

An investigation of the beliefs about the role of the moon in their lives held by women who participate in ‘Moon Dance’ and ‘Moon Circle’ gatherings, in person or online, and the perceived relationship these participants have with the moon.

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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And the Moon.

Abstract

Women's circles are a fast-spreading global phenomenon that has not been widely researched outside Latin America. Sometimes called moon circles, they are often held in timing with either the full or new moon, and are concerned with the Feminine and issues of feminine identity, often with regard to the woman's body itself and the menstrual cycle.

While the moon's significance in circles had not been comprehensively addressed before, the moon was referred to as symbolising menstruation or as a metaphor for the menstrual cycle in previous research. Related to this, some of the Latin American research spoke of the importance within circles of participants coming to know themselves as cyclical beings, like the moon. Additionally, some participants in this extant research, seemed to refer to the moon as a 'being' with whom they had a stronger relationship than terms such as 'symbol' and 'metaphor' might imply. Most of this previous research is in Spanish and as yet untranslated.

Building on previous research, therefore, this current research investigates the perceived relationship participants in women's circles (specifically those self-labelling as 'moon dances' and 'moon circles') have with the moon and what role they believe the moon has in their lives. Participants came from gatherings in the US, UK, Canada, and Costa Rica; seven women were interviewed, and an eighth filled out an in-depth questionnaire. Unanimously, participants did feel the moon had a role in their lives. Participants had complex, mutual relationships with the moon that related to the menstrual cycle and issues of identity, amongst other things, and that were, at times, explicitly not symbolic or metaphoric. This research suggests findings from Latin America may extend to elsewhere and that the moon may have more importance in circles than has previously been established.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In their research on women's circles in Europe, which Chia Longman stated are sometimes called 'moon circles', Madeleine Castro and Longman found that circles were often held in timing with the moon.¹ Longman found that the moon was a prevalent symbol or metaphor within circles for a woman's menstrual cycle.² Research from Latin America confirmed this understanding – Ana María Navarro Casillas, for example, found that in circles there, the moon was a key symbol for the natural female cycle, and mentioned the moon in roles beyond this association.³ Seeking therefore to understand the moon's perceived role within moon dances and moon circles - which are part of the larger women's circle phenomenon - this research asked if participants felt a relationship with the moon, or believed the moon had a role in their lives, and if so, how this manifested.

Women's circles outside Latin America have been identified by Longman and others as becoming visible around the year 2000.⁴ Within Latin America, they have been noted earlier – Gisela Valdés Padilla dated some circles from the 1990s.⁵ They vary widely, from small, informal gatherings to highly organised ceremonies associated with specific teachings and spiritual traditions – Valdés noted that the moon dance in Mexico, for example, gathers together hundreds of women annually to dance under the full moon

¹ Chia Longman, 'Women's Circles and the Rise of the New Feminine: Reclaiming Sisterhood, Spirituality, and Wellbeing', *Religions*, 9, 9 (2018), 1-17 (p. 2) <DOI:10.3390/rel9010009>; Madeleine Castro, 'Introducing the Red Tent: A Discursive and Critically Hopeful Exploration of Women's Circles in a Neoliberal Postfeminist Context', *Sociological Research Online*, 25(3) (2020), 386-404 (p. 387) <DOI:10.1177/1360780419889973>.

² Longman, 'Women's Circles', p. 2.

³ Ana María Navarro Casillas, *Análisis de la reflexividad de las comunidades ecosociales de mujeres como agentes de cambio cultural*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, University Autonoma de Aguascalientes, Centro de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, 2016) p. 147 <<http://hdl.handle.net/11317/1229>> [accessed July 13].

⁴ Longman, 'Women's Circles', p. 2.

⁵ Gisela Valdés Padilla, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas en Guadalajara. Cuerpo, Experiencia y Sanación*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, CIESAS Occidente, 2017), pp. 92-93. <<http://ciesas.repositorioinstitucional.mx/jspui/handle/1015/576>> [accessed 10 July 2021].

and participate in ritual over four days and four nights.⁶ In 2019, Valdés identified women's circles in Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, Guatemala, Spain, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Portugal, France, Canada, the US, Israel, Bulgaria and Australia.⁷ Other research has noted circles in additional countries – Longman, for example, studied women's circles in Belgium and the Netherlands.⁸ According to Navarro and others, circles can be held in cyberspace as well as in homes, yoga studios, sweat lodges, and ritual grounds far from cities.⁹

Definitions of the aims of circles vary but previous research agrees on common concerns, beyond a unanimous emphasis on the importance of the 'sisterhood' they provide (see, for example, Longman, and Valdés.)¹⁰ Navarro defined circles as combining:

eco-feminist thought, the pro-ecology discourse and digital communication of the 21st century, with eclectic spiritual practices that revisit symbols and rites from distant Oriental, European and Native American cultures.¹¹

Circles have been noted as focusing on the inner self/inner feminine/divine feminine/sacred feminine, or simply the Feminine and to be concerned with embodiment, (see Castro, María del Rosario Ramírez Morales, de la Torre and Cristina

⁶ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 94.

⁷ Gisela Valdés Padilla 'Círculos de espiritualidades ecofeministas en Guadalajara', in *Performances culturales en America Latina: reappropriaciones, ritualidades y performances terapéuticos*, ed. by Grit Kirstin Koeltzsch and Renata de Lima Silva (San Salvador de Jujuy: Purmamarka Ediciones, 2019), pp. 127-151 (p. 128).

⁸ Longman, 'Women's Circles'.

⁹ Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 169, 175.

¹⁰ Longman, 'Women's Circles', p. 1; Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 145.

¹¹ Ana María Navarro Casillas, 'The importance of the circle. The information and communication technologies in the conformation of the women's clan', *Paakat, Revista de Tecnología y Sociedad*, University of Guadalajara, Year 9, no. 17, September 2019-February 2020 (2019), 1-18, (p. 6) <DOI.org/10.32870/Pk.a9n17.449>.

Note that the link takes you to the original Spanish version: 'La importancia del círculo. Las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación en la conformación del clan de las mujeres'. The English translation was, at the time of writing, available on Academia.edu, but the only link is to the original Spanish. No translator was credited for the translation.

Gutiérrez Zúñiga).¹² Another concern is, for Ramírez, ‘self-realization’ (autorrealización) or - as de la Torre and Gutiérrez put it - the ‘making, unmaking, and remaking [of] the “selves” of their members’.¹³

The role of the moon in circles has not been the focus of any research – indeed Longman, Castro and others stated that women’s circles as a whole are under-researched as a phenomenon.¹⁴ A growing body of research emerging from Latin America and primary source material from within this research, as well as relevant social media, are suggestive of roles the moon might have beyond the association with the menstrual cycle. Valdés, for example, found that circles served to ‘reconnect [participants] with the body/self ... as well as ... the moon and the cosmos’; related understandings in some circles were that women are a channel for the moon, or a physical link between the earth and the moon.¹⁵ Furthermore, an interviewee in Valdés’ research spoke of how she had received direct, spoken guidance from the moon, and how she’d had a revelation in a ceremony that she *was* the moon.¹⁶ The Moon Dance page of the Tierra de Luna website similarly portrays the moon as something or someone who is honored in the dance and in the following lines suggests a possibility of identifying with the moon:

¹² Castro, ‘Introducing the Red Tent’, p. 389; María del Rosario Ramírez Morales, ‘Espiritualidades Femeninas: El caso de los círculos de mujeres/Female Spiritualities: the case of women’s circles’, *Encartes*, 2 (3) (March 2019), 144-162, (p.150) <DOI:10.29340/en.v2n3.81>; Renée de la Torre & Cristina Gutiérrez, ‘The sacred feminine in Mexico’s Neopagan women’s circles’, in *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves? The gendered triangle of religion, secularity and spirituality*, ed. by Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 90-108 (p. 90) <10.4324/9780429456923-4>.

¹³ Ramírez, ‘Espiritualidades Femeninas’, p.147; de la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga, ‘The sacred feminine’, p. 96.

¹⁴ Longman, ‘Women’s Circles’, p. 2; Castro, ‘Introducing the Red Tent’, p. 386.

¹⁵ ‘Las experiencias de las mujeres en los círculos de espiritualidad femenina, les permitió saber/sentir que no habita separación alguna entre nuestro cuerpo, la tierra y la luna. Las mujeres se reconocieron reflexivamente en el vínculo simbólico-material cuerpo/tierra-luna’, Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 183. Translations from the Spanish, here and throughout, are my own.

¹⁶ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 184-185.

All night long, women dressed in
 white skirts, white blouses, white cloths, white flowers.
 All night we are moons with skirts, moons with
 arms ...¹⁷

The song or prayer concludes with the wish that all the women in the world will become moons.

Therefore, both the academic and non-academic literature point to relationship with the moon as a potentially rich area of research in women's circles - both in terms of what has been investigated to date as well as in terms of the gaps in that research.

Building on previous literature on women's circles, the aim of this research was tripartite: 1) to gather together mentions of the moon - scattered throughout the relevant literature and primary sources - and from these to construct a picture of possible relationship to the moon for moon gathering participants and the moon's potential role in their lives. This construction forms part of the literature review; 2) to interview participants in different moon gatherings, in different geographical areas, to see if what has been described to date was experienced by them, and, if so, to deepen the understanding of what this was like experientially for participants, as well as to identify any other elements of relationship, thus emerging with, hopefully, a more detailed and rich description; 3) to see if there were any conclusions to be drawn from the findings about the moon's relationship/role.

A qualitative approach was adopted, and semi-structured interviews were chosen as the interview method. Fieldwork took place during February and March 2021. Eight women who regularly attended groups that had chosen to self-label as 'moon' took part in the research – seven of these were interviewed, and the eighth filled out an in-depth questionnaire. Groups were situated in Costa Rica, the UK, USA, and Canada.

¹⁷ 'Toda la noche, las mujeres vestidas de faldas blancas, blusas blancas, paños blancos, flores blancas. Toda la noche somos lunas con faldas, lunas con brazos, dando vueltas a la rueda de piedras blancas, piedras vibrantes de vida, piedras. Toda la noche vuelan las faldas, lunas,' Tierra de Luna, <<https://tierradeluna.weebly.com/danza-de-luna.html>> [accessed 9 September 2021].

A brief overview of women's circles, moon groups and moon dances follows this introduction, before proceeding to the Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, and Conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature review and introduction to women's circles

The introduction situated moon circles and moon dances within the larger phenomenon of women's circles; whilst the phenomenon was considered under-researched, a body of work emerging from Latin America was noted. Academics such as Renée de la Torre, Gisela Valdés Padilla, María del Rosario Ramírez Morales, and Ana María Navarro Casillas have all researched women's circles in Latin America, and some have contributed multiple papers on the subject (most of which is in Spanish and untranslated, and several of which are unpublished PhD theses.) This chapter surveys previous work on the subject, presenting women's circles and their aims as they've been represented in that literature and constructing a portrait of the moon's role within them.

Common themes

Whilst there are substantial differences between the different types of circles which come under the broad umbrella of 'women's circles' (discussed in the following chapter) research from both Europe and Latin America suggests important commonalities. Those pertinent to the object of this research are, as noted by Ramírez, Longman, and others: an emphasis on the sacrality of Nature and women's relationship to Nature; on generating/celebrating the Feminine – understood as an inner essence, as sisterhood, and as sacred or divine; on the woman's body itself, particularly women's cyclical nature, and women's reproductive capacities, including the menstrual cycle.¹⁸

These threads are iterated in different ways, depending on the type of circle being described and the focus of the researcher. Ramírez noted the dominant narrative of the body as a sacred space.¹⁹ De la Torre and Gutiérrez commented that circles '[emphasize]

¹⁸ See for example, María del Rosario Ramírez Morales, 'Expresiones femeninas de la Nueva Era: Los círculos de mujeres en Mexico', *Entre tropicos: Dialogos de estudios Nueva Era entre Mexico y Brasil*, (2018), 243-265 (p. 244-245); María del Rosario Ramírez Morales, 'La Espiritualidad Femenina Desde Los Círculos de Mujeres', in *Conflitti Sociali e Religione nel Mediterraneo: Riflessioni, teoriche e studi di caso*, ed. by Afef Hagi and Giovanna Campani (Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa, 2014), pp.157-161 (p. 161); Longman, 'Women's Circles', p. 386.

¹⁹ Ramírez, 'Expresiones femeninas de la Nueva Era', p. 255.

the sacred feminine'.²⁰ Navarro's observations agreed; she related the frequent use of the Divine Feminine in women's circles to:

participants' devotion to themselves as women who ... conceptualize [their bodies] ... as sacred ... [and know] that they are connected both to the material world and with a spiritual conception of the universe.²¹

As noted in the introduction, a common conclusion drawn by researchers is that circles are concerned with what Ramírez called 'self-realization' (autorrealización) and what de la Torre and Gutiérrez described as 'making, unmaking, and remaking the "selves" of their members through embodied rituals'.²²

All these common themes – the sacred, the body, menstruation, the Feminine, self-realization, connection to Nature - can be linked to the moon, as will be explored below. It is important to note that research differs greatly in how frequently the moon is referred to; several works don't mention the moon at all, for example Ramírez's chapter on women's circles and new spiritualities.²³ As the two main papers on circles outside Latin America mention the moon only once or twice, most of the following comes from research inside Latin America. Much of this research refers to specific circles in distinct geographical areas, so the threads drawn out are suggestive rather than conclusive and can't be generalized. Nonetheless, for brevity's sake I will not differentiate the Latin American from the European literature except when essential.

Menstruation and the menstrual cycle

The link made in women's circles between menstruation and the moon comes from a belief that the moon's cycles influence and/or are symbolic of, women's menstrual

²⁰ de la Torre and Gutiérrez, 'The sacred feminine', p. 90.

²¹ 'la devoción hacia sí misma en tanto que mujer que entiende y conoce su cuerpo y lo conceptualiza como sagrado, su mente y su espíritu, es decir que se encuentra conectada con lo material pero también con la concepción espiritual del universo,' Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 155.

²² Ramírez, 'Espiritualidades Femeninas', p. 147; de la Torre and Gutiérrez, 'The sacred feminine', p. 96

²³ *María del Rosario Ramírez Morales*, 'Cuerpos sagrados, cuerpos (re)significados: círculos de mujeres y nuevas espiritualidades', in *Comprendiendo a los Creyentes: la religión y la religiosidad en sus manifestaciones sociales*, ed. by Juan Pablos, (Mexico D.F.: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, November 2015), pp. 127-143.

cycle, according to Longman, Ramírez and others.²⁴ Ramírez stated that they're considered to be related because of their 28-day cycles and effect of moon on water.²⁵ This is certainly not a connection made only in women's circles, the words 'menstruation' and 'month' both being connected etymologically to the word 'moon'.²⁶ Such an understanding informs Spretnak's remark that women 'run on cosmic time, ie. share the cycles of the moon' and seems to be reflected by organizations like The Wild Woman Project (cited by Castro in her research) and Global Sisterhood, which offer moon circles and use the moon as a uniting image, as in Figures 1 and 2 below.²⁷



Figure 1: Artist unknown, Image illustrating the phases of the moon, Wild Woman Project website.

²⁴ Longman, 'Women's Circles', p. 2; María del Rosario Ramírez Morales, 'Del Tabú a la sacralidad: la menstruación en la era del sagrado femenino', *Ciencias Sociales y Religion*, 19 (Jan-July 2016), 134-152 (p. 139).

²⁵ Ramírez, 'Del Tabú', p. 139.

²⁶ T. F. Hoad, *The Concise Oxford dictionary of English etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁷ Charlene Spretnak, 'Introduction', in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1982), xvii; Castro, 'Red Tent', p. 387.



Figure 2: Artist unknown, Image of women standing between the earth and moon, Global Sisterhood website.

Ramírez noted the central importance of revisioning menstruation in what she called ‘the era of the sacred feminine’ and the association of the moon with menstruation, exemplified by the use of the term ‘moontime’ for the time of menstruation and ‘luna’ or ‘lunita’ (moon or little moon) for the menstruation itself.²⁸ Navarro reported that this was a practise in circles in Latin America and Valdés also noted references to menstruating on the full moon as the ‘red moon’ and menstruating on the new moon as ‘white moon’.²⁹ All these terms combine the moon and menstruation in a single image.

Menstruation was found to be significant in women’s circles in previous research, indeed some circles, according to Castro and others, particularly those of the Red Tent movement, take their inspiration from a popular concept of ‘menstrual spaces, such as moon lodges within some Native American traditions’ where women would gather during menstruation.³⁰ This practice was central to Diamant’s fictional *Red Tent*, set in Biblical times, where women share sisterhood and wisdom in the menstrual tent.³¹

²⁸ Ramírez, ‘Del Tabú’, p. 143.

²⁹ Navarro, *Análisis de la Reflexividad*, p. 205; Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 355.

³⁰ Castro, ‘Introducing the Red Tent’, p. 389, 340.

³¹ Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

Beyond this, Chris Bobel found there was an emphasis on menstruation itself as a medium for enlightenment among those she called ‘Feminist-spiritualists’ and Ramírez wrote of the link between feminine spirituality and the body as a sacred space, ‘through the (re)signification of processes like menstruation’.³² In their research on Regina Circles, de la Torre and Gutiérrez described rituals for the ‘recovery of the 13 moons’; that is, rituals that help realign women’s menstrual cycles to synch with the moon and ‘cosmic time.’³³ Valdés devoted an entire chapter to menstruation in her thesis.³⁴ The central importance of menstruation thus has potential implications for the importance of the moon within circles.

Another practise in some women’s ritual circles linking women, menstruation and the moon is the offering of menstrual blood to the earth, called ‘siembra de la luna’ (seeding the moon), described by Ramírez, Valdés and others.³⁵ Here menstrual blood is seen as a sacred fluid, linked to the moon. This practise is paralleled amongst the Spanish and Catalan pilgrims studied by Anna Fedele; in Fedele’s research, pilgrims offered their menstrual blood to Mary Magdalene as a symbol of the sacred Feminine.³⁶ Fedele found that such offerings fostered ‘an embodied relationship with the divine’ and forged, literally, ‘blood ties’ between pilgrims, the earth, and the sacred Feminine.³⁷ Thus, previous research found an emphasis in circles on the links between women, menstruation/menstrual blood, and the sacred, and the moon is conceptually implicated therein.

³² Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp. 68-69; ‘tomando en cuenta el vínculo que se ha construido entre la espiritualidad femenina y la consideración del cuerpo como espacio sagrado, particularmente a través de la (re)significación de procesos como la menstruación,’ Ramírez, ‘Del Tabú’, p. 135.

³³ de la Torre and Gutiérrez Zúñiga, ‘The sacred feminine’, p. 96.

³⁴ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, pp. 338-419.

³⁵ Ramírez, ‘Cuerpos Sagrados’, p. 139; Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 406.

³⁶ Anna Fedele, ‘Reversing Eve’s Curse: Mary Magdalene, Mother Earth and the Creative Realization of Menstruation’, *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 28, 2 (2014), 23-35.

³⁷ Fedele, ‘Reversing Eve’s Curse’, p.23, p. 27.

Cyclical Beings

Navarro and others reported that self-identification as a cyclical being is important in circles.³⁸ She identified this as ‘one of the key elements in rethinking identity.’³⁹

Navarro stated that this identity as a cyclical being is understood as paralleling other natural cycles, one of the key cycles being the lunar cycle (other symbols include the elements and the earth.)⁴⁰ A second, therefore, if intimately related, way that women are related to the moon in the literature is as cyclical beings.

Navarro wrote of the understanding within the communities she studied that a woman is explicitly linked with the moon - is a ‘Moon Woman’ - and that every month, she goes through different stages in her own being related to the lunar phases.⁴¹ Following on from this is the understanding that suffering comes from having to act as if she is the same throughout the cycle.⁴² Navarro described how ovulation is associated with the full moon, menstruation with the new moon; the ten days between menstruation and ovulation symbolically parallel the waning moon and are considered as dark, introspective days.⁴³

This understanding is illustrated in Figure 4, from Gray’s *Red Moon*, showing ovulation tied to the lunar cycle, along with different phases in the woman’s being.⁴⁴

³⁸ Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 147.

³⁹ ‘En la reflexividad de las coordinadoras en cuanto a lo que significa ser mujer, el reconocerse como mujeres cíclicas ha sido uno de los elementos clave para repensar su identidad,’ Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 147.

⁴⁰ Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 147.

⁴¹ Navarro, ‘The importance of the circle’, p. 10; Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 147.

⁴² Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, page 148.

⁴³ Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, page 147.

⁴⁴ Miranda Gray, *Red Moon* (Rockport: Element Books Ltd., 1994).

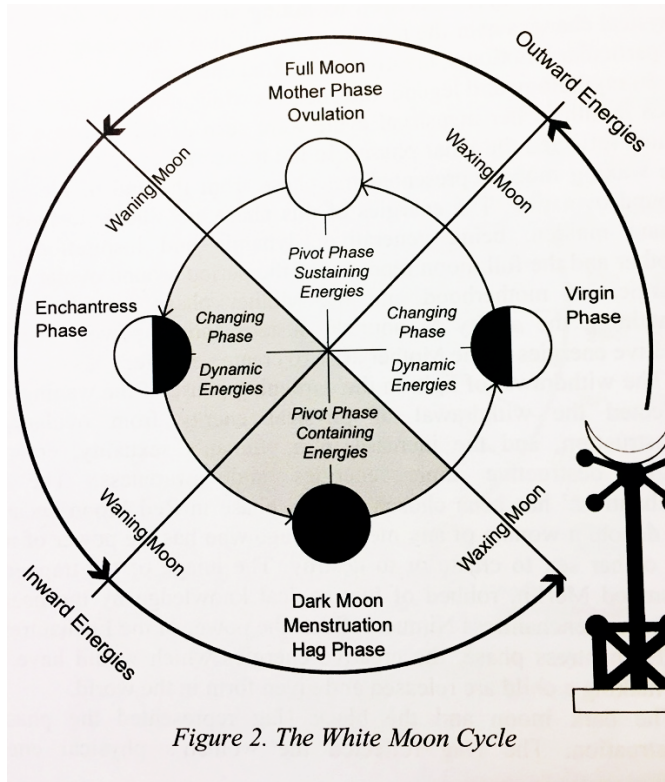


Figure 3: Miranda Gray, 'The White Moon Cycle', Miranda Gray, *Red Moon*, page 72. Image: scanned by Anne Day-Jones, reproduced with permission.

Navarro noted a further way that women are associated with lunar cycles in a teaching by one of the leaders of a ritual circle, Abuela Margarita.⁴⁵ According to this, women's ages are grouped into 13-year stages, reflecting the 13 moons in a year: infancy is 0 to 13 years, 13-26 is the awakening of hormones, 26-39 is youth, and 39-52 maturity. The historic association of women with the three phases of the moon, referenced for example by Charlene Spretnak – that is, the Goddess's 'triple aspect – the waxing, full and waning moon: the maiden, mother and wise crone' is not specifically referred to in the literature on women's circles, but may inform the teaching referred to by Valdés and Navarro.⁴⁶

Body as a link

A final, and perhaps more mysterious way that women are associated with the moon in previous research seems to be as a physical/energetic channel or link between the earth

⁴⁵ Navarro Casillas, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 153.

⁴⁶ Spretnak, 'Introduction', xvii.

and moon. Valdés, for example, stated that in circles, ‘women recognize themselves as a symbolic-material link/earth-moon,’ and again, that the experience of being in a circle ‘allowed them to know or feel that there is no separation whatsoever between [their] body, the earth and the moon.’⁴⁷

Symbolic/metaphoric/other?

Longman called the connection between menstruation and the moon a symbolic one, and de la Torre, wrote that it is a ‘metaphoric’ connection, but neither these terms, nor the connection were further explored or defined.⁴⁸ (Here and elsewhere, this is not to suggest any lack of academic rigour; it simply wasn’t the focus of their research.) The words of individual participants in Latin American research as well as primary source material, some of which was included in the introduction, suggest that whatever the connection is, it is important for those individuals – so important that a participant in Valdés’ research realized in a sweatlodge: ‘Yes, I am the moon!’ (Sí, soy la luna!)⁴⁹

Elsewhere, previous research quoted individuals speaking of the moon as a ‘being’ with whom the participant had an important relationship. For example, one participant in Valdés research spoke of being told things by ‘Grandmother Moon’ [la abuela luna], and about truth as coming ‘from herself, her heart, her intuition and her relation with the great mother and the grandmother moon.’⁵⁰ Valdés described a common understanding

⁴⁷ ‘Las experiencias de las mujeres en los círculos de espiritualidad femenina, les permitió saber/sentir que no habita separación alguna entre nuestro cuerpo, la tierra y la luna. Las mujeres se reconocieron reflexivamente en el vínculo simbólico-material cuerpo/tierra-luna,’ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 183.

⁴⁸ Longman, ‘Women’s Circles’, p. 2; Renée de la Torre, ‘The Feminization of Red Path: a Neo-pagan Network of Female Sacralization’, *International Journal of Latin American Religions*, (2, 2018), 234-247 (p. 243) <DOI.org/10.1007/s41603-018-0052-7>.

⁴⁹ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 184.

⁵⁰ ‘es a mí misma, en mi corazón, en mi intuición y en mi relación con la gran madre y la abuela luna,’ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 185.

of the earth and the moon as ‘beings, like a mother and grandmother, offering protection care and accompaniment throughout the lives of women’.⁵¹

Amy Whitehead is among those using relational discourses such as animism to understand relationships between humans and what Irving Hallowell (1892-1974) categorised as ‘other-than-human-persons’.⁵² In her research on the relationship between devotees to the Virgin of Alcala de los Gazules, Whitehead found, in a statement strikingly similar to that of Valdés, that the Virgin’s shrine was experienced as a “‘female ancestral person” who, with her ... relational capacities, is capable of reciprocally nurturing, relating with, inspiring, and protecting her devotees.’⁵³ Similarly, in her work on what she called ‘Appalachian Animism’, she used the language of personhood as a way to explore the ‘complex relationships’ that inhabitants had with the Appalachians, finding that the mountains were experienced as ‘kin’ to the people who lived there.⁵⁴

To return to Longman and de la Torre’s statements, therefore, that the relationship between women, menstruation and the moon is symbolic or metaphoric, it is important to understand what is implied by this. Angela Voss pointed to different potential understandings of the word ‘symbol’, quoting Henry Corbin’s comment on ‘the current attitude ... to confuse symbol with allegory.’⁵⁵ Peter Struck spoke of the word ‘symbol’,

⁵¹ ‘El reconocimiento de la Tierra y la Luna como entes, como seres, como madre y abuela, ofrece protección, guía y acompañamientos para los procesos y la vida de las mujeres,’ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 204.

⁵² Alfred Irving Hallowell, ‘Ojibwa Ontology Behavior and World View’, in *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, ed. by Stanley Diamond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 19-52 (p. 22).

⁵³ Amy Whitehead, ‘Devotional Bodies, Working Shrines: The Ritual Dynamics of Devotion in an Andalusian Marian Shrine’, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 13, no. 2 (2018), 212-230 (p. 213) <doi:10.1353/mrw.2018.0018>.

⁵⁴ Amy Whitehead, ‘Appalachian animism: Religion, the woods, and the material presence of the mountain’, in *Space, Place and Religious Landscapes: Living Mountains*, ed. by Darrelyn Gunzburg, and Bernadette Brady (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 147-170 (p. 161, p. 148)

⁵⁵ Henry Corbin, ‘Mysticism and Humour’, in *Spring* (1973), p. 27, quoted in S. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton 1999), p. 93 cited in Angela Voss, ‘From Allegory to Anagoge: The Question of Symbolic Perception in a Literal

in its original context, not as a ‘sign’ or association, but as being able to ‘tell us more than we can possibly know’.⁵⁶ The moon’s role as ‘symbolic’ and ‘metaphoric’ could, therefore, imply a variety of things in the context of women’s circles. This research seeks accordingly to develop a clearer picture about how the role of the moon and relationship with it is conceived of and experienced by participants.

World’, in *Astrology and the Academy*, eds. Nicholas Campion and M. Yorke, (Bristol: Cinnebar Books, 2004), pp. 1-9 (p. 3).

⁵⁶ Peter Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 201.

Chapter 3: Overview of women's circles and further description of moon gatherings

This chapter is an extension of the literature review. It begins by taking a step back, noting the main influences on the women's circle phenomenon, which are relevant for the current investigation. It then focuses closer in by further defining women's circles and identifying the different types of circles encompassed by this umbrella term. It concludes by locating moon circles and moon dances within this context and offers a brief description of the moon dance.

Influences

Wendy Griffin, in her work on feminist spiritualities, wrote that 'there exists today a family of feminist spiritualities. Like strands of color in a weaving, they are related yet not the same. They overlap and interact in many places.'⁵⁷ Sabina Magliocco described a recent and widespread 'explosion of ritual creativity' which is 'especially prominent amongst women'.⁵⁸ Women's circles arise as part of these new forms of women's spiritualities and changes in ritual practise.

Women's circles, which Longman and others considered distinct from previous circle movements, have grown out of and been influenced by eco-Feminism, second- and third-wave Feminism, and, even, as Castro suggested, post-feminism.⁵⁹ Indigenous teachings have also been an important influence, particularly pan-Indianism - which de la Torre defined as combining 'the cultural heritage of native people' and 'freely interchange[ing] ... ritual, ceremonies and cosmologies' - and, in Latin America, neo-Mexicanity - a reclaiming of Mexican indigeneity along with an openness to other spiritual traditions and discourses.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Wendy Griffin, 'Webs of Women: Feminist Spiritualities', in *Witchcraft & Magic*, ed. by Helen A. Berger (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 55-80 (p. 55) <DOI:10.9783/9780812201253.55>.

⁵⁸ Sabina Magliocco, 'Introduction: Ritual Creativity, Emotions and the Body', *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 28, 2 (2014), 1-8 (p. 1).

⁵⁹ Longman, 'Women's Circles', p. 3-4; Castro, 'Introducing the Red Tent', Footnote, p.386.

⁶⁰ de la Torre, 'The Feminization of Red Path', Footnote, p. 235.

Navarro's findings confirmed this picture; she added that 'symbols and rites from Oriental and European' cultures can be included.⁶¹ The goddess movement was also noted by as being important by Valdés and others, and de la Torre was amongst those who emphasized the importance of New Age thought and networks.⁶² These distinct threads have been the focus of much of the research on women's circles, for example Castro's investigation of the Red Tent movement in the light of neoliberal Postfeminism and Navarro's study of the use of information and communication technologies in circles.⁶³

Other influences noted in previous research by Chris Bobel and others include authors such as Starhawk (*The Spiral Dance*), Clarissa Pinkola Estes (*Women Who Run With The Wolves*), Anita Diamant (*The Red Tent*), and Joan Shinoda Bolen, along with feminist scholars such as Carol Christ, Merlin Stone, Riane Eisler, and Barbara Walker.⁶⁴ Valdés included Miranda Gray's *Red Moon* as an influence on women's circles in Latin America, as well as the work of Marija Gimbutas and Margaret Murray.⁶⁵

Further definitions

Longman offered a broad definition of women's circles which reflects other researchers' broadest definitions. For Longman, they are women-only groups that are 'non-institutionalized, recurrent' that often meet in timing with the lunar calendar, 'thus affirming the symbolic connection between the lunar calendar and the female bodily cycle.'⁶⁶ Ramírez's definition is also broadly applicable throughout the literature. She defined them as:

⁶¹ Navarro, 'The importance of the circle', p. 6.

⁶² Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos*, p. 57-58; de la Torre, 'The Feminization of Red Path', p. 235.

⁶³ Castro, 'Introducing the Red Tent'; Navarro, 'The importance of the circle'.

⁶⁴ Chris Bobel, *New Blood*, p. 68.

⁶⁵ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos*, p. 171, p. 39.

⁶⁶ Longman, 'Women's Circles', p. 2.

A model of female organization that takes up various spiritual and cultural elements in order to promote self-management, empowerment, self-knowledge and a strategic contact with the sacred that finds its expression in the body and the experiences of women.⁶⁷

Whilst Longman wrote that circles ‘did not affiliate with, nor promote any particular feminist and/or religious movement or spiritual tradition’, she was not considering Latin America, where many circles do focus on spiritual traditions, albeit in an amalgamation as described earlier in this chapter.⁶⁸ Ramírez, for example, wrote that whilst there was no religious adherence in circles, some did subscribe to indigenous Mexican traditions; she noted the principal themes, across circles, as sacrality and the feminine, as well as their ephemeral nature.⁶⁹ Again, however, this latter point is not applicable to all circles - the original moon dance, for example, is entering its third decade. Nonetheless, Navarro and others considered these different types of circles as part of the same phenomenon.⁷⁰

In their research, Longman and Castro used the term ‘women’s circle’ as an umbrella term to cover circles that are self-directed as well as those that are affiliated with trans-national organizations such as the Red Tent Temple movement.⁷¹ In Latin America some researchers have proposed other terms, referring to women’s eco-social communities, and eco-feminist circles.⁷² De la Torre used the umbrella term ‘female

⁶⁷ ‘Un modelo de organización femenina que retoma diversos elementos espirituales y culturales con el fin de promover la autogestión, el empoderamiento, el autoconocimiento y un contacto estratégico con lo sagrado que encuentra su expresión en el cuerpo y las experiencias de las mujeres; volviéndose así uno de los espacios privilegiados para el desarrollo y la gestión de la espiritualidad femenina,’ María del Rosario Ramírez Morales, *Lo femenino resignificado. Discursos y concepciones de lo femenino desde los círculos de mujeres*. (Unpublished PhD thesis, UAM-Iztapalapa, Ciudad de Mexico, 2017), p. 83 <http://tesiuami.izt.uam.mx/uam/aspuam/presentatesis.php?recno=22576&docs=UAMI22576.pdf> [Accessed 17 September, 2021].

⁶⁸ Longman, ‘Women’s Circles’, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Ramírez, ‘Cuerpos Sagrados’, p. 132; Ramírez, ‘Espiritualidades Femeninas’, p. 151-2.

⁷⁰ Navarro Casillas, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 168.

⁷¹ Longman, ‘Women’s Circles’; Castro, ‘Introducing the Red Tent’.

⁷² Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*; Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*; Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*.

sacred circles'.⁷³ Whichever of these general terms is employed, it encompasses various, distinctive types of circles. Navarro proposed three categories: ritual women's circles, urban women's circles, and circles affiliated with the Red Tent movement.⁷⁴ These terms are not used by other researchers, nonetheless Navarro's definitions are useful. They broadly differentiate 'ritual circles', which 'lean on traditional practises and conserve ritual elements' often taking place outside cities and involving sweatlodges', from the more informal 'urban circles' whose practices she defines, like the circles in Longman's research, as often meeting in members' houses or places like yoga studios for personalised ritual, workshops, and sharing, without an adherence to a particular religious or spiritual tradition.⁷⁵

Moon Circles and Moon Dances

The moon circles in this research belong to the phenomenon studied by Longman, and are what Navarro called 'urban women's circles'. As such, they need no further introduction. Moon dances, however, are distinct, and fall under Navarro's 'ritual circle' category. Valdés called the moon dance a 'reinvention of ... [neo-mexicanity] and a reappropriation of the Feminine in this tradition.'⁷⁶ The current Dance is a revival of a ceremony derived from pre-Columbian Codexes showing women dancing under a full moon, as described in the Pachamama website.⁷⁷ The first dance took place in 1992.⁷⁸

⁷³ de la Torre, 'The Feminization of Red Path'.

⁷⁴ Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 168.

⁷⁵ 'Se apegan a prácticas tradicionales y conservan elementos rituales', Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 169, p.175.

⁷⁶ 'La Danza de la Luna es manifestación del movimiento de la nueva mexicanidad, la Danza de la Luna es una reinvención de la tradición y una reappropriación femenina de ésta', Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 93.

⁷⁷ Chandani, *Moon Dance: A Mystical and Ancient Gathering*, (March 9, 2017) <<https://www.pachamama.com/blog/moon-dance-mystical-ancient-gathering/>>[accessed 10 July 2021]

⁷⁸ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 93.

Participants dance in collective movements in the moon arbour over four nights under the full moon, with a drum and singers.⁷⁹ Valdés stated the dances are conceived of as ‘mandalas drawn on the earth, directed to the moon and the cosmos, as well as the elements and the spiritual guides’.⁸⁰ She cited a 200-women dance in 2014 as typical but stated that each year more women attend the dances, noting moon dances from this lineage in Canada, the US, and Latin America.⁸¹



Figure 4: Photographer unknown, The moon arbour in Costa Rica, with the inner altar, in the shape of a uterus, 2017 Moon Dance, Tierra de Luna website on the Danza de la Luna page.

Figure 4 above shows participants dressed for the dance. They wear a large circular *quexquemilt* or cape, and are dressed in white and blue for the moon and sky (as in the song cited in the introduction).

Photos and descriptions of ceremonies are available online, however, part of the agreement made with the leader of the Quebec moon dance was that such details would not form part of this thesis.

⁷⁹ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 94.

⁸⁰ ‘se dibuja mandalas en la Tierra, dirigidos a la luna y al cosmos, también a los elementales y a los guías espirituales,’ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 94.

⁸¹ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 95.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction to research methods

In considering the approach best suited to investigating the potentially ‘complex interrelationships’ between participants and the moon, I followed Robert E. Stake’s recommendation and adopted a qualitative approach.⁸² Additionally, Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey are amongst those identifying this approach as being most suitable for researching sensitive issues such as belief.⁸³

An introductory letter set out the project description and aims, delineating my role as a researcher and as a member of a moon gathering. It stressed that the research would be respectful of participants’ beliefs and would not include any aspect of their experiences or the gatherings that participants felt should not be written about. As a measure of respect, as well as to ensure that I didn’t suffer any adverse effects from the research in my continued participation in the moon dance, I asked permission from leaders of the Costa Rican and Quebec dances before proceeding any further, which I received.

The main research tool was hour-long semi-structured interviews, following Judith Bell’s suggestion that semi-structured interviews allow ‘the respondent to talk about what is of central significance to him or her’ while providing ‘some loose structure to ensure all topics [are covered] which are considered crucial to the study.’⁸⁴ This fulfilled the research’s dual aim, allowing me to investigate whether research participants’ experiences were similar or different to what had been identified in the literature review, whilst allowing ample space for participants to speak of other things that might fall outside this.

Seven women agreed to be interviewed – two moon dancers and five moon circle participants – and interviews took place in February and March 2021. One interview

⁸² Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications), p. 37.

⁸³ Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* (London: SAGE: 2011), p. 11.

⁸⁴ Judith Bell, *Doing Your Research Project*, 3rd edn. (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p.138.

was in person, the rest were via Zoom. A secondary tool was a questionnaire; due to poor internet in a Costa Rican dance community, I was asked to send a questionnaire to their members. This questionnaire duplicated the guided interview questions, with encouragement to answer in detail and free-associate. Questionnaires were filled out by three moon dancers, two of which are not considered here: one was filled out with simple yes/no answers, the other had not been saved/shared properly and she declined to complete the questionnaire a second time. The one very full response I received speaks more to the participant's enthusiasm for the subject matter than the success of the questionnaire as a research tool in this case.

Interviews were transcribed, using CAQDAS software (QDA Miner Lite) to code for emerging keywords. From the keywords or codes came concepts and categories, as in the process described by Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey⁸⁵. Whilst they stated that such a process allows 'theory' to emerge, Gary Thomas and David James contest this word's validity, preferring instead terms such as 'interpretation' or 'narrative'.⁸⁶ The emerging interpretations or narratives, therefore, are presented in the Findings and Conclusion sections which follow.

Target Group

The target group was women who participated in women's circles that self-labelled as 'moon' – specifically moon dances and moon circles. Participants were required to have attended at least four moon circles or moon dances, to ensure some level of familiarity with the gatherings. This number was pertinent for the moon dancers in the research, as (according to my personal experience) a woman is not considered a moon dancer until she has danced in four dances. All participants greatly exceeded the four-gathering stipulation.

⁸⁵ Monique, M. Hennink et al., *Qualitative Research*, p.6.

⁸⁶ Gary Thomas and David James, 'Reinventing grounded theory: some questions about theory, ground and discovery', *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 32, No 6 (December 2006), 767-795 (p. 767).

Following Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey's assertion that a large number of participants isn't needed when 'the purpose is to achieve depth of information' rather than breadth, I contacted a small number of moon gatherings and participants.⁸⁷ Only one participant was known to me personally - the others came through my wider social network or from contacting moon dances directly through their website and Facebook pages. Although the aim was not to achieve even the most tentative of global conclusions, moon dances and circles are a global phenomenon, and I therefore sought to have some representation from outside Canada, where I am based. I therefore contacted moon circles in other countries and several moon dances in Latin America. As well as the Canadians in this research, therefore, the group included three members of a moon circle in New York, USA, a moon circle leader and attendee in Glastonbury, UK, as well as two members of the moon dance in Costa Rica. Some participants came from countries other than the ones the gatherings were held in - for example, Chile, Ireland, and Germany. Participants' ages were between 30-60. Participants' names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Reflexive Considerations

I am a white woman in my fifties with several decades of involvement in ritual, dating principally from living on an Ojibwe reservation in Northern Wisconsin for several years in the late 1990s. I attended one moon circle on the reservation – ironically what would be termed an 'urban women's circle' due to its informal nature – and am a member of the Quebec moon dance. I thus have an insider's view of the topic of research. Irving Seidman's statement that, as a researcher, I am implicated at all levels in the data produced, is therefore even more pertinent due to my involvement with the subject matter of the research.⁸⁸

I thus followed Seidman's advice in 'recognising [this implication] and affirming its possibilities' whilst attempting 'to minimise the distortion.'⁸⁹ In the spirit of 'affirming'

⁸⁷ Monique, M. Hennink et al., *Qualitative Research*, p.17.

⁸⁸ Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), p. 22.

⁸⁹ Seidman, *Interviewing*, p. 23.

the ‘possibilities’, my insider status allowed me to easily locate participants, and participants were more willing to participate in the research and to share in depth than I believe they would have been with an outsider. My experience of women’s rituals and the moon dance established trust and provided common ground and references.

With respect to minimising distortion, I attempted to use Edmund Husserl’s method of ‘bracketing’ my own beliefs – that is, putting them to one side - and to employ reflexivity.⁹⁰ The fact that my own experiences and beliefs were not consistently reflected by any of the participants suggests that I had some success, however partial: I was continually surprised, both by what participants reported and the emotional intensity of some of their interviews, finding, like James Olive, that ‘having considered myself so close to the topic of study, [I learned] how far I was from that mark’ in many instances.⁹¹

Clifford Geertz and others have recommended balancing the insider - or what Kenneth L. Pike termed as the ‘emic’ stance - with the outsider or ‘etic’ stance, and as an academic researcher my role was an etic one.⁹² I attempted throughout to balance the emic and etic stances so that participants would not feel their experience was distorted – or even, what Peter Cole referred to as overly ‘relanguage[d]’ into academic terms.⁹³ Using an inductive approach – in this case, allowing understandings or narratives to emerge from the data, as described – was part of the process of trying to balance these two stances, aiming, as Leonard Primiano stated, ‘to interpret cultural data in a way that

⁹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1982).

⁹¹ J. L. Olive, ‘Reflecting on the tension between emic and etic perspectives in life history research: Lessons learned’, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 15(2) 2014, p. 8-9 cited in Fiona Beals, Joanna Kidman, and Hine Funaki, ‘Insider and Outsider Research: Negotiating Self at the Edge of the Emic/Etic Divide’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 26(6) (2020), 593-601 (p. 595).

⁹² Geertz, Clifford, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 57; Kenneth L. Pike, "Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behavior," in *Language and Thought*, ed. D.C. Hildum (Princeton NJ: D.van Norstrand Company, 1967).

⁹³ Peter Cole, 2017, 'An indigenous research narrative: Ethics and protocols over time and space', *Qualitative Inquiry*, Volume 23, Issue 5 (2017), 343-351 (p. 348).

is meaningful to ... informants, as well as theoretically rigorous and responsible'.⁹⁴ My status as insider and outsider was embraced by several of the participants who expressed the importance of bridging what they saw as the gap between their understandings and the viewpoint of the scientific/academic world.

⁹⁴ Leonard Norman Primiano, 'Vernacular religion and the search for method in religious folklife', *Western Folklore*, Vol. 54 (January 1995), 37-56 (p. 40).

Chapter 5: Findings

Introduction

This chapter reports on the findings from the fieldwork. It is divided into three sections: Moon and Menstruation, Finding Identity, and Relationship to the Moon. Many places in previous research on circles and the sacred feminine utilise the metaphor of weaving – as did one participant in this research, who said she experienced the moon as ‘a weaver of ways and of water and of women.’ Weaving implies different threads continually interrelating, and the themes that emerged in the research were like this; there is, therefore, much overlap between sections, whose delineations are not rigid, and distinct ‘threads’ weave throughout the entire chapter.

Moon and Menstruation

Introduction

The introduction and literature review summarized how the association between the lunar cycle and the menstrual cycle – and hence women - has been referenced by moon gatherings and researchers. One of the early questions in the interviews, therefore, was what relationship, if any, participants believed existed between the moon and menstruation, with follow up questions, if they replied in the affirmative, to investigate how they envisaged it.

Nature of the connection

All interviewees connected the moon with the menstrual cycle – most spoke about this before the question was asked, indicating the immediacy of the association. All participants responded with varying versions of Ramírez’s statement, cited in the literature review, that length of cycle and the moon’s effect on water are the reasons why the lunar and menstrual cycles are linked.⁹⁵

About half of the participants believed that the moon directly influenced the timing of menstruation, and all of these cited the moon’s effect on water as the process by which

⁹⁵ Ramírez, ‘Del Tabú’, p. 139.

this happened. Mia, a Chilean doula in her forties, living in Montreal, who participates and runs moon circles, spoke of living by the ocean as a child:

I grew up by the sea. And the sea and the tides are obviously controlled by the moon, so I did grow up with a sense of respect, deep respect for the moon and its power ...

The moon of her childhood was thus a powerful presence and she felt that there was a direct, ‘scientific’ link between the moon and women’s whole reproductive systems – reinforced by her work as a doula, where, she said, ‘I definitely see that the full moon pulls out babies’. She felt that the moon even influenced conception. She said: ‘It’s not to do with belief systems. It’s got to do with “this is where we live. This is our universe.”’

Iyla, a Canadian woman from Nova Scotia who now lives in an eco-community in Costa Rica and is a central part of the moon dance there, called it one important facet of the teachings about women and the moon for the moon dance, and said: ‘It’s the same. The moon cycle is the same as the menstrual cycle. So that’s quite powerful.’

Those who were not sure whether the moon directly affected the menstrual cycle, or whether the two might be ‘mirrors’, as Georgia, a circle leader from NYC put it, nonetheless expressed the power of this relationship. Mathilde, a moon dancer living in Montreal, Canada, gave a response that was typical of these participants, saying:

I guess I feel it’s the same way as we are connected like water, like the tide ... We are in cycles and the moon is connected with that, or we’re connected to the moon through that.

A few of the participants, like Aya, a German moon dancer living in an eco-community in Costa Rica, had encountered the idea of a menstrual/lunar connection for the first time on entering a moon gathering. For the majority, however, it was a connection that they’d made before joining a gathering but it had not necessarily always been an important one. Georgia said that the idea of a lunar/menstrual connection hadn’t meant much to her at the time of founding her moon circle; the decision to call it a moon circle and to meet at the full moon had been made simply because the moon had felt like a convenient calendar marker which seemed ‘kind of feminine’. The lunar/menstrual link

had however become more important to Georgia through being in the circle; the effect that meeting regularly had on strengthening relationship to the moon was spoken to by many of the participants and will be explored further in following sections.

Whilst participants' responses to this first question accorded generally with previous work on the subject, Longman and Castro's sparse mention of the moon in their research could suggest that the lunar/menstrual connection was not important in moon circles: participants in this research spoke of it as a powerful and important connection. Furthermore, Mia and some others' certainty that the moon had a direct role in the timing of the menstrual cycle means that some participants perceived the relationship between the moon and menstruation as not/not solely metaphoric or symbolic.

Synching

Navarro, reported on the belief in ritual circles that women, 'like the moon ... have a phase of plenitude, which is associated with the full moon, this occurs during ovulation, that then decreases before converting itself into the new moon during menstruation'.⁹⁶ Whilst Navarro was perhaps speaking metaphorically, many of the participants reported that their menstruation consistently synched with the lunar cycle, with menstruation falling on either the new or full moon.

Georgia, for example, reported that:

I was menstruating on the full moon for several years and then it shifted more to the new moon and then it shifted back. But ... it does tend to coincide with one or the other.

Pippa, a member of Georgia's moon circle and an Ayurvedic practitioner, reported too that, through working hard on her health and paying attention to the moon, her

⁹⁶ 'Como la luna la mujer tiene una fase de plenitud, que asocian con la luna llena, esto ocurre durante su ovulación, que luego mengua hasta convertirse en luna nueva durante la menstruación, días oscuros es decir, introspectivos', Navarro, *Análisis de la Reflexividad*, p. 147.

menstruation now fell consistently on the new moon. She said that now she feels:
 “‘Yeayy me!’ [laughter] you know? I can feel a bit of achievement in a way.’

Sinead, an Irish woman living in NYC, and the third member of Georgia’s circle, had gone into an unexpected menopause in her early forties, prior to becoming involved in the moon circle. She noted that:

I was always heading toward my period at around full moon That idea of being swollen, over full. But once there was a full moon, and you know, you were on your period, it’s such a great sense of liberation. A sense of being seen. The other parts of the cycle were less ... apart from ovulation maybe, which would have been around the new moon, but I wouldn’t have made that connection back then.

Like many of the participants, Sinead spoke with a certain amount of joy about synching. The fact of not making the ‘connection’ between ovulation and the new moon prior to the moon circle also speaks to the way that moon circles were seen to focus attention on relationship between the lunar/menstrual cycle.

Others reported what might be perhaps expected, given that not all women have an exact, consistent 28-day cycle, that sometimes it synched and sometimes it didn’t. Most of these participants spoke in a way that implied they cherished the times when it synched. Mathilde, for example, said, ‘It can be for many months ... “oh look I’m on the new moon!”’ Mia’s response was a mirror image of this when she said, ‘for a number of months in the year it will coincide with the full moon. And I think, “the full moon’s coming!”’ Mia continued, ‘It always means something personal to you, where you are in your cycle in relation to the moon.’ She also noted that, ‘When you’re aware of it, I find that it happens,’ again reinforcing the idea of the power of attention.

Many of the participants reflected that bodies in a healthy, natural state would synch with the moon. Mia, Georgia, and Eliza, a moon circle leader from Glastonbury, UK, for example, said that they thought that without light pollution women would synch more. Pippa said that before joining the moon circle and beginning her Ayurvedic training, her cycle was:

all over the place. And I think a lot of women experience that when they've got a lot of instability in their lives ... but I ... started to notice that my body definitely wanted to be connected to ... either the full moon or the new moon.

She said that her own research showed how being linked in this way reflected both physical and psychic health.

Aya's response was similar. She was recovering from sexual abuse and painful, erratic menstruation when she entered the moon dance community. Through paying attention to the moon, through moon dance teachings, and, as a result, coming into regular synch with the full moon, she said that she was, 'feeling grateful and happy about menstruation' for the first time in her life. Pippa and Aya's experiences support de la Torre and Gutiérrez's findings that circles lead participants to 'experience shifts' in their hormonal and menstrual cycles'; beyond this, they show that relationship to the moon was an important part this shift.⁹⁷

De la Torre and Gutiérrez found that circles made a difference in values, work, and activity, and this was also reflected in my research.⁹⁸ Alongside what seemed like a valuing of being in tune with lunar cycles was a very practical consideration. Being familiar with their menstrual cycles allowed participants to plan their months according to the lunar/menstrual cycle. Most of the participants reported some version of this, even if, like Georgia, it was only to say that she wished she did it but hadn't managed to do so yet. Pippa related that:

I feel that synching with the full or new moon is kind of part of that process. It's like 'ok ... I'm clearing out the clutter of all ... this other stimuli that I'm imposing on my own life and on my body and I'm ... clearing the way for the natural impositions ... to really do their thing.'

In other words, Pippa adjusted her monthly schedule to her menstruation and its lunar phase, so that the natural cycle could work at its maximum efficiency. Mia planned beyond the time of menstruating; she filled her calendar from ovulation on the new

⁹⁷ de la Torre and Gutiérrez, 'The sacred feminine', p. 103.

⁹⁸ de la Torre and Gutiérrez, 'The sacred feminine', p. 103.

moon, and then reduced activity dramatically after the full moon. Whilst organizing activity in this way is, of course, possible without connecting to the moon, participants tended to merge the lunar and menstrual cycles into a single concept.

Participants were talking not simply about self-acceptance and getting better at managing their lives, as beneficial as these aspects were. They were also pointing to a constant mirroring in the sky, an attunement to ‘cosmic time’ (as noted by de la Torre and Gutiérrez) that was found through the moon, and that was in some way valuable/precious.⁹⁹ There seemed to be a joy about being able to look to the sky to see where they were in their menstrual cycle. Eliza, for example, said:

So, I’ll be like, ‘where’s the moon? Where am I in my cycle? Oh, so the moon’s half’ – so, depending on where I am, whether I’m cycling dark or full moon, I’m like – ‘ooh I must be premenstrual.’

Mathilde noted that:

... those markers of the half moon ... like maybe if you’re feeling ... more low in the first part of the cycle and ... not even being aware. And then - ‘Oh, it’s the half moon!’ Right? ‘So, that’s why I’m feeling more lifted or shifting or maybe more hopeful.’

These responses reinforce an emerging picture of a valued and often joyful relationship between participants and the moon, with the phases of the moon guiding activity and bringing insight to participants’ energy and moods. It’s important to note that what has been referred to so far in this thesis is not a ‘metaphoric’ moon, but the actual moon in the sky.

Sanctifying

As noted, both Aya and Pippa experienced the healing of painful menstrual cycles through paying attention to relationship with the moon/attuning to lunar cycles. There were, however, other ways that the moon was evoked in relationship to menstruation and healing that went beyond this idea of synching – in participants’ responses as well as in previous work on the subject. Some of these latter are Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe’s

⁹⁹ de la Torre and Gutiérrez, ‘The sacred feminine,’ p96.

findings that in women's spirituality generally there was a 'sacralization' of, amongst other things, 'menstruation' - the subject of Ramírez's paper on menstruation, taboo and the sacred feminine.¹⁰⁰

The idea of the sacredness of menstruation had most relevance to the moon dancers in the research group. Aya, for example, wrote about leaving Germany and going to the spiritual community in Costa Rica where the women called their menstruation their 'sacred moon time', a term that was antithetical to how she'd been brought up and that transformed her attitude towards it and herself. She said that, because of this and other practises, she had received a 'tremendous healing ... relating to womanhood', and was 'walking more humble, grateful and happy through this life, celebrating and feeling blessed being a woman.'

All moon dancers were familiar with the practice called 'seeding the moon' - offering menstrual blood to the earth, described in the literature review. Aya wrote about her own experience with this practise:

I started using a moon cup, collecting my blood, putting it on my altar ... Nowadays I have a small moon altar in my garden. It has the form of a female uterus laid out by stones that have been used in Moon Dance sweat lodges. I take care of it, clean it, decorate it, smudge it and plant my moon blood there. It is also one of the main places I use to pray and to smoke my pipe.

¹⁰⁰ Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe, 'Introduction: Gender and power in contemporary spirituality', in *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches*, ed. by Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe (New York: Routledge, 2013) pp. 1-28 cited in Chia Longman, 'Healers, missionaries and entrepreneurs of the feminine: the secularization of contemporary women's spirituality,' in *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves? The gendered triangle of religion, secularity and spirituality*, ed. by Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 68-89 (p. 68); Ramírez, 'Del Tabú'.



Figure 5: Aya, Aya's altar in Costa Rica



Figure 6: Photographer unknown, Aya's altar in Costa Rica, permission given to reproduce here.

Figures 5 and 6 were included by Aya on her questionnaire and illustrate her description. The beauty of the altar, decorated as it is with flowers, speak to how precious, and indeed sacred, the menstrual cycle has become to her. Crucially for this research, it implicates the moon in this sacralization process, and shows how identified she is, as a woman, with the cycle and the moon - including as these photos do, Aya herself, her uterus (its shape), and the moon (possibly as the inner circle and in the fact that she's used moon dance stones). Fedele, in her study of Spanish pilgrims, found that the practise of offering menstrual blood inferred or created a kinship – in her research,

with Mary Magdalene. Using Fedele's terminology, therefore, in this case 'blood ties' are made between the earth, Aya, and the moon.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

This first section has looked at beliefs held by participants about the moon's role/relationship with menstruation and with themselves as menstruating women. It reported that all participants made a link between menstruation and the moon, which was repeatedly referred to as 'powerful', even if participants differed as to what exactly the link comprised, and all reported some experience of synching with the moon, whether over a few months or over years. This experience seemed to be precious and important to participants. Many of the participants believed women in a natural setting would synch with the moon, and several believed that such synching was the healthy timing for menstruation. Thus, participants often referred to the 'real' moon in the sky rather than simply a 'symbol' or 'metaphor', as referred to in Longman and Castro's research, and some spoke of looking to the moon as a guide as to where they were in their emotional/energetic cycles. All participants spoke of the wisdom of planning activity around the lunar cycle. In line with research that reported how some women's ritual practices and beliefs sanctify menstruation, several participants, including all three moon dancers, had experienced this shift. While the sparse mention of the moon/menstrual link in Longman and Castro's research could indicate that it was not important, it was so to participants in this study.

In general, it was surprising how uniform the reaction was to many of the questions and how accurately responses reflected what was presented in the literature review, most of which focused on individual ritual circles in specific geographical areas. Not one participant disregarded the connection between menstrual cycles and lunar cycles – in all, to varying degrees, the moon's perceived co-presence in menstruation was experienced as powerful.

Both de la Torre and Fedele (working in a related field) noted that participants often draw from a common body of literature, and it may be that some of the beliefs came

¹⁰¹ Fedele, 'Reversing Eve's Curse', p. 27.

directly from literature and then were shared.¹⁰² Both Sinead, and Pippa, for example, said that they might not have made the link between the moon and their cycles without this literature or shared ideas in circles. What was evident was that, however this belief was come by, it was not a cerebral understanding but had become a powerful experiential one, supporting Magliocco's assessment that, in what she termed, 'creative ritual practices', 'embodied personal experience' is authoritative.¹⁰³

Finding Identity

Introduction

The literature review presented findings that circles are concerned with identity. Meredith McGuire found that gendered spirituality, in general, 'involves an ongoing mind-body-spirit practice' that is concerned with expression and transformation of identity and Longman stated a related idea that circles arise out of participants' 'desire to "re/connect" with ... their bodies, their inner selves'.¹⁰⁴ Some participants' responses in the previous section implied this – healing and affirmation of her cycle, for example, changed the way Aya felt about herself. The following section will present findings about the role of the moon in this area of identity, looking first at the concept of women's cyclical nature and secondly at relationship between participants' body images, feminine energy, and the moon.

Cyclical Beings

In the literature review, the notion of being a 'cyclical being' was highlighted as being important in certain women's ritual circles. Although there was no mention of it in the academic literature on urban women's circles, it is a key message in popular books such as Gray's *Red Moon*. Navarro wrote that Red Tent circles 'reassign ... meaning to what

¹⁰² Renée de la Torre, 'Religiones indo y afroamericanas y circuitos de espiritualidad New Age', in *Variaciones y apropiaciones latinoamericanas del New Age* ed. by Renée de la Torre, Christina Gutiérrez Zúñiga and Nahayeilli Juárez (Ciudad de Mexico: CIESAS/Coljal, 2013), pp. 27-46 (p. 38); Fedele, 'Reversing Eve's Curse', 24-26.

¹⁰³ Magliocco, 'Introduction', page 2.

¹⁰⁴ Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion. Faith & Practise in everyday life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), (p.165); Longman, 'Women's Circles', p. 1.

it means to be a menstruating woman, ie. a cyclical being’, making the terms equivalent.¹⁰⁵ Elsewhere, she stated that for what she called ‘eco-social communities of women’, women’s cyclical nature is ‘one of the key elements in rethinking [their] identity.’¹⁰⁶ Given its importance, therefore, in some of the literature, I asked whether participants regarded themselves as cyclical beings, and if so, what this meant to them. I didn’t include the moon in this question. All participants responded in the affirmative, and all referenced the moon.



Figure 7: Artist unknown, The Minds Journal website in a post by Megan Margery. Image inserted in Aya’s questionnaire.

Aya included the image in Figure 7 in her response, writing that it had really helped her; it reminded her that she was more than one thing and didn’t have to be ‘blooming’ all the time. Navarro noted an understanding in her research groups that a woman isn’t the same in each phase of her menstrual cycle but that the dominant society expects them to act as if they are – or, in Aya’s words – suffering comes from having to be ‘blooming’

¹⁰⁵ Navarro, ‘The Importance of the Circle’, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ ‘el reconocerse como mujeres cíclicas ha sido uno de los elementos clave para repensar su identidad’, Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p. 147.

all the time.¹⁰⁷ Navarro also noted the use of ‘the analogy of the moon’ in ritual circles as a guide to women’s cyclical nature – as did Aya.¹⁰⁸

Whilst Aya, in including the photograph, might have been solely referencing the menstrual cycle, other participants clearly took a broader perspective. Mathilde was speaking of something beyond the menstrual cycle, for example, when she said that:

I feel like also as a woman ... that, we’re not linear in general. I don’t think I’m very linear ... I’m very circular and very spiral and ... the moon reflects that sense of more like shifting, or changing, because the moon does change with the light.

Georgia echoed this, saying:

It’s not even that my personal menstrual cycle is necessarily in tune [with the lunar cycle] – although I do think it is. But in so much as it’s just the idea of cycling. Honestly, it was a really big personal shift for me once I started doing the moon group and I started thinking about cycles more ... and ... that feels feminine to me instead of the more masculine directionality and view of things.

... I really can’t underplay it. It’s had a big impact on me. It’s had an impact in the way I think about life, too, in a practical way.

Like many others in the research, Georgia identified the new moon time as a time to ‘set intentions’ – these intentions then ‘build as the moon waxes’, and the process of ‘reviewing’ is assigned to the moon’s waning. She referred to this as ‘the usual stuff’ - in the experience of circle participants in this research it was often ritualized in the circles they led and attended. Websites such as the Wild Woman Project also speak of setting intentions at the new moon. Georgia felt that identifying with the idea of being a cyclical being had also taught her about larger life cycles over many years, enabling her to recognise recurring dark/depressive times as simply one part of her natural cycle, soon to pass - and inevitably to return at some point. The analogy of the moon cycle and her identification as a similar cyclical being, was thus a living compass for Georgia and had transformed the way she approached her life.

¹⁰⁷ Navarro, *Análisis de la reflexividad*, p.147-148.

¹⁰⁸ Navarro, *Análisis de la Reflexividad*, p. 147.

The association of the moon in its waxing, full, and waning stages with the ages of women and the triple goddess in her maiden/mother/crone aspect was noted in the literature review. Two research participants referenced the triple goddess; Eliza spoke of the moon/triple goddess symbol as simply one of the ways that she thinks about the moon and mentioned that in Red Tent ceremonies, which she had participated in and led, participants were seated youngest to oldest, which she described as ‘red moon to white moon, depending on where you are in your cycle of life.’ This assumes an identification, however superficial or profound, between an entire (female) life cycle and the monthly cycle of the moon (‘red moon’ in this context meaning menstruating women, and ‘white moon’ signifying women who are no longer menstruating.)

Overall, this association didn’t seem to be of primary importance to participants, although they might have had more to say had there been a direct question. Mia, in transition from active motherhood and menstruating to less active mothering and menopause, was the exception. She was struggling in this transition – ‘grieving’ very fully as she put it. She spoke of the triple goddess and then went on to relate this to her own life. She said that:

especially now I feel a kinship [with the moon]. ... it’s a time of great loss for me ... and the moon reminds me of that ... Because ... historically speaking ... the moon has witnessed many things. ... And sometimes I feel like I relate to it in the sense of a maternal relating. You know, like the moon has gone through so many civilisations ... and had that feeling of growth and loss, growth and loss – like how many cycles has the moon itself been privy to in people in humanity, in civilisation – in all the things, you know? And in that sense, I feel like I relate to the moon. And sometimes it gives me a lot of comfort ... to think: ‘Well, you’re still there ... just kind of enduring and looking and being and witnessing and revolving around the earth – just kind of doing your thing. I can endure too. Continue those cycles.

The fact that the example of the moon ‘enduring’ cycles helped her to endure the ending of two of her own cycles underlines the nature of the relationship she felt with the moon – a kind of powerful and helpful identification with the moon or, as she put it, a ‘kinship’ as fellow cyclical beings.

Body and Energy

Connected to finding identity as a cyclical being, related to the moon, and of the moon therefore having a supportive role in affirming that identity, or guiding activity, the following discusses how identifying with the moon encouraged participants to think differently about their bodies and energies. As noted in the earlier section on menstruation, the work of paying attention to moon cycles and the implicit association of the lunar cycle with the menstrual cycle was important in promoting bodily (as well as emotional) healing for several of the participants. This section considers participants' experiences of healing related to the moon beyond the menstrual cycle.

Sinead spoke of how her strict Catholic upbringing had caused a disassociation from her body and sexuality; she had only recently begun what she called 'becoming whole again'. She spoke of a powerful and precious experience under the full moon. She and her husband were staying in a remote house in the country; the land was high up and afforded her a full view of the sky. She related how she went out under the full moon:

I took off all my clothes – because I knew there was nobody around – and I ran out into the field and just danced under the moon. Which was huge for me. Because I've always, because of my past, I've never – even though I feel like I've journeyed through all aspects of overcoming my Catholic indoctrination, being naked is never one I've embraced. And also, I've got a lot of scars – I've had a lot of surgeries and stuff. But ... that was so wonderful and so powerful.

For Sinead, there was something about being out under the full moon which freed her and allowed her to be joyful in her body, something that was difficult for her in her day-to-day life. The incident seemed to be part of a more general experience she spoke to earlier in the interview, of being out under the full moon, which she referenced as being 'seen'. I asked her what she meant by being 'seen'. She responded:

... there's something wonderful about the full moon in the sense that you feel you can expose yourself ... you don't have to wear any veils, so it's this sense of like – you're fully yourself. You can embrace yourself. You can be yourself.

Although Sinead's experience of liberation and acceptance under a full moon may be shared by many people, quite apart from any affiliation with moon gatherings, it seemed to be an experience which she cherished as part of a new healing path she was on, which

included the moon and moon circle. In another part of the interview, noted earlier, she spoke of being ‘swollen’ and ‘full’ like the full moon, underlying the parallels – albeit perhaps unconscious - that she drew between her female body and the moon.

The associations of the female body and the moon, hinted at by Sinead, were more explicitly referenced in other interviews. Mathilde, for example, spoke of the ‘belly sense’ of the full moon, as she touched her own belly, creating a physical link between the two. Aya wrote at length about a healing in body perception since joining the eco-community and identifying with the moon. She wrote that:

For me the shape of the moon is very feminine. The circular, round shape of the full moon is balanced, harmonious, soft and yet strong – and as round as my breasts ... The ‘bowl’ form of the crescent moon reminds me of the shape of my backside, my womb and uterus – and the side view of ... breasts and belly ... of the full moon. Seeing the beauty of roundness ... brought so much peace to me and my relationship with my female shape and body ... in the past I was constantly trying to change one or another part to appear smaller, tighter.

Aya’s transformative experience supports de la Torre and Gutiérrez’s statement that ritual circles are concerned with a ‘remaking’ of the self, showing that, for Aya, this was in a context that was intimately connected with the moon.¹⁰⁹ Both Aya and Sinead’s experiences of relating to the moon allowed them to come back to and celebrate themselves.

Beyond the physical body, participants identified specific ‘feminine’ energies with the moon throughout the interviews. Aya spoke of the experience of the moon and moon teachings helping her to integrate ‘the female attributes/energies of gentleness, acceptance, simple being and receptivity.’ So far in this thesis, these energies have also been described with words such as ‘changing’, ‘shifting’, ‘embracing’, ‘strong’, and ‘soft’. Mathilde said:

There’s something really yin and soft about even the brightest light of the moon - just like bathing in that light. And as a woman it feels like there’s a deep – like there’s a sensitivity of light. I’m really light sensitive and ... I just feel there’s that connection ... of being a woman, of receptivity, of this ... cold but warm light of the moon.

¹⁰⁹ de la Torre and Gutiérrez, ‘The sacred feminine’, p. 96.

Here, as elsewhere, the moon is seen as modelling qualities, physical and energetic, that are understood as pertaining to being a woman. Perceiving these qualities in the moon, and identifying themselves with the moon, seemed to give some of the participants permission to (re)value their female bodies and other more ‘traditionally’ feminine qualities. Longman noted a similar phenomenon, however, in her research, she related it to the Feminine, not the moon.¹¹⁰

Georgia related a critical moment when she’d changed her life path in order to follow these kinds of qualities, which centred on experiences of the moon:

I was in this training program to become a life coach, and ... I was trying really hard – they had this secondary level of training, and I was trying very hard to qualify for it ... and I couldn’t get it and I couldn’t get it ... And I had two or three ... instances where the moon just kept coming through ... almost as a message. It felt like a message ... And the day that I left the program, I was like ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do now’ and I looked down at the street and somebody had posted on the ground ... ‘moon’ stamps. And I knew it was a sign and I didn’t know what it meant. And then this [moon] group started, and it kind of gave me structure – that I didn’t have before. And I’d swapped this more masculine thing for this more feminine intuitive path. It was literally like this *path*, I was following this *path* of [the moon] ... and I knew at that time too: ‘Yeay, I’m now following the moon.’

Thus, the sudden appearance of the moon stamps at a critical juncture had encouraged her to pursue what she felt was a ‘more feminine intuitive path’, which she associated with the moon, and which also, literally, included the moon.

Eliza was the only participant who referred to concepts such as the Sacred Feminine, saying that ‘when we’re talking about the moon, we’re talking about the Sacred Feminine.’ Other participants seemed to make the direct link between themselves as women and the moon, without conceptualizing a third ‘other’.

¹¹⁰ Longman, ‘Women’s Circles’, p. 10.

Conclusion

This section has examined participants' relationship to the moon beyond the menstrual cycle, and the role of the moon in how participants' self-identified; in a variety of ways, identifying themselves with the moon or as like the moon was experienced by participants as being positive and transformative. The understanding of being a cyclical being, like the moon, gave participants a different way to experience themselves in time, to organize their schedules, and different expectations of themselves - different from what some saw as the dominant societal pressure to be the same always, which Navarro in her research and participants in this research identified with a more masculine/patriarchal way of being. The findings support Navarro and Valdés' statements that the concept/experience of women as cyclical beings is key to the transformation of identity in circles, and underline the importance of the moon in this process, as well as adding descriptions of the lived experience of this for participants.

Relationship to the moon also allowed some participants to embrace their bodies, as they were - in Aya's case, as round, like the moon, in Sinead's case as accepted, scars and all, under the full moon. The moon was perceived as embodying 'feminine' qualities that were seen as good qualities that participants could emulate, or accept in themselves - because, in some way, there was an assumption that they were 'like' the moon, or that the moon was like them. Beyond this, the example and 'kinship' of the moon in its triple goddess aspect helped Mia to deal with a difficult transition, moving from one life stage to another. In general, however, the concept of the triple goddess didn't seem to be an important association participants had with the moon.

Overall, the findings suggest that participants' experiences as part of moon circles/dances did indeed include what McGuire called a transformation of identity, what de la Torre and Gutiérrez called the 'making, unmaking, and remaking' of self, and what Longman called reconnection - and that the moon had a role therein.¹¹¹ Findings in this section again support the authority of embodied experience for participants. Whilst

¹¹¹ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, p.165; de la Torre and Gutiérrez, 'The sacred feminine', p. 96; Longman, 'Women's Circles', p. 1.

learning about cycles was important, none of the participants in this section quoted from any source other than their own lived experience.

Relationship to the Moon

Introduction

De la Torre and Gutiérrez in their research on Regina circles, wrote of ‘a two-way connection between the individual (body-mind-spirit) and the cosmos (nature-cosmic energy-planetary vibrations).’¹¹² They felt that each of these was ‘equally important for the analysis of these practices today’.¹¹³ This final section considers the other end of the potential ‘two-way connection’ between participants and the moon, presenting and discussing findings related to the moon’s identity for participants, how participants felt they related with the moon, and what participants might be seen as doing for or with the moon.

Moon’s Identity

In previous research, some individual interviewees from ritual circles had seemed to be referring to the moon as a person – a grandmother, for example.¹¹⁴ To mine this area of identity further, therefore, I asked a specific question about how the participants perceived the moon. This was particularly pertinent as the title of this thesis speaks of ‘relationship’; it was therefore important to discover – if indeed such a relationship *was* felt by participants - how they conceived of the ‘other’, the moon, with whom or with which they were having the relationship.

There was a host of responses, which built on some of the moon’s many identities or roles for participants noted in earlier sections. Participants often attributed multiple and even contradictory identities to the moon but none of them saw the moon as a lifeless

¹¹² de la Torre and Gutiérrez, ‘The sacred feminine’, p. 97.

¹¹³ de la Torre and Gutiérrez, ‘The sacred feminine’, p. 97.

¹¹⁴ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 185.

object in space. Or rather, not as *only* a lifeless object in space. Sinead was the only participant who didn't personify the moon at all or give it any identity beyond itself, but even so her response was nuanced, comparing the moon to other things in nature, such as a beloved tree (something with life). Georgia said:

It feels like it has a presence ... Western science has got its blinders on. The moon ... it feels like an entity to me. It feels like a spirit for sure ...

This was echoed in many women's responses. The moon was: 'definitely a somebody', 'a being', 'an entity'. Whilst the word 'entity' doesn't necessarily imply something with 'life' of any kind, as used by Mathilde it had this connotation. Aya felt this too, responding that, 'She is with life and a "real" being.'

Beyond this, Aya and others endowed more specific identities to the moon, often gathering multiple identities together as they spoke. Aya prefaced the above remark with the following:

The moon is mystery, a celestial object, a goddess, a guardian, guide and a grandmother.

Mathilde, said:

I feel ... the moon is like a reassurance, a reassuring sense. And like a mother or grandmother ... there's this feeling of speaking to the mother and getting this - like reflection and deep listening.

The sense of kinship, whether as a mother or a grandmother, was also spoken to Mia early in her interview when she spoke of praying to the moon as 'more of a kinship than a prayer really.' Eliza said that the moon felt like a friend, someone who she looked up at and who she was seen by.

Eliza was the only participant apart from Aya who mentioned the moon as a 'goddess' and her response was more complex, involving an association with 'light beings' and the Feminine aspect of herself (a thread which will be picked up later.) Thus, while the Goddess movement was noted in the literature review as being considered one of the tributaries that fed into the phenomenon of women circles, it wasn't an association for most of the participants.

The multiple identities of the moon were spoken to by Mathilde, adding one more identity which emerged specifically from her connection to the moon dance. Mathilde spoke of a recently-deceased dance leader – Abuela Malinali, one of the three original founders of the moon dance – as a ‘spider’ and the moon, through association, as a spider:

Energetically it feels like ... a grandmother looking over, giving ... radiating wisdom. Also ... somewhere there’s the spider grandmother that is connected to the first grandmother that I met in Mexico ... And just that sense of a weaver of ways and of water and of women and – this connected point of it all. Wherever we are in the world, we’re connecting with and to. And so, it just feels like this web and weaving of women and people of all nations of all beings, even in wonderment, even those who don’t know anything about the moon ... So, I sense her as a big web weaver.

Terms like mother and grandmother are prevalent in interviews in research on ritual circles, as well as being part of a way of conceiving of the moon beyond circles.¹¹⁵ Some of the terms above – as well as the sentiments noted thus far in the thesis - echo Whitehead’s description of the shrine of the Virgin, as a:

“female ancestral person” who, with her ... relational capacities, is capable of reciprocally nurturing, relating with, inspiring, and protecting her devotees.¹¹⁶

Whitehead reiterates this finding later, using different words. In the conclusion she speaks of a:

generational ancestor person, capable of educating, healing, knowing and helping reclaim one’s past in the present.¹¹⁷

The participants in this research were not ‘devotees’ in the sense studied by Whitehead, however many of the terms above, and elsewhere in this thesis, point to the idea of a ‘female ancestral person’ – echoing Mia’s earlier comment about kinship, as well as the ritual of ‘seeding the moon’ which Fedele found made ‘blood ties’.¹¹⁸ Whitehead’s

¹¹⁵ See for example Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas en Guadalajara*, p. 85, p.204, p.354.

¹¹⁶ Whitehead, ‘Devotional Bodies’, p. 213.

¹¹⁷ Whitehead, ‘Devotional Bodies’, p. 230

¹¹⁸ Fedele, ‘Reversing Eve’s Curse’, p. 27.

description is important as it includes being capable of reciprocal relating, of ‘relating *with*’ – another thread that will be picked up later in this section.

Several participants spoke of the moon’s identity as being merged with their own, including Eliza’s earlier comment that she thought of the moon, partly, as a ‘Feminine aspect’ of herself. So far in this thesis, elements of this final point have already been noted – that of a kind of shared identity, spoken to in multiple ways, both explicitly and by implication, by many of the participants. Eliza’s response to this question about identity, was long, and she ended by saying the moon was:

beyond mere human words. ‘The illumination of my heart’ is probably the closest thing I would get to with words ...

including herself in her final definition of the moon. Similarly, Georgia spoke of the moon as ‘a place, it feels closer to – like soul, or something internal, more wild place inside.’ Aya’s response most directly echoed the interviewee in Valdés’ research who said she’d realised, ‘I am the moon’.¹¹⁹ Aya wrote that, ‘she is in an unexplainable way a part of me.’ It should be noted that, like Emma above, the majority hesitated in answering this question about identity, suggesting a difficulty or discomfort in attempting to pin down what or who the moon was for them.

Relating with the Moon

To return to Whitehead’s definition of a ‘female ancestral person’ as, in this case, ‘being capable of reciprocally ... relating with ... her devotees’, most of the participants reported at some point in their interviews a sense of relating *with* the moon, rather than simply relating *to*.¹²⁰ At its simplest, Georgia, for example, said:

I like to talk to it and it feels like it sees me – I mean that’s a stretch probably. But ... that’s how I think of it.

Beyond Georgia’s sense of being seen, however, and Mathilde’s earlier comment, which involved a kind of ‘deep listening’, several of the participants reported that the moon

¹¹⁹ Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 184.

¹²⁰ Whitehead, ‘Devotional Bodies’, p. 213

actively related with them, in ways that paralleled interviewees' responses in previous research on ritual circles and are explicitly not metaphoric or symbolic. Both Iyla and Mathilde spoke of the moon giving direct guidance during the moon dance – Mathilde, for example, said that she 'had definitely heard words' – but neither felt that these were experiences which should be shared outside of the moon dance. Aya wrote that:

I once (in a plant medicine journey) had a very memorable and beautiful conversation with grandmother moon. She gave me some wise insights and valuable answers concerning my situation back then.

Eliza spoke of working with the moon in her shamanic practice:

So, journeying with the moon and asking the moon beings that came forward and the moon goddess ... for guidance and receiving guidance. ... Sometimes the guidance that comes through isn't literal. So, there's a feeling or a sense of something coming in or something moving, or of a sense that – or just a receiving, receiving a guidance in the body ... and that in itself is the guidance for you ... I have many meaningful exchanges with the moon.

Although it wasn't clear whether it was the moon itself (as in her beginning and concluding words) or something else – 'moon beings' or 'a moon goddess' – with whom she talked and received guidance, it is clear is that she regularly experienced 'relating with' the moon and/or aspects of the moon.

Iyla spoke specifically of the dancers speaking a language to or with the moon through the moon dance's set dances:

when we dance in a collective movement and we do those formations, I feel like that there's ... we're sending a, you know, a postcard to the moon. And that there is a language being spoken, with those forms and the songs.

This last response echoes what Valdés described: that the dances are 'mandalas' drawn on the earth, 'directed to the moon and the cosmos, as well as the elements and the spiritual guides'.¹²¹ It felt to Iyla that the dances were an offering the dancers were making to the moon using a mutual language.

¹²¹ 'se dibuja mandalas en la Tierra, dirigidos a la luna y al cosmos, también a los elementales y a los guías espirituales', Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 94.

What do participants do in relation to the moon?

The discussion in this final section has introduced animist perspectives alongside the literature on circles. In preceding paragraphs, Whitehead's description of a feminine ancestor who could be related *with* was utilised to discuss participants' experiences of relating with the moon. Elsewhere, Whitehead suggested several pertinent questions to be asked when investigating the relationship between humans and other-than-humans – a potential aspect of the relationship explored in this research. One of these questions is: what do humans do in relation to the 'other' in the relationship?¹²² The pertinence of this question is borne out by participants' responses, and de la Torre's statement, quoted earlier, about the importance of studying both ends of the 'two-way connection' in circles – in this case, the moon.

The first thing that was apparent in every interview was that participants loved the moon. Aya, for example, spoke of her relationship with the moon as 'a never-ending love story', and, as noted earlier, Eliza spoke of the moon as, 'the illumination of my heart'. Sinead, who had a wide vocabulary at her disposal, used the word 'beauty' or 'beautiful' connected to the moon twelve times in her hour-long interview. She said, 'It's just one of the most beautiful natural sights that you could ever take in', and:

It's so intensely beautiful. Like I see it for its beauty so much. Especially when it's full ... but there's times when ... you do see some of the detail, and you're like - 'How?' [the last word, spoken in an awed whisper]

Whilst a word like 'beautiful' can be used very lightly, none of the participants spoke of the moon this way. There was an intensity, a charge, and a sense of awe which unfortunately isn't fully represented in words alone.

As noted throughout, another thing the participants did is pay attention: attending gatherings, paying attention to lunar cycles and to the moon in the sky, particularly but not only in regard to menstruation. All spoke of the importance of paying attention to the moon in broader ways too. Mia, Georgia and Eliza spoke of how active times of

¹²² Whitehead, 'Appalachian Animism', (p. 154).

leading circles, and the preparation that necessitated, deepened their sensitivity to the moon. Many also spoke of actively seeking out the full moon. Mia spoke to this mixed bag of actions – loving, paying attention to, listening to - as ‘upholding the moon’. She said:

I feel that we (women) uphold the moon ... I feel like a lot of us honor and uphold the moon. We’re aware of its presence, we’re aware of its impact on ourselves.

While no one else used this precise term, it was echoed in other words, particularly a sense of honoring the moon. Sinead, for example, noted that moon circles ‘allow me to drop down into a sort of space where I’m honoring the moon and ... really recognising its presence.’

All three moon dancers – who were all, by definition, pipe carriers - spoke of smoking their pipe every full moon, in connection with women pipe-carriers all over the world. Iyla spoke of this as, ‘a commitment we have to the full moon.’ She said, ‘definitely the moon is somebody, is a being that it helps to, to honor and work with and recognise that absolutely.’ Iyla’s use of the term ‘work with’ underlines her sense of the reciprocity of the relationship.

Vessels/Downloading

Whilst the literature review did not specifically address the question of the moon’s identity for participants, it did point to a belief or experience in ritual circles of women acting as physical/energetic channels for the moon, or as a link between the earth and the moon. Valdés, for example, stated that in circles, ‘women recognize themselves as a symbolic-material link/earth-moon’.¹²³ I therefore asked participants if they had ever felt like a vessel or channel for the moon. Most of the material below is a response to this direct question – some participants, however, mentioned this experience before I asked.

¹²³ ‘Las mujeres se reconocieron reflexivamente en el vínculo simbólico-material cuerpo/tierra-luna’, Valdés, *Mujeres en círculos ecofeministas*, p. 183.

All three moon dancers strongly asserted that this was their experience. Iyla affirmed that, ‘I think we definitely are a channel for the moon’, and Mathilde, that:

Being a singer, I often feel I’m singing for the earth or from the earth or through the earth, somehow – being a vessel for her. But I also consider the same for the moon. I definitely sense that in me, and I can see that in others ... kind of being vessels of being from the moon.’

(It should be noted that Mathilde was one of many interviewees who mentioned the earth as being important to them. This is not to diminish the role of the moon, but to include the moon in a broader picture which includes earth, elements - particularly water - and nature as a whole.) Mathilde’s experience supports Ramírez’s findings that ‘the body of a sacred woman is considered as a medium of connexion with the universe and with the earth, which allows energies to circulate through it’ (even if Mathilde is not claiming to be a sacred woman).¹²⁴ However, again, as in most of the findings in this research, the way that Mathilde worded her experience – using words like ‘feel’ and ‘sense’ and ‘definitely’ – speaks to the authority of the embodied experience.

Surprisingly, given that it wasn’t spoken of by Longman or Castro, several of the ‘urban’ circle participants also felt that this was the case for them. Eliza, for example, said she felt like a ‘straw’ and a ‘conduit’ between the moon and her clients in her shamanic work:

The moon energy comes into my body and is expressed through my voice. So ... I’m able to channel ... but channelling that energy of the particular light beings that connect with the moon and the moon goddesses and then that is shared/given/received by the person who’s having the healing.

Mia, spoke of the experience of having very intense dreams around the full moon, early on in the interview. She said:

I feel almost like I’m plugged into something and I’m downloading information. I don’t know – there’s nothing really conscious about it. But it will be more like really electric download, it feels.

¹²⁴ ‘El cuerpo de la mujer sagrada es considerado como un medio de conexión con el universo y con la tierra, ya que se cree que las energías que circulan a través de él permiten tanto el desarrollo de la consciencia como un anclaje armónico con lo material’, Ramírez, ‘Del Tabú’, p. 137.

Georgia's experience was similar. She felt that this happened sometimes in her moon circles, where 'something' – which was sometimes 'specifically the moon' and sometimes 'general divine energy' – was 'trying to download' through participants. She said:

I've definitely felt that ... I've had a few really powerful synchronicities about this group, feeling it was ... coming from somewhere really specific ... like the group was important. I don't mean in the sense that *our* specific group is [important], but for whatever reason ... probably all of them [moon circles] are important in the evolution of the planet or the evolution of the species. And it was a little bit baffling to me when it happens ... I figured maybe with time it would be more illuminated. Or maybe it's not that specific. Maybe it's just the mere fact of the circle being, existing.

Georgia here speaks both of feedback or synchronicities coming to her as well as a feeling of serving some greater purpose beyond the limits of the circle she belonged to that the moon, or a divine energy, or simply 'somewhere really specific', was encouraging.

Thus, many participants' responses reflected Valdés', and others' findings in ritual circles, surprisingly extending this experience of being a vessel or channel to some of the participants in women's urban circles. It's clear from these latter participants' statements that they were not responding to any teaching about being a vessel but were relating highly personal experiences – indeed somewhat baffling ones for Mia and Georgia.

Conclusion

This final section has further unpacked the relationship between participants and the moon, first looking at how participants experienced/thought of the moon's identity, then at experiences some participants had of relating with the moon, and finally investigating what participants, implicitly or explicitly, could be seen as doing for the moon, an investigation suggested by de la Torre and Gutiérrez's research. It found that participants 'upheld' the moon – loving it, noticing it, honoring it - and many, in some way, felt that they acted as a channel for it. Some of the participants' responses were suggestive of Whitehead's concept of a "female ancestral person" – of the moon as being capable of reciprocal relating, and some participants had had experiences of being

related to by the moon in ways that were not metaphoric or symbolic.¹²⁵ The findings in this section show that most participants, albeit to varying degrees, experienced a two-way connection with the moon, fleshing out what such a connection could comprise, and showing that such experiences extend beyond from the specific ritual circles in Latin America where they were noted in previous research.

¹²⁵ Whitehead, 'Devotional Bodies', p. 213

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research addressed the question: What are moon circle and moon dance participants' perceived relationships with the moon and what beliefs do participants have about the role that the moon has in their lives? Responding to the need iterated in studies from outside Latin America for more research on women's circles, it was justified by the passing but suggestive mentions of the moon within this extant literature, as well as the more detailed possibilities of relationship with the moon gleaned from research on moon circles from inside Latin America and primary sources.

Findings confirmed the picture derived from previous work on women's circles: that the moon had a role as a symbol or metaphor within moon gatherings for menstruation and acted as a guide for the menstrual cycle, and that linked to this was an understanding that women were, like the moon, cyclical beings, and that adjusting self-perception and lifestyle to reflect this understanding was helpful and transformative. Beyond this, the moon had a role as modelling qualities that had been variously attributed to the Feminine/the inner feminine/the Divine Feminine/the Sacred Feminine in previous research – and hence relevant to participants as women. Whilst responses varied, to some degree participants experienced all the above and spoke to the power of these understandings/experiences.

Consistently, all participants made the connection between their menstrual cycle and the moon and all of them spoke to using the moon's example to move differently through the monthly cycle and life in general. Here, as elsewhere in the research, the relationship with the moon made a difference in their lives. The experience of synching their menstruation with the moon was experienced by many of the participants as healthy and natural, but beyond this it was experienced as powerful. Participants saw a reflection of themselves in the sky, and a reflection of the moon in themselves, creating a very particular relationship with the moon – a kind of mutuality that was spoken to by many of the participants in regard to their cycle, as well as in other ways.

Previous research was in agreement that issues of identity – transforming or refinding identity – were central concerns of women's circles. Findings supported this and

uncovered many ways in which the moon was bound up with this transformation of identity. Whilst this research makes no claim that the moon is the only factor in this, or any of the other aspects discussed in this thesis, it does suggest that it has a place and merits further research.

In terms of who or what participants felt they were in relationship with, the frequent use of words such as ‘grandmother’ and ‘mother’ were in line with work from Latin America – although not from outside Latin America – and suggest that many understood the moon partially as a ‘female ancestral person’ as well as a celestial body.¹²⁶ Importantly, this term of Whitehead’s included being ‘capable of reciprocally ... relating with’ participants.¹²⁷ Many participants reflected an understanding that they did something for the moon in honoring or ‘upholding’ the moon. Over half of the participants reported the experience of being a channel for the moon – something mentioned by participants in the Latin American research - and many stated that they spoke to the moon and/or had a sense of being listened to or watched over by the moon, underlining the reciprocal nature of the relationship – something which correlated with findings in scholarship on animism.

Although none of the participants recognised the term ‘moon woman’ from the prayer in the introduction (also noted by Navarro) this research gave insight into what such a term could mean.¹²⁸ In general, for participants in this research, the moon was implicated in all of the broader aims of women’s circles, noted in the introduction, as promoting, in Ramírez’s words, ‘self-management, empowerment, self-knowledge and a strategic contact with the sacred that finds its expression in the body and the experiences of women.’¹²⁹ Indeed, it was a point of connection for all of them.

¹²⁶ Whitehead, ‘Devotional Bodies’, p. 213.

¹²⁷ Whitehead, ‘Devotional Bodies’, p. 213.

¹²⁸ Tierra de Luna, <<https://tierradeluna.weebly.com/danza-de-luna.html>> [accessed 9 September 2021]; Navarro, ‘The Importance of the Circle’, p. 10.

¹²⁹ Ramírez, *Lo femenino resignificado*, p. 153.

Reflections

The correlation between previous research and findings here was surprising, for a number of reasons. Firstly, because of the small amount of research to date on moon dances and moon circles and the fact that some of the details of the picture were inferred from the literature review came from a handful, or even a single quote in previous research. Secondly, many details of the picture which could be gleaned from existing research concerned ritual circles in specific communities in Latin America and would not therefore necessarily bear any reference to even ritual circles outside those communities, let alone urban circles elsewhere in the world. Whilst three of the participants came from the same moon circle, and therefore their relationship to the moon might spring from that particular circle, and three of the other participants – the moon dancers – came from a single traditional lineage, many of the findings were consistent across all participants in this research. Thirdly, it was surprising that some of the findings here accorded with previous work on the women's circle phenomena outside of any reference to the moon, as well as to studies in gendered religion, supporting Griffin's assertion that feminist spiritualities share many common threads and are closely related.¹³⁰

Such consistency could be partly explained by what has been noted by other researchers – that there is a common body of literature that circulates among women's circles that promotes, among many other things, specific understandings of women's relationship with the moon, mostly in terms of menstruation and the hormonal/lunar cycle (as well as understandings of links between women and the moon that are part of the wider culture). Although participants did not refer to these key pieces of literature, a few of them did refer to other, similar books. Previous research also agrees that participants in one moon gathering may be a member, simultaneously or subsequently, in other, similar or different types of moon gatherings, in such a way that ideas pass from one group to another. Learning was certainly part of many of the research participants' experience – whether that be from books, online, other women, or the specific moon dance teachings. Some, although by no means all, of the participants reported that the moon hadn't had

¹³⁰ Wendy Griffin, 'Webs of Women', p. 55.

much of a role in their lives until they'd joined a moon gathering or read about the moon's link to women's cycles. For the most part, however, participants didn't seem to be repeating concepts they'd heard or read, but instead responding from personal experience, often searching for words to express what they felt or experienced, and although their responses broadly supported previous research and broadly agreed with each other, there was much variety. Like Fedele's pilgrims, they were not 'passive receptacles of theories they had read in books or heard in workshops'.¹³¹

Language was noted as important at the outset of this thesis, defining the research group as those who used the word 'moon' in the title of their groups, and asking therefore what role the moon was perceived to play in them – since the circle had chosen to self-label that way. Whilst the 'insider' experience of participants in previous research, often used direct, experiential language, in speaking of their relationship with the moon, the academics who framed their experiences often used more 'outsider' language like 'metaphor' or 'symbol'. Part of the implicit purpose of this thesis was to try to bridge the linguistic gap between these two understandings – the emic and the etic. When, in previous research, participants in ritual circles spoke of the moon as a 'grandmother' that listened to them or gave advice, did they mean this as an actual lived experience or as a metaphor? And what was the lived experience of the moon as 'symbol' and 'metaphor'?

This 'pinning down' was, overall, difficult to do, with all participants at times struggling to find words to describe their sense of the moon or stating in different ways that it was beyond words or singular definitions. The literature review ended with Struck's definition of the word 'symbol' as potentially pointing to 'more than we can possibly know'.¹³² In this latter sense it may be, in many instances, an appropriate descriptor of the connection between themselves and the moon, as related by participants. This research also found, however, instances where the moon's role or participants' relationship with the moon was explicitly not experienced as metaphoric or symbolic, even in this broadest sense.

¹³¹ Fedele, 'Reversing Eve's Curse', p. 30.

¹³² Peter Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, p. 201.

Limitations

Whilst not part of the research aim, the small number of participants who took part in this research, compared to the global nature of the phenomenon, limits the generalisability of the results. Nonetheless the findings gleaned from the literature review and in the interviews are the first to specifically address questions about the moon in women's circles and therefore add both new insight into what has been studied so far and suggest possibilities for future, larger-scale research.

A second limitation of this research was that so much of the most pertinent literature was in Spanish. As more translated material becomes available, research possibilities will expand for English-speaking researchers – however, to my knowledge, this delve into the rich pool of recent, untranslated work from Latin America is the first, or among the first - considered, as it is in this thesis, with research from outside Latin America.

Contribution

This research has provided insight and personal narratives of relationship between women and a celestial body – the moon – supporting and adding to the picture from Latin American literature and suggesting that the moon may have more importance in women's urban circles than has previously been noted. It contributes to scholarship on cultural astrology, women's circles in general, gendered religion and women's spirituality.

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