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An examen of Witches: an ethnographic inquiry of a coven of contemporary Witches

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An examen of Witches:
An ethnographic inquiry of a coven
of contemporary Witches

by

James Albert Whyte

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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INTRODUCTION

The witch is a familiar figure in the popular Western imagination. From the wicked queen of Snow White to Star Wars' Yoda, witches and Witch-like characters have been used to scare and entertain generations of young and old alike. Yet, dancing in the forests of myth and folklore are Witches of a different hue - serious people whose purpose is neither to scare nor entertain but to practice a faith that many of them believe stretches back to the dawn of humanity. Drawing upon old traditions and creating new ones, these Witches follow a quest for mystic experience and human transcendence. The particular road to religious expression that Witches follow may at first glance seem alien and bizarre - totally out of place in what we are sometimes pleased to imagine is a secular society. But perhaps our society is not as secular as we like at times to think. We see all about us the signs of a resurgent Age of Faith, and the once heralded triumph of science over religion is no longer proclaimed with a confident voice. The currents of religious belief run deep in this land and surge in many directions. Witchcraft is one such current, albeit a small one, and as such deserving of understanding and interest on the part of students of contemporary American culture.

The scientific study of Witchcraft as a belief and behavioral system is within the general genre of the Sociology of the Occult. The emergence of the sociology of the occult as a discernible specialty in social science is a recent development dating back only to the late 1960s. The literature is not yet large but it is growing as the study of occult groups gains in academic respectability. Although many intriguing and interesting insights
into occult beliefs and groups may be found in the extant literature, there is still a relative paucity of published accounts based upon actual field work with occult groups. There are some notable exceptions to this; but in general much of the basic ethnography of occult groups remains to be done.

From June 1979 to December 1980, I had the opportunity to conduct participant/observation field research with a coven of Witches. The following account, based on that research, is presented with two main goals. First, as a contribution to the basic ethnography of occult religions, the present effort is a descriptive case study intended to stand on its own merits. My second goal is to move beyond the description and analysis of a single coven and attempt to formulate some insights of a more general nature that might be of some utility in understanding the larger phenomena of Witchcraft. This second effort will be largely contained in the concluding sections wherein I shall present a model of how Witch groups evolve. Being based upon the structures and processes of a single group, the model may at best be viewed as tentative. It will be offered as a stimulus to further research rather than as the definitive conclusion of research.

My initial interest in Witches arose quite accidentally. One evening while watching television, I happened to see an interview by a local news station of some Witches. Interest piqued, I decided to investigate the possibility of conducting field research with whatever local covens may have existed. The coven that had been on television was a public group and it was relatively easy to make contact with them. My initial contact with the Witches was promising as they appeared amenable to being researched. For most of the spring of 1979, I maintained sporadic contact with the Witches. Tantalizing hints were dropped about meeting other Witches who were members
of the group, but for the most part introductions were not forthcoming. Basically what I had in hand at this time was a coven based on a nuclear family and a very few associated friends. I also learned that a larger group had existed but this had split apart in January shortly before I made my initial contact.

Two groups had emerged from the split; the one I was already in contact with and another, apparently larger coven. The discovery that there were two distinct groups was very exciting - at the very least it opened up the possibility of doing a comparative analysis. Desiring very much to meet the other group I asked one of my informants to provide me with an introduction. He readily acceded to this request. I was introduced to a member of the other group and received an invitation to attend a ritual.

One evening in early June 1979, my wife and I went to our first ritual meeting with Witches. After the coven members had all arrived I was introduced as an anthropologist who wished to research the coven. I was queried for a while about my motives and own religious interests. Tacitly at least, acquiescence to my presence as a researcher was granted.

From this time on the focus of my research was the new group. For a time I maintained contact with my initial informants as I was still contemplating the possibility of doing a comparative analysis. Reluctantly, I came to concede to myself that such an approach would have to be abandoned. The initial group was tiny and showed no signs of growing. Moreover it appeared to be largely inactive ritually. I felt that focusing on this group, while productive of insights into a few individual Witches, would yield very little by way of understanding group dynamics. Moreover, I was aware by this time that the split of the two groups had by no means been
entirely cordial. I had some concern about being caught in the middle of things and wrecking my chances with both groups. In retrospect this was probably a needless worry, but at the time, as both newcomer and outsider, I was keenly concerned with protecting my opportunity to work with a ritually and socially active coven. Finally, in a personal sense I found myself more compatible both intellectually and socially with the new group. Simply put, I felt that the second group would afford me a more congenial research experience. For a variety of reasons then, I ended up focusing almost exclusively on the group that I call the Sword Coven.

Social Context of the Research

The city in which I conducted the research is a Midwestern city of about 250,000 inhabitants. Heartland America, it does not have any especially cosmopolitan flair; nor is it renowned as a mecca for religious innovators.

The most significant feature of the Sword Coven's social environment is the apparent lack of any other viable covens in the immediate area. For most of its history the Sword Coven stood pretty much on its own as a ritually and socially active coven. An important qualification however must be made to this statement. There may be an undetermined number of clandestine Witches or covens in the same area. But if these exist they do so unknown to me and, more importantly, unknown to most of my informants.

Personally, I doubt that the two dozen or so individuals that I met constituted the entire Witch population in the immediate area. Some informants have mentioned that many more Witches are in the general area. Other informants, however, do not support these statements; at best they may make mention of knowing isolated individuals who are interested in Witchcraft.
The information from informants coupled with the fact that the available figures (all guesses) about the national population of Witches are miniscule lead me to conclude that I have probably met most if not all of the area's non-clandestine Witch population.

The Unit of Analysis

My primary research interest was in the structure and organization of the coven as a social group. My choice of a research focus was largely determined by two factors. First, there is my own research interest in social structure and organization. I had a group to work with and my intellectual interests rather naturally directed me to focus on the structure and organizational dynamics of the group. A second consideration was the desire to preserve some sort of economy of effort. One of many surprises that I encountered was the astounding amount of information that can be solicited from even a small group of Witches. As things sorted themselves out, I discovered that in terms of discovering the elements of Witchcraft as a belief system, I was coming up with nothing new. There already exists a whole host of books about Witchcraft and anyone willing to make the requisite search through libraries and bookstores can learn about Witchcraft as a belief system.\footnote{The most thorough and perhaps best treatment of contemporary Witchcraft is Margot Adler's \textit{Drawing Down the Moon} (1979).} A very intriguing research focus would have been to concentrate on the manner in which Witches articulate their beliefs into a coherent world view and life style. I followed this track for a while but eventually discovered that inevitably it would lead to a series of individual biographical vignettes.
I have often been struck and sometimes frustrated by the diversity of belief that Witches exhibit both in terms of content and interpretation. To do full justice to this diversity is simply beyond the scope of the present analysis. The story of how individual Witches come to articulate their personal religions is, for the most part, one that I shall leave to those researchers whose interests and skills incline them towards biographical analysis.

In brief then, while the following pages contain a great deal of information about both Witchcraft and Witches, neither of these subjects were the proper analytical focus of the research. I sought information about beliefs and Witches primarily to understand the structure and functioning of the coven as a social organization.

Methodological Considerations

I utilized two general primary means to gather data. For purposes of direct observation, I was able to freely interact both as participant and observer in coven meetings and rituals. When recording observations, my usual practice was to write notes after leaving the Witches. Only rarely did I take notes on the spot. My rationale for this procedure was to remain as unobtrusive as possible while interacting with the Witches. I supplemented this approach by individually interviewing several of the Witches either in their homes or mine. In general, I focused my interviewing efforts on individuals who in one way or another, were most active in coven affairs. I had some basic questions (age, occupation, and the like), but in each case we ranged over a wide range of topics. These interviews and more casual conversations at coven meetings yielded a great deal of information.
I have used this information in several ways. First, to supplement and confirm impressions that emerged from my own observations. Second, to gain information about events prior to my research involvement with the coven. In this connection, information supplied by Ares, High Priest of the Sword Coven, was very valuable. Ares keeps a personal journal which he consulted when describing to me the development of the coven. I also solicited the recollections of others as to events prior to my research involvement.

As far as I know, I was never barred from coven meetings. Nevertheless, there were occasions when for reasons of my own I did not attend. Significant events also occurred outside of the coven meetings. Not being present at these times I have had to rely upon accounts supplied by informants. Whenever possible I have attempted to cross check the accounts given to me.

Some Narrative Considerations

All of the proper names, whether referring to a coven or individuals, are pseudonyms. From the outset, I have felt obligated to maintain strict informant confidentiality. Being a Witch is for many people not without potential social cost and the requirement of privacy is very real. In practice, I have deliberately restricted the number of named individuals to two. These are Ares and Diana, who were High Priest and High Priestess of the coven. Participation in the coven has been quite fluid and attempting to follow the comings and goings of named individuals would be both tedious and confusing. Moreover, in terms of the formal and informal roles in the coven there were two individuals who were of primary significance in terms of influence and importance in coven affairs. Without meaning to imply that all other participants should be reduced to the status of a passive audience,
it is convenient to refer to the main protagonists by proper names and refer to the other Witches in terms of statuses and relationships.

The reader will encounter a certain deliberate vagueness in parts of the narrative. For instance, I have been somewhat imprecise in identifying occupations by using general rather than specific areas of employment. I have also been vague in discussing some aspects of individuals' purely personal lives. In some instances where personality clashes occurred, I have been asked to exercise discretion and feel obligated to do so. Moreover from the ethnographer's point of view, it was the occurrence of the clash rather than its specifics that were interesting. I have been much freer in describing procedural disagreements and other such bones of contention. These occurred openly and discussing them involves no betrayal of confidence.

I have organized the narrative in the following fashion. The first three chapters are intended to introduce Witchcraft and Witches. They are descriptive in their own right but also intended to provide background information necessary to understanding the chapters on organization and conflict. In particular, the highly eclectic nature of both Witchcraft and coven membership should be noted.

I originally intended to terminate the research at the end of the summer of 1979. As things worked out, I continued to work with the group for much longer. I continued to attend coven meetings partly to supplement data, but also and primarily because I enjoyed the experience. This longer involvement with the coven resulted in my being able to follow its fortunes until it finally broke up in the spring of 1981. In effect, I was present throughout most of the coven's history. Insofar as possible, I shall
present the chapter on organization as a natural history of the coven's evolution. This approach makes it possible to demonstrate how specific elements of coven organization and structure effected and were effected by specific events. The chapter on conflict will backtrack somewhat to examine in more detail some of the specific and general causes of conflict that the coven in actuality and potentially had to deal with. This chapter is analytical in intent and will seek to impose a degree of perspective on what happened to the coven. As previously noted, the final chapter will present a tentative, more general model of the organizational development of Witchcraft.
Toward the end of my research, a Witch asked me how I was going to define the term "witch." This is an easy question to ask, but one which is extraordinarily resistant to a quick and easy answer. The image of Witchcraft presented both by informants and the literature is of a very diverse, highly eclectic belief and behavioral system. The situation is made even more complex by what appears to be an almost continuous process of innovation and elaboration of belief by both groups and individuals. At times one is left with the distinct impression that all that Witches really have in common is a common label (and not always even that).

Part of the problem in coming to terms with Witchcraft as a religious system is caused by the connotations that the terms "Witch" and "Witchcraft" have in both the popular and scholarly mind. In order to advert possible misapprehensions about the religion of Witchcraft, it is necessary at the outset to dispel some of the more common misconceptions evoked by the term "witch."

The Witches that I studied are not Satanists. They do not believe in either the Devil or Hell; nor are they practicing a sort of perverse Christianity. Satanism is a heretical reversal of Christianity very different in form and content from Witchcraft (see Lyons, 1970; Moody, 1974, for descriptions of Satanism). Satanists often refer to themselves as "Witches," but Witches do not like being identified with Satanists and resent the association.

Anthropologists are probably not overly concerned with the Devil, but the term "witch" has certain technical usages in anthropology which might
be misleading in present context. The Witches dealt with here are not the solitary magical specialists of ethnographic fame. Truzzi, a sociologist, (1974:632-633) has argued:

"...most anthropological descriptions of witchcraft have little to do with what is today called witchcraft in the U.S., and numerous analytical distinctions made by them...have little use for us in looking at modern urban forms...."

Truzzi's point is well taken though perhaps a bit overdrawn and out of context. For instance, both categories of Witches do work magic and have, at least to some extent, a bad popular image. Students interested in the behavioral consequences of deviance labeling might find some interesting cross cultural correlates by undertaking the comparative analyses of ethnographic witches and Witches.

A third category of Witches can be briefly mentioned and dismissed from further consideration. The term "witch" excites a whole host of images, from half remembered childhood tales to Samantha of television's "Bewitched" to the purveyors of charms who advertise in the National Enquirer and the like. Simply put, Witches of these stripes are far outside the bounds of the present study.

Excluding from consideration certain categories of people to whom the term "Witch" is applied resolves only part of the semantic problem of "Witch." The problem has a second component, namely that Witches themselves do not agree on how to either define themselves or on whether or not they should even employ the term "witch." Margot Adler (1979) has conducted the most thorough survey of Witchcraft and notes this diversity of opinion:

"Among the Wicca, there is a division over this word 'Witch.' Some regard it as a badge of pride, a word to be reclaimed....But others dislike the word. Some
Witches will tell you that they prefer the word 'craft' because it places emphasis on a way of practicing magic. Others will say they are of the 'Old Religion' because they wish to link themselves with Europe's pre-Christian past, and some prefer to say they are 'of the Wicca,' in order to emphasize a family or tribe with special ties. But when they talk among themselves, they use these terms interchangeably, and outsiders are left as confused as ever." (p. 42-43)

My own experience with Witch informants has paralleled the situation described by Adler. Informants have variously used "Craft," "Wicca," "Old Religion" and "Witchcraft" and individuals have distinct preferences. The High Priestess of the Sword Coven for instance, has a distinct preference for "Witch" and regards the use of "Wicca" as a "cop out." This matter of different preferences of labels has not been regarded as an issue in the coven.

The definitional and labeling problems inherent in Witchcraft are matters of more than casual academic interest. They illustrate directly the diversity of form and content that characterize Witchcraft at every analytical level. Generalizations about Witches must be approached with extreme care.

Like Christianity, Witchcraft is a religion. Again like Christianity, Witchcraft as a belief and behavioral system is both complex and eclectic.

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1"Craft." A shortened form of "Witchcraft."

2Wicca is the Old English root of "Witch." The term thus has the dual function of hinting of an ancient past and avoiding the negative connotations of "Witch."

3"The Old Religion" usage embodies the idea held by many Witches that Witchcraft is a survival from Pre-Christian Times. This term also avoids the negative connotations of "Witch."
It contains many diverse, sometimes contradictory, traditions, a situation made even more complicated by the often highly idiosyncratic interpretations that individual Witches develop. In the present discussion only the most general of descriptions of Witchcraft as a belief system will be offered. Even so, the caveat must be posted again and yet again that individual Witches may or may not hold with some of the elements of even the most general description of Witchcraft.

A useful general description of Witchcraft has been developed by Gordon Melton. Working from information gleaned from a number of Witch groups and traditions, Melton (1978:267-268) sees Witchcraft as a religion characterized by:

1) Polytheism
2) A Pantheon based on pre-Christian European nature religions. (This must be qualified; non-European religions such as that of ancient Egypt are also drawn upon.)
3) The principal deities are the Goddess and the God. The Goddess is usually referred to as the Triple Goddess (maiden, mother and crone) and the God as the Horned God. The Goddess is usually seen as having precedence to the God.
4) A belief in reincarnation.
5) A manipulative world view.
6) Belief in the efficacy of magic and spells.
7) A poetical-mystical view of nature.
8) An emphasis on psychic development.
9) A ritual calendar based on the lunar and seasonal cycles.

Melton's trait list corresponds closely enough with the more detailed and nuance laden image of Witchcraft presented in Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979), the most complete examination of Witchcraft to date. To the above should be added some items of a more ethical nature. Adler (1979:99) states that most Witches subscribe to the Wiccan Creed, "An (if) ye harm none, do what ye will," and to the "Threefold Law," the triple return of
good or evil to an actor. Upon occasion, some of my informants have cited the Wiccan Creed or Threefold Law as ethical constraints.

In terms of my own research experience with Witches, the general traits listed above are applicable to one degree or another depending upon the specific individuals being examined. Three important qualifications must however be made. First, there is a great elaboration of distinct yet overlapping traditions in Witchcraft. Second, individual Witches often incorporate into their religious worldview a great number of more general occult and non-occult beliefs. Third, individuals often interpret even the most basic beliefs quite differently.

There is no single book, leader or corpus of dogma that all Witches can point to as embodying the central truth of their religion. There are instead any number of books, leaders and folk beliefs that Witches draw upon. As a result there have arisen a large number of different traditions in Witchcraft. An idea of the extent of the elaboration of major and minor traditions in Witchcraft may be garnered from the 1980 Circle Guide to Wiccan and Pagan Resources which lists some 200 Wiccan, Pagan and Magickal groups. Herein are mentioned more than 40 traditions: Gardnerian, Celtic, Druidic, Egyptian and the like. To further complicate the picture there are large numbers of covens which are eclectic and draw upon any number of different traditions for inspiration. The coven I worked with was an eclectic group with no special group emphasis on following a particular tradition. However, individual Witches in the coven do express preferences for some traditions over others.

In addition to the beliefs generally subsumable under the general rubric of Witchcraft and its various traditions, Witches as individuals draw
upon and incorporate into their personal religious views a great many more
general beliefs. During the course of my research, individuals have men­tioned belief and/or interest in The Tarot, Astrology, Palmistry, The I Ching,
Atlantis, Astral Projection, magic of various varieties and techniques,
spirits, ghosts, crystal balls, herbalism, Biblical prophecy, the more
esoteric aspects of Quantum mechanics and the imminent end of the world.
Such beliefs while not at all necessarily part of Witchcraft as a religious
system, are part of the religious expression of individual Witches. Witches
are aware of their different beliefs and interpretations and in general are
tolerant of this diversity. However, individuals do upon occasion label
some beliefs as "witchcrap" rather than Witchcraft.

In talking with Witches about their beliefs, I found that as individuals
they may have different interpretations of even the most basic of beliefs.
The necessity of understanding this point simply cannot be overemphasized.
Aside from the confusion sometimes generated by the term "witch," the
potential for misunderstanding Witchcraft is greatest when the researcher,
for one reason or another, does not explore for the meaning that may lay
beneath literal statements of belief. The approaches to the Goddess and
God provide a convenient example to illustrate this diversity of interpreta­
tion.

Some Witches approach the Goddess and God in their various manifesta­tions as actual persona while others take a more symbolic approach to the
deities. Furthermore, there does not always appear to be a firm dividing
line between the two approaches. One Witch may say "all deities are real,"
while another says "there are no greater gods than those you create your­
self." The two statements are by no means irreconcilable. A Witch may also
say "We are the creator and the created." The outsider, lay or scholar, is apt to raise his eyebrows and look askance at the Witch who, chanting ancient runes, invokes Isis and Pan. Perhaps the Witch is being literal or perhaps one has to lift the mask of gods and goddesses to find something else.

The Witch may be invoking the images of gods and goddesses simply as symbols with which to commune with some deeper truth. The whole process may be one of employing a kind of grand metaphor in order to achieve transcendence. Consider this statement by one of my informants:

As I look at the highly organized churches all about me performing their heavily vested services in elaborate buildings with all their pomp and circumstance and endless hierarchy, I can only reflect how different things must have been in that supper room when a greater Witch than I took bread and wine and shared it with his friends and said "I and my Father are One." Today as a Witch I believe even more firmly that I am one with God, for God dwells within me and every living or non-living thing. The complexity of creation becomes ultimately the simplicity of the Oneness in God!

This statement is not important for what it says about Witchcraft. It is important for what it says about what one individual is able to find in Witchcraft. I have seen the same individual call upon many different gods and goddesses during the course of a ritual. The point I would emphasize is that a literal interpretation of these invocations would be misleading. In this individual's case, something else is going on.

Brief mention should also be made of the large array of physical paraphernalia that Witches make use of in their ritual activities. Extensive use is made of Zodiac signs, chalices, representations of the four elements (earth, fire, water, and air), wands, brooms, bells, knives, daggers and swords. Usually the sole lighting at a ritual is provided by candles. Often a cauldron, sometimes with a lit candle in it, is present. The deities are
represented physically by plaster busts and statues. All of the physical paraphernalia used by the group I worked with was individual rather than coven owned. People purchase their own artifacts from Occult or other retail stores.

Adler (1979:131) has argued that the physical trappings of Witchcraft have generated a lot of confusion and misunderstanding among outsiders. I, for one, was somewhat leery when I first saw the profusion of knives, daggers and swords lying about on the alter. Moreover, while many of the physical objects and artifacts have symbolic and traditional meanings associated with them, this aspect of their use in a ritual can be overplayed. The following quote from Adler (1979:131) contains much truth:

"Why did you put a red cloth on the alter?" A novice asks a priest of Wicca, framing the question softly as if a big secret is about to be revealed.

"Because I just happened to have a red cloth," the priest replies.

Witchcraft in the United States

In addition to the beliefs and symbols of Witchcraft, some matters of a more mundane nature should be examined. This section presents a brief overview of Witchcraft in the United States in terms of its development, organization, and numbers of practitioners.

Both the history and historiography of Witchcraft are quite complex and fraught with controversy. An excellent and thorough examination of both matters may be found in Adler (1979:42-93). Mention is made here only of what has come to be called "The Myth of Wicca" (Adler, 1979:45).

The Myth of Wicca is basically the belief that Witchcraft is the survival of ancient pre-Christian pagan religions. Numerous 20th century
authors have contributed to the myth - the most important being Margaret Murray and Gerald Gardner. Murray, a serious scholar and non-Witch, first promulgated the survival thesis; Gardner, a Witch, claimed to have participated with a group of English Witches and wrote about their beliefs and rituals. Gardner is widely credited with providing direct or indirect inspiration to the formation of numerous covens.

Adler (1979:81-85) credits the Myth of Wicca with giving many Witch groups a sense of historical legitimacy and continuity with the ancient past. However, the survival thesis has not withstood the test of time and scholarship. It has long been challenged by historians (see Rose, 1962; Cohn, 1975). Adler (1979:46) sees the myth as rapidly losing its credibility among Witches. Her own work, Drawing Down the Moon (1979), may in fact do much to finish off the myth among Witches. She gives very thorough and systematic treatment to the various sources and versions of the myth. Informants have told me that they view Adler's work as highly significant though it is still somewhat premature to assess its actual impact on Witchcraft.

Melton (1978:272) views Witchcraft in the United States mainly as an import from Europe after 1954. Although his Encyclopaedia of American Religions (1978) does include accounts of several covens which claim to be able to trace their ancestry back to colonial times or Medieval Europe, in general it appears that most American groups arose after Gardner's publications. Not all Witchcraft traditions in the United States, however, draw directly upon Gardner for inspiration. Gardner's original doctrines have

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1See Adler (1979:41-91) for a thorough discussion of the claims and counterclaims surrounding the myth of Wicca.
been considerably modified and supplemented by more recent Witches.

In the United States, Witchcraft is closely tied to the broader Neo-Pagan movement. Adler (1979:10-11) views Witchcraft as but one of a number of Neo-Pagan religions and the dividing lines as hazy. Melton (1978:286) sees Neo-Paganism as somewhat more nature oriented than is Witchcraft and as rejecting the survival thesis. However, if Witches continue to move away from the survival thesis the dividing lines are likely to become even vaguer. One of my own informants notes the distinction as "Every Witch is a Pagan but not every Pagan is a Witch." Taxonomic boundaries are, however, apt to be misleading and should not be stressed too sharply, especially in view of the ambiguity surrounding "Witch."

Estimates of numbers of people in the United States actively involved in Witchcraft and/or Neo-Paganism vary. Melton is quoted in Time (1979:84) as estimating that there may be 40,000 practicing Pagans. In 1972, Truzzi (1972:26) estimated that the total number of Witches was no more than 3,000. Adler (1979:106) estimates that there are about 10,000 Neo-Pagans. All estimates are suspect in view of the fact that nobody knows how many clandestine or semi-secret groups or individuals are around.

Organizational, Witches tend to group themselves into autonomous covens. However, there are also solitary Witches and associations of covens. Truzzi (1974:637) estimates that solitary Witches are more common than group affiliated Witches. Melton (1978) mentions several groups which claim to be organizations of more than one coven and Scott's (1980) field study was based upon an organization composed of five covens. Adler (1979:97-105) describes some attempts by Witches to form larger alliances. As with individuals, estimates of numbers of covens vary. Truzzi (1974:637)
estimates that there are 300 covens in the United States. Adler (1979:105) claims to have had contact with 100 covens and estimates that from five to ten times that number may actually exist. The 1980 Guide to Wicca and Pagan Resources (Fox, 1980) lists names and addresses for more than 200 Witch and Pagan groups.

An attempt to assess the geographical distribution of Witch and Pagan groups has been made by Stark et al. (1979:353-354). They conclude that Witch groups are highly represented in the South and West Central census regions and Pagans in the Pacific and Central regions. However, this work is marred methodologically by lumping Witches and Satanists together and by separating Witches from Pagans.

Despite the lack of any central organization or hierarchy, Witches manage after a fashion to keep track of one another and maintain communication. There are a fairly large number of small circulation publications: more than fifty in 1980 (Fox, 1980:50-71). There are also a number of Pagan and Occult directories which list contacts in various locales. In a given year, there are likely to be a number of meetings or gatherings that attract Witches on either a national or regional basis. Circle (Fox, 1980:131-133) lists twenty-six festivals and gatherings. Witches also maintain correspondence with one another and travel. Upon occasion I have met out-of-state Witches at coven meetings and these guest Witches tell about events going on in their own areas. Some members of the coven have also visited other groups or attended gatherings such as the Annual Pan Pagan Festival. I have also met one Witch, not a member of the group I worked with, who claims to have traveled to a number of cities in response to invitations from various groups to start covens and initiate Witches. Communication, sporadic and
unsystematic, does exist between groups, and individuals are able to develop something of a feel for what is happening nationally in Witchcraft.

To complete this overview of Witchcraft mention should be made of the clandestine nature of Witchcraft. Generalization is difficult. Some Witches such as world famous Sybil Leek are very public and well-known. For one reason or another, other Witches are totally secretive. Truzzi (1974:633) argues that "...being labeled a Witch today is hardly stigmatic. In much of today's middle-class society, a witch is viewed as a highly glamorous figure." Marty (1970) has also made a case for occult beliefs becoming respectable to middle America. It is also true that many Witch and Pagan groups are publically listed in directories and grant newspaper and television interviews. Witchcraft may in fact be becoming more open and the publication of serious works such as Adler's Drawing Down the Moon (1979) may hasten this process. This optimistic view must be tempered somewhat. Adler (1979:128-130) also notes the continued existence of prejudice and legal constraints against Witchcraft.

Summary

Witchcraft, both in terms of content and organization, is very complex and diffuse. At the present stage of its development, it appears to have been elaborated and splintered to the point where it is highly unlikely that a central organization or dogma will ever develop. Witchcraft also appears to be in a transition phase at the present time, breaking with past myths and perhaps becoming more open.

As a belief system, Witchcraft may be seen as having some general elements to which have been grafted other ideas and beliefs from the more general realms of occult and religious thought. This belief inventory may
be seen as a pool from which individuals selectively draw elements and incorporate these either literally or symbolically into personal belief systems. To the outsider the situation is somewhat confusing. Witchcraft at its worst may appear to be nothing more than a hodge podge of silly superstitions; at its best, a profound belief in the divinity and transcendence of man.
WITCHES

During the course of my research, I met a total of 26 individuals who were practicing Witches. Of these, twenty-one were involved with the Sword Coven. As individuals, the Witches are quite diverse in terms of socio-economic characteristics. Any attempt to delineate the traits of an average or prototype Witch is apt to be misleading. Therefore, the following account is intended to illustrate the general composition of the coven with emphasis on the diversity that characterizes the group.

Socio-Economic Characteristics

1) Marital status: There were three pairs of married Witches but only one of these couples was involved directly with the Sword Coven. Two other participants were married but their wives were not involved with either the coven or Witchcraft. The other coven participants were single during my research.

2) Gender: There were a total of eight female and eighteen male Witches. The Sword Coven participants consisted of five females and sixteen males.

3) Occupational status: Witches consisted of white collar professionals, factory workers, office workers, retail clerks, housewives, and unemployed. The Sword Coven members with three exceptions were employed throughout the period of my research.

4) Education: In general terms, the educational level of coven participants was quite high: four have Master's degrees; several others have at least some college education. Among the college educated Witches, most were
Arts and Humanities majors. One Witch, however, has a Master's degree in Engineering.

5) Age: The age range of members was from late teens to middle fifties. Most of the Witches were in their twenties or thirties.

6) Sexual orientation: Some Witches were homosexual or bisexual and others heterosexual. The Sword Coven does not have any sort of marked sexual orientation and the different sexual preferences do not appear to have been significant in shaping coven affairs. On an individual basis, however, sexual orientation does sometimes appear to have been significant in shaping religious orientation - Witchcraft with its androgeneous godhead and easy tolerance is more acceptant of homosexuality than is traditional religion. Recruitment mechanisms may also be important in this context. Witchcraft appears to spread along the lines of existing social networks. It is in nature of things that homosexuals have other homosexuals in their friendship networks. Therefore, the logical outcome is incorporation of homosexuals into the group.

In terms of the general characteristics of its members, the Sword Coven provides some interesting comparisons and contrasts with the Aquarian Age Order described by Scott (1980). This group is actually an association of five covens and as such has a much larger participant base than the Sword Coven. Order Witches also span a wide occupational and educational spectrum and, like Sword Coven members, are predominantly single. In contrast to the Sword Coven, however, Order members are predominantly female.

The group described by Scott has a decidedly counter culture cast to it. This is not the case for the Sword Coven as a whole although most of the members are to one degree or another somewhat out of the mainstream of Middle
A number of the Witches are socially and economically well-established in the local community in the sense of being solidly career tracked and having investments in property and relationships. Other Witches are more rootless and less established in terms of jobs and investment. Such status differences do not appear to have generated conflict within the group. It remains a fact, however, that some individuals simply have more to lose in the face of public exposure than do others.

Orientation Towards Witchcraft and Coven Participation

A striking feature of the coven is the ideological diversity it contains. While there is a broad general consensus about the major elements of Witchcraft, this consensus is vague at times. There are differing interpretations even over such a central concept as magic — a point that should be especially poignant to the anthropologist.

This diversity has several roots. In large part, it stems from the highly eclectic and decentralized nature of Witchcraft as a belief system. Personality factors must also be taken into account. Different individuals, for one reason or another, find different occult and Witch beliefs especially attractive and will naturally emphasize these in their practice of Witchcraft. A woman for instance may feel an especial affinity for the Goddess while a man may elect to be more God oriented. Similarly a Witch of British descent may tend to emphasize Celtic symbolisms because these are most closely associated with the Witch's ancestry.

Within the coven there is no real feeling either among the rank and file or leadership that ideological conformity is at all necessary. Upon the occasions when there have been discussions about ideological differences,
these have centered on exploring rather than resolving the differences. The open and tolerant perspective afforded here must be tempered somewhat. The differing orientations toward Witchcraft were seen by some of the Witches as contributing to the eventual fragmentation of the group.

Several of the Witches have told me that they perform rituals and raise magic outside of the coven context. Again, this is something that is best viewed as highly individual. Some of the Witches have told me that they quite often perform individual rites while others say that they never do so. Specific examples of private magic that informants have mentioned include astral projection, healing spells, love spells and spells to resolve interpersonal frictions. Some individuals on the other hand say that they are unsure of their own control of magical technique and rarely, if ever, attempt magic except in the company of other Witches. Upon occasion, individuals also get together with each other outside of the coven context to perform rituals. This has been done with other coven participants and upon one occasion with some former members of the old combined coven.

The general attitude of the Witches towards participation in the coven is that the group is important but not necessary to an individual's practice of Witchcraft. Many of the members have practiced at one time or another as solitary Witches and are quite willing to resume doing so if for one reason or another membership in the coven becomes untenable. Indeed, this is exactly what happened when the coven finally broke up. At the same time people do value their participation in a group and have said that they would seek out or start a new group if necessary.

There are two general reasons why Witches value their participation with the coven. First, it provides them with an opportunity to get together
with other Witches and perform rituals. Magic raised by a group is often viewed as more powerful and effective than is individual magic. Second, the coven meetings are social events that people find highly enjoyable. In a few cases, the coven meetings appear to be the major socializing events in people’s lives. In general, however, the Witches do not give off the impression of being a group of loners drawn to each other because of a paucity of other interpersonal relationships. Most of the Witches appear to have significant social lives outside of the coven context; they talk about non-Witch friends, families and social activities.

Attempting to assess the social significance of coven membership is admittedly still a difficult task. A number of factors complicate the matter. There is the fact that the centrality of Witchcraft in a person’s life differs markedly from individual to individual. Some Witches are much closer to having made religion the dominant focus of their lives than are others who have kept their lives more compartmentalized. There is also the fact that for a number of the Witches, there exist primary relationships within the group which are independent of coven membership. For these people, the coven is also a friendship network that is socially significant independent of its religious purposes. These people would be associating with each other as friends even if they were not co-religionists.

Finally, membership in the coven in no way necessitates the severance of or withdrawal from other social relationships. The coven is not a cult in the sense of insisting that members make the group the central focus of their lives and no guidelines are laid down dictating how people should conduct their lives. In general, the significance of the coven as a social group in a person’s life appears to be largely dependent upon the individual’s
prior social relationships and people are free to make whatever accommodations in these that they feel necessary.

The extent to which individuals involve themselves in coven affairs is likewise quite varied. Some members are very active while others are much more subdued. There is no necessary correlation between knowledge of Witchcraft and degree of coven involvement. It is true that the coven leaders are highly knowledgeable, but other individuals who are also highly knowledgeable are very passive in coven affairs.

On Choosing Witchcraft

Perhaps the most interesting question that can be asked about the Witches as people is "Why are they doing this (Witchcraft)?" In conversations with Witches about their beliefs, a recurrent theme expressed either explicitly or in sentiment is that "It (Witchcraft, magic, reincarnation and the like) makes sense." Many of the individuals with whom I have examined this matter give every indication of having thought out and articulated their belief system. Since some of these people are highly educated and exhibit considerable powers of introspection, some weight should be given to their sentiments. Leaving aside the important issue of what psychological factors may predispose individuals to engage in occult beliefs, it is worthwhile here to examine some of the general cultural and social factors that help explain why Witchcraft "makes sense" to some people.

At the heart of the matter lie some general considerations about the status of the occult in Western Culture. Whatever the historical roots of the situation may be, it is simply a fact that occult beliefs permeate much of popular Western Culture. The expression of these beliefs ranges from the
banal to the profound, from the crass to the sublime. But, at whatever level, it is probably unavoidable that the average member of our society is going to experience a degree of exposure to these beliefs. Some people are going to explore these beliefs and articulate them into a world view. In effect, the occult alternative is one that is presented to the individual by the general culture and it is to be expected that some people will exercise the option.

The question now arises of why normal intelligent people ever elect to exercise the option. Here a question of values unavoidably intrudes itself. To the agnostic social scientist, belief in magic or reincarnation is apt to seem somewhat arcane or absurd. However, when measured against the prevalent standards of belief in popular Western culture, many occult beliefs are by no means ridiculous. Many people believe to some degree in the efficacy of prayer. Magic is different than prayer, but basically each is a species of behavior performed to gain some feeling of control over life. Most people in the United States believe in an afterlife of sorts and many even believe in reincarnation. The overwhelming majority of people in this country believe in some sort of god - a belief shared by Witches.

The list of comparisons between Witch and more mainstream religious beliefs could easily be extended. The main argument here is that there exists in Western culture certain fundamental categories of belief and that at a most basic level many occult beliefs can be seen as expressions of rather than contradictions of these fundamental beliefs. Thus, it can be

\[\text{The major distinction I have in mind is that prayer involves supplication whereas magic does not. More sophisticated distinctions are of course possible. (See Goode, 1951:52-55.)}\]
argued that many occult beliefs are simply variations on more fundamental themes and the leap from mainstream to occult beliefs does not necessarily involve a major switch.

Complimenting this argument, there exists a large and expansive body of occult literature, much of it seriously written by serious people. This literature, also part of the Western tradition can afford legitimation and inspiration for an individual's occult beliefs. Ultimately in terms of major cultural traditions of belief, many of the elements of Witchcraft can indeed be seen as "making sense."

If there is any substance to the argument that Witchcraft as a religious system is in some respects not really all that alien to the more mainstream beliefs of Western Culture, it may in part explain how and why some individuals become Witches. The belief inventory of the general culture may be seen as paving the way for entry into Witchcraft. The process appears to be a sort of intellectual preadaptation of belief. This may account for the fact that for the most part the Witches do not present the impression of participating in anything all that out of the ordinary. After the initial shock of contact with Witches wears off, much of what the Witches do and believe actually becomes very familiar.

As a belief system, Witchcraft has some general characteristics that people find attractive. Lacking a hard core of dogma, Witchcraft appears to have some appeal as an intellectually open system. In a sense, Witchcraft is a religion of personal exploration wherein the individual is relatively free to delve as deep or as shallow as he or she might wish. Of similar appeal is the fact that Witchcraft is a religion in which the individual can be very active. One is not simply part of a passive audience or congregation
but an integral and active part of a ritual. Finally, the esthetic appeal of the Craft should not be discounted. Witchcraft contains a wealth of poetry and symbolisms which can be articulated into very beautiful ritual expressions. Furthermore, individuals are free to elaborate this symbolism and extend it. For some individuals this freedom of poetic expression appears to be a very important element of their religion.

Another factor leading to involvement in both Witchcraft and the coven is more mundane in nature. Of great significance is the influence that friends exercise over one another. There are several friendship dyads among the Witches and these appear to have been instrumental in shaping people's decisions to participate. Given the fact that, for most people, Witchcraft is not something that could be discussed lightly with an absolute stranger, it is understandable that friendship should be important in involving people in Witchcraft.

The length of time individuals have been involved in Witchcraft varies considerably. Some Witches have been involved for years, while the participation of others may be measured in months. In some cases, individuals have gone through a kind of religious quest before finally settling on Witchcraft. I met no one who claimed to be a hereditary Witch in the sense of having learned the Craft while being bounced on their grandmother's knee. In two cases, however, individuals mentioned that they felt that their family backgrounds had some elements such as belief in reincarnation or ESP that were Witchlike. One Witch has told me of a belief in Witchcraft since childhood and says that she has always felt herself to be a Witch. For others, involvement appears to have been stimulated through chance acquaintance and casual interest in occult matters. It is interesting to speculate on whether or
not in the absence of a behavioral context such as a coven, some individuals would ever have really become practicing Witches. There must be a fairly large number of people about who have a casual interest with Witchcraft but who are not in contact with a coven and consequently lack the opportunity to become seriously involved.

The actual gravitation of individuals to Witchcraft to involvement with Witchcraft is explained by some Witches in terms of their belief in reincarnation. In the context of such a belief, the Witch essence at the core of a person's spiritual being is passed on from life to life and will eventually express itself. Witches will thus find both Witchcraft and each other because of their inner nature.

Reincarnation is not something that even in principle is amenable to empirical inquiry. Belief in reincarnation and the Witch essence is not, however, without empirical consequences. One Witch has told me that she "knew" that some other individuals were Witches before any actual open statements to that effect were made. Speculations about the exact psychological mechanisms involved in this real or imagined recognition process are of necessity tenuous, but the weight that Witches place on feelings of psychological rapport and reliance on intuitive faculties may partially explain the matter.

I personally had occasion to observe an apparent example of this perceiving the Witch essence in another person. Shortly after I began my research with the coven, a Tarot reading was done for my wife by one of the coven members. During the course of the reading, the reader announced that my wife was a Witch. We thought nothing of the matter at first but over the period of my research some of the other Witches came to the same
conclusion. I myself do not appear to have elicited the same feelings. For most of the Summer and Fall of 1979 I was expected to remain outside of the rituals, observing but not participating. I had informed the Witches at the outset that my own attitude towards their beliefs was best described as one of neutral agnosticism. While this attitude on my part was acceptable, it was also felt that my skepticism might interfere with the flow of energy during a ritual. My wife posed no such problem and she was invited to freely participate in the rituals. Since at no point did my wife express a real or feigned belief in Witchcraft, this posture is difficult to account for. The only rationale I can really offer is that my wife, as a warmer, more spontaneous person than I, perhaps more readily evokes sympathetic reactions. To people who believe in their own intuitive ability to recognize each other as Witches, such reactions might easily lead to the conclusion that the person evoking them was a Witch. This underscores the potential importance of the psychological and emotional rapport of friendship in bringing people into Witchcraft. Such feelings also probably contribute to making the experience of entry less alien and more comfortable to the recruit.

Tolerance and Humor

Two of the general traits of the Witches that I found most appealing were their tolerance and sense of humor. Attempting to assess such qualities is at best a subjective matter, but I feel that an understanding of these traits is very germane to understanding the coven as a whole.

Initially, I thought the coven would turn out to be a kind of mini-cult, centered around a charismatic leader or central dogma claiming to embody the
only true religion. I did not find this to be the case. In general, the Witches appear to be quite tolerant of other religions. Comments are sometimes made about the Christian predisposition to burn Witches; at other times Witches point out parallelisms between Christianity and Witchcraft such as shared ceremonial dates. Aside from the occasional comment about Christian intolerance, I have not witnessed any serious attack or denigration of Christianity. Tolerance does not of course imply acceptance. Individuals have told me that they cannot accept Christianity. In this context, individuals say that they view Witchcraft as having a more positive image of man than does Christianity with less emphasis on guilt and the possibility of hell fire.

This general attitude of tolerance takes some interesting twists. I once found myself in the curious position of listening to a Witch say that she thought modern scholarship was demonstrating the truth of much of the Bible. Another Witch has pointed to Biblical miracles as instances of magic and views the Bible as providing proof that magic works. Yet another said to me that upon occasion she has lighted a candle to Mary in a Catholic church; the intent here was to commune with the Goddess principle symbolized by Mary. Finally, a couple who are married went through the marriage ceremony in both a traditional church and a Witch ritual.

A religion such as Witchcraft, being both eclectic and synthetic, might well have as a psychological prerequisite a degree of tolerance. Lacking a central dogma and being expressed through a plethora of traditions the existence of Witchcraft as a religion is probably dependent to a degree on the tolerance of its adherents for each other's preferences and idiosyncracies of belief. At the very least Witches must be able to agree to disagree and
not be too quick to label each other's Witchcraft and "Witchcrap." Tolerance might also be seen as functioning as a survival mechanism vis-à-vis establishment religion as Witchcraft becomes more public. Laying no claim to a central truth that competes head on with the basic tenets of other religions, a tolerant Witchcraft might be seen as less threatening and allowed to survive as a marginal alternative.

Hand in hand with this tolerance is a marked sense of humor. The Witches are not at all the dour Fanatics I originally thought they might be. Several Witches are accomplished wits and some are excellent raconteurs. An evening spent with the coven can at times be quite hilarious, marked by an easy exchange of banter and abundant puns. Even the rituals are not immune from occasional jokes and from time to time a joke or pun helps ease the psychological tension of a ritual.

Handling the Consequences of Being a Witch

The coven as a whole is best described as non-public. It is not exactly a secret organization nor exactly an open organization. The coven is listed in one of the national Pagan directories with Diana named as the contact point, but this is a relatively recent development occurring in the Fall of 1980. This semi-clandestine nature of the coven reflects the different manner in which individuals handle the immediate and potential consequences of being a Witch. Some are quite open while others are very discrete.

In a most general sense, the major consequence of being a Witch involves the risk of public exposure, exposure which potentially could lead to ostracism or ridicule. Individuals handle this matter very differently. Some have told me that they are quite open about their religion with family,
friends and in one case even with an employer. In a few cases, I had a fleeting impression that individuals flaunted their Witchcraft openly to deliberately shock or gain a moment of notoriety. For the most part, however, for the individuals who are open about their involvement, Witchcraft appears that to be so incorporated into an overall life style that being open about it is just a natural expression without overtones of secretive revelation.

Other Witches are much more circumspect and discrete in keeping their religion under wraps. Individuals have said that they keep their religious orientation secret from friends, family and co-workers in order to avoid potential embarrassment. Some people brought friends and, in two instances, family members to rituals. As a general rule of thumb, it appears that the more circumspect Witches, while avoiding total secrecy, reveal themselves only to people whom they feel they can trust. The difficulty of generalizing about this entire matter is perhaps best illustrated by recounting the only outdoor ritual the coven held.

When I was told that there was going to be an outdoor ritual, I assumed that we would probably stand outside in the dark and rather silently raise our arms to the moon. Instead, when I arrived at the covenstead, I found that its backyard had been turned into a giant altar room. A bonfire blazed and a well lighted altar was set up. Various images and Witch objects were also distributed about the yard. We were all wearing a variety of robes and would have presented a rather colorful spectacle for any chance observer coming our way.

At first, I thought that this event might herald a lowering of the coven's tacit rules of discretion, but this does not appear to have been the case. When I later discussed the matter with Ares, he pointed out to me that
he had been aware that his neighbors on either side were away for the evening and his yard was semi-secluded in the back to safeguard against prying eyes. He does not regard the event as a radical departure from the coven's usual indoor activities. All in all, the event seems to typify the coven's general behavior: not totally private, but still contained within certain bounds of disclosure.

Membership in the coven does not appear to require major readjustment or accommodation of life style for most of the Witches. One problem for some is the lateness of the hour to which the ritual often extends. In some cases, people who have to work the next day are unable to attend the entire ritual. Some of the Witches also live out of town and have lengthy drives and upon occasion this causes some inconvenience.

The fact that most of the Witches are single probably reduces the inconvenience of belonging to the coven. Most people do not have to explain to their husbands or wives where they are going or what they are doing. If more of the Witches were married to non-Witches, one could easily imagine a greater tension between coven participation and family life. Even as matters now stand, individuals sometimes plead outside events or pressures as excuses for not attending coven rituals.

Summary

The Sword Coven is quite eclectic in terms of its members' ideological preferences and personal characteristics. Ideological diversity is tolerated and even encouraged. For most of the members of the coven, involvement in Witchcraft or the coven does not appear to involve major changes in overall life style. The coven is not a cult in the sense of requiring adherence to a central dogma or severence with the outside world. This openness and
tolerance probably accounts at least in part the attraction of Witchcraft to some people.
AN EVENING WITH THE WITCHES

Witches meet together according to a calendar based on the seasonal and lunar cycles. As per the seasonal calendar, there are eight sabats:

1. Candlemas - February
2. Spring Rite - March
3. Beltane - May
4. Mid Summer - June
5. Lamas - August
6. Autumn Rite - September
7. Hallows - October
8. Yule - December

Hallows, Candlemas, Beltane and Lamas are known as the Greater Sabats; the Lesser Sabats being the soltices and equinoxes. Ideally, the coven would convene at each sabat on the exact date the Sabat falls on. In practice, this is sometimes done, pragmatic considerations may dictate holding the ritual on another day. For instance, if a Sabat falls in the middle of the week, the actual ritual may be held on the weekend.

In addition to Sabats, rituals may also be held on esbats. Esbats follow the lunar calendar of old and full moons and thus come around about every two weeks. As with Sabats, the ideal would be to observe the esbat on its exact calendar date, but the practice is to observe it on the weekend. Most of the Witches have jobs, and rituals extending as they often do to a very late hour, are best held on a Saturday evening. This is also more convenient for the Witches who travel in from out of town and whose attendance largely would be precluded by mid-week rituals.

Physically, the coven always meets in Ares' house which is referred to as the covenstead. This is strictly a matter of convenience and coven tradition. Ares is single and his home is large enough to accommodate Witches and guests for ritual and social purposes. With a single exception, all of the rituals I attended were conducted indoors.
The ritual evening may be divided into three discrete phases:

1) A pre-ritual period of socializing
2) The ritual
3) A post-ritual period of socializing

The actual length of the evening and the span of each phase vary considerably. In general, the entire evening will run from 8:00 p.m. to 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. The ritual itself is usually slated to start at 9:00 but this is rarely the case in practice, a fact that from time to time has produced friction as people complain about the lateness of the hour. After the ritual, people may stay around for a considerable amount of time before the group finally breaks up for the evening.

The Pre-Ritual Phase

People start to arrive at Ares' house around 8:00 or 8:30. Over the next hour or so the remainder of the people will arrive. In general, this makes for a two or three hour period of socializing before the ritual begins. Typically there will be several small conversation groups clustered in the kitchen and living rooms. People may wander freely back and forth. For the most part, Witches interact quite freely with each other and with any non-Witch guests who may be present.

I have not observed that Witches' conversations during this period exhibit any marked tendency to center on occult or religious subjects. In general, the conversations are pretty much what one would expect at a typical middle class party: books, cars, real estate, pets, politics, personal anecdotes and the like. This is not to say that there is never any discussion of religion or occult matters. There is, but such discussion does not dominate. During this period there may be a lot of joking, puns, witticisms
and bantering back and forth among the Witches.

Generally, there is very little use of alcohol or other social drugs by most Witches during this socializing period. There may be the occasional glass of wine or punch but the main beverage is coffee and a large percolator always is kept brewing. Occasionally some of the Witches will pass a joint around. Getting drunk or otherwise loaded prior to a ritual is frowned upon. Once in a while, an individual may become intoxicated but this is rare and not appreciated. In general, the use of alcohol by the Witches during a ritual evening is quite moderate.

Upon occasion, more formal meetings are held prior to the ritual. These will be convened by Ares and Diana to discuss coven affairs or just to talk about Witchcraft in general. The discussions are quite informal and anybody present, even non-Witch guests, are free to voice their opinions.

While most of the Witches are socializing upstairs, Diana will occupy herself in the altar room with preparations for the ritual. This preparation can often be a time consuming affair taking one or two hours. Prior to the meeting, Ares will have partially prepared the altar. On the evening of the ritual Diana will bring her own ceremonial objects and complete the preparations. She will do so either alone or with the assistance of her Hand Maiden. The other Witches are expected to remain upstairs until summoned to the altar room. In addition to the physical preparation for the ritual, Diana also prepares herself psychologically at this time.

After completing her preparations for the ritual, Diana will send her Hand Maiden upstairs to warn everybody to get ready and to request a quiet moment. At this time, the participants who have not already done so will put on their ritual robes. These robes are usually rather simple affairs that
loosely drape over the body. There are a variety of colors, the choice being a matter of individual preference. For guests and any others present who may not have their own personal robes, Ares keeps an extra supply on hand. At this same time, the Witches will also don their own ceremonial objects - wands, athames (ceremonial knives) and jewelry.

After everybody is robed, they sit quietly together for a few minutes and wait to be summoned to the altar room. The actual summons is sometimes the ringing of a hand bell or the Hand Maiden may simply announce that everything is ready and request that the people come downstairs. Downstairs, people wait quietly outside the altar room until Diana summons them to enter. Entry is on an individual basis and generally non-Witches are requested to enter last. Each individual is greeted and blessed by the High Priestess as they enter.

Occasionally, a coven member or guest who does not wish to participate in the ritual will remain outside of the altar room. This is not the preferred behavior, but it is acceptable and there are chairs available which afford a good view of the ritual. Non-participants are sometimes delegated the task of answering the phone or doorbell or shooing away Ares' dogs during the ritual.

The Ritual

The ritual is conducted in a small basement room that has been set up as an altar room. The altar room has a floor space of thirteen feet by thirteen feet. A twelve foot diameter circle is painted on the floor. From time to time Ares had to repaint the circle as the paint peeled off when the dancing was quite vigorous.
The altar itself is actually a massive portion of the house foundation that runs the width of the room and rises about four feet above the floor. Ideally the altar would be situated in the center of the ritual circle. This is sometimes done with a portable altar but this can make things very cramped. Usually the center of the circle is occupied by a cauldron or left empty.

The center of the altar is covered with a white cloth and ritual paraphernalia placed on this cloth, such as books, busts of gods, daggers, swords, candles, and incense. Wine is used during the ritual and a supply is kept off to one side. On the other side of the altar sits a stereo and the various records that are used in the ritual. Around the walls of the room are posted ceramic zodiac signs and at the four cardinal compass points are candle stations called the Watchtowers. There is a single doorway which is kept open but covered with a string curtain. There are usually chairs or stools in the corners for the convenience of people who wish to sit or rest during the ritual.

The mood generated by the physical setting of the ritual is difficult to describe in other than highly subjective terms. Despite this limitation, I believe that an attempt to assess the psychological mood generated by the altar room is important in understanding what goes on during a ritual. One does get an impression of being transported into another world and another time.

To begin, there is the actual decoration of the altar which, whether elaborate or plain, is usually esthetically pleasing. The statuary and other objects, though not situated to any set formula, are placed with an eye to

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1The recordings are usually medieval or folk style dances.
achieve harmony and balance. The effect is heightened by the use of candles for lighting. Sometimes the room is quite dim while at other times, numerous candles brilliantly light up the altar. The flickering of candles generates a constant interplay between light and shadow which helps stimulate a feeling of transition between levels of experience. The altar room, being located in a basement, often has a slightly damp chill in the air and on the floor. This can make for an interesting tactile contrast between coolness and warmth as you draw your robe about yourself. Voices are hushed and the air is pregnant with incense and soft music. The atmosphere of the room is not conducive to a person bringing care and worry into it. (Agnostic as I am about most of the Witches' beliefs, I personally find the mood of the ritual room quite relaxing; problems of everyday life that may have been nagging at my mind quickly dissolve and for a time at least are forgotten.)

The actual ritual varies considerably in content and structure depending upon the occasion, the person conducting the ritual and the participants themselves. Most of the rituals I attended were conducted by Diana but upon occasion Ares and other members of the group have also conducted rituals.

I shall not attempt here to present an example of a "typical" ritual but rather present a composite ritual. The resulting description, though not specific to any particular ritual that I witnessed, will illustrate the general outline of the rituals and give an impression of the variety of practices that have been incorporated into rituals from time to time. Somewhat arbitrarily for narrative purposes, I have divided the description into a number of discrete stages. In actuality, some of these stages flow into one another without the implied hiatus.
1. Outside of the altar room a large table is set up with a bowl of water and small containers of salt and water. The water used here is rainwater, or in Winter, melted snow. In his capacity as High Priest, Ares blesses the salt and water. The other participants line up single file in front of the table and Ares ritually washes the first person's hands in the bowl of rain water. This person then washes the next person's hands and so on until all have undergone the ritual cleansing.

2. Ares, now inside the altar room, lights some candles and rings a small hand bell. The bell ringing dispels evil spirits and announces the formal opening of the ritual. At this point the person conducting the ritual often will move about the circle with a censor.

3. One by one individuals enter the altar room. As they step through the doorway they are greeted by the person conducting the ritual. A question or set of questions is asked of the entrant. The person's names is asked as is his or her intent or motive for attending. Traditionally, this is called the "Challenge at the Gate" and should be done at sword point. However, the Sword Challenge is not much in vogue with this group.

Diana has told me that she regards this step as more of a greeting than a challenge. She also attempts to avoid asking questions that might make people uncomfortable or embarrassed by having to "think on their feet." This greeting is viewed as setting the emotional stage of the ritual and marks the start of the transition between experiences. At one time, the usual practice of the group was just to have everybody come into the altar room. However, the individual entry has more dramatic impact. As people enter they stand silently and wait for everybody else to come in.
4. The next step is the setting of the mood and theme of the ritual. The High Priestess or High Priest will talk about the purpose of the group meeting that night. There may be chanting, either individual or group, and a selection of Witch poetry may be read. Often the participants will join hands and chant together, sometimes stationary, sometimes moving. This holding of hands is regarded as promoting and symbolizing coven unity and a feeling of togetherness.

5. The next step is the consecration of the circle which involves a number of actions. The coven stands within the circle and a member, usually but not always the High Priestess, takes a sword (actually an old bayonet) and traces the outline of the circle with it.

Next the the Watchtowers, the candle stations at the four cardinal points of the compass, are lit and their attendant spirits summoned. This may be done by the person conducting the ritual or another participant may be asked to summon one or all of the Watchtowers.

Starting in the East, the place of greatest power, each candle station is lit and its associated "Lords of the East" or "Mighty Ones" summoned. The invoker then moves around clockwise until all of the Watchtowers are lit. The other participants stand within the circle and greet each Watchtower as it is lit by raising their arms.

The summoning of the Watchtowers is regarded as creating a feeling of being guarded and protected. I was told that some Witches regard the Lords of the Watchtowers as the spirits of departed Witches who are summoned to protect the coven during a ritual. Others have different interpretations. For instance, Diana regards the "Mighty Ones" more symbolically, as extensions of her own self into an imaginary realm.
The ritual circle now cast is viewed as a sacred spot set aside and guarded from the mundane world. The circle also has symbolic meanings. It is seen as representing the cycles of life, birth and rebirth, and the seasons. It is also seen as a womb. For magical purposes, the circle serves as an energy focus. The circle and circular motion are also viewed as having great esthetic appeal.

In theory, once the circle is cast, participants should not leave it (i.e., go out of the altar room). Should it be necessary to leave, the person doing so is expected to request that a portal be opened. This is done by tracing the sword in front of the doorway. The portal will then be closed and the circle resealed. When I first started attending the rituals, there was actually quite a bit of free movement in and out of the circle as people stepped out for calls of nature and cigarette breaks. This has since been tightened up and people are expected to request that a portal be opened should they wish to leave.

6. Associated with the casting of the circle at some point is the invocation of the God and/or Goddess and the consecration of the four elements of fire, earth, air and water. The invocation, not regarded as a supplication, involves the lighting of candles and calling upon the deity to attend to the assembled coven.

The manner in which the four elements are consecrated varies. In general, the High Priestess or High Priest will start at the altar and bless each element. These will then be passed round robin or carried around and presented to each member. After this will be a blessing and dedication of each member. This may be done by the person conducting the ritual or may be done round robin with each participant blessing and being blessed by another.
The blessing starts at the altar and moves clockwise around the circle. Each person's forehead is anointed with wine or scented oil as the blessing is done.

7. There is now a blessing of Wine. A male, sometimes the High Priest, sometimes another participant, kneels in front of the altar and presents a chalice of wine to the High Priestess. She lowers a dagger into the vessel of wine. Words will be spoken to the effect that the dagger represents the male and the cup the female. The wine thus blessed is seen as symbolizing the union of the male and female principles of the cosmos.

This portion of the ritual is seen as the symbolic enactment of the "Great Rite" or ritual sexual union of man and woman. The symbolic enactment is considered as valid and powerful as the actual Great Rite. I have never witnessed an actual Great Rite but have been told it has been performed upon occasion. As related to me, the rite was performed between two individuals who already had a romantic and sexual relationship. The rite was privately performed; the two individuals consummating intercourse and then summoning the other members back to the ritual.

After being consecrated, the wine chalice is passed round robin; each participant takes a drink, passes the chalice and says "blessed be." A standing joke among the Witches is after the chalice has made the rounds a few times, someone will hold it up and say "smashed be!" When alcoholics or non-drinkers are present, non-alcohol wine or apple cider will be provided in addition to the wine.

The wine chalice will make one or more circuits and then each participant is given their own glass of wine. This sharing of wine is seen as promoting fellowship and unity and as loosening up people to relax and drop
their inhibitions.

8. There now follows a period of relaxation and socializing. This period provides a psychological break between the consecration of the circle and the magic raising that will soon follow. People talk and drink more wine. A portal is opened and people go in and out to get cigarettes. Occasionally, some of the participants will smoke marijuana. People will often drink several small glasses of wine but while looseness or even mild tipsiness is sought, drunkeness is frowned on. Discussion sessions may develop with each person contributing his or her feelings about Witchcraft or life in general.

9. The next stage is the raising of magic. The High Priestess calls the group back to order and asks if there are any works of magic to be performed. Sometimes people will have previously told her of their request; others will make the request on the spot. Guests as well as Witches are free to make requests.

Magic is raised in a "cone of power" by the Witches dancing clockwise around the sacred circle. The body exertion raises energy and by way of analogy the dancers can be viewed as a kind of human dynamo. The process will start with a few dances to get people loosened up and into the spirit of things. The group will then move on to raise energy for specific requests for magic. Should there be no specific requests for healing or personal problems, the group may dance just to raise energy for their own use.

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1 Dancing styles vary. It may be a ring around the rosy type of motion, or a folk style type of dancing.
The person making the request for magic, either for themselves or someone not present, will stand in the center of the circle. The other participants will then dance around this person to the accompaniment of music. The records are provided by Diana and she makes the selection according to the tempo she thinks appropriate. For each work of magic, the usual practice is to perform three dances. It is felt that once the cone of power is begun it should be sustained by continuous movement and in the brief pauses between dances participants are encouraged to keep moving around the circle. As the magical work progresses the tempo of the music may be increased and the dancing becomes quite vigorous. The climax of the work occurs at the end of the third dance when as the music stops the dancers move to the center of the circle and lay hands on the person making the request. If the request was made for an absent party, the power raised may be passed on, apparently through an act of will. The absent person may or may not be a Witch and it is even felt that it is not actually necessary for the recipient to know that energy was raised for him. One act being consummated, the group will then move on to the next request for magic.

The degree to which people participate in the dancing varies considerably. Participation is encouraged but not mandatory and some few never really dance. Others will dance for a while and then rest on the stools provided for the purpose. Still others take part in every dance. A considerable amount of grace and skill is exhibited by some of the Witches while others have a heavier, more plodding style. In general, when more

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1 The music is usually Medieval or Celtic style folk music.
than five or six people are dancing at the same time, things get a bit cramped because of the different styles and tempo with which people dance and move in and out of the circle. Finally, I occasionally have seen people achieve what appears to be some sort of transcendent state after vigorous and sustained dancing— an emotional high brought about through mood and motion.

The dancing continues until all of the requested works are performed or until people are simply tired. There may then follow a moment of two of relaxation and softer, more mellow music may be played to help people unwind.

9. The final stage of the ritual is the thanking and dismissal of the Watchtowers. One by one, the Watchtower and altar candles are put out. The ritual ends in complete darkness as the circle is declared broken and the rite over. After a moment of silence people will file out of the altar room, though some may remain behind to meditate or dance some more.

Before leaving this description of a Witch ritual, some comments of a more general nature should be made. An effective ritual is not a casual haphazard affair. A certain amount of planning and preparation goes into putting together a ritual. I have gone over the details of preparing the ritual with both Ares and Diana and in each case a considerable degree of thought to articulating the elements of a ritual is evinced. The form and content of the ritual is largely preplanned while still allowing for the expression of spontaneity.

The rituals performed by the Sword Coven are not lifted whole from any of the numerous books on Witch rituals. Elements of the ritual are incorporated from a variety of sources including a person's own creativity. For example, Diana writes her own rituals and enjoys doing this as her own poetic expression. She is writing a book of rituals and eventually hopes to publish
it. In this sense then, for some people the ritual can be seen as a creative expression rather than as a process of simply following the received forms of real or imagined traditions.

A Witch ritual can be a very dramatic affair. Many factors contribute to this feeling: the basement atmosphere of the altar room with its flickering candlelight and medieval dance music; the wearing of robes that cover the real world as well as the body; the chanting of ageless runes by the High Priestess; all make for an easy transition between levels of experience. With only a slight leap of the imagination, the world of alarm clocks and utility bills is banished for a while; Merlin lives and wonder is the rule. When magic is afoot, it is easy to feel a kinship with the old Christians worshipping together in the catacombs; they too practiced a forbidden and maligned faith.

I consider myself something of a hard-boiled empiricist, albeit one with a romantic streak. I therefore regard my own experiential impressions of a Witch ritual as important. In my case, the impressions are inculcated by mood and atmosphere rather than belief. The subjective meanderings of my mind at such times are perhaps best attributed to the fanciful flights of an overactive imagination. Yet in this connection it is well to remember that Witches place great reliance upon their own imaginative and intuitive faculties. For them mood, atmosphere and belief can combine to bring about the transformation of realities.

This dramatic impact of the ritual is not accidental but deliberately sought. Diana speaks of an expressive need for drama and acknowledges the role of theater in her rituals. In a sense, the person conducting the ritual can be seen as a kind of stage director striving to set the conditions for a
change of consciousness. Informants who have talked about this change of consciousness describe it in various ways. One speaks of seeking an "ecstatic hypnotic state," while another speaks of the shedding of the outer levels of personality so as to reveal the inner essence of one's being. Others remark of a "mystical communion with the Godhead" or a communion of one's spirit with the whole.

A Witch once remarked to me that she was "looking for Gandalf." She visualizes Tolkien's Wizard as embodying the ideal of magic. As a participatory and experiential happening, a Witch ritual seems to embody and contain this quest for wonder and transcendence. That some of the Witches are able to attain this goal during a ritual is a fact which I believe does much to explain why Witches gather together to dance in the circle of rebirth. Whatever the psychological and/or physiological mechanisms at play may be, the ritual can serve as a vehicle for subjectively experiencing a different realm of being and presumably provides emotional catharsis as well.

The Post Ritual Phase

Upon the termination of the ritual, the group often will have a period of informal socializing. Sometimes people will leave immediately, but usually people will stay around for a while. Refreshments are served. Some sort of main dish and desserts are out buffet style. People eat, drink coffee and converse. They may talk about the ritual they have just participated in or just about topics in general.

There may be a business meeting to discuss coven affairs or to set the date for the next ritual. Otherwise, people simply converse and then gradually drift out. This portion of the evening may last for several hours
as people remain to talk. Gradually, however, people leave to go home, although out of towners may spend the night at Ares' house.

Summary

The ritual meetings of the Sword Coven consist of three distinct phases: a pre-ritual socializing phase, the ritual itself and a post-ritual period of socializing. The meetings are held according to the lunar and seasonal calendars with adjustments made for pragmatic reasons. The meetings are enjoyable as social events as well as being important religious rites. The rituals themselves involve several distinct components. Some Witches appear to achieve some sort of transcendent experience during the course of a ritual. Usually, a ritual involves one or more works of magic being performed by the coven. After the ritual is completed, the group usually has refreshments and a period of socializing.
My primary interest in researching the Sword Coven focused on the structural and organizational aspects of the group. At the outset, informants told me that there was not actually that much organization of the coven. They were right, but only to a degree. Despite the largely informal nature of the group, there are still discernible patterns of relationships and roles which give the coven a degree of organization and structure. Furthermore, upon occasion the group has attempted to evolve into a more elaborate and structured organization. Ultimately, these attempts were fruitless, indeed the coven eventually fragmented rather than grew. Nevertheless, the organizational aspects of these events are worth noting. That these efforts were attempts rather than achievements diminishes neither their interest nor their utility to understanding the coven. From the outsider's point of view, the history of the Sword Coven can largely be seen as a series of attempts to evolve some sort of organizational format that could adequately contain the diverse interests and personalities of the Witches.

The Development of the Sword Coven

The Sword Coven existed for about two years, from January 1979 to December 1980. However, the story of the Sword Coven's development actually begins in 1975. At this time Ares, interested in the occult and Witchcraft for some time, decided either to set up or join a coven. With this aim in mind, he wrote to various Witch groups throughout the country for information. The replies he received informed him that he would have to be formally initiated into Witchcraft by an already initiated Witch. At this time Ares,
was unaware of any initiated Witches in the immediate area and, lacking the time to travel and receive the requisite training, he was about ready to give up the project. Instead, together with a few friends Ares formed a Pagan as opposed to a Witch group in the Summer of 1976. Pagans unlike many Witches do not place emphasis on initiation.

This group functioned independently until the Fall of 1977 when contact was made with an active Witch coven in the immediate area. This was the Horn Coven which by this time had emerged as a public group, conducting Craft classes and publishing a newsletter. The initial contact between the two groups was apparently prompted by a local newspaper article about the Horn Coven.

By the time of this contact, Ares was well versed in the lore of Witchcraft and within a month, he was initiated first, second, and third degree Witch by the High Priest and High Priestess of the Horn Coven.

Shortly after meeting each other, the two groups decided to merge together. The merger was effected and the combined coven with a membership of some 13 to 16 individuals functioned for about a year. The group split apart over the Winter of 1978/1979 with the subsequent formation of two independent covens.

The breakup appears to have resulted from a variety of factors. The Horn Coven people preferred to perform rituals skyclad (naked) a preference not shared by some of the other members who preferred wearing robes during rituals. The practice of ritual nudity is not uncommon among Witches. Skyclad adherents draw inspiration from the Gardnerian Tradition of ritual nudity. A common part of many Witch rituals is the phrase "Be ye naked in ye rites." The phrase is subject to interpretation, some accept it literally
while others take it to mean spiritual or emotional rather than physical nudity. The differences in interpretation generated a degree of stress although the Skyclad adherents did agree to wear robes during joint rituals.

At one point a misunderstanding arose over the position of High Priestess. At the time of the split this position was held by Diana. Some members of the group developed the idea that Diana was no longer interested in fulfilling the role. This was not in fact the case and misunderstanding resulted.

Finally some members of the Horn Coven became increasingly critical over the manner in which rituals were being conducted. Arguments arose over whether or not traditions were being adequately adhered to. This combination of factors resulted in interpersonal friction and rather than continue in an association which was becoming increasingly uncomfortable, the decision was made to void the combined coven and split up.

Communication between the two groups did not cease altogether for some time. In June of 1979, when I first started attending the Sword Coven’s rituals, there was some talk about a possible reconciliation between the two groups. Over the Summer of 1979, some invitations were extended to members of the Horn Coven to attend Sword rituals but these never were acted upon. However, members of the two respective groups did perform a joint ritual once in the fall of 1979. The occasion was prompted by the formation of a third coven in the area. For a while, this new group was seen as threatening and magic was raised to counter its negative influence.

Gradually, the Horn Coven appears to have gone ritually inactive. The nuclear family upon which it was based eventually moved out of the area. Gradually, over the next year, other members of the old combined Coven drifted into participation with the Sword Coven.
When I first began working with the group, membership consisted of ten or so individuals. Over the next eighteen months there was a total of 21 Witches who participated in the coven at one time or another. Membership tended to be quite fluid as people joined or left the group. The group attracted both Witch and non-Witch recruits but also lost members through people moving away or leaving because of friction. A membership peak occurred in November/December of 1980 when a comination of new members joining and former members coming back brought the group up to eighteen. However, for most of the period of my research the coven's participant base was about ten Witches. Throughout this period there existed certain discernible roles and patterns of relationships which functioned to give the coven a degree of coherence and structure. For descriptive purposes, these elements can be divided into three major categories: the formal positions in the coven, the various formal organizational reforms that were occasionally attempted and the informal patterns of relationships that characterized the group.

Formal Roles in the Coven

Traditionally and ideally a coven should have thirteen members. If the ideal were met there would be five formal positions or offices:

1. High Priestess
2. High Priest
3. Hand Maiden
4. Scribe
5. Summoner

In actuality, only three of these positions were formally filled in the Sword Coven: the High Priestess, High Priest and Hand Maiden. The Scribe and Summoner roles were informally filled by the High Priest and Hand Maiden.
In June of 1979, the coven had a High Priestess but no formal High Priest. However, Ares filled the role of High Priest as need arose. Later, in August 1980 at the High Sabat of Lamas, Ares was formally installed as High Priest. On the same occasion, Diana was reaffirmed as High Priestess and a Hand Maiden also affirmed.

The choice of people to fill the formal positions is reached through informal discussion and tacit understanding. Since the group is quite small and everybody is aware of each other's interests and qualifications, the choice is not difficult to make. In this connection, there are some underlying reasons for the formal positions being filled by specific individuals. Diana was a High Priestess before joining the Sword Coven and has the interest and ability to perform the role. The effectiveness of her rituals is acknowledged; two members in particular cited her as a primary motive for participating with the group. When the combined coven split apart and the Sword Coven became independent, she was thus a logical choice for High Priestess. Similarly, Ares, who was instrumental in forming the coven and owner of the covenstead, and who had with his experience and knowledge of Witchcraft, was the most logical choice for High Priest. Not every member of the group has the interest or for that matter the requisite knowledge to adequately fill the formal roles in the coven.

The High Priestess

The position of High Priestess can be interpreted both in terms of being a status within the coven and in terms of the functions associated with the role. The High Priestess is titular head of the coven, a status which reflects the precedence that the Goddess takes over the God in Witch theology.
In principle, as head of the coven, the High Priestess should have the final say in coven affairs. In practice, however, this authority is subject to a great deal of modification and interpretation. For instance, Diana has told me that she regards herself as High Priestess, and as having the authority to take a firm hand in directing the coven if necessary. At the same time she does not like a strong authoritarian image of the role of High Priestess. Given the highly individualistic nature of Witchcraft as a religious system, she believes that the danger of people going on an ego trip is very real. This can lead to abuse and she prefers to keep an open, flexible interpretation of her role.

The personal interpretation or style an individual brings to the role of High Priestess is one limitation on the authority of the status. Another limitation is the fact that the High Priestess reigns only with the consent of the other members and this consent may be withdrawn. There is no external authority that imposes the High Priestess of the coven. Nor does the High Priestess have any real or imagined authority or control over the private lives of the coven members. I have never noticed any particular subservience towards her by the other members and her decisions have been challenged more than once.

A final limitation on the authority of the High Priestess in the Sword Coven stems from the nature of the informal networks of friendship that characterize the coven. These networks will be dealt with more extensively in a later section but in the present context it may be noted that for much of her tenure as High Priestess, Diana was in effect without potential allies. When I first started working with the coven, Diana could be seen as the central figure in a friendship network consisting of herself and three other
people. One by one, over a period of months, the other people splintered off from the coven. In effect, this isolated Diana within the coven in the sense of largely cutting her off from an influence base resting on ties of friendship and personal loyalty. I should not care to overemphasize the impact of all of this. Given the fact that friends often view each other as natural allies and in the course of things are able to influence each other, the lack of such allies for the High Priestess may be seen as a structural constraint on her potential authority in the coven.

The role of High Priestess as fulfilled by Diana has two primary general functions. Within the context of the coven's rituals, the High Priestess is responsible for designing and conducting rituals. Diana enjoys doing this and is acknowledged to be skillful at it. In the ritual context, Diana views herself as directing and giving focus to the ritual as well as encouraging the participation of the other members.

Outside of the ritual context, the function of the High Priestess is to lead or guide the coven in decision making. Given the constraints on her authority, she is perhaps best viewed as being the first among equals; a degree of deference is paid to her opinions—but only a degree. Basically what she does is initiate discussion about coven affairs and then acts as a group leader in order to guide the discussion. The informality of this process is compatible with both her own personal style and the basic nature of a group wherein all individual members appear to be quite free in expressing their opinions.

Despite the limitations of the role, the position of High Priestess is still one of real and potential influence in the coven. Diana, for example, was instrumental in doing away with the degree system and was the
major stimulus in getting the group to adopt the practice of dancing during the raising of magic. That innovations are brought about through informal discussion and consensus seeking does not negate the importance of the High Priestess in bringing about such innovations.

Diana was High Priestess of the coven until the Winter of 1980 when part of the group formed a new coven centered around Ares and a new High Priestess. Unfortunately, events changed direction quite rapidly at this time and I had no real opportunity to observe how the new High Priestess acted out her role or to discuss with her the interpretation of that role. Impressionistically, however, it appeared as if things were going to be tighter and more formal. However, I am unable to evaluate to what extent this may have been a function of personal interpretation of the role or to what extent it reflected the more rigid, restrictive organization that the new coven appeared to be developing.

The High Priest

As a formal status, the High Priest is in principle the junior partner to the High Priestess. In conjunction with the High Priestess, he will perform part of the ritual such as the wine blessing. The High Priest will also take the place of the High Priestess upon the occasions when she is unable to be present or when the male aspect of the Godhead is being emphasized.

Outside of the ritual context, the High Priest of the Sword Coven cannot be realistically seen as junior to the High Priestess. This situation arises because of the fact that Ares, in addition to being High Priest, has other sources of influence in the coven. He owns the house where the coven
meets and is thus the host for the group. Like Diana, he is the center of a small friendship network within the coven, but his network has endured rather than splintered apart. Finally, he has the interest to be active in coven affairs. This combination of sources of influence in many respects makes Ares the most influential member of the coven.

In effect, Ares and Diana exercise joint guidance and influence over coven affairs. They are both aware of the existing relationships and lines of influence in the group and conduct their relationship accordingly. Both appear to have realistic assessments of what it means to fill their respective roles. For instance, the acquisition of a title has in neither case led to pretensions of grandeur - a situation which would quickly become absurd, given the small, informal nature of the group. Somehow one finds it difficult to imagine a person lording it over his friends.

Other Formal Roles

The role of Hand Maiden is to assist the High Priestess in preparing and performing the ritual. She may help in setting up the altar and performs certain tasks such as passing wine around during the ritual. In the Sword Coven, the Hand Maiden also usually summons the members to the ritual. Two people have held this position: initially a friend of Diana's who later dropped out of the group and subsequently a woman who joined the group in the Winter of 1979.

The final formal position, Scribe, has its function performed by Ares. He keeps a personal account of coven activities and is largely responsible for notifying the other members of upcoming rituals.
Coven Structure

In addition to the formal individual roles in the coven, there have been efforts to formulate more or less formal structures for the coven membership as a whole. These will be dealt with here as they made their appearance chronologically. First, however, it is useful to describe the degree system as this was dealt with in the Sword Coven.

Within Witchcraft as a whole, many covens practice a hierarchical degree system which consists of three levels. As a person's knowledge and experience increases he or she is initiated into the next degree by a higher degree Witch. An analogy used by Ares is useful: the first degree is equivalent to a learner's permit, second degree is like a driver's license, while third degree is the equivalent of a chauffeur's license.

People have mixed feelings about the degree system. Some like it and some do not. Diana does not hold with the degree system and during her tenure as High Priestess it was not formally practiced by the coven. However, upon occasion Ares initiated members. These private initiations were not regarded as coven affairs. When Ares and a new High Priestess formed a new coven in December 1980, they did so in part at least on the basis of the degree system. However, this group was short lived.

Potentially at least the degree system could serve as a mechanism with which to structure the coven membership. Not having had any opportunity to observe the degree system in practice I can make no assessment of how this might have worked out. For comparative purposes, the group described by Scott (1980:111-113) has an elaborate degree system which appears to give strong structure and cohesion to the group. Some definite benefits of the degree system have been pointed out to me. For example, it is viewed
as a powerful learning device and training structure. However, at the same
time, the degree system does confer status differences which run contrary
to the egalitarianism that many Witches espouse.

Other than the degree system the first formal structure that was
mentioned to me was the council of elders. This was composed of a half
dozzen or so individuals who acted as a decision making body. I have no
information as to the performance or efficacy of this group. When I first
made contact with the group, I was told that the council had been abolished.

For the first part of its existence, from January 1979 to June 1979,
the coven was regarded as being in a kind of transition phase wherein
people would see how things would work out. Over the Summer of 1979, it
was felt that the group had attained the degree of stability necessary for
more formal organization of the coven. At this time, Ares and Diana drew
up a set of guidelines that were geared to giving a degree of structure
to the group and insuring a sense of continuity should expansion occur.

These guidelines for the most part dealt with an expansion which
never occurred. In fact, shortly after they were drawn up, the group began
to lose rather than gain members. Thus, implementation was at best casual
but the guidelines are useful as indicators of how, at one time, the coven
thought it would deal with new members and expansion.

1. A prospective member must attend a minimum of six
rituals in a year's time. In cases where there is
doubt about the candidate's qualifications, up to
twelve rituals may be required.
2. The existing core group must approve of new
members.
3. After initiation the new member becomes a member
of the core group.
4. The core group must be at least five in number.
5. The maximum size of the core group is thirteen.
6. If the coven expands beyond thirteen, one member
will be asked to form a new group. When this
group reaches five, a new coven will be formally
declared. Diana will train the High Priestess
of this new coven for one year.
7. If the daughter coven(s) fall apart, the members
can be brought back into the mother coven.
8. Once a year the mother coven and daughter coven(s)
will come together to celebrate a High Sabat.

Although at the time of the adoption of the above guidelines, overt
interpersonal friction within the coven appeared to be low, people were
aware of the fact that interpersonal friction was a primary factor under-
lying the breakup of covens. Having achieved what was felt to be a stable
comfortable group, there was a real desire to maintain this stability. In
principle, the guidelines would ensure that new members would be compatible
with the existing group and reduce the potential for personality conflict.

The guidelines are largely concerned with the potential expansion of
the coven. However, they should be viewed more as a plan to deal with
expansion rather than a plan to expand. By and large, Witches are not very
interested in actively attracting new members. The general attitude is
one in which recruits are welcomed rather than sought. It is not the size
but rather the compatibility of the group that is of primary concern.
Indeed, there seems to be a preference for a smaller group which lends
itself to more comfortable intimate interaction than does a larger group.

Organization of Coven Participation

The appearance of the notion of a "core group" at this time provides
a convenient point at which to analytically segment the participation base
of the coven. Basically there were three levels of participation: (1) core
group members, (2) regular guest participants and (3) casual guests.
Core Group Members

The term "core group" is one used by the Witches to indicate a full­fledged member of the coven. When this organizational device was set up in August, 1979, it consisted of seven individuals. For a while, it appeared as if the core group would be a permanent organization and decision making structure within the coven.

Functionally, the core group can be seen as having two major purposes. First, it provided a small but fairly reliable base for planning rituals. Usually, core members could be counted on to attend rituals. In planning a ritual, some consideration must be given to the number of attendants since the available space is limited. At the same time, if it is desired for one reason or another to restrict attendance or participation-in a ritual, the core group provides a boundary to do so.

A second function of the core group was to limit friction within the coven. As per the coven guidelines, core group members have the final say about the admission of new members into the coven. Potentially at least, this could have served to limit interpersonal conflict.

In actual practice, the core group's importance was more latent than real. The notion of an inner group with restricted membership was there, but for the most part appeared to have very little real consequence for the group. From what I observed, input and suggestions about coven affairs appeared to be generally accepted and welcomed whether coming from a core member or someone else. Furthermore, the core group itself was by no means immune from interpersonal friction and could not really be viewed as an actual stabilizing influence. In sum, the concept of a core group was important for a while but the real implementation of it was at best casual
and its consequences slight.

Regular Guest Participants

A second category of coven participants is what I call "regular guest participants." At a given time, there may be from three to six of these people although the specific individuals constituting this category changed over time. Although it is analytically possible to separate "regular guest participants" from "core group members," care must be taken not to imply a rigid firm dividing line. The core group as concept and actuality appeared to fade in importance over the Fall and Winter of 1979/80 as some of its members left the group because of friction or moved away. Concomitant with this was the gradual entry into the coven of several new participants and by the Spring of 1980 it was difficult to make a case for dividing the coven into firm participation categories.

The "regular guest participants" are of two types. In the case of four individuals, they were participants in the old combined Coven who did not join with the Sword Coven but who drifted into solitary practice. Over a period of months they were invited to attend rituals as individuals, and thus became participants with the coven. The other type consisted of three more or less casual non-Witch guests who became seriously interested in Witchcraft and affiliated with the group.

Guests

A final category of coven participants is that of the casual non-Witch guest. About half of the rituals that I attended had guests present. Usually these guests numbered no more than one or two individuals as a deliberate effort was made to limit the number of non-Witch guests at a
While coven participants appear to be generally free to invite guests, they are expected to give advance notice of their intent to do so. There are several reasons for maintaining some degree of control over inviting guests. It is important to limit the number of people present at a given ritual because of space limitations. Things become quite cramped if more than a dozen or so people are present. There are also considerations of privacy to be taken into account. There is a degree of concern that a guest might know or recognize other members who may not wish to have their involvement revealed. Having advance notice allows time to determine whether or not other people might object to the presence of outside guests. Finally, upon occasion guests were not allowed when it was felt that the presence of strangers might inhibit the ritual.

Guests are expected to be respectful and open minded. They are invited to participate freely in the ritual, given robes and coached about where to place themselves and what to do. They are also free to participate in any group discussion that may develop.

The guest policy in general appears to work fairly smoothly. Some members, however, have told me that at times they felt that too many guests were being invited. I witnessed one argument about admitting guests to a ritual. On another occasion when two guests were present, one tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the other not to participate in the ritual. Although not really disruptive, the incident was noticed and viewed as disrespectful.

Most of the occasional guests attend only one or two rituals. However, in four instances attendance has become regular as the individuals decided
to become Witches. In each case, the "convert" was a friend or acquaintance of one of the Witches. During the period of my research, there were only four non-Witch recruits to the coven and it is significant that in each case the recruit was a friend or acquaintance of a Witch in the coven.

From the Fall of 1979 to the Fall of 1980, no major formal organization changes occurred in the Sword Coven. Individuals came and went and the coven remained basically an informal group meeting once or twice a month for ritual purposes. As previously noted, in the Spring of 1980 some Witches from the old combined coven started participating with the Sword Coven but no formal organizational change was implemented. There was casual talk about some changes but nothing was ever done.

In the late Summer and continuing into the Fall of 1980, the coven went into a destabilization period which ultimately led to the fragmentation of the group. Before the final breakup, however, there were several attempts to restructure the group and gain control over events. The crisis or rather series of crises that occurred at this time stemmed largely from personality and procedural disputes. Events had a roller coaster quality to them and the deterioration process was by no means a linear one. Reconciliations occurred and at times it looked as if the group would attain a degree of stability and cohesion.

There were two distinct attempts at organizational reform during this period: the formation of a new coven by some members and the more inclusive formation of a Grove. These attempted reforms occurred parallel to each other; first one and then the other was predominant.

Matters came to a head in October at the Hallows ritual. For personal reasons, Diana was unable to attend and a communications breakdown led to
the other members not being informed until the last moment. The ritual was held anyway and afterwards there was some discussion about selecting a new High Priestess. Instead, a meeting was called three weeks later at Ares house to discuss the future direction of the group.

At this meeting each person expressed his or her views on the group's problems and potential future. There emerged a consensus to develop a Grove organization. The impetus behind the Grove was the desire to reduce or eliminate interpersonal friction. Ideally, a coven should be a small intimate group of people who interact to help each other grow spiritually. It was recognized that the group as now constituted, contained too many diverse interests and personalities to achieve this ideal. The Grove was presented as a format wherein people would be able to associate with those individuals whom they felt most compatible with and at the same time provide a larger organization wherein the group as a whole could interact. In effect, the Grove would be an association of small covens.

The Grove was short lived. The group met for the Yule ritual in December. Although there was no overt conflict during this meeting, it broke out the next day. Ares and several other members of the group formed a new coven which excluded Diana and two other people.

The new coven which was formed at this time was described to me as consisting of an inner and outer circle. By January of 1981, the inner circle had four people and the outer circle consisted of four or five individuals. This coven was set up to follow the degree system and would have a more restrictive policy towards an outsider attending rituals than had been the case with the Sword Coven.
By mid-January, however, some reconciliations occurred and the Grove resurfaced. Another meeting was held to discuss the future of the group. At this time the new coven was still in being and it was tacitly assumed that one or two other covens might form within the Grove. As with the previous Grove meeting, each person present was free to contribute his or her views on issues.

The main organizational proposal that was presented at this meeting was put forth by Ares. Recognizing that different personalities and interests had to be accommodated, he proposed some sort of provision be made for the formation of subgroups within the Grove. Contained within this proposal was the acknowledgement that the group contained three categories of Witches: learners, knowledgeable and very knowledgeable. Ares proposed that subgroups of whatever size be allowed to form as long as they contained at least one very knowledgeable Witch. He offered to make his house available as a meeting place for any of the subgroups who wished to use it. There was considerable discussion of these proposals but nothing was ever firmly resolved and decisions were deferred until future meetings. The session broke up without incident and it appeared that the Grove, as yet loosely defined, would serve as a context within which individuals would ultimately sort themselves into compatible groups.

Over the Spring of 1981, the group gradually fragmented. From information supplied by informants the process appears to have been a gradual unraveling of an already loose structure. Portions of the Grove got together from time to time for rituals and discussion sessions. For a brief moment, there was a movement back towards a single coven with Diana as High Priestess. Some people moved away and some conflicts cropped up.
again and ultimately the group split up. Ares and several others went solitary; Diana and a few others maintained a small group under the old Sword Coven name. However, as of the Summer of 1981, this group met only sporadically.

Informal Relationships in the Coven

In addition to the formally defined structures that have been attempted by the coven from time to time, the group also contains certain discernible sets of informal relationships based on friendship. The description and analysis of the significance of these friendship networks is complicated by the relatively high degree of mobility that characterized the coven membership throughout its history.

For most of the summer of 1979 the coven contained two major friendship networks. One centered around Ares and consisted of five or six people. The other group, centered around Diana, was somewhat smaller and had only four members.

At no time did observation or information from informants support any conclusion to the effect that these friendship networks were rival or contending factions within the coven. Potentially, however, the presence of two distinct discernible groups based on friendship ties could have served as a natural cleavage or fissure line if for some reason the coven had split up at this time. Potentially, a scenario developed wherein friction between Diana and Ares, if carried to the breaking point could have resulted in the two respective groups breaking apart from each other. I believe that if such a split had occurred, the stimulus would have been some sort of personality conflict rather than a theological dispute. The
two groups discernible at this time were largely based on friendship rather than any perceived ideological affinity. Admittedly this latter quality was present to a degree, but even within the respective groups there is a considerable degree of difference in regard to the interpretation of Witchcraft.

Over a period of months, the individuals comprising Diana's network dropped out of participation with the coven. Towards the end, however, during the Grove period, one of these individuals did return to the group. This person, together with Diana, formed the nucleus of the small coven which continued after the final break up of the grove.

The Ares network endured rather than split apart. The composition of the Ares network did change over time as some people left the coven and others joined it. By the late Summer of 1980, the movement of people in and out of the coven resulted in a coven which in terms of informal relationships was one in which Diana was largely isolated and without potential allies.

No attempt has been made here to portray completely the total of existing relationships, friendly or otherwise in the coven. Over the course of its history, the coven contained a number of dyadic relationships, some friendly, some not. These changed from time to time as conflicts and reconciliations occurred between individuals. Sometimes these dyadic relationships have been significant in contributing to individual's joining or leaving the group. However, from an organizational point of view, it is the existence of friendship networks centered around pivotal figures that appears to be most significant in understanding the coven.
The Ares group in particular is important to understanding the coven. This group endured and at a given time constituted roughly half of the coven's participant base. Although the exact composition of the Ares network changed over time, in addition to Ares three individuals remained in the group throughout much of its history. While not functioning as an inner cabal directing coven affairs, this small group does function as a template upon which the coven as a whole rests.

The friendships within this group are of long standing duration and antedate any of the individuals' active involvement with Witchcraft. These individuals also interact with each other socially as well as being co-religionists. Ares was instrumental in bringing the others into Witchcraft although he does not appear to exercise any sort of ideological control over them. The members of this group have stable established lives and appear able to maintain a comfortable relationship with each other. The existence of this small group can be seen, therefore, as giving a degree of membership and psychological continuity to the group. However, I should not care to overemphasize this sense of inferred continuity. Researching Witches yields many surprises. For example, when the group finally fragmented in the spring of 1981 a new coven did not form out of the Ares network. I suspect, however, that should Ares start up a new group, this small circle of friends may well form its nucleus.

From time to time, other individuals have been part of the Ares friendship network. In particular, two of the four recruits to the coven became his friends as well as co-participants. In each case, Ares was instrumental in bringing these people into the coven and providing them with the major part of their instruction in the lore and traditions of Witchcraft.
The fact that Ares is the pivotal figure in a friendship network within the coven is central to understanding the organizational development of the coven. In addition to the aforementioned sense of continuity, a reasonable psychological inference would be that having the bonds of long-standing and comfortable relationships might predispose an individual to taking a more active role in coven affairs than might otherwise be the case. In such a context, friends would implicitly at least be viewed as natural allies. In the case of Ares, this position is enhanced by his role as High Priest, as owner of the covenstead and his general interest and knowledge. As previously noted, these factors combine and interact to make him the most influential member of the group.

More empirically, the importance of friendship networks in shaping the coven's evolution is demonstrated by the events of the Grove Period. Specifically, when in December, Ares and a new High Priestess formed a new coven, the Ares friendship network formed the base of the new coven's membership. It is worth noting, however, that the Ares network was not congruent with the inner circle group that the new coven set up. Ares and one friend were part of this, but other of his friends were part of the outer circle.

Other informal interpersonal relationships also came into play during the Grove Period. Given the fact that this entire period was one of flux wherein personal reconciliations were made and unmade and events shifted direction from meeting to meeting, these are difficult to describe. In general, however, it appeared that people were sorting and aligning themselves along the lines of a combination of personal and ideological affinities.
In terms of both formal and informal patterns of relationships, the Sword Coven exhibits a number of discrete structures which have interacted to shape events. Both types of structures have changed from time to time and often their importance was more potential than real. In the balance, it appears that the informal relationships were the most important in giving the group continuity and shaping events. For the most part, the formal structures that the group attempted to evolve never really materialized. Lacking a formal organization that could control rather than be controlled by events, the coven was in effect forced to fall back on the informal relationships within the group for cohesion and stability. These worked for a while but in the end were unable to hold the group together as a corporate body.

Summary

In general terms, the Sword Coven organization was quite loose. The leadership style was casual and open. There were attempts from time to time to implement some formal organizational rules and structures. In the main, these did not work out. The coven was also characterized by certain informal patterns of relationships. Friendship networks in particular were important in holding the group together. In part, the history of the Sword Coven may be seen as a series of efforts by which the coven attempted to devise an organizational format that could accommodate diverse personalities and interests.
Ideally a coven should be a small, intimate group of sharing, caring people who help each other grow spiritually. It is fair to say that as individuals many of the Sword Coven members strove for this ideal. However, in the end, the ideal was not reached and interpersonal conflicts of various sorts caused the group to break apart. At times events almost seemed to unfold with a cruel irony. The establishment or continuation of emotional rapport between individuals would point for a while to the possibility of attaining a lasting stable group; then conflict and friction would occur. Tension and stress ultimately contributed to the coven's breakup. I would emphasize, however, that in the main, overt conflict tended to be episodic rather than continuous. For most of its history the coven's meetings were without incident and things ran smoothly. Still, there were undercurrents of disagreement and discontent which needed only the appropriate stimulus to bring them to the surface.

I was present at very few instances of overt conflict between Witches. I attended some of the meetings held to resolve differences and was thus able to learn what issues were at stake. Furthermore, informants have been quite frank about discussing their underlying differences and conflicts with me. What emerges is a series of potential and real friction points ranging from the purely personal to theological disagreements about the appropriate degree of organization for the group. The present discussion first will describe the sources of disagreement within the coven and then examine the major mechanisms by which the coven attempted to regulate conflict.
Sources of Tension

I became aware of the existence of personality friction within the coven on the very first occasion that I attended a ritual. As we were all preparing to go down to the ritual room a member informed me that he would not be participating that evening because he felt uncomfortable with the presence of another person. Subsequently, interviews with informants produced information about other instances of personal dislike or feelings of discomfort.

The feelings of purely personal discomfort that exist between people in the main appear to have been of indirect import to the coven, though in some few cases they appear to have been instrumental in people leaving the group. Pure personality clashes did not result in splitting the group apart. However, upon occasion the stress produced by personal quarrels has generated conditions that proved stressful for the coven as a whole.

The first major crisis that I witnessed in the coven was the result of such purely personal factors interacting with procedural disputes and external stimuli to produce a very tense situation. In the late Summer of 1979, a series of events occurred which almost led to the breakup of the coven. At this time, some of the Witches were experiencing personal conflicts which, while unrelated to Witchcraft or coven participation, still placed a great deal of stress on the involved individuals. At roughly the same time, another coven had started up in the area. One of the Sword Coven members was involved in setting up this new coven, an involvement which led to this particular individual leaving the Sword Coven. Another person was suspected to be sympathetic to the new group. This led to friction and this individual left the Sword Coven. Much later he informed me that he did join
the new coven, though not until some time after leaving the Sword Coven.
Finally, attempts to recruit yet another of the Sword Coven's members by
the new coven were suspected. Taken together these events produced a great
deal of instability in the Sword Coven. People were leaving and others were
upset by the course events were taking.

I view these events as setting the psychological stage for a major
confrontation that occurred in early September, 1979. The group met for a
ritual but delay followed delay and things never got going. Finally, the
cumulative delay triggered a major row between Ares and Diana. Tempers
became heated and at one point it looked as if the coven might be disbanded.
Instead, a group discussion developed which attempted to explore and resolve
the unpleasantness. One acknowledged factor was that rituals never seemed
to start at the appointed times. Discussion also centered on the underlying
factors that helped create the conditions leading the conflict. People
admitted to having stress in their private lives which was affecting their
attitudes. The recent stress that the coven had experienced as a result of
the formation of the new group was also discussed and the possibility
mentioned that negative energy was being directed against the Sword Coven
by members of the new group. This discussion extended over some time and
apparently defused the crisis. However, the coven did not hold a ritual
that evening; people were not in the mood. Instead it was decided to hold
a ritual two weeks later and use the interval as a cooling off period in
which individuals could sort matters out.

The only other major overt instance of conflict at which I was present
occurred about a year later. In the summer of 1980, the coven appeared to
be quite stable. Over the previous months it had gained some new
participants as some recruits joined and some Witches from the old combined coven started attending meetings. Insofar as I have been able to determine, there were no serious conflicts or major personal crises among the members at this time. Traditionally, the High Sabat of Lamas is the occasion for the reaffirmation of the priesthood and coven ties. This was done, Diana being reaffirmed as High Priestess and Ares formally affirmed as High Priest.

The ceremony was held without incident and the Witches filed out of the altar room and began their socializing period. People were sitting around when suddenly one of the newer members asked when it had been decided to affirm the Priesthood. She said that she had the impression that the group was planning to hold off having a formal priesthood for a while. The other members present, however, noted that the decision had been openly made at a previous meeting and there was no legitimate cause for complaint. Nevertheless, the discussion between the Witch making the complaint and Diana became quite heated as tempers were lost. Group discussion of the issue developed which resulted in lowering the intensity of the debate, at least nobody stormed out in a fit of pique. In part, this incident may have resulted from a communication breakdown. In the course of the discussion, it developed that the individual voicing the complaint had not attended the meeting when it had been decided to affirm the priesthood. The affirmation therefore may have come as a surprise to her and contributed to her misunderstanding. The affirmations were left standing and the meeting broke up without further incident.

As I have already stressed, there were actually very few cases of overt acrimonious conflict at coven meetings - the two incidents related above are the only two I directly witnessed. I was told of other serious quarrels but
these occurred outside of the ritual meetings. In general then, while episodes of overt conflict certainly occurred, most friction and tension tended to be expressed in a much less dramatic manner.

Witches make much of being comfortable or uncomfortable with one another. The term "comfort" appears to be an euphemism covering both feelings of personal like and dislike and, to a degree at least, ideological affinity. It is in the nature of things that people are going to want to associate more closely with people whom they like and feel intellectually compatible with. Ideally the entire coven should be composed of people mutually comfortable with one another. This was manifestly not the case with the Sword Coven. Instead, the group was composed of diverse personalities and orientations towards the practice of Witchcraft which sometimes made it very difficult for people to always feel mutually comfortable.

In large part, the differences that directly or indirectly contribute to feelings of discomfort stem from the very nature of Witchcraft as a belief system. Witchcraft is not a formal body of lore. It is rather a loosely knit but still extensive set of new and old traditions from which individuals are able to draw elements and piece together a highly individualistic belief system. This being the case, it is inevitable that people will develop different and sometimes incompatible interpretations of Witchcraft. To a degree these differences are paved over by the generally tolerant attitude Witches assume towards each other's beliefs. However, tolerance and compromise have their limits and at some point the perceived differences in orientation towards Witchcraft come to the surface.

These differences within the Sword Coven run the full spectrum of Witchcraft as a belief and behavioral system. Some examples are illustrative
of this point. Some individuals believe that Diana's rituals are too Goddess oriented and do not pay enough attention to the God aspect of the deity. By way of balance, however, she is aware of this feeling and attempts to incorporate both aspects of the deity in her rituals. The degree system affords another example. Some like it, others do not. Either point of view is legitimate within the larger context of Witchcraft. People could accommodate to each other's different feelings, for example, the coven would not incorporate the degree system but Ares would on an individual basis initiate people. However, when a new coven formed within the Grove and practiced the degree system, the issue came to the surface again. The practice of dancing in a ritual is yet another dividing line. Some people really get into the act of dancing while others do not. Nobody gets angry or upset about the difference, but again a reminder is drawn as to the individual differences that exist within the group in regard to how individuals orient themselves to the practice of Witchcraft.

Leaving aside such specific examples, there is also the more general issue of how individuals incorporate Witchcraft into their overall life style. Some Witches have gone much further in formulating what Diana terms a "Pagan life style" than have others. The concept of Pagan life style is at best a nebulous concept to describe but it has a distinct counter-cultural cast to it: disinterest in material achievement, an emphasis on following a natural life style and a mystic quest. Other Witches have kept their lives more compartmentalized; for them Witchcraft is an important religious expression but it does not involve a major restructuring of life style. From the outsider's point of view, both styles of Witchcraft appear legitimate and useful to the people who follow them. A useful, if somewhat
inexact analogy, might be the distinction between the cloistered monk and the lay Catholic. Both may be devout and practicing Catholics, but the orientation of their respective life styles towards religion is very different. Again this difference existed in the Sword Coven and while not directly stimulating overt conflict, its perception was important as a reminder of the different orientations towards Witchcraft.

In view of all of the differing interpretations and orientation towards Witchcraft that existed in the coven, the question arises of why these people even got together in the first place. Here one of the ironies of fate interposes itself. Briefly put, there is very little by way of a viable alternative to the Sword Coven. The Witch community in the immediate area is quite small. Informants have pointed out to me that this limited population of Witches imposed a situation wherein people of different orientations are more or less required to associate with each other if a group of any size is to be formed. A city with a larger Witch population and presumably more covens would have afforded individuals more opportunity to seek out groups more compatible in terms of personalities and ideological affinities. As things are, in the absence of alternatives people associate with others whom they might not have otherwise. This bringing together of different personalities and ideologies makes a breeding ground for discord.

Despite all of the differences the Witches perceived among themselves the coven might have endured if specific instances of friction had not occurred. People would have left because of personal or procedural disputes but the coven as a whole would have continued. However, over time matters accumulated. Some specific overt disputes have already been described; others also occurred. A persistent sore point with some people was the
timing of the ritual which was usually later than scheduled. Upon occasion, people simply left or were not able to stay for the full ritual because of the late hour. Upon a few occasions, Diana was unable to attend for personal reasons and the other members were not informed until the last minute. Whatever the right and wrong of this it is still viewed as indicating a lack of organization. Disagreements about the performance of rituals or the organization of the group also arose from time to time although these did not always result in overt conflict.

Taken together, personality differences, procedural disputes, and the different ideological orientations worked to gradually dissolve the group. Despite the attempts at organizational reform described in the previous chapter and despite various reconciliation that occurred, people grew tired of the friction and went solitary or formed their own little ritual group.

The Witches are keenly aware of the role of conflict in shaping their destiny as a coven. Almost from the outset informants told me that they viewed interpersonal conflict as the major reason leading the breakup of covens. Individuals who have some degree of participation in Witch gatherings beyond the local level have also told me that they see conflict as a major factor to be contended with when Witches come together.

Coping With Tension

The Witches have developed a number of mechanisms to deal with conflict. As detailed in the previous chapter, the formal attempts at coven organization and reorganization were largely attempts to avert or limit the disruptive effects of conflict.

There were other structural factors which served to limit conflict.
The small size and informal nature of the group can be seen as limiting conflict but paradoxically also contributing to it. Because they were a small group in which a great deal of face to face interaction was possible the Witches had a fair opportunity to get to know each other as individuals. On the one hand, this can be seen as facilitating communication and promoting an understanding of each other's point of view. On the other hand, easy communication and interaction also promoted the ability of Witches to become more aware of the different personality and ideological orientations that promoted incompatibility. With increased acquaintance, there is always the danger of a person developing disliking rather than liking for another. Similarly increased knowledge of another person's vision of Witchcraft may lead not to increased sympathy but rather to increased awareness of existing differences. Finally, the small informal nature of the group made it difficult to contain conflict. When conflict occurred, the ease of communication rapidly made other people aware of the problem.

Another structural feature that limited conflict was the existence of friendship networks in the coven. Other things being equal, it might be expected that friends will either experience less conflict or be better equipped to handle conflict should it occur. But here again practice belies principle. Emotional bonds are sometimes severed and upon occasion friction between friends contributed to individuals leaving the group. Of potentially greater significance to the coven was the fact that for a time it contained two distinct friendship networks, each pivoting around one of the coven leaders. Although these networks were not mutually antagonistic on competing groups, the fact that they existed and the fact that they were each centered around a coven leader made for a natural potential fissure
line should the appropriate conflict stimulus occur. Extending this argu-
ment, it might be predicted that a more stable coven would be one which was
composed of a single friendship network. At the very least a coven composed
of distinct friendship networks would have to somehow promote individual
bonds across the respective networks. Failure to do so only attenuates
the potential dividing line.

The nature of the coven leadership poses yet another analytical paradox
in analyzing the role of coven structure in inhibiting and promoting
conflict. As coven leaders, both Ares and Diana appear to me to have made
realistic assessments of their roles. Titles do not appear to have led to
swollen egos. Moreover, there was no attempt to enforce ideological con-
formity on the membership. I suspect that if Ares or Diana had either
collectively or singly attempted to formulate a rigid ideological system
and impose it on the group the coven would have quickly splintered and
disintegrated. Neither of the leaders were charismatic leaders; nor did
the individual members appear to be seeking such a leader. The informal
manner of leadership coupled with ideological tolerance probably served to
avert conflict. Demands for ideological conformity would fly in the face
of the intellectual autonomy Witches seem to prize and would generate
conflict very quickly. The lack of insistence on ideological conformity,
however, posed its own dangers. Simply put, people were free to develop
and become aware of their differences. A more authoritarian leadership,
which was able to impose ideological conformity, might well have made for
a more stable coven.

A second significant quality of the coven leadership was its dual
nature. As described in the previous chapter, Ares and Diana each had
different bases of influence in the coven as coven leaders. Perhaps this
division of leadership reduced the potential for conflict. Dual leadership
coupled with an informal style of leadership rather effectively reduced the
potential for a single individual to dominate the coven even if he or she
had wished to do so.

However, not having a single leader with clear cut lines of influence
and authority also promotes the potential of conflict to disrupt the coven.
In a dual leadership situation, when the two leaders interact harmoniously
the coven runs smoothly. But when conflict occurs between the leaders
there is no final authority to which appeal can be made to settle the
dispute. Lacking such final authority, individuals are left to their own
resources to resolve their differences. Again, a single leader whose sole
authority or influence was recognized as legitimate by the members might
have made for a more stable organization.

In summary, the structural characteristics of the coven provided no
clear cut mechanisms to limit conflict within the coven. In analyzing the
real and potential impact of structural qualities, a paradox is revealed
in each - conflict is inhibited to a degree but also promoted. This fact
coupled with the failure of reorganization efforts to solve problems
effectively left the coven without unambiguous formal mechanisms to resolve
conflict. In the absence of such structural or organizational mechanisms,
people were left to fall back on behavioral mechanisms.

One simple behavioral mechanism to resolve a conflict mechanism was
for an individual to simply stop participating with the group. This occurred
on several occasions, sometimes permanently; at other times reconciliations
occurred. In the present context, the reader will recall that previously
I argued that from the individual's point of view, there are two primary benefits to belonging to a coven: the experience of a ritual and the social interaction with other Witches. These benefits lay on one side on the balance. On the other side of the scale are feelings or dislike or discomfort toward other individuals. As these accumulate they may come to outweigh the benefits of belonging to the coven. Feeling uncomfortable with another person in a ritual effectively inhibits the individual experiencing the ritual to the full. There have been occasions when people stayed out of a ritual because of feeling uncomfortable with somebody else. Similarly social interaction with people with whom an individual feels uncomfortable is hardly beneficial or enjoyable. Given the fact that many of the Witches have practiced as solitares and see no great shame in doing so, individual splintering off from the group is a very viable option for the person in a conflict situation. The benefits of group membership are not absolute nor is coven membership a necessary requisite to practicing Witchcraft.

A second mechanism, though one rarely utilized by the group, is to ritualize conflict. Upon occasion, rituals were done to gain control over problems or friction and tension. One time when I was present this was done when the coven had experienced a great deal of stress and members felt that there was a great deal of negativity in the air. There was considerable discussion about the nature of magic and the place of negativity in the cosmos. Perhaps it was felt the group had not been paying enough attention to the negative side of the existence. There was some initial confusion as some people thought that suggestions were being made that the group should raise magic for negative purposes. Gradually, however, the notion emerged that acknowledging negativity—not invoking it—might be
useful in dealing with negativity rather than letting it build up. The ritual that evening incorporated this theme. The group danced counter clockwise rather than clockwise and music decidedly gloomier than usual was played.

On one other occasion, which I did not attend but was told about, some members of the coven conducted a ritual to counteract negativity that they felt was possibly being directed against them by members of a different coven. Individuals have also mentioned from time to time that they raised magic to help resolve personal conflicts.

I can make no firm assessment as to the efficacy of such ritualization in dealing with conflict. However, a reasonable inference might be that such actions might be psychologically very important to the individuals practicing them. At the very least people might feel that they have done something about their problems and feel somewhat better about the situation.

Another device is to engage in group discussion about problems. This has been effective upon occasion of overt conflict where the group as a whole has been able to interject itself into arguments. At the very least, such intervention has served to defuse the immediate situation though not always resolve the issue.

During the Grove period, I was present at the two full-scale meetings at which the group discussion centered around the need to develop some form of organization that would accommodate all of the different personalities and interests of individuals. There was no overt friction at these meetings though various disagreements surfaced and were noted. Discussion was polite, intentions good, but nothing was really resolved. Questions about leadership and type of group organization were raised but decisions were deferred
to a later date. It is perhaps a moot point as to whether firm decisions and decisive resolutions at this time would have made a difference in the group's subsequent fate. As it was in the end, the Witches were largely forced back upon the only other way they had of dealing with conflict—leaving individuals to sort things out among themselves as best they might. In the end, this did not work out and people just drifted apart.

Summary

The Sword Coven experienced a considerable amount of stress and tension. In the end, the inability of the Witches to get along together contributed to the breakup of the group. Conflict, however, was not constant but tended to be sporadic. The coven had a number of devices to limit and contain conflict but was never successful in developing organizational structures to deal with conflict. Given the diverse personalities and differing ideological orientation in the coven, a degree of conflict may well have been inevitable.
THE WITCHES' DANCE

In noting the slight attention paid by the sociology of religion to the study of cults, Stark et al. (1979:359) conclude:

Jesus never preached in a cathedral, and Mohammed did not start out in a mosque. It is hundreds of years too late to study those groups while they were newly-formed cults. So if we want to understand how religions begin, and what determines whether or not they survive, we shall have to study contemporary cults.

Perhaps they have a point. Occasionally, while dancing with the Witches, I have felt a flash of kinship with the early church fathers who, like us, came together in secret places to practice forbidden rites. Extending the fantasy somewhat, it is tempting to wonder if the small congregations of early Christians had to have discussion sessions geared to solving their organizational problems.

The study of small scale religions such as Witchcraft indeed may shed some light on our religious past, or on our religious future. We cannot dismiss occult beliefs from the inventory of possible futures. In this regard, Tiryakian (1972) and Hartman (1976) have noted the possibility that the current interest in the occult may herald major shifts in religious consciousness.

I do not think that Witchcraft will ever become a large scale religion. I must note that some informants would disagree with me on this. Several Witches have expressed great confidence in the possibility of Witchcraft spreading and growing. Certainly, its beliefs are not absurd by comparison with those of Christianity. When Witch rituals are properly conducted they are highly satisfying experiences. Perhaps all that Witchcraft has to do
in order to become more popular is to overcome its bad press.

Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor notes the need of man for "miracle, mystery, and authority." Miracle and mystery there is aplenty in Witchcraft, of authority, little or none. Perhaps therein lies the central reason why Witchcraft as an organized religion is unlikely to expand much beyond being a small scale religion. Christianity had a book and a leader; Witchcraft has books and leaders. Consequently there is in Witchcraft no central focus around from which to direct organizational growth.

The study of the Sword Coven here reveals some of the organizational problems that covens have to solve if they are to expand. I felt on occasion that the coven had achieved a degree of stability or was going to evolve into a larger organization, only to see the group split apart in the end. Insofar as I know people either have gone solitary or joined one of two small groups which appear to be coalescing, I suspect that the future of whatever groups eventually emerge will not be too much different from its past: minor expansion and contraction as people move in and out of the group. Certainly some of the events such as the formation of the grove, which I thought were highly significant and a prelude to coven expansion in actuality came to naught. If anything, the Witches are at a much lower level of organization than they were when I first made contact with them. As a coven the group endured for about two years before finally breaking up. It would be interesting to have comparative data on the life span of covens in other areas.

The organizational problems of the Sword Coven posed rather severe limits on the ability of the group to attract new recruits. The importance of this may be highlighted by the fact that in the long run the coven was
totally dependent upon recruits for its survival. The Sword Coven could not replicate itself through the incorporation of members' children. If the coven's life span were to be measured in decades rather than a few years, it would have to recruit from the outside. This lack of internal replacement may be simply a characteristic of the single group I studied and not at all indicative of Witch groups in general. At this point the demographic characteristics of the Witch population, especially in terms of child rearing are simply not known. I have met Witches who were bringing their children up in the Craft, but the interesting question of children and Neo-Paganism remains to be investigated. It might even be the case that the Craft draws many or most of its adherents from people who are childless or who do not raise their children up in the Craft. Witchcraft has been around long enough now for a potential second generation of Witches to be approaching maturity. Their behavior in regard to their parents' religion and covens would be very interesting to follow.

Groups such as the Sword Coven appear to be totally dependent upon outside recruits for both expansion and replacement. However, the ability of potential recruits to make contact with the group is severely constrained by several factors. The coven is not a public but a semi-clandestine organization and this retards the ability of potential recruits to find the coven. Most of the Witches do not talk with just anybody about their practice of Witchcraft or involvement in Witchcraft. In a sense, each member of the group serves as a potential contact point for new recruits, but the very small membership of the group and the general reticence of some to talk about involvement severely reduces the probability of an interested individual gaining access to the group.
I do not expect that even if the coven was a totally public entity listed in the Yellow Pages that there would be a sudden and permanent surge in membership. There is in all likelihood a widespread casual interest in Witchcraft throughout the country. However, if my own experience is any indicator this interest is apt to fade upon contact with the actual article. Despite the fact that there have been several guests at rituals, only a very few of these have chosen to become Witches and join the group.

The potential recruit seeking quick and easy solutions to life and existence would probably be somewhat disappointed by initial contact with a group such as the Sword Coven. The leaders of the coven make no claim to have all the ready answers to life's problems. They are willing to offer instruction in Witchcraft to a recruit but the main burden of actually putting things all together resides with the neophyte himself. In effect, the individual looking for a rigid formula or leader around which to organize his or her life simply will not find this type of easy answer in a group such as the Sword Coven. Witchcraft, as I have witnessed it, appears to be more conducive towards the development of individual intellectual autonomy rather than restrictive of such autonomy. This looseness of belief and organization while undoubtedly attractive to some might also be repellant to others.

The importance of friendship networks in individual recruitment and conversion appears to be a general characteristic of small occult religious groups (Lofland and Stark, 1965; Lynch, 1977; Scott, 1980; Stark and Bainbridge, 1980). For groups such as the Sword Coven, the main potential for expansion is also through the more or less random incorporation of acquaintances or friends of the already existing members. In the lack of
any real emphasis on increasing membership, this process is likely to result in only a very slow increment. In the two years I worked with the group, there were only four non-Witch recruits - not even enough to replace the attrition caused by people moving away or dropping out for other reasons.

Expansion of a small group potentially poses severe problems. The impact of a single individual in a group of eight or ten is likely to be greater than the impact of one person on a group of a hundred. The sudden entry of three or four new members into a small group would result in a considerable strain on the group. Having too many people come in at once would greatly increase the potential for interpersonal friction. Small groups are simply very vulnerable to even tiny arithmetic fluctuations in membership.

Expansion results in physical as well as social crowding. Physically, the space available for the coven to perform rituals and hold meetings simply cannot support a large group. When you have eight or nine people dancing vigorously in a ritual circle, you very quickly appreciate the need to limit numbers. Such physical limitation imposed on membership numbers may be quite important to groups which, because of force of circumstance or the need for privacy, have to meet in private homes. Should expansion occur, the group must either seek a larger accommodation or undergo some sort of organizational change. For instance, the development of the Grove, if successful, would have been one way by which the group could have accommodated increased membership. In this particular case, things did not work out but other groups have gone through expansion and implemented organizational changes. In particular, the New Aquarian Age Order described by Scott (1980) has achieved an organizational level very analogous to what
was intended for the Grove.

To the extent that expansion is dealt with by the fissioning or budding of daughter covens off from the original group, the likelihood is greater that sectarianism will increase. Different groups based upon different covensteads would (other things being equal) in all likelihood eventually develop along different lines. The relative isolation and small size of covens imposed by meeting in private residences of limited capacity might well be seen as a factor contributing to the proliferation of traditions in Witchcraft.

For a variety of reasons, it seems likely that groups such as the Sword Coven are likely to remain rather small informal groups. The weight of traditional, psychological, societal and physical factors are largely against the expansion of a coven into a larger organization.

Somewhat paradoxically, the very factors that would seem to inhibit the expansion of single covens may also provide at least a partial understanding of how Witchcraft as a whole has grown and elaborated itself. The organizationally diffuse and highly eclectic ideology of the Craft makes it difficult to understand why Witchcraft has been able to sustain itself and attract adherents over the last thirty years. Precise and reliable figures are not available but the impression remains that there has been an increase in the number of Witches and number of covens. Of a certainty, there has been great elaboration of traditions since Gerald Gardner made his "revelations" in the early 1950s.

In part, the growth and elaboration of Witchcraft since Gardner's day must reflect the apparent general revival of interest in matters of occult that appears to have occurred in recent decades. There are more occult
books and journals available and presumably more people have been reading them. A case can be made for there being a widespread, if vaguely formulated, interest in the occult and for viewing this interest as generating recruits for organized occult groups.

Consider the case of Ares. His initial search for a coven to join was not successful so he made the decision to start his own group. This presents a new problem since Witchcraft is not something which a person is likely to go about seeking recruits on a door to door basis. It is natural for the Witch to seek associates among the people he or she is already on familiar terms with such as friends or relatives. This is what Ares did and together with a small group of friends started up a coven. Up to this point, there was an increase in the number of Witches and covens due to the efforts of a single individual.

If it is not totally closed and clandestine, once a coven is formed it has a potential for attracting new members. The extent of this potential is determined largely by the degree of publicity a coven tolerates and the extent of the social networks of the individual members. Other things being equal, a coven which has at least some degree of public exposure has a greater chance of coming to the attention of potential recruits than does a coven lacking such exposure. Likewise, the probability of expansion is governed to a degree by the extent of individual member's social networks. Stark and Bainbridge (1980:1392-1393) have argued that small religious groups whose main appeal is to loners have limited potential to expand. A coven composed of loners would have a lesser chance of attracting recruits, than would a coven whose members have extensive networks of friends and acquaintances. If future research shows
that many Witches tend to be marginal people who are relatively isolated in terms of social networks, expansion along the lines of a social network would be of limited potential. In such a case, the pool of most probable recruits would be soon exhausted and a different recruiting mechanism would have to be devised.

Expansion would appear in and of itself to generate its own limits. To the degree that a coven expands, the greater the potential for the formation of sub-groups within a coven and the greater the probability for interpersonal conflict. For instance, a small coven based upon a small group of friends or relatives is probably more stable than a larger coven containing two or more such factions.

The formation of subgroups within a coven provides the potential though by no means the necessity for a coven fissioning. A coven may also lose members through the splintering off of individuals. The Sword Coven, for instance, has tended to lose members through the gradual attrition of individuals who splinter off. However, in the short-lived grove, there were at least three distinct subgroups emerging that could have been natural fissure groups. The probability of these groups fissioning off would have been enhanced by individual personal antagonisms that existed between some members of the group. The grove organization was in part an attempt to reduce interpersonal conflicts; but at the same time by encouraging the formation of distinct subgroups, it may have set the stage for future factional conflict.

The formation of subgroups within a coven could occur on the basis of any number of factors. Friendship is one such factor, an especially important one given the nature of recruitment along social networks.
Preference for one individual or another to fill the role of High Priest or High Priestess could be another factor. Ideological considerations should also be taken into account: some people may prefer to emphasize the Goddess; some may prefer robes; while others prefer to go skyclad. Given the eclectic nature of Witchcraft, there is no paucity of ideological issues that factions could crystallize around. A small group may be able to smooth over ideological differences for a while. Initially, the important thing may be association with other Witches rather than association with other Witches of a particular persuasion. Expansion, however, brings the likelihood of finding allies of a like persuasion. Again, the Grove provides at least a hint of an example of this process. One group within the Grove decided to implement a degree system while other participants did not wish to do so.

Because of their ideological openness, covens such as the Sword Coven may be especially vulnerable to ideological friction under conditions of expansion. A group with a rigid doctrinal belief that everybody is expected to accept is not a group in which "heresy" or alternative interpretations are likely to be tolerated. Under conditions of ideological consensus and authoritarian or at least strict leadership, the heretic is likely to be forced back into line or expelled. In an intellectually open group where only a sort of vague agreement on general principles is expected and where individuals pretty much articulate their own personal systems, there is almost definitionally more ideological diversity. When and if factions begin to crystallize around different ideological elements, then natural units of fissure are formed. The problems for a group wishing to expand is to determine just what are the limits of its tolerance. It might be the case that the less tolerant a group is, the more it reduces the
formation of natural fissure units and hence the greater its potential to expand.

As exemplified by the Sword Coven, there appear to be a number of factors which can cause an individual to splinter off or a coven to fissure along the lines of existing subgroups. While these factors would appear to work against any single group becoming large, they would as a consequence also appear to promote the spread of Witchcraft in terms of proliferation of covens. When individuals splinter off or subgroups fission off, the nuclei of new covens are formed. If the individuals or subgroups expand, then conceivably the process could continue indefinitely. This argument could be schematized as:

![Diagram of Coven Evolution]

Figure 1: A Model of Coven Evolution

This model is tentative and lays no claim to closure. It does, however, seem to encompass the various processes that either shaped the Sword Coven's affairs or were at least present in an incipient form. The model might be
seen as laying too much stress on the role of conflict. Conflicts within a group may or may not be inevitable depending upon the personalities and circumstances involved. However, even if an expanding group avoids ideological and emotional conflict it will soon run into the problems imposed by physical and social crowding. Insofar as Witches continue to meet for the most part in private residences and to prefer to have small, fairly intimate circles, then expansion will result in subgroup formation and fissioning.

The model would predict that Witchcraft as now constituted will continue to be largely based upon small autonomous covens. For the most part, these covens will remain small since expansion will probably lead to fissioning of covens. At the same time, fissioning will generate new covens who will in turn expand and fissure. One might expect then an increase both in numbers of Witches and of covens but no hierarchical development of Witchcraft. Given such diffuse organization and lack of centralization it might well be that Witchcraft as a belief system will become even more eclectic as new traditions are born and old ones modified by the proliferation of covens. In the end, Witchcraft might become so diffuse and eclectic so as to denote only a body of people who share a common label but little else.

As outlined above, the model does not take account of organizations above the coven level. As previously noted, Scott (1980) has described a group that has evolved beyond the single coven level into an organization of covens. The evolutionary process as described, appears to have resulted from a combination of fissioning from an initial mother coven and recruitment along friendship networks. Scott's account does not elaborate as to
the reasons for groups fissioning off from the initial mother coven. She does, however, note the diversity of interests and practices within the Order. Interpersonal conflict and procedural disputes are also significant in the Order. Scott's group appears to have successfully weathered the transition from a single coven to a grove-like organization. Perhaps a grove organization is a natural evolutionary stage for covens - a necessary development to deal with increased membership and the concomitant ideological and personality diversity. Questions may, however, be raised about the long term stability of grove-like organizations. The group that I researched had a very short lived grove stage. Scott's group has been of longer duration but even here we are dealing with a matter of only a few years. I suspect that groves are subject to the same ideological and personality stresses that afflict covens. A question for future research would be to examine the processes characteristic of the rise, survival and fall of grove-like organizations.

The organizational future predicted here for Witchcraft is rather a bleak one. Covens are not seen as having much potential for long term stability and expansion is seen as generating stresses that largely preclude long term organizational development. Witches, however, have proven me wrong upon a number of occasions and perhaps they will again. Furthermore, predictions generated from a model based upon a single case study are perhaps especially tenuous. Still the Sword Coven in many respects seems to reflect the eclecticism and diversity of Witchcraft in general, and the processes governing the coven's fate may also be shared by other groups.

Fairness compels me to let a Witch have the final word. In the Summer of 1981 I had a final conversation with Ares. The coven was still
split up but Ares and a few others were thinking about starting a new group. We discussed some of the organizational problems of Witch groups. This after all was what I was interested in studying and organization has always been uppermost in my mind. Ares, however, said to me that I was trying to impose an organizational ethic on a group of people who do not share it. I can accept this comment and it affords a tempering of the otherwise bleak future predicted here for Witchcraft. From the Witches' point of view, the organizational failure that seems so important to the ethnographer may in retrospect be not much more than a passing irritant. Perhaps in the end it is the anthropologist, not the Witch, who most sees the coven as being significant.
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