





In the circle formed by the Rollright stones of Oxfordshire, group dances around a cauldron

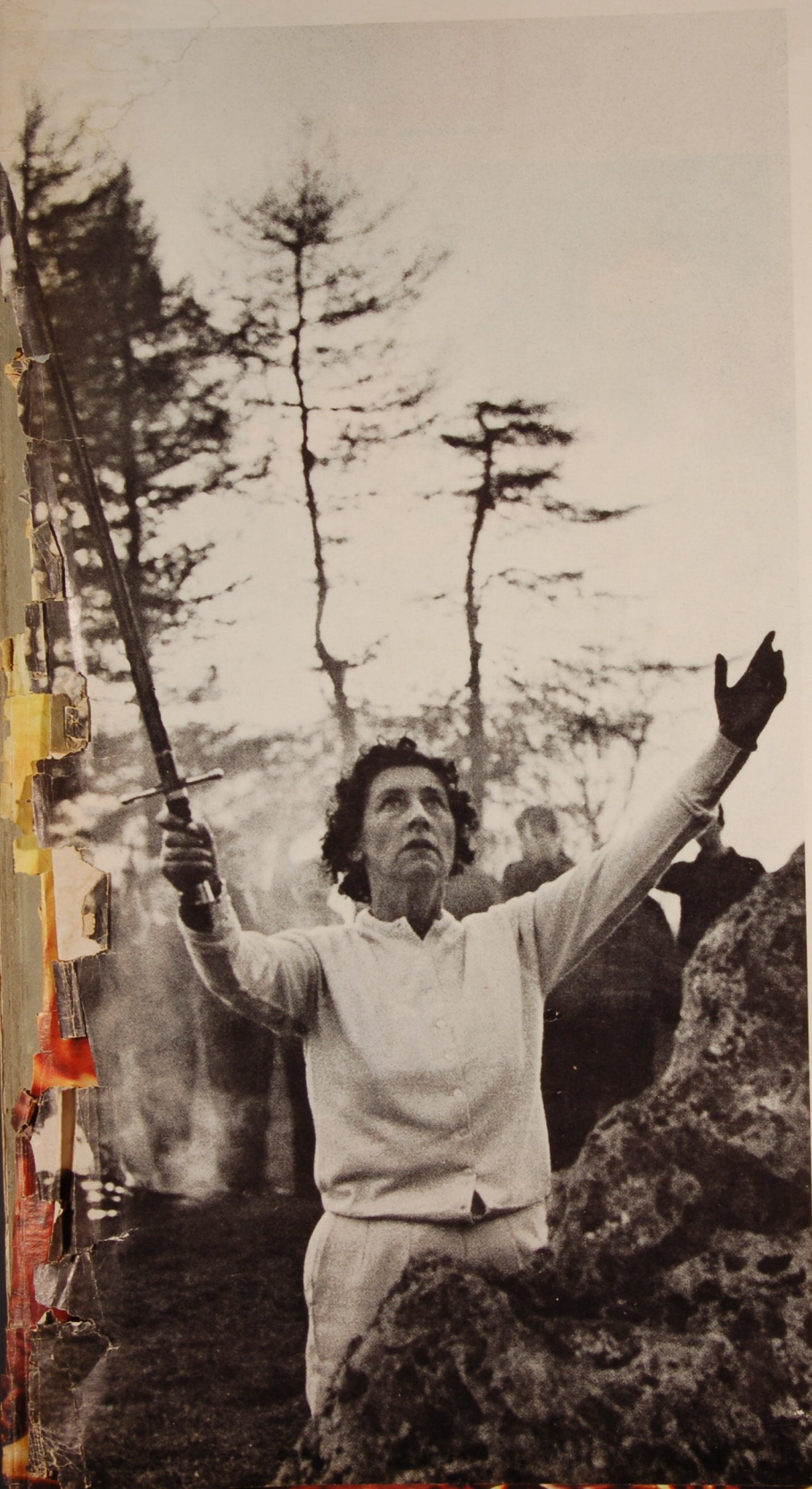
bubbling above the flames over which they will leap. ("We need the fire . . . it gets cold.")

a prevalence of Witches

Listen to the words of the Great Mother, who of old was also called among men Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite and many other names. . . ." So begins the ritual. And whether the mystic words are intoned around a flame-enveloped cauldron on an Oxfordshire field at May-time, or in a South London living room where the telly has been shunted aside because the moon is full, they

attest to an astonishing phenomenon: the revival of witchcraft as a religion in Britain. Distinct from the Black Magic of African cities and Mediterranean villages, British witchcraft counts among its devotees teachers, solicitors, civil servants, housewives. Here Photographer Terence Spencer and Reporter Dorothy Bacon of LIFE's London Bureau present an unprecedented look at an ancient cult.

Photographed for LIFE International by **TERENCE SPENCER**



Before an altar circled by the Rollright stones, Artemis invokes the Mighty Ones, a ritual sword held aloft. Members of coven grip sacred knives called Athame.





The meeting draws to a close, and witches jump over the fire in an ancient ritual which held that the fire stimulated the life-giving properties of the sun.

Dancing in a circle around the fire, the witches chant "Eko Eko Azarak, Eko Eko Zomelak, Eko Eko Ganas, Eko Eko Arada." Chant's meaning is secret.

Sabbat ritual within a circle around a fire

Ritual witchcraft has been legal in Britain since the Witchcraft Act of 1735 was repealed in 1951, but secrecy—to prevent the dissipation of the ritual's supposed powers, to obstruct their misuse and to shield practitioners from abuse—is deemed of its very essence by many of its followers. Thus the witches themselves differ whether they number, in Britain, a mere 400, or some 6,000. They group in covens (ideally 12 members and a High Priestess) and they all accept reincarnation as a fact of life, but interpret the word variously. One author-

ity, Gerald Brousseau Gardner, had a simple approach to the witch's way of life and death: "The witch wants quiet, regular, ordinary good government with everyone happy, plenty of fun and games, all fear of death being taken away. As you grow older, you rather welcome the idea of death as an abode of peace and rest, where you grow young again, ready to return for another round on earth." Others hold a more complicated belief in a return to a universal life force.

On these two pages, the coven of the High Priestess Artemis—a Tooting housewife named Ray Bone—welcomes May Eve, one of the four Great Sabbats of the witches' year, in Oxfordshire.

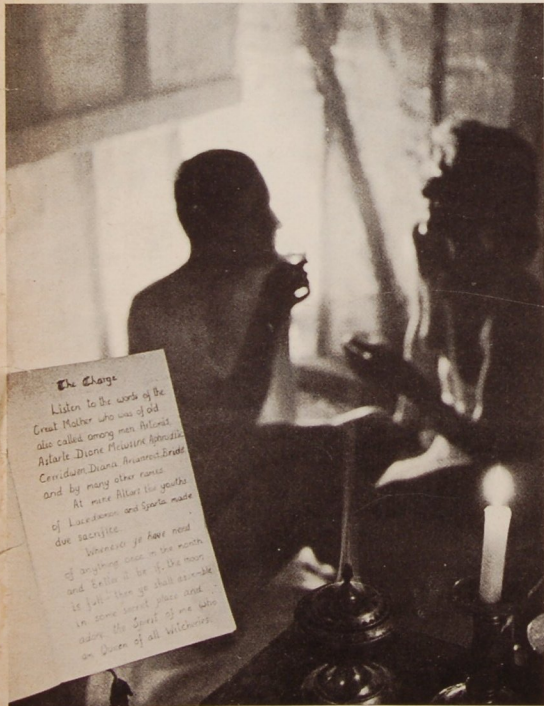


'Witchcraft is no place to take your maiden aunt . . .'



A beginning of meeting of St. Albans coven, Artemis consecrates water and salt. Ready for use are an incense burner, a wand, a knife, a cord.

Two witches take wine by the fire, in a ritual which they assert does not parody, but antedates, the Christian Mass. A sacred book stands open.



The Charge

Listen to the words of the Great Mother who was of old also called among men Artemis, Atlatle, Diane, Minerva, Hygeia, Ceridwen, Diana, Ananias, Enki, and by many other names. At once Allens the youths of Lacedaemon and Sparta made due sacrifice.

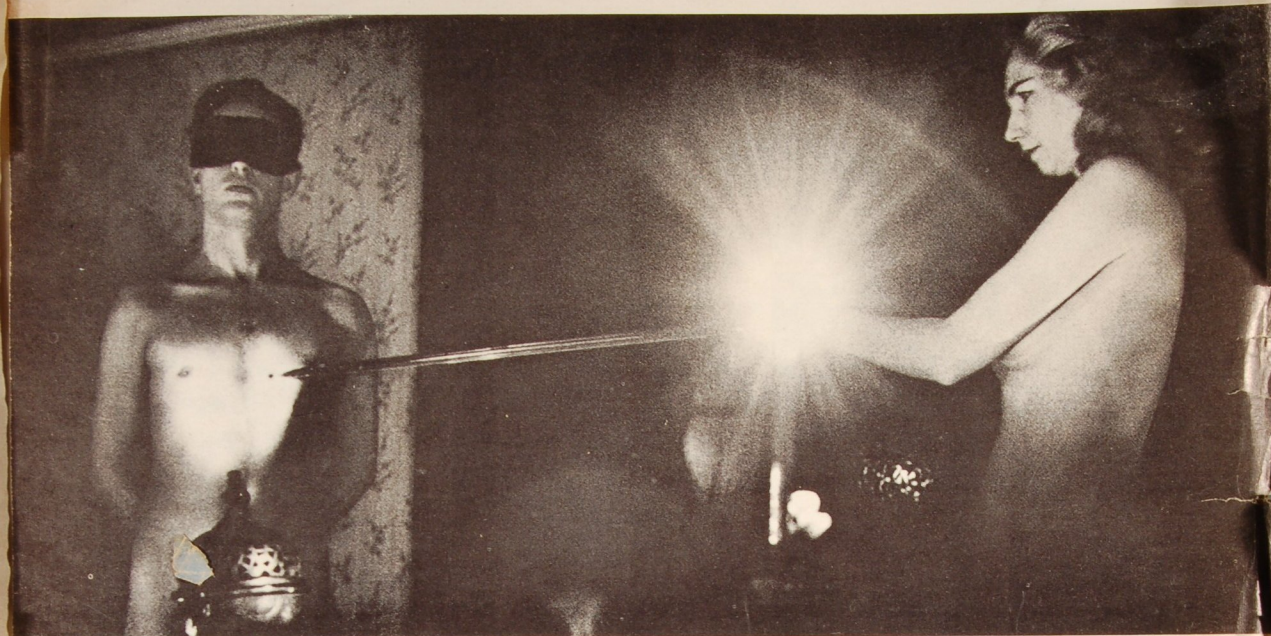
Whereas ye have need of anything, call on the moon and Enki. It be it the moon is full, then ye shall assemble in some secret place and adore the Spirit of me who am Queen of all Witches.

Once a month, on a Saturday night closest to the full of the moon, Artemis' coven gathers in a nine-foot circle chalked on the Axminster in the Bones' suburban living room in Trinity Road, Tooting. (Mr. Bone, no witch, is wryly amused.) But on occasion, for such ceremonies as an initiation, Artemis moves to a 17th Century cottage in a wood outside St. Albans, the quarters of a coven of which Jack Bracelin is High Priest. Bracelin's coven includes an economist, a physicist, and a university lecturer. "Worship of the female is compensation for the masculine world in which we live," says Bracelin. "There is a dual aspect—masculine and feminine—in the life force. We are trying to attune ourselves to it in order to know ourselves. All of witchcraft could be written up in Jungian terms—

the initiation ceremony, for instance, with its blindfolding, the cord tied to the mother, the new name. It helps to bring people out and to know themselves. The taking off of clothes removes external influences."

But Ray Bone, who turned to a study of comparative religions, occultism and eventually witchcraft because the Anglicanism of her childhood signified—to her—the stiffness of Sunday-best clothes, the scent of camphor balls and the agony of boredom, adds: "There aren't any orgies in our covens, though I cannot speak for others. Why should we go to all this trouble if we simply wanted to go to bed with someone?" But Gerald Gardner, who influenced Bracelin and Mrs. Bone, has warned: "Witchcraft is no place to take your maiden aunt even if she is romantic."





In invocation to the *Mighty Ones*, the *High Priestess* and her followers point athames upward before cabalistic symbols placed on cottage wall by Gerald Gardner.



Her sword against his heart, a witch called *Thelema* warns neophyte that "it were better to rush on my weapon and perish miserably" if he lacks courage.

Holding hands, a male and female witch dance in a circle at increasing speed until they break into a frenzied run. Whole coven takes part in this ritual.



A skeptic vs. the believers

Although photographs such as those on the preceding six pages have never before been published, witchcraft does command wide attention in Britain. "One or two narrow types think I'm a nut case, but generally I am quite accepted," says Ray Bone. The extent of the interest was demonstrated in a recent confrontation between a nonbeliever, the medievalist Dr. Rossell Hope-Robbins (*left*), and an avowed witch, Sybil Leek (*below*), before a phenomenally large audience. Lecturing to the Folk-lore Society at London's University College, Dr. Hope-Robbins dismissed witchcraft as a 15th and 16th Century invention of the Inquisition, intended to suppress heresy. Witches—of whom there were at least 40 and perhaps 100 present, by the count of one of their colleagues—rose to the challenge, heckled him with questions on such points as the existence of the 10th Century *Canon Episcopi*, which states that those who professed to have ridden by night with Diana were "seduced by the phantasms of demons."



President of the Folk-lore Society which sponsored lecture, Douglas Kennedy introduces himself jestingly as a "retired witch."

Scornful of claims that modern witchcraft derives from ancient, pre-Christian faiths, Dr. Hope-Robbins braves witches' wrath. Photos on this page are by Denis Cameron.

A witch who lives in the New Forest, Sybil Leek disdains secrecy; she appeared at lecture with her jackdaw, Hotfoot Jackson.





In Gardner's witchcraft museum at Castletown, Isle of Man, witch pores over *The Book of Shadows* in the Witch's Cottage. Book tells of rituals and spells.

A search for health, then for belief

Though witchcraft has survived without interruption in Britain through the centuries, it owes its current vogue to Gerald Brouseau Gardner, who was so dedicated to the rites he practiced and wrote about that he established a museum of witchcraft on the Isle of Man. Gardner began his travels with a flamboyant Irish nursemaid when he was sent off at age 4 to seek an asthma cure. The search took him to the Canaries, Africa, Ceylon, Singapore, Borneo, where he became a rubber planter, and Malaya. Lacking formal education, he became a self-taught anthropologist, and his researches interested him in spiritualism. On a visit to England in 1939, he encountered a coven in Hampshire. He already believed in reincarnation, and after the witches told him "You belonged to us in the past. Why don't you come back to us?" he found himself committed. The St. Albans coven and, indirectly, Mrs. Bone's group stem from him and when he died in Lebanon in February rival covens forgot their differences to issue a press release in tribute.



On museum's *Witches Cradle* the sign that reads "Whoever rocks the cradle fills it" often makes visitors nervous. Witchcraft is related to fertility rites of paganism.

Equipment of an herbalist witch who died a decade ago is on exhibition by courtesy of her family, which prefers to remain anonymous. She kept herbs in chest.



The old 'black magic' vs. 'white magic'

In remote and desolate regions of Britain—as in remote and desolate regions of France, Italy, Germany, Poland and dozens of other lands—the evil, the mischievous and the troubled often turn, as they have through the ages, to the Black Magic popularly associated with witchcraft.

A grave is opened, perhaps because a victim of goiter believes the superstition that it will vanish if it is touched thrice by a dead hand. In a church in a green and placid village in Sussex, four men are surprised in a mysterious ritual and the vicar finds it necessary to rehallow the altar because "they were definitely in league with the devil. . . ." Strange symbols appear on farmhouses, or a sheep's heart pierced with

thorns is found on a grave. Desecrations of churches alone in Britain totaled 578 last year, and how many represented vandalism, and how many were exercises in the occult, no one can say.

But the Black Magic which in much of the world casts a spell on an enemy, a cow or an infant has nothing whatever to do—such witches as Ray Bone and Jack Bracelin insist—with witchcraft as a religion. Whether other covens mix in some Black Magic with the white remains in doubt, but the distinction is sharply drawn by anthropologist Margaret Murray, and, on the next two pages, by the American anthropologist Joan Wescott, a psychologist living in Britain who is doing a book on modern witchcraft.

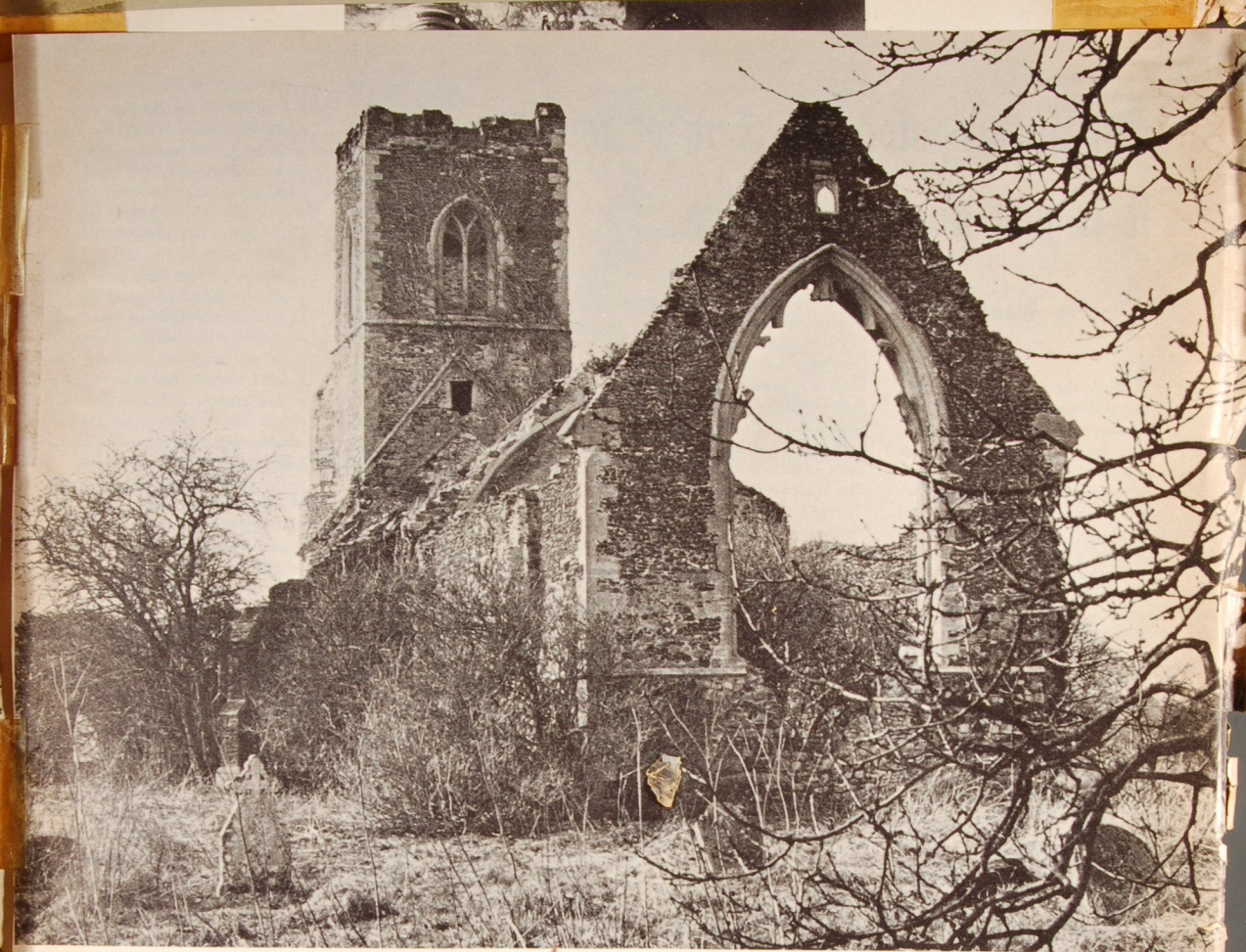


Black candle, female figure pierced with hawthorn and a sheep's heart on ruins of Church of St. Felix at Babingley may be work of jealous wife.



Effigies and a sheep's heart (left) and a circle and cross of root appeared mysteriously at threshold (above) of the castle at Castle Rising, a ruined Norman keep in Norfolk, at the moon's waning last September.





On site of first Christian church in East Anglia, built in Seventh Century, ruins of St. Felix are half mile from nearest farm and ideal for Black Magic.



At King's Lynn, graven heart (above) is by legend that of Mary Smith, burned in 1616, who warned her heart would fly out and perch (arrow) on judge's house.

An anthropologist's view of witchcraft: it is just another religion

by Joan Wescott

While the rituals of witchcraft are still secret, and must always remain so, it is no longer necessary for witches to practice their religion furtively. But secrecy, which is part of its tradition, has led to absurd exaggerations and confusing speculations about the nature of witchcraft. Journalistic sensationalism, with its dire warnings of "a devil on our doorstep," and hints of the corruption of innocent young girls in "nameless orgies," are all that remain of the witch hunts of long ago. But headlines which report the presence of "repulsive pagans in our midst," together with public condemnations of witchcraft by the clergy, have a chilling echo of the political and religious massacres that defile the history of mankind. In fairness, however, it must be said that the trend in publicity is beginning to change and that sympathetic accounts appear more frequently. Consequently, witches, who have always been shy of publicity, now find themselves in a state of ambivalence. Still insisting on the secrecy of their rites, they

would like at the same time to help clarify their beliefs.

There is an unfortunate confusion of witchcraft as a religion with such a variety of other occult activities—many of a blatantly sinister nature—and also with phenomena known by the same name in primitive societies, that it is necessary to distinguish it from them at the very outset. Witchcraft as it is practiced in England is a highly ritualistic religion, and is described by the witches themselves as pagan, pantheistic, and pre-Christian in origin. It is completely unrelated to Black Magic and to the ritual of the Black Mass. Contrary to popular belief, Christianity is not a target for abuse or even antipathy on the part of English witches. Indeed, witches tend to be liberal in their view of other religions.

What is known as witchcraft among, for example, the tribes of East or West Africa is of a very different order. The fact that it goes by the same name is simply the result of an equation of the manifestations of deliberate malicious practices in exotic cultures with what was thought to be the evil practices of European pagans. The feature of primitive



Engraving from Molitor's *De Lamiis* purports to show witches around a cauldron ceremonially producing a hailstorm in the year 1489.

witchcraft which stands out in striking contrast to the organized rituals and regular meetings of English witches is the absence of group activities. The banding together of witches is not a feature of witchcraft in primitive societies. Incantations and spells, the making of effigies, and the magical use of herbs are common to both. But here the parallel ends, because the primitive witch is working privately for private ends and not within the context of a religion. If one is to make any profitable comparisons of European witchcraft with primitive rituals it should be with those cults which worship similar deities.

English witches worship both a male and a female deity. But this is a matriarchal religion, and it is the goddess—whose name must remain secret—who is the focal point of worship. The goddess of the witches is a Great Mother who in the liturgy and ritual of the craft is clearly identified with the life force and with the power of love.

In the religion of witchcraft, *The Book of Shadows* stands in a similar position of importance as the major scriptures do to other religions. In it are set down the rituals of worship and initiation,

the symbolic meaning and the ritual function of the tools of witchcraft, and the esoterics of herbs and incense. *The Book of Shadows* is said to have been passed down through the generations, from witch to witch. Each initiate must make his or her own copy of the book and it is expressly forbidden to show it to anyone who has not been initiated into the craft.

In my own investigation of English witchcraft, I have chosen to lay greater emphasis on the rituals I have been privileged to witness and the accounts given me by the individual members than on the available literature. While there are many learned and sympathetic books such as those written by T. C. Lethbridge and Margaret Murray, their concern is mainly with historical reconstructions. Conjectures as to the origin of witchcraft seem less rewarding than an examination in depth of the meaning of present-day ritual to the members. As an approach, this is especially valid since it has become increasingly clear in the course of my investigation that witchcraft is a religion which gathers ideas around it. It is a composite affair and not a simple survival of what Margaret Murray calls a Dianic cult. Some might consider that it is therefore not more than a hodgepodge. Although it may well be a hybrid, what has been brought to it from, for example, Freemasonry or the Kabbalah seems to be perfectly consistent with the fundamental tenets of the craft. As an anthropologist, I can only look at it in its present form. It is a vital and growing religion with sincere devotees, and as with all religions it is as profound and rich, or as banal and empty, as the individual worshippers. All the ritual stems from the recognition of a male and female principle which, although opposed, must unite, each being incomplete without the other. The expression of this dichotomy pervades the religion of the witches. Within the magic circle, drawn and consecrated by the High Priestess at the opening of each meeting, the two principles are magically brought together. After the circle is drawn, each member is ritually purified and then brought into the circle by the High Priestess. Following the principle of duality, men and women must be in alternate positions around the circle, their hands joined. Both the god and



A Witches' Sabbat is depicted in this old print, with the celebrants following the ritual of the "Two-Horned Cult." The two horns are linked to fertility rites.

goddess are invoked and greeted and in the ceremony of cakes and wine it is ritually acknowledged that in the union of both lies the fulfillment of all the members.

Each element of the witches' rites is at once an expression of these dichotomies and a magical means of learning how to accept them. Thus it is that the essentials of a ritual religion cannot be preached and must be communicated by the ritual itself, and directly experienced by the worshiper. An awareness of good and evil, of light and darkness, summer and winter, black and white, harmony and discord, the passive and creative is dramatically heightened by the ritual.

Much of the rich symbolism of witchcraft must remain the secrets of the initiate. But two important symbols—the circle, and the two triangles, one inverted and superimposed on the other—may be interpreted as symbols of wholeness. The triangles represent fire and water and the male and female principles. The resulting symbol speaks clearly of the molding together of incompatibles.

It is the traditional custom of witches to perform their ritual in the nude, as it is an essential part of their belief that power is latent in the body and may be drawn out in various manners through chanting, dancing, and through other secret rites. The witch recognizes that the experience of the senses is sterile without religious significance, and that all joy—which is the provenance of the goddess—depends on the satisfaction of the senses. The wisdom of mystical experience that is claimed by witches is accompanied by an esoteric knowledge of herbs which purify, heal and stimulate, and of incenses such as myrrh, aromatic rush roots, cinnamon bark, musk, juniper and sandalwood. Each of these incenses has its own discrete function in the ritual, and their use together with herbs reflects the importance placed on the stimulation of the senses.

Throughout its history, witchcraft has been recognized as a fertility cult, and present-day ritual still reflects this fact. But much depends on interpretation. The old fertility rites are still performed, but a new interpretation has now been given to them—the fertility of the human spirit and imagination.



Gardner willed the museum and a cottage to its manager, Bill Worrell (no witch) who here serves tea to High Priest Jack Bracelin and Priestess Ray Bone (right).

A bourgeois-looking as any of her neighbors who follow less exotic faiths, Mrs. Bone walks her dog outside her home in the South London suburb of Tooting.

