WEAVING A TANGLED WEB?
PAGAN ETHICS AND ISSUES OF HISTORY, ‘RACE’ AND ETHNICITY IN PAGAN IDENTITY

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Introduction

On the 25th of March 1997 a witch, Kevin Carleon, got into Stonehenge and at dawn unfurled and flew the Union Flag. This was in protest at a theory published in the Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine that Stonehenge and Avebury may have been built by insurgent peoples originating from the West of what is now France around 4,500 years ago. Carleon explained his protest by declaring: ‘It is my theory that those living in this country invaded Europe—and not vice versa’.1 The deployment of a Union Flag in the circumstances seems somewhat anachronistic, given that it did not exist in its present form until 1801 and the idea of ‘nation’ in its contemporary sense did not exist before the eighteenth-century (Robbins 1989, Hobsbawm 1990). But this is just one example of a whole range of misconceptions, and arguably misappropriations, of concepts of history, nation, ‘race’ and ethnicity which seem to exist within popular pagan lore. It is the purpose of this article to hold up to the light, from an academic and pagan participant perspective, a number of issues arising from the continuing evolution of pagan identities in Britain at the end of the twentieth century. Some of these are named in the title of this short piece; all, it will be suggested, arise from a number of as yet unaddressed assumptions about the place that pagans occupy in our current historical, social and political situation(s). These assumptions are articulated in a number of ways: in the opinions, philosophies, texts and vernacular expressions of pagan culture and they occur with a regularity and variety which is almost dizzying when one seeks to catch at their sources and their boundaries.

In order that the varying emanations of ideas around history, gender,

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‘race’, identity and ethnicity and other issues do not slip the net, I will be seeking to identify the nodes each presently occupies on the web of pagan culture and to name the points at which this web is becoming entangled with that of the more dominant social structures in which pagans also participate. This piece will argue that current pagan praxis has the power to transform both, and to point the way towards a pagan ethics which would support this mutual transformation; but this first requires acknowledging the links between the two identities and meanings being allotted and ascribed to an ongoing construction of current pagan identity that may make that identity appear more fragile and contingent.

‘History’ and Popular Pagan Texts

‘The dead are not always quiet, and the past will never be a safe subject for contemplation’ Ronald Hutton (1996).

A survey of popular pagan texts published by Aquarian Press, Thorsons, Element and Arkana turned up an arresting unproblematised relationship with ethnic, historical, national, social and political boundaries. Amongst the very popular titles surveyed, there was a markedly lackadaisical attitude towards historical periodicity. This was particularly the case in titles which invoked historical precedent as the foundation of both the authority of the information contained in the book about contemporary pagan practices and, significantly, the basis for present-day pagan identity. The examples I analysed were peppered with invocations of ‘Ancient times…’ and began seemingly authoritative pieces of information with ‘In the past…’ invariably failing to identify era let alone dates, cultural context or cite provenance. Admittedly, none of the books I looked at claimed to be an academic text, although one of the worst offenders did, somewhat ironically, deplore the ‘flimsy scholarship’ on which many books detailing various magical traditions are based (Green 1995).

I would argue, however, that neither the lack of claims to scholarship nor the disclaimers about it that some texts occasionally carry exonerate them from blatant inaccuracy or unaccountability. The influence of popular pagan texts should not be underestimated; most self-identifying pagans in Britain, Northern Europe and North America are first-generation pagans (in the contemporary sense at least!) and the majority