

Article

# Musicking and Soundscapes amongst Magical-Religious Witches Community and Ritual Practices

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**Abstract:** Drumming and chanting are core practices in modern magical-religious Witchcraft in the absence of unifying texts or standardized rituals. Song and musicality contribute towards self-creation and community making. However, Nature Religions and alternate spiritualities are seldom included in surveys of religious musicking or soundscapes. This article considers musicality in earlier publications on modern Witchcraft, as well as the author's fieldwork with magical-religious Witches in the UK, to show the valuable contribution they make to discussions on religious belonging and the sensorium through song, music, percussion, and soundscapes.

**Keywords:** musicking; soundscapes; magical-religious Witchcraft; contemporary Paganism; ritual; sensorium; historicity

## 1. Prelude

Sound is a vital part of religious traditions. Music and singing are embodied; like dance, they are experienced as powerful forces that bring people together and offer connections to divinity. While there are notable works that consider music amongst contemporary Pagans (Magliocco and Tannen 1998; Weston and Bennett 2014; Ezzy 2014a), alternative spiritualities and Nature Religions have been largely absent from the broader literature in the study of religion (for example: Bohlman et al. 2006; Weiner 2009; Hackett 2012). However, closer inspection reveals a lack of attention rather than a gap, an example of 'methodological deafness' (Weiner 2009). Listening, is often considered a passive sense, and Hackett recommends paying attention to 'hearing culture' (Hackett 2012, p. 171). This article addresses this with a retrospective sketch.

Soundscapes are always central and warrant further attention (Hackett 2012). Ethnographies amongst modern magical-religious<sup>1</sup>: Witchcraft from the early 2000s are full of noisy ethnographic descriptions (Greenwood 2000; Pike 2001; Salomonsen 2002). Musicality is heard across accounts of festivals and music gigs, it is demonstrated that songs make up for lack of unifying texts in Nature Religions and help 'codify shared principles' as part of Pagan 'folk culture' (Frew in Magliocco and Tannen 1998). Ritual soundscapes are full of chanting and calling, often accompanied by percussion instruments, drums, rattles, bullroarers to draw energy and instigate trance states. Witchcraft practitioners urge researchers to listen to nature, the elements, and their bodies, and to hear voices from spirit worlds. In Bado-Fralick's account of invoking the God and Goddess during her Wiccan initiation, she reports a 'heightened rush of energy as the chanting creates swirling circles of sounds around me and I focus my will and energy' (Bado-Fralick 2005, p. 118). Listening is a whole body matter.

In this article, I read back through these earlier studies to listen more carefully, to make connections between the literature on sound, music, and modern Witchcraft and reflect on my own fieldwork, carried out in the early 2000s.<sup>2</sup> While my anthropological focus is how histories are navigated, I have found that sound plays a valuable role in history-making, at workshops, rituals, and community gatherings.

The varieties of sound and musicking in this literature is diverse. It includes recorded music, but I focus on live singing and musicking, as participatory as well as attentive,



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and to generate active community making and garner responses through the sensorium. I differentiate between musicality as the performance of songs and chants, and soundscapes to describe the ritual use of percussion and voice, as well as attention to more ambient sounds. In practice these are often overlapping but I follow the general shift from scholarly attention to religion and music through congregational musicality to expanded sound, affect, and the sensorium. I set out how musicality is deployed towards authenticity and community amongst Witches, while soundscapes generate altered states of consciousness and connections with a sacred landscape, although they are entangled in accounts of dynamic and experiential magical-religious traditions.

To conclude this introduction, I give an account from my fieldwork in 2001 to provide a flavour of the kinds of sounds I encountered. It was a May Day ritual, an open event to welcome an expanding community and enhance interfaith networks. It was organised by the Sussex Pagan Circle,<sup>3</sup> predominately made up of Wiccans, traditional Witches, and Druids.

In the evening of the first of May 2001 I joined a small group of around twenty practitioners to celebrate Beltane, the start of summer, one of the eight seasonal festivals that make up the ritual calendar, the Wheel of the Year.<sup>4</sup> The aim was to welcome the warmth of the sun, the fertility of the land, and invite abundance over the coming months. The organisers had instructed us to wait in a carpark on the edge of the woodland. We became aware of the sound of distant drumming, and a woman emerged from the footpath and asked us to follow her, in single file and in silence. We followed the drumming until we arrived at a glade where we formed a circle. The drumming stopped as we stood, hand in hand, with our eyes closed in the silence, and waited. The noise of rustling leaves and early evening birdsong was sudden and loud in the absence of the drum beat. As is usual in Witchcraft rituals, the sacred space was opened by calling to the cardinal spirits, the quarters, with group members taking it in turns to invite the spirits of air in the east, fire in the south, water in the west, and earth in the north to join. As they called, the drummer slowly walked around the perimeter, the sound resonating as he moved closer and further away. The intention was to build the vibrations in the air and focus attention. Only then did the speaker ask us to open our eyes in readiness to begin.

## 2. The Orchestra: Magical-Religious Witchcraft

Magical-religious Witchcraft sits loosely in the umbrella of Nature Pagan Religions, a network of flourishing polytheistic and spirited traditions that have emerged in Britain in the mid-twentieth century (Lewis 1996).<sup>5</sup> The term magical-religious is problematic. The extent to which modern Witchcraft is considered a religion is contested. Definitions often pivot on organisation and communality, as well as notions of divinity (Bailey 2006). There are different approaches to what counts as Witchcraft. It is commonplace today to hear practitioners differentiate between Wicca as a modern religion and Witchcraft as a more ambiguous practice, while twenty years ago, these were considered synonyms. Organisational structures are also variable, from closed initiatory covens and solitary practices to informal community gatherings (Doyle White 2016). My use of 'magical' takes a distinct step away from the conventional use in a tripartite system of magic, religion, and science, steeped in evolutionary schema and constituted through European colonial practices and comparative anthropology (Pels 2015). In the 1990s Lewis (1996) defined 'magical-religious' as an attempt to challenge dualisms such as conscious/unconscious, faith/skepsis, and culture/nature. While 'magic' cannot be isolated from its complex histories, I follow Greenwood (2005), who positions magic as a 'more experiential and less logical set of processes and conditions', and Magliocco (2015), who considers it through the lens of participatory consciousness. These approaches help dislodge magic from an intellectual position, where it is considered poor religion or bad science (Cornish 2021).

There is no formal theology or sacred text in modern Witchcraft traditions, and sacred space can be constructed anywhere (Hume 1998). Values and practices—including singing and musicality—are woven through ideas about Pagan ancestors found across eclectic

sources. Strategies to think about the landscape are borrowed from Earth Mysteries, while New Age principles lend techniques for personal transformation through innovative rituals. European folklore is taken up as a source for rural customs and apotropaic skills. Gods and goddesses from multiple pantheons are considered inspirational aspects of universal divinity. What is distinctive and shared is a 'spirited world', a 'connection with the natural world' through 'magical consciousness' (Greenwood 2005, p. 1). This is a 'participatory and holistic way of thinking' in which the world is vital and alive, participatory and drawing on perception, sense, and interaction (Greenwood 2005, p. 7), and made up of interconnected 'multiple intelligences' (Abram 2012).

While Witchcraft has long been recognised as a thoroughly modern phenomenon by scholars (Heelas 1996; Harvey 1997), practitioners often locate their practices as revitalisations of an ancient tradition, the Old Religion. How the past is reckoned is not always straightforward. Witches have been urged to recognise the limits of documentary history and to celebrate its twentieth century formation as a highly creative process (Hutton 1999). Arguments about the extent to which modern Witchcraft can claim continuity with the past pivot around how to evaluate empirical evidence and raise questions about silenced narratives.<sup>6</sup> However, alongside the demand for a public-facing, realist history—necessary to be taken seriously in interfaith contexts—practitioners seek alternate connections to the deep past. Magliocco describes it as a form of modern folklore (2004) that can be accessed through the ecstatic imagination (2009); Greenwood says witches prefer to honour a past rooted in myth (2000), and Pike suggests that while Witchcraft is presented as ancient tradition, it is constituted through personal transformation, made and remade in the present (2001). These emphasise ritual practice, finding more embodied and affective ways of apprehending the past.

There are contingent debates that contribute more widely to this topic. My analysis of history-making amongst contemporary magical-religious Witches (Cornish 2019) is informed by the 'inventiveness' of tradition (Sahlins 1999), as well as the role of collective memory and the ways in which the past is recreated in the present (for example, Lowenthal 1985; Halbwachs [1925] 1992; Trouillot 1995). The anthropological concept of 'expanded historicities' offers a holistic approach that allow dynamic varieties of historical experience to be incorporated alongside conventional empirical interpretations (Hirsch and Stewart 2005; Palmié and Stewart 2019). Ethnographic analyses have explored dreaming (Stewart 2017) and spirit possession (Lambek 2003). Parmigiani's (2023) work with southern Italian Pagan women details vibrant and embodied connections to the past through dancing, tambourines, and song.

Sound and musicking played a striking role in my ethnographic fieldwork. Open rituals, conferences, and seasonal celebrations were full of music making, singing, and calling as the spirits were invited to join the sacred space. These seldom took place without drums, rattles, or bullroarers.<sup>7</sup> Many were held outside, where we were encouraged to pay attention to our sensory responses to the elements, the sound of the wind or sea, and the noise of rustling woodlands, birdsong or flowing water, or to stand in silence while focusing on the noise of our breath or heartbeats. Percussion instruments helped generate focus and provided the means for open spaces for encounters with other-than-human worlds. I attended workshops where I was taught traditional songs and chants, but my attention was on how challenges to historical orthodoxies were navigated. However, I began to understand how expanded historicities included more sensory experiences. Music, singing, and soundscapes help generate legitimacy while rhythmic beats create embodied conditions for altered states of consciousness and communication with a spirited world.

Twenty years ago, I attended a workshop on 'how to see fairies' to consider techniques for expanding our awareness of other-than-humans. The facilitator, Dave, said 'you can't see fairies by looking for them'. He described a childhood fairy sighting and his unsuccessful efforts to see one again, however hard he looked. He took a step back and said he later learned that you need to look differently, not harder. To the contrary, he said, you needed to let your eyes go a bit slack, to pay attention to your peripheral

vision. More than that, he said, it was a whole-body awareness; you needed to use all your senses, not just sight. Dave's advice can also apply to thinking about soundscapes, musicking, and inspired worlds. It is a different kind of listening—not listening harder, but in multisensory, emotional, and active ways—and listening at times to silence as well as to sound.

### 3. The Score: Community to the Sensorium

It is well established that musical experiences and religion are interconnected, and I open this section with a brief literature review. Religious experience is collective, and music 'shapes and bounds communities of believers' (Bohlman et al. 2006, p. 13). Forms of musicality are intrinsically part of religious beliefs, practices, and histories and demonstrate how response to music is deeply individual, but also generates shared sacredness (Weiner 2009). The literature is dominated by Judeo-Christian traditions, often with a North American focus, although plenty of work considers Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. While there is some attention to Indigenous music (Ralls-MacLeod and Harvey 2000; Robinson 2020) and practitioners of contemporary alternative spiritualities are often inspired by Indigenous musicality, they should not be confused with extant Indigenous peoples.<sup>8</sup>

The literature shows a general emphasis on congregational musicality. Liturgy and sacred music are central components for constructing religious communal identity, such as Hinson's analysis of how black gospel music strengthened bonds and encouraged individuals to engage collectively amongst African American sanctified communities (Hinson 2000). Singing well-known songs brings historical and ritual time together. Lyrics and genre assert shared perspectives on theology and sacred journeys. Songs can offer instruction as well as emotional connections to the divine. For Witches and Pagans, the lyrics of chants and popular songs help forge community feelings through attention to divinity, nature, and the spirit world.

While research in soundscapes is well established, it remains methodologically complicated and ephemeral. Kay and Noudelmann (2018) emphasise how much sound is dynamic, unstable compared to the more static landscape: 'it pulse and vibrates, it moves in waves'. Sound is present in work on ritual practice that attends to materiality and the senses amongst Witches and ritual practice (Harrington 2006; Rountree 2006; Magliocco 2014). There is an emphasis on sight and emotions; words and chants are accompanied by gestures, visualisations, and visualisations. Magical ritual has the potential to 'change your point of view' and allow you to 'see' possibilities for change. Sounds—and silence—are taken for granted as part of the background noise.

Weiner argued that the focus on hymnody has meant less attention to other sonic elements, such as stamping feet, clapping, or shouting, or the spaces created by silence (Weiner 2009, p. 902). This gap in attention looks stark retrospectively as more expanded forms of soundscapes are introduced as crucial elements in understanding religious practice and identity (Hackett 2012). Even so, Weiner observed that despite the gradual turn to more sensory elements of musicality, scholars of religion have been slow to move beyond evocative illustrative accounts rather than consider how soundscapes shape identity and experience (Weiner 2009, p. 901). He noted that while studies of religion had incorporated a shift from ideas to things and beliefs to practices, auditory cultures remained marginalised, shaped by deeply embedded assumptions about hearing that were founded through modernity (2009). Along with new print technologies, the emphasis on observation in Enlightenment science meant that sight, rather than sound, had long been dominant (Ong 1991; Classen 1993). Audio innovations and communication technologies, critical to shaping the modern subject, have been marginalised in these 'all encompassing accounts of visualism' (Connor 1997, p. 205).

Bull and Back (2003) pay attention to 'auditory cultures' in response to the dominance of visuality. They do not suggest that one sense is replaced with another, but that 'knowing the world through sound is fundamentally different from knowing the world through vision' (2003, p. 1). Schmidt (2000) and Hirschkind (2006) have shown how auditory cultures are

reshaped and give rise to new religious hearing practices. This comes together in innovative rituals amongst magical-religious Witches as they pay attention to sound as a means to communicate with spirit worlds.

Current attention to soundscapes has roots in the turn to scholarly research on the cultural construction and agency of the senses, as well as that of affect (Supp-Montgomerie 2015). Hearing and listening, individual and shared, highlight how the sensorium is not the private domain of psychology but rather 'dynamic, relational and political' (Howes 2005, p. 400). The ethnomusicologist Feld proposed the concept of 'acoustemology' to rethink registers of listening and acknowledge the interplay between sound and other senses (Feld and Basso 1996; Feld and Brenneis 2004). For the phenomenologist David Abram, the world is understood through sensual knowledge; perception is always participatory and mediated through sensory modalities (Abram 2012). These more sensory aspects of religion and soundscapes move the discussions beyond that of establishing community values. Amongst Witches and Pagans, spirit worlds are partly apprehended through soundscapes. Sacred circles are often opened with rhythmic voices, humming and chanting, or percussion. Drumming or whirring bullroarers are used to focus attention at rituals and pathworkings. They are considered to act as sonic vibrations that bridge human and other-than-human worlds. The use of percussion and voice to generate trance states is an obvious example, but ambient sounds in the broader landscape can include trees, birdsong, water, and other more elemental sounds. The next section explores the use of musicking to generate authority and community before turning to more expanded sounds.

#### 4. The Choir: Musicking and Community

Pagan Studies scholars in the 1990s were keen to demonstrate that new religious movements were legitimate, and that practitioners asserted coherent authority through rituals. Ethnographic accounts show that musicality played a unifying role in constructing spiritual identity, taking the place of unifying texts or liturgy (Frew in Magliocco and Tannen 1998). In North America and Australia, the emphasis was on ritual in groups or at festivals, while in Britain, research on Paganism and music has focused more on Pagan pop, rock, and folk, live music events where the boundaries between entertainment and sacred experience are blurred (Bennett et al. 2008; Weston and Bennett 2014). Across genres, bands have employed Pagan themes to make connections between nature, free spirit, and countercultural politics. Scholars have examined these as performances rather than sacred events. Music gigs reinforce community, where belonging is generated through music, singing, and dancing, while Pagan intentions are fostered through meaningful lyrics. It is clear from their conclusions that Pagans love to party (Weston 2011; Letcher 2014; Weston and Bennett 2014; Moberg and Partridge 2017; Wilson and Cusack 2017). For more than twenty years rousing Pagan bands and charismatic singers such as Inkubus Sukkubus and Damh the Bard have performed their explicitly Pagan songs and reworked traditional folk tunes.

Music, like other vernacular traditions, does not always have a stable empirical history. Early twentieth-century folk music and dance collectors like Cecil Sharp were part of a drive to identify a rural culture that he feared would be lost to modernity (Bennett 2014). Their claims were founded in an intellectual environment that considered that marginalised folk held the key to surviving remnants from an earlier pagan cult, as proposed by cultural evolutionary theorists such as Frazer and Tylor (Letcher 2014). These theories have long been rejected by scholars (see Hutton 1999 for how this is worked through Witchcraft histories), but they cast an influential shadow over popular culture that suggests folk songs and music offer links to the past and ways of living that elide modernity, industrialisation, and amplified or recorded sound.

Witches and Pagans often borrow traditional tunes and songs to celebrate seasonal festivals such as the Cornish May Day Obby Oss festival in Padstow or to bring in the harvest with John Barleycorn. Empirically, they can seldom be traced further back than the late Victorian period (Hutton 1996), but are welcomed as ways of connecting to the

past, whether literal or imagined, and shape ideas about history and ancestry that are not mapped in the documentary record. A wide body of literature sets out the importance of memory in collective histories (Nora 1989; Olick and Robbins 1998). Connerton (1989) explores the embodied ways that the past is remembered and recreated through events and can include singing and musicality. This can illuminate how singing and making music help enhance connections to community and history.

Political as well as magical-religious sensibilities have been shaped by musicality. Pagans and Witches can be found across a broad political spectrum. While in the 1950s, generations of Witches in Britain challenged establishment ideas of religious practice, over the next two decades, associations between magical-religion and progressive politics were reinforced through 1960s counterculture, where folk music was used as a form of social protest. Christopher Chase (2006, p. 147) examines how British and American folk songs were a 'crucible for creating heritage' that reflected and reinforced connections to the past. They inspired shared-earth philosophies and ideas about the land, contributing to the rise of greenfield music festivals (Bennett 2014). It is commonplace now to assume that modern Pagans and Witches hold countercultural political viewpoints (Lyons 2020). As British forms of Witchcraft were taken up across the English-speaking world, it was embraced in North America by those who were already involved in participatory and anti-authoritarian countercultural politics, such as anti-war, environmental, and feminist movements. By the 1980s, these flowed back and were incorporated into British occult and magical communities (Feraro 2020). They were established as core Pagan values by the 1990s, affirmed through musicality (Hume 1995; Magliocco and Tannen 1998; Pike 2001; Salomonsen 2002).

By the 1990s, Pagans and Witches were setting up large, open festivals. Sarah Pike explored how these established new communities on the American east coast through sacred space and collective rituals (2001). She showed how 'neopagan identity' is 'primarily expressed through music and dance' where festivals offer spaces that contrast with mundane life outside. Similar conclusions were drawn by Jone Salomonsen (2002) on the west coast of America, with her focus on the eclectic Californian Reclaiming collective community. In Salomonsen's (2002) analysis of Californian Reclaiming Witchcraft traditions and rituals, she traces how folk songs and Quaker poems are borrowed and re-invested with Pagan themes. They are considered to contain traces of almost forgotten magicity. Songs are ephemeral, but they are effective through the idea that people have always sung collectively to celebrate togetherness, while the songs share stories and beliefs.

The use of songs by Pagans and Witches fosters authenticity through lyrics and offers a sense of connection to the ancestors (Magliocco 2004, p. 178). Not all are drawn from traditional songs; some are recent compositions. Some, like 'The Burning Times', relate Witchcraft origins. It was written in 1981 by Charlie Murphy, an American singer-songwriter and activist. It outlines a controversial account of Witchcraft history that is no longer considered historically tenable but was taken for granted by earlier generations of practitioners. In it, witches are considered 'the healers and teachers of the wisdom of the earth'. He describes European medieval witch accusations as a singular form of state violence which actively set out to destroy organised Pagan practices that were continuous from antiquity: 'the pope commenced the inquisition, a war against women whose powers were feared'; and concludes with a hopeful refrain that lists the names of goddesses and celebrates the Earth as 'a healer a teacher and a Mother'.<sup>9</sup> While Magliocco and Tannen (1998) caution against this song as a literal history, they report that hearing and singing it is stirring and heartfelt (p. 187). By the time I came across this song, it was met with both concern and emotional resonance. Other songs, unlike The Burning Times, convey generic emotions or events such as the harvest or relate mythic adventures or shape shifters, like the Fith Fath Song which is an invocation of a shapeshifting hunter and their prey, and a spell of concealment. It is commonly known now as the Beltane Chase Song to celebrate a specific point in the seasonal cycle.<sup>10</sup>

Chants are rhythmic and repetitive and are included in ritual practice, but lyrics also play a part in outlining beliefs. The Goddess Chant, extracted from Charlie Murphy's *The Burning Times* is one such example: 'Ishtar, Cerridwen, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna', listing goddesses from across an array of religious pantheons, from Mesopotamia to India. This, I was told, illustrated the inclusive and universal nature of the Mother Goddess, vibrant across time and culture. As I learned chants at workshops, often taught in harmonious rounds, I found them repeated at conferences and festivals and incorporated into open rituals as ways of invoking the elements through The Earth, the Air, The Fire, or The River is Flowing.<sup>11</sup> The women leading one session held at a Pagan conference explained they had been taught many of these chants in the 1980s at Greenham Common, the anti-nuclear protest camp in the UK,<sup>12</sup> where they found music powerfully reinforced their overlapping spiritual and political values. At the Broomstick Rally, a weekend summer camp held in 2001 by the Sussex Pagan Circle, the evenings were spent around the bonfire, where stories were told and songs were sung. They were often accompanied by guitars, fiddles, and drums, but the emphasis was often on the power of the story told in the song. I was urged to pay attention to enduring relationships between practitioners and nature in the lyrics. They often set out connections to a living earth, as illustrated by the following chant:

Mother, I feel your heartbeat; Mother, I feel you under my feet.

Air my breath and fire my spirit. Earth my body. Water my blood.

These weave connections through the cosmos and the elements. The community, it suggests, is larger than human gatherings, and it is not simply a matter of worship but of active participation in a live and dynamic world. In the next section, I explore how chanting is repetitive and contributes the more emotional forms of attention to sound, where the voice—whether speaking or singing—acts as an invocation to spirit.

## 5. The Ensemble: Call and Response

Innovative rituals are fundamental to contemporary Witchcraft magical-religious expression and can combine disparate elements into a coherent whole with the aim of raising energy and generating focused attention towards altered states of consciousness. Songs, chants, and dancing can play key roles in creating the conditions for these experiences (Magliocco 1996; Pike 2001). Schulz uses an expanded notion of sound as it is perceived and conceptualized to mediate divine presence (Schulz 2008). In addition to establishing shared values and belonging, they hint at the significance of soundscapes in broader auditory cultures as part of a spirited world. While I have differentiated between lyrical musicking and rhythmic soundscapes, these are blurred in practice as rituals encompass songs and chants, and include drums, bullroarers, rattles, and other instruments to generate rhythmic sounds, often working in time to participants breath or heartbeat. They are participatory as well as attentive.

For some writers, public music concerts and festivals are akin to collective rituals. Ezzy (2014b) depicts festivals as arenas for experiencing sacred spiritual community as well as individual transformation. He explores how the emotional aspects of religion make it meaningful and transformative. Sound and rhythmic music can invite altered states of consciousness, trance states, where communication with spirits might be possible (Ezzy 2014a, p. 111). It is in these expanded movements and sonics of ritual dancing that connections with a spirited cosmology can be experienced. While physiological and neurological research explores the effects of sounds on the body in altered states of consciousness (Tuzin 1984; Becker 1994), these studies tend to study experiences produced through dance music. This kind of musical experience is readily taken up by 'neoShamans' and Pagan electronica (St John 2004; Weinel 2014; Simão and de Magalhães 2015) and adds more sensorial flavours to the literature on Paganism, popular music, and gigging (Weston and Bennett 2014). However, I turn to analogue rather than digital soundscapes.

Amongst Witches, retellings of myths are played out in music and songs as part of 'ecstatic ritual' (Magliocco 2009). They remind us that song and movement are inextricable, whether expressed through theatre, ritual performances circle, or spiral dances, intuitive

trance dance, or folk dances. Giovanna [Parmigiani's](#) (2019, 2023) ethnographic account of the intense soundscape experienced by the Sisters of the Circle dancers in southern Italy through the *pizzica* explicitly examines sound and movement together. The collective ritual of dance and the power of 'flow' is embodied and emotional. Across the ethnographic literature, music and dancing help demonstrate strategic ways to invoke transformative relationships with other-than-humans.

It is worth returning to ethnographic accounts of rituals that have focused on visual and material elements to examine how much sound is woven through the descriptions. Continual monotonous sounds, such as drumming, are used as 'sonic driving' that focus attention in pathworkings and visualisations ([Hume 1998](#), p. 317). To return to Pike and Salomonsen's accounts of North American Pagan festivals, they include more experiential approaches to sonics beyond community bonding. Drumming, singing, and sometimes dancing, all active and embodied, are central to developing meditative trance techniques and altered states of consciousness. Salomonsen describes a visionary ritual for 'raising a cone of power' through a 'power-song and a power-dance, a Spiral Dance': a circle dance with a call and response. Ecstatic sacred possession can be induced by 'exhausting singing and dancing' that borrows from shamanic trance and draws 'knowledge, abilities, and healing' directly from a divine source (Starhawk 1987 in [Salomonsen 2002](#), p. 150). Salomonsen vividly incorporates atmospheres, affects, sounds, and experiences through a participatory hermeneutics (2002, p. 192) as she relates how the circle was broken by the leader, who led the dance into the centre, spiralling until it was tightly coiled, before turning back outwards. Repeatedly, while the dancers sang, they moved into the centre and out again, synchronising steps, voices, and heartbeats. It is evocative, but it bears recalling [Erlmann's](#) (2004) warning that sound should not be considered as another script to be 'read', but as sensory communication and knowledge. The account of the Spiral Dance is a visionary experience, immersive and embodied, and the sound is crucial to the rising intensity.

Pike describes a Web Ritual, a celebration of spring, held at a camp in 1997. The aim was to focus attention on earth rhythms and the land to encourage everyday connections to a sacred place. This was a large event; several hundred participants formed a snaking line and entered through a wooden arch, accompanied by the sound of drumming. The circle was cast and the elemental spirits were called in to lend their power, with each invitation followed by different drumming beats. The participants wove yarn through ropes strung out from a central maypole to create a colourful web while the drumming continued. After the ritual had been closed, the continued drum building rhythmic momentum and emotional intensity that encouraged ecstatic dancing around the campfire ([Pike 2001](#), p. 8). The voice is also used as an integral technique to help focus emotions and meaning. I attended a much smaller ritual in 2001, in which a dozen of us passed red thread between us, over and again, across the sacred circle while chanting affirmations.

Ritual experiences emphasise imaginative and embodied aspects through participatory ([Magliocco 2015](#)) or magical ([Greenwood 2005](#)) forms of consciousness. These help us understand how the world is experienced as spirited, live, and dynamic and provide modes of communication with nature, the sacred, and the past ([Magliocco 2009](#)). For Greenwood, this means taking the imagination seriously in order to understand magical consciousness as a distinct kind of knowledge, not measured against the conventions of rationalist criteria, but more analogical ([Greenwood 2013](#)). Drumming, musicking, and the voice are central techniques for otherworldly communication and regularly appear in her ethnographic accounts of rituals. For example, Greenwood describes a private group ritual to celebrate the first day of spring and the return of the light, in which percussion played a central role in building power. The quarters were opened—called—and three women representing the Maiden, Mother, and Crone aspects of the Goddess sat in the centre around a lantern. Other participants joined in the call to Cerridwen and Herne, reciting invocations as they danced around the circle to a rhythmic drum beat: they were 'dancing and drumming and shaking their rattles around the Triple Goddess in the centre as power was raised' ([Greenwood](#)



2000, p. 87). In a later discussion about magic, Greenwood describes the use of drums in a ritual to welcome the spring. It was organised by UK shaman Gordon MacLellan, who performed it in front of a small invited audience. He wanted to show his participation with the spirit world and its guardians through movement, sound, and the imagination. Greenwood observed that:

this was an occasion when the spirits were to be made known as they danced through him . . . as the drumming increased, it was evident to me that there was a participatory communication between Gordon and the spirits in process, the other-than-human coming though into the human form. (Greenwood 2005, p. 94)

These rituals highlight that participation with a spirited world is found through sensory responses and the imagination in ritual contexts.

One ritual I joined in 2005 used a bullroarer to focus our attention. Bullroarers are made out of a simple piece of flat wood with rounded edges, while a hole drilled in one end allows a string to pass through. It is whirled high above the head to generate a low pulsating growl or drone. In the 1970s, folklorist Alan Dundes (1976) observed that they were used in multiple cultures to aid concentration towards trance states. Today, they are often considered the cultural property of Australian Indigenous peoples; Tuzin (1984) includes them in his survey of secret cult instruments, as uncanny instruments that allow the voice of the spirits to be heard. Witches and Pagans self-consciously borrow—and celebrate—Indigenous materials and techniques to create ecstatic rituals (Magliocco 2009). Without downplaying the anxieties some practitioners raise, the emphasis is on creativity and experience (see Cornish 2023). One interlocutor in my research described a display of bullroarers at the Oxford Pitt Rivers Museum which included examples from Eastern Europe and Asia as well as Australia. It encouraged him to imagine how inviting trance states through droning instruments would have been part of human religious practice across times and cultures, and a reminder to focus on the experience rather than the mechanics or techniques. Witches consider that bullroarers offer auditory vibrations that are felt in the body and senses and help create intimate conditions for ecstatic ritual and magical consciousness.

This particular ritual was held in Cornwall, held at the end of Boscastle Harbour, where the river meets the sea. We had gathered to celebrate the re-opening of the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic after a flash flood had ripped through the town the previous year (Prudames 2005). We took our places in the circle; the sound of waves and the taste of the sea were in the air. It is a highly public space, but it was early evening, and the light was fading. There were about twenty participants, and four people stepped up to call the quarters and open the space. As they did so, there was an eerie vibration in the air. Another four people stood outside the circle, whirring bullroarers over their heads to instigate a call to ancestral spirits for protection and celebration. We were instructed to listen to the ebb and flow of the sounds and to hold the energy raised between the sea, the air, and the earth. We were encouraged to become absorbed in the repetitive rise and fall of the vibrating air and to take up the physical presence of the sound in our bodies. The circle leader broke away, and we danced hand in hand over the bridge, towards the museum, and back out onto the edge of the sea. Later, participants exchanged lively conversations about what it felt like to dance with the bullroarer's voice ringing in our ears and vibrating in our bodies, in tune with the noise of the sea. Pike argued that the combination of collective repetitive actions and words spoken aloud generated space for transformative self-creation, as well as making community (2001, p. 155). It is not only human voices that are reported amongst the array of noisy responses. Listening, musicking, and sound-making are active elements of conversation in a spirited cosmology, back and forth between human and spirit worlds. Outside of ritual contexts, soundscapes are attended to as part of dynamic and active landscapes: the wind in the trees, birdsong or animal calls, or otherworldly echoes. In a collection of essays by practitioners, *The Wanton Green* (MacLellan and Cross 2012), writers describe musicality in a waterfall singing or recognise the voices of ancestors in prehistoric

places (Cross 2012; Hart 2012). They set out how place is immersive and sensorial, where the emphasis is on listening rather than speaking.

## 6. Coda

This article has demonstrated a rich and well-established body of literature that incorporates musicking as part of establishing authenticity and belonging amongst Pagans and magical practitioners. Some explicitly address sound through Pagan rock and pop, and it is a central motif in expressing new religious authority through ritual practice. While these were not often theorised in terms of more sensory scholarship or identified as examples of ‘expanded sound’ (see Hackett 2012), they are open to re-interpretation through more sensory and sonic perspectives. Along with building communities and authority that help root modern Witchcraft it also creates the conditions for joyful shared singing and music making that can help develop techniques for altered states of consciousness and communication with spirit worlds.

Acoustemology is rooted in the centrality of sound and how it is always intimately entangled with other senses. The Beltane ritual in the Sussex woods that opened this article illustrates different registers of listening that make contemporary Witchcraft traditions distinctive as ways of understanding and being in the world. Building community, sharing belonging, asserting authority, communicating with the spirit world—these are not isolated but interconnected strands. Explicit musicking was a strong component in the ritual plan, helping participants feel their way into the presence of a sacred nature. The beat corresponded with heartbeats and the pace of human breath. After the ritual, as the sun was setting, we walked back through the woods. One of the participants reflected that the initial drumming had been powerful. She felt connected to the ancestors and the land, and for a moment, there was no boundary between herself and the trees around us. Through shared vibrations, it was all part of the same pulsing spirit.

Expanded soundscapes have an enduring presence in Witchcraft traditions. While accounts have been dominated by visual elements, gestures, materiality, and performance, sound permeates descriptions of rituals. Music and song are crucial for establishing legitimacy and authority and help construct alternative forms of historical connections. By listening in more multisensory ways, it becomes possible to recognise how musicking and sound are integral elements of engagement with spirited cosmologies, in and out of ritual contexts. In combination, these add nuanced and experiential dimensions to the literature on musicality, soundscapes, and religion.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A note on terminology. As I explain later in the article, the term ‘magical-religion’ challenges established debates and honours more ambiguous elements of modern Witchcraft traditions by acting as an inclusive term for subgroups such as Wicca or Traditional.
- <sup>2</sup> I carried out participant observation in the UK (Cornwall, London, and the southeast) between 2000 and 2003 as part of my Anthropology doctoral studies at the University of London (Cornish 2005). One of my fieldsites was the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic. My research was approved by the doctoral ethics committee and participants gave verbal consent to my presence. I have maintained relationships at the museum and with several interlocutors, which has provided a long-term perspective on these themes.
- <sup>3</sup> Sussex Pagan Circle was an informal organisation which was set up by Pagans, Witches, Druids, and others from across Sussex in southeast England between the late 1990s and mid 2000s. At its height it ran a regular schedule of moots (meetings), open rituals, walks, and other social events. It produced a bimonthly magazine, *The Path*.
- <sup>4</sup> The Wiccan Wheel of the Year is a coherent calendar of eight seasonal festivals that offers a ritual structure that corresponds to the solstices, equinoxes, and cross-quarter days. It follows a myth cycle of birth, death, and rebirth through the European

growing seasons and rural customs. It has been shown to be a rationalization of disparate events and customs put together in the mid-twentieth century (Hutton 1999).

- 5 Perhaps the most famous of modern Witchcraft's ancestors is Gerald Gardner, although Alex Sanders, Cochrane, and Doreen Valiente are also key mid-twentieth figures (Hutton 1999). Philip Heselton (2000, 2012) has documented how people and traditions span outwards from Gerald Gardner; Shai Feraro (2020) has focused on the interconnections between witchcraft and feminism and transnational trails between the UK and the US and back again; and Ethan Doyle White (2016) has traced key themes over the twentieth century. These histories form the background, rather than the detail, of this discussion.
- 6 Gerald Gardner claimed that there was an unbroken lineage between neolithic fertility traditions and modern coven Witchcraft (Gardner 1954). He was inspired by Margaret Murray's (1921) *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* and James Frazer's (1922) *The Golden Bough*, although these were already discredited by scholars, and found other inspirations amongst popular sources, such as spiritualism, Masonic rituals, occultism, folklore, and seasonal customs. Practitioners in the UK and the US began to challenge these claims in the 1980s and 1990s (Adler 1986; Kelly 1991), and debates became heightened after Ronald Hutton published his detailed account of the emergence of modern Witchcraft, *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999).
- 7 While guitars and fiddles were often used to accompany musical performances, participants in rituals tended to use percussion instruments, the voice, and occasionally horns.
- 8 The extent to which modern magical-religious Witches are guilty of appropriating Indigenous techniques and customs is a lively debate, some of which pivots on the extent to which claims to universal spirit perpetuate Eurocentric and neocolonial extractions. Elsewhere, I considered the implications of Bucar's (2022) recommendation to borrow more but with greater awareness for cultural flows, hybridity, and property in relation to Nature Religions and Witchcraft (Cornish 2023).
- 9 The full lyrics to The Burning Times can be found online (<https://www.christymoore.com/lyrics/burning-times/>) (accessed 30 October 2023).
- 10 Damh the Bard notes this is often claimed to be a traditional song performed at Beltane to celebrate fertility, but that it was written by Caitlin Matthews in 1978 who was inspired by a traditional Scottish ballad (<https://www.paganmusic.co.uk/1462-2/>) (accessed on 29 October 2023).
- 11 These two chants were included in the repertoire recorded for the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in 1997 by Liz Crow and Heike Robertson. When Carole Tallboys and Liz Crow recorded a second soundtrack for the museum in 2001, they sung it in a cave near Tintagel and had to work fast against the turning tide. The chants for CD *Chanting I* and *Chanting II* were collected at camps and gatherings around the UK, and they offer 'sincere thanks' to the unknown writers who have brought 'pleasure and enchantment' to so many (Crow and Robertson 1998; Crow and Talboys 2001).
- 12 The women's camp at Greenham Common was established in 1981 and remained until 2000.

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