Consumer witchcraft: are teenage witches a creation of commercial interests?

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The production of books, magazines, kits, films, TV programmes and Internet sites aimed at teenagers, especially girls, on witchcraft, Wicca and related topics, has been a growth industry of the late 1990s and 2000s. This article examines whether Ezzy’s distinction between ‘traditional witchcraft’, a serious religious path, and ‘white witchcraft’, an aspect of consumerism, can be used to understand the phenomenon of ‘teenage witchcraft’. An analysis of some of the materials available and of interviews with young women who identify as witches attempts to answer the question of whether young people are being exploited by commercial interests, or whether the ‘teen witch’ phenomenon cannot be so easily dismissed. The author suggests that at least some young people who identify as witches or Pagans are not mere consumers of exploitative materials, but are well-informed, critical thinkers articulating their own serious spiritual and theological perspectives.

Two types of witchcraft?
In a recent article, Doug Ezzy (2006, p. 15) sets up a contrast between ‘traditional witchcraft’ and ‘white witchcraft’, a label he uses to describe ‘a type of witchcraft consistent with consumer capitalism’. In distinguishing between the two, ‘traditional witchcraft’ is seen as an established form of Pagan religion, practised from the 1940s onwards, associated with names such as Gerald Gardner, Alex Sanders, Starhawk and Vivienne Crowley, a tradition which is often called ‘Wicca’. This contemporary religious path, he claims, tends to be small scale and private, and represents a strand within the growing Pagan movement, with rituals which celebrate nature and fertility, and which recognise death as well as life. The ethic of this form of ‘witchcraft’ is centred on both self-development and also concern for social justice, feminism and the natural environment. It can be viewed as a religious path which seeks, like other

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religions, to be transformative. In contrast, he distinguishes ‘white witchcraft’ as a phenomenon dating from the 1990s, which is more public, commercially available, and provides the practitioner with techniques for self-gratification and success in wealth, career and relationships. It does not challenge accepted gender roles or concern itself with environmental issues, but fits well into the consumerist world, which ‘traditional’ witchcraft tends to challenge as unhealthy for individual, society and the planet. Whereas ‘traditional witchcraft’ accepts the darker side of life, Ezzy claims that ‘white witchcraft’ either blithely ignores the more difficult sides of human existence or seeks to transcend such difficulties for the individual alone. He obviously views ‘traditional witchcraft’ with more approval than ‘white witchcraft’.

In setting up this contrast, Ezzy is using terms like ‘witchcraft’, ‘tradition’, ‘white’ and ‘Pagan’ in specialised ways which may need explaining to those unfamiliar with the worlds of contemporary Paganism. Both adherents and academics use these and related terms in different ways and there is an inbuilt ‘fuzziness’ to any attempts at definition. However, it is clear that Ezzy is using ‘witchcraft’ to refer to a phenomenon of the contemporary ‘Western’ world rather than what might be meant by the term in connection with traditional African religions or fourteenth to seventeenth century Europe. The ‘tradition’ he refers to dates back half a century rather than to any millennia-old, pre-Christian pagan practice, though adherents may draw upon what is known of such religions for a mythological vocabulary. The term ‘white witchcraft’ he employs because this is often the term used to self-designate by the writers of popular commercial spellbooks in order to indicate to the public that they should not be seen as evil. The terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ witchcraft would not be used by ‘proper’ witches as apart from being potentially racist such a simplistic division would not be recognised by the Wiccan ‘community’.

In using the word ‘pagan’ he (and the current writer) is referring neither to ancient polytheism nor contemporary non-monotheist indigenous traditions, but a contemporary movement united only in its location of the sacred in nature, in the feminine as well as the masculine, and by a shared culture and vocabulary. In another article (2003) Ezzy associates ‘traditional witchcraft’ or Wicca with ‘Paganism’ and the witchcraft of popular spellbooks with the label ‘New Age’, in that the stress seems to be on the self, this-worldly success and evolutionary teleology. Typically, the demands on the individual are only ephemeral (again this is a particular understanding of the term ‘New Age’, a term which tend to be even ‘fuzzier’ than ‘pagan’ or ‘witch’). Useful further clarification of Wicca, witchcraft, Paganism, ‘New Age’ and related phenomena can be found in Pearson (2002a, b).

The growth of ‘teenage witchcraft’

In a similar time frame to that in which Ezzy claims to see the growth of ‘white witchcraft’ and the widespread availability of popular spellbooks (i.e. the last 15 to 20 years) there has been a noticeable rise in the number of young people identifying themselves as ‘witches’ or ‘Wiccans’ (often used as synonyms rather than with a more specialist connotation). The current author observed this amongst university
students, including those training to be teachers. The Pagan Federation claims to have several hundred enquiries a week from young people, and has set up a network, ‘Minor Arcana’, for those under 18. Entering ‘teenage witch’ or ‘young pagan’ into an Internet search engine produces about 700,000 results for the former and 238,000 results for the latter. Paganism and Witchcraft are now found as part of the curriculum of university courses in Religious Studies. In a recent edition of the magazine for religious education (RE) teachers *RE Today* (Robertson, 2005, p. 44) a young Pagan RE teacher was happy to write about the connection between her Pagan faith and her professional role, and, perhaps more significantly, the magazine was happy to print the article. This interest from young people has been labelled the ‘Teen Witch Phenomenon’ and has attracted media interest, for example the 2002 Channel 4 documentary *Witch Craze* or the report in the girls’ magazine *Sugar* (Sugar Special Report, 2001) ‘Wild about Wicca’. The current author is involved in an ongoing research project of in-depth interviews with young people identifying themselves as witches or Pagans which started in 2003. It is tempting to see a connection between the growth of ‘white witchcraft’ and ‘teenage witchcraft’: is the explosion of interest among young people a result of commercial exploitation of their natural curiosity by the purveyors of spellbooks and Internet sites with paraphernalia to sell? The purpose of this article is to attempt to answer this question by means of examining both the materials available and drawing from interview data with young witches and Pagans.

**Negative views of teen witchcraft**

The phrase ‘Teen Witchcraft’ tends to attract negative comments from all sides, including adolescent witches themselves. Setting aside warnings from ‘anti-occult’ Christian sources, or ‘anti-cult’ organisations, there are many criticisms from adult Pagans which seem to suggest that ‘teen witchcraft’ is identified with Ezzy’s ‘white witchcraft’. Letters and articles in the Pagan Federation’s journal *Pagan Dawn*, for example Steele and Dodsworth (2003, pp. 26–27), inveigh against the ‘commercialised plastic rubbish’ that much of the ‘teen witch’ material represents, as do many web sites. Interestingly, some complain about teenage witches because they believe sensational images from popular films and think that witchcraft is about drinking blood and conjuring demons, when Wicca is a positive and responsible spiritual path, whereas others blame teenage witches, or the commercial interests supplying them, for reducing witchcraft to a sweet, bland, harmless ritual practice in contrast with ‘real’ Wicca, which is serious, can be dangerous and can involve practices unsuitable for the under-18s.

The author was amused by the contents of one particular web site *Stupid Teenage Wiccans* (Anon A, 2003), which was particularly annoyed by teenagers who give themselves romantic pseudonyms, wear occult jewellery, believe they are following an ancient path, and use pink and purple throughout their web sites. Is teenage interest in witchcraft a junior form of Ezzy’s ‘white witchcraft’, in the words of another web site (Anon B, 2003), merely a ‘trendy teenage fad’, maybe harmful, maybe harmless, but not a serious spiritual path?
Analysis of commercial media and popular literature

In the last decade in particular there has been an explosion of easily available material about Wicca and witchcraft, much of which is aimed at a teenage audience. Ezzy (2003) examined popular spellbooks available in Australia. The current author has been collecting similar materials available locally in the UK, including teenage magazines, books, popular films, TV programmes and Internet sites. The influence of the Internet in spreading teenage witchcraft cannot be underestimated, and it is interesting to note that the growth of the ‘teen witch phenomenon’ coincides with the availability of this facility as well as with the ‘white witchcraft’ publishing phenomenon.

The first point to notice is that much of the material is aimed at teenage girls rather than boys, although materials for boys do exist (for example Penczak, 2005). The ‘teen witch’ phenomenon is largely, but not exclusively, female. In magazines for girls aimed at the 10–13 or 13–16 age group (and therefore probably read by even younger girls), among the usual diet of fashion, boy bands and advice on teenage embarrassments, it is common to find features which could be labelled ‘teen witchcraft’ or possibly ‘New Age witchcraft’. Sampling copies of Mizz magazine between 2002 and 2006 revealed a regular feature on ‘mystic stuff’, including spell of the week, information on topics such as runes, tarot cards and various forms of divination. One serial featured a heroine with a grandmother who was a ‘white witch’. Sugar, for a slightly older age range, ran an in-depth article on Wicca (Sugar Special Report, 2001) in as well as features on topics such as the Kabbalah. Generally witchcraft is presented as part of a package with other occult and ‘New Age’ phenomena. What is most striking is that it is not presented in a sensationalist way, but as a fairly unexceptional teenage interest. The ‘magic spells’ recommended were always positive in tone, dealing with things like increased confidence or patching up disagreement between friends. In fact some would not be out of place as ‘experiential’ activities in an RE lesson.

From the huge range of books aimed at the adolescent readership, the most well known is probably Silver RavenWolf’s Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation, first published in 1998. According to Llewellyn, this is their best-selling Wiccan title which had sold 350,000 copies in the USA alone by 2006, and has been translated into 12 languages. Although this might be put in the category of ‘popular spellbook’ it does not conform completely to Ezzy’s characterisation of such books as concerned only with material benefits and individual success, but puts forward an explicit ‘theology’ which acknowledges a deeper power which RavenWolf is even able to call ‘God’. A young Wiccan should live in harmony with nature, care for the environment, live ethically and responsibly, be tolerant of other faiths, is not racist or sexist and would not even believe in, let alone worship, Satan. They would never take illegal drugs, try to hurt people magically or otherwise, sacrifice animals or try to force anyone to fall in love with them. As far as an uninitiated outsider can tell, she does seem to have knowledge and experience of ‘traditional’ witchcraft.

Film and television are acknowledged by those studying teenage witches (see Robinson, 2005), and by teenage witches themselves, to be important. Two popular and influential films which came out in the period under discussion are The Craft
(directed by Andrew Fleming, 1996) and _Practical Magic_ (directed by Griffin Dunne, 1998). The young girls in the _Witch Craze_ documentary admitted to copying some of their rituals from these films, and no doubt they are not the only ones. Television programmes like _Sabrina, the Teenage Witch_; _Buffy, the Vampire Slayer_ and _Charmed_ all feature young ‘witches’. However, before seeing such visual media as propaganda for ‘witchcraft’, it has to be acknowledged that programmes like _Sabrina_ are light-hearted and clearly part of mainstream entertainment culture—and as for films like _The Craft_, the young women who ‘dabble’ in witchcraft end up suffering for it, thus preserving the moral status quo, and if there is any message, beyond entertainment, it would be to leave such practices alone. Although most of the respondents interviewed had seen and enjoyed these films, they were quite aware that this was ‘just entertainment’ and not to be taken seriously. In the words of one group of 16 year-olds, ‘we do Media Studies, we know how these things work’.

Many of the magazines, books, visual media and Internet sites surveyed are clearly commercial productions, and would fall into the category of ‘white witchcraft’ as described by Ezzy. Most items in the teen magazines or the television series are safe and unchallenging. There are ‘popular spellbooks’ that focus on selfish and material goals such as gaining money, career success, or even compelling other people’s partners to prefer the practitioner. Several of these are described by Ezzy (2003) and similar texts are on sale in the UK. However, the situation is more complex than being able to divide books on witchcraft into the ‘authentic’ and the ‘commercial’. Many of the books aimed at teenagers collected by the author may include spells for common teenage anxieties such as relationships and examinations, but also portray Wicca or witchcraft as a religious or spiritual path, include an unselfish and responsible ethic, and reveal some acquaintance with the authors and traditions that would be placed under the ‘traditional witchcraft’ banner. On the one hand, it does not seem to be an accident that the increase in teenage witchcraft has coincided with an increase in the availability of easily available information, whether books or Internet sites. On the other hand, the distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘white’ witchcraft might not be so clear cut, and the relationship between young people who identify as witches and commercially produced material may be a more complex one than effect and cause.

**Interviews with young witches**

The remainder of this article uses data collected from interviews with young witches and their classmates to examine whether their interest lies in the ‘white witchcraft’ category stimulated by commercial interest and illustrating consumerist values, or whether they are articulating a serious spiritual orientation (see also Cush, 2007–08, forthcoming). The findings used here are based on semi-structured individual interviews of at least an hour with four young women in the age group 18–24, all of whom had identified as witches in their earlier teens, similar individual interviews with two girls in the 13 to 14 age group, focus group discussions with a group of three 13-year-old girls who were selected as non-witches interested in ‘spirituality’ and with an RE class of 15 students aged 16, of mixed gender, containing some who identified as witches or
Pagans. All interviews took place in safe settings such as school premises or parental homes and were conducted by an interviewer who has Qualified Teacher Status and the associated police clearance. Written parental permission was gained for all interviewees under 18. This is admittedly a small sample, but the individual interviews gave access to rich material.

The 18 to 24 year-olds were asked about both their current beliefs and practices and asked to look back upon their early teens. Some aspects of their responses would place them in the ‘white witchcraft’ category. They had used in the past or still did use commercially available books for their information on witchcraft and for rituals. They mostly practised on their own rather than as part of an organised group, and they did use rituals as a form of self-empowerment and to help cope with events like examinations, friendships and common anxieties of young women. For one of the four, it was connected with other aspects of ‘goth’ identity. On the other hand, all four had progressed to the stage where they were more likely to compose their own rituals. They all saw what they variously described as ‘being a witch’ or ‘being a Pagan’ as a serious religious path which they had been following for many years since their early teens, and an important expression of their identity. They were very well informed about Paganism, Wicca and related topics from academic as well as popular sources. Their motivations did not seem to be the selfish and trivial ones of ‘white witchcraft’ but among the attractions of their chosen religious path were a concern for the natural environment and social justice. In contrast with some other traditions, Paganism and witchcraft appealed because of their clear feminist credentials and absence of homophobia. The label ‘New Age’ did not appeal as helping to describe their spirituality, ‘Pagan’ was far preferable. While distinguishing their own serious interest from the more trivial ‘teen witch phenomenon’ in the girls’ magazines, they were not as critical of it as some adult Pagans. One summed it up as ‘cool but twee’. It could be a passing fad fuelled by commercial interests, but it could be the first step, as it had been for them, on a serious spiritual path.

The two girls aged 13 and 14 might be expected to fall more clearly within the ‘teen white witch’ category. They both practised alone, and made use of commercially available books and, even more than the older students, Internet sites. Some of their practice was about self-empowerment and the achievement of desired goals. However, they were surprisingly well informed and serious in their approach. The younger opined ‘it’s not so much that I am a witch but I’d rather say I will be a witch—to claim to be one now would be impertinent’. Much of the attraction of witchcraft did seem to be about taking control of events and improving your own life as ‘white witchcraft’ promises, but it was also seen as a serious spiritual path, ‘it is about changing yourself and changing the world’. These two young women were not seeking success as defined by the world of consumerism, but were very critical of the status quo. They considered that girls became witches ‘because they don’t like the world around them’. Their theologies were quite sophisticated; one talked of her belief in ‘the essence of everything’ of which gods, goddesses and spirits were manifestations, and of her ‘spirit guide’ not as a literal being but as ‘an idealistic vision of yourself which looks after you’. They were critical of consumer culture, espoused
non-authoritarian but responsible ethics and did concern themselves about the future of the planet. Being a witch was an expression of an alternative and special identity.

The focus group of 13 year-olds did not call themselves witches or Pagans but they were generally interested in ‘spirituality’, believed in ghosts, fairies and spirits and were fascinated by the different traditions they learned about in RE. They explained this interest as a result of the world according to ‘science and logic’ being ‘just too boring’. They were aware of the ‘teen witch phenomenon’ in a general way. The major contrast with the girls who identified as witches is that this focus group seemed to lack a vocabulary with which to articulate their beliefs, whereas the young witches could draw upon a shared tradition.

The RE class of 16 year-olds admitted that nearly all of them, Pagan, Christian or agnostic, had tried spells from popular spellbooks, watched the films and knew of the magazines. They all agreed however that the commercial images were just entertainment and it was obvious to them that such things did not portray ‘Wicca as it really is’. They considered themselves to be sophisticated in their understanding of ‘the media’ and that they were unlikely to be ‘taken in’ by those seeking to exploit them. They agreed that a main attraction of witchcraft and Paganism is the positive valuation of women in comparison with other religions, and we ended with an interesting debate about whether in the end there was much difference between a spell and a prayer.

Conclusions

Both the analysis of the commercially available materials and the interviews with young people suggest that the situation is more complex than a simple correlation between ‘white witchcraft’ and ‘teenage witches’. The two phenomena have grown side by side and obviously interact. It is clear that commercial concerns do make money out of the provision of books, films and artefacts connected with witchcraft aimed at teenagers. It is not so clear whether such products reflect an existing interest or construct an interest to exploit. Certainly young people who identify as witches or Pagans buy the books, use the Internet sites and watch the films. However, whereas for some this is a passing fad, for others it is the first step on a spiritual path—and this is certainly what predominated in the conversations with young witches. The clear divide between traditional (authentic?) and commercial witchcraft suggested by Ezzy is hard to maintain. Many of the sources examined by the author were partly about self-empowerment and achieving success, but also about Paganism as a religion, and a concern for social, ethical and environmental issues. This mixture is hardly unknown in more ‘mainstream’ religious traditions. Buddhist temples in Japan sell amulets for safety when travelling, protection from illness, and success in schoolwork as well as being custodians of the Dharma. Christian churches may have corners where candles can be lit for intentions including the recovery of ill relatives. Most adherents require their spiritual paths to help them with their daily lives as well as ultimate salvation. If the ability of a religious tradition to enhance the self-esteem of young people and enable them to feel empowered means that it should be described
as ‘New Age’, then this would apply to Christianity as much as witchcraft (cf. Jones & Francis, 1996). It would seem to an outsider such as the author that it would be unbecoming of Paganism, which prides itself on its flexibility and lack of dogmatism, to be labelling strands of witchcraft as heretical.

The research to date suggests that young people who identify themselves as witches and Pagans may sometimes use commercially produced materials and might even have had an original interest stimulated by such items, but are too well informed, educated in the ways of the media and think too critically to be a mere creation of such interests. Many of the so-called commercial materials in any case go beyond the trivial into theology and tradition, and the young witches themselves seem to be working out for themselves a serious spiritual position, using the concepts and images provided by the various traditions of contemporary Paganism.

Organisations cited

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