And knowledge today does not equate with economic access, and therefore one should look at these movements carefully when stating that they are composed mainly by a middle or bourgeoisie classes.

Mariana, in the conversation we held on 20 May 2020, resumes the abovementioned idea in her statement:

we are going through a phase in terms of Paganism that I think is extraordinary. There is the idea that “pagan” is the belief in the rural [in the sense of countryside], it is the belief in Natural cycles – that are the most essential things you can indicate around you –, but in truth, for someone to identify as pagan, and for someone to have content [to explain] if you ask what Gods are, this will demand more of this person intellectually. It would, more than to any other person that goes to Fátima in *13 de Maio*<sup>183</sup>, and does not think about it [going to the sanctuary]. We have a scientific framework that we do not need to let go. I am a pagan, but I will refer to the Big Bang if someone asks me how the world started. I will mention that theory. And if someone asks me how human beings arose, I will mention the Theory of Species Evolution. This makes sense to me. It makes more sense that all this fits perfectly with my religious view. But this means that I

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<sup>183</sup> As noted on the first chapter of this thesis, 13 May is a major religious date in the Fátima sanctuary and to Portuguese Catholics. It marks the first apparition of Our Lady of the Rosary to the Three Shepherds. See Fedele (2020c; 2020b); and Cavallo and Fedele (2020) for more on the celebrations of 13 May.

pondered, I thought, I fitted it and know enough about both subjects [religion and science] to be comfortable.

Therefore, more than an idealized countryside inhabitant, being a pagan today is recognizing the power of knowledge and making use of it while staying connected to the natural rhythms of a system that is part of what we are, and more than articulating the ideas, narratives and pieces of knowledge of their lived pagan existence with the sociocultural referential they live in.

The second set of power dynamics that were identified during the research process relates to interactions between contested leaderships, rights and legitimacy. These are seen at the level of the interaction of the groups with each other and with solitary practitioners, but also with a movement towards recognition, authenticity, legitimacy and freedom.

### **5.2.2. Leadership and Rights**

The power dynamics related to leadership and rights are implicit and explicit, working at the level of interpersonal relationships and with the State. Looking at how these different levels interact provides relevant insights about a phenomenon such as Contemporary Paganism and its complexities and incongruencies, with Pagans disputing their presence in the public space and revindicating their rights. They do so by negotiating internal power dynamics that at the same time reinforce hierarchical organizations, the same ones that they contest, criticize and draw away from in institutional religions such as Christianity. I will now start by analysing and providing examples of the negotiations that relate to the macro level, that relate, in a sense, to the power dynamics disputed at the level of their relationship with legislation, State and recognition; then, I will explore the dynamics seen at the level of the interpersonal relations, such as the tensions between groups and solitary practitioners, and at the level of leadership roles and personal gnosis as constitutive of those relationships.

#### **Rights, Recognition, Legitimacy and Authenticity**

As has been discussed in Chapter 2, some of the contemporary pagan groups with which I worked have been engaged in legal and political actions towards recognition of the movement as a religious and spiritual confession, with the same legal status before their corresponding Governments. I consider this process of revindication a form of political participation in the public sphere and, therefore, of a power dynamic that organizes, motivates and informs specific

political actions.

Not all Contemporary Pagans I worked with, and others in the Portuguese and British contexts, agree with this movement towards recognition as a religious and spiritual confession, mainly because they feel that Contemporary Paganism is non-hierarchical and is not a religion<sup>184</sup>. Being recognized as such would lead the movement to be what they criticize in other religious and spiritual confessions. Despite this, this movement is significant as an affirmation in Portuguese and British societies' social and religious domains; mainly in the Portuguese one, which is mapped by a cultural and religious hegemony of Catholicism, but one that has been transformed in the last decades, with the emergence of new religious movements and New Age groups (Roussou 2016), as well as the establishment of Religious communities such as Hinduism (Lourenço 2011), Islam (Mapril 2012; Carvalheira 2020) and AfroBrazilian (Saraiva 2010) from transnational and diaspora movements, as well as by refugees and migrants. If the number of campaigns, mobilizations and commissions being organized around the Interreligious Dialogue and Religious Freedom are any indication, the sociocultural and religious Portuguese milieu is highly politicized in the sense that people are mobilizing and demanding equal rights and freedoms.

As Mariana asserted in one of our conversations, being drawn away from the discussion around recognising Paganism as a religious and spiritual movement formally brings consequences to the movement because

If we want to be taken seriously, we must be serious. And we are serious when we start valuing our rights and duties also. Now, saying that “there is no religious freedom in Portugal”, and not doing anything in the sense of looking for inter-religious dialogue, searching to know other religious confessions, creating events that promote the inter-religious dialogue, or promoting those that do it, how can you complain about not having religious freedom? Politics affect everyone.

The motivations vary, but behind these movements towards recognition is the wish for representation in national instruments such as the National Census, as the space to be heard about politics that may affect their religious and spiritual lives. In Portugal, this was not yet attained, while in the United Kingdom, “Pagan” appears as one of the religious options that can be chosen in the National Census. The recognition of State-centred mechanisms offers a sense of legitimacy that can lead to the creation of educational activities about what is Contemporary Paganism, which, on the one hand, aids in the deconstruction of preconceptions and prejudices

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<sup>184</sup> This issue will be discussed in the next section in articulation with the negotiation of leaderships and authorities.

and, on the other, helps with affirming their place in the public domain. Besides, being recognized calls for the acceptance of the identification as something, in this case, the recognition of the word “Pagan” as legitimate and part of their identity. In Portugal, it is still difficult for people to affirm themselves publicly as such.

The sense of legitimacy is indissociable from a sense of authenticity. In the case of the Contemporary Pagans I worked with, much of the narratives are focused on the past, on what can be learnt, used, and reframed from past Civilization’s history and myths, and what ancestors offered through time. Archaeological sites and findings, combined with Historical accounts, are sources for Contemporary Pagans not just to build their knowledge about past pagan practices but also ways to legitimate their existence. What is being done is supported by academic knowledge; therefore, it is valid and authentic.

Authenticity is a constant in the processes of recognition and in the power dynamics among Ecocentric Pagans – and with the wider public domain. Most Contemporary Pagans must affirm their connection with what was considered authentic and with tradition (Rountree 2015) since it provides an archaeological and temporal line of connections in time. However, while connecting with an idea of the past, an opposition with the present is created, and, in some cases, which is not easy to overcome. Contemporary Pagans are now using pre-Christian ways of life as an inspiration to create and lead their worldview. They focus on a supposed pre-Christian way of life for which there is not enough information and vestiges to know their social and cultural organization. Focusing on the issue of authenticity can lead to the dismissal of relevant issues particular to the present moment and to their sociocultural and environmental lives. In contrast, they focus on internal disputes about whose path is leading to the correct form of Paganism.

Besides, this entails another power dynamic in the context of Contemporary Paganism that arises in this process of affirmation and recognition, which is the confrontation with the cultural and religious referential they have. As shown throughout the thesis, Catholicism has been more or less explicitly present in the identity affirmation of Contemporary Pagans, mainly in opposition and estrangement. Fedele (2013a), in her research with Italian and Iberian Goddess spirituality adherents, has shown that they reconceptualize the teachings from Contemporary Paganism to fit their European Christian Heritage. The author argues that her interlocutors “wanted to bring back to NeoPaganism certain Christian elements and figures whose power and influence they felt could not be ignored because they belonged to their ‘cultural heritage’” (*ibid*: 53).

While during my fieldwork in Portugal among Goddess Spirituality, I found the same

reinterpretation and integration of the Catholic heritage in their spiritual practices; I also found Contemporary Pagans, mostly in leadership positions, that deny and criticize Christianity. Either way, Catholicism and Paganism appear as interlocutors in the lived experiences of the Contemporary Pagans I worked with, whom I remind come from several social backgrounds and follow different paths.

In the interview I conducted with Sofia, one of my youngest interlocutors, we spoke about the issue of authenticity in Contemporary Paganism. At a certain point in our conversation, I asked her if she believed that focusing on this question could be counter-productive for Contemporary Paganism's self-affirmation in the public space as a religious and spiritual expression, to what she answered

Clearly, that is one of the major problems of the community. There is a lot [of problems], but that is one of the major ones. All communities have problems. But it is something I have always said that if we do not talk about our problems, who will talk about them? We have the responsibility to talk about these problems. (...) The authenticity discourse began as [showing] antagonism towards Christianity; in other words, Paganism is the antagonist of Christianity, and then inside Paganism, people started *to beef*<sup>185</sup> with each other. Like if we practice this because it is the most authentic, then there must be an even more authentic tradition inside this tradition. (...) [Pagans] should try not to repeat this discourse, try to be more honest and say, "I follow this path because it is for me, it is mine, it is my practice, it is what I like". Being constantly comparing to other traditions is not the correct way of doing religion. You must exist aside from the others.

As Sofia alluded, positioning themselves before Christianity is recurrent in the narratives of Contemporary Pagans in the field, and for some of my interlocutors, like Sofia, it is problematic. While, at first, the focus was on building Paganism as opposed to Christianity, a non-hierarchical movement, more welcoming of gender, body and sexuality, drawn away from the figure of the male God; with the growth in the number of Pagan paths in the years since it first developed, the authenticity and legitimacy discourse shifted to the centre of the movement. Some pagan paths affirm themselves as older and "true" adherents of Paganism. I have encountered some tension in the field mainly towards the Goddess Movement, since it is understood by more traditional Wiccan groups or reconstructionist Pagans as not true Pagan

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<sup>185</sup> Originally used in the Portuguese interview. According with the Urban Dictionary, having a beef with someone, means having a conflict with someone.

and more “New Age”.<sup>186</sup>

The quest for authenticity arises not only among Contemporary Pagan paths, and towards Christianity, but also in tensions developed towards Contemporary Pagan’ movements from other countries. I observed this tension for the first time in the Portuguese Goddess Conference, as had already been stated in Chapter 4. The demarcation from the Glastonbury Goddess Conference came first from the organizing team and second from the participants in the Conference. In April 2019, one month before the First Portuguese Goddess Conference, I went to Óbidos, near Lisbon, to meet with Luiza. Among other themes, we spoke about the Conference. She disagrees with the statement that they are importing the movement, despite recognizing that there is a connection with the Movement in Glastonbury, and that Kathy Jones created a format that is replicated by those that were trained by her. However, they are given the liberty to introduce new approaches, and it is legitimate for them to look for a Goddess that is “theirs”, without mimicking another movement. In her understanding, the format given by Kathy Jones is non-dogmatic, giving the inspiration and the freedom to creatively build their own spiritual and religious local practices adapted to the territory in which it is taking place.<sup>187</sup>

Despite the argument that they are not importing the Glastonbury movement and all the works towards a local Portuguese Goddess Movement and Goddess expressions connected with the Portuguese territory, while attending both Conferences – even if one was online, and comparing it with the literature – I found out that it is possible to find similarities. First, I could identify the structure that Kathy Jones proposed:

- Nine ceremonial Priestesses held the sacred space. While in Portugal, these goddesses took the name of local Iberian deities or saints, that integrate the Whell of the Year of the *Jardim das Hespérides* Goddess Temple, they held similar characteristics to the ones proposed in the original model;

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<sup>186</sup> Unfortunately, it was impossible to explore this issue in dept due to the constraints the fieldwork suffered as indicated in the introduction of the thesis. However, this is an important issue to have in account in the future, and to see which groups and paths gain visibility in the public space and which ones start losing the influence that they may have.

<sup>187</sup> Fedele (2015) on her research on the Goddess Conference in Spain in 2011, ten years before the first Portuguese Goddess Conference took place, she identified the use of the same format that arose in Glastonbury and discussed how it was being imported and applied in Spain, even with other language. She also noted, interestingly, that while this conference proposed to include all Iberia, her Portuguese interlocutors did not know it would take place: “When I asked my Portuguese interlocutors whether they would attend the first Goddess Conference in Spain, many of them did not know about it and once they had gathered information about it they all at first commented that it was too expensive for them. Some added that they felt that the conference organizers should also contact Portuguese Pagans in some way; although on the conference website the organizers addressed the whole Iberian Peninsula, as far as my interlocutors knew, no direct contact had been made with Portuguese Pagans to see whether they wanted to contribute” (249).

In my fieldwork on the Portuguese Goddess Conference, one of the priestesses of a Goddess Temple in Madrid was called to be part of the ceremonial circle and was one of the leading priestesses of the conference.

- Even if it was shorter than the Glastonbury one, it followed the same structure in terms of the types of ceremonies, workshops, opening and closure of the sacred space and the existence of a pilgrimage to a sacred place, with banners created by those involved in the organization of the Conference;
- It had Lydia Rules Goddess Banners – already mentioned in the previous chapters – which were central symbols for the creation of a true Goddess Conference;
- It had “Melissas” the volunteers that helped in the organization of the event and usually are also making the Priestess of the Goddess training;
- The presence of Kathy Jones as a participant and also as one of the speakers and workshop holders.

Positioning the Portuguese Goddess Conference as something different from the Glastonbury Conferences<sup>188</sup> kept being reaffirmed during the Conference, even in brief encounters. On the first day, I was with Alexandra walking down the path to the tent. In the middle of the path, we encountered a woman Alexandra knew. This woman was one of the “Melissas” of the Conference, and when Alexandra asked her if the Conference was going to be similar to the Glastonbury one, she was quick to answer assertively that it was not. She said that the main Priestess was formed in Glastonbury, but what she was doing here was unique and based on characteristics of the Portuguese territory, without explaining which characteristics they were. This defence – of doing something legit and new – comes hand-in-hand with a need to affirm their space, legitimacy and validity before the international contemporary pagan movement, but also before the religious and spiritual Portuguese milieu, showing that they have the basis and know-how to do what they are doing.

This process relates with the power of knowledge abovementioned, but also with a tension between the local and the global. Since, as Rountree refers, “in the context of living in a globalized, hyperconnected world, as all Pagans and Native Faith followers inevitably do, tensions between the local and global are constant despite the unavoidable – often sought-after and embraced – cross-fertilization of ideas, beliefs, values, products, preoccupations, practices and so on” (2015, p. 7). With a deep research based on authority figures such as scholars and their disciplines to sustain their narratives, articulated with their personal spiritual and magical knowledge, they can affirm their space and legitimacy to hold it before internal and external milieus.

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<sup>188</sup> In Chapter 4 I already explored some of the differences and similarities between the Glastonbury Goddess Conference and the Portuguese Goddess Conference.

In the process of recognition and legitimacy tensions arise, and power dynamics are noticeable, as has been discussed so far. One of these tensions is related with leadership in a supposed non-hierarchical religious and spiritual movement, which I will approach next.

### **Leadership Roles – Tensions Between Group and Solitary Practitioners**

When analysing power dynamics in the context of Contemporary Paganism, several tensions appear in the negotiation of leadership roles and in the organization of the practices. These tensions relate to questions about who can hold these roles and by which ways and processes; to the maintenance of hierarchies despite their refusal of those same hierarchies; to the knowledge that is being disputed; and with the lack of unity between the groups to present a united front when defending their rights and freedoms, as discussed above in the dynamics related with rights and recognition.

One of the most common tensions is between groups and solitary practitioners.<sup>189</sup> In a group practice, several elements must be taken into account, primarily relational and organizational ones, in which social and personal relations have to be free of tensions if the group is to work, and these people have to work well together. To this, the personality of each of the group members has a key-role: if all are wishing an equalitarian and horizontal distribution of power among all the group members, or if some are not. On the contrary, solitary practitioners only have to manage themselves, and they do what they want without external inputs. Even if they reach-out for the wider movement in particular moments, they feel well returning to their solitary practices afterwards. Some chose this form of practice due to their personalities, living in places away from other Contemporary Pagans, or having had bad experiences with group interactions.

For instance, Alexandra, which follows solitary work, prefers it that way because there is no need to manage someone else, and the freedom to do what she wishes is undisputed. However, she does collective rituals, and participates in events in particular moments.

Issues about who has the power to initiate who and with self-initiation, are present in the movement, even if today to a lesser extent than some years ago – or maybe the sources and the practices used evolved. Initiatory work, which leads to Priesthood, implies the creation of a hierarchy and holding a power status. Being a Priestess or Priest requires work, education and

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<sup>189</sup> The majority of solitary practitioners have been referred by several scholars researching Contemporary Paganism. I highlight here the recent study conducted by Helen Berger (2019) with North American solitary Pagans.



formation with other Priest/ess – with someone that already reached this status and will guide the process and decide when that person is ready to conclude her/his Priesthood training. In this sense, power relations are created: those that educate hold the power to decide when the other is ready, and this usually implies a relationship with the deity – a proof of dedication, and the presence of someone else to recognize that this step is being taken. It is not mandatory, but it is recommended.

However, it is a process that is not available to everyone, at least in Portugal, if you are not already involved with a group. Alexandra, who is a Priestess formed by the Fellowship of Isis, told me while we sat sharing our camomile tea and cookies on that rainy November afternoon that

It is hard having Priesthood formation unless you are in a specific Tradition, like Wicca or Druidism. (...) It is the case in Portugal. We have almost nothing [regarding spaces for Priesthood formation]. Now we are getting better, but a few years back, ten years ago, we had almost nothing. Let's admit. There were no resources or groups. None.

As Alexandra noted, there are few Priesthood formation spaces. Priesthood entails dedication to the deities and responsibilities towards the pagan community. Usually, in paths such as Wicca, Druidism, or Goddess Movement, in this case, with a connection with the Glastonbury tradition, people are initiated or trained inside the groups or courses for that end. There is a most experienced Priest and/or Priestess that evaluates and decides when someone is ready to assume that responsibility. While in these cases is the figure of authority that decides when someone is a Priestess, there are cases in which people self-proclaim as such, given their understanding that the deities they work with are the ones who should decide when and how their service as a Priest/ess is taken, and not a third party. During fieldwork, I encountered cases where they dedicated themselves to the service of the deity and of the broader community after several years of studying and engaging with their personal relationships and connections, and with the gods and goddesses they serve.

Needless to say, these two positions, Priesthood by recognized formation versus self-proclamation, are a source of tension among the contemporary pagan community. This is subject of dispute because the latter puts in question the need for authority and recognition from someone in a place of power that decides, based on evaluation results but also on subjective criteria, the legitimacy of another person to hold an authority place like their own.

The other tension relates to the lack of preparation or cohesion of the pagan community to receive those that are now starting on the path of Paganism because, as Mariana mentions

Our *modus operandi* in the community is this: each one in their house doing their own things; it is good when there is an event here or there; but the work in a group is not easy. Group work entails more than formalising your identification with the word “pagan”; it forces you, in your life, to prioritize a ritualistic activity that is out of the norm! One thing is you doing it in the comfort of your home, with your candles and other things; another is to coordinate with your family, with people who have to coordinate themselves with their own families, to spend a day around the fire to make a ritual. Or, with luck, take all the families and do it [the ritual].

Mariana touches on a very relevant point that may explain one of the reasons solitary practices is so widespread among Contemporary Pagans, besides the relative freedom of doing they practice as they want. Group work entails dedication and work, besides managing availability, families, personalities and different approaches present in any setting that includes more than two people. This creates, to some extent, circles within circles and a fractured movement, as can be illustrated by Mariana:

But that is creating a community inside a community. And we feel a bit ambivalent towards that. We want the freedom to believe in what we want but also want a comfortable camouflage, so we are not identified as different, because being different entails a massive weight. And since you do not have a community that has its doors open [the doors of a building] waiting to receive you, to remedy being an immediate orphan when you become a pariah in your initial community [the sociocultural community you belong to]. Without that, people prefer to stay camouflaged in their thing and being solitary.

Therefore, as pointed out by Mariana, the lack of organization brings another tension: between freedom and autonomy, and the lack of a spiritual and magical support group with a structured and public movement, and with community spaces where one can gather, where people make sense of this and mediate their engagement with their personal wishes for a free lived experience, but also with the wishes of creating and finding community with like-minded people. This brings us to the third group of power dynamics identified during the research: empowerment.

### **5.2.3. Empowerment**

The last set of power dynamics identified in the context of Contemporary Paganism analysed

in this research relates with empowerment, and how they attain it during their religious and spiritual lived experiences. This form of power dynamic entails a very personal work of recognizing the possibilities of this participatory consciousness that is not perceptible or materialized. Part of this work towards the collective starts with an individual dimension.

Personal empowerment and self-expression have been discussed broadly in academic literature about contemporary spirituality and religion as one of the main features of these movements (Heelas 1996; Heelas, Woodhead 2005; de la Torre 2018; Fedele, Knibbe 2013). People explore their freedom and self through their spiritual, religious and magical practices, since these provide a language and a way to achieve the transformation in themselves and in the world they seek, as exemplified by the rituals and political actions with my interlocutors explored in the previous chapters. As Viola Teisenhoffer affirms regarding Umbanda practitioners in Paris – that can be applied to the context of Contemporary Paganism here discussed –, “ritual activities bring about a sense of empowerment to the practitioners, pushing them to go beyond their limitations and revealing that they are more than what they seem to be” (Teisenhoffer 2013, p. 82).

In the context discussed here, people are empowered while – through ritual – they understand which emotional wounds are being carried, as discussed in the previous chapters, so they can transform and work on them in their daily lives. Besides, the spiritual and religious work they do through contemporary pagan practices can change how they lead their lives<sup>190</sup>. For instance, my interlocutors have shared with me that when some tension or issue arise with their families, they resort to their rituals and contact their deities to ask for clarity about what is the best approach to solve that problem, or on how to approach the tensions and affirm their needs before their families, partners or children. At the same time, through their lived pagan experience they encounter ideas and approaches to the world that not just help them in their relationships but also in teaching other ways of being in the world to their children – ways that are respectful towards Nature and all life. How Paganism influences and is influenced by their views of motherhood and raising their children better is illustrated by what Mariana shared during one of our interviews. When she became a mother, her understanding of Paganism changed since motherhood transforms the way that people engage with Nature given that

It is not just the physical circumstances and routines... when you multiply, when you generate life, and work with a spirituality that is profoundly reverent of life and of the natural phases that create life – grow, mature, decline, die and reborn – you feel the

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<sup>190</sup> See Wendy Griffin (2000) edited book for more testimonies of how goddess-oriented people feel healed and empowered through their religious and spiritual practices.

phases of this pattern much more organically, than just “alright, I just gave birth”. We like to believe that we choose to arrive. And I believe that we chose with whom to arrive. But giving birth is much more animal than conscious. Being a mother is much more conscious (...) it is the flame of the Mother Goddess that you feel much more legitimized inside you. When you call the Mother Goddess, you represent the Mother.

Recognizing that they are following a spiritual and religious path that sacralises a critical dimension of their identities – that of motherhood<sup>191</sup> – makes them feel understood and empowered. Palmisano and Pibiri, in their work among goddess spirituality in Italy had noted that

This truth coincides with the effectiveness of the spiritual practice. Direct experience of this effectiveness gives rise to a process of personal empowerment (deriving from valorization of female qualities) accompanied by an increased sense of individual and social responsibility on the part of both men and women members of Goddess Spirituality groups, revealed by the interviews as premises for transformation of the self and, as a consequence, of the world. In other words, empowerment results in increased awareness of one’s own effectiveness which is to say personal ability and power to become co-creators of reality by exercising one’s willingness and active participation, from which the above-mentioned sense of individual and social responsibility derives. (2020, p. 60)

As Fedele and Knibbe refer contemporary spirituality and religion, as well as

Holistic practices present themselves as forms of enchantment, a way of getting in touch with energies, authenticity and realness in a world where meaning has leaked away through monetization and exploitation that are the consequences of instrumentalist ideologies and the accompanying exploitation of the earth that dominate economic life. At the same time holistic spirituality recuperates core ideas of secularism such as the idea of empowerment of the self, and the overcoming of moralistic and constraining ways of life associated with religion and tradition.(Fedele, Knibbe 2020, p. 14)

Therefore, empowerment narratives, despite their importance to go beyond limitation and make sense of personal anxieties, can be misleading and can – at the same time they affirm –

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<sup>191</sup> This will be more explored in this chapter, on the section “The MotherWorld Vision”, as well as the issues with idealized views of motherhood.

withdraw agency from the people they are supposed to help. For instance, all the courses around the divine or sacred feminine that I analysed during this work imply a notion of empowerment, which translates into a language of empowering those people. Even if it is not the intention, using the narrative of empowering others instead of focusing on providing the tools to people to build this empowerment withdraws the inherent agency of these people in building their path.

This form of power dynamics is also indissociable from the power granted by knowledge and experience. As Kate, the Glastonbury Goddess Conference member, stated during our interview, this question of the issue of empowering others and providing the tools for people to work on their empowerment and voices is

Tricky because the reality is that some people are further ahead, they have more wisdom. Wisdom, experience, different skills. We are not all the same. Yeah. We are not into sameness, we're into uniqueness. Diversity and uniqueness are the ways of goddess. So that creates a, what you could call hierarchy of sorts quite naturally, which I'd like to see more as a healthy village dynamic where there's this great skill base, as a community. We are adjustable, we can adjust to things. However, we all also carry the wounding of lack, the wounding of separation, the wounding of, hum, not feeling good enough, not being wanted, not being loved, whatever, in whatever form which leads to competitive behaviour and structures.

While knowledge appears as a source of empowerment, they are still conditioned by structures such as capitalism, patriarchy and neoliberalism that control their sociocultural ways of being. Hierarchies inevitably appear in a movement that denies that hierarchy while reproducing it. Besides, as Kate continues, knowledge provides the power, but while it may appear they are empowering others, in her opinion they are just providing the tools because, in the end, the only power that can produce empowerment is the Goddess.

So the moment we are working with empowerment of people – for me, it is really Goddess empowers. We may be vehicles, or we may be holding gateways of particular forms for people to walk through and have those experiences. But for me, I am not empowering that person. The persons are empowering themselves, but that is also semantics and people may well experience that differently. People project, you know, there's a lot of projection, both positive and negative, uh, projection going on. So I think once you have empowered people or once people have an empowerment journey that you are facilitating, then you have to support those people. And that is where the place of scarcity and the competition wounding then gets into play. (...) So, it is very, very

easy to then fall into subtle or not so subtle ways, exactly what you're talking about that creates hierarchical, uh, close group circles or closed door, um, layers that we see everywhere else in our society. Glass ceilings, if you like.

For her, then, she is not empowering anyone, she is guiding the people that are walking their own paths, and supporting them. But she also recognizes very clearly that it is easy to fall into the reproduction of those hierarchies that are theoretically criticized. It is important, then, to recognize that

All these kind of shadow forms of course, are there in actually in all of us and in, in some people and in some structures a lot more. And it's about how conscious we can be about it. So, you can't say in Paganism it doesn't exist. It's not true. And the shadow of, you know, teacher or guru and the pride that, the spiritual pride that goes with that, or the projection that people, and then our normal human fallacy where we can make mistakes.

And they have consequences of course, and they can be very unpleasant, and they can be very hurtful for people. And, and we are human beings. We have to be as honest as we can be, you know, and, and to be, have a little bit of allowance and forgiveness for each other as well.

Returning to the feminist idea that the individual and private are political, approached in the section about the power dynamics related to patriarchy, this movement towards empowering themselves focuses on the so-called shadow work, engaging with what is hurtful and distressing and transforming it. As Luhrmann (1993) wrote thirty years ago, but which remains relevant, the attention paid to the self can lead to collective strength and change. The author defends that women participating in these groups defend that it is necessary to transform oneself to transform the world. In order to do this, they have to go through a kind of therapy where frightening feelings and anger are confronted with understanding old behaviour patterns that are no longer useful. They can grow into more effective political beings through confrontation with the personal. As the dark represents the unconscious for the feminists, they use it to represent the change they seek to create themselves and politically transform the collective. Knowing themselves, they lose the fear of the unconscious, which is neither reachable nor dark and opaque (Luhrmann 1993).

Another facet of this political therapy is reclaiming, and recasting images connected to weakness as images of power. They turn outcast symbols like the hag, spiders, menstrual blood,

and death, into sources of strength. And these images work due to the pain in the lives of those drawn to them, of which they are conscious about.

They see themselves as capable of doing effective work in the world. They also see themselves frustrated by traits they cannot control: their gender, their race, their body type and face. (...) Political action can give them hope and constructive action can dull the hurt. (...) These women can and do use the process of explicitly identifying with the rejected and then redescribing, relabelling, that which is rejected as that which has the greatest power. (*ibid*: 228)

All the power dynamics discussed here are articulated implicitly or explicitly with the lived and embodied experience of Contemporary Pagans. These, in the end, translate ways of being in the world that dwell at the crossroads of complexity in the domain of Contemporary Paganism today. Even without consensus, these analyses provide relevant information about a growing sociocultural and religious phenomenon that informs on how people live in a world facing constant social, economic and environmental crises. I propose that these internal power dynamics, as I chose to call them, are pathways to understanding the complexity of these movements and ways to understand how people's motivations move beyond religious and spiritual reasons, but inter-relate, translate and trespass political dimensions.<sup>192</sup> It is the approach to politics that is analysed in the next section, starting with a debate on the possibility of Paganism being political followed by the dangers of Contemporary Paganism, as a spiritual and religious movement focused on the past as a source of legitimacy, to reinforce nationalist and far-Right stands, and if those groups related with far-Right sentiments are present or not in the contexts analysed in this thesis.

### **5.3. “You Should be Aware That What You are Doing is Political” - The Different Understandings of Politics by Contemporary Pagans**

It has been established that Contemporary Paganism is a religious and spiritual movement, one highly influenced by political and social movements, as has been shown. But can it be considered a political movement? One of the research questions was to understand the

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<sup>192</sup> Roussou and Panagiotopoulos (2022) propose the term “Transreligiosity” as an analytical tool to understand how religious, spiritual, symbolic and national frontiers are negotiated, trespassed and articulated in the lives and religious identities of contemporary religious and spiritual practitioners. One can consider the way that Contemporary Pagans articulate creatively their lived spiritual and religious approach with political ones, as transreligiosity.

connection of the movement with political participation, since I have been observing several movements towards recognition as a religious movement and the presence of some groups and pagan people in Inter-Religious Dialogues. Notwithstanding, it is a question that raises tensions and shows several approaches that move more towards affirmative stands than to negative ones and mostly settle for a neutral approach. This section will explore the different meanings and understandings of politics for Ecocentric Pagans and their perception of the movement as political. There is a tendency for people to mix up politics and political practices as organizing structures of society with political Parties. This raises some difficulties when using these words, which will also be analysed.

### **5.3.1. Is Paganism Political?**

In the semi-structured interviews I conducted one of the questions was, “Do you consider Paganism to be political?” The answers varied. Some agreed, others not so much because “politics” or “political” draws an image of political Parties that not everyone feels comfortable with, or see as synonyms. When I asked Mariana this question, I received a sound confirmation that it was. For her

Paganism IS political. There is no doubt in my mind. None. From the moment that you name a belief that is not from the majority, that is not part of the pattern, that is not even officially recognised by the Nation-State you live in, but that you have the freedom to name it, identify with it and worship it, you are political. You are political. And more: You are benefiting from policies. You are benefiting from the right to do so. And you are doing it because they exist. And thinking that “I do not involve myself in politics. I just do my thing, and I’m good” is not taking accountability for all the people that made it possible for you to do what you are doing now. For you to do what you are doing without explaining to anyone, it is because someone struggled for it and probably gave their lives to do so. Therefore, at the very least, you should be aware that your actions are political. I think that it is incredibly childish and immature to believe that there are things that human beings can do, both socially and culturally, that do not have consequences. As if! As if! Now, even more, since social platforms give you visibility.

As can be seen by Mariana’s answer, the moment there is a clear demarcation and identification with a certain spiritual and religious movement there is no way to deny that it is a political act. Besides, the moment that there is legislation and legal and regulatory State



mechanisms that aid in the protection of rights and freedoms of religious and spiritual practice – as the ones that were explored in Chapter 1 when I discussed the creation of the Law for Religious Freedom, or in Chapter 2, with the work for recognition some Contemporary Pagans are engaged with – Contemporary Pagans are under the protection of those politics, and are acting in political ways.

Besides, the majority of my interlocutors are people that exercise their democratic rights and duties. As I stated at the beginning of this thesis, the Ecocentric Pagans with whom I work follow Left-wing, or at least Centre-Left-wing ideals, and when voting tend to do so in Parties that uphold the equality views promoted by Left ideals. Those that are more unsure in which Parties to vote usually decide to choose one of the ecological parties, like PAN<sup>193</sup>, since its focus on ecological and environmental issues and animal rights reflects the approaches that many of my interlocutors have towards Nature and the respect for all of life. Some analyse the political programs to see which Parties defend things like fracking and mining or support some industry that is not beneficial to the planet, so they can be informed, not voting for them.

Mariana keeps explaining her view that Paganism is political, giving the example of the freedom of practice and organization that Contemporary Pagans have in the current democratic regime:

This counts for the covens that get together every full moon in the middle of the forest, and no one knows who they are or where they get together. Perhaps they don't even know their jobs and never speak of that to anyone. If they are doing it, it is because they can do it without being persecuted, killed or beaten. They are doing it because they are entitled to do so.

If women are engaged in these movements, they can leave their homes and families for several hours at night; they benefit from politics<sup>194</sup>. That, or they are drugging people. Even so, they are exercising the right to buy drugs without asking for the permission of their husbands to go to the pharmacy.

So yes, it is entirely political! Of course, it is. You have to choose which policies you want to give visibility to during the process of making politics. That is the luxury you have. If I shut up, I just give visibility to those who do not recognise me. Those that think I should not have the rights I do. It would be easier if people mobilised and felt like this.

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<sup>193</sup> They define themselves as the party for the People (P), for the Animals (A) and for Nature (N).

<sup>194</sup> Mariana is mobilizing the importance that the Portuguese revolution of 25 April 1974 had for women's freedom in particular, and democratic freedom in general, that was approached in Chapter 2 of the thesis.

As shared by Mariana, it is not just affirming as pagan what mobilizes politics and political stances. Engaging with some of the practices that Contemporary Pagans engage with, like going to a forest to make a ritual, doing a public event in which they are exposing themselves and what they do, or even conducting a ritual on a public beach during the day with people walking by – even more if you are a woman – is exercising and benefiting from politics and being political.

This view illustrates how some of my interlocutors in Portugal approach politics and understand Paganism as political. But I found similar stances in the United Kingdom when I spoke to Rosemary, the PF member who stated clearly that Paganism is political:

Very much so (...) politics is life. Politics is how you live and what you believe is right in life. I think Paganism, and the things that most Pagans believe, especially at the moment, are very political. You know, protecting the environment. Things like inclusion and diversity, those things that Pagans have been preaching for years. They are politically charged issues at the moment and a lot of the people that I see on the front lines of these things, at the protests and stuff like that are Pagans. Have been for a long time.

For Rosemary, Contemporary Paganism is political, not just because the issues that it approaches are political, such as environmental crisis, gender equality and recognition rights; but because it is a way of life. It is a way of life, and politics is how we organize ourselves socially and how we are present in the world; therefore Paganism, which precisely promotes this, must be considered and recognized as such. Besides, Rosemary approaches something already explored in the previous chapters: how Pagans were involved from the beginning with environmental activism, and how they are among the louder voices in the religious and spiritual sphere, defending the transformation of attitudes and the protection of the environment.

Contrarily to Mariana and Rosemary, Daphne the member from the PFI shared that while she understood what I meant when I asked if Paganism is political, she personally felt uncomfortable using that word for Paganism due to the fact that “being political can be quite negative because it is used sometimes for a political message, propaganda in a way (...) but then again, we always are political. Whatever we do, we have an influence. But I like to make this nuance.” João, the PFI- Portugal member hold a similar approach when he said that they prefer not to associate Paganism with politics since it can hinder them. In their opinion, the moment it happens it will be connected with political Parties, and that would be negative and

limiting. Therefore, they would not like to see that. Paganism, for them, has an orientation function, orientating principles from which the human being is free to choose. Despite this, they recognize that “we have logical principles that can be closer to one or other political Party.”

On the other end, Alexandra shared a more neutral approach while affirming the political dimension of Contemporary Paganism, illustrating another way that my interlocutors understood politics to be and how they interrelate it with their spiritual and religious lived pagan experience. She does not like to

Mix things up [politics and her spiritual and religious practices]. But that is my preference. Nevertheless, I think that yes, it should because Paganism allows us to see the world differently. And that can be of value for political movements and environmental movements. Yes, we all have a role to play, and we should help the best we can. Be it for obtaining rights, religious, social ones, whatever. I think we should. I choose not to mix both things. After all, I do not have political activism because I do not get mixed up with politics. It gives me much anxiety. I cannot deal with it. I have tried, but I cannot do it. It does not work for me. So, I prefer that my work for the community be done through teaching. (...) Through education, helping others and so on. But I do recognise the work of those who choose to use Paganism as a tool to try to change the world and make it better. Therefore, no doubt that it can be used. Probably not by everyone because some, like me, do not identify with it. But it does not mean that others that can work with that tool, cannot do so.

Despite not adhering to – or wanting to identify with – political participation, she supports all those Pagans who do, preferring to look for other ways to engage in transformation, preferring to follow the path of education. I propose that even this neutral position is a form of political engagement, since she is clearly demarcating what works and does not work for her.

I could not do it. The political and rights situation causes me much anxiety because it is so complicated and requires so much energy, time, and no way I can do it. Around one year and a half, two years, I decided to deal only with politics in critical situations. I vote I am attentive to the political Parties, any important decision made, I am aware, but I do not follow political Parties on Facebook or any social media page. I have it all disabled to try and have the less possible contact with politics and news. The little I know it is in passing, or I see on the news while at work. I see that this [disengaging from politics and news] made my mental health much better. Before, I was constantly thinking, watching the news, continually seeing the chaos in the world we have, which

was harming me. I could not dedicate myself to the things I liked, because I was constantly thinking that I had the duty of doing other things. We all use it in a certain way and are responsible for the communities we are part of. But I cannot work with activism and go to demonstrations. It is at odds with who I am, what I do, and the work I want to do and have as my mark in the world. I prefer teaching. To help, guide, lead. However, we can say that I appreciate the work of those who can put on that armour and go to battle. Furthermore, I completely support their work.

In the last bit of her interview excerpt, Alexandra alludes to a distinction that needs to be taken into account: she votes, exerts her political rights and duty, and draws a line in what type of political work she can do. For her, it seems that what does not seem to work is a form of political participation that is more extreme, activism (Pike 2017). Interestingly, for some of my interlocutors' activism is not understood as a form of political participation. When I asked if Paganism was political, they were quick to answer negatively, while when asked if it could be a form of activism, the response was positive.

Therefore, seeing Contemporary Paganism as a form of activism is much more acceptable than as understanding it as political, as I could gather from the interviews I conducted, due to the tendency for the words politics, policies, and partisanship to be mixed, as Rosemary shared when saying that the Pagan Federation had to be careful “not to get party political”, and even in the answers given by Daphne and the members of the PFI – Portugal.

For Mariana, when asked if the presence of environmental activism and feminism in Paganism make sense, she mentioned that

It does not make sense for me to be pagan, a woman, and part of a spiritual current like mine without being so. Christians use that horrible expression, whether you are a “practitioner” or not. I use it with quotation marks because it is hilarious. But, in the case of Paganism, being a practitioner does not mean that you only practice rituals. Being a practitioner means that you are militant. You wear the colours.

I remember having these conversations precociously in my first encounters with other Pagans. If we, who worship the natural rhythms do not wear the colours of the ecosystem, who else will? Who else? If we are returning to work on the sacred feminine and giving it a place of honour, and returning to sacralise the female Nature in all its aspects, who else can be if we are not feminists? So, all the people who say they are part of this ideology and are pleased doing only what is of their competence but do not practice any militancy, in truth, they are just doing an onanism exercise.”

Like Mariana exposed in the excerpt above, and also at the beginning of this section when asked if for her Paganism was political, it is clear for her that her political approach to the world is indissociable from the spiritual and religious ones she presents, making a harsh criticism of those that do not, in a way “practice what they preach”. Mariana’s answers demonstrate the position of other contemporary Pagans both in Portugal and in the United Kingdom, what I also encountered in the answer that Mora, the young non-binary Portuguese pagan, gave to the same question, in which, in her words,

an important part of Paganism and pagan communities is, since always, an alternative subculture – this is due to the fact that for years Paganism was something that should have been avoided and hidden, with the persecution of such beliefs (...). Paganism became political the moment that politics were imposed on it. Until today, despite the existence of religious liberty, Paganism keeps existing in a marginalized way, frequently demonized by other religions. (...) The point is that religion, the stories we tell about the Gods and even the Gods themselves, represent activism, the fight for equality. It is not by chance that several Gods as protectors of a certain community exists. Religion is and has always been a form of protection, empowerment, and acceptance. When we say that we are Pagans – a spectre of religions that have a history of suffering due to prejudice – we are fighting against societies’ prejudices, not just the religious ones, but all those that do not allow the acceptance of the “self” like it is.

However, how activism can be transposed into action and how Pagans get involved depends on who they are and on what they believe to be their actions. We have seen several examples, from those participating in demonstrations, others in magical healing circles, and others through the support to those engaging in direct actions or their daily ritualistic practices. I argue that these are specific forms of political participation in the public sphere, even if some of my interlocutors do not identify it as such or have different understandings of the meaning the word “political”. Mora, sharing her opinion when I asked her if she considered Paganism political, stated that it all depended on the person, but that it is necessary to talk about it either way. It needs to be

Discussed so it can be normalized. Activism is very much connected to the fight we see, to demonstrations, to associations, but this is not possible for everyone. In Paganism, even something as simple as praying to the Gods, and meditating with them about the world’s inequalities, can be a form of personal activism. Striving to understand the

societies from whom we appropriate the myths for our worldview in all their complexity, the prejudices that they suffered and how those affected the myths and the ways through which the Gods were represented, as well as recognize their feminism and queerness when it exists. Share this knowledge with the pagan communities because the information is also a form of activism. Paganism implies unity and fraternity between believers. Being a pagan is fighting for the right of all the sons, daughters and children of the Gods, not just those that fit on our preconceived notion of society.”

Besides, as Mora points out, political participation does not need explicit and radical public events, like activism, but is also seen in the personal relationships they create with their deities. The production and sharing of knowledge are also a political act, much like Alexandra demonstrated when she stated that it was her chosen way to engage in the world.

The political dimension of the Goddess Movement was recognized during the Goddess Conference in Portugal. Luiza, the main Priestess of the Conference mentioned that “these divine entities [different expressions of the Goddess] want to be found and be recognised in this time and place, so we can receive their healing and inspiration”, and that this can lead to change. In a conversation we had after the Conference, I inquired if this change was individual or if it was a collective one, and she explained that

It is both, of course. For it to be collective, it must be individual first, isn't it? To work in a group, I must know about myself first. (...) [For her, this awareness] is Gaia, the Earth Herself, defending Herself. Once, when I was in Glastonbury, two young men visited the Temple, and we started talking. They started mentioning that this was a strategy from Gaia. These things, this Goddess Spirituality, were a strategy from Gaia for Her own survival. And I thought, “that is it! It is really it!”. It is something that goes beyond us. People say it is a fashion and all, but what does that mean? It is something that...makes you feel deeply, makes sense, and is necessary to the world.

With this excerpt, an important dimension that was already approached at the beginning of the chapter returns: that the individual and collective are interrelated, and that the personal is political. In the voice of this Priestess, a widespread idea in the milieu of contemporary spiritual and religious groups, as well as in political movements that hold Nature as sacred is seen that it is the Earth that is responsible for sending the message to humans that they need to change, that they need to reconnect and be interconnected. By working on personal spiritual paths, they also promote collective change, even while reproducing hierarchies, inequalities or romantic

perspectives.

Besides, this participation and connection between Contemporary Paganism, feminism and environmental activism are not consensual. Depending on the tradition followed – Wicca, Goddess Spirituality, and others – opinions may change and diverge. One may focus more on feminist inspiration and on how to combine it with environmental activism, and others may focus more on the environmental path, consistent with their political views. Some may entirely disregard it and withdraw from politics. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider these types of participation in public spaces and the importance they have for people.

As was seen throughout this section, there were three different understandings of Paganism as political: one that stated clearly that it was political, like the voices of Mariana, Mora and Rosemary demonstrated; others against it being political, like Daphne and some members of the PFI – Portugal; and, finally, some presenting neutrality, preferring not to engage while still defending that it is an essential issue to the movement, like Alexandra noted. At the same time activism, which is a form of politics, has been understood in some cases as a dimension separated from politics, being more predisposed to affirm themselves as activists than as political due to the widespread idea that politics – and being politically engaged – means being part of a political Party. In these cases, they draw a clear line between their duties as citizens and as Pagans, still voting, still choosing to follow ideals that combine well with their pagan worldview, but not understanding it as such.<sup>195</sup>

It is undeniable that religion and spirituality are in a dialogue with social movements, and mainly with feminism and environmentalism. They cross borders and creatively combine sources that are perceived as separate, questioning traditional distinctions like the one of public versus private, or collective versus individual realms, which need not be mutually exclusive. They overlap and go beyond it, being complex dimensions to be considered if one wants to fully understand these movements. Besides the abovementioned examples, how they overlap will also be illustrated in the next section, in which I bring the case of the MotherWorld vision that arose from the Glastonbury Goddess Temple, which became a political Party.

### **The MotherWorld Vision- When Paganism, Politics and Political Parties Blend**

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<sup>195</sup> From the online fieldwork I conducted about Contemporary Paganism in the United Kingdom, and from the interviews, the views of Contemporary Pagans in this country are very similar to the ones in Portugal. The difference is that in the United Kingdom, the movement have been established for longer and appear to have less resistance to make statements and engaging in political actions of several types, then in Portugal, that it is still developing and finding its space in the public space, but also amongst each other.

While we sat on the floor in front of the Goddess altar, in the Goddess Temple in Óbidos, Luiza spoke emotionally of how the Goddess Movement can contribute to the world and how politically charged that movement is. While doing so, she shared that politics and activism are so ingrained in the Goddess movement that “Kathy Jones has a political Party. MotherWorld is, at this moment, a Political Party.”

MotherWorld is a vision that arose in Glastonbury with the Goddess Temple managed by Kathy Jones in 2013, and has become a political Party in the United Kingdom since 2019. It was presented by Kathy Jones during the first Portuguese Goddess Conference, as a movement with the possibility of becoming a political Party in any part of the world.

The leaflet shared during the conference stated that the vision of MotherWorld entails the wish for a

society in which creative and life-affirming values, actions, insights and awareness are honoured and encouraged in women, men and children. It is the society that is grounded in the fact that we all live upon our Mother Earth. She is the source and foundation of all that we are and all that we have. We need to take care of Her, of each other and of all life.

In it were also shared the values of this vision:

- honouring Mother Earth as a living being
- love for each other, kindness, respect, support, care and compassion
- honouring all forms of mothering, honouring fathers, and the celebration and nurture of children and young people
- protecting and taking care of the earth, water, fire, air and space in Her world

All these values focus on protecting, caring and safeguarding the future as the bases of a new society that must be created, one that, in their view, should be based on the nurturing that is imputed to women as mothers and from the Earth as the mother. However, their vision calls for the equality and social and environmental justice that can be read in the leaflet, in the same structure that a manifesto and a prayer are constructed. In fact, they are very vague and do not entail any specific political measures that can be put into action to achieve what they call for.

We call for the empowerment of women, and girls, men and boys.

We call for peace in our world.

We call for an end to all violence – violence against women and girls, boys and men, including assault, rape, genital mutilation, circumcision, slavery, people trafficking, torture, murder and war.



We call for an end to intimidation and power-over aggression in all forms.  
We call for an end to the arms trade and the personal and societal ownership of harmful weapons.  
We call for an end to hunger and starvation, poverty, homelessness and the ownership of the resources of the earth by the few at the expense of the many.  
We call for an end to all human and animal sacrifice for religious, political or social purposes.  
We call for an end to all forms of human and animal cruelty.  
We call for an end to all inequalities based on gender, race, sexual orientation, disability and age.<sup>196</sup>

In the United Kingdom, this movement is already registered as a political Party, in which one of the members was a candidate in the 2019 and 2020 elections. The proposals presented at local and national levels are more specific than the general views shown above, proposing to work towards implementing “financial and economic support for Renewable energies, reforestation (...) compassionate farming. Subsidies for food production.”; they also “promote the active participation of Women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social and cultural life”; “payment and support for all Mothers of dependent children”; “free childcare”; “creation of healthy relationships”; “an education system founded in a knowledge and love of the Earth and its many interlocking systems”; to name some of the thirteen national proposals that could be found in their website in 2020.<sup>197</sup>

From the information available, this movement has specific actions and political expression only in Glastonbury, and has not yet spread to other countries, despite adherents of the Goddess Movement seeing themselves in this proposal and Luiza being hopeful that someday it may reach Portugal: “As you know, politics demands great availability, dedication and study. You cannot enter it lightly. People have to know something. But since there are many young people, with much skill in activism, in Portugal, a political Party of women for the Earth will probably be created.”

The MotherWorld Party is an explicit example of how Contemporary Paganism can be connected and integrate some of its beliefs into political Parties. I believe that despite the importance of its values and proposals, it will not be a popular political Party if there is not much public information about its actions, since at only past three years since it was running

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<sup>196</sup> Leaflet distributed during the Portuguese Goddess Conference, May 2019

<sup>197</sup> Accessed 2 February 2020. When I visited the website to review the material in May 2023 it is no longer online. The official facebook page has some activity, but scarce, mostly sharing information about courses of illusive images and illustrations of pregnant women as the Earth. However, in June 2023, it no longer exists. In 2021, Kathy Jones released a book called “MotherWorld”, in which she proposes ideas and information on how to apply the vision and change the world.

for an election. Being born or having any impact, will be even more challenging in Portugal. Besides, it is not the only way politics engage with Contemporary Paganism. I have presented mostly Left-wing movements, but there are also several Far-Right influences among Contemporary Paganism, mainly in paths highly influenced by nationalist streaks, as will be seen next.

### **5.3.2. The Ghost of the Far-Right in Contemporary Paganism**

I could not look at power dynamics and approaches to politics in the context of Contemporary Paganism without finishing this chapter by mentioning the nationalistic and far-Right relations that Contemporary Paganism has in Europe in general, particularly in Portugal and in the United Kingdom. In doing so, I am not affirming that Contemporary Paganism generally follows far-Right ideals nor that Contemporary Pagans are fascists. As I have demonstrated throughout the research, most people with whom I worked follow Left ideals or at least Centre-Left. I am presenting an issue that has been on the rise in Europe and is impacting contemporary Pagans, even if there is a tendency not to talk about this issue among themselves. In a way, it became one of the *Shall-Not-Be-Named* themes. Regardless, it is not a specific issue in Contemporary Paganism. Its presence in these groups is symptomatic of a rising socio-political issue throughout Europe, as several authors have been discussing (Aitamurto, Simpson, 2014).

In the context of Contemporary Paganism, the influence of far-right approaches has been rising in Eastern Europe, as noted by Aitamurto and Simpson (2014). However, this is happening not only in this part of Europe but also in other countries and areas, in more implicit or explicit ways, and from groups adhering to certain currents. Most groups that adhere to far-Right ideologies have a solid nationalist and ethnocentric focus while reconnecting to an ethnic and cultural identity that was lost during the Christianisation of Europe (François 2018).

At the beginning of the research, while mapping contemporary pagan groups in social media, I was added to a Facebook group about European Paganism mainly focused on Northern Europe. When I started scrolling down the shared posts, all of them spoke about the need to reclaim an ethnic past, reconnecting to the white and blue-eyed ancestors that conquered the lands and seas. The narratives were lauded with nationalistic and ethnocentric language, some even explicitly racist and xenophobe. It could have been an interesting online space to explore, but I could not withstand it and removed myself from this Facebook group. It was the first time since I started researching Contemporary Paganism that I was confronted with extreme and explicit ethnic, far-Right narratives. I had witnessed some nationalist streaks in Portugal and

had heard and read about the presence of some of these groups in the United Kingdom, but nothing to that extent.

From what I could gather, in the United Kingdom, it has been growing within some Asatru or Heathen groups, which are currents of Contemporary Paganism based in Nordic faiths and mythology, venerating the old Norse gods (Blain 2002).

The Pagan Federation has issued statements over the years condemning these positions since they do not adhere to Paganism's central core, that of respect between all beings, which are part of Nature, and that includes all human beings. The Pagan Police Association and other Heathen groups are working towards educating the members on how to identify discriminatory language and far-Right ideals in Heathen groups and educating the major public to demarcate themselves from this issue.

In the days following the United States Capitol invasion on January 2021, several Pagans in the UK started denouncing the press articles that were quick to paint heathery and Paganism as white supremacist due to the individual tattooed with pagan symbols that invaded the Capitol. Despite not happening in the United Kingdom, the international impact of this act, and the depiction of sacred symbols connected with such an event, raised the question about the need for Pagans to demarcate themselves from supremacist narratives and show the support and inclusivity of their community. Most of the publications in social media are not available anymore, but some articles are still online. At the time, I registered some of the phrases that were circulating in several social media posts, images with slogans such as "You can practice Heathery regardless of your skin colour or heritage"; "Pagans against White Supremacy"; or "Witches united for democracy and against Fascism".

The Pagan Federation published a statement with other groups on their Facebook page, condemning the initiative. For weeks it was an open discussion in online circles.

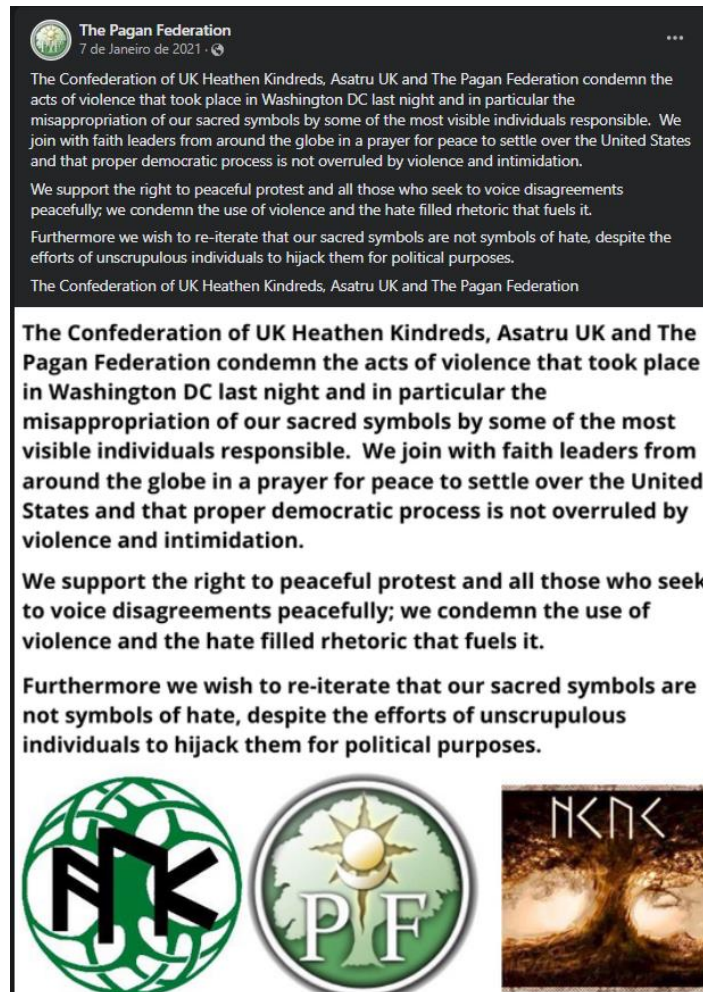


Image 23- Print screen PF Statement after the US Capitol Invasion

In Portugal, this issue is not openly debated yet. When mentioned, the response is to dismiss it as something happening elsewhere in Europe, not in Portugal. Mostly, these responses come from a place of fear that Paganism, still perceived as an outcast and misunderstood religious and spiritual confession, is painted negatively due to this issue. However, as some of the eco-Pagans with whom I worked stated throughout our conversations, Contemporary Paganism in Portugal is still focused on some discussions that are already over in other countries, and this is a hindrance to debating essential questions such as the presence of nationalistic, supremacist, racist and misogynist narratives in some of the paths of Paganism. In their opinion, it is crucial to speak about this issue so that awareness and information can keep circulating. As for the presence of these narratives in the Portuguese pagan milieu, in the circles I moved in, I had not found it; however, I have witnessed some nationalist narratives, mostly from circles that are related with freemasonry, discourses about a cultural identity, much in the same way a Celtic past is looked upon to legitimate the Pagan presence in the territory. While some approaches to these narratives and ideas around a cultural identity are harmless at first, they can become

dangerous in a country with a far-Right political party as the third major political force that is openly discriminatory. I do not mean that those Pagans that look for their country's history to find vestiges that legitimate what they are intending to build today are doing so with supremacist goals in mind. The danger that this movement towards the past entails is falling in these narratives unconsciously if not done with a critical view of what is being researched and explored.

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Throughout this chapter the different power dynamics at play in the lived religious and spiritual experience of Ecocentric Pagans have been addressed, as well as the ways by which they relate to politics in this process. Despite discussing anthropological approaches to power, I argued that contemporary pagan power dynamics could be seen on three levels: structural power, leadership and rights and empowerment.

The structural power includes patriarchy, which is one of the significant presences in power structures pointed out by Contemporary Pagans, being pinpointed as the cause of women's oppression but also of Nature's destruction. I argue that while mobilizing theories that are not scientifically sustained, like the myth of the matriarchal past, or the theory that there was a feminine cult that survived throughout Europe's history, they recognize the influence of this structure in the way the society they belong to is organized, and they try to contest it through their religious, spiritual and political embodied lives that provide recognition of their identity, gender roles and needs.

Interrelated with patriarchy are capitalism and market relations, which are the second way by which structural power affects my interlocutors and the broader contemporary pagan movement, since despite criticizing the significant impact that capitalism has had in the destruction of the environments and of human relationships, they are integrated into this system. At the same time, these movements are criticized for serving the markets due to the idea that most middle-class people map these movements – which scholarship has shown that it is true – offering courses and services that are outside the scope of the economic and financial capacities of the majority of the population; there is a dimension of subsistence and survival that have to be safeguarded and looked upon carefully, which is why I analysed the third structural power that relates with class division and access.

The second set of power relations analysed was related to questions of leadership and rights. While developing the work towards recognition already discussed at the beginning of the thesis, several power relations emerged in the mobilization of narratives about authenticity, legitimacy

and knowledge that are at the centre of the tension inside the movement and one of the causes for its heterogeneity. I have demonstrated how within the movement, several hierarchies emerged that need to be taken into account when analysing Contemporary Paganism, and that these must not be overlooked if one wants to understand the complexity of the movement and the way they emerged and mobilize in the public space. Finally, I have examined how empowerment is the third set of power dynamics most relevant for analysing this dimension in this context and demonstrated how the personal and the public intertwine. This empowerment is attained by ritual and personal work but transposed to the collective space. It is essential to note that even if this empowerment is seen as something positive, there are issues related to power-over and not power-with when someone charismatic tries to control how others can attain this empowerment.

After discussing the power relations, the ways in which Ecocentric Pagans I work with engage with politics were analysed. It was possible to identify positive, neutral and negative approaches to politics and to the question of Contemporary Paganism being considered a political movement besides a religious and spiritual one. In this process, I have argued that the meaning of the words and how people define politics and political participation, relates with an understanding of the political as partisanship – and as most public democratic expressions, like voting – and not the broader sense of the word, as a way of organizing society. This raises tensions and misunderstandings, which is why some prefer Paganism to be connected with activism and not politics, disregarding that activism is a form of political participation in the public space, while others accept this identification. This is why Contemporary Pagans in Portugal do not openly discuss the rise of the far-Right ideals and influences in the movement, as I have demonstrated. In the next chapter, the impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions and the rise of conspiracy theories will be analysed, since, in that period, some of the power dynamics discussed throughout the thesis were at play and more easily perceived.



## **“We Will All Be Well”: Contemporary Paganism and the Covid-19 Restrictions<sup>198</sup>**

On 23 March 2020, I opened my field notebook and wrote:

Since March 17, the Portuguese Government dictated the National Emergency Status because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Since March 11<sup>th</sup> I have been home, because the Municipality I live in closed all the public and municipal infrastructures, libraries included to which I used to go to work. Since this day that productivity has been low, and anxiety levels high. I feel like I am floating, unsure, and afraid, but feeling that change is coming. What are the implications of this virus for my research? In these thirteen days, I have been thinking about the impact and global transformations that are to come; what is being asked from us at such a primal level that goes to the centre of our human condition; how are the systems and structures that sustain us, and we take for granted collapsing? How are people with whom I work being affected by the forced lockdown? With these restrictions, there will be transformations in practices, interactions and sharing. Let us see what is to come...

The restrictions imposed with the outbreak of COVID-19 impacted us personally, emotionally, professionally and socially in the way we lived, mostly in 2020 and 2021. In Portugal and in the United Kingdom, measures were taken to control this outbreak, and people and communities everywhere had to develop strategies to cope with the uncertainty and fear of the virus, of the news, of reactions and of measures implemented. The contemporary pagan movement had to adapt its practices and was challenged to provide for the community, mainly in the form of spiritual care.

The focus of this research is not COVID-19 and the impacts of its restrictions on the lives of people. However, this is relevant to the approach I am proposing. First, because it greatly impacted the research fieldwork, transforming it; secondly, neither the people with whom I worked or myself, are the same people we were when we started weaving this web; thirdly, and of the utmost importance, it proved to be a moment of intense creativity and community support, that illuminated the adaptability of contemporary religious and spiritual groups before the change and their importance as a support during a crisis, but also how prone they are to be

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<sup>198</sup> This chapter will be partly published as an article: MARTINS, Joana, (2023a) “*Connect and Celebrate the Great Mother Online: The Ritual Creativity of Contemporary Pagans in Portugal and the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 Restrictions*”, *Nova Religion*, volume 26, fall issue (November 2023). Forthcoming.



mapped by conspiracy theories, primarily those that relate with environmental and ecological questions, that are rapidly spread in online spaces. Therefore, even if the COVID-19 impacts are not the focus of the research, they need to be documented, analysed and discussed, which I will proceed to do so in the following sections.

The first section will discuss the rise of conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 period, focusing primarily on those related with the environment, which gained other visibility with the centrality of the online space; then, I will discuss the impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions on Contemporary Pagans, as well as the transformations in terms of celebrations and sociability; and finally, I will also approach community care they provided and its positive and negative impacts.

## **6.1. The Rising of Conspiracy Theories During the COVID-19 on the Pagan Online Space**

In March 2020, due to the public health risks posed by COVID-19, both the Portuguese<sup>199</sup> and British<sup>200</sup> Governments imposed several regulations and restrictions to control the spread of the disease. Measures such as social distancing, mandatory use of masks, limitations on citizens' mobility, the closure of various services, businesses, and borders, the implementation of remote work, and general lockdowns<sup>201</sup> were implemented in both countries. People could not be present in public spaces without legitimate reasons, teleworking became mandatory – whenever possible – schools were closed and restrictions were applied, such as limitations or probations on religious celebrations or other cult events that implied agglomeration of people. This situation resulted in a period of fear and uncertainty for people of all economic and social backgrounds, exacerbating social divisions and causing people to resort to the online space as the primary source of engagement and social interaction.

For Pagans, affected by the same general measures for all citizens, and by the one related to religious celebrations, this was reflected in the cancellation of several events, from rituals to participation in conferences and seminars, working groups, and discussions. The groups stopped gathering, and all contact was primarily established via online and digital tools. It is therefore significant that it was in this context that several conspiracy theories started gaining

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<sup>199</sup> For the regulations and legislation applied by the Portuguese government consult <https://dre.pt/dre/geral/legislacao-covid-19>, accessed 23 February 2022.

<sup>200</sup> For the regulations and lockdown's timeline in the United Kingdom, consult <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf>, accessed 23 February 2022.

<sup>201</sup> The restrictions were slowly raised with the vaccination campaigns, in phases. In the United Kingdom, despite the superior number of cases and deaths, these measures were raised before than in Portugal.

a broader attention and presence in the online space, which was not so widespread until then.

The widespread conspiracy theories that map political, economic and social interactions are not new. Conspiracy theories are understood as “fluid networks of ideas deployed against the grain of accepted understandings to argue that specific events do not unfold at random or as the secondary fall-out of mundane social processes or day-to-day, disinterested bureaucratic decisions” (Sobo, Drążkiewicz 2021, p. 70). Most of the scholarship around this issue has been analysed in several fields, as is manifest in the academic literature (Butter, Knight 2018; Moore 2016), most notably in the field of medical anthropology (Sobo, Drążkiewicz 2021), but also in the field of religion and spirituality (Dyrendal, G. Robertson, Asprem 2018; Asprem, Dyrendal 2015; Parmigiani 2021). I will not provide an in-depth analysis and theorization of conspiracy theories, nor of so-called *conspirituality*, defined by Ward and Voas as “a politico-spiritual philosophy based in two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age: 1) a secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order; 2) humanity is undergoing a ‘paradigm shift’ in consciousness or awareness” (2011, p. 104).

I had not enough material and time to conduct a thorough analysis of this phenomenon, nor was this the focus of the research. However, since these were so relevant during the COVID-19, and to some extent related to the narratives of possible futures and regenerated relationships and approaches related to human life with the world, it would be wrong not to mention them at all in this chapter, even in a short section. I prefer not to apply the term *conspirituality* as proposed by the authors mentioned above because of it being too vast, what can lead to analysis that can incorrectly paint New Age movement approaches as conspiracies and, in this process, disregard their importance for people who follow these movements and for the broader religious and spiritual contemporary milieu. In this sense, I prefer to speak about the use of conspiracy theories, then to affirm that they are forms of *conspirituality*.

With the COVID-19 outbreak, several social media platforms were swamped by conspiracy theories. Hand-in-hand with these theories, fake news arose and became widespread. In the social media platforms I accompanied during the online fieldwork period, several posts, news, images and *memes* were shared, and some were reposted by some of my interlocutors, even if they were unaware of the sources of what they were sharing. One of the most popular related to the notion that COVID-19 was a virus sent by the Earth to punish humans for all the destruction, pollution, and death they provoked, endowing the planet with an agency, a rebellious scream against human beings to stop all the destruction for which they were responsible, forcing them in the process to isolate themselves and retreat to their homes.

To support this theory, several articles about the decrease of carbon emissions during mandatory confinement were shared in several groups and by relevant figures from the Portuguese and British pagan milieu, celebrating this positive transformation. At the same time, news began to circulate about marine and terrestrial non-human animals appearing in urban areas or returning to ecosystems from where they were drawn away due to pollution, like the supposed return of dolphins and swans reported to have been seen in the Venice canals. These were shared as hopeful messages in a period of social anxiety, legitimating previous discourses that demanded changes in human behaviour, but also fell into a discourse of human responsibility from which they removed themselves.

Another common theory in circulation was related with vaccine hesitancy and the health measures implemented by the governments, which were understood as serving economic factors and oppress citizens. In the case of the vaccines, some Portuguese and British Pagans followed the narrative that the vaccines were just a strategy of big pharma for more profit, while the mandatory use of masks, the social distancing and the lockdown were forms of oppression, and governments, while implementing those restrictions, were being unconstitutional. However, most of the people with whom this research was conducted adhered to the imposed health restrictions, or, when not doing so, respected the position of those that did, even if not agreeing with it. Others did not explicitly spoke about the issue; however, as mentioned before, they searched for the best ways to care for the community.

Despite the presence of these theories circulating in social media and among Pagans I am not affirming that all adhered to them, nor that Pagans are susceptible or conspiracy believers. As Parmigiani states regarding the engagement of Italian Pagans in conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 period, believing in conspiracies is not the same that what the author calls “conspiracy-believing”. In this sense, “*conspiracy-believing* among Italian Pagans takes the shape of an explicit, populist form of *dissensus* aimed at challenging the common ways to sense and make sense of the world” (Parmigiani 2021, p. 518).

In the case of Portuguese and British Pagans, I agree with the observation that Parmigiani made regarding the contemporary pagan context she worked on: “my Pagan interlocutors do not ‘believe in’ conspiracies, in fact, their adoption of conspiracies should be considered as a form of *conspiracy-believing*, one that is contextual and positional and that is adopted since it enhances ‘participating’. In doing so, it allows the political emergence of a community of sense” (ibid: 520-521). This use of conspiracy theories, mostly the ones related to perceived ecological and environmental changes, reinforces and legitimizes specific issues they have been calling attention to, like the effects of pollution in ecosystems and all its inhabitants.

In this affirmation, I do not intend to disregard how conspiracy theories are dangerous and can lead to discriminatory narratives, nor am I defending their circulation. I am arguing that their circulation is a symptom of a broader phenomenon that is affecting contemporaneity and how people interact with their governments and power institutions (Sobo, Drażkiewicz 2021) and find different, even if polarized – and in some cases harmful – ways to contest these powers.

Analysing mainly the conspiracy narratives surrounding ecological and environmental issues – the most shared among Pagans – provides some comfort before the uncertainty that this particular sociohistorical situation provoked and that, in the process, legitimized what they have been advocating in their religious and spiritual lived existence: the planet is breathing, is alive, communicates, is sentient and suffers as humans do. Therefore, it is asking for help from those that are hearing it, and through their spiritual and magical actions, look for ways of healing and caring for it, and through their political ones call our attention to the threat for the future of the planet and of all the beings. These conspiracy theories mapped the online milieu and raised heated discussions in commentary boxes all over social media. People were contesting government measures or raising anti-vaccination debates; others related with attempts to explain the causes of the virus, some even presenting racist and xenophobe narratives about a population. In the milieu of Contemporary Paganism some of these conspiracy theories started circulating at the same time that they tried to make sense of the transformations that COVID-19 restrictions had on their practices and lived experiences, as well as on how to provide care for the Contemporary Pagans, which will be analysed in the next section.

## **6.2. The Impact of COVID-19 Restrictions on Contemporary Pagans**

Official statements from Pagan organizations were shared before the Government's lockdown declarations presented in the beginning of this chapter. For instance, the Pagan Federation published a statement on its official Facebook page where they mentioned that

Over the last few weeks, it's become apparent that anxieties and concerns are rising over the current pandemic. As a faith community, our responsibility is to support, bolster, and empower people in their spiritual lives. However, it is also the aim of a faith community to offer comfort, reassurance, and love in times of high stress and uncertainty. (...) To that end, we will be making an additional effort to engage online with you over the coming weeks and months, much in the way we have been remotely

supporting the disabled and isolated of our community for many years.<sup>202</sup>

This statement supports the claim that using online tools is not new for Pagans, as will be seen, who were already using them for communication, supporting and providing access to those in the community that could not participate, which helped them adapt to online interactions during the lockdowns.

Similarly, the MotherWorld Party, after the lockdown announcement in the UK, wrote on their official Facebook page:

Human Family, If ever there was a paradigm shift it is now, this is the beginnings of the new story we have been waiting for – for the opportunity to connect into our global family, people like you and me who care deeply for humanity and our planet Earth (...) Thus is a shift from our heads into our hearts.....and the understanding that we are all connected into this global pandemic. We are finally beginning to care about each other in a way that has never been expressed before in any of our lifetimes, social media is bringing us into a collective awakening of the vulnerability of our human family and the understanding that the heart that beats inside each of us is also the heart of this Mother Earth where we live. And we will all grieve for the loss of our human global family as we have grieved for the loss of the rainforests, the rivers, the ice caps, for the extinction of so many species in the past. (...)

Global family this is the opportunity to bring ourselves HOME. (...) We create communities for our actions, by our common-unity, by our care and support for others and by reaching out to others when we ourselves need help and support.”

As can be seen in the citation above, the COVID-19 outbreak and the consequent restrictions raised uncertainty and fear but also hopeful narratives about the possibility of a new chapter, of a “paradigm shift” that was necessary to reinforce and return to healthy relations with the planet, the common home of every species. Besides, it also illustrates a common statement in the contemporary pagan milieu, that of family or kinship relations, of which humans are not separated from and impervious to the ailments suffered by other entities. The focus on caring and togetherness, already seen in the statement made by the Pagan Federation and of the MotherWorld Party, was also reinforced in Portugal, as seen in the statement done by Templo de Inanna:

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<sup>202</sup> The Pagan Federation official Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/paganfederation/photos/3439020366124779>, accessed 13 March 2020

Even if our present is uncertain and of profound changes, we will not stop working in our altars.

Even if chaos threatens the world we live in, we will not stop calling our Gods and Ancestors.

Even if fear darkens our places of comfort, we will not stop looking for peace, sense and strength in the words of our myths and prayers, as well as in our ritual gestures.

The world changes in a cyclic way, and humanity is transformed with it.

The world changes and invites bravery, care and healing so they can become the priority of our day to day.

The world changes and we face the challenge with fire in our hearts and with the responsibility of protecting not just yourself and yours, but also the collective that sustains us all.

That the myths' wisdom inspire us,

That the emotion of our prayers gives us the courage and encouragement,

That the revelations granted to us strengthen ourselves,

That our rites maintain our resilience's flame lit.

That faith does not falter,

That the spirit does not abandon us,

We embrace this challenge, and we will take care of life, of our present and future, preserving our past.

Under the same Sky, over the same Earth, we will prevail facing this crisis together!<sup>203</sup>

All three of these statements approach what the role of the contemporary pagan movement was: care for their community and support them emotionally and spiritually while calling for togetherness; how they did it varied. Some transformed rituals, others organized online events that provided continuity and promoted engagement. Others offered guided meditations and healing currents. All these creative responses will be analysed in the next section, based on the online fieldwork conducted during 2020 and 2021.

### **6.2.1. Transformations in Practices and Social Engagement of Contemporary Pagans**

As with everyone else in subjected to the COVID-19 restrictions during 2020 and 2021, most social interactions between Contemporary Pagans were transported to the online space. Their

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<sup>203</sup> Translated by me, original published in Portuguese on the Official Facebook Page of Templo de Inanna, in March 2020. Accessed on the same date. It is no longer available online.

use of these tools is not new, they primarily have been using as a form for Pagans to interact, find equals and create a community, as several scholars have noticed in their research among Contemporary Pagans. Berger and Ezzy (2004), some of the pioneering scholars approaching this question, have explored how American and Australian teenagers, in their journey to become a witch, had used the internet as a tool for gaining information, meeting people and creating online spiritual communities; Coco (2008), based in the Australian context, also found that through the use of online tools, such as email discussions, Pagans were providing a space for other Pagans to create and interact with the community. Some of the considerations of these two works, mostly in their questioning of the impact of these tools in the lived experiences of Pagans, are no longer pertinent today since access to the internet was democratized and widespread, contributing to the increase of Contemporary Pagans in the last decade.

With the creation of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, not just younger people are adhering more easily to pagan paths, but the movement itself is much more connected and engaging. Renser and Tiidenberg in their research with eclectic Estonian witches online and their uses of social media to provide counsel have encountered that they use these tools to learn, educate and develop their techniques, they are ‘shaped by the interactivity, storage, and networked information access affordances of Facebook, primarily where they shape and constrain specific forms of individual, automated and algorithmic feedback.’ (2020, p. 9). Evolvi (2020), in her research in a contemporary pagan forum, theorized that what is contested and negotiated in online spaces impacts and is impacted by concrete issues that happen in the embodied experience. In online spaces, those starting in these paths, or already engaging with them, find authority and negotiate them.

When I started this research, even before the COVID-19 outbreak and consequent restrictions, online tools were already central in the lived experiences of those Contemporary Pagans with whom I worked, primarily acting as a space to find sources and to create a sense of community if one considers how isolated solitary Pagans (Berger, 2019) can be or how spaced in time the collective events can take place. When a religious and spiritual movement does not have physical buildings or spaces where their adherents can congregate, people have to find and create these spaces, which in this case were online. With COVID-19, this was enhanced. In both contexts, several initiatives were organized on social media to start community emotional and spiritual support and keep their ties and rituals during these times of isolation.

First, the number of Facebook groups about Contemporary Paganism, or engaging Contemporary Pagans increased. During the mandatory confinement I followed at least four

Facebook groups; some still exist, but are in some cases inactive, and others are active even today. These groups, or the official pages of the groups – or even personal pages – organized live-streamed guided meditations weekly or monthly; usually ending with a message of hope and intention for healing. They also housed shared presentations, lectures, and discussions on several themes of interest for the pagan community; planned online markets for artisans to sell their items; ensured social media live streams for discussion – and social media groups and forums grew; organized magical currents for healing, protection and political participation; and conducted live-streamed, pre-recorded or synchronic rituals and ceremonies, which in some cases are still available on platforms like YouTube or social media.

Despite the relevance of all these initiatives, the way the rituals and ceremonies were conducted during this period was the most interesting one to accompany since these moments are extremely sensorial and embodied experiences that at first light seem incompatible with online practices. Next, we will focus on some examples that show how this engagement was done.

### **Online, Synchronous, and Recorded Rituals**

Several types of rituals and ceremonies were explored during this period, as stated above. The online rituals consisted of group members conducting the ritual as they would onsite. For instance, the PFI-Portugal held several online rituals via Zoom or Skype platforms, following the structure of some of the rituals already described in the previous chapter: opening a sacred space, calling for the protection of this space by calling the energies and elements (earth, air, fire, water) associated with the four cardinal points (North, East, South, West), then calling the main Deities with which they would work with during the ritual, finishing with the farewell to the Deities and elements and finally the closing of the magical or sacred circle. During the opening of the 2020 Summer Solstice ritual, they read a text that stated that

Today, on this Summer Solstice night, even inside our homes, we will celebrate the sun's power, celebrating the solstice as a community. There may not be nocturnal festivities with bonfires, but there will be a light in every house: the internal flame, our light. In a Pagan circle produced by the Portuguese Pagan Federation, now opened in the physical and virtual community, may it be a communion circle, uniting our hearts.<sup>204</sup>

Sustaining that even physically apart, they would try to provide a way to connect and celebrate the energies that the Summer Solstice called for through a new form of conducting

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<sup>204</sup> Online PFI – Portugal Summer Solstice Ritual 2020, 21 June 2020



rituals.

Synchronic rituals were the other forms of ritualization most used during the social isolation period. For instance, to celebrate the Spring Equinox, Templo de Inanna<sup>205</sup> organized a ritual in which each group member was at home, and at the same time and day, and with the exact liturgic text to which everyone gave their input, they would create an altar with candles, statues, and offerings, with the intention on connecting with the cycles and deities they were celebrating. Then, the ritual would start with chants, drumming, and prayers such as “The time of life’s blossoming has arrived / The time of the fields in flower has arrived / Inanna, who dictates the fates and that reigns the season’s cycle...”; this was being shared from different geographical locations. Afterwards, photographs of the altars and the messages received during the ritual were shared, expanding the sense of connectivity and shared experience. This form of ritualization was the most consensual because some Pagans felt that online rituals become a bit “cringy”, as shared by some of the Pagans I interviewed. After all, online rituals were almost theatrics and did not promote the immersion, while synchronous rituals did.



*Image 24- Photo taken during the Synchronous ritual with Templo de Inanna, March 2020*

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<sup>205</sup> Portuguese Pagan religious and spiritual organization dedicated to the study and devotion of Mesopotamia Reconstructionist practices <https://eankiasag.blogspot.com/2020/11/sobre-o-templo.html>, accessed 16 February 2022

However, one should not disregard the impact that online rituals had on the people that chose to participate and conduct them during a time when it was impossible to do so onsite, and the community relationships were dissolving due to the lack of social interactions. Besides, it offered opportunities to those that generally could not engage with those events due to financial or accessibility reasons, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Some Pagans, such as the Glastonbury Goddess Conference team<sup>206</sup>, conducted the rituals in physical temples and live-streamed them, which was the third form of ritualization found in this period. The Priests and Priestesses live-streamed or recorded the ritual they were conducting in their temple, offering mostly blessings, asking for healing and peace, comforting those watching the stream, and sometimes requesting that people accompany them with the lighting a candle or with a prayer. The 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference, already introduced in Chapter 4 to discuss the understanding of the Goddess as the living Earth, took place during the lockdown, and all the ritual strategies mentioned above were applied at various moments, but mostly the recorded rituals or live-streamed ones.

Aided by platforms like Facebook and Zoom, they engaged with participants and offered workshops, ceremonies, and lectures. A private Facebook group was created and used as an online temple where every participant, speaker, and ceremonialist holding a ticket would gather, interact, and co-create. It was a safe space<sup>207</sup> for the participants where symbolism was present, and intentions were set: “the platform from which you will be directed to the whole program of the goddess conference and where you can socialize with other participants.”<sup>208</sup> It was not the bounded physical space, but it still was the space where symbolism was present and intentions were set – people would connect in a safe and loving environment, as said in the introductory post of the group. As Sarah Pike notes from her work with Contemporary Pagans in Pagan festivals, “participants expect that sacred space will make it possible for them to both go deeper into the self and to act more powerfully on the surrounding world” (2001, p. 24).

In the month leading up to the conference, the co-organizers would go live on the Goddess Conference’s official Facebook page to share how the preparation for the conference was going and what was to be expected. In one of these videos, they mentioned that

The Conference is all about connection through the Earth Mother Goddess and how

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<sup>206</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/GLASTONBURYGODDESSCONFERENCE/videos/310045706684172>, accessed 16 February 2022

<sup>207</sup> For a deeper understanding of these spaces see, among others, Chia Longman (2018) and María del Rosario Ramírez Morales (2018) that have discussed at length how the notion of “safe space” have been created in women circles.

<sup>208</sup> Facebook group description, accessed on 27 July 2020.

we can connect to each other even physically apart. On how to heal the great wound of disconnection and displacement. (...) it is a gathering of international Goddess-loving people (...). Online is not an impediment to joining in. It is just another way, even if it is not the way we would have chosen to do it.<sup>209</sup>

This means that, people could “become together,” meet the circle, focus on the Goddess, and be part of the “World Wide Goddess Web”, in a most inclusive way, both culturally and in terms of accessibility.

The days of the Conference had the same structure, with the mornings allocated to the pre-recorded presentations shared as live-stream videos. People could watch them live, commenting and engaging with the presentations, sharing their gratefulness and thoughts, or could save them for later. Due to their time zones, the flow of comments was synchronous and asynchronous, with people engaged at different times. In the afternoon, it was time for the Earth Circles – the space where we engaged more personally in small groups, under the supervision of a Priest/ess, and shared our intakes of the conference and how we were feeling – and the Workshops, which were live events conducted via Zoom. In the evenings, it was time for the ceremonies. Two significant ceremonies were held via Zoom on the first and third days of the Conference – the Opening Ceremony and the Ceremonial Embodiment Ceremony. Both were intense, and people were asked to engage from their homes by lighting candles and incense, holding Crystals, saying prayers and dancing to the sound of drums and music being shared on the Zoom session.

There was a sense of connection, happiness, and gratefulness because the conference was happening, even if it was online. Everyone present was nurtured in those uncertain times, feeling connected, emotionally engaged and proud that history was being written with the first online experience, as the Goddess Conference’s official page published:

Well, that was a Goddess Conference nobody will forget lightly! The 25th Anniversary, the first ever fully online and an amazing celebration of the Earth Mother Goddess. We are so grateful for all the beautiful people who made this adventure possible; what a beautiful example of love, support and service to the Goddess! 🙏<sup>210</sup>

This is in line with Kathryn Rountree when, in a similar experience of online ritualization with the groups she has been working with, she mentioned that “watching was conflated with

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<sup>209</sup> Video 20 July 2020, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/GLASTONBURYGODDESSCONFERENCE/videos/2386158348350637>

<sup>210</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/GLASTONBURYGODDESSCONFERENCE/posts/3295778023876343> accessed 7 September 2020

being there. An intersubjective space was created by the awareness of our collective focus, awe, and excitement, which led to visceral experiences” (2021, p. 10)



Image 25- The altar created for the 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference

A magical sacred space was created<sup>211</sup>, despite lacking central elements of the community’s in person spiritual and religious experience. However, since the spiritual connection comes from individuals and people who individually enter the magical space, it works because “sacred space online and sacred spaces ‘in the world’ interweave, physical and imagined places connect, and all places become one place in the sacred collective consciousness.”(Rountree 2021, p. 21) The event kept happening even after it ended officially because people kept their interactions on the Facebook group during the whole month of August, watching and rewatching the recordings, publishing and commenting, sharing a “repertoire of meaning”(Coco 2008) over time. Besides, a unique, more accessible ticket was created for those that could not see the live Conference due to financial difficulties, which was added to the Facebook group after the Conference. The experience of those that accessed the event after it happened differed from

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<sup>211</sup> Most scholarship about Contemporary Pagans state that sacred and magical spaces are ‘found’, as exemplified by Malita-Krol (2021) with her work among Polish Pagans. However, and despite agreeing with these statements, I have witnessed the creation of sacred and ritual places. Based on my experience, creating, and finding walk hand in hand. I have attended rituals in event rooms that were booked for the occasion, and they had nothing sacred or special *per se*; as well as a ritual done in an old dance club/bar because it was the available space for a group that does not have a physical building as a temple. With the COVID-19 it became difficult to ‘find’ the right place, and people had to use the places they had available: places that were at the same time for domestic, work, and religious and spiritual activities; hence my choice to use the word ‘creating’ instead of finding.

those who experienced it live. They watched and received the messages but lacked live commentaries, live workshops, and Earth Circles that gave a sense of connectivity and shared experience. At the same time, this sacred online space had a beginning and an ending, like other ritual spaces onsite. After August, all the shared publications were hidden or deleted, and people were removed from the group, adding to the ephemeral energy of these events.

People, also, felt that returning to reality was the same as after an on-site conference, as seen in several comments describing this feeling, reporting a sense of loss and disconnection from being back to their routines:

I can't believe the Conference is over! It was stunningly beautiful and so very moving...thank you to all the organizers, Priestesses, Melissas, facilitators, artists, and participants. ❤️ ❤️ ❤️ My intention was to connect to Earth Mother, and it has happened more powerfully than I could have imagined.

I felt a little lost yesterday, after such a beautiful conference ended. (...) I feel so connected to you all, despite having never met you in person. That's definitely due to the magic of the Conference and those who made it happen. Thank you!<sup>212</sup>

Setting a magical and ritual space implies a sense of disconnection from routines; however, in this event, they were in their homes, and the magical experience intertwined with the routines that followed; they were aware of fluidly “being there” and “being here” (Rountree 2021) at the same time.

### **6.2.2. Community Care During Times of Uncertainty and Crisis: Negative and Positive Responses**

Despite this seeming success of contemporary pagan responses to the COVID-19 restrictions, mainly in the form of rituals, some issues emerged. The first was the lack of embodied and sensorial experience. Every person tried to create their own ritual space in their homes. However, the social dimension of the ceremonies was missing, which created difficulties in capturing attention and feeling immersed, as Rountree (2021) – among other scholars – noted in her research with Contemporary Pagans in Malta and the English Heritage Livestreamed events during the lockdowns in 2020. For Kate, who was among those organizing the Glastonbury Goddess Conference<sup>213</sup> these two years were hard:

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<sup>212</sup> Comments from the private Facebook group, accessed on 3 August 2020. Emojis in the original.

<sup>213</sup> The Glastonbury Goddess Conference was also organized online in 2021, with one day dedicated to in-person events. In 2022, despite being a fully in person conference, they also provided the online option, in the form of pre-recorded talks and materials.

It was soul destroying, especially after this year's conference, we really had to pick ourselves up and motivate ourselves (...) because energetically it doesn't work if we can't meet in person (...) and energetically online is much difficult. It's much more difficult. You can do, you can do some things really beautifully online (...) but some things you can't. And we have really learned what we can and what we can't do and where our boundaries are and where we can give energy and where it is, you know, we know that this is no, and this is a yes. It's been a very tough learning. It's been a very tough year, because you don't get the energy back like you do when it is a in person conference. And it is a huge investment of time and energy and love and dedication. Some of the gifts in it have been the amazing support we've had from particularly out presenters and our Priestesses, our ceremonial team, our Priestess teams, our pillars. And it has created, in a way, even though we've not been able to be in the same space with the majority of those people, like at all, it has created this bond. It's like a ship crew that's been through this really awful storm or something and still managed to, you know, survive. Have a beautiful time sailing as well. (...) We've come through something together. We've learned a lot.<sup>214</sup>

The second issue relates with Internet access, which was mandatory to partake in these activities, implying, then, an idea of equal access to these tools, which is not always the case. While most people in these movements belong to the same socioeconomic background, there is still a discrepancy in technological literacy and economic resources. Moreover, the stability of this access was not always constant. During the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, the most common complaint had to do with access and time-zone variations. Participants complained that the main ceremonies were not recorded and shared on the Facebook page. First, it was impractical for some to assist to the live ceremonies due to time zone differences; second, due to issues with an internet connection, difficulties in accessing the Zoom sessions, and not understanding which platform they needed to go to, primarily due to issues of those not familiar with the platform. Answering these complaints, the co-organizers explained that for the main ceremonies, it was necessary to fully be there, to understand and be involved in it. It had to be a live(d) experience.

Besides, it was also a time of uncertainty for those that make a living out of contemporary pagan services like workshops, courses or therapies. Those faced a hard time, as Kate, of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference team shared, since

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<sup>214</sup> Interview with the co-organizers of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, online, 19 November 2021

There's a lot of negativity against the conference that goes on as well (...) so we personally take the hit of that quite regularly, and that's just...you know, we are human beings and there comes to a point where, where that really becomes unhealthy. And I think both of us reached that point last year with all the extra struggle of keeping a livelihood going. A Priestess livelihood that is based on in-person work that has to go online. Now, I've gotten quite good at doing things online, but to move an in-person course online is quite a different thing from creating something that is designed to be online. So, it's been a massive stress, a massive stretch.

Nevertheless, not all was negative. The creativity and resilience shown by Pagans when faced with the uncertainty of social, health, and economic crises exacerbated by COVID-19 was essential to support the community. This support translated into two main dimensions: the increased focus on the role of personal and collective care and equal access.

Regarding personal care, what was most spoken about was for everyone to take care of their health, especially their mental health, not just because of the increased rates of anxiety and the health risks of the virus but also the impacts of changed routines and isolation. Since most people in this movement were women over 30 and with children, their routine changed with schools and day-care centres closing, and their professional life was reduced to remote work, at least for those that had the privilege of working from home. Some had to be on leave to take care of the children, creating financial strain and increasing anxiety levels when seeing the relegation of their roles to care work for others and for the household, and a lack of time and space to provide for their self-care.

Mariana, in this situation, told me that the moments she could stop to listen to the guided meditations, watch the recorded rituals, or do her own, were the moments when she could take care of herself and find the emotional support to face the challenges she was going through. For her, some of the responses from the community were "Beacons of hope and good sense, of comfort. Telling us: 'We are here. Do your work. Be active. Do what makes you feel connected. Take care of yourself. Do not devalue that fear. Dive in it, heal it.'<sup>215</sup>

Besides the abovementioned personal care, the widespread sense of care for the community, human and more-than-human, that also arose during these times of uncertainty and restrictions. As the narrative shared during the Goddess Conference shows, the need to reconnect, regenerate and care for the planet and all those that inhabit it is urgent and imperative for stability. Therefore, the mobilization of the Pagan community was a form of community care, translating

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<sup>215</sup> Online interview with Mariana, 12 May 2020.

into new possibilities for access and engagement:

Many layers fell off as it became clear that the Internet had provided a means that, more than helpful, was essential for us to survive, for instance, an epidemic. And it, also, made us focus on what is essential, which is serving people. In the majority of the groups that have Priests, they are finally doing what they were meant to do, which is serving the community!<sup>216</sup>

Before the COVID-19 restrictions, some community members could not participate in some on-site events and rituals due to economic, financial, geographical, or disability issues. The prices of the tickets for some of these events were high, and people did not have the financial resources to partake in them; others lived outside of the metropolitan areas where most of the groups are concentrated and could not travel there; others could not leave their family responsibilities or had no-one to care for their children, and therefore could not attend the events; and, finally, some of the ritual places chosen by the groups, like those in the countryside that imply walking across uncertain terrain, did not grant an equal access to someone with physical disabilities. In an interview with Alexandra, she mentioned that

COVID-19 made it possible for organizations to understand that the Internet is an excellent tool for sharing knowledge. Not just during a quarantine. We cannot discriminate against those that cannot go to certain places. And I am not just talking in terms of financial difficulties, but of those with health issues or mobility problems. (...) I hope that in the future when we can return to normality, they will think of keeping an online option.<sup>217</sup>

For instance, the open online events allowed increased engagement and offered opportunities to those who usually would not attend due to financial difficulties. In the official group created by the PFI-Portugal for online interactions, one member wrote that, "I am living in Portugal, but we are poor and cannot pay the membership fee. I am very grateful to be accepted [in the Facebook group]".<sup>218</sup>

Turning to online ritualization allows the community to engage, interact and participate when otherwise some could not. As mentioned before, some of the groups, like the Pagan Federation, already had tools to provide accessible content; others, like the Goddess Conference, reduced the price of the tickets and created ticket options for those with financial

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<sup>216</sup> Mariana, during the joint online interview with Alexandra, 30 June 2020.

<sup>217</sup> Alexandra, during joined online interview with Mariana, 30 June 2020.

<sup>218</sup> Comment on 30 April 2020.



difficulties, providing a more inclusive experience, therefore supporting the community during these times. For Mary, part of the organizing team of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, the response of the participants was very positive, and the Glastonbury Goddess Conference Team are determined to continue because the conference is a, is such a special, much bigger than an individual. It's a very special treasure, a Goddess treasure. And we take our responsibility and love for that very seriously. And She hasn't told us She wants us to stop, so that's okay then, you know, we have to trust. She'll carry us forward. Bring us lots of people to share Her with."

Through the example of how Pagans adapted to online ritualization to maintain the support of the community, both in Portugal and in the United Kingdom, we have seen that this process was facilitated not only because of the already creative nature of their rituals but also because they were already familiar with these tools to keep the contact, and, in some cases, provide resources to the community. The technological literacy and presence of younger people in the groups also contributed to the response given by groups and organizations during restriction times.

While adapting to this period, using several strategies like guided meditations, presentations and lectures, workshops, online markets, social media video streams, and live-streamed, pre-recorded, or synchronic rituals and ceremonies, Contemporary Pagans were providing spaces for care and possibilities for an equal access of the community what otherwise could not have been done – like in the times before these restrictions – because those events were not always financially and mobility accessible.

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The first months of the COVID-19 restrictions gave rise to several reflections about the future, both apocalyptic and hopeful ones (Mbembe 2020; Krenak 2020a; Žižek 2020a; 2020b), and social media platforms and corporations appropriated the language of care to promote the connectivity and in the process to increase their outcomes (Cabalquinto, Ahlin 2021). With time, tiredness overtook the hope that something would change in how human beings act towards each other and the planet that sustains them. Two years of global restrictions took a toll, and now, writing these words one year after the last restrictions were raised, it is perceived that significant structural changes that were hoped for did not happen. Social inequalities were exacerbated, even with the support for housing, access to governmental and health services and economic measures that the governments instituted during the isolation period. If the extreme narratives and polarization seen in conspiracy discourses are an indication, all the solidarity that

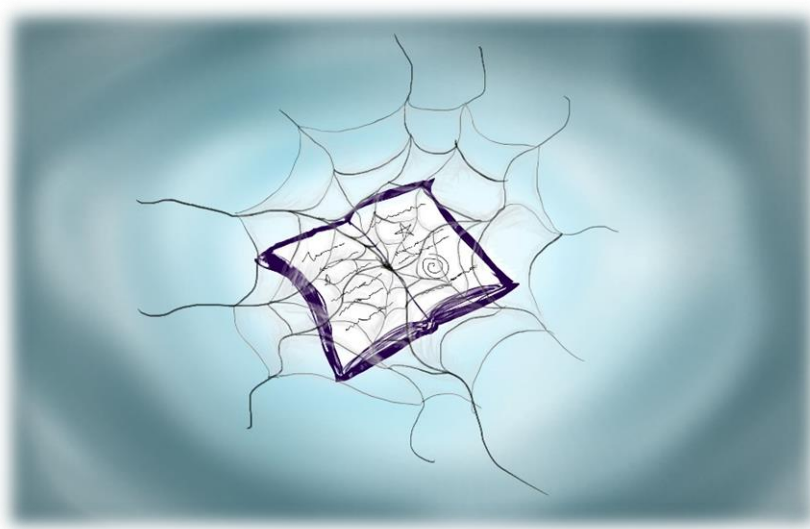
was called for during the COVID-19, and all the rainbows stating the “We will all be well”, were in vain.

However, this does not change the power that care holds amid social relations. As the responses of Contemporary Pagans to the COVID-19 restrictions and the general crisis have shown, it is possible to create a caring community that provides emotional and spiritual support when uncertainty strikes. The several strategies and ritual transformations were powerful indications of the adaptability of these movements while facing a crisis. These strategies offered comfort even while lacking the embodied, sensorial and Nature-relational dimensions so central in their lives. The need to reconnect with a wider-than-human world to sustain the possible future was also reinforced, as will be explored in the next chapter to a greater extent.



## **Caring, Healing and Regenerating the Earth: The Future of Interconnection**

Our Spider has reached the end of her web. Fastidiously weaved, she can rest at last. But always keeping in mind the infinite possibilities. This design could have changed, had the spider decided to change directions, complexifying it even more. She could have added more layers, more threads, and more approaches. But her aim was attained. Perhaps, when building another Web, she will include all the threads that were not part of this one.



*Image 26- Illustration of the metaphor of the Spider Web mobilized in the Thesis.*

This research aimed to understand how internal power dynamics related to gender relations and environmental engagement inform Contemporary Pagans' political participation in the public space. To do so, it approached how Nature is understood by Contemporary Pagans, and how they demonstrate political stands while engaging with it. At the same time, based on an idea of the Goddess as the manifestation of Nature, they make sense of their gender identities, intertwining their personal and religious and spiritual approaches with ecofeminist stands about the health of the planet and the need for social equality. In the process of their lived religious and spiritual lives, several power dynamics emerge, related to considerations about gender and Nature, but also with the broader structural and organizational social and cultural aspects of their lives. Before the uncertainty, crises and possibilities of the future that are central to their lives, a narrative of hope and transformation appears.

As was seen throughout these pages, the words “care”, “healing”, and “regeneration” are mentioned several times, implicitly and explicitly, in all the chapters. I argue that Care, Healing

and Regeneration appeared as the solutions through which meaning could be given before a crisis, and that this was done through individual and collective engagements in spiritual, religious and political approaches, as will be seen in the next section.

## **7.1. Healing, Care and Regeneration: Magical Transformation for a Regenerated Individual and Collective Future**

During the research, a recurrent theme appeared whenever one of the three dimensions mentioned above was explored. Several rituals were conducted with the aim of healing and saving the Earth; others to heal the wounds caused by structural powers such as patriarchy and capitalism; in other cases, it was the need to care for the Earth and the community, both human and more-than-human that arose, even more pressing, when a global health crisis impacted the lives of everyone; in the words of several people, relationships needed to be regenerated, revived and restored. This was attained by religious and spiritual, magical and political means. As we will see, care, healing and regeneration are presented as solutions for the destruction and the several crises that contemporaneity goes through.

### **Healing**

Healing is a recurrent theme in contemporary religious and spiritual movements and the focus of scholarship since the 20<sup>th</sup> century (McGuire 1993; Sointu 2006; Sointu, Woodhead 2008); however still relevant nowadays. Since then, the mindset changed from what one can do to be saved to how one can be healed; and from the world's salvation to its healing (Bowman 1999). This shift perceives the agency of individuals with control over their bodies and their actions. The need for healing is perceived as necessary at an individual and global levels. As Bowman notes,

A key concept in such healing rhetoric is interconnectedness. Individuals may embark upon their own spiritual quest, or ostensibly seek healing for themselves, but it is ultimately seen as part of a larger whole. (...) What it is that we and the world need to be healed of, what constitutes healing, how is to be achieved and the source of healing are matters of constant exploration and negotiation (1999, p. 184).

Twenty years after Bowman wrote these words, they are still relevant in Portugal and in the United Kingdom if the examples that will be explored next are any indication. Looking for explanations and meaning when instability crosses paths is a specific human necessity. When the biomedical system – the influential structure that provides sense when some ailment affects

the body – does not provide answers to an issue that impacts the well-being of the person, or simply does not have the necessary answers for emotional and spiritual needs, people look for other sources, while still maintaining the importance of biomedicine.

Some find it in alternative healing practices like reiki or radionic tables (Roussou 2021); others are devoted to *Nossa Senhora da Saúde*, a type of Marian worship to which people resort to for health and healing (Pereira 2021)<sup>219</sup>, or go to Fátima's Sanctuary, looking for healing through pilgrimage, to pray for health or *pagar promessa* (Fedele 2020b); or pilgrimage to Catholic Shrines, where creativity and reinterpretation of these sites with contemporary pagan theories and practices can happen in order to make sense of life processes, therefore healing symbolic wounds regarding gender roles, body images and physiological processes (Fedele 2013b), as well as holistic mothering practices, an alternative to biomedical approaches to the body and motherhood (Fedele 2016), to name a few. These forms of healing practices through religious and spiritual means are not mutually exclusive, interacting and trespassing borders in peoples lived religious and spiritual lives.

In the case of Ecocentric Pagans with whom I worked, all these forms are more easily found in the Goddess Spirituality adherents than in wiccan-inspired groups. However, it does not mean that even these groups cannot find in catholic shrines dedicated to healing, for instance, the energetic symbolism that can be applied to their rituals. Most recognize that before there was a catholic cult in that shrine, it was already a sacred space for pagan worshippers, as result of religious syncretism. Besides, Catholicism is the religious and cultural referential for most Pagans – the house they grew in and from where they set off –, and in this sense they are never really able to erase it. For them Catholicism is simultaneously their central religious identity referential and what they oppose; it is their starting-point, and no matter where their paths may lead their origin was right there. Having said this, some Pagans are able to blend their past references with their present beliefs – for instance when understanding the Marian cult as a manifestation of the Goddess (Frazão 2017; 2021) – while others oppose that past, that origin, and reinvent themselves as Pagans while never really succeeding in ignoring or erasing their catholic past. In this sense, that past becomes in itself an element of their pagan identities and remains present in their narratives.

To exemplify how the lived pagan spiritual and religious practices interact with the religiocultural referential, I will share my embodied experience in two healing shrines: the Endovélico Shrine in Alentejo, and the Our Lady of Fátima Sanctuary.

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<sup>219</sup> For more on Marion cults in Portugal see also Vasconcelos (2005).

On 14 July 2019 I travelled to Fátima, with the group of the Summer School “Religion in the Public Space”<sup>220</sup>. As a Portuguese woman that was brought up in a Catholic background, as shared at the beginning of this thesis, going to Our Lady of Fátima Sanctuary is part of my family memories, usually in moments of transition, like when someone dies or gets married. I can still remember being five years old and going on a family trip to the Sanctuary after my aunt’s marriage – in which I was the flower girl – to offer our flower bouquets to Our Lady of Fátima. While I cannot remember much from those years, that trip is imprinted in my memories, from the moment when I laid my small flower bouquet close to Our Lady in *Capelinha das Aparições*, to how strange it was for me to see people *pagar promessa*, and asking my family what was happening. When any family member went to Fátima it was – and still is – always requested that a candle would be lit, usually for protection and healing to a particular family member or to the whole family.

On that Summer Day when I went to Fátima for work, it was no different. I knew how important it was for my family for me to light a candle at the Sanctuary, meditate and pray, and request Our Lady’s blessing. And since a year had passed since my grandfather's death – my family not having had the opportunity to go to the Sanctuary themselves – I carried it on. I approached the burning fire next to the *Capelinha das Aparições*, lit the candle for all the family members, those alive and those that were gone, syntonised with them and meditated for a little while. Then I texted my mother and aunt, saying “It is done. I have lit candles for all of us and said a prayer in the memory of grandad”, a sense of relief and fulfilled duty running through me. At the same time, it was like the circle had been completed.

The first half of this circle had been cast the day before. On 13 July I went on a fieldwork excursion to Alentejo to visit an Endovélico Shrine with Templo de Inanna. Endovélico is a pre-Christian and pre-Roman deity that was worshipped in the Iberian Peninsula, mainly in the Alandroal area. Some archaeological vestiges of its worship were found in this area, and it is one of the Iberian deities most known and worshipped today in the Iberian Peninsula, with vestiges pointing towards local worship in the area of Alentejo (Leite de Vasconcelos 1905; Velloso 2020; Olivares Pedreño 2002). It is understood as a deity of the Earth, sought by worshippers to ask for healing and health, and several rituals have been conducted in this area by contemporary pagan groups. On that day, with Templo de Inanna, we went to the shrine to ask for healing and health.

We left the car outside the fence that delimited the property where the archaeological

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<sup>220</sup> The Summer School Religion in the Public Space was organized by CRIA and University of Groningen.

vestiges attributed to Endovélico were and walked there as pilgrims, stopping along the path. I remember the heat on my skin, sweat running down my temples and the back of my knees, the weight of my backpack over my shoulders, no breeze in the air, and the dried vegetation crushed under our feet as we walked. It was not a long walk, but under the Alentejo's heat, it seemed so. We stopped under some trees, from where we could perceive at the end of the path some red bricks appearing among the vegetation and trees. It was time to be purified by water before proceeding to the sacred space. We proceeded, leaving an offer to the spirits of the place, in the form of water and olive oil, so that we would be welcomed there. Cicadas and other buzzing insects accompanied us in our silent walk, the birds chirping in the distance. At last, we reached a circular red brick complex with a tree or overgrown bush, loose ground and rocks inside. Endovélico was called by the Priest and Priestess of the Temple, being offered wine, bread and olive oil, strategically placed so they would be absorbed by the earth or eaten by any scavenger that could be around there, looking for food. With that prayer and offer, healing and health in general were asked in return.

Then, each of us performed our personal rituals. I looked around the place and chose a spot behind an olive tree to leave my offerings, in the form of honey, olive oil, bread and rosemary, saying a prayer asking for health and healing for myself, for my family and for my friends – mostly the grief we were feeling. The experience in those shrines, one Catholic and the other Pagan, in the same weekend, and with similar purposes and intentions set on the personal rituals, is an example of how the religiocultural background engages with the pagan lived religion and spirituality. I described that it seemed like a circle was completed and that I felt relief when conducting the candle ritual in Fátima. While at the Endovélico Shrine, I conducted the request for healing through my Pagan religiospiritual practices, which make sense to me and provide me comfort; in Fátima I was drawing from my family ties and cultural background to make the same request in a language and ritual that I knew had meaning to them; but it was also done in a way that was in conformity with my beliefs.

This also exemplifies how healing is a transversal and central dimension in contemporary religion and spirituality<sup>221</sup>, as has been shared by my interlocutors and during fieldwork. Recently, while writing about the experience at Endovélico Shrine, I texted Mariana, the woman who also accompanied me to the Goddess Conference and has been one of the main interlocutors of the research, and the Priestess of the Templo de Inanna, to ask if she could share with me her pilgrimage experience to Endovélico, since she had done it several times. She

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<sup>221</sup> See Emily Pierini (2018) for an example of how healing and therapeutic dimensions are mobilized in other contexts, in this case in Brazil with spirit mediumship.



wrote:

The experience of going to the Endovélico shrine starts with the planification of the trip to the site, and preparation of the water that will be used for purification (spring water charged with rosemary and olive branch leaves during the night before, and that were collected with the intention of healing), and the offerings (bread, water, honey and olive oil).

While I shape the bread in an anthropomorphic figure, I think about someone in particular and will weave and imbue with my gestures healing for who the doll represents. This preparation also implies the selection of prayers and ritual gestures that will accompany the offering in the site.

At the site, a pilgrimage is done in silence until we reach the location where the shrine was erected. This pilgrimage starts with cleaning the face, hands and arms, in a simple purification rite with the spring water prepared in the night before. It is common for the pilgrimage walk to be done with the heads covered by a scarf (in the women's case), a custom that I still maintain until today, that helps me entering the contemplation state to reach the site where we will connect with the God of Healing.

When reaching the site [where the shrine was built] we sing to Endovélico and leave our first offerings, greeting Him [Endovélico] as the force that brings us healing and restores life. Then, the site of personal tuning is another moment that facilitates our proximity with Endovélico, and that allows us more personal healing rites, where we leave the bread dolls, ask for the healing of whom we want and seal the rite with a contemplation in the site, because we know that the God Endovélico reveals Himself in His spaces and in His elements (flora and fauna).

This moment of contemplation and intimacy with Endovélico is profoundly invigorating for me, and even though the revelations [received during the rite] are not always easy to accept, the act of connecting with His power renews my body and soul. Because it is not just a simple petition exercise, it is a renewal and recelebration of the ties of affection and power of this God with the people of this land, that, like before, leave their homes and move towards His place of worship. And even if there is nothing remaining of the original building, His sanctuary lives in our worship.

When I asked if she had felt specifically the effects of the request, her answer was “Yes.

And when I requested it for my grandmother, what she had was a very peaceful death.” As alluded to by Mariana’s answer, these rituals are perceived as having concrete effects in the lived experiences of Contemporary Pagans and the family, or people for whom they requested healing, being part of a transformation process that starts in those places but keeps happening in the lived experience, being worked and re-worked symbolically and emotionally through time. During the Portuguese Goddess Conference, I also encountered similar effects, although in a wider sense, encompassing the personal and collective dimensions of lived religion and spirituality. In previous chapters the Portuguese Goddess Conference was presented, and as stated, its focus was on healing the feminine, therefore the individual, and healing the planet, the collective. In this sense, all workshops, ceremonies and rites had this component. The word “healing” was mentioned several times, in prayers and in parts of songs sung during the events or the talks.

I sat with a group of women inside the ceremonial tent on the first day of the Conference, next to one of the altars surrounding the sacred space. Like the other Melissas with other groups, the Melissa that sat with us started teaching us a song that would be part of the opening ceremony later that night. We slowly sang every word, trying to memorize it. By the end of the conference, it was so ingrained that I still remember the words by heart and the song’s tune four years later. For the opening ceremony, after the invocations and the blessings, a spiral dance started, accompanied by the beating drums and this song:

*(...) Dá-me força e valor para poder curar.  
Poesia e Musa que me faz criar.  
Planta em mim a semente que me faça avançar.  
Te invocamos para curar!  
Te invocamos para despertar! (...)<sup>222</sup>*

The words of this song alluded to the need for healing and empowerment, translating the theme of the conference and the importance that the dimension of healing through the reconnection with the Goddess or with Nature has for ecological and environmentally inclined Contemporary Pagans.

On the last day of the Conference, this dimension was worked upon even more deeply in a women’s only ceremony – the Menarche and Heart Mysteries Ceremonies – in which the focus was on healing the female ancestral line, since these wounds are carried from generation to generation through birth, sometimes manifesting in troubled family relations; but also the

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<sup>222</sup> This is the original song composed and sang in Portuguese. In English can be freely translated as *Give me strength and courage to be able to heal / Poetry and Muse that makes me create / plant in me the seed that make me progress / We invoke you to heal! / We invoke you to awake!*

approach to menstrual blood and women's fertility and sexuality, dimensions understood to be taboo and demonized in a patriarchal society like the one they belong trying through this ritual, to aid the women present to review and heal the relationship with their own bodies.

“Mysteries” and menstruation rituals are common in spiritual and religious settings focused on women's spirituality in general, as stated by Anna Fedele with her work among Mary Magdalena pilgrims (Fedele 2013b; 2014), and in particular in contemporary pagan movements, such as the Goddess Movement, and feminist witches. “Mysteries” is used in this context to “refer primarily to bodily life cycles and are usually celebrated in various rites of passage connected to childbirth, puberty, menopause, etc.”(Salomonsen 2002, p. 218). In this case, since the Conference was celebrating the Maiden facet of the Goddess, this ritual was focused on the menstrual cycle, from menarche – the first menstrual cycle in women and the rite of passage to puberty – to menopause – the last menstrual cycle – as the standard life process that women go through. As discussed by Jone Salomonsen in her work with the Reclaiming Witches in San Francisco, these rituals offer a space where the women's menstrual cycle is depleted of its negative connotation and used to re-evaluate the female body, the female being, the female in society, the female genealogical lines, and mother-daughter relationships. Therefore, the women involved in these rituals are challenging assumptions about their bodies that in specific religious settings can be understood as impure and taboo, and in society are seen as a physical handicap that needs to be rendered invisible and shamed (ibid, 232-233).

In the Conference this was approached. We all were in a circle waiting for the Priestesses to enter. They were dressed in flowing red, white and black dresses, and gathered in an inner circle to start invoking the goddesses that would be present during the ritual. In the centre of the circle a table with a big clay bowl, athames, apples, feathers and a scythe, draw everyone's attention.



*Image 27- Altar used during the Menarche and Mysteries Ceremony*

The ritual had at least three distinct phases, besides the usual opening of the circle, calling of the goddesses and closing of the ritual. From the notes I took after the fieldwork, I registered that I could not remember the whole ceremony, due to its intensity and the order of the phases took place, but I could register what was approached in each.

During the ritual, the Priestesses promoted the connection with the ancestors, mostly the maternal lines, so each participant could start healing the wounds passed from mothers to daughters, manifested in their relationships. We were asked to cover our eyes with a red ribbon and walk until we found someone to accompany us on the journey. The drums were being played, the Priestesses guiding the participants, connecting with their ancestors and caring for each other once the cloth was removed.

Then, the menarche blessing took place. The Priestesses mixed some water, clay, earth and herbs in the clay bowl in the centre of the room, giving to each of the nine Priestesses the blessings of the elements that were being included in that mixture. Most of these blessings focused on the healing of women, their fertility, their connection with the Earth, and the need for them to release their wounds and feel their sensuality. Each element symbolized these dimensions. One of the Priestesses invoked the ancestors, those women that were called witches and silenced, that lived hiding their powers, their magic; invoked the Earth, the body that in death will return to the Earth, and is also the body of all the ancestors; she used a red pigment to represent the sacred blood.

This mixture was put in small bowls, and the Priestesses and Melissas walked around the tent, offering this blessing to the participants, forming symbols on our foreheads, cheeks, chest and arms. Some requested that the Priestesses offer these blessings to specific areas of the body, primarily breasts, head or wombs. In those cases, we may assume that some health issues may have been affecting those women, or they were using those blessings as a preventive measure. Furthermore, it was extremely powerful and emotional, from the reactions of those who shared it with me and my own reaction to it, as alluded when I mentioned that I could not recall the whole ceremony to record it in my field notebook. Some women who shared that space with me during the ceremony cried; some yelled in pain and delight; some removed their shirts, others their underwear, and danced freely. I had tears running down my face and felt my head pounding with a headache. Once the ceremony ended, my first reaction was to sit on the floor, my forehead on the floor, to ground myself.<sup>223</sup>

Then I sat and observed the tent while recovering from all the charged energy that was created by the Priestesses and all the women present; my face, chest and arms were marked with the mixture created during the ceremony. At that moment, I looked at my wrist and saw that the ritual took place for three hours. I looked to the side and saw Mariana doing her grounding, and Alexandra had a absent look on her face. Everyone was still recovering from the intensity of the ceremony. A little while after I heard several women sharing their experience of the ceremony, mainly speaking about who they saw during the part of the ritual dedicated to the Ancestors to heal the maternal line and what they understood they could do from now on. Some also shared their experience with health issues and how these types of rituals, particularly this one, helped them make sense of their diseases, social roles and sexuality, and recover from the emotional toil that these health issues caused them. Regarding some of the older women present – already in menopause – I heard them discussing how the ceremony helped them reconnect with their menstrual cycle again and to their bodies since they did not experience it anymore. Furthermore, other events in the context of the Conference were transforming events for those participating, as Alexandra shared with me when I asked if she had really felt any specific healing effect in operation during the rituals, and she answered positively:

The most striking experience at the Goddess Conference was at the "Donzela Selvagem" ritual/workshop. It was a transformative ritual where I totally stepped out of my comfort zone. The ritual consisted of us being in pairs, playing the drums, and

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<sup>223</sup> Favret-Saada (2012) describes how she too was affected by the rituals she was experiencing during her fieldwork. It is something that several pagan studies scholars also describe: how the intensity of these events affect the researcher (see for instance the edited book by Blain, Ezzy, Harvey 2004).

singing/shouting/vocalizing while walking in circles. I am a very introverted person, and the idea of dancing in front of a group of unknown people and especially with an unknown person, is almost unthinkable, but I could feel the Goddesses, especially Goddess Persephone, urging me to go and with internal dialogues, between the Goddess and me. In the end, I decided to leave my comfort zone and participate, and it was a moment of catharsis and rebirth, where I cried, screamed, sang, danced, felt as if I left space and time and united myself with the Ladies and the World. This experience also made me closer to my Art sisters and created unbreakable bonds between us. It was a true rebirth in the middle of the Conference<sup>224</sup>.

These rituals, as seen in the description of the Portuguese Goddess Conference, sacralise the body and provide meaning and support in a shared, communal setting. Those women are not alone; they have a community supporting them and a way to re-integrate their bodies and emotions and control these dimensions since, as asserted by Magliocco,

Ritual healing offers an experience intended to transform the emotions but is ultimately powerless to undo the damage caused by the larger forces of capitalism, neoliberalism and globalization. Creative ritual practices also share a notion of embodied personal experience as authoritative. In this context authority resides not in sacred writings or the words of a prophet, but in the bodies of individual women. (2004:2)

Ritual healing can also be conducted towards the collective and the planet, such as the ones I encountered in my fieldwork, in which the narratives of healing and actions towards it are present in the ritual circles for transformation and to save the planet, but also in magical healing circles that were done targeting specific areas, that were somehow affected by wildfires, extraction activities or any other natural and human-action/catastrophe, what was already analysed in previous chapters. As Pike (2001) stated in her work among contemporary pagan festivals, Contemporary Pagans focus on healing themselves, their communities and the planet, and when doing it together, the results are amplified. Just like my interlocutors shared regarding the reasons to participate in activism and doing rituals for healing, Pike's interlocutors believe that:

this healing, they believe, must take place through relationships – with deities, the land, and each other. What 'relationship' means in this case is not simply a conversation between self and other, but an intimate connection with the natural world, with a goddess

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<sup>224</sup> Testimony given by Alexandra via WhatsApp, on May 2023, when I asked her three years after the event what were the concrete effects that she felt and have accompanied her since then.

or God, and with one's community. (...) And if the deity represents a force of nature or the earth itself, neopagans believe that they are becoming one with the world. (...) And the healing power that they conjure up is more powerful because of its collective amplification than if they were working individually, which is one of the reasons festivals are very important. (Pike 2001, pp. xxi–xxii)

Therefore, this spiritual and magical work in the form of healing translates into specific actions that can be performed in the face of uncertainty. Similarly, Bron Taylor (2001), when analysing the participation and environmental awareness in several earth-based spiritual groups, found that “participants believe that these rituals can magically contribute to earth healing by manipulating the energies of the universe, thereby transforming human consciousness and fostering greater environmental sensitivity.”(Taylor 2001a, p. 230).

All the case-studies presented above illustrate the centrality that healing has among contemporary religious and spiritual groups, particularly for Contemporary Paganism when perceived as a key-element that leads to transformation – both personal and collective – of relationships and engagements with the planet, and that can also, engage with other religious and spiritual confessions and backgrounds, as seen in my experience in Catholic and Pagan shrines. However, it is not the only language that appears in Contemporary Paganism, translating this idea of transformation and re-connection. On several moments of the research my interlocutors referred to the necessity to heal the connection with the Earth and regenerate it, as will be seen next.

## **Regeneration**

Regeneration is a concept that is less used than healing in religious and spiritual movements, at least when referring to individual participation in the world. However, it is one that is growing among Contemporary Paganism with an environmentalist and ecological focus, such as the one approached in this research. The Cambridge dictionary presents two possible uses of the word “regeneration”. The first relates to improvement: “the act of improving a place or system” to make it more active and successful. The second, with growth: “the act of something growing or being grown again”(Regeneration [no date]).

Regeneration in the context of Contemporary Paganism is used as the second sense: as growth or re-growth, not in the sense used in the economic and political theories of Growth (Greenwood, 2005) but in the sense of symbolic relations, since it is the disconnection and degeneration of human relationships with the life of the planet – and on the planet – that are

understood to be the cause for climate change, environments destruction and exploration and extraction activities. It is used by both Contemporary Pagans and ecologists as the tool to bring life – all life – to the centre, since

Regeneration is not only about bringing the world back to life; it is about bringing each of us back to life. (...) It is inclusive, engaging, and generous. And everyone can do it. It restores forests, lands, farms, and oceans. It transforms cities, builds green affordable housing, reverses soil erosion, rejuvenates degraded lands, and powers rural communities. Planetary regeneration creates livelihoods – occupations that bring life to people and people to live, work that links us to one another’s well-being. (Hawken 2021, p. s/n)

Daniel Christian Wahl, in *Designing Regenerative Cultures* uses the word “regenerative” as a “commitment to the life processes inherent in ecological design. That, too, is reciprocal, mutual and inescapable” while “exploitative and degenerative cultures tend to have economic systems focused around the notions of scarcity and competitive advantage, whereas regenerative cultures understand how collaborative advantage can foster shared abundance.” (2016, p. s/n)

To focus on the collaborative dimension of regenerative cultures was something intended by the organizers, Priestesses and speakers of the 2020 Glastonbury Goddess Conference Online. As stated in the previous chapters, its theme was Earth Mother Goddess, and all the ceremonies focused on the premises of connecting with the Earth to restore and regenerate this relationship. In the presentation letter of the conference program, they mention that

We need to drop into a connection that is restorative, and not just for nature, but for us as humans, and our place within Her nature. (...) She tells us that we are never above or disconnected from, but deeply rooted in Her (...) It is when we have forgotten this, that the disease of destruction, environmentally and of Her human people, through expressions like war, colonialism, slavery, greed, competition, and pride manifest. This disease is within and around us all (...) She had called us to remember, to reconnect (...) She is our home, and our responsibility to Her is awakening.

It is not enough to heal the relationship with the planet; restoring and re-growing or regenerating these relationships is necessary. During the Conference, one of the workshops focused on – and stated explicitly – the idea of regeneration. It was given by Starhawk, the ecofeminist witch and permaculture instructor that greatly influenced the Goddess Movement, who combines in her practice and movement environmentalism, and feminism with pagan



ideals. On the same day of the workshop, she had given a talk under the title “Mother of Regeneration”, referring to the Goddess in the Earth Mother form as the provider, receiver and active participant in the regeneration process. During the workshop “The Wheel of Regeneration”, she deepened what she understood to be the regenerative process provided by the Goddess. She presented what she proposed to be the wheel of regeneration, conducted a guided meditation and asked everyone who was participating in draw their own connection to the Earth: what they hoped and wished to harvest from those regenerated connections with the Earth. Since I was also a participant, I decided to grab my pencils and drawing pad, and do the exercise to see what would come from it. I quickly sketched a tree surrounded by earth and water, elements that, for me, are essential for our sustenance and, therefore, to our human continuity, and wrote down some words that arose while I was drawing, which, when analysed, alluded to the meaning that the word “regeneration” holds – as growth/re-growth, and transformation.

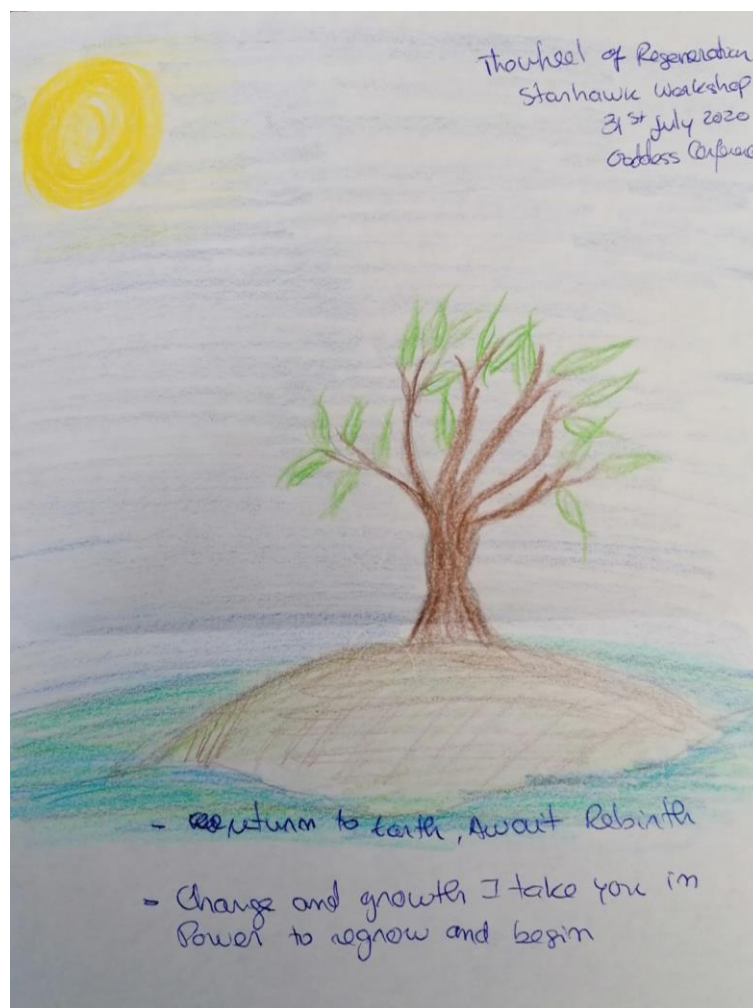


Image 28- Drawing done during the Workshop with Starhawk, 31 July 2020

During the workshop, Starhawk affirmed that the work towards regenerating the Earth can

be done through specific and material practices, such as permaculture, and also symbolically through the nourishment of relationships between humans and more-than-humans. For her, regenerating the planet and our relationship with it is also “culture” because “there is the need to create a culture that celebrates life and regeneration cycles.”<sup>225</sup> Therefore, in her approach, we can find the amalgamation of concrete actions that are religious and spiritual but also political, towards a new cultural paradigm.

This need to restore relationships and understand them as part of the cultural existence of human beings was also approached one year earlier at the Portuguese Goddess Conference. One of the Priestesses gave a talk about Earth’s spirituality and Deep Ecology<sup>226</sup>. This Priestess, Magnólia, is an environmentalist and ecofeminist that affirmed several times during her talk the urgent and vital need to reconnect with and act for the planet, affirming at point that that the “wounds of the Earth are the same wounds that we find in our culture. These are wounds of power abuse”, and that it is necessary, to overthrow and heal these wounds to “find preventive and regenerative strategies, for the ecosystem and for the human heart”. For her, “prayers in action” are needed, to reconnect; and since prayers are not enough, specific actions are necessary if we want to achieve this.<sup>227</sup>

As stated in the examples above, Contemporary Pagans call for a re-framing of the way how ecosystems prevail and how humans engage in and with them. Therefore, we can consider the call for transformation shared by Starhawk and Magnólia as a component of what Daniel Christian Wahl perceives as part of a newly emerging cultural narrative, which is

One that unites humanity in our interdependence with the wider community of life. This new and ancient story of interbeing with life and as life is driving people and communities around the world to create diverse, locally adapted, thriving cultures in global collaboration. (...) Transformational responses at a personal and collective level take place when we question deeply ingrained ways of being and seeing and in the process begin to reinvent ourselves. In doing so we also change how we participate in shaping culture through our interaction with the world around us. (2016, p. s.n.)<sup>228</sup>

Regeneration focused on re-growth, emphasis then the life cycle that has the potential to

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<sup>225</sup> Direct quotation from Starhawk, that I wrote down in the field notebook during the workshop.

<sup>226</sup> Deep Ecology was developed by Arne Næss in 1972 to “express the idea that nature has intrinsic value and to criticise anthropocentric, ‘shallow’ environmentalism, which he criticised for its instrumental view towards nature.”(Taylor 2001b, p. 179) This approach was proposed as a philosophical movement that understood all life as sacred and interdependent, and that it is through spiritual experiences in nature that this perception arises. (ibid)

<sup>227</sup> Quotations from Magnólia’s talk during the Portuguese Goddess Conference 2019.

<sup>228</sup> Abram(1997) and Ingold (2000) have been among some of the scholars sharing similar positions proposed by Wahl in the field of Anthropology.

provide new relationships with the environment, recognizing its capacity and mechanisms to prevail, even after the destruction of its soils, for instance, or its equilibrium. If one considers the importance of the seasonal cycles as guides to Ecocentric Pagans, as a form of making sense of all the transformations that they go through in their lives – just like the transformations that can be observed in the turning of the seasons – regeneration as re-growth engages perfectly with these approaches to Nature found in the celebration of its cycles.

Healing and Regeneration are, therefore, relevant and essential dimensions in the lived religious and spiritual lives of Ecocentric Pagans with whom I worked but translating different approaches. Healing conflates with something that is damaged and implies a power relation, in which humans are the ones that have the power to destroy but have also the power to heal the unprotected Earth from their own actions, focusing on a narrative of salvation. Regeneration, on the other hand, is the potential to re-grow something that has always been there, even if human beings are disconnected from it. As seen in most of the narratives shared throughout these pages, Ecocentric Pagans are remembering the relationships with the Earth that were forgotten. In this sense, regeneration is more accurate than what healing implies.

Nevertheless, healing and regeneration complement each other since healing promotes a more personal and spiritual engagement with the world, and regeneration promotes transformations that can also be understood as a form of healing. Engaging with the narratives of healing and regeneration, which appear as alternatives to the current capitalist approaches, encourages people to mobilize towards another paradigm of existing in harmony with the environment and each other. Recurrently these appear connected with the language of care, of the human collective, of the more-than-human, of the planet. For instance, healing rituals for the Earth and permaculture practices that promote the regeneration of the soils and respect the rhythms of Nature can be understood as ways to care for the planet. How care appears in the context of Contemporary Paganism debated in this thesis, will be analysed next.

## **Care**

Care is a word that is part of our daily lives and central to what it means to be human in relational settings (Tronto 1993). It can be broadly defined as

All the supporting activities that take place to make, remake, maintain, contain and repair the world we live in and the physical, emotional and intellectual capacities to do so. (...) care is at the heart of making and remaking the world. (...) the work of caring is the lifeblood of our social and economic system. Care is central to the reproduction

of society and thus one of its bedrocks, part of a fundamental infrastructure which holds society together. Without care, life could not be sustained.(Dowling 2021, p. 21)

Due to the connection of care with emotions and to reproductive work, it has been mostly done by women, in private and public settings, from child to elderly care<sup>229</sup> (Federici 2015), and has been a form of gender inequality (Comas-d'Argemir 2017) in which women secure most of the care of the home and their dependents, while still holding a job and contributing to the productive work (Folbre 2008). Besides, as Antónia Lima states, care has a double meaning: on the one hand, it translates practices; on the other, it translates a set of values, primarily emotional and affective (Lima 2016). Anthropologists have been showing that several modalities of care are perceived, enacted and provided and that “societies imagine, structure, and practice caring relationships so differently as to create significant differences at the level of who has responsibility to provide care, who is seen to need and to deserve it, and what care aspires to do and be.” (McKearney, Amrith 2021, p. 1)

In Euro-American settings, influenced by capitalist economies and neo-liberal approaches to the individual, care has been mainly relegated to the private spheres, removing the responsibility to provide this care from the public sphere of politics and government. Therefore, care has been relegated to the family and kinship roles, this responsibility falling on women as the significant providers of care due to the understanding that it is “natural” to them due to the fact that they give birth and are considered to be more emotional (McKearney, Amrith 2021; Dowling 2021), demarcating a clear distinction between productive and reproductive work (Carrasco Bengoa 2018). The separation of care work in different spheres has been debated, and it should be understood as a broader dimension that implicates private, public, and political spheres (*ibid*).

In the Portuguese Goddess Conference, Kathy Jones, the Priestess responsible for the creation of the Glastonbury Goddess Temple and Conference, gave a talk to present the MotherWorld vision, already referred to in Chapter 5. This vision, highly based on an approach to motherhood and mothering values, is interested in bringing care work and the goddess to the centre of cultural and social interactions. To do so, it focuses on mothers and reinforces the idea that they are the most essential elements of society due to their role as givers and providers of life. After explaining her vision, she asked every woman that was a mother to sit around her in a circle in the centre of the tent and asked “What can we do for you? What can society do for

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<sup>229</sup> Care work is gendered but also intersect with migration processes. Nowadays most of the elderly care is provided by migrant women and men, at lower income (Datta, Mcilwaine, Evans, Herbert, May, Wills 2010).

you, mothers?”

Some of these women voiced what they needed, mainly in terms of time and support from their partners and institutional powers. During the talk – that was reinforcing their roles as mothers and women, and the importance they held – some of the women were brought to tears, feeling heard, that their work was recognized, understood, that they were doing their best as mothers, and feeling cared for. And this is transposed also to the Earth, the Goddess and Mother of all beings, as affirmed by Jones. This focus on motherhood is not inclusive, and reinforced several images about women’s roles in society that feminists and social scientists have contested through time (Hays 1996; Douglas, Michaels 2004; Fedele 2016; Dowling 2021). However, that moment, for those women, was extremely important. It provided a sense of community and of collective care, answered their anxieties of not being good enough in the role they were performing, or unsupported and overwhelmed by all the responsibilities that were imputed to them, and also empowered because of the connection between Mother Earth and themselves, as mothers, a key discussion amongst contemporary pagan groups focused on the sacred feminine and goddess worship (Bromwich, Richard, Ungar, Younger, Symons 2020; Jordan, Alexandre, Chandra 2021).

Patrícia Alves de Matos resumes well what is behind the sensorial and emotional interconnections being promoted in the episode of the Conference and the broader importance of care when she states that “care as something that enables survival and human flourishing and what ultimately enables people’s agency needs of livelihood conditions of being and possibilities of becoming by nurturing their abilities of interdependence, relationality, obligation and affect.” (Alves de Matos 2021b)

Furthermore, if care is found in kinship relationships, in several modalities, and Contemporary Pagans understand the relationship with Nature and all beings through the lenses of kinship relations, providing care to the wider-than-human, and outside the nuclear family – here family in the sense of nuclear family relationships in all their configurations, and the sense of big human family – and as have been shown, is relevant and urgent for Contemporary Pagans. Caring for this big planetary family includes the emotional depth and connections found in human relationships, and losing these connections is a source of uncertainty and anxiety. As Magnólia shared:

I believe that people that follow a pagan path, feel a deep connection to Nature. For us, loosing nature’s elements, and loosing ecosystems, is like losing people. There is no difference. And this is what a lot of people have a hard time understanding. The loss of an ecosystem is a tremendous grief. The loss of one more river, the opening of one more

mine, is...is...devastating.

Religious and spiritual movements provide meaningful care relationships and a tight community that actively works towards common care. For Ecocentric Pagans, from what has been discussed, spiritual care is something that intertwines the individual and collective levels. The individual in the sense of the personal, of the self-care, of maintaining social networks of support between family, friends, the groups, of life; but also collective, in a broader sense, since the collective care is provided at a global level, of the planet, all ecosystems and environments, in the form of changed actions and reverence to all life, encompassing also care relationships of the more-than-human. It implies a macro level, and an individual one, that can be understood as constitutive of our human condition (Carrasco Bengoa 2018).

All of these dimensions work at the level of the individual, the collective, the private and the public; however, these are not crystallized dimensions as perceived in the analytical frames used by scholars of religion. Contemporary Pagans demonstrate this perfectly when first focusing at the level of the personal or the group and then reaching the general, both Nature and society, for instance, by the use of magic in demonstrations to promote political and governmental transformations in complex relationships that include spirits, elementals, deities, humans, more-than-human animals and ancestors. It also entails spiritual, magical, social and political work. It is frequent that spiritual and well-being culture to be criticized as being individualistic, a reflection of neo-liberal and secular governmentality, which holds the individual accountable for cultivating a happier and empowered self, as stated by Chia Longman (2018) in her work with women that belong and frequent Women's Circles. However, for the author, sisterhood in this context captures a sense of collective agency and community that goes beyond the individual. For women in these circles, the empowerment found is not just a personal issue but something that can be found in the connectedness and solidarity between them, taking, thus, a collective dimension.<sup>230</sup>

In a context of rapid transformation and perceived crisis and threats to life, these approaches are challenging demarcated borders: analytical ones, challenging the division between the religious and the secular; structural ones, looking to overcome the neo-liberal and capitalist stands that organized social and cultural life in Europe, that promoted the individual and the mechanical production and reproduction, in the mobilization to promote care as indispensable to regenerate relationships between humans and with the wider-than-human, promoting a wider

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<sup>230</sup> For more on the discussion on the individuality vs collective dimension of contemporary spiritual and religious movements, see Roussou (2016) and Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000) among others.

sense of community that goes beyond social bonds as traditionally understood. While focusing on healing, regenerating and caring for the planet, Contemporary Pagans with whom I worked are taking part and recognizing an integrative system where every presence, human and other-than-human, is actively working towards replenishing the environment to a state of equilibrium. Even if still conditioned by the sociocultural background they live in, and with all the incongruencies and issues that were analysed throughout these pages, Ecocentric Pagans are proposing, in the end, the re-enchantment the world they live in, as will be seen.

## **7.2. Reenchanting the World: The Contributes of Religion and Spirituality to the Future**

Religion and Spirituality are central to support individuals when facing a crisis. As mentioned by Nathan Oxley,

uncertainties are more than just risks to be calculated and overcome. Fears and hopes are not just global: they can be local, very specific – personal even. Religious language and practices have long been a resource for capitalizing on these emotions or helping people deal with them by connecting local, personal struggles to wider institutions, bigger stories, and deeper histories.(2020, p. 165)

Religious and spiritual movements can offer security, certainty, protection, and emotional and spiritual support when people face uncertainty before the future and the unknown. In times of uncertainty, the resilience, innovation, and creativity of Pagans were a beacon of hope, comfort and support to all those who looked for them, if the several actions to halt the environmental crisis are any indication. Religion and spirituality provides the space, place, time, and connection to cope with personal and collective crises (Kwilecki 2004).

Tucker states that “religions have been significant catalysts for humans in coping with change and transcending suffering, while at the same time grounding humans in nature’s rhythms and earth’s abundance. The creative tensions between humans seeking to transcend this world and yearning to be embedded in this world are part of the dynamics of world religions”(2006, p. 3). I propose that it is in the language of care, healing and regeneration, perceived, embodied and applied through magical spiritual and political work that Contemporary Pagans find ways to make sense of the personal and collective crises and uncertainty that they face and propose to be as a way to be in the world. Even if in this process, they reinforce several dichotomies and incongruencies that they look to dispose of, in practical terms, they cannot, being part of a sociocultural milieu that informs their approach to the world

and is rooted in who they are as part of a society.

Ecocentric Pagans, while engaging, challenging, reinforcing and transforming the power dynamics related to gender and environmental engagement discussed in these pages – doing so through the language of ritual, magic (participatory consciousness), activism, spirituality and religion – are looking for meaning in a world where life's continuity is at stake. Sabina Magliocco, after many years working and researching Contemporary Paganism, and exploring the notion of magic as a form of participatory consciousness, understands “contemporary reclamations of magic as means of re-enchanting the world” (Magliocco 2012, p. 7). For the author, Contemporary Pagans, while part of a context that disregarded and rejected the existence of magic, are, in their lived experiences, consciously reclaiming the use of this concept to re-enchant the world they live in and the embodied spiritual and religious experience, at the same time that they reject the dominant cultural paradigm that denies other forms of participation and dwelling (Ingold 2000) in the world.

Let's suppose that one considers the uncertainty and discontentment with the current paradigm of disconnection from the world that is the cause of the social, ecological, environmental, economic and financial crises faced during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In that case, it is not strange that magic, for Pagans, can be understood “as an art form. Like art, the goal of magic is to bring about a set of emotional, affective responses that cause a change in consciousness – that allow participants to switch to a more participatory view of the world.” (Magliocco 2012, p. 18), and is used as a tool to attain some enchantment before the bleakness of the future.

At the same time, the concept of life sustainability can be called to this discussion. In the end, it means living for today and for the future. This concept implies societies' transformation towards a more equalitarian and better society to live in. The main goal “is life (human and not just human), allows in a clearer way to understand the profound relationship between the economic and the social, considering several interdependencies and interrelations between the ecological, the economic, the social, the human, conceiving as a priority, as a fundamental aim, the life conditions of people”(Carrasco Bengoa 2018, pp. 56–57).<sup>231</sup>

It provides the possibility of sustaining the continuity of society and of the environments today and for the future: bringing life to the centre of our sociocultural narratives, and creating a life worth living in empathy, connection, and infinite possibilities of being part of a great web of interconnection, even if in the process, several languages are used. In most of the interviews

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<sup>231</sup> Translated by me.



I conducted I asked my interlocutors what, in their opinion, Contemporary Paganism had to offer to the world before the socio-environmental crisis we are facing. The answers given by the members of the Glastonbury Goddess Conference sums up all that have been discussed above. For them, it can offer

A way back to our place in the great family, the kinship in the sacredness of life and Nature, in our bodies, in the land. And how that translate in how we act towards other people, towards nature, towards the resources that we have gifted that are not just for us to use up, that are (...) a reciprocity. So, I think Goddess Spirituality brings us back to reciprocity with nature and that hopefully will change the way we behave as humans.

But it is also

About, you know, becoming into a consciousness that brings all that. (...) bring the consciousness about who you are, your place in the world, your responsibility for your place in the world. There's no separation there. We are all Nature. We are all the Earth. What is your place (...) what is your responsibility towards all of life. And I think that by bringing the divine feminine, got us, in many forms (...) back into consciousness. We are working at a rebalancing of a very particular viewpoint, a particular way of living, a particular way of being in power over structures that have to do with how we behave towards each other, but also, the Earth Herself.

For Magnólia Contemporary Paganism can offer

Freedom. A true freedom that does not depend on the State's permissions. Freedom to question all types of institutions. Freedom to be who we are. And to have a voice. And to have the right to exist just because we exist. And, at the same time, it also offers tremendous humility before the others, because the others have the same rights we do. It is a different experience from ours, but as valid as ours. And not just human beings, but all the other beings. Therefore, it puts us in a place of great humility and of great openness before what the other human beings and all the other living beings have to share with us. (...) We can look at the forces of Nature, even those that are not nice and pretty. Because Nature, is not a garden. Nature is not our garden where we put our plants aligned. In Nature there are movements of illness and death. And Paganism has the keys to help us deal with that. Moreover, it can help us deal with illness and death better than any other religion. (...) Maybe Paganism's greatest contribution can be understood as what the place of illness and death in our existence is. (...) For some nations, there is

nothing nobler than return to the forest. Because it is to the forest ground that our dead body returns. And I saw in that major greatness and major dignity. Maybe we have to learn to be Forest again. Let our body be forest again, be earth again. Not consider it as a loss, but simply a contribution.

There is a traditional song from Alentejo, that says “Eu estou em dívida à terra, e a terra me está devendo. A terra me paga em vida, e eu pago à terra morrendo”.<sup>232</sup> Therefore, while we are alive, the earth nurtures us. When we die, it us that nurture the earth. And that is a huge gesture of gratitude and greatness. (...)

For her, being a pagan, is then

Looking to serve Nature the best way I can. Nature in all its expressions. The organic nature, the human nature, nature in all its dimensions. The best way I can. And it is understanding that that service is intrinsic and innate because we are necessarily at the service of a living and conscious planet, no matter what we do in life. And that it is of great beauty, in truth. I find great beauty in this process of being born, live, transform and dying. I see a lot of nobility and dignity in that.

Rosemary, the Pagan Federation member believes that

Paganism has the power to save the world right now. If people would just...the way that we view the world, the way that we treat the world, the way that we live in the world, instead of apart from it, you know, the way that we're not really consumerists, that we accept people the way they are and embrace them. I actually believe Paganism could change the world if it was allowed. And I think it is being given the chance to do that. It's growing exponentially. It's getting easier and easier to be a pagan. I think, I genuinely think we're on the verge of an explosion of Paganism where it will become the main way. I just hope it happens in my lifetime so I can see it. Because I really think, given the problems that we have, it's the medicine. It really is. Just hope more people find it.

And finally, for Mariana, one of the main interlocutors of this research, member of Temple of Inanna,

Paganism responds to a human anxiety, to reconcile a number of things. Wanting to reconcile a...erm...humanist vision of being and remaining in the ecosystem; a need to

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<sup>232</sup> This expression can be translated as “I am in debt to the earth, and the Earth is in debt to me. Earth pays me in life, and I pay the Earth by dying.

reconcile with one's past, and with the traditions in particular, the pre-Christian ones; a need to reconcile the sacred feminine and masculine. And it has...and it has above all an anxiety of religious and spiritual plurality, it seems to me. Then...Paganism gives you this deeply liberating dimension. It tells you "ok, the human being has a catharsis of traditions and you have all the freedom to look for the one that best attunes to you; you have a catharsis of myths to explore, so see the one that sounds best to you; and that's appealing too". (...) And then of course there's the Magic part. which, done well, forces you to look at everything that happens to you as your own responsibility, and helps you to... helps you to put in relation a series of problems that might otherwise escalate and overwhelm you at vulnerable moments in your life. Like all religious beliefs, it's a cushion. It's a cushion. It gives you meaning, it gives you comfort...feeling and thinking. And it gives you tools. It gives you tools to work with the transcendent, to work with your own anxieties, because it's also an inner compass....and this mind you, are common to all spiritualities and religiosities on their light side, not their dark side. But there it is exactly that. It's part of the pattern. (...) For me, being a pagan is being part of all the anxieties we have been speaking about. It is feeling...the question is what I gain when I identify myself as a pagan (...) When I identify myself as a pagan, I am assuming the weight of the word, I am assuming the weight of the heritage. (...) I am affirming myself as a pagan because I am reinforcing the idea that this word represents the beliefs I am reconstructing, and through which I am guiding my life. There's something of resistance in the word 'Paganism' (...) For me Paganism is this. It's breaking with the pattern, it's taking on a word with historical weight, which can be perfectly misunderstood. But to assume forever the pedagogical duty of enlightening the people around you, and who are available to listen to you. About what it is, and in truth, is to give new meanings to the word. And linking it to pantheism, linking it to an intellectualism that perhaps you only saw in the times of the classics, perhaps in Sumerian and Egyptian times as well. But it's about associating Paganism with much more than the people who are around crops, potatoes, rice, and corn, and associating it with a new theoretical and theological construct. One that marries science and makes Pagans much fonder of science.

The responses above provide, therefore, an example of how humans can engage and re-enchant a complex world, full of life, if relationships with this complex web are regenerated and restored. Through spiritual and religious embodied engagement with the planet and all of life, Contemporary Pagans that are environmentally and ecologically inclined are looking for a

life worth living in the future. In healing the personal and collective wounds they carry, in practising regenerative actions that reframe the human positionality before the environment, and in caring for a wider-than human community, they are giving, as Mariana shared, a new meaning to the world we live in, and comfort before the uncertainty and anguish that the current socioecological crisis raises in people. Even if by doing so, they are reinforcing hierarchies, reproducing gender essentialism, and unequal access, which must be taken into account when studying these movements.

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In this chapter, I have demonstrated how healing, care and regeneration are central dimensions in the lived experience of the Ecocentric Pagans I worked with. All three dimensions enter the narratives of transformation and re-enchantment of the world that Contemporary Pagans propose when mentioning the need to reconnect in relationships that take into consideration the sacredness of all of life. In their calling for environmental protection, or gender equality and liberation, as well as while contesting power structures such as capitalism or patriarchy, Ecocentric Pagans are mobilizing a narrative and living a religious and spiritual movement that tries to put back in perspective a more balanced way to be in the world. I have argued then that the narratives of Care, Healing and Regeneration appeared as the solutions through which meaning could be given before a crisis, and that this is done through individual and collective engagements with spiritual, religious and political approaches. There are transversal dimensions when analysing the approach to Nature, gender and power, the central themes that guided this research. I have also claimed that Contemporary Paganism is also part of a movement for re-enchantment that is arising in contemporary societies before the uncertainty of the future (Federici, 2019), and in which religion and spirituality hold a significant role and responsibility in providing emotional and spiritual support to those that seek them in a circle and spiral of interconnectedness.



## CONCLUSION

### **Closing the Circle**

The spider can rest at last. At least, she can rest, for now. It was a laborious work she weaved, each silk thread intertwined, complexified, sustained. She crawls to the centre of her web to observe the work she has carefully weaved. From there, she looks back to the main threads that were the central structure of her web.

This thesis focused on how Contemporary Paganism's internal power dynamics related to gender and ecological and environmental demands to inform about its participation in the Portuguese public and political space. Through the use of ethnography, digital ethnography, and autoethnography, theoretically sustained by the lived religion approach, I analysed how the dimensions of gender and ecological and environmental worries are lived and exposed through the religious and spiritual lived experiences of ecologically-oriented Contemporary Pagans, or Ecocentric Pagans. Through ritual and activism, they negotiate, contest, and explore their gender roles, looking for meaning and representation in Goddess-oriented spaces and approaches; and while celebrating Nature's rhythms and festivals, they combine their political approaches to look for transformation. In both these cases, the influences of the feminist and environmentalist movements are clear, as has been addressed throughout the chapters.

While proposing transformations and calling attention to environmental issues – for personal and collective empowerment from structures such as patriarchy and capitalism that are considered the causes of gender inequality and violence and the destruction of the environment, and for care, healing and regenerating relationships and approaches to the Earth and to each other – they reproduce power relations that can be seen at several levels. First, at the level of the relationships established inside the movement, where tensions about leadership and maintenance of hierarchies arise, and the legitimacy and authenticity of some of the paths and solitary practices; second, in the accessibility of the movement to those that do not identify with the binary female-male and feminine-masculine energies, that are reproduced in the lived contemporary pagan experiences; third, issues of accessibility in terms of knowledge, and financial and economic capacities; fourth, with issues related with personal empowerment and who provides the tools – and how – for people to attain this supposed liberation, which is highly mapped by neo-liberal understandings of individuality. While at first glance these movements may not perceive themselves as reproducing these power relations, or do not perceive them as such, when one looks closely at their interactions, they surface and become clear.

I started by offering an overview of the Portuguese sociocultural, historical and religious contexts to provide a background to understand the development of contemporary Paganism in this context and some of the historical events that significantly impacted the Portuguese social fabric. A late dictatorship, financial and economic crises, gender inequality, demography, discrepancies between the interior and the littoral of the country, as well as the relevance and influence of Catholicism as the primary religious and cultural confession, greatly influenced the development of the contemporary pagan movement in Portugal, and my interlocutors' biographical paths. Through an autoethnographic exercise, I explored the influence of the events and my positionality before the research and in relation to the people I worked with that belong to the same context I do, while illustrating the social heterogeneity of the movement.

Then, I explored the arrival narratives to the movement through the life stories of my Portuguese and British interlocutors and what it meant to them becoming pagan. Their voices illustrate the tendency of arriving to Paganism after breaking with their religious past, being inspired by literature, scholarly production, friends, or family. At the same time, I provided an overview of contemporary Paganism, focusing on how the romantic movement inspired it, the main transversal principles recognised and followed by most groups and people, and the themes that scholarship about Contemporary Paganism has produced. I focused the research on a specific kind of contemporary Paganism that is ecologically and environmentally oriented, choosing interlocutors that, in their lived experiences, focused on these issues. In this type of contemporary Paganism, it was possible to identify the influence of environmentalism and ecofeminism in the movement, and how these political movements intertwine with the religious and spiritual lived experience of these Contemporary Pagans, even when they do not recognise their apparent influence.

As I have shown throughout the thesis, environmentalist principles and ideals are mobilised in contemporary pagan narratives to transpire and legitimise their urgent call for changing human relationships with the planet and with other non-human animals and beings. In this process, in which they participate via demonstrations and other direct environmental actions – like the case studies of the March for Climate, March for Animal Rights, and demonstrations against mining activities in Portugal or the Goddess women that participated in Extinction Rebellion actions, or even the Pagan Federation ritual during COP 26 in the United Kingdom – at the same time mobilising those events and integrating them in the contemporary pagan ritual forms, they are clearly reinforcing their presence in the public space. While doing so, they also reproduce romanticised views of Nature demarcated by the influences received from the Romantic Movement and reproduce the very hierarchies between species they propose not to

follow. At the same time, Nature appears as the common denominator in a very heterogenous movement, mobilising images, informing their participation in the public space but also in dialogue with other movements and political agents.

Ecofeminism is mobilised to make sense of gender roles and oppression over women in relation to the environment they live in, that was also affected by capitalist exploration. It is by finding in the Goddess an enlightened, emancipated representation of their condition as women, that they make sense of their existence and heal several issues related to their bodies and emotions, roles in society, and agency. In rituals, all these dimensions are worked on; however, the work done during these moments goes beyond the personal. They also engage with political stands related to gender roles and to feminist and environmentalist approaches. While doing so, they reproduce some issues, mostly related to the gendering of Nature that reproduce gender roles and binary and heteronormative narratives that exclude those not identifying with them.

In their lived experiences, the personal and collective are perceived not as separated but as intertwined dimensions. While these movements are accused of being individualistic, analysing their lived experiences demonstrates that while personal, religious, and spiritual motivations and work is being done, they are not separated from the collective well-being and maintenance of the future. While transforming their actions, they are promoting a transformation of the broader issues that affect the sociocultural space in which they move. Of course, as mentioned above and throughout this thesis, they are reproducing some of the issues they criticised.

While I analysed how Contemporary Pagans call for gender equality by celebrating the Goddess as the Earth or affirming that women need to “rise” or transform human relationships with Nature, I identified three levels of power dynamics that influence their lived experiences. The first I called “Structural Power” and included patriarchy, capitalism and markets, as well as class distinction and economical access (or lack thereof). Each was analysed to understand how these structures impact the way they live and are mobilised to contest and challenge their gender roles and place in the world, all the while still being ingrained in these structures.

The second set of identified dynamics relates to leadership positions and claim for rights. I demonstrate how they negotiate these power relations at the macro level, with the State, with legislation and with the Catholic religious and cultural background, while mobilising discourses about freedom, representation, legitimacy and authenticity. The latter is also disputed inside the movement in Portugal and towards other countries’ contemporary pagan movements. Moreover, in interpersonal relationships there is the maintenance of the hierarchical organisation they criticise other religious groups for having, usually using arguments related to knowledge, experience and responsibility to defend why these hierarchies are maintained.



Finally, I identified the last level in which these power dynamics operate, which could be seen in the personal revindication of power, commonly referred to as empowerment. It is a widespread word mobilised by contemporary spiritual and religious groups in several contexts to demarcate their liberation and personal power, as other scholars of these movements have demonstrated. I have shown how through ritual, Contemporary Pagans seek to address the anxieties and uncertainty they face personally and collectively and work towards personal transformation. While this type of power is significant in their lives and self-affirmation, there is also the risk that it is being used to reinforce the abovementioned hierarchies. Usually, empowerment is attained through personal healing, which entails, in some cases, someone in a power place that provides the tools, guidance and support to attain it. However, there are cases in which these people in a powerful place do not provide the tools to those that follow them – trying to build and make their own paths – offering instead an idea of dependency on themselves, so that people can attain this empowerment only through the actions of their supposed guides. Like other scholars of these movements, I argue that all forms of empowerment that Contemporary Pagans mobilise contest the division between personal and collective, since while confronting themselves emotionally, there are behaviour changes that steer them towards effective political participation in the world.

In addition, my interlocutors understand politics in different ways, which has an impact on how they understand their political participation in the world. Aided by the interviews I conducted with them, I have demonstrated that words like “political” or “politics” raise tensions and confusion, because usually they are misunderstood as partisanship and not as an organisational structure of society since this is the most visible form of politics encountered in everyday life. Interestingly, some of my interlocutors also illustrate a tendency to consider activism as something different from politics, when in reality it is also politics, while others, primarily those that recognise Contemporary Paganism as having a political dimension in addition to the spiritual and religious one, do not. In their narratives, we can see positive, neutral, and negative understandings of contemporary Paganism as political, and that, in a way, it can become a political Party, of which the MotherWorld Party in the United Kingdom is an example.

Another essential feature one must account for while analysing Contemporary Paganism’s power dynamics is the worldwide rise of far-Right influences within the movement. As other scholars have shown, I have argued that the tendency for Contemporary Pagans to focus on the past and look for authenticity in their religious and spiritual expressions can easily slither towards a nationalist and supremacist terrain. Since I chose to collaborate with Contemporary

Pagans that demonstrated some Left or Left-Central ideals, I have not explored this issue deeply. However, I did find in the Portuguese contemporary pagan milieu some nationalist streaks that must be surveyed in the future to see if they gain terrain, even more when the majority of the movement in Portugal disregards and dismisses the existence of these streaks as some minor issue found mainly in other countries, and in particular paths.

Through the analysis of Ecocentric Pagans internal and external power dynamics that were explored in the chapters of Nature engagement and activism, of gender and ecofeminist approaches, and on the power dynamics one, I defend that Ecocentric Pagans engage with the public space through participation in personal and collective events, some implicitly and others explicitly political, motivated by their lived spiritual and religious experiences and approaches to the world and society to which they belong.

While COVID-19 restrictions had a significant impact on the ways that Contemporary Pagans socialised and ritualised, I have shown how several conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus as an answer from the Earth for human beings to stop their harmful and destructive activities started circulating in online contemporary pagan spaces. Although not all Contemporary Pagans adhered to these theories – some even contesting them – they were used to reinforce some of the narratives they already shared about the need to reconnect with the planet and transform the interactions with it for the benefit of the common future. At the same time, it was also a period in which some of the power dynamics discussed above became clearer, both in their positive and negative dimensions. It was also a time for collective care and solidarity; for a re-connection in which care, healing and regeneration appeared as urgent and transversal dimensions before, during and after this particular moment.

I have demonstrated how Contemporary Pagans, while engaging, challenging, reinforcing and transforming the power dynamics related to gender and environmental engagement discussed in these pages, do so through the language of ritual magic (participatory consciousness), activism, spirituality and religion, and are looking for meaning in a world where life's continuity is at stake. I then argue that care, healing, and regeneration appeared as the solutions through which meaning could be given before a crisis. These dimensions are mobilised while Contemporary Pagans engage individually and collectively in spiritual, religious, and political ways of being in the world, even if they reproduce worrisome issues whose existence in their movements they supposedly deny. Their lived experience with all incongruencies and issues is part of a general process of re-enchantment with the world, which is urgent and transversal in a contemporary world facing uncertainty and crisis.

A circle is only a circle if drawn as a continuous line. However, when this circle is

composed of people holding hands there are always spaces between their bodies. A spiral is a space where the air enters freely and movement happens, just like in the web that was built with these pages. These gaps and spaces that the research left untouched need future consideration. I can identify some of these. There are apparent generational differences in contemporary Paganism. Additional data collection would help to illustrate and define the internal tensions that arise in their interactions, as well as the questions that are more relevant for each generation as a response to the sociocultural moment in which they live.

Further analysis of the LGBTQIA+ movement among Contemporary Pagans in Portugal is needed, since despite the long struggle for equality the LGBTQIA+ movement in Portugal is still denied the presence in the public space, and therefore also among Pagans. How Contemporary Pagans perceive time and work with it was also left unapproached, as well as the use and claims over megalithic<sup>233</sup> and Catholic sacred sites. Besides, further research is needed to investigate the impact of far-Right ideals in the movement, what was only superficially approached in this research. A closer inspection of the originality – or lack of it – of the Portuguese Contemporary Pagan Movement and events, in relation with the movements and events from the United Kingdom would also be a plus. Along the same line, further analysis will be needed over time, to find out if Portuguese Contemporary Paganism will engage with the indigenising discourse that other Contemporary Pagans in Europe are engaging with. An important question to address is how narratives about magic are mobilised and used for political participation, as well as how Contemporary Pagans in Portugal mobilise ideas about magic and witchcraft today in dialogue with rural and past magical practices and to what extent these contemporary approaches can be encountered in the anthropological and ethnographic research done in the 20<sup>th</sup> century about these themes.

I recommend that future research examines the continuity and discontinuity of contemporary pagan events and groups and the presence of contemporary Paganism in Portugal. While its visibility in the public space has grown in the last ten years, due to the emergence of recreation pubs and fairs, with events such as the Goddess Conference granting visibility, or via the participation in interfaith initiatives, there is also a tendency in these movements to abandon some of the quests they propose to follow. One of the reasons relates to the heterogeneity of the movement, which presents opportunities for a creative cross-fertilisation but can also lead to ruptures. In the United States, one of the major pagan festivals, Pantheon, ended after twenty-five years; the Iberian Goddess Conference that Anna Fedele researched no

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<sup>233</sup> In Martins (2023b) I have approached briefly the use of heritage places by Contemporary Pagans in Portugal.

longer occurs. These examples are mentioned here to reflect on the possibility of events such as the Portuguese Goddess Conference – that is preparing its third event for 2024 – prevailing in the milieu of Portuguese Contemporary Paganism. But also, to keep in mind that if some groups may end others may start or reconfigure themselves, as I witnessed during this research. It would be interesting to see if there will be any movement towards a dialogue among contemporary pagan groups that may create a united front, one that can provide answers and collective support and care to all its adherents before a crisis or moment of uncertainty. Besides, it could also be interesting to see if, over time, contemporary pagan movements gain more recognition in the Portuguese public space and how the movement changes, or not, with the worsening of the climate crisis.

Despite these limitations, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature about contemporary spirituality and religion, guided by perspectives from the anthropology of religion, anthropology of ecology and environment, and anthropology of gender. Intersecting all these theoretical approaches provided a deeper understanding of contemporary Paganism as a religious and spiritual movement *per se* and all its characteristics and incongruencies, but also of the broader sociocultural and ecological context where it developed. Furthermore, with this thesis, I offer a contribution to the limited anthropological literature about contemporary Paganism in Portugal, still a small but emerging movement that is taking place in the Portuguese public sphere.

Caring for each other and regenerating relations with the planet in which we live is one of the most significant tasks of our time: reconnect to a paradigm that respects life in all forms and presents an alternative to the destructive, capitalist, and neoliberal modes of existence. Which paradigm to follow is being debated by Contemporary Pagans, environmentalists, anthropologists, other social scientists, Indigenous peoples, and groups at local levels worldwide. In this process, it is easier to fall into a very romanticised view of the past and of what it was – something that Contemporary Pagans do – but one needs to go beyond the idea that in the past better conditions could be found for recognition, or that it simply needs to be disregarded. It is necessary to look at time and space as interrelated, and look to the past, the present and the future if we want to maintain the conditions of life.

Therefore, *Connecting with the Great Mother, Regenerating Us* is an exercise of making kin and reconnecting in a world going through rapid change, faced with social, environmental, ecological, and health crises that endanger life and risk its continuity. Contemporary Pagans, ecologically and environmentally inclined, take stands about human beings that vary between apocalyptic and optimistic. For some, human beings should be taken from the equation for the

continuity of life of the planet itself. For others, human beings need to be involved, need to be active agents in the transformations that must happen in the future. However, most agree that a possibility for a future can only happen through relationships of care, solidarity, and in the sustainability of all forms of life. Despite the relatively recent presence of contemporary pagan movements, they are probably the religious and spiritual movements that address and denounce the environmental crisis in Portugal more clearly. Therefore, even if Contemporary Pagans in Portugal focus a lot on individual lived experiences, and on ways to attain personal transformations, empowerment and healing, the fact that they address the environmental and feminist issues in their lived spiritual and religious experiences makes contemporary Paganism also political. Besides, it is through these processes that they participate in the public space. Caring, healing and regenerating the web of interconnection is a political act.

We can now go back to our Spider. She saw a web of interconnectedness after stepping back to see her beautifully waved web. She had dreamt about it, but before it was finished, she could not comprehend the level of complexity she would create. Now she can. Moreover, she knows that the relationships of care and sustainability of all forms of life in the world will sustain her web. Drawing a breath, she crawls back to the centre of her home. Closing her eyes, she travels to the land of dreams, a proud and accomplished expression on her face. She was part of the endless life circle that is being spun thread after thread.

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