



Intuition, Rebellion and Tradition

First Encounter Narratives in Mexican Neopaganism

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ABSTRACT Neopagans in Mexico City started to communitise only about 20 years ago. An initial analysis of related interview material shows that the narratives they develop about their first contact with neopagan content and their access to the field are framed as a conversion-like process, often connoted as a home-coming or a rebellion against predominant Catholicism. Both narratives are usually mixed with a notion of intuition that led to their further involvement in neopagan groups. Nevertheless, Mexican “folk magic” and vernacular healing traditions, Afro-American religions, and the flourishing esoteric scene in the Mexican capital are already offering links to beliefs and practices that are common in neopaganism, like ritualised ways to interact with transcendent entities, magic, and ideas of an “otherworld”. This raises various questions related to the underlying dynamics, in brief: how do heterogeneous sociohistorical situations influence emerging religious fields like the neopagan one in the Mexican capital, and how do these interactions shape personal religious transformation processes in the wider context of glocalisation, transcultural dynamics, digitalisation and the diversification of the religious field overall? In the light of Adler’s (1979) influential concept of home-coming and Luhrmann’s (1989) theory of the interpretative drift, it remains clear that becoming neopagan is rarely understood as a conversion, and therefore the two contested theoretical approaches are discussed critically and in relation to conversion. Using a grounded theory approach and thus emphasising the emic perspectives of my interviewees, I show how they construct their first encounter narratives and frame them as intuition, rebellion, or tradition, considering the underpinning sociocultural circumstances.

KEYWORDS neopaganism, first encounter narratives, Mexico, religious conversion, grounded theory

Introduction

The most frequently analysed factors that have fostered the emergence of a neopagan¹ religious field in Mexico include digitalisation ([Medina 2019–2020](#)), a general diversification of the [1]

1 Neopaganism serves as an umbrella term for various earth-centred religiosities that include contemporary witchcraft and heathenism as well as Norse, Germanic, Celtic, and other pre-Christian religious traditions.

religious panorama (De la Torre, Gutiérrez, and Hernández 2020) and the positive influence of pop-cultural productions (Calico 2018, 149–54; Gründer 2008, 52) like movies, TV-series, and games on neopagan core-tropes like the figures of the witch and the wizard in the public discourse. However, these analyses only survey external influences to the field and do not account for how the active Mexican neopagans got involved in neopaganism on a personal level in the first place. As studies from Europe (Fischer 2009; Gründer 2008, 2012; Hegner 2019; Hutton 1999, 2015; von Schnurbein 2016), the USA (Calico 2018; Harvey 1997; Hutton 1999; Lewis and Pizza 2009; York 2003), and other parts of the world (Ezzy 2009) have shown, various religious phenomena that have been categorised as neopaganism—most prominently Wicca and Asatru—share the characteristics of decentral organisational structures, non-institutionalisation, individualisation, and a focus on personal expertise in relevant topics as well as a historically established tendency towards secrecy. Nevertheless, the question remains how persons with an interest in neopaganism in Mexico originally managed to discover the existence of organised neopagan religions, what let them to delve deeper into those topics, and how they started to build local communities. In order to trace the underlying motivations and initial motifs that sparked their interest and led to further involvement, I show how neopagans in the Mexican capital narratively frame their first contact with neopaganism, thus emphasising the involved emic perspectives.

Due to the fact that very little academic research has been published about neopaganism in Mexico,² the empirical data used to construct the arguments presented in this paper is limited to those neopagan groups³ and actors that have been subject to my research since 2018, most prominently witchcraft-oriented Hysteria Pagana⁴ and Hermandad de la Diosa Blanca,⁵ as well as Allthing Asatru México⁶ with their respective founders, leaders, and core members. Practitioners without formal connections to established groups have been taken into account, too. Based on a snowball-system for the selection of interlocutors due to the low accessibility of the field and its actors, I've conducted narrative and semi-structured interviews⁷ and participant observation in and around Mexico City mostly during wheel of the year celebrations between 2018 and 2023 and supplemented the respective findings with digital data recovered from webpages and social media presences.⁸ Since the abductive approach I employed, based on Glaser and Strauss' ([1967] 2006) Grounded Theory,⁹ favours a dynamic relation between empirical data and theory, a special emphasis is placed on the emic perspectives and object language during the coding process, leading to theoretical approaches

2 Up to this date, only two papers with focus on this topic have been published: Hermosillo et al. (2016) and De la Torre, Gutiérrez, and Dansac (2021).

3 The groups that have been considered for this research are Hysteria Pagana, Allthing Asatru México, Ormbitur, Black Hat Society, Casa de la Luna, Cofradía Wicca Luna Azul, Sociedad Wicca México A. C., Circulo Wicca México, Hermandad de la Diosa Blanca, and Espiral de Avalon.

4 See <https://www.facebook.com/HysteriaPagana/>, last accessed May 3, 2024.

5 See <https://www.hdiosablanca.org/> last accessed May 3, 2024.

6 See <https://allthingasatrumexico.wordpress.com>, last accessed May 3, 2024.

7 No statistical data regarding the estimated number of neopagans in Mexico-City is available. However, the sizes of the mentioned organisations range from just a few people in the smaller groups or covens to several hundreds of people, as in the case of Hysteria Pagana.

8 The data linked to digital neopagan presences was collected on the mentioned groups' YouTube channels, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts, as well as in the following Facebook groups: "Wicca en México," "Wicca y Neopaganismo," "Ormbitur," "Wicca México" and "Nordic Page MX."

9 See also Charmaz (2014).

closely linked to the field data.¹⁰ The categories “intuition,” “rebellion” and “tradition” are therefore the result of the initial coding process of my empirical data.

Although there is a broad range of theoretical approaches available regarding the definition and process of religious transformation dynamics as in the cases considered here, I do not aim to deductively work with a particular theoretical approach. This is due to the fact that neopaganism is often considered a religion without converts, and consequently alternative concepts to “conversion,” like Adler’s ([1979] 2006) home-coming and Luhrmann’s (1989) interpretative drift thesis, are more widely used in the academic study of neopaganism. While I discuss this critically, instead of focusing on conversion, interpretative drift, or home-coming theory in depth, I rather analyse the portion of my empirical data that revolves around the narratives related to the first encounter with neopagan topics which are usually linked to the respective interview item,¹¹ complemented by relevant participant observation data. The analysed material thus comprises information on personal trigger-events that led to a further search for information and involvement in neopagan topics and groups in individual cases, shedding light on the religious transformation processes that lead towards and into neopaganism.

Consequently, this paper first discusses the idea of home-coming into a neopagan religiosity, the interpretative drift theory, and why conversion theory is often discarded when studying neopaganism. In order to contextualise the narratives, an overview of the sociocultural and socioreligious situation in the Mexican capital is then provided, including the establishment of the first neopagan groups that formed around the year 2000. Subsequently, I present the analysis of the narratives regarding the first encounter with and personal transformation towards neopaganism along three argumentative lines that I have identified as core motifs: intuition, rebellion, and tradition. Finally, the analytical findings are summarised with regard to the wider sociocultural context and implications for the further development of the Mexican neopagan field.

Theoretical Entanglements: Conversion, Home-Coming, Interpretative Drift

As a pioneer in the academic study of neopaganism in the USA and a practitioner herself,¹² Margot Adler stated already in 1979 in her influential book *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* that neopaganism is “a religion without converts” ([1979] 2006, title chapter 2). Discarding conversion as a viable concept for the approach to how neopagans acquire their identities and become part of a community, she instead coined the idea of a home-coming to a neopagan worldview, emphasising that rather than converting to a new religion, neopagans tend to describe their “home-coming” as finding a proper name and community for a worldview they already maintain. This concept

10 Thus, the argumentation and conclusions I present below need to be considered as part of the first abductive “spirals” of the underpinning research process, that is, close to the empirical data and as starting points for further theorisation.

11 The corresponding interview-item is “your first contact with neopaganism.” All 17 interlocutors responded to this.

12 The fact that several Religious Studies scholars who do research on neopaganism are practitioners themselves has to be critically taken into account. See, for example, Davidsen (2012). Apart from that, many neopagans consume academic literature on neopagan content.

not only set the tone for practitioners' narratives,¹³ but also the analytical angle in more recent studies (Harvey 1999; Harrington 2002). Harvey later pointed out that home-coming covers the ideas that neopagans come home to themselves, to a community, and often also a specific tradition (1999, 239; Harrington 2002, 26). Nonetheless, Adler's theory caused critical discussions (Gallagher 1994; Reid 2009; Mayer and Gründer 2010; Anczyk and Vencálek 2013) that repeatedly revolve around her poorly developed concept of conversion, yet all referenced authors agree that becoming neopagan is indeed described by neopagans mostly as some kind of "coming home." This is not surprising, as different variations of the home-coming narrative play a central role in various conversion theories regarding a wide range of religions.¹⁴

But why do both neopagans and religious scholars for the most part reject conversion both conceptually and rhetorically? In line with Adler's ([1979] 2006) still prevailing influence on neopagan conversion discourses, the idea of conversion is embedded in Christian tradition, prominently displayed in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*¹⁵ and the biblical account of Saul's conversion. This often leads to the assumption of conversion as a rupture or radical change, among other features based on Christianity-related case studies, and derived concepts often unintentionally maintain latent Christian connotations. This is not only problematic when non-Christian or non-European religious phenomena are concerned, but also in the specific case of neopaganism with a notably critical if not adversarial attitude towards it. Such dismissive opinions are often argumentatively tied to the European history of forced Christianisation of Norse and Germanic tribes in late Antiquity and the witch trials as well as the Inquisition during the Middle Ages (Hutton 2015, 13). Apart from the problematic Christian tinge of the original notion itself, its focus on a radical rupture and binary change on a personal level omits other relevant perspectives on individual religious transformation, such as their processual and continuous nature and cultural embeddedness. Several attempts to broaden the concept have been made, yet in the field of the academic study of neopaganism, other concepts became more widely used.

Although more focused on magic practitioners than neopagans in general, Tanya Luhrmann's (1989) controversial interpretative drift concept is frequently discussed as the counter position to the home-coming hypothesis and the idea of conversion in the narrow sense explained above (Mayer and Gründer 2010; Harrington 2002, 26). Interpretative drift describes the process during which neopagans gradually establish their (magical) beliefs based on meaningful subjective experiences and how they develop strategies of rationalization for those beliefs and their efficacy (Luhrmann 1989, 312–14; Mayer and Gründer 2010, 3). Focusing on the experiential dimension of becoming neopagan, Luhrmann underlines the processual character of the personal transformation of becoming—and identifying as—a neopagan. Analysing the relation of the interpretative drift and home-coming theses, Mayer and Gründer conclude that both are in fact complementary and identify "... (a) the feeling and experience of coming home, (b) the process of interpretative drift, and (c) extraordinary experiences containing strongly subjective evidence" (2010, 15) as three important facets that characterise the process of becoming a magic practitioner, and in their wider perspective also a neopagan.¹⁶ Thus, they

13 See, for example, non-academic literature like Diane Smith's "Wicca and Witchcraft for Dummies" (2005), especially "Part III: Coming Home: How Wiccans Become Wiccans".

14 Han (Han 2019), for example, calls this process based on his study of young Asians who become Buddhists "reversion."

15 In his thirteen-part autobiography, the later sainted Augustine of Hippo narrates his conversion to Christianity. His account had a major influence on the idea of conversion and tied it to a Christian context.

16 Mayer and Gründer (2010) as well as Luhrmann (1989) first and foremost refer to magic practitioners, however, in both cases the authors extend their theories to neopagans in general. The resulting conceptual

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recognise the interpretative drift and the home-coming idea as different approaches to the same individual transformation process, adding meaningful personal experiences, e.g. dreams or encounters with transcendent entities like gods, as a third influential factor. In the same complementary sense, Berger and Ezzy (2007) highlight that although the prevalent notion of home-coming rightfully underlines the agency of neopagans as individual seekers, the cultural environment and especially mass media also influence this process considerably. They even point out that the

... phrase “coming home” and all that it implies can itself be understood as a conversion narrative, that is, a culturally constructed rhetorical device through which individuals attempt to explain themselves and others why they changed religions or joined a religion after being unaffiliated. (Berger and Ezzy 2007, 58–59) [8]

In line with their observations, the tendency to analyse neopagan conversion narratives from a variety of premises, especially those that focus on conversion as a continuous process, external sociocultural circumstances like mass media, meaningful subjective experiences and other significant factors, going beyond the narrow idea of conversion Adler initially referred to, seems to present a fruitful approach among the referenced authors. The emic perspectives presented in the respective studies show that many neopagans do not understand themselves as converts, rendering “conversion” a rather superimposed label from their perspectives. This underlines the substantial differences between practitioners’ understandings of the concept and more recent approaches to conversion by scholars who make an effort to develop more sensitive, e.g., de-colonial theoretical concepts. [9]

Following a Grounded Theory based research design, I chose to approach the question of how my interlocutors became neopagans through the narratives they develop about their first encounter with neopaganism, considering external influences like sociocultural circumstances, especially mass media, and internal influences like decisive experiences, without mentioning “conversion” in order to avoid the possible negative connotations of the concept. Analytically, I thus take key elements identified by the aforementioned authors into account, yet use the codes abstracted from the empirical data as the main conceptual axis. The developed categories are therefore the result of abductive coding rather than deductive theoretical work, and consequently maintain close proximity to the empirical data on purpose. As the term *conversión* was thoroughly avoided by my interlocutors, I chose “first encounter narratives” as an analytical label, encouraging a conceptual inclusion into narration-focussed conversion theories like Jindra’s¹⁷ (2011) approach. [10]

Without pre-empting the analysis, it must be added that what Luhmann describes with her interpretative drift, i.e., a processual development of beliefs and their rationalisation, emphasising the experiential dimension and processual character thereof, plays a major role in the narratives I categorise as “Intuition.” As expected, due to the huge impact of the home-coming narrative among both practitioners and scholars, the idea of coming home to a neopagan self, community, and tradition also serves as a core element of both the “Intuition” and “Tradition” narratives as it highlights the continuity many interlocutors point out regarding the development of their religious identity. [11]

ambiguities does not play a role here because the majority of the interviewees can be described as magic practitioners, as illustrated in some interview excerpts below.

17 She interprets conversion processes based on narrative biographic interview material and analyses “push” and “pull” factors, e.g., the biographical/sociocultural background of a person and what she calls “religious content,” as well as the interaction between these factors.

The following overview of the sociocultural context in which the first formal neopagan groups emerged in the Mexican capital sets the stage for the subsequent analysis. [12]

Neopaganism in Mexico City

Mexico is rightfully known for its particular version of Catholicism, and the official census from 2020 shows that 75.9 % of Mexico City's residents identified as Catholics at this time (INEGI 2022, 133). However, as De la Torre et al. (2020) argue, global tendencies like digitalisation, decentralisation, an increase in transcultural exchange, and heightened environmental awareness have given rise to a broader variety of religious phenomena as a reaction to the related growing challenges, resulting in diversification and an overall reconfiguration of the Mexican religious panorama during the last decades. In this context, the upsurge of neopaganism can be considered symptomatic, especially due to the known cybercultural affinity among neopagans ever since the popularisation of the internet (Cowan 2005). Although the emerging neopagan field in the Mexican capital is still in an early stage of its development in comparison to other regions, and communitarisation only started around the year 2000, a variety of more or less formally organised groups tied to religious traditions like Wicca and Asatru have been established since then. Not only are the corresponding religiosities locally (re)configured with a focus on the individual and in reaction to the rapidly changing sociocultural context, but they also offer continuities with a wide range of already existing traditions. Among those are over sixty indigenous religions on Mexican soil as well as Afro-American religions, local vernacular healing traditions, so-called folk magic, and a variety of Christian beliefs. The more obvious, predominant, and historically traceable references, however, are pre-Christian and contemporary European cultures as they are considered to be the socio-cultural base or serve as a central inspiration for beliefs and practices. [13]

In a sociocultural context characterised by Christianity, especially the Catholic Church, neopagan core concepts like magic and the stereotypes of the witch and the wizard in modern Wicca and witchcraft traditions or the Blót-ritual and the Viking warrior stereotype in Norse and Germanic religious traditions tend to be negatively framed as inherently opposed to the predominant values and worldviews in public discourse. Thus, those main concepts are often linked to satanism, demon- and devil-worship, illicit and malicious magical practice (often so-called "black magic"), and counter-cultural ideologies in mass and Catholic media, giving them a negative connotation there.¹⁸ Although ambivalent ties to those publicly discredited topics can indeed be identified within the current neopagan fields, people interested in them [14]

18 In order to briefly illustrate this tendency, the translated headlines of representative newspaper articles from Aciprensa, a Catholic news outlet, as well as El Universal and Milenio, two influential Mexican newspapers, should suffice here: "Is Karely Ruiz a victim of witchcraft? Work against her found buried in a cemetery." (Milenio, 03.08.2022, last accessed May 3, 2024. URL: <https://www.milenio.com/virales/karely-ruiz-hallan-trabajo-brujeria-contra-ella-en-panteon-video>); "Exorcists warn of dangers of following 'modern witch' trend." (Aciprensa, 20.07.2022, last accessed May 3, 2024. URL: <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/exorcistas-advierten-los-peligros-de-seguir-la-moda-de-las-brujas-modernas-56866>); "Divination, charms and witchcraft open door to the devil, warns priest." (Aciprensa, 27.08.2019, last accessed May 3, 2024. URL: <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/adivinacion-amuletos-y-brujeria-abren-puerta-al-demonio-advierte-sacerdote-76940>); "New cardinal who was an exorcist for 20 years teaches to live a faith free of 'new paganism'." (Aciprensa, 26.07.2022, last accessed May 3, 2024. URL: <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/nuevo-cardenal-que-fue-exorcista-por-20-anos-ensena-a-vivir-una-fe-libre-del-nuevo-paganismo-31360>); "Catholics angered by 'Little Demon' series on Disney-owned channel. The faithful feel they can no longer even trust the 'suitable for all audiences' label." (El Universal, 07.09.2022, last accessed May 3, 2024. URL: <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/espectaculos/enoja-catolicos-serie-de-la-hija-de-satan-en-un-canal-propiedad-de-disney>)

during the time when neopaganism in Mexico City was not yet formally organised not only had to deal with the associated prevalent prejudices in their social circles but were also confronted with a lack of relevant sources in Spanish. In consequence, this led them to mostly European and US-American source material in foreign languages. As a matter of fact, prominent pop-cultural productions like “Harry Potter,” “Ghost Whisperer,” “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina,” and “Charmed” have in turn contributed to shifting the public connotations of the respective tropes, presenting them as positive and empowering, and therefore creating possible points of entry into the neopagan field.¹⁹

A last observation about the specific case of cultural phenomena in Mexico that are strongly related to “Western” (i.e., European and US-American) traditions has to be made due to the colonial history of the country and what is commonly known as *malinchismo*:²⁰ the tendency in Mexican culture to hold foreign things and ideas in higher esteem than Mexican ones. Although the underlying tendencies of exoticism and xenophilia might hint at superficial reasons for the fascination with pre-Christian European traditions, they can only account for one generalised factor among the many that influence the sociocultural and religious dynamics that lead the relevant individuals to a deeper involvement with those cultures on a personal level. Therefore, the concrete individual narratives are analysed in the following.

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Core Elements of First Encounter Narratives

One of the central items taken up by the interviewees during the first round of interviews is the “first contact with neopaganism.” In response, the interlocutors not only elaborated the back stories of how they became neopagans and their first encounter narratives themselves, but also embellished stories of experiences with deities, energy, magic, or the “call” towards a non-Catholic religion, consequently offering explanations for their search for information and community around them. The three guiding narratives that crystallised out of the interviews are presented below as an empirical basis for further abductive analysis. The resulting categorisation is based on the motivation(s) and context(s) given by the interviewees, resulting in three approaches: intuition, rebellion, and tradition. As they are not mutually exclusive, the individual narratives all contain elements of two or of all three.

[16]

Intuition

Jenny,²¹ who calls herself a “progressive Wicca,” says that although she was raised as a Christian and had consequently celebrated baptism and confirmation, she never identified with the Catholic religion because “something else was always calling”²² her and she had therefore already resigned herself to the fact that it was better not to belong to any religion at all, also because she could not find any tangible connection with exactly what was “calling” her. She emphasises that she has always had a vague intuition since childhood: “... so somehow there

[17]

19 The positive impact of mass media on the development and growth of neopagan fields is analysed in more detail by various authors, see for example Berger & Ezzy (2007).

20 Derived from the historical figure Malinche, interpreter and advisor to the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés. She was a native Nahuatl and is considered a stereotypical traitor to the Mexican indigenous population due to the fact that she helped the Spaniards conquer Tenochtitlan. *Malinchismo* thus polemically refers to the betrayal of Mexican culture by Mexicans themselves, especially to those who value what is foreign over what is Mexican. In the extreme, this attitude can be understood as Latin American auto-racism.

21 All names of the interviewees have been changed so that their identity remains anonymous.

22 Original: ... *siempre me llamaba algo más*.

was something, but I don't know exactly what it was."²³ She speaks of a *llamado*, a call, which she describes as a feeling of having to follow a certain path. In detail:

The path calls you, but you only follow this call when you are ready for it. [...] There] were many occasions in my life that connected me to it, but I paid little attention to them because I grew up with this belief—or rather, because this belief was drilled into me—that witches are of the devil.²⁴ [...] I then discovered all this over time. But what caught my attention the most, and this sounds quite simple at best or [laughs] a bit silly, well, were pop-cultural films and series.²⁵ [18]

She mentions the TV series “Ghost Whisperer” as an example for pop-cultural sources of inspiration, because she picked up the term “Wicca” there for the first time and later searched for it on the internet. However, she found little useful information at the time. It was not until many years later (around 2013) that she returned to the subject of Wicca, again pop-culturally inspired by the movie “The Craft.” She searched the internet yet again and actually found more information and a concrete connection, in this case to the Mexico City-based neopagan organisation Hysteria Pagana, where she is now a core member. The similarities to Berger and Ezzy's (2007) findings regarding the importance of mass media products that shed a positive light on neopaganism, as well as the idea of a home-coming, become apparent here. [19]

Just like Jenny, other interviewees recount an intuition, a feeling, or an urge that directed their interest towards neopaganism, which they classify in the first instance as an experience or impactful thought without linking any specific external influences to it. Following this internal “call,” they embarked on a quest²⁶ for information and community, which in turn actually led them to tangible literature, people, and groups. Dominic illustrates this as follows: [20]

Ever since I was little, I knew that something was different about me. I had dreams that involved Freya and feral landscapes full of snow and wild pinewoods—things I couldn't make sense of at the time, but which felt somehow familiar, homely. From there on, a yearning developed, a kind of... secret quest. My friends did not have something like that. Later, when I learned more about the Norse gods, many things became clear to me that I had only begun to guess at as a child.²⁷ [21]

The same motive of intuition that Dominic uses to explain him being drawn to neopaganism is used to frame his journey into neopaganism later in his life as the kind of home-coming Adler ([1979] 2006) and Harvey (1997) point out, while also leaning heavily on the meaningful subjective experience Mayer and Gründer (2010) highlight, which in this case refers to dreams. [22]

23 Original: ... *pues es que hay algo más allí, pero no sé qué es.*

24 “Of the devil” is but one possible translation of the Spanish term *del diablo*, which has satanic and overall evil connotations in public discourse.

25 Original: ... *el camino te llama, pero hasta que estas listo como que atiendes el llamado. [...] fueron muchas ocasiones en mi vida que me vinculaban con esto y no les presté mucha atención, porque pues yo crecí con esta creencia, o bueno, nos inculcan esta creencia de que las brujas son del diablo [...]. [F]ue como descubrir todo conforme fue pasando el tiempo. Pero es que lo que más me llamó, y va a sonar a lo mejor medio simple [se ríe] o a lo mejor un poco tonto, pues fueron películas y series de la cultura pop.*

26 In their respective conversion models, Lofland/Stark (1965) and Straus (1976), among others, would label those persons as “seekers” as they try to solve a tension in their lives by seeking a (religious) solution. This label, however, falls short of the emphasis the quoted interlocutors place on pivotal encounters that were not sought after at all, as exemplified below.

27 Original: *Desde chiquito sabía que yo era algo diferente. Tuve sueños con Freya y paisajes llenos de nieve y bosque boreal – cosas que ni sabía clasificar en este momento, pero de alguna manera se sintieron acogedores. De ellas se desarrolló un anhelo, una especie de... búsqueda secreta. Mis amigos no tuvieron esto. Más adelante, cuando conocí más sobre los dioses nórdicos, entendí mucho de lo que de niño solo había intuido.*

Other interlocutors also describe unintended encounters that brought them into contact with specific neopagan content that they had not previously known. Penelope, for example, reports an occasion that happened while she was suffering a depressive episode: she had perceived an unknown woman on the edge of her bed one night who told her that she was there for her and that she should not worry. Penelope picked up the name “Hecate” from this encounter, which she claimed she had not known before, searched it on Google and found out that she was dealing with the Greek goddess Hecate whose images resembled the woman she had seen on her bed. In the following, she had strived to find out more about this goddess and, in the wider context, also about Wicca, and finally decided to become initiated as a Wiccan priestess later on. As Mayer and Gründer argue, the extraordinary experience “containing strongly subjective evidence” (2010, 15), in this case the encounter with the goddess Hecate, triggers a deeper involvement with neopaganism, and this process reflects, on the one hand, what Luhrmann (1989) describes as interpretative drift insofar as it includes processes of rationalisation and “growing into” a Wiccan priestess; on the other hand, it matches the idea of coming home into a community of likeminded people after years of searching, but also into a self-image and label that properly represents how she understands herself. In accordance with Pike’s findings about neopagans in the USA, first encounter narratives often include “childhood visions of the divine in nature and encounters with unusual phenomena such as ghosts” (2001, 165) that mark a crucial point for their religious self-identification. [23]

The intuition of a hitherto foreign, neopagan world is identified here as a pronounced motive which the interviewees use not only to justify their involvement with neopaganism, but also to contextualise and interpret it. The narratives that revolve around the first encounter with neopaganism through an intuition rely heavily on situations that are interpreted as meaningful and pivotal by the practitioners and often include altered states of mind like dreams. In turn, the second motive, rebellion, is not predominantly based on subjective experience and thought, but on narratives about a tangible everyday social life. The passive, experience-based concept of intuition thus in a sense opposes, and in some cases complements, the active, action-based concept of rebellion. [24]

Rebellion

A second leitmotif in the narratives concerning the interviewees’ first encounters with neopaganism is their resistance against Roman Catholic discourses that were (and still mostly are) dominant in Mexican society, and are usually reproduced among their families and broader social circles. Although the majority of the interlocutors distance themselves from Roman Catholicism or Christianity in general, not all of them adopt a fundamentally rebellious attitude towards Christianity. However, the rebellion motive is not characterised by a merely passive distancing from the Catholic Church or Christianity, but rather an actively voiced counter-position that is acted upon. This position becomes clear in situations like my encounter with Selena, an Alexandrian Wicca I met for an informal interview in autumn 2018. When we walked past a Jehovah’s Witnesses information table in a Metro station, she reacted to the two women’s invitation to a quick talk by vigorously pointing at her T-shirt that featured the vibrantly coloured lettering “We are the granddaughters of the Witches you couldn’t burn”²⁸ and flashing them a provocative smile, thus clearly indicating her aversion. [25]

The narratives about any kind of rebellion are characterised by the respective interviewees [26]

²⁸ Translated from the Spanish original *Somos las nietas de las brujas que no pudisteis quemar*.

as starting in their childhood or adolescence and flattening out during adulthood with the adoption of a genuine neopagan identity, implying their becoming more reflective and less impulsive. Yet, the initial motive remains an act of personal rebellion. Meredith, for instance, opens her encounter with neopaganism by narrating this anecdote:

My mother was a Catholic and I think it was passed down like that from generation to generation and that is why they wanted to imprint that on me [...], but I was never interested, I never felt comfortable with it. No. I didn't like going to church, as we usually had to, and I felt kind of bad at church. So, I avoided it. I remember my mother telling my brother and I when we were teenagers that we should go to church; if we did not, we would not go out for dinner afterwards or something like that. "From the Sunday service we will go to this or that place." And I was like: "No, forget it." No. Never. That is, I never felt part of it. It just did not find anything in it at all.²⁹ [27]

The uneasy feeling about the Catholic Church, paired with a parent-imposed obligation to interact with Roman Catholic content—primarily churchgoing, monotheistic dogma, and the Roman Catholic organisational structure, especially its hierarchies—shape the rebellion narrative. The majority of my interlocutors also actively resigned from church if they were formally affiliated as children by their parents. It must be stressed that the corresponding interviewees rebelled against Roman Catholic socialisation from childhood or adolescence onwards and, in the cases of three of them, actively pursued practices and world views that were deemed contrary to the predominant value systems, e.g., Satanism or Paganism.³⁰ They then consciously exhibited these practices and worldviews in public and private. The means of choice to express their rebellion, apart from the corresponding religious activities, were mainly attire and accessories with symbols such as the pentagram, triple moon, Vegvesir, Mjölner, and others commonly used by neopagans, as well as music, often tied to Gothic and Metal music subcultures, Satanism, Occultism, and Esotericism, including their typical stylistic elements. [28]

The arguments that support the rebellion narratives tend to reproduce negative discourses about Roman Catholicism and are aimed less at a dissociation from the Catholic Church but rather at actively choosing neopaganism over it. Aurora exemplifies this: [29]

One has heard of so many abuses and it feels as if [Roman Catholicism] is always a religion that causes a lot of fear, right? And so I think that now people want to be a bit freer and want to know a bit more about the truth, right? So they do not want to be, well, so that there is... not so much punishment [...]. And that it can be a bit freer.³¹ [30]

29 Original: ... mi mamá era católica y creo que esto ha sido de generación en generación y pues es como que lo que me quisieron inculcar. [...] pero nunca me llamó la atención, o sea, no, como que no estaba yo a gusto. No. No me gustaba entrar en una iglesia, como siempre, como que me sentía mal. Entonces lo evitaba. Me acuerdo que ya más como que de adolescente, mi mamá, a mi hermano y a mí nos decía que fuéramos a la iglesia, si no, no nos iban a llevar a comer fuera o no sé. ¿No? "De allí de misa vamos a tal lugar" y yo así de "no", o sea, "olvidalo". No. Nunca, no sé, no me, no me sentía parte de esto. Como que no le encontraba yo el chiste.

30 Two interviewees mentioned Anton LaVey's Satanism, one named Camino Rojo as examples.

31 Original: Se han escuchado de tantos abusos y como que siempre [el catolicismo] es una religión que meten como mucho miedo, ¿no? Y entonces como que yo pienso que ahora las personas quieren ser un poco más libres y quieren como saber un poco más la verdad, ¿no? De que no estar, pues que no... hay tanto castigo [...]. Y puede ser un poco más libre.

The connection she draws between neopaganism and freedom and, in contrast, the Catholic Church and fear and punishment is similarly found in other interviews. The Catholic Church as an institution as well as the value system conveyed by it are consequently accused of being too dogmatic and institutionalised, especially their hierarchical organisational structure and attributed (moral) rigidity. These accusations usually also describe the Catholic Church as intolerant, outdated, misogynistic, patriarchal, fear-inducing, and too focused on proselytisation. Those attributes are then used to justify turning to neopaganism in search of a viable alternative. One striking aspect of this argumentation is that by contrasting the negative attributes ascribed to the Catholic Church, the ideas, organisational structures, and values ascribed to neopaganism are in turn inherently framed as the better option. Hence, this narrative leads to the conclusion that rebellion against a negatively connoted religion has the logical consequence of turning to a religion that embodies the opposite values—in this case, any kind of neopaganism. Further points in favour, prominently mentioned by the interviewees who talk about their rebellion against the prevailing social system, include the following points:³² [31]

- An emphasis on female empowerment, especially in light of the growing number of femicides in Mexico. [32]
- Nature protection and sustainability, tied to their pan-, polytheistic, or animistic world-views and the derived ethical and moral value systems that are frequently linked to holistic ideas. [33]
- The lack of missionary tendencies towards non-neopagans, underpinning their open criticism against those actors in civil society that try to convert them to their religion or ideological view. [34]
- The opportunity to create individual, local traditions that overcome ideas and structures which emerged in a colonial setting where the local population, frequently highlighted as venerated ancestors by the interviewees, was forced to convert to Christianity. [35]

The rebellion narratives also illustrate the latent criticism of conversion as a concept related to Christianity and colonial history, especially one that frames the converted person as a passive recipient rather than an individual with agency, much in the sense of Adler ([1979] 2006), Reid (2009, 172), and Anczyk/Vencálek (2013, 165). [36]

“Tradition,” the third narrative motif regarding the initial encounter with neopaganism, presents yet a different approach, since Christian socialisation plays only a secondary role in this line of argumentation. In turn, prior influences of a religiously heterogeneous or overtly “magical” or “spiritual” family context form the centre of the respective arguments analysed below. [37]

Tradition

Five of the seventeen interlocutors emphasised having grown up in family circumstances where magical practices and beliefs that align with those interpreted as neopagan formed an important part of everyday life during their childhood and adolescence. Points of intersection [38]

32 It would go beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate further on those points, yet they only touch the surface of crucial developments within neopaganism that require further research.

between those world views and their individual configurations of neopaganism are above all folk magic and vernacular healing practices, African-American religions such as Santería and Palo Mayombe, and indigenous Mexican world views like those of the Maya, Nahua, Mexica, and Mazahua people.

The clearest example of the tradition narrative is provided by Aurora, who reports that her first contact with neopaganism took place “... when I was little. [...] I did not even know what neopaganism was, but my father, well, he did purification and shamanic rituals at home and together with a witch.”³³ She says these practices were considered “normal” at home and that later, around the age of twenty to twenty-five, she developed an active interest in witchcraft and magic, and subsequently pursued it herself. Penelope also explains that she has family members who are Catholic Christians and from various other religions, including Mayan, who:

... not only believe in the supernatural, but also have gifts.³⁴ For example: my maternal grandmother can predict the future. My mother levitates things when she gets angry. [...] My sister is a medium. [...] So it has always been like a topic in my family. [...] And I started to make my own potions when I was little.³⁵

The “supernatural” ideas she later takes up in what she calls progressive Wicca, she has already related to since childhood, and her contact with Wicca occurred primarily through her continued preoccupation with the “supernatural” and possible ways of interacting with it. Even if she does not engage in the exact same practices as her family members, she was born and raised into religious traditions characterised by many elements that are equally prevalent in neopaganism: an “otherworld”, magic and sorcery, communication with transcendent non-human beings, spirit, gods, poly- as well as pantheism, and the like.

Adriana and Mateo also relate stories of core moments when they received worldview-related explanations from their parents or grandparents who brought them into direct contact with a magical, supernatural reality and entities that were interpreted as dwellers of a dimension other than the material realm. When she discovered what supposedly was an unusually fast-blinking firefly in the garden of her grandparents as a child, Adriana states that she asked her grandfather for an explanation and that he showed her in response “... how to open this third eye, and told me: ‘Take a good look at her, that is a fairy.’”³⁶ She highlights that her socialisation inherently contained elements she later interpreted as neopagan; in this case, fairies and the “otherworld.”

Mateo directly links his approach to herbalism and folk magic practices to the genetic lineage of his ancestors, stressing their function as a common ground with Wiccan practice and a magical worldview in general. His maternal grandmother was a *curandera* (natural healer) who also performed folk magic practices such as *limpias* (spiritual cleansings), and it was through his mother that “... the tradition was then passed on, right? Through the genes as well. [...] I feel that this was my first contact. And later I started to seek and search and investigate on my own.”³⁷ In this case, too, attention is drawn to a line of tradition that not only suggests

33 Original: ... fue de pequeña [...]. Yo ni sabía lo que era neopaganismo, pero con mi papá, porque él practicaba como rituales de limpia y rituales chamánicos allí en la casa, sí, con una bruja.

34 The Spanish term *don* she uses also refers to talents and skills, and may allude to supernatural abilities as in this case.

35 Original: ... no solo creen en lo sobrenatural, sino que tienen dones. Por ejemplo: mi abuelita materna puede predecir el futuro. Mi mamá, cuando se enoja, levita cosas. [...] Mi hermana es médium. [...] Entonces desde siempre ha sido como un tema en mi familia. [...] luego empecé yo de chiquita a hacer mis pociones.

36 Original: ... cómo abrir este tercer ojo y me dijo: “Véla bien, es un hada.”

37 Original: ... se va pasando, ¿no? Entre los genes también. [...] Yo siento que desde allí fue mi primer contacto. Posteriormente pues yo empecé a buscar y buscar e indagar.

an upbringing that harmonises with neopagan ideas but also explains certain abilities, for instance skills in magic, herbalism, and spiritual healing, through a genetic lineage.³⁸

Although framed differently than in the previous example, Mariela also ascribes herself to a religious tradition that assumes a magical dimension because the majority of her family is affiliated to the Afro-Cuban religion Santería. Moreover, she speaks of having “gifts” and connects this idea to her heritage in terms of worldviews that were passed down through her ancestors and living family members. The “gifts” she identifies include the communication with supernatural entities, channelling energy and working magic. In comparison to the other examples, she does not place herself in the concrete family tradition of Santería, but distances herself from it. However, the orientation towards a magical worldview remains and is used by her to explain her search for like-minded persons in order to properly deal with her “gifts”:

... I never practised them [the gifts], but I was always aware that I would have to deal with them if they became too invasive. That is because when you have them, they suddenly become quite invasive in your life until you accept them or go crazy.³⁹

She explains the decisive factor for further involvement with neopaganism as a necessity to avoid going “crazy,” apart from her more obvious link to the “supernatural” due to her being raised in a Santería-based world-view.

The narratives in which the interviewees locate themselves in a tradition that contains elements that directly interact with their idea of neopaganism frame their turn to a neopagan religion on the one hand as a logical or necessary consequence of an already acquired worldview, and on the other hand as a strategy for coping with an everyday reality that contains elements like an “otherworld,” as well as related energies and entities that form the centre of their individual configuration of a neopagan religiosity.

As “tradition” continues to be a controversially discussed topic among both neopagans and scholars (Rountree 2015; Magliocco 2004), especially regarding the negotiation of authenticity, it is not surprising that my interlocutors talk about becoming neopagan as carrying on a tradition. Yet, neither of the theoretical approaches introduced in the first part of this article considers the “tradition” approach as a kind of “conversion,” as there is neither a rupture regarding core elements in the respective worldview nor an interpretative drift, but rather the active decision to follow an already familiar worldview while interpreting, utilising, and adapting its elements in a highly individual way.

Conclusions

Trying to avoid the ambiguities of conversion theories and the entailing conceptual difficulties known in the field of neopaganism, this paper focused on first encounter narratives in order to trace how individuals describe themselves as becoming neopagans. In the case of the interviewed Mexican neopagans, the transformation processes are often understood as “coming home” to the “right” religion, as a gradual and active process. Although the individual

38 This is not uncommon in neopaganism. Stephen McNallen, an influential US-American author in the field of Norse and Germanic heathenism, prominently coined the controversial concept of Metagenetics that ties the authenticity of North American neopagans to their ancestral lineage from Europe (see Calico 2018, 175).

39 Original: ... *nunca las practiqué, pero siempre estaba consciente de que en algún momento de mi vida si estuvieran como que muy invasivas, yo los tuviera que pelar. Porque cuando las tienes, de pronto se vuelven muy invasivas en tu vida hasta que los aceptes o te vuelves loco.*

approaches to neopaganism are framed differently in the interviewees' narratives, all of them contain at least one motif based on which they explain their search for concrete access and connections and subsequently their integration into the neopagan community, usually also into a particular group. One of the central ideas is an intuition based on concrete experiences, thoughts, dreams, or visions that the interlocutors describe as a fundamental feeling that is imposed on them and has to be dealt with, thus placing related and connectable neopagan ideas in the centre of their religious interest. However, there are individually differing variants of this intuition; the motif of returning home to a neopagan culture and that of an intimate connection to a neopagan deity or (Northern) European culture without having known either of them beforehand are two meaningful examples. These encounters are often linked to dreams and visions, that is, altered states of consciousness that do not correspond to a regular mind state. Apart from that, the intuition is described as a latent abstract feeling experienced as a longing or a "call" towards something different than the ordinary and known, which sooner or later leads to concrete involvement with neopaganism.

Two other tendencies become evident in the empirical material: that of an active rebellion [50] against a Catholic education and the associated worldviews, dogmas, power relations, and rites, on the one hand, and that of the pursuit of a magical tradition or, less specifically, the adoption of a worldview deemed "normal" by the family which already contains meaningful elements that the interviewees interpret as neopagan, for example polytheism, magic, or shamanism, on the other hand. In both cases, the encounter with neopagan contents is presented as a conscious decision or as a reaction to an upbringing within a certain ideological framework, which is either followed (tradition) or opposed (rebellion) to a certain extent, leading to the configuration of individualised neopagan religiosities.

It must be stressed that these three tendencies are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, [51] the majority of my interlocutors recount both an emotional, experiential, and intuitive approach mostly during their childhood or adolescence, but then highlight that their active decision in favour of neopaganism occurred in the context of, and therefore as a reaction to, prevailing socio-cultural-religious circumstances. Those are mainly shaped by Mexican Catholicism, more often than not interpreted in the light of colonial history, and the entailing public Christian discourse wherein core neopagan tropes remain negatively connoted. Opposing discursive forces that reassign positive connotations to emblematic neopagan content comprise not only folk-religious and herbalist practices as well as indigenous and Afro-American traditions that offer substantial points of connection, but also entertainment franchises that shed a positive, if not heroic light on stereotypes that inspire and shape core ideas taken up in neopaganism like the Viking warrior, the spirit medium, or the witch with their respective idealised lifestyles. As a consequence and in line with Ezzy and Berger's (2007) findings, the rise of the internet can be understood as a main catalyst for neopagan communitarianisation in the Mexican capital: it offered access to information on existing traditions of interest and anonymous communication platforms where interested persons could interact with like-minded people without having to travel abroad to establish personal contact with existing foreign neopagan groups⁴⁰ and without having to fear the negative stigmatisation they may have suffered in their predominantly Christian social circles, in spite of the already broadening and diversifying Mexican religious panorama.

40 The interview data shows that Mexican neopagans in leading positions, like the founders of Allthing Asatru Mexico and Hysteria Pagana, have established ties to European and US-American neopagans mostly as teachers or mentors. Yet most interlocutors have not had any contact or relationship with foreign actors at all due to their self-declared economic incapacity to afford a trip abroad.

The three identified first encounter narratives are embedded in complex sociohistorical and cultural entanglements, and therefore reflect the underlying societal power relations and resulting religious configurations in a merely exemplary and simplified way. They still offer insights into the reasons why Mexican neopagans initially decided to proactively engage in neopaganism and how they make sense of their religious trajectory so far, highlighting the subsequent developments as results of arising religious demands. The three categories can thus be understood as narrative framings of personal approaches and entries into the neopagan field as well as the underlying reasons, motives, and triggers as follows: [52]

- **Intuition:** fundamental feeling of belonging based on personal experiences related to thoughts, dreams or visions of transcendent entities and relevant foreign cultures, often childhood-related and understood as a latent “call”, later labelled as coming home. [53]
- **Rebellion:** active, action-based, often counter-culturally framed opposition against the prevalent social norms, mostly Christianity (Catholicism), often visually expressed and acted out during adolescence. [54]
- **Tradition:** continuation of an ancestral lineage or family tradition related to core elements of neopagan practice and world-view, often genealogically framed. [55]

These narratives point towards further communitarisation processes as reactions to the shortcomings and an increasing demand for information and formal communities. The lack thereof can be interpreted as a principal motivation for those persons who are now main actors in the Mexican neopagan field to found organisations, covens, and clans, set up educational offers like seminars and workshops, libraries, later also websites and presences on digital social platforms. They even strive to become more visible in the public, for example through events like a yearly pagan pride parade and commercial establishments like shops, cafés, and events that cater specifically to a neopagan clientele. It becomes clear that further investigation is not only necessary in order to trace the developments of the ephemeral and fluid emerging neopagan field in the Mexican capital and nationwide, but also to discover the underlying glocal⁴¹ relations and relationalities that influence the ongoing processes of (re)configuration and shape individual neopagan religiosities. [56]

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