

***Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America.* By Sabina Magliocco. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Pp. 280, notes, bibliography, index, ISBN 0-8122-3803-6 cloth, ISBN 0-8122-1879-5 pbk.)**

Roman I. Shiyan

Volume 27, Number 2, 2005

Terrains disputés
Contested Geographies

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/014050ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/014050ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Shiyan, R. I. (2005). Review of [*Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America.* By Sabina Magliocco. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Pp. 280, notes, bibliography, index, ISBN 0-8122-3803-6 cloth, ISBN 0-8122-1879-5 pbk.)]. *Ethnologies*, 27(2), 264–266.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/014050ar>

Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America. By Sabina Magliocco. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Pp. 280, notes, bibliography, index, ISBN 0-8122-3803-6 cloth, ISBN 0-8122-1879-5 pbk.)

Sabina Magliocco's *Witching Culture* — lucid evidence of the growing popularity of neo-pagan topics in North America and the academic world in particular — explores modern Neo-Paganism as a complex cultural phenomenon. In her work Magliocco examines the historical and intellectual origins of Neo-Paganism from the ancient world to Enlightenment, Romanticism and up to the present day (Part 1: Roots and Branches). She also analyzes the place of this religious movement in the modern world and does so effectively by taking her audience inside neo-pagan communities, analyzing their organizational patterns, membership, teachings and rituals (Part 2: Religions of Experience, and Part 3: Beyond Experience: Religion and Identity). Lastly, the author raises several important theoretical issues while dealing with the role of modern paganism in the process of the formation of individual and group identities, perceiving Neo-Paganism as an artifact of postmodern reclamation of culture as well as exploring the “subaltern” status of this movement as one existing on the margins of a dominant culture.

After Margot Adler and Ronald Hutton, Sabina Magliocco describes Neo-Paganism as a relatively young “movement of new religions that attempt to revive, revitalize, and experiment with aspects of pre-Christian polytheism” (4). In Magliocco's opinion, modern Neo-Paganism in North America, which was actually reintroduced to the American public after 1971, represents the most important folk revival movement since the music revival of the 1950s-1960s. It appears highly eclectic, i.e. it draws from various cultural and historic traditions: from European folk customs, religions of Classical antiquity, ancient Egypt, the Celts, and the Norse, occasional appropriations from Native American or Afro-Caribbean traditions (7). The transformation and amalgamation of those traditions into neo-pagan cults occur on the individual level and on the level of small pagan covens, which are often comprised of several people who share interests and a unique worldview, one quite different from the worldview of adherents of the North American cultural mainstream.

Indeed, neo-paganism draws its substance and inspiration from individuals who have vision and make things happen. While discussing the cultural production of this subculture, Sabina Magliocco emphasizes

the extraordinary creativity and imaginativeness of its followers, who make use of folktales and other sources as templates for reconstructing magical rituals and reclaiming structures and practices for these new religions (9, 39-41). In fact, that was how the modern Neo-Pagan movement emerged in the first place: due to works by intellectuals and enthusiasts, like Charles G. Leland (1824-1903), Margaret Murray (1862-1963), and most notably Gerald B. Gardner (1884-1964), who is "credited with the invention of modern Neo-Pagan Witchcraft" (44-54).

Compared to "the average citizens," whom the author most likely ascribes to the cultural mainstream and dominant majority, the modern adherents of Neo-Paganism are better educated and tend to, "gravitate toward the humanities and social sciences," the disciplines which provide ample background for reinvention of pagan traditions with their teachings and rituals. Magliocco pictures them as "vibrant, creative individuals who seek their own personal meaning" while studying history, archeology, anthropology, religion, mythology and folklore, who create "imaginative, artistic" production, which, nonetheless, exists primarily "on the margins of the academy, putting them in a tenuous position vis-à-vis the academic establishment" (54). By their nonconformist stance modern pagan intellectuals strive to "construct authenticity for their practices according to academic paradigms, and simultaneously [reject] academic authority as the ultimate seal of approval for their productions" (54-55).

Throughout her work Magliocco consistently draws a picture of profound differences between Neo-Paganism and mainstream modern American culture. She often refers to a generally higher educational level of contemporary North American pagans, contrasts their spirituality and materialism with bearers of the dominant culture, emphasizes pagan liberalism and mainstream conservatism on certain issues, and tests pagan "ecological" thinking against the consumerism of members of the dominant culture.

It appears that the Neo-Pagan movement emerges, first of all, as a reaction on the part of educated and nonconformist people to important issues that preoccupy contemporary North American society. Among these are gender, nature and sexual orientation issues. For instance, the teaching of "Dianic" cults appears to resonate with the agendas of the feminist movement. As Sabina Magliocco points out, about 60% of all

Neo-Pagans are women. Such a disproportion with the North American cultural mainstream, represented in part by Christianity and Judaism, happens due to pagan religions' positive portrayals of women, numerous liturgical and creative opportunities, and focus on divine femininity (62). The nature and gay rights activists may also find a certain appeal in ideas expressed by various Neo-Pagan groups; while people in power, who belong predominantly to one of the Christian denominations, favour the further exploitation of nature's resources and oppose same-sex marriages, neo-pagans reject the exploitation of "mother-earth" (very much like the "green movement") and accept same-sex marriages. In short, as Sabina Magliocco summarizes it, "paganism attracts intelligent nonconformists critical of dominant paradigms" (62).

Though Magliocco attempts to depoliticize the nature of this movement and argues that "most North American Pagans do not live in a situation of colonization or domination in the margins of a larger polity" and are "engaged in the reclamation of a marginalized and silenced tradition" (9), Neo-Paganism clearly goes beyond a mere reclamation of pre-Christian polytheistic religious beliefs and rituals. For one thing it questions dominating paradigms of religion, science, civil rights and values, negotiating what can be considered "proper" and "normal" in the postmodern world. Also, the teachings of many Neo-Pagan religions resonate with certain ideas, entertained within the dominating culture, making new religions a factor in the cultural as well as the political life of North America.

All in all, Sabina Magliocco's book takes us deep into a largely obscure and often misunderstood culture, which offers a very different perspective of the world and the place of humans in it. While the rest of the people face various life challenges within the cocoon of the cultural mainstream, modern pagans create their religions as an alternative way of dealing with this world: a way which is based upon non-conformism, individual creativity and a belief in the possibility of a better self and a better world, greater personal freedom and spirituality.

*Roman I. Shiyon
University of Alberta
Edmonton*
