

# TRANSCENDING TIME AND PLACE IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19: IMAGINATION AND RITUAL IN MODERN PAGANS' AND SHAMANS' CREATION OF SACRED SPACE

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**Abstract:** During 2020, because of Covid-related restrictions, opportunities to travel to sacred heritage sites dramatically decreased and Pagans' and shamans' gatherings and rituals necessarily moved online. This article picks up from an earlier paper (Rountree, 2006) to reconsider relationships between time, place, imagination and ritual performance in the online context. It argues that whereas in the context of "real" heritage sites, the *temporal boundary* between past and present seems to blur or dissolve as a result of Pagans' embodied, material connections with a sacred place, in the online ritual context *boundaries of place* blur or dissolve because of synchronous temporal connections with likeminded others in sacred space. Two case studies are explored: the responses of those who gathered online to witness English Heritage's livestreaming of Summer Solstice 2020 at Stonehenge, and the experiences of a group of modern Western shamans, mostly living in Malta, whose regular meetings shifted from members' homes, places in nature and sacred heritage sites to Zoom in early 2020.

**Keywords:** Modern Pagans; Maltese shamans; Online ritual; Sacred place/sacred space; Magical consciousness; Summer Solstice at Stonehenge; Covid

## Introduction

"Heritage" is a multivalent term that is variously mobilised according to context, for example, within ethno-national religions, ethno-national cultural history and identity, the revitalization of tradition, tourism, and a variety of contemporary global or cosmopolitan spiritualities, including Neo-Paganism, or modern Paganism as followers prefer to call it. For Pagans heritage sites are the sacred material remains of

the ancient religions that were the antecedent of their contemporary religious or spiritual path. They provide a sense of antiquity, continuity and authenticity, a place to gather with likeminded others, meditate, do rituals and feel connected to ancestors. Fifteen years ago I published a paper in *Body and Society* (Rountree, 2006) which explored relationships between ritual performance, imagination, memory and interpretation in modern Pagans' embodied experiences at sacred heritage sites. Before reviewing and extending those ideas in the present paper, I will say a little about modern Paganism.

Paganism today is an umbrella term for a large number of modern Western Nature religions: a diffuse, global religious or spiritual matrix which draws on a plethora of ancestral religious traditions to create different Pagan paths or traditions. The individuals who follow any particular path are diverse in terms of their beliefs and ritual practices: personal choice and autonomy are fundamental, dearly-held values among Pagans and the imposition of religious homogeneity is shunned. The Pagan Federation International describes a Pagan ethos as: "A positive morality, in which the individual is responsible for the discovery and development of their true nature in harmony with the outer world and community. This is often expressed as "Do what you will, as long as it harms none".<sup>1</sup>

Some Pagan groups and individuals attempt to recover or revitalise a local religio-cultural heritage and some eclectically combine elements from multiple ancient and extant traditions which may or may not include one's own cultural heritage. Thus the traditions they draw on include not only old, so-called "Pagan" religions, such as those of ancient Greece and Egypt, but sometimes also elements of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity, especially where Pagans have grown up immersed in a dominant religious culture, such as in Israel or Malta. Across the diversity of modern Paganism, a good deal of ritual invention is explicitly or tacitly embraced. Paganism's commonest forms are Wicca (modern Witchcraft), which further divides into a number of sub-traditions, Druidry, contemporary Western shamanism, Goddess Spirituality and Heathenism or Heathenry (which draws on Germanic and Scandinavian traditions). There are numerous other traditions, often inspired by the indigenous traditions of a particular culture or nation, for example, the Maausulised movement in Estonia (Västriik, 2015), Rodnoverie in Russia (Shizhenskii & Aitamurto, 2017), Rodzimowierstwo in Poland (Simpson,

2017) and Greencraft, a Flemish offshoot from Wicca (Van Gulik, 2015), to name a few.

While these are all distinctive Pagan paths, there are two uniting principles shared by the majority of Pagans: 1) love for and kinship with nature, reverence for the life force and its ever-renewing cycles of life and death,<sup>2</sup> and 2) reverence for the religious beliefs, practices and sacred places of ancestors (either generally, or a culturally-specific set of ancestors). Paganism is associated with a strong ecological sensibility and many Pagans are animists with a strong sense of interconnectedness with other inspirited beings in the web of life. Rituals commonly celebrate Earth's seasonal cycle (the Solstices, Equinoxes and quarter days between) and the moon's cycle, along with important moments in group members' lives (birthdays, house blessings, child namings, handfastings,<sup>3</sup> etc.) and significant local or cultural rituals, for example, the annual rising of the Pleiades constellation, known as Matariki to New Zealand Māori.<sup>4</sup> Pagans' deep connection with nature means that physical places and their many inhabitants—animals, stone people, plant people, rivers, mountains, the elements (water, fire, earth, air) and so on—are vitally important to Pagans everywhere and, where practicable and weather permitting, rituals are preferably held outdoors in the company of these beings.

During Covid, however, many Pagan gatherings and rituals necessarily moved online, as did those of other religious paths and all manner of other social gatherings: weddings and funerals, concerts and conferences, business meetings and school lessons, political summits, Sunday lunch with the family, “happy hour” drinks with friends and so on. Arguably, because of their strong connections to nature and place, one might have expected the shift to ritualizing online to be more challenging for Pagans than for followers of religions less preoccupied with the material, natural, embodied world and more concerned with the unseen, supernatural realm. The scholarship on modern Paganism has long drawn attention to “the seeming paradox” of Pagans' extensive use of cyberspace despite being a “self-proclaimed nature religion” (Grieve, 1995: 87). As Evolvi (2020: 14) points out, Pagans' extensive use of the Internet “may appear as a contradiction, if digital technologies are considered the antithesis of the natural world”. While Pagans have for decades habitually used the Internet for community building and maintenance, sharing and searching out information and support, identity construction, and buying

and selling Pagan merchandise and services (Coco, 2008: 527; Cheong, 2013; Renser & Tiidenberg, 2020), their participation in online rituals, while not unknown, has been far from the norm. In the first book-length study of Pagans and the Internet, Douglas Cowan (2005: x) claimed that “online Pagan ritual... barely makes a showing”. Fifteen years on, due to Covid-19 and the “new normal” (Cornain, 2020) imposed on many areas of social life, Pagan gatherings and group rituals online became common within a climate of ever increasing Internet use, facilitated by such tools as WhatsApp (available since 2009) and Zoom (since 2013). The case studies discussed in this article explore how—and how well—some Pagans have made the shift to the new normal of ritualizing online.

My ethnographic fieldwork over the last thirty years has been carried out mainly with eclectic Pagans and Witches, followers of Goddess Spirituality and modern Western shamans in New Zealand and Malta, with a shorter stint in Ireland. In early 2020, as a result of restrictions related to Covid, my field shifted to sacred spaces online. Some of the gatherings during this time included Pagans and shamans I knew well and with whom I had shared hundreds of rituals over the years; other people I first met or came to know better through the online gatherings.

Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork and the published accounts of Pagans and scholars of Paganism, my 2006 article argued that through the combined lenses of their imagination and somatic experiences at sacred heritage sites, Pagans’ inner and outer landscapes co-create and flow into one another, with Pagans experiencing themselves not as isolated subjectivities, but as sharing an intersubjective milieu with others and with the site and Earth herself. The visceral experience of ritually mapping one’s human body on to the site’s body (for example, by curling up against a Maltese Neolithic temple’s megalithic stone walls) removed not only the boundary between human body and Earth body, but also dissolved the boundary between past and present time in the Pagan imagination, creating a sense of timelessness. As Pearson and Shanks (2001: xvii) put it, the past “does not hold comfortably some point in a linear flow of time from past through to present” in the context of an embodied connection with a site. Rather, “the past bubbles around us”. Time travel becomes possible because of emplaced experience (c.f. Menzel-Bruhlin, 2016). The intimate material connection to the heritage site created by an enacted ritual opens the imagination to a story about the past, one in which the

Pagan may experience themselves as a participant, often interpreted as the remembering or re-experiencing of a past life.

Mircea Eliade (1957: 68) long ago claimed that it is by means of ritual that humans<sup>5</sup> “can pass without danger from ordinary temporal duration to sacred time”. Rituals can arrest the “profane temporal” (Ibid.: 42), having “the power to interrupt it by periods of a sacred time that is nonhistorical (in the sense that it does not belong to the historical present)” (Ibid.: 72). Sacred time, he said, “is composed of an eternal present” (Ibid.: 88). He was, of course, referring to people carrying out rituals physically together in sacred physical places, as I was in my 2006 paper. Since then, the use of technology to connect socially has vastly escalated. During 2020 screen-mediated social engagement via online platforms such as Zoom increased significantly, while opportunities to travel physically to distant sacred heritage sites dramatically decreased for most people. Pagans, including would-be Pagan travellers, like everyone else, were impacted. Goddess tours to the UK, Malta, Crete, Turkey, Italy, Crete, Egypt, India, Israel and other places were cancelled or rescheduled.<sup>6</sup> For the first time in its 25 year history the Glastonbury Goddess Conference, which typically attracts hundreds of attendees from numerous countries, was held online.<sup>7</sup> Pagans, like everyone else, were tethered to their homes, their normal ritual activities, gatherings and journeys curtailed or suspended. During this time Pagan ritual creativity, however, ran wild and more, not fewer, rituals were held in the communities I belong to.

My experiences of Zoom gatherings of spiritually likeminded but geographically dispersed groups of modern Pagans and shamans since 2020 have prompted me to reconsider relationships between time, place, imagination and ritual performance. Here I propose a fresh configuring of these relationships in the online context. Whereas in the context of a “real” sacred heritage site, the *temporal boundary* between past and present seems to blur or dissolve as a result of Pagans’ embodied, material connections with a site, in the online context *boundaries of place* seem to blur or dissolve as a result of Pagans’ synchronous temporal connections with other group participants during shared ritual. This relates to Pearson and Shanks’s (2001: 55) contention that “the site is as much a temporal as spatial concept”. Moreover, bodily experiences also occur in the online environment in the form of strongly felt and expressed emotions: tears,

laughter, a quickening of pulse, tingling skin, surge of joy or excitement, and so on. In both “real” and virtual “places” ritual performance and imagination are the key vehicles that together enable the dissolution of, respectively, time and place boundaries.

Not only does “the sacred place give access to a sacred time” (Rountree, 2006: 105); the online contexts discussed below suggest an inversion of this relationship: that sacred time shared synchronically may give access to a sacred place or space. Earlier, following Bolen (1994: 119), I wrote: “In sacred places time and the timeless, visible and invisible worlds intersect or blur into one another” (Rountree, 2006: 99). Here, through a discussion of online ritual gatherings, I add that in sacred time visible and invisible worlds intersect and blur into one another. Being connected in sacred, synchronous time is experienced as a flow of consciousness within the online gathering wherein physical place is not an impediment to participants’ sense of connection. Rather, it is the deep immersion in ritual brought about by participants’ concentration, focussed imagination and will to engage that produces a sense of entering what Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1990) calls a “flow” state. Participants temporarily lose their normal sense of time, merge action and awareness leading to a temporary loss of ego and experience an enhanced or transcendent sense of self and intense closeness (Victor Turner’s (1974) *communitas*). In this state what Eliade (1957: 42) called “profane temporal time” falls away. Through sharing sacred time online a sense of physical place may also alter. Materiality is not immaterial, however. A physical device—laptop, phone or iPad—is the portal for entering an online space, and often other material objects—candles, sacred objects relevant to a ritual’s theme, symbols of the elements, rattles and drums—may be set up near an individual’s device (c.f. Evolvi, 2020).

The emergence of a flow state resembles what Sabina Magliocco describes as “participatory consciousness”, whereby being-and-doing together is a kind of “magic” or art form whose goal is to “bring about a set of emotional, affective responses that cause a change in consciousness—that allow participants to switch to a more participatory view of the world” (Magliocco, 2012: 18; c.f. Greenwood, 2009, 2020; Starhawk, 1979). Indeed, Magliocco (2012: 20) argues that entering an altered or alternate consciousness “is the ultimate goal of most Pagan rituals”, often facilitated by guided meditation, visualisation, or “journeying” which

leads participants to a collective landscape, albeit uniquely imagined by individual participants. Magliocco's examples draw on Pagan rituals where the participants have gathered in outdoor natural settings and undertaken their guided meditation, visualisation or journey in physical proximity to one another. Here I suggest that a participatory consciousness can also emerge in Pagans' online experiences of being-and-doing together. I begin with a discussion of the first ever livestreaming of Summer Solstice 2020 at Stonehenge, which Facebook says 248,800 people gathered to experience.<sup>8</sup>

### **Summer Solstice 2020, Stonehenge**

This iconic heritage site is much loved by Pagans and deemed part of a sacred landscape by archaeologists, historians and heritage experts, as well as by those for whom the site has spiritual significance.<sup>9</sup> The sarsen stones were erected by a late Neolithic farming community around 4,500 years ago to align with the sun's movement through its annual cycle. Normally visitors cannot get close to the cordoned off stones, but in 2000 English Heritage,<sup>10</sup> the body responsible for the site's guardianship, began granting special access to the henge on the summer and winter solstices, and in later years also on the spring and autumn equinoxes.<sup>11</sup> On a typical summer solstice thousands of Pagans, tourists, spiritual seekers, travellers, revellers and others gather to witness, from the heart of the site, the sun's setting on solstice eve and rising on solstice morning behind the Heel Stone in the north-east part of the horizon. For Pagans the solstices are holy days: a time to celebrate the sun's cycle; greet friends; bask in the ancient site's atmosphere; conduct rituals, handfastings and Druidic ceremonies; drum, chant and sing; pray, picnic and party.

On 12 May 2020 English Heritage tweeted: "For everyone's safety and wellbeing, we've had to cancel this year's summer solstice celebrations at Stonehenge. We know how special this occasion is to so many of you, and we'll be live streaming it for free online". Before taking this step English Heritage consulted the emergency services, the Druid and Pagan communities and others. The site's director, Nichola Tasker, commented: "We hope that our live stream offers an alternative opportunity for people near and far to connect with this spiritual place at such a special time of year... please do not travel to Stonehenge this summer solstice, but watch it online instead".<sup>12</sup> Liz Williams, writing in the Pagan magazine

*The Wild Hunt*,<sup>13</sup> reported that on the whole Pagans responded favourably to English Heritage's decision to close the monument and stream the solstice online, not only because of Covid, but also because of the often anti-social behaviour of a minority of those attending, as one interviewee for Williams's article explained:

I think summer solstice at the henge is the worst thing I have ever witnessed and I only went once. There is no respect for the place, the atmosphere or other people; it's a free for all with kids using the stones as a personal playground, a stoner's paradise. Rubbish and crap strewn about after everyone went home—Stonehenge was a dustbin with broken glass everywhere.<sup>14</sup>

The livestream of sunset on solstice eve 2020 began at 8.41pm BST on Saturday 20 June and continued for 1 hour and 21 minutes. On solstice day itself the streaming of sunrise began at 4.07am BST and lasted 54 minutes.<sup>15</sup> Multiple cameras captured different views of the site. On Saturday's livestream natural sounds were audible: occasional traffic, wind, birds and airy silence. There was no sound on the Sunday morning because, English Heritage later apologised, torrential rain meant the cameras had to be wrapped in bags, muffling their microphones, and the external microphone failed. On both occasions the actual moments of sunset and sunrise were not visible because of cloud cover (and of course would not have been visible if people had been able to be physically present at the site).

On 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> June I was on the opposite side of the world from Stonehenge, 20,000 kilometres away in Stewart Island/Rakiura at the southern tip of New Zealand. The season was opposite—it was the winter solstice in New Zealand. When the sun rose at Stonehenge on 21 June, it was mid-afternoon where I was (New Zealand being 11 hours ahead of the UK during the British summer). I did not watch the solstice eve livestream (I watched it later on YouTube), but at sunrise on the longest day of the year at Stonehenge, I was hunched over my phone in multiple puffer jackets pitching about in a catamaran crossing Foveaux Strait,<sup>16</sup> yet joined in time with hundreds of thousands of others in hundreds of thousands of places, all focussed on a single place: Stonehenge. My sense of having “journeyed” to a global convocation was enhanced by the live chat greetings constantly popping up on my screen, many of which prompted a string of more personal replies from other viewers. A sample of posts from the live chat suggests that many viewers had a similar



sense of “being there” together, while also physically emplaced elsewhere: a merging of here and there in a synchronous online moment.<sup>17</sup>

- A big thank you for allowing us to “be there” when we couldn’t be 🙏
- What is really cool is that we all watching together from all over the world. Hello world! We will heal together.
- It’s wonderful to share this sacred moment with the earth and the stones that have stood so long!
- It was such a treat to be able to align with the ancient Druid structure sitting here at my home in Canada at the exact moment of the sunrise on the summer solstice 2020... bless.
- Blessed Be and Solstice Blessings to one and all!!!
- Love, Peace and Light to ALL beings on Earth!
- I’m watching from Japan
- I’m watching the sun come up from my bedroom window magnificent
- Greetings to the world from my comfy sofa in London!
- Peace on Earth and goodwill to all living beings 🙏❤️
- Much love and comfort to all in the world.

The comments posted on the solstice eve’s livestream—which I read after the event—similarly included greetings and blessings from around the world, gratitude to English Heritage, emotional exclamations about the site’s beauty, musings, poetry and prayers to the stones. Again there is gratitude for the opportunity to “be there”, reference to having made a “trip”, and a sense of “global spiritual connection and communion to this sacred place” in a “magical moment”.<sup>18</sup>

- I live in the US and felt very fortunate to have this chance to “be there” live. Thank you English Heritage for this live feed. I will be tuning in for the sunrise as well.
- I have always wanted to be there, but disability has financially and physically stopped me over the years. I’m going blind now (at 32) and am so thankful I got a chance to see, even if it was cloudy.
- Thanks for this trip!!!
- Earthlings! Sun worshipers! Greetings from Ukraine to all present at this supreme sacrament! At such greatest moments enlightenment comes, and you begin to understand very clearly that we are all one family on our small and very vulnerable, very fragile planet.
- OMG!!! That’s soooooo beautiful.
- Thanks fir the magnificent energy!!! An argentine’s druid 🧙🏻🌈  
🌀🐉🔱🎵

- Thank you, English Heritage, for to see this beautiful place and magical moment: Stones, clouds, birds, ALL singing with silence. Luiz Felipe. Brazil.
- Oh, sacred stones, what wisdom you hold. You've stood on this earth for thousands of years, marking a place where the veil between this world and Avalon is very thin. You hail the sun at both the solstices of the year. You remind us that magic is both extraordinary and in the everyday world around us. May you continue to stand for countless years to come. A happy Midsummer, everyone. Blessed be!
- Greetings from São Paulo City, Brazil. Thank you for this gift to all of us!
- Absolutely stunning! Through dark times, this pagan monument is still standing! Love from Norway.
- Wonderful to hear the birds... thank you and Happy Solstice.
- The silence is so poignant, beautiful.
- Solstice blessings to everyone. May you all have an enchanting Midsummer. Thank you for bringing us something I have always wanted to see. :)
- Much love and gratitude National Heritage for providing an opportunity for global spiritual connection and communion to this sacred place. 🍷🙌🍀 xx
- I like that the solstice can be enjoyed and bring connection to the Earth regardless of one's spiritual beliefs. It's special like that, all you need is to see and you can feel it.
- And you my love, won't you take my hand?  
We'll go back in time to that mystic land  
Where the dew drops cry and the cats meow  
I will take you there, I will show you how  
Oh!

Like most who tuned in to watch, my attention was captured and held by this once-a-year solar event at Stonehenge, despite the brooding clouds and lack of sound. I became almost oblivious to my own physical surroundings and other passengers on the ferry, many of whom were also on their phones, perhaps immersed in other online spaces. Those of us watching the solstice were physically isolated from one another and emplaced in thousands of global locations, but we were imaginatively emplaced at Stonehenge, connected in sacred, synchronous time in a “collective landscape” (Starhawk, 1990: 109). Our online connection overrode our individual separateness: we were “all one family on our small... very fragile planet”. Watching was conflated with being there. An intersubjective space was created by the awareness of our collective focus, awe and excitement, which led to visceral experiences. As the

penultimate post above says: “all you need is to see and you can feel it”. Intersubjectivity was enhanced by the conversations generated in the live chat, which included humour and ribbing, information about the heritage site, complaints about the weather, answers to questions and support, empathy and kindness. When someone in Brazil posted during the sunrise livestream: “Thanks for the energy; I’m in Brasil and we need something good [good] in our sad moment”, the replies quickly came: “Much Love and Healing to Brazil”, “Do not despair. The ‘sad moment’ is the energy overcoming the material!”, and “Thinking about you and your Country and sending white light and love ❤️”.

For some the livestream prompted poignant memories of previous visits to the site—up to half a century earlier—including sensory and emotional experiences and a recollection of time distortions within the henge. For these people visiting the site imaginatively in the present blurred with memories of the past.

- Visited Stonehenge in 2012, so magical. Seeing it again, hearing the sounds, takes me back to that day. I can almost smell the stones once more. Beautiful. 😊
- I was lucky enough to be at Stonehenge during the 1984 summer solstice free festival. I was only 8 years old, but I remember the druids, and Hawkwind playing live.
- I went to stone henge a couple of years ago and paid for the pass to walk amongst the rocks. One thing I did notice is that time felt different there – the hour or 2 we were there literally felt like 5 minutes.
- Visited Stonehenge in May 2019. It was a different world then, just 1 year ago. Loved the peaceful quiet watching this video today. Thank you for posting! Rochester, NY USA
- We partied at Stonehenge on June 21, 1972! What a night! Then at sunrise the Druids appeared!

However, not all posts were positive. There were complaints about the camera work (to which others replied, either agreeing or reprimanding these posters for their ingratitude and negativity), disappointment about the weather and regret about being unable to be physically present.<sup>19</sup>

- I need pagan friends. No fun by yourself 😞
- I am gutted that we can’t all be there however it is better than nothing 😞
- First time in history of Stonehenge that no one’s there to celebrate?
- Bliss to see Stonehenge without overwhelming crowds, but very disappointing photography! Cameraperson obviously completely

clueless about Stonehenge, history or alignments, no research done either. Would have been magical with professional photographers. Please try again (harder!) next year – and the Winter Solstice.<sup>20</sup>

A small minority of viewers were confused and seriously underwhelmed. Clearly they did not experience it as a collective liminal moment in sacred time, but rather in terms of media production values and its success or failure as visual entertainment. Without music (or any other sound in the case of the sunrise livestream), digital enhancement, slick camera work, commentary, Druids in robes and lively action—without even the sun at sunrise—they were unimpressed. They were not vicariously visiting a sacred heritage site to join others in a sacred moment; they were watching a pointless, boring film.

- What am I supposed to be seeing?
- Hello from Oregon! Can anyone tell me what we are looking for? I don't want to miss it ... Thank You
- where are the druids?
- our school made us watch this for work
- where is the solar eclipse?
- Not tryin ta be negative but wut again was the point of this vid!?!? No sound, no commentary, and not much else.
- Other people: very cultural, amazing wow  
Me: an hour and a half staring at rocks. Wokay

These viewers were connected to Stonehenge in live time through their devices, but their experience contrasted sharply with the majority of those watching. To appreciate the event it was clearly not enough to be collectively joined in time to the site. Without an understanding of the site's significance, a valuing of it as a sacred place or an appreciation of the solstice as a Pagan holy day, it may have been difficult to engage emotionally or experience a sense of participating in sacred community. Their confusion and disengagement was not necessarily the failure of the online event to engage these viewers; it is possible that had they been physically at the site they may have been similarly bemused. Some local and foreign visitors to Malta's Neolithic temples see nothing remarkable about them, and do not understand those who make a big deal "over a pile of old stones" (Rountree, 2010: 204), a comment resembling the last quotation above. Of course, it is also possible that an immersive, sensuous and tactile encounter with the site might have inspired a different response

from the digital encounter. Nonetheless, for some people who had never visited the site, and therefore did not have memories to help activate the imagination during the livestream, the digital experience did trigger the imagination and an emotional response; for others it did not.

I found it fairly easy to “journey” to the site because the scenes on my phone’s screen somehow fused with my memories of physically visiting the site. These memories, my imagination and the consciousness that I was participating in a collective, synchronous witnessing of an important event for Pagans made it easy to “be” at Stonehenge. A sense of *communitas* emerged as the live comments flicked up on my screen. It was these comments – perhaps more than the nearly static and cloud-obstructed view of the sunrise – that generated a sense of being present in sacred time at a sacred place. My normal awareness of place was ruptured: in physical terms I was bouncing around in wintry southern waters, in terms of engaged imagination and empathy I was with thousands of others at Stonehenge witnessing the solstice sunrise. Or if not at Stonehenge, in a shared sacred space online, facilitated and mediated by modern technologies.

Viewing the recorded solstice livestream on YouTube several months later provoked a fond appreciation for the site’s beauty, but almost no sense of *communitas*, heightened emotion or blurred boundaries of place (especially because the recording was periodically interrupted by noisy advertisements for a vast range of products and services). To experience an altered sense of place – Csíkszentmihályi’s “flow” or Magliocco’s participatory consciousness – I required an awareness of immersion in sacred, synchronous time with likeminded others. The feeling of “being there”, although strong and “real”, was obviously different from the bodily sensations, smells, sounds, sights, feelings of being drenched in torrential rain and so on that one would have experienced physically at the site that morning. Nonetheless, the live comments suggest that through collective, concentrated focus on the slowly illuminating sacred landscape visible on their screens, many viewers journeyed to Stonehenge in the imagination and entered a sacred consciousness. The mention of their countries’ names and personal locations – “my bedroom window”, “my comfy sofa”, “sitting here at my home in Canada” – suggest an everyday consciousness of place running parallel to a consciousness of sacred space: the simultaneity of being there and being here.

“The sacred is saturated with being”, Eliade (1957: 12) claimed, and “the sacred is equivalent to power, and, in the last analysis, to reality”. In the context of Covid, Pagans’ imagined journeys to sacred heritage sites were real insofar as they enabled travellers to connect with a sacred place in sacred time through a sacred collective consciousness. The imagination is often juxtaposed to reality according to so-called rational thought. For Pagans, however, the imagination is a key tool that opens access to a different order of reality, “a vehicle to enter other dimensions of experience” – a “magical consciousness” seen perhaps most powerfully in the shamanic journey (Greenwood, 2020: 85), as we will see below. The importance and extreme acuity of the Pagan imagination has been frequently emphasised in Pagan scholarship in relation both to online and offline religious practices (Luhmann, 1989; Greenwood, 2000, 2009, 2020; Magliocco, 2004, 2012; Berger & Ezzy, 2004; Grieve, 1995; Cowan, 2005; O’Leary, 1996; Davis, 1995). Guided meditations, journeys or visualisations are commonly included in modern Pagan rituals. Pagan “‘magic’ is in fact a set of techniques for training the imagination by attuning to the elements, phases of the moon, cycle of the seasons, and emotional connections between inanimate objects” (Magliocco, 2012: 18). Before ritualising online became the norm during Covid, Pagans’ imaginations were already much-valued and well-honed by long experience and frequent practice.

## **Shamans’ Online Circles**

In 2015 I joined a “tribe” or “sistren”<sup>21</sup> of modern Western shamans in Malta and for the next few years, whenever I was in Malta, shared in their rituals, held in group members’ homes, at a beach, or in the countryside adjacent to a Neolithic heritage site (Rountree, 2017). It was only in 2020 in the context of Covid, however, when the group’s gatherings necessarily moved online, that I came to know these women well and became fully integrated into the group – a network whose bonds deepened immeasurably over this period. Not only was I able to attend the ritual circles easily from the other side of the world (apart from the minor inconvenience of ten to twelve hour time differences), but circles were also held more frequently: on the new and full moons, as well as three special series of workshops in which a sub-group of us participated. These included a 28 day Medicine Wheel Practice with weekly Zoom

meetings and daily tasks to complete between meetings, two playful art workshops led by a painter who is a member of the sistren, and four sessions exploring our personal Life Maps.

It has to be said that undertaking journeys is core business for shamans. Whether archaic or contemporary, indigenous or non-indigenous, traditional or modern, the shaman is archetypally a soul traveller. Scholars have long debated definitions of shamanism and generally admitted the impossibility of arriving at a list of universal criteria because of the variety of historical and cultural variants, but Eliade's (1989) key characteristics have formed at least a starting point for many understandings inside and outside the academy (Hutton, 2001: vii; Wallis, 2003; Harvey & Wallis, 2016: 2; Hoppál, 1984). They also form the basis of the sistren's understanding, for whom a shaman is a person who travels to the spirit world via the *axis mundi* (represented by a sacred tree, pillar, mountain, pathway, rainbow, stairway etc.) in an altered state of consciousness, in the company of spirit guides (usually animals, but also ancestors, elementals, nature spirits and other beings) to communicate with spirit beings and seek healing, guidance or knowledge for oneself or others in need. The sistren, like a great many modern Western shamans – and many Pagans more generally – are very familiar with the “journey” as an analogous concept and are adept at visualising and travelling to landscapes invisible to everyday consciousness. Fusing analogy with the imagination, assisted by guided meditation and often by drumming, they regularly undertake journeys within shamanic consciousness and these journeys deeply impact their everyday lives in normal waking consciousness. Through such journeys the imagination becomes “a bridge into the unfathomable, and it offer[s] the possibility of providing a conduit for certain magical understandings” (Greenwood, 2020: 86).

Prior to 2020 the rituals held in Malta began – following exuberant greetings and warm hugs – with the creation of sacred space. Women sat in a circle around a central altar on the ground or a low table laden with drums and rattles, candles, crystals, feathers, stones, sacred images and precious objects. The ritual space and women's bodies were smudged and ritually cleansed with smouldering *palo santo*<sup>22</sup> or sage and candles were lit. Different women positioned closest to the cardinal directions called in the directions and their associated elements and sacred animals: south/earth/Great Serpent; west/water/Golden Jaguar; north/fire/Royal

Hummingbird; east/air/Great Eagle; below/Mother Earth; and above/Grandfather Sun, Grandmother Moon and Star Sisters and Brothers. We held hands and visualised our energetic connection within the sacred circle. A discussion of the evening's ritual work followed. The latter usually included, among other activities, a meditation to send healing to particular people in need and almost always a guided journey to one of the three worlds in the shamanic universe – the upper, middle and lower worlds – to seek particular advice, healing or insight. Following the journey each woman had the opportunity to relate her experiences and there was time for sharing reflections and interpretations. Finally, closing prayers were offered to the directions, elements and animal spirits, and sacred space was closed. The evenings typically finished with lively socialising and feasting.

This ritual process (though not the hugs or feast!) translated well to the Zoom format. Most women already knew each other and the process well from years of gathering physically in Malta and undertaking shamanic training in workshops together. Zoom actually made getting together easier. There was no need to drive in heavy traffic to meet at the other end of Malta and those who lived abroad were able to participate, including one who had moved to the Canary Islands, a new member living in Turkey, and me in New Zealand. Towards the end of 2020, the main facilitator of our circles spent several months in Cornwall in the UK, but this did not interrupt the scheduling or operation of Zoom meetings. A WhatsApp group with 17 participants facilitated communication between meetings, and this became a dynamic, much-used sacred space for sharing information about upcoming meetings, debriefing after meetings, all manner of musings and experiences, requests for healing for loved ones or self, photographs and videos, a great deal of light-hearted banter and, above all, unfaltering, loving support.

Before each Zoom gathering individuals were pre-assigned to invoke and farewell the directions and we were advised about what to bring to the session in addition to the regular sacred tools: sage or *palo santo* for smudging, a rattle to greet the directions, and a candle to create a sense of sacred space. Prior to the Medicine Wheel workshops the facilitator asked us to each gather 28 small stones to be used as part of an altar we would create to honour the four directions and their associated elements over the duration of the course. Individuals later shared photographs of



these personal altars to the WhatsApp group. Thus, although gatherings from early 2020 were conducted using Zoom, the material dimension of ritual – especially that which expressed the shamanic connection to the Earth – was still present, albeit in different ways, dispersed to individuals' locations and transmitted to one another visually through our devices. We could not sit around a table focussed collectively on a visually rich altar with flickering candles, the air fragrant with *palo santo*; we sat physically alone, staring at a “gallery view” of faces obscured by the odd waft of smoke on our devices' screens. But we relished and responded to the visual richness and creativity evident in the photographs of women's personal altars posted on WhatsApp. We were physically isolated, but there was a strong sense of being connected in sacred space online, as well as to the physical places each of us occupied in the world. When the directions were called by women located hundreds or thousands of kilometres apart, we stood to face and greet the relevant direction from the perspective of our individual location. Thus the collective online space was joined to a dozen or so physical locations around the world. These “real” material places and offline referents were integrated in the creation of our shared sacred consciousness (c.f. Evolvi, 2020: 40). We held hands by raising our palms towards our screens and visualising powerful energy flowing in a circle around the world encompassing the UK, the Canary Islands, Malta, Turkey and New Zealand. This was facilitated by the connection between imagination and memory – as we sat facing our screens reaching out to “connect”, we remembered sitting in a circle in the same room or at a heritage site “really” joining hands.

Through the work during and between rituals, a sense of participating in an intersubjective milieu of multi-layered material and immaterial connections developed. Firstly, each woman connected with her own local physical place on Earth through both embodied and imaginative work (making friends and performing rituals with a special tree, dancing and singing with the wind, writing a love letter to the earth and reading it aloud in a special place in nature, and so on). Secondly, we travelled to connect and ritualise together in a sacred online space enabled by Zoom. Thirdly, from that online space we travelled through guided meditation to connect with imagined places and spirit beings that were intensely real within shamanic consciousness. As Susan Greenwood has written recently:

...in the magical mode of thought, reality is accounted for by emotions, ideas, images, feelings and impressions that simply emerge in phenomenal awareness, with no differentiation between “real/imaginary”. In this purely magical mode, everything experienced becomes “subjectively real”. (Greenwood, 2020: 85)

Fourthly, through attentive and empathic listening to one another’s accounts of shamanic journeys, the rest of us imaginatively connected with those places too. Divisions between seen and unseen, online and offline, material and immaterial places blurred and a collective consciousness emerged comprising all real and imagined journeys to all real and imagined places. The connection engendered during the Zoom meetings spilled out of the online meeting space and time to permeate individuals’ everyday consciousness. One woman commented that the Medicine Wheel and Life Map rituals were “like a deep tissue spiritual massage in that I keep feeling their impact unfolding... Thank you sisters. I never realised the strength I could draw from allowing myself to be vulnerable”. Thus, individuals’ physical locations, places imagined during shamanic journeys, local places visited in “real” embodied journeys (photographs of which were posted later on WhatsApp), and the shared online sacred space became connected in a vast multidimensional matrix. All places became one place in sacred collective consciousness.

As I was writing this paragraph the day after a Zoomed ritual to celebrate the full moon on 28 January 2021, my phone began pinging wildly (I counted 94 WhatsApp messages!). Inspired by the ritual the previous evening, the sistren had begun planning a venture to activate a matrix of energetic connection focussed on Malta’s megalithic temples, seven of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites (there are many others in various states of preservation across Malta and Gozo<sup>23</sup>). On the next full moon the group would gather online to undertake a shamanic journey to the particular temple each felt drawn to, connect with the spirit of that place, and ask what each could do for the place. After the meeting individuals would physically visit their special temple in their own time and perform the ritual suggested by the spirit during the meditation. Together these rituals would activate and connect all temples in a grid of sacred energy. This project exemplifies the intersubjective weaving together of physical sacred places and online sacred space, collective journeying in shamanic consciousness and individual physical journeys.

At the end of one of the Zoom rituals in January 2021, when I was thinking about writing this article, I asked the group for their reflections on holding shamanic rituals online over the recent year, and for permission to quote their ideas (which they readily gave). Many of their insights focussed on the unanticipated “gifts” of Covid. All felt the online rituals had worked much better than they had expected and that the group had “become closer than we ever were, more connected than ever”. Others took up the theme of connection and disconnection, one commenting that despite spending so much time alone during lockdowns, she had become more aware of “not being separate from all that is”. Another said that although physically cut off from other people, she had got more in touch with younger versions of herself and had spent time getting to know her child self. While physical travel was impossible, someone else said, Covid had been a time of “travel with the soul, travel with the heart”. The conversation continued in the WhatsApp group. One woman described her creativity and spiritual awareness becoming more acute as a result of the world quietening during lockdown, along with unusual temporal, visual and auditory experiences, including hearing the earth’s heartbeat:

I could actually hear myself think during semi lockdown and realised how a whole day, when not busy, can be a whole meditative experience. When we would journey together I could see the net protecting us with little lights in between ppl who are also with us in this awakening. I could journey in little time as I felt I was always grounded, could hear the heartbeat of an ongoing drum which I later realised was the earth’s... Journeys were faster and I could see myself pop from one place to the other, could feel the temples “on standby” waiting to be activated... The world had “gone quieter”... I was brimming with ideas for painting and things I could do to make it better, planting seedlings, ideas to do... and I had a lot of enthusiasm, but then when I would get in contact with ppl from work this would dissipate, making my longing to be on my own even stronger... Now I miss my hermit life!

Another also spoke to this theme:

It’s true that being able to be still at the beginning of this pandemic has given us a real gift. As everything became still, I felt that within myself and that enabled me to “see” things much more clearly. Our Zoom meetings have joined so many dots. It feels the same as being in the same space with you all... as we connect on a level that allows our physical self to sit it out while we meet in our otherworldly spaces... it’s wonderful that

although separated by vast distance we can meet and connect this way. It means everything to me x.

The bonds within the group are strong and treasured by all, however I am not suggesting that group members are unanimous in all their beliefs, opinions and priorities; they are not. Without question, though, the trust, respect, humour, empathy and love within the group are more than sufficient to hold these differences. Nor, of course, have experiences since early 2020 been unremittingly positive for anyone. Members of the sistren experienced uncertainty, anxiety and deep sadness when people they loved became ill and, in a few cases, died from Covid or other illnesses. At these times women's support for one another was unstinting and extraordinary both to witness and to receive.

## Conclusion

In the sustained liminality of Covid, a great many modern Pagans and shamans unable to journey physically to sacred places, or even to gather for rituals close to home, instead journeyed to share sacred space online. They also travelled to imagined sites assisted by images on their devices' screens, memories of "real" places and guided visualisations. Sacred space is not tethered to place and is outside chronological time. Rather, sacred space is potentially everywhere in shamans' and Pagans' magical consciousness. Somatic experience is not necessarily prior to, or solely causative of, a sense of dissolving time/place boundaries. Being physically emplaced together in a sacred heritage site promotes a sense of sharing an intersubjective milieu with others in a ritual space (Rountree, 2006), but physical emplacement is not essential. It may work the other way round: group members' synchronic imagining of a shared intersubjective milieu may prompt a sense of shared connection to a sacred place, a "timescape" (Adam, 2004: 143), as facilitated by the livestreaming of Summer Solstice at Stonehenge in June 2020. The vivid memory of having physically visited Stonehenge assisted some of those watching the livestream to imaginatively journey (back) to the site, supporting Coco's (2008: 513) claim that "the body carries the memories of [such] experiences forward and backward in time and mediates between inner and outer realities" (Coco, 2008: 513). But a memory of an embodied visit to Stonehenge was not essential to producing a vivid imaginative journey

or a sense of shared sacred consciousness and connection to sacred space/place. The strongly felt intersubjective connection among those who logged in to watch the Solstice livestream together – what Grieve (1995: 87) long ago referred to as Pagans’ “shared ‘feeling of energy’ which binds them together in cyberspace” – overrode any division between those who remembered a “real” visit to the site and those who had never visited physically.

The Zoomed shamans’ gatherings demonstrate how sacred space online and sacred places “in the world” interweave, physical and imagined places connect, and all places become one place in sacred collective consciousness. With Coco (2008: 512), I would argue that drawing a line between “virtual” and “real”, or “online” and “offline” timespaces, is an “historically entrenched dualism” which inadequately characterizes social connection in the networked society, and this has become ever more true with increased, ubiquitous use of social networking in recent years, especially since Covid. My 2006 paper described a Pagan worldview as reconceptualising commonly understood dualities as continuities: “human body/earth body, past/present, self/other, human/deity” (2006:102). Experiences of ritualizing and making journeys online during Covid suggest that the duality of here/there, along with the distinction between imagined and material places, are also much less stable than we might have thought.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Pagan Federation International: < <https://www.paganfederation.org/about-the-pf/> > (accessed 8 January 2021).

<sup>2</sup> The Pagan Federation International: < <https://www.paganfederation.org/about-the-pf/> > (accessed 8 January 2021). Thirty-five countries or regions are listed on the PFI website.

<sup>3</sup> A handfasting is a Pagan wedding ceremony, derived from Celtic tradition < <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handfasting#Neopaganism> >.

<sup>4</sup> In recent years Matariki, drawing on Māori tradition, has been added to the national festive calendar in New Zealand. The rising of this constellation starts the Māori New Year. “#SpaceMagic Matariki”: < [https://aminoapps.com/c/pagans-witches/page/blog/spacemagic-matariki/6PzB\\_aXLCzuPdbw3ox1qwxqb8da7aLBRjlv](https://aminoapps.com/c/pagans-witches/page/blog/spacemagic-matariki/6PzB_aXLCzuPdbw3ox1qwxqb8da7aLBRjlv) > (accessed 10 January 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Eliade was writing in the 1950s and his term here, and throughout *The Sacred and the Profane*, was “religious man”.

<sup>6</sup> “Goddess tour to Egypt: A Women’s Spiritual Retreat in Egypt with High Priestess and #1 Bestselling Author Syma Kharal” < <https://www.flourishinggoddess.com/egypt-goddess-tour-2020/> > (accessed 18 January 2021). “Edge of Wonder Tours with Jennifer Berezan” < <https://edgeofwondertours.com/malta/> > (accessed 18 January 2021). “Goddess Tours Italy” < <https://goddessstoursitaly.com/index.html> > (accessed 18 January 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Facebook post 3 August 2020 < <https://www.facebook.com/GLASTONBURYGODDESSCONFERENCE/videos/2383989055239357> > (accessed 11 January 2021).

<sup>8</sup> < <https://www.facebook.com/events/581183132524229/> > (accessed 11 January 2021). The recording of the event has been viewed more than 302 thousand times.

<sup>9</sup> “Prehistoric Sites”, English Heritage website: < <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about-us/our-places/prehistoric-sites/> > (accessed 15 January 2021).

<sup>10</sup> “Solstice”, English Heritage website, < <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/things-to-do/solstice/> > (accessed 18 January 2021).

<sup>11</sup> “It’ll only get better from here! Pagans and druids gather at Stonehenge to celebrate first sunrise after the winter solstice – the shortest day of the year”, by Nick Enoch for Mailonline, 23 December 2017, *Daily Mail Australia*: < <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5206357/Stonehenge-winter-solstice-sees-pagans-druids-gather.html> > (accessed 18 January 2021).

<sup>12</sup> “Stonehenge’s Summer Solstice Event May Be Cancelled, But You Can Watch the Whole Thing on Facebook” by Kelly Corbett, 18 May 2020. < <https://www.housebeautiful.com/lifestyle/a32502125/stonehenge-summer-solstice-2020-livestream/> > (accessed 11 January 2021).

<sup>13</sup> “Pagan responses to Stonehenge Solstice being live-streamed” by Liz Williams, *The Wild Hunt: Pagan News and Perspectives*, 21 May 2020. < <https://wildhunt.org/2020/05/pagan-responses-to-stonehenge-solstice-being-live-streamed.html> > (accessed 15 January 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Louisa Morgan, quoted by Liz Williams in her article: “Pagan responses to Stonehenge Solstice being live-streamed” in *The Wild Hunt: Pagan News and Perspectives*, 21 May 2020. < <https://wildhunt.org/2020/05/pagan-responses-to-stonehenge-solstice-being-live-streamed.html> > (accessed 15 January 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Sunset/Summer Solstice 2020 at Stonehenge. < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EZ5cLVOako> >. Sunrise/Summer Solstice 2020 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxfiRpbe9iI> >.

<sup>16</sup> Foveaux Strait connects Stewart Island/Rakiura with Bluff, the southern tip of the South Island.

<sup>17</sup> Sunrise/Summer Solstice 2020 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxfiRpbe9iI> > (accessed 19 January 2021). I have not corrected spelling, grammatical or other errors in the posts quoted.

<sup>18</sup> Sunset | Summer Solstice 2020 at Stonehenge - YouTube, accessed 17 January 2021. I have not corrected spelling, grammatical or other errors in the posts quoted.

<sup>19</sup> Sunrise | Summer Solstice 2020 at Stonehenge - YouTube, accessed 20 January 2021. I have not corrected spelling, grammatical or other errors in the posts quoted.

<sup>20</sup> English Heritage clearly paid attention to comments about the technical aspects of the livestream events. The camera work on the Winter Solstice 2020 livestream was more sophisticated and poignant meditation music was added. The weather was also better, presumably making the filming easier.

<sup>21</sup> “Our Tribe” private group on Facebook has 45 members.

<sup>22</sup> *Bursera graveolens*, *palo santo* or “holy wood” in Spanish, is a South American tree with very fragrant resin used to cure a range of ailments and in smudging to clear negative energy.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Trump and Cilia (2002).

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*Trascendiendo el tiempo y el lugar en contexto de Covid-19:  
la imaginación y el ritual en la creación del espacio sagrado por parte de  
paganos y chamanes modernos*

**Resumen:** Durante el año 2020, debido a las restricciones relacionadas con la epidémica de Covid, las oportunidades de viajar a sitios de patrimonio sagrado disminuyeron drásticamente y las reuniones y rituales de paganos y chamanes se trasladaron necesariamente a Internet. Este artículo retoma un trabajo anterior (Rountree 2006) para reconsiderar las relaciones entre el tiempo, el lugar, la imaginación y la realización de rituales en el contexto “en línea”. Sostiene que, mientras que en el contexto de los sitios patrimoniales “reales”, la frontera temporal entre el pasado y el presente parece difuminarse o disolverse como resultado de las conexiones materiales y corporales de los paganos con un lugar sagrado; en el contexto ritual en línea las fronteras del lugar se difuminan o disuelven debido a las conexiones temporales sincrónicas con otras personas afines en el espacio sagrado. Se exploran dos estudios de caso: las respuestas de aquellos que se reunieron en línea para presenciar la transmisión en vivo del Solsticio de Verano 2020 en Stonehenge por parte de English Heritage, y las experiencias de un grupo de chamanes occidentales modernos, que en su mayoría viven en Malta, cuyas reuniones regulares se trasladaron de los hogares de sus miembros, lugares en la naturaleza y sitios del patrimonio sagrado, a la plataforma Zoom a principios de 2020.

**Palabras clave:** Paganos modernos; Chamanes malteses; Ritual en línea; Lugar sagrado/espacio sagrado; Conciencia mágica; Solsticio de verano en Stonehenge; Covid

*Transcendendo o tempo e o lugar no contexto da Covid-19:  
a imaginação e o ritual na criação do espaço sagrado por parte de pagãos  
e xamãs modernos*

**Resumo:** Durante o ano de 2020, devido às restrições relacionadas à Covid-19, as oportunidades de viagem para locais de patrimônio sagrado diminuíram drasticamente e os encontros e rituais de pagãos e xamãs passaram a ser realizados de modo online. Este artigo retoma um trabalho anterior (Rountree, 2006) para reconsiderar as relações entre tempo, lugar, imaginação e performance ritual no contexto online. Argumenta-se que, enquanto no contexto de locais de patrimônios “reais” a fronteira temporal entre o passado e o presente parece borrar ou se dissolver devido às conexões materiais e corporificadas dos pagãos com um lugar sagrado, no contexto ritual online as fronteiras de lugar borram ou se dissolvem por conta das conexões temporais síncronas com pessoas semelhantes

no espaço sagrado. São explorados dois estudos de caso: as respostas daqueles que se reuniram online para testemunhar a transmissão ao vivo do Solstício de Verão de 2020 em Stonehenge, feita pelo English Heritage; e as experiências de um grupo de xamãs ocidentais modernos, a maioria vivendo em Malta, cujas reuniões regulares que antes eram praticadas nas casas de seus membros, em lugares na natureza e em lugares de patrimônio sagrado, passaram a ser realizadas via plataforma Zoom no início de 2020.

**Palavras-chave:** Pagãos modernos; Xamãs maltaneses; Ritual online; Lugar sagrado/espço sagrado; Consciência mágica; Solstício de verão em Stonehenge; Covid