

Challenging the binary principles: LGBTQ+ Wiccan practice in the Berkano Wicca Tradition in Hungary

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In the 21st century, the world faces the emergence and growth of a rich variety of New Religious Movements (NRMs). New Religious Movements can generally be described as freshly emerging forms of religiosity, but which typically have identified connections to, or reflect, already established religious traditions. One of the fastest-growing sets of NRMs is what has been broadly labelled as Contemporary Paganism, and within that, Wicca or Witchcraft. In the introduction to his *Wicca History, Belief, And Community In Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, Ethan Doyle White noted that Wicca emerged from the occult milieu of mid-twentieth-century Britain, where it was first presented as the survival of an ancient pre-Christian Witch-Cult.¹ Spreading to North America, where it diversified under the impact of environmentalism, feminism, and the 1960s counter-culture, Wicca came to be presented as a Goddess-centered nature religion, in which form it was popularized by a number of best-selling authors and fictional television shows. Today, Wicca is a maturing religious movement replete with its own distinct worldview, unique culture, and internal divisions.² The scholarly parameters of Wicca can be broad or narrow. Writing in North America, Chas Clifton following Aiden Kelly suggested that it could be extended “to cover any contemporary Pagan religion that honors a god and goddess, meets within a ritual circle, invokes the elemental spirits of the four quarters, and claims to work magic by any definition”.³ In

1 Ethan Doyle White, “The Meaning of ‘Wicca’”, *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 12/2, 2010, 185–207.

2 *Ibid.*, 2.

3 Chas A. Clifton, “Earth Day and afterwards: American paganism’s appropriation of ‘nature religion’”, in Murhpy Pizza – James R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, Leiden: Brill 2009, 109.



his 1954 book *Witchcraft Today*,⁴ Gerald Gardner gave the practitioners of that religion a name ‘the Wica’, adapted by the 1960s to its enduring form of ‘Wicca’⁵, by which it will be known hereafter in this article.

I will use the term Wicca and witch interchangeably, and the term witchcraft for anything related to witch rituals, Wiccan practices, and all the spells and norms which belong to Wicca as a religion. But the word Wicca itself will be used to refer to the Wiccan witches’ religion. Therefore, what is Wicca? I will use the work of Thea Sabin, a recent English-language author who has been translated into Hungarian, and this work has influenced some of the Hungarian communities discussed herein. In Sabin’s book *Wicca for Beginners*,⁶ she claims that the majority of witches see it as a means of expression, a moral compass, and a way of life based in nature:

Wicca is a new religion that incorporates surviving folk traditions and more modern components. It is loosely based on reinterpretations of Western European pagan rites and rituals that have been performed for centuries...such as reverence for nature, observance of the cycle of the seasons, the celebration of the harvest, and doing magic. Some of the structure of these old rites still survives in Wicca, but most of the religion’s structure and many of its practices are more modern... Wicca is a living, evolving religion.⁷

Born in the 20th century in the British Isles, then blooming in other lands such as the United States, Wicca is most visibly concentrated where English is spoken, and a significant portion of its religious literature is published first in this language.⁸ Internet resources likewise appear most often in English. Still, since the 1980s, there have been increasing numbers of translations of those texts available in an increasing number of languages. Early translations of English-language Wiccan-themed books into Hungarian include Raymond Buckland’s 1986 *Buckland’s Complete Book of Witchcraft as A boszorkányság nagykönyve* (2000)⁹ and Scott Cunningham’s 1988 *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner as Wicca: útmutató boszorkányoknak* (2001).¹⁰ In 2005, Gerald Gardner himself was

4 Gerald Gardner, *The Witchcraft Today*, New York: Rider and Company 1982, 102.

5 E. Doyle White, “The Meaning of ‘Wicca’...”.

6 Translated into Hungarian as Thea Sabin, *A wiccáról kezdőknek*. Pécs: Alexandra 2019.

7 *Ibid.*, 4.

8 The earliest “guidebooks” for Wicca were written by Gerald Gardner himself, establishing a linguistic primacy that has not significantly changed since then.

9 Raymond Buckland, *A Boszorkányság nagykönyve*, Budapest: Édesvíz 2004.

10 Scott Cunningham, *Wicca – Útmutató boszorkányoknak*, Budapest: Édesvíz 2001.

translated as *A boszorkányság eredete: a mai boszorkányok*,¹¹ and recently-popular translations include the aforementioned Thea Sabine translation in 2019. The flow of Wiccan-related literature from English to Hungarian has been constant and represents more than one viewpoint within Wicca.

Historically speaking, as a contemporary Pagan, occult, new religious movement, Wicca is a recent development.¹² Admittedly, for many with little interest in sociology this fact may seem rather inconsequential, but as Helen A. Berger, a sociologist who has specialized in the study of American Wicca, notes, “the distinction is important for placing the religion within its social and historical context.”¹³

Academically, in spite of claims of ancient roots, Wicca is categorized as a Contemporary Pagan religion because “modern Wicca is not a survival of an ancient tradition, but rather the modern syncretization of a number of old and new elements that never co-existed, much less were united, before”.¹⁴ Along with the perception of witches found in pop culture, Wicca inherits stereotypes adopted and amplified by the media. Examples of this kind of adaptation include images of witches as older women wearing pointy hats, accompanied by black cats, brewing potions and using cauldrons. An important purveyor of these ideas in the past two decades has been the fantasy universe of the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling. (The first Hungarian translations of these books appeared in 1999.) These stereotypes make witchcraft more globally popular, but they miss an aspect that is important for Wicca practitioners: a way of living. From an academic perspective, this new religious movement is not just dealing with witchcraft but is deeply embedded in a nature-centered and individualistic worldview, unlike the image the media usually portrays.

This article aims to put a spotlight on how the Berkano Tradition works in Hungary regarding its highly non-heterosexual members and how these witches reinvent Gardnerian rituals for their own want or will while still establishing their queerness. During the winter solstice of 2021 in Budapest, I interviewed several Berkano witches who identified as homosexual and bisexual, these interviews addressing the topics of self-initiation, gender roles, and the personal objects they use in their coven altar and/or home altar. These qualitative research methods (interviews) were

11 Gerald B. Gardner, *A boszorkányság eredete: a mai boszorkányok*, Miskolc: Hermit 2005.

12 E. Doyle White, “The Meaning of ‘Wicca’...”, 22.

13 Helen A. Berger, *Witchcraft and Magic in the New World: North America in the Twentieth Century*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2005.

14 Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of The Moon: a history of modern pagan witchcraft*, New York: Oxford University Press 1999.

conducted in Hungarian, recorded digitally, and written down word-for-word in an audio transcript, as part of my Master's thesis.

Wicca and its arrival in Hungary

The Preamble of the 2011 Constitution of the Republic of Hungary begins with the words “God save the Hungarians” and goes on to reference Saint Stephen, “Christian Europe”, and the Holy Crown. International observers have criticized Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government restrictive treatment of many smaller religions, including those that do not match the government's image of religions as bulwarks of Christianity in Europe.¹⁵ Viewed from abroad, Hungary may seem like a surprising place to find vibrant Wiccan developments.

The laws and social atmosphere of Hungary in the post-communist 1990s, however, seemed more inviting to religious innovation. Wicca took advantage of this opportunity, with initiates of the Gardnerian and Alexandrian traditions establishing covens across Budapest during the early years. Even today, in Hungary Wiccan practices are centered mainly in the capital metropolis of Budapest, while smaller cities like Szeged hold a smaller number of practitioners. Although the emergence of Wicca was not evenly distributed across the country, instead clustering in the more socially liberal, educated urban areas and university towns, its success across an ostensibly Christian nation was something few could have predicted.

There are currently two large Wicca communities active in the Republic of Hungary: the Congregation of Celtic Wicca Heritage Keepers (KWHE) and the Berkano Wicca Tradition. Both are oriented towards the worship of Celtic Gods and other deities from various pagan pantheons. “The Berkano Wicca Tradition” was an independent local development which split from the KWHE.

When Wicca arrived in Hungary in the early 1990s, there was still limited Internet access. However, by the early 2000s, KWHE had its own website hosting Wicca-related documents and a forum. But the widest range of information was only accessible through esoteric bookstores. This affected the organizational structures of Wicca. For a long time, members practiced the religion in small, isolated groups. In 1998, some of these groups decided to work together to create the Unified Church of the Celtic-

15 Tímea Drinóczi – Miklós Kocsis – József Petrétei, “Altering regulations – freedom of religion in Hungary”, *Persona y Derecho* 65/2, 2011, 21–36; David H. Baer, “Hungary's New Church Law is Worse Than the First”, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* XXXIX/3, 2019, 2-6.

Wicca Heritage Keepers to form a legally recognizable organization. The church was officially recognized in March 1998).¹⁶

By 2005, distinctive ideas and orientations had developed in the KWHE's constituent covens, including different entry requirements and religious practices. The Berkano Tradition, initiated by its two founding members, Saddle and Osara LaMort, was the first to develop a distinctive identity. Nonetheless, at this time it was still possible for Berkano to function under the aegis of KWHE. In March 2012, changes to Hungarian state regulations forced KWHE, like many other small religious organizations, to become a civil association).¹⁷ This new "Act CCVI of 2011" effectively allows Hungarian politicians to deregister existing religious organizations. Formally, Berkano could no longer continue as a tradition under KWHE's umbrella and therefore, the Berkano Wicca Tradition formally separated from KWHE in the summer of 2013.¹⁸ Berkano also publishes a monthly esoteric magazine called *Árnyak magazin (Magazine of Shadow)*.

LGBTQ+ Dimension: Sex, Gender, and Sexuality in Wicca

The LGBTQ+ aspects of Wiccan practice are worth further discussion, especially looking at how the LGBTQ+ individuals perform their rituals in their coven, or individually at their home, and, moreover, at how the broadly globalized iteration of Wicca as an inclusive 'universalist'¹⁹ movement accepts marginalized communities. As a case study, I will analyze the group called the "Berkano Wicca Tradition" in Hungary.

Since the initial stirrings of the rebirth of Pagan religious practice in Europe in the 19th century, gender and sexuality have been key concerns, and this has remained true all the way through the development of

16 Réka Szilárdi, "Neopaganism in Hungary: Under the Spell of Roots", in: Kaarina Aitamurto – Scott Simpson (eds.), *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing 2013, 230-248: 237.

17 David H. Baer, "Hungary's New Church Law is Worse than the First", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 39, 2019.

18 "Berkano Wicca Tradíció" [online], < <http://www.berkano.hu/index.html>>, [27 April 2022].

19 A universalist Wicca coven has some of the listed criteria: understanding that diversity has a place in celebration, theology and cosmology; understanding that gender identity, gender expression, sex/gender assigned at birth, and biological characteristics are distinct; understanding that one can practice religious acts through polarity (tension of opposites), resonance (two similar people), or synergy (joining the 'energies' of the whole group); understanding that polarity can be made by two or more people of any gender and sexual orientation, and by two or more people of the same gender, and that polarity exists on a spectrum; understanding that fertility is not strictly biological and may refer to creativity, and that you don't need a male body and a female body to produce fertility on a symbolic level, etc.

Contemporary Paganisms. The reclamation of the concept of “witch” and the reinstatement of the divine feminine were two crucial ideas for the women’s movement. The idea of sexual liberation in ancient Greece, epitomized for women by Sappho and for males by the deity Pan and the satyrs, and subsequently by the finding that many ancient societies were welcoming of a diversity of sexual orientations, encouraged gay and lesbian practitioners.²⁰

The Charge of the Goddess by Doreen Valiente²¹ is an important guide in Wicca since it incorporates many of the religion’s essential concepts, including the line “All acts of love and pleasure are My rituals”, which is often interpreted to suggest that the Goddess approves of all consenting sexual interactions. The Goddess’s nurturing element is also emphasized in *The Charge*:

I am the Gracious Goddess, who gives the gift of joy unto the heart. Upon earth, I give the knowledge of the spirit eternal; and beyond death, I give peace, and freedom, and reunion with those who have gone before. Nor do I demand sacrifice; for behold, I am the Mother of All Living, and my love is poured out upon the earth.²²

In contemporary academic discourse, sex and gender are two distinct concepts: sex is a biological trait (chromosomes, hormones, and genitalia), and gender is a psychological role, with potentially as many genders as there are people. Some feminists, such as Judith Butler²³, have argued that sex is also socially constructed, given that we do not have to split the world into male and female categories and that women’s and men’s bodies are developed differently according to gender norms (e.g., men are encouraged to develop their muscles, and women are not) Lou Hart²⁴ looked at a range of gender models from different cultures and came to the conclusion that the combination of sex and gender is a uniquely Western concept. In some communities, for example, you could be a *woman-man* (a woman who lives as a man), a *man-woman* (a man who lives as a woman), cross-gendered (in modern parlance, a gender-blender), a man, or a woman. We

20 Erik Lorenzonn, ““Abanthis” play illuminates little known Greek women’s stories”, *Miscellany News* CXLII/16, 26 February 2009, <<https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=miscellany20090226-01.2.38&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->>, [27 April 2022].

21 Doreen Valiente, *The Charge of the Goddess – The Poetry of Doreen Valiente, Reading*: Centre For Pagan Studies Ltd. 2014.

22 “Charge of the Goddess – Chant – Coven of the Goddess” [online], <<https://www.covenofthegoddess.com/charge-of-the-goddess-chant/>>, [27 April 2022].

23 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge 1990.

24 Lou Hart, *Magic is a many gendered thing* [online], <https://www.academia.edu/31935408/Magic_is_a_many_gendered_thing>, [27 April 2022].

can look at Javanese culture, where, before colonization happened, there was an accepted and celebrated third gender, whose members acted as a shaman, a traditional dancer, or a spiritual leader. They thrived and were common, but after the Dutch imposed their Eurocentric Christian worldview, this third gender ceased to exist. In Islam, Transvestites or effeminate men were recorded to be present in the city of Medina at the time the Prophet Muhammad came to make it the center of Islam. These men were called mukhannathun²⁵ and had similar characteristics to modern day transvestites and effeminate gay men, but not exclusively so. Mukhannathun, respectively, is a third gender: this is the designation of the groups of individuals serving as entertainers and/or working in harems of Muslim men. Even in Islamic belief – as explained by Muhsin Hendricks in *Islamic Texts: A Source for Acceptance of Queer Individuals into Mainstream Muslim Society* – it is mentioned as a valid gender identity.²⁶

As we have seen, people's theological beliefs can influence their gender perspectives.²⁷ In magical discourse, there is a variety of models to choose from. *Duality* is one of them. *Duality*²⁸ is the presentation of things as opposites with no shared characteristics (dark and light, evil and good, left and right, and so on), with the different halves of the pairs becoming conflated with each other (for example, left = passive = female = dark = evil – hence, the word sinister, literally left). Another is *polarity*, which represents the two ends of a continuum. The two poles are drawn to each other and there is a dynamic between them. Not only that, but each of the continuum's ends contains the other (hence the Yin Yang symbol has a black dot within the white half and a white dot within the black half to represent Yin within Yang and Yang within Yin). *Complementarity* is another term for this. *Multiplicity*, the belief that there are many different forces and energies in the universe, just as there are many different gender roles and forms of sexuality, is another option.²⁹

Many covens, including Gardnerian ones, have a tendency to use the polarity of sexual tension as a catalyst for magical practices; however,

25 Mukhannathun, meaning 'effeminate ones' or 'men who resemble women', is the classical Arabic term for people who would now be called transgender women, perhaps poorly distinguished from eunuchs. Hadith often makes mention of them. Outside of religious texts, they are strongly associated with music and entertainment.

26 Muhsin Hendricks, *Islamic Texts: A Source for Acceptance of Queer Individuals into Mainstream Muslim Society*, London: *The Equal Rights Review*, Vol. 5 2010.

27 Yvonne Aburrow, *All acts of love and pleasure, Inclusive Wicca*, London: Avalonia Ltd. 2014, 1-122.

28 Simone Pétrement, *Le dualisme dans l'histoire de la philosophie et des religions*, Paris: Gallimard 1946, 23-57.

29 Jo Green, *Queer Paganism: A spirituality that embraces all identities*, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 2016, 1-137.

because the majority of members are heterosexual, this can lead to LGBTQ+ members feeling excluded. Some Wiccans believe in duotheism, or that “all the gods are one god, and all the goddesses are one goddess... the gods wove the web of creation between the poles of the pairs of opposites,” as Dion Fortune wrote in a book that would later have a profound effect on Gardner.³⁰

Gardner’s own writing in the 1950s distinguished God from Goddess, and assigned them polar attributes, such as an association with winter for the God and with summer for the Goddess. According to Gardner, when mortal practitioners take on the roles of these deities, then the role of the Goddess must be played by a priestess (and never a man) and the role of the God should be played by a priest (although in this case, a priestess may ‘strap on a sword’ to play the God if no suitable male is available).³¹

Because this binary heavenly couple is then considered to constitute two lovers, LGBTQ+ practitioners are once again excluded. It is also an issue for those who do not identify with or relate to the main archetypes associated with the divine couple, regardless of gender. Some Wiccans have even gone so far as to say that homosexuality is ‘unnatural’ because the primary dynamic of the universe is the sexual relationship between the God and the Goddess.

In practice, in the 21st century, Wiccans are generally welcoming towards gender and sexuality diversity, and they are willing to confront conventional standards on these and other topics. Christine Hoff Kraemer explained) that ancient paganism permitted a wide range of gender and sexual roles.³² Ancient Greek religion included various temples worshipping the virgin goddess Artemis, the wifely womanhood of Hera, the aggressive masculinity of Ares, etc. Although modifying older Wicca rituals to be more inclusive has proven difficult, this can readily be accomplished by introducing new versions of ancient forms of words.

The Berkano Wicca Tradition in Hungary was my laboratory while writing this article. Its name refers to the *berkano rune of the Elder Futhark.³³ In contemporary Germanic runic magic, this is frequently assigned the role of the rune of birth. It also represents a protective force, which it provides for the coven. For this community, the magical effects

30 Dion Fortune, *The Sea Priestess*, Newburyport: Weiser Books 2003, 172.

31 Gerald B. Gardner, *The Witchcraft Today*, London: Rider 1954.

32 Christine Holf Kraemer, “Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Paganism”, *Religion Compass* 6/8, 2012, 390-401.

33 The asterisk indicates that it is a hypothetical reconstruction. This is standard practice in academic discussion of hypothetical unattested rune names. It is not a typo. It is frequently omitted in non-academic discussions of the hypothetical names of the ‘elder futhark’ runes.

of the Berkano rune include spiritual rebirth, the ceremony of Protection and Secret, an increase in the power of secrets, preservation and protection, and the realization of ideas through a creative act. The rune also represents the unity of the moment itself, which is the union of the Divine couple in continuous Creation.

Berkano Wicca started a Wicca camp which has been held since 2002. They hold regular and free training, at which they welcome all interested parties. They also write and publish books, publications, and articles dealing with magic and Wicca. They organize meetings, get-to-know-you evenings, public rituals and performances, as part of which the Wiccaf e and *Pubmoob* tradition began and organized the first Wicca Festival in Hungary, which has since been followed by many others. In 2009, a documentary called “*Neopog nyok*” or Neopagans was made about them; it can be watched on YouTube.³⁴ The regular journal of the Berkano tradition has been * rnyak magazin* since January 1998.

I have worked with and interviewed some witches of Berkano, each of my interview subjects identifying themselves as a non-heterosexual queer or rather not saying, ranging from homosexual, bisexual, to asexual. Berkano, as a coven, according to the members, is very inclusive and flexible about gender roles during the ritual. As noted earlier, a more traditionally Gardnerian coven would not allow a man to appropriate a woman’s role in a ritual. But Berkano allows everything regarding gender roles and obligations as long as it does not impact negatively on anyone’s boundaries. Setting a clear boundary is important, as one of my subjects said; she sets really clear boundaries and consents to various rituals or acts, as long as these boundaries are respected. But the moment a ritual or a discussion is close to getting out of hand, she chooses to leave the scene. Berkano supports this notion to a high degree, and they teach their members to be aware of themselves and not to do any harm to other members. Hence, any obstacle to reaching a common goal is minimized by this belief that a ritual is not exclusive, but instead inclusive and welcoming towards many genders and sexualities.

Polarity: God and Goddess

The main question is what kind of God and Goddess play a role in the LGBTQ+ individuals’ lives? Which traits are the most important to their daily lives as an LGBTQ+ individual? Parallel to the answers to these questions, the binarity of deities will be addressed.

³⁴ “*Neopog nyok*” Szakdolgozatfilm, 2009, KVAT Miskolc [online], *Youtube*, 30 January 2015, <<https://youtu.be/Unie1AGeM68>>, [27 April 2022].

Many Wiccan ceremonies emphasize polarity, the concept that for magic to function, there must be an erotic connection, usually between a man and a woman. Only a woman can initiate a man, and only a man has the capacities to initiate a woman, according to Gardnerian tradition.³⁵ The most common motivation for a woman to introduce a man (and vice versa) nowadays is to maintain a balance of power in the group (if one gender or one person performed all the initiations, they would have an unfair advantage).³⁶

Most Wiccans believe in duotheism, Goddess and God, and these are construed as essentially male and essentially female. This can result in some people feeling unable to relate to these traditional roles.³⁷ Nonetheless, even though polytheist Wiccans regard the Horned God and the Moon Goddess (the divine couple's two deities) as patron deities of Wicca, with a special relationship to the religion, there is still a great deal of emphasis on duality and polarity in the rituals; and there are still plenty of people³⁸ who insist on Wicca being a "fertility religion" presumably based on ideas gleaned from J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.³⁹ Wiccan liturgy, on the other hand, does not appear to indicate that all magical acts are about fertility. It might also be argued that the term "fertility" should be defined in its broadest sense, encompassing the fertility of ideas and spirit as well as physical reproduction as a result of heterosexual sex.

And yet, the broad and diverse tradition of Wicca is not, and has not been, always heterosexual in its models. The Minoan Brotherhood, founded in 1975 in New York, worships Rhea, the Cretan snake Goddess, as their primary Goddess and the Cretan Bull God as their main God. Since they are duotheistic in nature, the binarity of God and Goddess is not challenged exclusively, but the Minoan Brotherhood primarily worships the masculine aspect of the transcendental. Their pantheon is formed around a set of Gods from Cretan and Aegean mythology, with the God of Bull as the peak of the said pantheon. Gods like Zeus and Poseidon are worshipped, as well as other male deities from different mythological settings, like Thor. The Minoan Brotherhood has a worldwide network: active groves are mainly located in the United States and Europe. On the other hand, Dianic Wicca worships Diana (or her equivalent in Greek mytholo-

35 G. B. Gardner, *A boszorkányság eredete...*

36 Yvonne Aburrow, "Wicca" [online], 2015, GLBTQ Archive, <http://www.glbtqarchive.com/ssh/wicca_S.pdf>, [27 April 2022].

37 J. Green, *Queer Paganism...*

38 "Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Paganisms – part 2" [online], *Theologies of Immanence*, <<http://pagantheologies.pbworks.com/w/page/13622073/Gender%20and%20Sexuality%20in%20Contemporary%20Paganisms%20-%20part%202>>, [27 April 2022].

39 James G. Frazer. *The Golden Bough, United Kingdom: Macmillan and Co. Press 1890.*

gy Artemis), the Lunar Goddess of wild animals and the hunt as the primary deity. They also include all types of Goddesses from all over world mythologies, such as Freya, Athena, etc.

In the case of the Minoan Brotherhood, the usage of phallic idols and statues represents the God's power of masculinity and fertility. These are also connected to homosexual sex magic and rituals. As Dianic Wicca has rituals exclusively involving women, they challenge the binary practical elements of the Great Rite, and the equal representation of a God and Goddess that Gardnerian Wicca originally maintains. The absence of balance gives the flexibility or freedom for Dianic Wiccans to create their own safe space while worshipping their own pantheon regardless of the gender of the Gods.

The liminality that Minoan Brotherhood members have to go through is very important. They must undertake some rituals in order to be initiated into the groves. This provides us with a vantage point to observe the phenomenon of liminality, as Turner said in his book about *rites de passage*.⁴⁰ The Minoan Brotherhood challenges the concept of binarity in Wicca covens, as they embrace their homosexuality and apply it to their rituals and practices. Not only do they worship only male deities, but the members are only men from all spectrums of sexuality and other sexual minorities. Examples of their Gods are from the Minoan tradition, but not limiting or excluding from other pantheons, such as the Celtic or Scandinavian. They also use, as an example two athames in their rituals, instead of a knife and a chalice. In Minoan brotherhood rituals, the chosen male priest will lead the ritual and conducts all the necessary processes for only male participants, as women are not allowed to participate. They use two athames, a phallic wand, and other phallic male idols to worship and call upon the Gods. They, of course, still use basic materials like salt, candles, and incense. This provides us with an insight into how their witchcraft can be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of magical practice; it does not, however, eliminate the possibility to reinvent and reinterpret the rituals so that they do not discourage LGBTQ+ members of the groves. A male-dominated pantheon represents their identity as a male in the purest and rawest way possible and how it can become manifest through their prayers, offerings, and conversation with the higher deities. The usage of two athames in the Great Rite also symbolizes the male elements and a challenge to the traditional concepts of binarity: they use the ritual knives to represent male sexual identity, hence eliminating the gen-

40 Victor Turner, *Liminality and Communitas in The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago: Aldine Publishing 1969, 11.

erally used chalice (the representation of the female aspect). The flexibility is represented here in the material (the visual representation of two athames) and ritual (the changing of the chalice to a second athame) dimensions as well. The Minoan Brotherhood encourages its members to study sex magic and eroticism from a homoerotic angle. Groves can include sex magic as part of their practices or as an ‘extracurricular’ activity. Each grove can determine if the community will engage in sex magic. They study and discuss homoerotic sex magic as well as sexual mysticism: “We encourage individual members to explore this for themselves. Anything beyond that he leaves to the gods.”⁴¹

As Minoan Brotherhood is male only coven, the other binary is the exclusively female coven-network of Dianic Wicca, which worships only female deities. Just like many other Wicca traditions, the Dianic one has a few lineages, which are mostly similar; however, they demonstrate major differences. The most popular and definitive lineage was founded in 1971 by Zsuzsanna Budapest (born Mokcsay Emese Zsuzsanna in Budapest) during California’s Winter Solstice.⁴² Like the Minoan Brotherhood, which is a coven for exclusively gay men, Dianic Wicca was created for the feminine side of humanity, for women with feminist ideological backgrounds or same-sex orientations.⁴³

As Wicca had been influenced by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, women (and some men) adopted these ideologies and integrated them into Wicca’s practice as well. Devotion to the Goddess and the divine feminine was something they desired but couldn’t find elsewhere at a time when American women were discovering and testing their power. While Gardner’s Wicca acknowledged both the God and the Goddess in a somewhat equal manner, the Goddess-movement grew increasingly prominent in the practice of many Wiccans during this period, and some Wiccans abandoned the male aspects of worship entirely. In this atmosphere, we see the founding of the “Dianic” Wiccan grove, which was called after the goddess Diana and consisted entirely of (or almost entirely, in some circumstances) females.⁴⁴

Dianic Wicca, which was developed by the hereditary witch, Zsuzsanna Budapest (who claims the artistic and magical influence of her mother, Szilágyi Mária), sprang out of the feminist movement, honours the

41 Official Page of The Minoan Brotherhood [online], <<http://www.minoan-brotherhood.org/>>, [5 April 2022].

42 “Dianic Wicca” [online], *To Salem*, <<https://tosalem.com/dianic-Wicca/>>, [5 April 2022].

43 *Ibid.*

44 Lynda L. Warwick, *Feminist Wicca, Women and Therapy*, Oxford (OH): Miami University 1995, 121-133.

Goddess and pays little attention to her masculine counterpart. Most Dianic Wiccan covens are exclusively female, but a few have allowed men into their ranks to provide some much-needed balance. Dianic Wiccan has come to be associated with lesbian witchcraft in some circles, but this is not always the case, as Dianic covens welcome women of all sexual orientations, except trans women.⁴⁵

Even though Dianic Wicca has gained popularity among women and many feminists, many believe that Dianic Wicca is controversial due to its trans-exclusion practice, or the so-called TERF or trans-exclusionary radical feminist element. Coleman uses the term “*transvestite*” unironically, and the coven which she studies is limited to “*women-born women*”. She goes so far as to claim that transgender individuals cannot possibly join because they “*don’t experience menstrual cramps*”.⁴⁶ They think it hurts the idea of womanhood if transwomen are included in the coven. Unlike the Minoan Brotherhood, which is universal in nature and welcomes men from all across the spectrum of gender and sexuality, Dianic Wicca is exclusively for women, but not for transwomen. This may cause controversy within and outside the covens. But with modernity, more and more people are redefining their Wicca covens to be more universal and inclusive towards people regardless of their gender and sexuality.⁴⁷

To put this into perspective, some solitary Wiccans also worship gender-ambiguous deities such as Loki. The God of trickery from Scandinavian mythology is a genderfluid Deity, which means they can adopt a gender from the whole spectrum of gender. They can be woman or man or both or even neither, as shown in the story where Loki in female shape was impregnated by a stallion and gave birth to Sleipnir (but at other moments was capable, in male shape, of siring Fenrir with a female giantess). Technically, not only Loki, who can shapeshift regarding their gender, but also many Gods from Eastern, African, and Greek mythology are shapeshifters in their nature. Loki is quite popular among unconventional solitary witches. A Wiccan would likely worship this kind of deity in accordance with their sexuality and gender. When a Wiccan worships their pantheon, they tend to have an emphasis on the God and the Goddess, but they are allowed to invoke several “specifically” attributed Gods according to their spells or prayer, such as Aphrodite for beauty, Mars for strength, and Odin for wisdom. LGBTQ+ witches also do the same:

45 Michelle Mueller, “The Chalice and the Rainbow: Conflicts Between Women’s Spirituality and Transgender Rights in US Wicca in the 2010s”, *Female Leaders in New Religious Movements, Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities*, New York: Springer Publishing 2017, 249-269.

46 Kristy S. Coleman, *Re-riting Woman*, San Jose: Altamira Press 2010, 49-52: 49.

47 L. L. Warwick, *Feminist Wicca...*

Priapus is worshipped as an aspect of sex and fertility, Hera as womanhood, etc. There is no difference in how they worship their Gods whether a witch is gay or not. But the difference may be observed in their material tools, such as idols and statues.

Magic: Rituals and practices

During my research, I attended several open Berkano Wiccan rituals, attaining both emic and etic perspectives as an observer, as well as a participant. Berkano Wicca's nature is inclusive and open towards outsiders: they let me participate in their holy practices, such as drinking wine from one ritual chalice. They would encourage new participants to take part in their rituals in order to promote their beliefs and to spread awareness that Berkano Wicca is not a Satanic belief, but instead a love-centered and family- and community-oriented group of witches.

In the following paragraphs, I will describe how an open ritual commenced in the Berkano Wicca coven. Before the ritual actually began, the members held a short workshop to make pentagrams out of natural materials. A priest and the high priestess were in a private room discussing some secret conversations and writing these down in their Book of Shadows. The priest participated in the subsequent ritual as a regular participant, but not a special leader. After the room's door opened, the other witches, students, and I stepped into the ritual room. The room was decorated in an interesting manner: a circle made of salt was drawn and four candles representing compass points were lit. The ritual was led by a woman, the priestess. The priestess began the ritual by calling upon the God and Goddess, and then subsequently performed a number of spells and invited the initiates and students to take part in calling upon the elemental guardians of the compass for guidance, assistance, and blessings. The wine was then shared with all the participants. The athame for Gardner had a clear sense of representing the male principle and phallus, although priestesses also use the athame, though to be "armed as a man" with a sword is an attribute of the Magus, or Priest. (As Gardner had written in the previously-cited 1954 book,⁴⁸ a woman, then, would symbolically play the part of a man by bearing that sword.) In Berkano's practice, as in many of 21st century performances of Wiccan ritual, there are two Priestesses who fluidly employ the athame and the sword, bearing the power of "male" tools, and also, for that matter, "female" tools such as the chalice. If there is a polarity between the priestesses, it is not to be found in a strict male-female binarity, symbolic or otherwise. This non-binary paradigm exists

48 Gerald B. Gardner, *The Witchcraft Today*, London: Rider 1954.

within the Sacred Space circumscribed by several incense sticks and candles burning around the edge and the center of the ritual space. From my personal experience – in an emic way – the ritual was quite intense and personal. The small community of Berkano Wicca succeeded in creating a magical and inclusive atmosphere during the ritual. The ritual ended with us singing a handful of prayers fitting for the particular event's theme.

For solitary Wiccans, the ritual is even more personal, unique, flexible, and individualistic in nature. They make a salt circle and take out all of the objects from their home altars. But there is no itinerary regarding what they should do chronologically. They make it as flexible as possible to accommodate their needs; sometimes they just perform the ritual to attain divination, help, or guidance, or to celebrate the sabbaths. One of my interviewees performs their ritual in private; nobody may enter the room or disturb them during spellcasting or meditation. An interviewee told me that he performs the ritual naked because he believes that it will appeal to the Goddess and God he works with.



Fig. 1. A Berkano Wicca altar during winter solstice ritual⁴⁹

⁴⁹ All illustrations are author's own photographs.

I saw a Berkano Wicca coven's altar during an open ritual of the winter solstice in Budapest in December 2021 (Fig. 1). Such objects included a red wooden pentacle as the focal point of the magical circle; an athame representing the masculine aspect of the universe; a chalice or a glass representing the feminine aspect; and several candles on the altar, two of them representing the God and the Goddess, and four in the cardinal directions calling the protectors or personifications of North, West, South, and East. I also saw incense being burned, salt both on the altar and to create a magic circle, wine and cookies (both for offerings and for the communal feast), a magic wand, and some plants as a representation of nature. This picture is a typical example of what a coven's altar looks like during a ritual (Fig. 2). However, such features are not all obligatory and can vary from coven to coven, and even between rituals during the year.



Fig. 2. Objects seen are a pentacle, an athame, a chalice, wine, candles, salt, and Book of Shadow

Other than communal altars, Wicca individuals usually have a sacred space in their living sphere as well, which they call a 'home altar'. Solitary or lone practitioners of witchcraft often build their own personal sacred spaces. It is indeed very personal and the objects chosen vary from one to another. The following sentences are taken from a witch who was willing

to share photos⁵⁰ of their altar and explain the presented image in depth and with personal meanings (Fig. 3). We can see at the pictures the objects this person uses on his home altar, such as pentacles, candles, idols, a broom, a tarot deck, and a voodoo doll made of hair (Fig. 4 and 5).



Fig. 3. Private home altar of a Berkano student



Fig. 4. Objects seen are a pentacle, idols, candles, crystals, and incense

⁵⁰ The transcripts and the photos from the subject are available and can be obtained through the author.



Fig. 5. Objects seen are a broom, tarot cards, and voodoo doll made of hair

This occasion should be considered a privilege, as commonly, a witch would not want to share their sacred space – because of its private, sacred nature, and because it is connected with a sense of belonging and connection to the spirit and higher entities. Another interviewee put pictures of their loved ones on the altar, as well as a necklace inherited from their grandmother. He said it acts as a portal to the spiritual world so that they can communicate with the dead and keep the connection from afar.

Challenging the binary aspects

Yvonne Aburrow's Survey Data was made available on 28 November 2016 and closed on 8 March 2017. I used this survey as an excellent comparative tool while working with the Berkano Tradition.

It was publicized in several Facebook groups, the inclusive Wicca Discussion Group, and some closed groups for Gardnerian and Alexandrian initiates (not all of whom identify as inclusive). The questions were based on the description of what an inclusive coven looks like, which was a joint effort of members of the inclusive Wicca Discussion Group. Some respondents criticized the statements and the use of a Likert scale and said that I should have mixed up the statements more. All the statements were formatted as a desirable quality of inclusive Wicca, which respondents were invited to agree or disagree with. Some people mentioned that they were not sure whether they were answering for Wicca as a whole, their tradition or lineage or coven as a whole, or their personal view. Some people would have liked to embrace

same-sex initiation, for example, but felt that it would probably not be acceptable to other Wiccans.

[...]

Most of the respondents identified as male or female, but 4 people were genderfluid, 9 were non-binary, 2 were other, and 7 people preferred not to say. 164 respondents declared their sexual orientation. 44.5% were heterosexual, 18.3% gay, 21.3% bisexual, 3% lesbian, 7.3% pansexual, 2% asexual, and 4.3% other (one of whom wrote “straight... stop labelling”). So, the LGBTQIA respondents outnumbered the heterosexuals. This may have been because LGBTQIA people feel more positive about inclusive Wicca, but it may also reflect the high number of LGBTQIA people in Wicca.⁵¹

Aburrow’s main conclusions could be summarized in the following sentences: we can clearly state that “Wiccans are mostly quite a liberal bunch. However, there is a difference between the USA and the rest of the world in how same-sex initiation is viewed”.⁵²) In the Berkano Tradition, on the basis of my interviews with members, the members are open towards same-sex initiation and regard it as a valid ritual, and they believe that Wicca needs to accept changes and embrace them as religion is in constant evolution. My sample is pretty much aligned with this conclusion: all the subjects were part of LGBTQ+ community and believed in a non-heterosexual flexible interpretation of magic.

Clifford Geertz⁵³ and particularly Thomas Tweed⁵⁴ (held the view that religions will constantly evolve and renew themselves to be able to fulfil their role in society and provide relevant answers to the universal questions, such as what the purpose of life is and how to act properly, throughout different eras. One of the conditions or features of their renewal is to integrate certain views that question the limits of their explanatory ability, as well as the challenges and questions of new eras.

Individual religious experiences should also be taken into account. Individual, unmediated experiences of the divine go beyond institutional limitations and many times question those. In such experiences, which are often called mystical experiences, we see examples of crossing or completely disregarding ritual and institutional borders. Accounts of mystical experiences talk about a direct connection with the divine/ultimate reality and knowledge might provide a base for either questioning or confirming religious teachings.

Not only mystical experiences but also the mere fact that a person is religious or not has a significant effect on their thinking processes and mental condition – in short, on their cognitive world. First and most im-

51 Y. Aburrow, *All acts of love...*, 1.

52 *Ibid.*, 13.

53 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books 1973.

54 Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling, A Theory of Religion*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2006, 1-96.

portantly, when we talk about the effects of religiosity on mental processes in a contemporary context, we need to define the concepts of religiosity and spirituality. It is crucial to remark that religion and spirituality are overlapping, yet distinct constructs. The two concepts cannot be separated fully. Separating the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' fully is a contemporary attempt. Religion and spirituality have many-layered meanings. However, many mainstream definitions of 'spirituality' and 'religion' overlap significantly with the categories of 'subjective-life spirituality' and 'life-as-religion'. The term 'spirituality', for example, is frequently used to convey dedication to a fundamental truth found inside what pertains to this world. And the term 'religion' is used to describe belief in a higher truth that is 'out there', beyond what this world has to give, and solely tied to externals (scriptures, dogmas, rituals, and so on.) It can mean in an institutionalized way too, where a person is religious and goes to church, practicing their religiosity. On the other hand, a spiritual person may not want to be affiliated with a church but still go to many religious festivals to enjoy the religious experience.

Another vital notion for this article, Tweed⁵⁵ also explained the concept of liminality, on which he explores the notion of change. Individuals first find themselves getting out of a place which is conditioned by social constructs assembled when they were still a baby, such as a nominal religion and nationality, and then moving to a new place where decisions are made with conscious choice and free will. This notion can also be applied to Contemporary Paganism; a person can leave a dogmatic religion and move to a 'pagan spirituality' by choice. In Wicca, as in some other contemporary Pagan religions, there is no obligation, or it is not definitive, to leave a person's previous religion in order to practice Wicca. There is more opportunity to stay in a liminal space. A Wiccan can, for example, be a Christian or a Muslim, while at the same time identifying as a practicing witch. Their liminality emerges when they reinvent their religiosity and spirituality to accommodate their needs; this concept also applies to queer Contemporary Paganism. Even in the internal discourse of Contemporary Paganism, a queer person can shape their belief so that their queer identity can work harmoniously with the religion. Queer Wiccans can worship their chosen deities, practice non-binary divination, use spells to combat dysphoria, and so on. In the case of Berkano, the liminality is between sexuality and gender that creates liminal moments.

One interesting example can be found in the method of divination using Tarot cards. In the arcanum of Tarot cards, we can find an articulated binarity of the divine, such as Empress and Emperor, High Priestess and

55 *Ibid.*

Hierophant, Kings and Queens, and the list goes on. A person will use the mode of divination by means of these binaries to express their will and their magic. There are no exact rules on how someone uses these cards regarding the binary, as the cards they use are random in nature. But it is interesting to examine the character of the cards that are divided by male and female counterparts. The role of gender is prominent and crucial for the arcanum, for the list of tarot cards, as they could have various meanings. A gay person would have the tendency to believe in and divine from more male-ish cards, while the polar opposite of female counterparts is likely to be attracted to female-ish cards. This presents how Wicca as a practiced religion is flexible and accommodating to the needs of the conjurer through tarot cards as well. Some of the subjects create their own versions of hand-drawn tarot cards representing their view of the world, and these are often non-binary regardless of their gender. Hence, the cards accommodate the conjurer's internal world by reading a story from their tarot decks, a story invented about oneself and for oneself. It results in a better teller of the story or the person conjuring tarot divination, for non-heterosexual and or non-cis because the binary fails to give a platform for their identity.

The presence and use of a chalice and athame on someone's altar can be defined as approval of the dualistic binary of Wicca; the God and the Goddess are addressed using a symbolical object to represent both biological sex organs. Throughout their rituals, the athame is used to imitate the movement of penetration into the chalice, thus illustrating, or more likely ritually replaying the insemination of life. Gay men, as seen in The Minoan Brotherhood and its gay members, would reinvent the use of two athames to draw the connotation of two male genital organs having a union. Thus, it can be concluded that various LGBTQ+-oriented and inclusive covens have their own means of redefining rituals, whether by changing the use of objects, the words of the liturgy, or even the content of the Book of Shadows. My proposed idea that the ritual can be modified to better accommodate their needs, then, is relative, as neither coven Wiccans nor lone practitioners have peculiar, strict, rigid rituals that they follow. Everything is flexible, relative, and fluid regarding their magical praxis.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that gender and sexuality are fundamental theological issues for many current contemporary Wicca covens, researchers are just now beginning to examine their position in the movement critically. Furthermore, while topics like transgender, ethical non-monogamy, multiple-partner relationships, sky-clad ritual, and BDSM are frequently dis-

cussed among Wiccans, they are mostly treated as footnotes in assessments of Wiccan spirituality.

Just as Aburrow⁵⁶ notes, Wiccans can be generally considered a mostly liberal movement. However, there is a difference between the USA and Hungary in how same-sex initiation is viewed: people are not quite sure how to deal with LGBTQ+ issues in various regions. This is probably the reason why fewer Hungarian LGBTQ+ community members wish to enter traditional Wicca covens; hence, the community, even though promoting inclusivity, is still unaware of the changes that should be made to include these marginalized groups.

Most of the interviewees I interviewed did not explicitly say that they worship particular Gods or Goddesses; instead, they are something personal which varies according to the person concerned. With respect to gender and the spectrum of sexuality, their Wicca beliefs in the Berkano Tradition accommodate their identity very well; most of them skew and modify the rituals and praxis in their own way, so that they can be as comfortable as they could and be at ease with their spiritual pagan belief.

My original hypothesis, that Hungarian LGBTQ+ Wiccans eagerly employ the label of Wicca because it is a belief-system and ritual-system that is both universalistic and also highly individualistic, appears to be correct. Hungarian Witches of the Berkano tradition use Wicca as a tool for self-expression regardless of their sex, gender, and/or sexual identity. They use different kinds of objects for their ritual to accommodate their needs, and they reinvent and reinterpret received Wiccan beliefs for their own local and present needs, so that they can be the best version of themselves. We may then conclude that Wicca in Hungary, especially in the case of the Berkano Tradition, is a religion that can be modified accordingly to fit within the framework of the given individual regardless of sexuality or gender.

56 Y. Aburrow, *All acts of love...*, 1.



SUMMARY

Challenging the binary principle: contemporary LGBTQ+ Wiccan practice in the Berkano Wicca Tradition in Hungary

Wicca is one of the fast-growing New Religious Movements (NRM) of the 21st century, although its roots can be traced back to the early 20th century. This article focuses on the analysis of Hungarian LGBTQ+ Wicca practitioners' practices in the Berkano Tradition, with a special interest in the representative aspects, such as altars and home altars. This element of the material dimension will illustrate how LGBTQ+ practitioners challenge the binary aspects of Wicca and how they utilize the liminal aspects of gender. With guided interviews, this article illustrates and provides a deeper understanding of how the traditional Wicca binarity of a God and Goddess is changed according to the given individuals' sexual orientations and how these individuals innovate their altars and reinterpret the traditional Wicca worldview and religious practice to create a closer, more personal religious attachment. With respect to gender and the spectrum of sexuality, the Berkano Tradition and their Wicca beliefs accommodate their identity very well; most of them skew and modify the rituals and praxis in their own way, so that they can be the most comfortable and at ease with their religious belief. My original interpretation that LGBTQ+ Wiccans use the adjective of Wicca because it is a belief system that is universalistic yet so individualistic is correct because they use Wicca as a tool of self-expression regardless of their sex, gender, and or sexual identity. They use different kinds of objects for their ritual to accommodate their needs; they also reinvent and reinterpret their Wiccan beliefs for their own good, so that they can be the best version of themselves. This article then closes with a positive statement that Berkano Tradition's Wicca is a religion that can be modified accordingly to fit within the framework of the given individuals/members.

Keywords: Wicca; Hungary; Berkano; LGBTQ+; binary; reinterpretation

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