

**“You Have Witchcraft on Your Lips”: How a coven of white, Afrikaans-speaking witches negotiate their craft in the context of past and present**

By

Jeanie Blackbeard

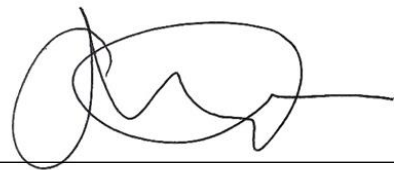
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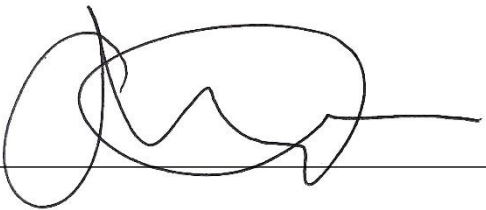
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## Ethics Statement

The author, Jeanie Blackbeard, whose name appears on the title page of this dissertation, has obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable research approval.

The author, Jeanie Blackbeard, declares that she has observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of Ethics for researchers and the Policy guidelines for responsible research.

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## Abstract

### “You Have Witchcraft on Your Lips”: How a coven of white, Afrikaans-speaking witches negotiate their craft in the context of past and present

Over the years, there has been much Anthropological inquiry into witchcraft and how it functions in the lives of people. Most of the research conducted in South Africa concerning witchcraft has been carried out amongst black South Africans with very little attention paid to white South Africans. Having come across a group of white, Afrikaans-speaking women who are practicing witches, I decided to investigate how they use their craft in their daily lives to make sense of their past and present. Given that white South Africans have largely escaped anthropological analysis due to privilege, I found no literature pertaining to white, Afrikaans-speaking people being connected to witchcraft. I decided to establish a historical trajectory through the existing literature and then connected my coven to this. I was also given the opportunity to be initiated and the chance to engage in becoming a witch myself. Apart from participant observation, I was able to interview the women and construct detailed life histories which were the primary sources of data that I used for this project. I found that the women primarily use their craft to make sense of their positions as Afrikaans-speaking women in post-apartheid South Africa as well as redefine their connection to nature through their gender and use it to empower themselves. This is an area that warrants much more investigation and as such I will be continuing this project into a PhD in order to explore all that which I did not have the space for in this project.

Key Words: white witchcraft, white witches, Afrikaans-speaking women, *ordentlikheid*, Post-apartheid

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## When shall we three meet again?

What is now so strange about three Afrikaans *tannies* [aunties] doing a little hocus pocus? Is it because you don't expect it from us? Are we supposed to sit quietly in the church and *ja* [yes] and amen everything *dominee* [pastor] and our husbands say? *Nee man* [no man], the time for that has passed. When the universe reveals herself to you then you can't just ignore her. And I'll tell you another thing, *boerevrouens*<sup>1</sup> have been practicing magic since *ou* [old] Jan van Riebeeck landed here and set his *snoepie* up – they just haven't called it magic because nobody wanted any *skande* [disgrace].

– Freya

Freya, the leader of our coven of witches<sup>2</sup>, looked around the table. Her gaze shifted from Astrid to Hazel<sup>3</sup> and finally to me. We sat at a round table that, on any other day would have been straining under the extravagant meals that Freya usually prepared for her family. Today however, it had become a meeting place for our coven. Strewn across the table were jars of herbs, several worn and weathered tarot decks, various books on the subject of witchcraft and, open in front of Freya, her *grimoire*<sup>4</sup>. She lit a bundle of dried sage and began to waft the smoke around the room while she spoke directly to me,

Today you are embarking on a path that is going to change your life forever. You are going to truly learn how this earth and all those things on it and around it work in unison and conspire with you. It is not an easy path you have chosen, but it's so worth it. Your life will no longer be black and white, but grey, no borders, no veils and no limits. But this comes with a warning – a simple one, but an important one – be aware of your intent, always. And also, don't talk shit about spirits, they will always hear you!

With this in mind I began my initiation into a coven of witches.

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<sup>1</sup> This term is difficult to translate as its direct English translation – farmer women – does not capture what this term has come to encompass over the years. It speaks to the strength, resilience and nurturing tendencies that have been associated with Afrikaans-speaking women in nationalist Afrikaner narratives.

<sup>2</sup> A coven commonly refers to an organised group of witches.

<sup>3</sup> Freya, Astrid and Hazel chose their own pseudonyms for the purposes of this study.

<sup>4</sup> A grimoire is a witch's collection of notes on spells, correspondences, herbs and their properties, how to guides on rituals and just about anything else the witch may deem important to their craft. It differs from a Book of Shadows, which is specific to the religion of Wicca (Hart, 2018).

## Introduction

Over the past few years I had noticed a growing trend of people writing and talking about witches and the practice of witchcraft. I first saw it online when I noticed several hashtags becoming popular and how many tagged posts were about helping people become witches as well as how to refine their magic. These posts were not limited to any one social media platform and a quick search for hashtags such as *#witchblr* or *#witchesofinstagram* brings up thousands of posts that are instructional, reflective on spirituality or even digital art. Many of these posts also contain quotes about female empowerment. I then started to notice several news sites that were publishing articles that spoke of witchcraft being a new up and coming ‘brand’ of feminism and that witchcraft was perhaps a new way for contemporary women to empower themselves in a world that was otherwise failing them<sup>5</sup>.

At the same time, I also saw a rise in television shows and movies that had plots that centred on witchcraft. Television shows such as *American Horror Story: Coven*, *Salem*, *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *Grimm*, *Penny Dreadful*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Originals* have all tapped into popular culture’s growing fascination with witchcraft. Films such as *The Witch* (stylised as *The VVitch*), *The Last Witch Hunter*, *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters*, *A Discovery of Witches* as well as the *Harry Potter* series are no exception to popular culture’s fascination with the power and lore associated with witchcraft. The literary world has not escaped being drawn into this trend either and so many witchcraft-centred novels are published every year that it is simply impossible to keep track of all the titles. Every year there are more shows, more movies, more books and more hashtags and I could not help the feeling that perhaps these events and trends were not happening independently of each other.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example *Are witches the ultimate feminists?*

(<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/05/witches-feminism-books-kristin-j-sollee>)

*Why witchcraft is making a comeback amongst US feminists*

(<https://www.euronews.com/2018/05/11/why-witchcraft-is-making-a-comeback-among-us-feminists>)

*Hex appeal: how Netflix's Sabrina taps into the rising feminist passion for witches*

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2018/oct/29/hex-appeal-how-netflixs-sabrina-taps-into-the-rising-feminist-passion-for-witches>)

*Ja*, we're all over now, hey! Okay so they give us more power on TV than we have but we are there. It's cool to be a witch and that's a good thing. Shows women that they can have power.

– Astrid

These occurrences piqued my interest as I had developed a curiosity for the 'non-ordinary'<sup>6</sup> during the research I conducted for my honours research report. I had chosen to interview four Afrikaans-speaking women who unwillingly received communications from spirits of the deceased. I had to rely on only interviews as I could not participate in communicating with spirits of the deceased as it was not something they could teach me. After finding that they were adamant that they were not born with this ability, I – with their input – came to call them Seers. They believed that they had caused this somehow and while I found that their abilities did grant them power and the ability to subvert behaviours that were expected of them, ultimately their agency was limited to their homes and immediate family.

My honours research report taught me to open my mind and to approach this kind of research from the point of meaning making, not from an angle of trying to prove or disprove these actualities. I needed an open mind in order to understand how certain narratives about witchcraft developed and were used. The coven told me that one cannot understand contemporary witchcraft without looking back through history and seeing how witchcraft has been both perceived by society at large as well as how it was written about. I quickly realised how little I knew about the historical trajectory witchcraft outside of the work of classic anthropology or fairy tales. Freya also comfortably made reference to moments in European and South African history that I had only a basic understanding of and I realised early on that I was largely out of my depth. Also, as an avid reader of the *Daily Sun*, I could not find many similarities in what the women were telling me and what I had already read about witchcraft in South Africa. I decided to visit my local bookstore to try to find some information. When I started to peruse the books held in these dusty shelves, I noticed that all the people around me strained their peripherals to watch me and when I was ready to make my purchase one cashier even refused to help me.

All the books that I could find were always about witchcraft practices in the global north and there was practically no mention of Africa throughout these sources. I visited nearly every

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<sup>6</sup> Edith Turner (2006) admonished anthropologists for telling 'ghost stories' and referring to the supernatural disparagingly and elected to refer to unexplainable encounters as non-ordinary, non-logical or actualities.



bookshop in Pretoria but was always directed to the same dusty shelf and always regarded with scepticism or avoided completely. The problem I was having with finding sources on witchcraft was compounded by the fact that I was looking for information concerning white Afrikaans-speaking people practicing witchcraft or interacting with magic in some way. One bookstore clerk even noted, looking down his nose at me, that “*Afrikaners is Christens en ons doen nie sulke goed nie. Ons is ordentlike mense*” [Afrikaners are Christians and we don’t do things like that. We are respectable people]. As I was about to discover, the concept of ‘respectability’ was to become central to my research project.

With the witch and anything even remotely associated with her being feared, persecuted and often viewed as undesirable in society, I found it strange that books and websites that helped one become a witch existed at all. The question that I needed an answer to was why would there be people who choose to practice witchcraft and even self-identify as witches in such an antagonistic context?

I was given the opportunity to answer this question when I was introduced to a coven<sup>7</sup> of witches by a friend. My friend (who elected to remain anonymous) and I became very well acquainted in 2017 when I conducted interviews with her for the purposes of my honours research report. Ever the fan of an active Facebook group, my friend mentioned one day that she had come across what she called a “digital coven” of witches. She added me to the group, and I noticed that there were some South African people, mostly women, who were very active on the group and always posted about reaching out to other possible South Africans on the group. This was how I met Freya. After we met, she ascertained that she was able to work with me and said that I could meet the other members of her coven<sup>8</sup>. They are all white witches. I must clarify here that ‘white’ is in reference to their race, not their method of practising witchcraft. The women explained that our coven does not draw distinctions between ‘black’ magic and ‘white’ magic because it is arbitrary. It must also be noted that I will not be referring to the coven’s practice of witchcraft as being Pagan or Neo-Pagan as they only refer to themselves as witches. A quick search online revealed that I had a very big task ahead of me because I found absolutely no existing literature on Afrikaans-speaking witches. I knew that I was going to have to extract as much as I could from the literature that does exist and use it in such a way that I could apply it to the context in which I was working.

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<sup>7</sup> A group or meeting of witches

<sup>8</sup> This process is discussed in more detail in the second chapter – *Witchcraft 101*.

The golden thread that I traced through both the literature as well as the historical trajectory of the witch can be seen in chapter 1 – *Ritual Readings*.

Freya offered to personally oversee my initiation into the coven and continues to guide me as she says that there is not really an end point to becoming a witch. The fact that we are always working, practising and honing our craft is an early lesson I learnt.

### Something wicked this way comes

Over the course of my studies in anthropology I have become acutely aware of the American Anthropological Association's globally accepted model for dynamic informed consent (<http://www.americananthro.org>). Through working with women who are exposed to a world beyond our own as well as forces that we have yet to understand, my primary concern was that the coven felt safe at all times. To this end I asked them to come up with their own pseudonyms, not only to give them control over how their stories would be represented but to also reassure them that would be protected from any epistemic harm.

It was only once they settled on pseudonyms and signed consent forms under these names that I started the interviewing process. The three weeks that it took them to settle on names provided me with the opportunity to informally get to know each woman before I started interviewing them for their life histories. This allowed the process to be more casual and comfortable as the women had already shared some stories with me and were keen to open up. Following these initial interviews, I began meeting with the coven regularly on Sunday mornings at Freya's house. This is when I consider my initiation to have started. Due to the coven not being a Wiccan<sup>9</sup> coven that requires a structured initiation, mine could be considered to have been a process of educating until the coven decided that I could hold my own as a "baby witch"<sup>10</sup> in our meetings. Initially there was very little that made sense to me but the more I was exposed to the women's knowledge and their own ways of practicing their craft, the more it began to make sense. There are still many Sundays where I am once again lost in conversation or completely misunderstand what they are trying to explain to me. For

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<sup>9</sup> Wicca is categorised as a neo-pagan religion that is influenced by pre-Christian beliefs. It requires a rite of initiation into a coven and observes both male and female deities.

<sup>10</sup> A phrase we often used in the coven to designate that I had only started my journey. This term is also often seen online when beginner witches reach out to others for help or advice.

this reason, I found that becoming a witch is always an ongoing process and must be approached with this mind. While the women called me a witch from the very first meeting I was at, they always emphasised that being a witch is a “life sentence”.

I supplemented much of my observation and participant observation with semi-structured interviews that were either one on one or set in a group situation. I was more often than not allowed to record these interviews but was never allowed to record our weekly meetings. The reason for this as well as a more detailed discussion of how I became part of the coven can be seen in chapter 2 – *Witchcraft 101*.

### The Weird Sisters

One of the very first things that I needed to understand was how these three Afrikaans-speaking women ended up on a journey of spiritual exploration that ultimately led them to witchcraft. I was curious as to how they acquired knowledge, shared it – if they did at all – as well as how these three women found each other and decided to form a coven. I decided to conduct life history interviews in order to get an idea about how they grew up, the role that church and Christianity played in their lives, as well as how and why they eventually decided to separate from their church. Their life history interviews were very rich in data and revealed many issues that I had not initially considered at the start of this project. These issues in turn guided how I approached the rest of the questions that I set out to answer with this project. The life history interviews revealed that starting the spiritual journeys that they are now on was not an easy task. The women often emphasised that they have to negotiate what is expected of them as Afrikaans-speaking women. Due to my wish to represent each woman’s voice and story I have put each woman’s life history in separate chapters as can be seen in chapters 3, 4, and 5 – grouped under the title *Life [Her]stories*.

Expectations of what a ‘good Afrikaans woman’ should be<sup>11</sup> became such a complex issue and in depth discussion every time that it was mentioned that it became a focal point of the analysis in this project. Before I had started regularly meeting with the women I was curious as to how the practice of witchcraft fits into their daily lives. Meeting with them on Sunday mornings did reveal this, but also complicated the questions I needed to ask. I had to go beyond their daily lives and ask how they used their craft to make sense of the position they

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<sup>11</sup> An idea that the women grappled with and mentioned many times.

find themselves in as white Afrikaans-speaking women in Post-apartheid South Africa. Small acts of witchcraft are connected to much larger ideas than simply protection or luck in the moment. Their craft must surely speak to something larger that is happening in their daily lives. My initiation and participant observation allowed me to gain insight into this. The discussion regarding how they negotiate their position in Post-apartheid South Africa can be seen in chapter 6 – *Trotse Tower Tannies*. Meetings sometimes focussed on personal issues or happenings in the coven members' lives and many of their issues connected to larger discourses that I had come across in my studies in Anthropology.

One such larger discourse was that of female devaluation and how various societies condone or condemn this. With much of the literature – anthropological or otherwise – portraying witches primarily as women, I wanted to know how the coven felt about the gendered history of witchcraft as well as how they personally view their gender given that they are practicing witches tangled into a very complex history. Each woman made it clear that they feel as if they constantly have to negotiate the behaviours that are expected of middle-aged, Afrikaans-speaking women. It was only once they discussed the issues related to this that I started to unpack and analyse what these expectations are and how they relate not only to their being Afrikaans-speaking, but their very specific context of being Afrikaans-speaking women. This discussion in chapter 7 – *She is a Force of Nature* – should be seen as a continuation of the preceding chapter as it is very difficult to completely separate these ideas.

This has been but a brief introduction as to how I came to this project as well as how I chose to approach it. The ideas that I have mentioned and touched on here will be dealt with in greater detail throughout the following chapters. Having outlined the chapters in my discussion above, I wish to spell out their structure here. The next chapter will be a discussion of both the historical trajectory and the literature concerning witchcraft in South Africa. Following that will be a chapter that is dedicated to my methodological discussion as well as insights into my initiation into the coven. I have then dedicated three chapters to each member of the coven's life history. Using this data, I have two analysis chapters, one that seeks to address their positions in Post-apartheid South Africa and another that discusses how they view their gender as well as how they negotiate their highly specific context of white Afrikaans-speaking, female witches.

## 1. Ritual Readings

The history of witchcraft is one that has been shaped by not only the scholars that have attempted to capture it in print over the years, but also the general public, which has been fervently discussing it alongside them. For this reason, the literature and history of witchcraft are interwoven into a consolidated tale that spans centuries. Witchcraft has grown and changed from varied beliefs in rites and rituals to a consolidated idea of an evil figure on earth. However, as of late, it appears to have been reopened to interpretation. At one of my first meetings with Freya she told me that in order to be a witch, I had to understand our history.

We are the daughters of the witches they could not burn. The Burning Times<sup>12</sup> were horrible, and we must always remember those who were murdered – men and women<sup>13</sup>

– Freya

The words ‘witch’ and ‘Pagan’ are intrinsic to Paganism and the way they are used within this community contradict the way that they have been used and understood in Christianity. There has been a misrepresentation of these words due to an association with Satanism and evil. This discourse has been shaped by colonialism and cultural imperialism. It is clear that there exists a local intolerance for witchcraft and Paganism in South African society and this is regardless of race. Witchcraft has become a word that most people fear. In order to understand who these primary agents are that have disseminated this discourse in South Africa, it is necessary to trace their line through history in order to understand how they held – and hold – such significance.

### Prominent South African Literature

Locally there has been much investigation into witchcraft and how it has functioned in various communities. One such example of this is the work of Isak Niehaus and his research

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<sup>12</sup> This was a period roughly between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries which witnessed the accusation, trial and subsequent execution of those who were deemed witches. Between 200 000 and 500 000 people were executed and about 85% of them were women (Ben-Yahuda, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> The role of Collective Memory will be discussed below by making reference to the work of Aleida Assman.

into the intersection of witchcraft and politics in his book *Witchcraft, power and politics*. In this book, Niehaus (2001, p. 16) seeks to uncover “the complex relationship between witchcraft and the changing social and cultural environments within which it exists”. He illustrates how changes in subsistence farming and the introduction of the migrant labour system provided for changing contexts during apartheid in the South African Lowveld. This resulted in the emergence of new forms of misfortune and growing fears which saw the perceptions of witchcraft change. Added to this was the disruption of villages and living spaces brought on by the Apartheid government. Under Apartheid, it was conventional that chiefs would preside over punitive matters as well as accusations of witchcraft. It was in this way that the institution of chieftaincy exercised its political and moral power. These powers were seriously challenged when youth activists became involved in the community and sidelined chiefs as political puppets and challenged their legitimacy. Niehaus (2001, p. 149) argues that it was against this background that “chiefs no longer assisted the bewitched, and the police arrested those who took justice into their own hands”. In a Post-apartheid South Africa, Niehaus suggests that the ANC faces a similar issue that chiefs were previously confronted with. Local ANC officials fear that if they are to implement the Suppression of Witchcraft Act like the chiefs, they could earn the reputation of siding with witches and lose crucial support in villages and if they do not, they could be condemned by the ANC National Executive. This leaves a political space that chiefs could assume responsibility over.

Niehaus also points to certain binaries that emerged from his analysis – such as insider versus outsider and human versus nature. While binaries may reinforce divisions and make the supernatural appear as only a function of the material world, it is helpful to analyse the binaries that emerge from data as they may inform the underlying structures in communities.

Another example is apparent in the work of Adam Ashforth in his book *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa*. While he was living in Soweto, Ashforth (2005) was struck by the widespread fear of bewitchment that he witnessed. This book explores the political dimensions of spiritual insecurity in terms of the anxiety that stems from omnipresent invisible forces. Ashforth dedicates the first section of his book to providing context to the socio-political dynamics that can be observed in Soweto after which he segues into a discussion on *muthi*, ideas of pollution, and spiritual beings. He discusses much of the witchcraft that he encountered in relation to the context he provided in the first section and explores the impact that invisible agents have had on Sowetans’ lives. With many Sowetans

having turned to the Zionist, Apostolic, and Pentecostal churches<sup>14</sup>, Ashforth (2005) argues that Postapartheid South Africa has not addressed the questions of spiritual (in)security enough. The state has been slow to respond to the recommendations of the Ralushai Commission<sup>15</sup> to treat witchcraft as a serious offence and to regulate traditional healing. Ashforth states that it is partly due to the insurmountable problem of evidentiary procedures in cases where invisible forces are at work and also because traditional healers and their powers are not necessarily amenable to bureaucratic control. While Ashforth's research is not directly applicable to the context in which I am working, there is merit in how he has connected socio-political context to experiences of witchcraft and spiritual insecurity.

After looking at these two books there were large differences I noticed between the texts and the women that I was working with. The women in my study self-identify as witches, whereas those that appeared in the above texts, as well as throughout most of the literature in South Africa, were *accused* of being witches. Also, I worked with middle-class, white women who are Afrikaans-speaking so much of the contextual discussion about the lives of poor black South Africans would not necessarily be applicable to my research. What this showed me was that there was a gap in the literature pertaining to a South African context. And while I could find an article that discussed women identifying as witches (see Badsteubner, 2003) this was still focussed on black South African women. White Afrikaans-speaking people have largely been excluded from anthropological analysis in South Africa due to their previously held positions of power as well as their continuing privilege (Niehaus, 2013). While the conventional literature on witchcraft in South Africa has been helpful in understanding how those who came before me have worked, I cannot follow this canon that has been laid out due to the fact that the coven that I am working with is comprised of white middle-class, Afrikaans-speaking women. It is for this reason that I decided to diversify my approach and trace a line through history instead and try to understand how my informants have specifically come to envisage their witchcraft.

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<sup>14</sup> The prevalence and role of these churches will be discussed later on with specific reference to the work of Jean Commaroff.

<sup>15</sup> This Commission was appointed by the Executive National Council of the Northern Province in March 1995. The terms of reference were to investigate the causes of witchcraft violence and ritual murders in the Northern Province, to review all criminal cases related to witchcraft and ritual murder for the past ten years, to recommend legislative measures to combat witchcraft violence and killings, and finally to recommend educational measures to be undertaken by government to combat commission of criminal acts related to witchcraft. Whilst the report was widely influential, it could be criticized for ignoring the complex roles of prophets – and Christianity more broadly – in ritual killings.

## Tracing a golden thread through history

It was the *Malleus*. Nothing was the same after that. It infected everything and still *vrots* [rots] in people's minds today. Kramer hated women and we are still paying the price for that.

– Hazel

The Medieval Witch Craze— sometimes referred to online or between witches (such as Freya had) as ‘The Burning Times’ – is absolutely critical to engage with, as it was during this time that witchcraft was associated with Satanism and evil. There was mounting concern regarding Satan and what his powers were, and this had been increasing from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Christian writers began to place a greater emphasis on the Devil as chief of a demon army who roamed the earth trying to undermine Christ. During this period, many of the details of how witches and witchcraft functioned were refined and rationales were established. This was done by an authoritative intellectual structure that was populated by theologians across Europe (Russell, 1980). Witch hunters could then draw on these for support of their ideas as well as their hunts and trials. One such witch hunter was Heinrich Kramer<sup>16</sup>. Having worked as an Inquisitor and witch hunter in a region of Europe that is now modern-day Germany, Kramer dedicated himself to recording the knowledge he acquired about witches and witchcraft over the years (Broedel, 2003). He collected his knowledge in what he had hoped would become a standard instructional manual, but instead became one of the most controversial books to emerge out of this time period.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* authored by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger<sup>17</sup> is a notorious tome that has remained a point of intrigue and discussion for more than five hundred years. Freya insisted it was where my historical reading had to start. It was also fortuitous that at this point I was on my way to Germany for a semester abroad. Having been published in the region that is modern-day Germany, I had the unique opportunity to speak to professors of history at the university I would be visiting and gain their insights into the impact that the book had.

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<sup>16</sup> He is sometimes referred to by his title of *Institoris* (Inquisitor) in other literature.

<sup>17</sup> The authorship of the *Malleus Maleficarum* is highly debated. Many scholars have argued that the co-author, Jacob Sprenger, participated in name only. Others even question whether he knew if Kramer used his name. More often than not, both authors are referred to, but Kramer has been widely regarded as the lead author due to his experience in prosecuting accused witches and his position as an inquisitor (Mackay, 2009).



First printed and distributed in 1487 the *Malleus Maleficarum*<sup>18</sup> (translated as the “Hammer of Witches”) was written as an instructional manual on what witches looked like, how they lived, and how to kill them. Throughout the various translations of the *Malleus Maleficarum* one sentiment remained clear – it was women who were naturally weaker and succumbed much more readily than men to the Devil and his promises of power. Following from this ‘woman’ became the foundation of the definition of a witch. The book explains that witchcraft is in fact a very real phenomenon and bases this in Catholic doctrine. It argues that witches’ power could only come from the Devil because it is only him who would grant such malevolent power and drive people to do harm and, because the Devil is real, so is witchcraft (Mackay, 2009). This is not an uncommon thought nor is it limited to a pre-Enlightenment Europe. Jean Commaroff investigates African Independent Churches (AICs) in her book *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* and their serious concerns about witchcraft. This will be discussed later in relation with how missionaries interacted with black South Africans and their spiritual beliefs<sup>19</sup>. The *Malleus Maleficarum* also discusses how witches maintain their power through regular interaction and intercourse with demons (Mackay, 2009). Though the book does not go into much detail here it is clear that views on ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’ were grounded in evil and commitment to the Devil.

Included with the book was a Papal Bull that by all intents and purposes appeared to give the blessing of the Vatican to the authors and the book<sup>20</sup>. The authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* used the power that came along with this as well as highly emotional and sensational language to convince readers that their cause was just and that suspected witches had to be tried (by methods they suggested in the book) and executed if found guilty. After publication, one professor at the University of Cologne declared that the book only be read by professionals, however, due to the advent of the printing press, nearly 30 000 copies were initially printed and distributed (Mackay, 2009).

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<sup>18</sup> This is the feminine genitive plural of *maleficus* from the Latin meaning wicked, vicious, criminal (Gonin & Lubbe, 1987)

<sup>19</sup> Jean Commaroff has written extensively on missionisation and its effects, it is unfortunately not suited to the case that I am building in this chapter with regards to German missionaries.

<sup>20</sup> A papal bull is a proclamation that states official doctrine. In the papal bull that was included in the *Malleus Maleficarum* there is a statement that warns against witches and gives sanction to Kramer to hunt them. This bull is more notable for what it does not say rather than what it does. It does not mention the book in which it is included, and it is dated for three years before the *Malleus Maleficarum* was published. It is suspected that it was included in an attempt to convince readers that the contents of the book were sanctioned by the Vatican (Broedel, 2003).

By the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the book had reached the general public during a volatile period of wars between nations, internal strife in the Catholic Church as well as the beginning of the Protestant revolution (Mackay, 2009). The book spoke of the apocalyptic power of witches and created a culture of fear and suspicion that was impacted by the claustrophobic nature of villages. While few objections to the book were raised, it was not enough to slow the accusations – many of which were levelled at old peasant women. According to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, due to female sexuality<sup>21</sup> as well as their inherent weakness, they could not control themselves in sight of Satan and willingly entered into a pact with him. The idea of a pact that was established through ritual intercourse with Satan was very important as it made it so that women were more likely to be witches (Russell, 1980). What the book also accomplished was lending language to describe witchcraft and its practices. The classification and information that was condensed into one place was unseen before and this ultimately contributed to the popularity that the book enjoyed.

Upon discussing this book with a professor at the German university that I was visiting for an exchange semester, she said that it was apparent in how German missionaries conducted themselves on their missions that *Malleus Maleficarum* had had far reaching and dangerous effects. The local impact that the book had resulted in missionaries seeking to stamp out anything that they may have deemed to resemble what the book had mentioned.

As much is evident in the work of Delius (2001) and Kirkaldy (2005) and their respective research on the Berlin Missionary Society (BMS) in South Africa. It is useful to look into the BMS as a case study for how European missionaries imposed their understandings and ‘knowledge’ of witchcraft on the various groups of people they interacted with in South Africa. Also, a central doctrine of the Christian church at this time was that if one worshipped any God other than the Christian God, then one was in fact worshiping Satan because any other God was false.

According to Delius (2001), during the station of German missionaries in the Pedi Kingdom between 1861 and 1866, missionaries witnessed what *they* [own emphasis] called *Zauberei*. This term was understood to mean magic or sorcery and was written about in travel logs as being central to existing Pedi religious beliefs. It was believed that the missionaries had to confront, understand and overcome it in order for Christianity to prevail (Delius, 2001).

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<sup>21</sup> Female lust was argued to be a portal to Satan. Women’s lust was spreading perversion and the domination of women had to be stopped.

However, Pedi beliefs were being interpreted within the Christian cosmology. Missionaries wrote of the religion of the Pedi being “of the devil”, their priests were “sorcerers”, and that if they did not believe in Jehovah then they could only believe in Satan (Delius, 2001, p. 432). Therefore, through the lens of Christianity, any spiritual practice that existed outside the realm of Christianity was considered false and evil and this categorisation would include any form of *Zauberei*. *Zauberei* was initially used as an all-encompassing term for any kind of magical practice with very little distinction between that magic that was meant to harm and other magic that was meant to heal. However, as time went on, small distinctions began to emerge, yet they were still framed as being evil due to their proximity to Christianity.

According to Delius, the relatively harmless sorcery, like invoking rain and the blessing of weapons, was practiced by what the Germans named, *Zauberdoktors* or the Pedi term *dingaka* [diviners/herbalists]. This lay in opposition to the more malevolent force characterised by the German *Hexerei* or the Pedi term *baloi* which was more in reference to people rather than the force. However, both were still seen as heresy. Another problem lies in that *Hexerei* and *Zauberei* are synonyms, yet the two forces they seek to describe are at odds with each other. This would indicate that no matter the intention of the practitioner nor the force, due to Christian doctrine, they are evil.

Another window into the past concerning missionaries is provided by Alan Kirkaldy in his book *Capturing the Soul*. In it, he attempts to bring the voices of the BMS and Vhavenda into conversation with each other. Kirkaldy (2005) asserts that encounters between the missionaries and Vhavenda are best understood as a contest for supremacy (Mulaudzi, 2006). In his view, conversion entailed the substitution of one religion with another and this left no room for blending of Christianity and African religious beliefs<sup>22</sup>. The Berlin missionaries had effectively attempted to silence the African voice and forced Africans to accept their version of Christianity. Kirkaldy (2005) writes of how missionaries came to regard local stories of magic disparagingly and how these missionaries had come to regard the magic – what they called witchcraft – as fallacious.

While Kirkaldy has been criticised for overstating the voice of the BMS, there is still value here in that he shows how there was an intolerance for local beliefs. By imposing European beliefs on locals, missionaries forced African religious beliefs into a mould that complimented Christianity. As mentioned earlier, this is precisely the moment that Jean

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<sup>22</sup> This would eventually lead to the rise of Independent African churches.

Commaroff has explored. In her book she writes of how Zionist churches became popular in South Africa after the expansion of apartheid and capitalism. These churches offered an alternative to the white churches that did not understand the problems that black South Africans faced. One of these problems was that of malevolent witches and the need for a symbolic spiritual path that emphasised healing people through the reconciliation of matter and spirit. Commaroff sees the validation of collective experiences through the church as a reaction to expanding neo-liberalism and also attributes the Zionist church's popularity to their ability to blend the symbolism of what missionaries would have called witchcraft, but what Commaroff refers to as rituals, and the salvation that Christianity offers. By directing their attention to not only blending rituals, but actively protecting against what could be construed as witchcraft<sup>23</sup>, the Zionist church acknowledges people's fears and makes it abundantly clear that witchcraft is real, and people must guard against it.

Kirkaldy addresses the beginnings of the disconnect that Commaroff highlighted when he recounts the tale of one missionary's experience of non-stop music and sleepless nights due to an ongoing ritual – akin to the kind Commaroff mentioned the church threatened. The missionary in question recorded an instance of a *Malombo* dance in his diary and described how he spoke to the people who watched four women (whom he describes as 'idolised people') dancing in praise of the ancestors. He directly addressed the people at this gathering and said "[He sees] people who are lost, who have left the correct path. [He] pointed at the idolised-people and said to them they were imposters and that the people were deceived by them, etc". (Kirkaldy, 2005, p. 183)

The kind of missionary activity mentioned above was highly advanced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was heavily concentrated in rural areas of South Africa<sup>24</sup>. Missionaries, in one of their attempts to 'civilise' Africans, built schools at which they had hoped to teach children from a young age about what it meant to be a good Christian. These were often the only schools that were accessible to rural black children and Christianity – as well as the magic that missionaries deemed evil – became entrenched. Colonialism compounded how these ideas became entrenched as Christianity was the fulcrum around which it pivoted its dominance of 'the savage Other'. This lack of separation between church and state was

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<sup>23</sup> The Church has allegedly been said to emphasise symbolic drinking of a special blend of tea to ward off evil and possible hexes from witches (Hlungwani, 2008)

<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that during this time there were also independent Boer republics and pockets of white settlement that had not yet been unified as one nation.

continued by the Apartheid government when National Party (NP) took power of South Africa in 1948. The NP entrenched Christianity as the state religion and used it to support their policies of separation. In a letter dated the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1954, the former Prime Minister D. F. Malan wrote to Reverend John Piersma of the Oakdale Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids in Michigan and told him,

“...Apartheid is based on what the Afrikaner believes to be his divine calling and his privilege to convert the heathen to Christianity...” (Mermelstein, 1987, p. 95)

This sentiment is echoed in how the apartheid government structured its education system, social welfare, and law enforcement. It also resonates within the Witchcraft Suppression Amendment Act, 1970 which is a testament to how Christian religious language was used to legislatively ‘stamp out’ beliefs external to Christianity – just as missionaries had sought to. The Act seeks to “provide for the suppression of the practice of witchcraft and similar practices” (Witchcraft Suppression Amendment Act 3 of 1970, 2005, p. 1)<sup>25</sup>. Offences include but are not limited to the employment or solicitation of a witchdoctor, professing to a knowledge of witchcraft, circumstances indicating that [a person] professes or pretends to use any supernatural power, witchcraft, sorcery, enchantment or conjuration.

For these offences the punishment includes a fine of R500 or imprisonment between 5 and 20 years, or both (Witchcraft Suppression Amendment Act 3 of 1970, 2005). It is important to note that these offences are based on a colonial definition of witchcraft which is ultimately based on the work of missionaries. There is a glaring problem here in that witchcraft has been defined within the Christian cosmology as the antithesis to good and God and only capable of doing harm within a society. It should also be noted that the Act upon which this Amendment Act applied to was based on British law that was used at the Cape Colony in 1895 (Witchcraft Suppression Amendment Act 3 of 1970, 2005). This legislation is clear in its denial of witchcraft and makes no exclusion for traditional healers, despite its revision. The result was that the witch became the embodiment of evil and social ills which, according to Isak Niehaus (2001, p. 192) and his examination of the intersection between witchcraft and political power, illustrates that “apartheid official discourses about civilization, called for the

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<sup>25</sup> When this research was taking place, the Act had not yet been repealed, but only parts if it were ruled unconstitutional in January 2016. A Bill has been submitted by the South African Law Reform Commission, but no judgement had been passed on it at the time of writing.

suppression and elimination of superstitions, such as witchcraft”. This Act officially legislated the belief in or pursuit of witchcraft as a primitive and irrational action<sup>26</sup>.

That Act – I’ve dealt with it lots at work. The lawyers I work for always make fun and don’t take those cases very seriously. It made witchcraft a joke and did a lot of damage.

– Astrid

### The Oppressed Oppressor

In my discussions with the coven, they routinely connected themselves to the aforementioned historical narrative. Perhaps not as overtly upon first glance, but when they began to open up about how they felt about the words ‘witch’ and ‘pagan’ as well as how they connected themselves to the history of the words, it all became clear.

Growing up and raising a family under apartheid was not for the faint hearted. Look, we can’t complain, we didn’t have it nearly as hard as black women for instance, but it was still tough for us in its own way. There was no space for being in between. You were either a good Afrikaans woman or not at all. You were either an on fire Christian or a Satanist. You were always being watched and criticised by those perfect ladies whose stockings you couldn’t see through. If you did one thing wrong, you were a witch – in their definition of the word.

– Freya

Freya expressed this to me one day during an interview and as much was echoed by Hazel and Astrid when I broached the subject at our next meeting. The European Witch Trials hold a position of great importance in these women’s lives. They have used the narrative of suppression and victimisation of women to rally not only around each other, but other women within the witchcraft community. Attaching themselves to this history has had a galvanising effect but has also given them a language with which to describe their spirituality and practices<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> See for example *S vs Phama* and *S vs Phalhane*

<sup>27</sup> Words such as coven, sabbat and even the word ‘witch’ itself

Not only have they managed to rally around their shared history, but they have made themselves part of it and, through this connection, feel the suffering of the women who came before them. The Burning Times are an emotional topic for not only Freya, Hazel and Astrid, but also the online community. Throughout meetings and interviews, they have spoken about their “sisters” that suffered and that we must never forget about the witches and the falsely accused that burned for “the gain of the church”.

How could we not feel their suffering? Their energies are with all of us every day. You know, even those who were falsely accused and had to die alongside our sisters, we acknowledge them and their pain. We have their memories and they live on in us. We must never stop telling our story.

– Astrid

Astrid was visibly emotional when speaking to me about the Burning Times and it felt almost as if she was there and felt the flames herself. There is something to be said about how collective memory functions and Aleida Assman recounts this in her book *Introduction to Cultural Studies* where she dedicates an entire chapter to memory. She mentions “social group memory” (Assman, 2012, p. 175) and how a common experience could link participants together and that the communication of these memories acts as the emotional cement of a group – creating a memory community.

Language is treated in this context as a cultural artefact that is taken up by individuals when constructing their identities. This is also why the case studies of the BMS are so important. Both portray that there was a certain construction of language that colonialism would have never attached to white people, yet I found that the coven empathised with the Pedi and Vhavenda when I told them about each. They spoke to the intolerance for anything other than Christianity being deeply unfair and forcing Pagans and witches to hide. What also struck me as very important was Freya’s comment about being “a good Afrikaans woman”. These women, while having to come to terms with the spiritual paths they had chosen had to find a way to reconcile it with their being Afrikaans women.

Christi van der Westhuizen’s book *Sitting Pretty* was very telling in this regard as to the internal strife to which Afrikaans women have been subjected. She writes of Afrikaans women occupying a dual position of both oppressor and oppressed. There were – and still are – certain expectations of how a woman should behave in order to be seen as a good Afrikaans woman by others. This behaviour is regulated by a concept called *ordentlikheid* (van der

Westhuizen, 2017). Van der Westhuizen (2017, p. 22) writes that this concept can be understood as an “ethnicised respectability” that is central to Afrikaner identity.

*Ordentlikheid* embodies principles like presentability, politeness, decency, good manners and “humility with a Calvinist tenor” (van der Westhuizen, 2017, p. 23). These principles collectively speak to the idea of ‘respectability’ and is the primary English translation she refers to. *Ordentlikheid* was employed as a mode of ‘whitening’ and consequently played a role in generating the Afrikaner identity. Van der Westhuizen (2017) argues that women are central to the generation as well as the maintenance of a nation’s identity, that women are bound in domesticity and that their household routines reproduced a nation’s identity. In the early twentieth century, Afrikaner women<sup>28</sup> were charged with preserving ‘civilisation’. After the South African War, there was a panic about imagined sexual violation of white women by black men. White men felt undermined by this and began to police white women and their behaviour (van der Westhuizen, 2017). By using respectability, Afrikaner heterofemininity was produced and became a yardstick for measuring women’s ‘goodness’.

While van der Westhuizen’s work applies to only a small percentage of the South African population, it is connected to a larger discussion that includes Sherry Ortner (1974) and her work on patriarchal logic in men and women’s connection to culture and nature respectively.

Ortner (1974) writes of how the secondary status of women in society is a universal truth and within this truth there are diverse cultural conceptions and symbolisations of women (i.e. the work of van der Westhuizen). She states that due to women’s ability to reproduce and being physiologically bound to carrying a child to term, they have been intrinsically linked to nature and, by extension, the domestic sphere. Due to the fact that men’s bodies grant them freedom from being physiologically attached to reproduction, they have the opportunity to create artefacts, products and technology that is much more permanent than a human being, thereby linking themselves to culture and, by extension, the public sphere (Ortner, 1974). As culture is seen as the control of nature and the bending of it to ones will, women have come to be seen as inferior. The societal framework in which these mechanisms operate is what gives them significance and has resulted in the public versus domestic dichotomy which in turn resulted in a gendered hierarchy (Ortner, 1974).

Ortner (1974) and van der Westhuizen’s (2017) work then appear to speak to an issue that I have seen raised by the coven. Patriarchal ‘logic’ assumes that women have to perform their

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<sup>28</sup> Similar to British women at the time



femininity in such a way as to be deserving of male attention and protection and *ordentlikheid* functions within this framework. Afrikaans-speaking women's behaviour and even their thinking is policed by *ordentlikheid* in their communities and this perpetuates patriarchal 'logic'. In this regard it is essential to consider Ortner (1974, p. 67) who states that

Much of the creativity of anthropology derives from the tension between two sets of demands: that we explain human universals, and that we explain cultural particulars. By this canon, women provide us with one of the more challenging problems to be dealt with.

## Conclusion

Unique women and unique circumstances require a more nuanced look as to how literature and a historical narrative can be used to understand the position that they find themselves in. This is by no means a complete review of all the literature that I have utilised throughout my research, it is but a map that I have constructed for myself to guide me through not only the vast web of history but also the vast wealth of literature that exists on the subject of witchcraft. This was done by drawing a golden thread through European witch trials into South Africa and how a local context was created, up to how Afrikaans women's lives were and still are controlled by the patriarchy.

While the existing literature on witchcraft in South Africa may not be wholly complimentary to the women I am working with, I have been able to extract guidance on how to analyse my data. It is apparent in the work of Niehaus that it is useful to examine binaries but that these must be combined with a pragmatic discussion of political economy, such as that provided by Ashforth, that may inform contemporary social positions. These are of course subject to the local context which is mostly one of fear and suspicion and treats witchcraft as something evil. This is attested to by the ongoing debate around the Witchcraft Suppression Act and the various parties involved in it. While the works I have consulted have operated on a much grander scale, I have chosen to focus my research on understanding very specifically how these women negotiate their roles not only as women subject to the patriarchy, but specifically their dual role of oppressor and oppressed due to their being Afrikaans-speaking. This is not a grand theory of all Afrikaans-speaking women in South Africa, but a very

specific line of enquiry as to how these women, given their backgrounds and upbringings, appear to have chosen to walk a very different path with regard to their spirituality.

All of my reading culminated in me having a much clearer idea of how I was going to handle the task of data collection. Due to the fact that very little literature existed on how Afrikaans women practice their witchcraft, I realised that I would need to be creative with my methodology. In the next chapter I recount some of my experiences with the coven as well as how I used participant observation in combination with interviews and observation.

## 2. Witchcraft 101

As I sat in my car outside of a home that I knew belonged to a woman who was a witch, I found myself suddenly drawn to one question: I wonder how she learnt it all? I was about to find out. Freya's driveway was a long panhandle and the prospect of having to reverse out of it every Sunday for the foreseeable future scared me more than anything I thought she was going to teach me. I took a deep breath and left the safety of my car and set out across her front yard to where she waited at the top of her patio stairs. She beamed over a cup of tea and offered it to me – to calm the nerves she said. She ushered me into her kitchen and leaned against her counter and regarded me for a moment while I drained the teacup. Her bloodred lips parted in a warm smile, "Ready?"

Much has already been written about witches and how to collect data about their lived experiences. In her book, *Deadly Words*, Favret-Saada (1981) makes it clear that witchcraft is used not only to explain misfortune, as Evans-Pritchard (1976) had argued during the Functionalist era of anthropological theoretical analysis in the 1930s, but that it rather explains concurrent discourses on misfortune, healing, hope and faith. Favret-Saada (1981) emphasises that witchcraft consists of words that often seem unimportant to an outsider but are in fact places where power lurks. However, she also emphasises how powerful silence can be. Favret-Saada (1981) writes of how unwitchers<sup>29</sup> use amulets and other such enchanted items to protect against the power of words, but ultimately the words are always stronger. She knows this through her learning about witchcraft by becoming actively engaged in the narratives in the village. She highlights that the only way an ethnographer can become a meaningful interlocutor is by becoming involved and learning from those who hold the knowledge (Favret-Saada, 1981). By the ethnographer becoming involved it prevents her from treating witchcraft as a belief system and thereby dismissing it as something that could be false and misunderstanding it (Favret-Saada, 1981). Given that words emerged early on as important carriers of meaning, I think it is of the utmost importance to look, from the inside, at the power of words.

The nature of my research demanded that the best way for me to collect data was going to primarily be through participant observation. I had been presented with a unique opportunity

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<sup>29</sup> A professional magician who combats the words of a witch that have sought to do harm (Favret-Saada, 1981)

that a group of witches was not only just willing to work with me, but actually welcome me into their lives and wanted to teach me their witchcraft. In previous research for my Honours degree, I had for the most part only conducted interviews and some observation, so I was thrilled at the chance to participate and learn first-hand. I had been introduced to Freya by an informant turned friend from my previous research. My friend had started to explore spiritual alternatives to the Abrahamic faiths that she was familiar with and had found a Facebook group for witches<sup>30</sup>. It was an international group, but she found other South Africans on it, one of whom was Freya. Freya was a regular contributor and always ended her posts by saying that anyone, from anywhere, could reach out to her for help. My friend joked that the group functioned as an online coven. I tumbled over the word mentally. ‘Coven’ was such an old word for a gathering of witches, and it conjured up images of women sneaking out at night to dance in the forest, not people casually messaging each other online while queuing for a coffee at Starbucks. I joined the Facebook group immediately<sup>31</sup>.

My friend added me to a group chat that had Freya in it, and we arranged for a meeting for just the two of us. She said that only if the meeting went well would I meet the rest of the coven. Freya’s kitchen is still to this day one of the most interesting spaces I have ever been. She had bundles of dried herbs hanging from exposed beams, nearly every surface carried jars filled with various liquids or herbs, and her windowsills spilled over with all sorts of plants. She noticed my eyes searching the room when she offered what she thought to be an explanation, “I’m a kitchen witch, you see. Don’t worry,” she responded to the puzzled look on my face, “it’s part of your homework”. After an intense afternoon of questioning, Freya agreed to have me meet with the rest of the coven to see if they were willing to work with me. I was indeed sent away with homework.

Freya suggested I sign up for both Tumblr and Reddit<sup>32</sup>. Both are online social media platforms where users can share original posts that are either art, text posts, videos, sound

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<sup>30</sup> This group was aimed at not only helping people with becoming witches, but also with various spells, charms and recipes.

<sup>31</sup> This is not the only instance of witches or supernatural practitioners using the internet to extend their reach. See for example *A new breed of techno-savvy sangomas* (available at <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/a-new-breed-of-techno-savvy-sangomas-20180722>) or *Casting Curses and Love Spells with the Most Powerful Witches in Romania* (available at [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/big5bq/casting-curses-and-love-spells-with-the-most-powerful-witches-in-romania](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/big5bq/casting-curses-and-love-spells-with-the-most-powerful-witches-in-romania))

<sup>32</sup> Tumblr (pronounced tumbler) is a blogging and social media tool that allows users to publish a "tumblelog", or short blog posts. Tumblr's major differentiator is the free-form nature of the site and the ability of users to heavily customize their own pages. This is the exception to the rule, as nearly all other social networks have standardized profile pages with limited design flexibility (Boone, 2012)

clips or news articles. Freya showed me that many witches and Pagans use these platforms to share their knowledge as well as to learn from others. She told me to read as much as I could in order to better understand the terminology that they would use at our next meeting. I kept what was initially a journal of notes, but when I started bringing it with me to our meetings, Freya joked that it had become my *grimoire* and the name stuck. I scoured endless blogs to try and understand the list of terms Freya had sent me home with. I discovered that a kitchen witch, also known sometimes as a hearth witch or a home witch, practiced their craft mostly in the home or in the kitchen. They are often incredibly nurturing and make their home their sacred space. When practicing their craft, they combine their own personal and individual magical energy with essential oils, herbs, food, and everyday objects to create their spells and rituals (Syrdal, 2019). At the next meeting I learned that Hazel is a hedge witch – a witch who can communicate with the spiritual world and send messages between both worlds. Hedge witches practice astral projection<sup>33</sup> as well as work with herbs and Earth based magic. What makes them specifically a hedge witch is their ability to cross the ‘hedge’ of the boundary between this world and the spirit world. Astrid on the other hand called herself a cosmic witch and this meant that she looks to the cosmos, astrology, and astronomy and works those elements and celestial energy into her practice (Syrdal, 2019).

This is but a small representation of the sheer amount of brand new knowledge I had to study and master, but it also raised an interesting question of knowledge acquisition and how, once in the community and having demonstrated some kind of insider knowledge as to how to find these sources, information was readily available. I had barely even started my initiation into the coven but already the others were calling me a witch and speaking of *our* history, *our* knowledge and *our* coven. My meetings with the women alternated between coven meetings at Freya’s house, and individual sessions with Freya. It became clear early on that Freya was the leader and that each woman had a specific role that they fulfilled based on what type of witch they are. When we celebrated Samhain<sup>34</sup> for example, Hazel led us in our dedications

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Reddit is a massive collection of forums, where people can share news and content or comment on other people’s posts. Reddit is broken up into over a million communities known as “subreddits,” each covering a different topic (Nicol, 2018)

<sup>33</sup> An intentional out-of-body experience that assumes the existence of a soul or consciousness called an “astral body” that is separate from the physical body and capable of travelling outside it throughout the universe.

<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that due to being in the Southern Hemisphere the Wheel of the Year (Pagan festivals) is reversed, where Samhain is normally celebrated at the end of October in the Northern Hemisphere, here it is celebrated at the end of April. Samhain marks the end of the harvest season and heralds the beginning of winter as well as honouring death (Hart, 2018).

and rituals. When a tarot reading was deemed necessary, Astrid would conduct the reading. Freya was charged with preparing a meal for us every Sunday and would help us with our rituals in the home or if we needed a salve or basic plant based medicines. I took notes on all of this but was never once allowed to record our Sunday meetings. In an interview (which I was allowed to record), Hazel explained this as,

As a witch, your voice is your power. You speak things into the Universe, you communicate your intention, or you cast a spell – all these things use your voice. Imagine if you had a recording of Freya blessing an ointment she’s made for you, you could just play it over and over and drain all of her energy and she wouldn’t know what was going on with her. Same goes for if I communicate with a spirit. It might attach itself to that recording and follow you home and then what? Sage can only do so much, my girl.

It made sense; their power was in their voices which had so often been silenced in their lives. The witchcraft hung on their lips and their voices carried it into the world. In *Magic: AIDS Review*, Isak Niehaus discusses the power that words have in people’s lives in relation to treatment literacy concerned with HIV/AIDS. He argues that in-depth ethnographic research is required to understand how words have power in people’s lived experiences. In a social context where words can curse or cure, it is important to learn about the extent of people’s knowledge of these words. Niehaus states that intensive participant observation is required in order to gain the knowledge required to not only understand these words, but to learn the nuances of their power. He also dedicates much space in his writing to presenting his informant’s own words and descriptions of events. From this point, I decided to whole heartedly commit myself to learning not only their words, so to speak, but to also represent their voices throughout the text.

There were a few moments where I was unable to participate, but I would then just observe the rest of the coven and tried to learn so that I could participate the next time. One such instance was Freya’s blessing of a new protection ring for Hazel<sup>35</sup>. I did not know how to ground<sup>36</sup> myself yet and so my unbalanced energies might have thrown off the spell. A few

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<sup>35</sup> Due to Hazel interacting with many different kinds of spirits, Freya has to bless the ring quite often.

<sup>36</sup> In witchcraft grounding is the practice of balancing personal energies. The term comes from the process of grounding an electrical circuit. Essentially if an object is negatively charged, grounding allows excess electrons to flow from the object into the earth, and if an object is positively charged, electrons flow from the earth into the object. It’s a method of balancing and equalizing the flow of energy. (Hart, 2018)

weeks later when Hazel joked that she wanted a ‘top up’, Freya invited me into the circle and showed me how to ground and contribute towards the spell. Oftentimes, such as before or after our meetings, I would just watch the women and see how they interacted with each other. Freya is by all intents and purposes the leader with Hazel her second in command. That is not to say that Astrid was the odd one out, she would often retire to the patio awash in sun and would read various tarot spreads and compile our horoscopes for the upcoming week. There was a seamless division of labour and when I was brought in as initiate and what Astrid jokingly called ‘The Tea Wench’, I too found a role that suited me and did not clash with anyone else.

I had decided early on in the project to spend a good amount of time with the coven before conducting life history interviews. I had learnt from my previous research that people are more comfortable in an interview if there is some kind of pre-existing relationship. I had also decided that because I would be asking about their past and constructing Spiritual Biographies, that I should know them well enough in order to address sensitive or personal matters<sup>37</sup>. Their stories (see Chapters 3 through 5) in a general sense were not unlike some I had seen on some of the Facebook groups and posts on Reddit and Tumblr. It was these interviews that sent me back to these social media platforms and I spent quite a lot of time reading what others had to say, but also what the women had themselves posted on these sites<sup>38</sup>. Female empowerment definitely stood out the most and there were even a couple of Facebook events that called for witches all over the world to conduct a spell at the same time in order to afflict Donald Trump and force him to step down as president. I also saw many posts about how to recover from past trauma, heartache and even bounce back from the common cold. One thing that was emphasised each time was that witchcraft was never a replacement for a doctor or a therapist but was rather something to help the process along a bit or to help clear yourself of negative energy so that you could seek out a healthcare professional. I also saw many atheist witches – referred to in the community as secular witches – that practiced because they enjoyed the ritual and ceremony. One thing that struck me was the general notion of acceptance within our community. The LGBTIQ+ community was welcomed with open arms and kitchen witches were posting that if there were mothers

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<sup>37</sup> The American Anthropological Association’s globally accepted model for dynamic informed consent was always in the back of my mind (<http://www.americananthro.org>).

<sup>38</sup> For the sake of online anonymity and identity protection I will not be including screenshots of the coven’s nor anyone else’s posts, but rather discussing the trends I observed throughout both.

who had rejected people based on their sexuality/gender orientation then they would be mothers to the community instead<sup>39</sup>.

There is a very definite note of defiance and resistance to conservative politics and social injustices. I raised this with the coven and their responses, as middle-aged Afrikaans-speaking women who grew up in the Apartheid era and attended the NG Church, surprised me. Hazel told me,

Isn't it great? It just shows you how many good people there are out there. Our community knows what it's like to have to hide who you are, so now that religious freedom is a thing, we are coming out in full force and helping people along the way too!

Freya echoed this,

If your mom won't love you because you're gay or transgendered then come here, I'll be your *mama*. Once you realise how cyclical everything is and how everything you give comes back to you again, you very quickly stop your shit. The Universe wants to work with you and when it does, wow, it's amazing. You know, all of us benefited from apartheid, but we all knew it was wrong [Hazel and Astrid agree in the background]. We wanted it to change, we still want so much to change.

Astrid thought for a while and then added,

We are in a new age where you can't hide from other people's ideas and opinions. You go online and there it is. What is great about that is you are forced to change your worldview when you have been exposed. You know, we interact with a lot of young people online and it's great. We learn so much from them. I learnt about metal straws from my niece's Facebook. I learnt about gendered violence from a 19 year old's blog. The internet is revolutionising not only our craft, but also our community.

When I started to write up my research, I could not help but notice a marked change that I could follow in my *grimoire*. At the beginning of this journey, I made detailed notes on

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<sup>39</sup> This speaks directly to notions of chosen families that can be seen in research conducted within the LGBTIQ+ community. One such example is the work of Kath Weston in the San Francisco Bay area where she attempts to explore how gay men and lesbians are constructing their own notions of kinship by speaking to ideas of symbolism of love, friendship and biology (Weston, 19914)



definitions of various terms and was obsessed with knowing the facts of witchcraft. This stands in contrast to the point where I find myself now and there are more recipes in my *grimoire*, notes in the margin about how to settle an uneasy stomach before reaching for a tablet, drawings of Tarot cards that Astrid explained to me, protection runes that Hazel drew for me and countless other notes and drawings. I introduce myself to people as a witch and there is not an ounce of shame that accompanies that. I could pinpoint the moment in my notes where I started writing of *our* coven instead of *their* coven. I had read about Clifford Geertz's (1998) writing on 'deep hanging out' which could be explained as an anthropological research method where one would immerse oneself in a culture, group or social experience on an informal level. The observations that could be gleaned from deep hanging out could end up being the most poignant insights of one's anthropological research. This stands in contrast to anthropological practices of conducting short interviews with subjects or just observing behaviour. Deep hanging out is a form of participatory observation in which the anthropologist is physically or virtually present in a group for extended periods of time or for long informal sessions. This struck me as not only what I had been doing for the duration of my research, but also as a research method that had to be done with this kind of research. I had to immerse myself not only in the coven, but also in the online community. Participant observation is something that intimidated me at first but was absolutely critical to this project. I was able to immerse myself in the world of witchcraft and have started to learn how to not only interpret the world around me from a completely different perspective than the one I was used to, but I also learnt about new words and how powerful they can be. I used individual interviews often to gain clarity about rituals and ceremonies that we had conducted as a group and upon further inspection, I do wish I had conducted more. I was allowed to record some interviews and it was useful to have data that I could quote in order to make sure that each member of the coven's voice was represented. I might have used regular observation more, especially during rituals and ceremonies, in order to simply observe more instead of participating. When I was participating there were moments where I felt myself no longer observing for the sake of my research and rather dedicating myself to becoming a witch.

It became clear that I was working with a process of becoming. I was becoming a witch and strangely enough so were the others. Even though we called ourselves witches, we were always working, always practising and learning in order to become better and stronger witches. Martin Holbraad and Morten Pederson (2017) write about the process of becoming

in reference to ontological approaches to anthropology. Although it can be, and has been, argued that anthropology has always been somewhat ontological in its approach, I want to make a point of highlighting it due to the nature of my project. Ontological anthropology seeks to open realities beyond our own and encourages the study of being. It also helps us to understand how humans communicate and interact with a host of non-human actors. Due to the impact that magic and witchcraft has – and continues to have – on the coven’s lives, my approach to this project has been to treat the witchcraft in these women’s lives as real because it has real effects in their lives and the decisions they make. It is for this reason that I never sought to either prove or disprove their magic. I wanted to understand their realities and their experience of their world. Favret-Saada (2012, p. 444) wrote a retrospective on her work in Bocage mentioned earlier and noted that the “implicit ontology” in anthropology allowed her to explore non-verbal, non-intentional and involuntary communications that drove her to “explore a thousand aspects of the subject’s essential opacity to himself”

Due to the emphasis that was placed upon informants’ words by Niehaus, I decided that it was vital to this project to give the women that I worked with their own voice. Only they could describe their social memory and experiences of being white Afrikaans-speaking female witches in South Africa. It is for this reason that I have chosen to present each woman’s life history separately in the following three chapters. Each chapter is dedicated to a member of the coven and traces what I have called their Spiritual Biography – a story of their spiritual journeys.

## Life [Her]stories:

### 3. Freya

The de facto leader of our coven, Freya, was born in 1962 on a farm in the Free State. She grew up in a conservative Christian home and regularly attended church with her parents and older brother. Freya's father was an elder in the Nederduits Gereformeerde Church (NG Church) and took it upon himself to teach her and her brother about the Bible and Christianity throughout the week. Freya said that as a young girl she had many questions about the universe and the nature of God but soon learned which questions she could and could not ask. Some of questions angered her father and she very quickly learnt that there were things she could not speak to her father or the *dominee* [pastor] about.

Her parents mainly farmed maize and she recalls that the workers on the farm would always tell each other stories about what lurked between the maize stalks. She knew she could never ask her father about it and tentatively brought it up one day after school while she was helping her mother and one of the domestic workers, Mina, in the kitchen. Freya recalled how Mina and her mother shared a long knowing look. Her mother peeked out of the window to make sure her father and brother were out of earshot. Slowly, Mina and Freya's mother began to tell a story, together, that some people believe that spirits walk through the corn at night. They are not always bad, sometimes they are old *boere* [farmers] making sure the crop is healthy, but sometimes it is not something that we can recognise – something that wants to rot the crop. Freya's interest was piqued.

Later that night she woke her brother and told him that she wanted to see the *boere* in the maize and, after some convincing, he agreed to go with her. They snuck out of a bedroom window and ran for the columns of maize. They broke through the initial leaves with cries of delight and giggles, but as they ran further the lights of their home disappeared and a deathly silence fell over them. Freya could not see or hear her brother anymore and she stood still and started to call out for him. She could see the maize ahead of her starting to split as if someone was walking towards her and believed it to be her brother. She called out to him, but he did not answer her. She accused him of trying to scare her and when she called out a third time, he appeared behind her. She said that in that moment she just knew that whatever was heading towards them wanted to harm them, so she grabbed her brother's hand and ran in what she hoped was the right direction. As she turned, she felt something cold grab her shoulder and try to pull her back, but she pulled out of its grip and her much faster brother

tugged her towards the house while they both silently wept. Banging on the locked front door and calling to their parents, Freya looked back and saw the maize splitting as it had before, but faster this time and coming from all directions. When their mother opened the door, they tumbled in and demanded she lock the door behind them immediately and they both burst into tears. When Freya told me this story, she turned pale and her voice was barely a whisper. We sat alone at her kitchen table and she confessed that nothing that she has ever seen or heard since has scared her as much as whatever was in the corn that night. She told me,

I instantly knew that there was more. I knew I was asking the right questions all along. I wanted to protect myself and my family.

The morning after her escapades in the corn, she was in the kitchen once again with her mother and Mina while her mother told Mina about what happened the night before. Mina was exasperated. Freya chuckled remembering this and noted Mina's absolute shock at how, even after all the stories she heard, Freya still ventured out. She pushed the issue and asked how she could protect herself. Her mother, predictably, told her to pray and ask God for protection but then she suggested something that left Freya completely speechless – she suggested Freya put salt on the all the windowsills and across all the doors that lead into the house. While Freya sat absolutely dumbfounded, Mina quietly walked to the pantry and fetched a bag of salt and handed it to her. Of this experience Freya said,

That was my introduction to witchcraft, I obviously didn't know it then, but that was it. And it was like a silent agreement between us three women. I was about seventeen and it just completely changed the way I saw the world. So much was said in that tiny gesture of Mina and Ma handing me that bag. They empowered me beyond prayer. Here was something I, a girl with very little say or power in our community or church, could do to protect my family – more than my brother or father could with a gun. That meant the world to me.

Freya teared up at this point and after a long drink of her tea, jumped forward in her story to after she had matriculated and moved to Pretoria.

It was while working as an administration clerk in Pretoria that Freya met the man that would become her husband. She glossed over much of this part of her life and said that it's a boring part of her story because she always did the 'right thing'. She got married in the NG Church, took his surname and together they had two sons. As a family they attended church at their local NG Church every Sunday and were more or less known as a well to do family. Freya

did not agree wholeheartedly with the Church, but after noticing that neither of her sons had inherited her curiosity decided that it was probably best for them to remain in the Church – she notes it was more a social than spiritual thing in her mind. Her peaceful accord with the Church was abruptly broken one Sunday morning in 1989 when their *dominee* began to preach about Satanism and terrorists.

You know, I sat there with my mouth hanging open. The things that man said. People who question the Church and who questioned the government were terrorists who were being manipulated by the Devil. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. And the people were nodding!

Her display of open disgust towards the sermon did not go unnoticed and the following week when she picked up her sons from Sunday School they were in tears. The other children had teased them and said that their parents had said that Freya was scheming with demons and the Devil. Freya was gobsmacked and decided to confront the Sunday School teacher. Her reception was frosty, and her concerns were dismissed almost immediately. In the weeks to follow her sons were almost always in tears until she finally had had enough, and she removed herself from the Church.

They made it clear that they did not want me there. They were upset that I had a mind of my own and that I – according to them – was raising my sons to be weak Afrikaans men and that I was an insubordinate wife. I in any case felt very little joy as a woman in that Church so it was absolutely no loss for me. I had other ideas that it was time to explore.

After exiting the Church<sup>40</sup>, Freya turned Sundays into her library days, and she began to read up about all other faiths and slowly found herself reading more so-called 'esoteric'<sup>41</sup> books. She read about astrology, dream symbolism, crystal healing and magic, spirit invocation and more. Each week she left the library with some of her questions about the universe answered, but about a hundred more that she fervently looked forward to researching and answering. She began to incorporate some of what she learned into her everyday life and found herself

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<sup>40</sup> Her husband as well her sons had elected to stay. Her sons wanted to be confirmed in the Church and did not want to start over at another church and her husband decided to stay to help their children.

<sup>41</sup> Esoteric meaning subject matter that is intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest

pouring over the Yellow Pages looking for stores or people that could have helped her along the way.

“Nothing,” she said, “and then – the internet. Wow”.

The internet completely changed the way Freya consumed information and she could start to look up books she could take out at the library instead of solely relying on the librarian who had begun to grow wary of the requests she had been making. Slowly, she learnt which words would return the kinds of results that she was looking for and she discovered a few websites that spoke to a certain way of practicing womanhood in unison with nature and the Universe at large and they called it Witchcraft. The sudden appearance of the word across her screen prompted Freya to close her browser and immediately walk away from her computer. This is a word that she was taught to fear, to read it was bad enough and she could not imagine saying it out loud ever. She brought the subject up one night with her husband while they were cleaning up after dinner and the boys had retired to the TV to play videogames. She told her husband that she did not think she was just Christian anymore. Sensing his confusion, she quickly followed this up with an explanation of what she had been reading but avoided using the words ‘witch’ or ‘witchcraft’. He asked her if she was now a ‘hippie’ and, thinking it would be easier to be a hippie than a witch, agreed with him and asked for his support. He tentatively agreed but Freya confessed that even up until today she does not really think he is completely at peace with her decision and spiritual path.

Sometime after this discussion, right before her son’s confirmation, the Church hosted a braai for the youth to commend their commitment to God and Freya’s sons begged her to attend. At this point Freya had started to personally make peace with the idea of witchcraft when she learned of how the Christian world had manipulated what it meant. She even toyed with the idea of calling herself a witch. She agreed to attend but told her sons that she would not stand back if someone disrespected her. At the braai many were surprised to see her but were mostly polite. One of the other women at the braai sarcastically asked what Freya had been doing with her free time on a Sunday and Freya, annoyed at the tone of her question, began to speak of the Zodiac, how to read Tarot, and old pantheons of gods that she thought made more sense than simply one god – and a male one at that. She knew she would strike a nerve, but she also knew that she wanted to. Alarmed, the other woman said that she could not possibly be Christian and if she was not a Christian then what was she?

“I told her I was a witch”, Freya told me, a smug grin across her face. “What that woman didn’t know is that I was just as scared as her, but as soon as I said it there was this power in me. Like the Universe said yes, you absolutely are”.

Freya walked away a changed woman that day. The following day she sat proudly in church and watched her sons pledge themselves to God and knew that in every other respect, where their God could not help them, her gods would because she had the power to invoke them.

Freya’s confidence had grown, and she found herself going into shops that she previously had not thought she could and asked a few friends from England and the United States send over some books for her. She turned her homemaking into her way of practicing her craft. She started using some of Mina’s healing remedies in meals she made and imbued these meals with a loving intent for her family. She hung herbs around her house and started sprinkling salt around her home – just as Mina had shown her. Later on, Freya would learn that she was what many call a Kitchen Witch.

She displayed her craft proudly in her home and had even started a crystal collection. She states unequivocally that she was not exactly totally convinced by crystal healing but that anything at that point was worth a try and it made her house look pretty. One day she had been driving through Pretoria after work when she noticed a crystal store<sup>42</sup> she had never seen before and decided to pay it a visit.

I instantly felt myself being drawn to it. I can’t explain it. I just suddenly knew that I had to absolutely go into this shop.

Freya closed her eyes and moved her hands through the air as if she was painting on a canvas. She described seeing the woman’s hair first, a wild mane of brown interlaced with grey and swept up into a bun. The colours and patterns that darted across her clothes told Freya that this could be a kindred soul. The woman instantly reacted to Freya and slowly turned to face her. Freya introduced herself and the two began to speak superficially about the beauty of the crystals, but the conversation began to develop a deeper layer. Freya started using what she called ‘keywords’ to hint to the woman that she was a witch. The woman responded to them immediately and the two instantly knew what the other was. The conversation continued into

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<sup>42</sup> Strictly speaking it marketed itself as a bead and crystal store, but Freya remembers very few beads actually being sold.

the parking lot after they had made their purchases. They decided to exchange numbers and to meet for a coffee that weekend.

That was how I met Hazel. I can spot that *mop kop* [messy hair] anywhere in a crowd now. The Universe pulled us together in that moment. Do you know how wonderful it is to have the Universe bring you the person you need? It sent Hazel to me and I knew instantly that it was no coincidence. Hopefully in the next life we find each other a little sooner!

Freya and Hazel have seen each other every weekend since then and slowly curated their Sundays and turned them into days of practice and study of the craft. They shared knowledge and, when Hazel brought Astrid with her one weekend, their coven was all but established.

Freya had conducted a lot of research and read up about witchcraft practices, but it was only when she joined forces with Hazel and Astrid that she found the confidence to invoke gods and spirits as well as try her hand at some spell work. She began to imbue her cooking with healing and protection intent and used herbs and ingredients that had magical correspondences. Just like Mina had shown her years ago, she continues to salt her windows and doorways for protection and replaces it weekly when she smoke cleanses her home. Freya remarks that ADT and pepper spray can only deal with a break-in problem once it has already occurred – with her magic she can prevent anything from even happening in the first place<sup>43</sup>. I asked her husband about this one afternoon and he explained that their neighbours have moved away from conventional security companies and have instead requested protection spell jars<sup>44</sup> and Freya has even taught many of these women how to make their own<sup>45</sup>. Freya's husband shifted uncomfortably when I remarked that it was interesting that it was women and herbs protecting the neighbourhood instead of men with guns and he promptly changed the subject.

Freya has dedicated her home to her craft and remarks that it is as much part of her practice as Astrid's Tarot or Hazel's visions. Being a kitchen witch, Freya dedicates her home to all those who pass through it and it is difficult to leave without a homemade jam or spell jar that

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<sup>43</sup> Freya insisted that I put in a footnote with a protection spell that anyone can use in their home. She suggests cutting an apple in half to expose the pentacle shape within and burying the halves in in garden beds in your property. This will prevent intruders as well as protect those that live within the home.

<sup>44</sup> This is a jar that contains various ingredients that are intended to bring something, such as protection, into one's life or even to keep something, perhaps a troublesome person, away.

<sup>45</sup> These women did not join in on our Sunday meetings.



she whipped together while you visited. She has taken control of the kitchen and home in such a way that her husband has to ask her permission before moving anything and regularly retires to their patio insisting that “it’s [her] space, I don’t want to fall over something and wake up a toad”. Freya also insists that she sit at the head of the table during meals and when I asked her one day as to why she cackled over a bowl of mashed potatoes, “All the better to see my dear!

Freya focuses her daily craft on acquiring and securing strength in her life. Many of the spell jars that she keeps at her home are for various friends and family members that may or may not know about them. Many of these are concerned with keeping them healthy, ensuring their continued success and some even are dedicated to financial prosperity. Freya has an encyclopaedic knowledge of witchcraft and has been known to start doling out information to people alongside her in the Post Office queue. She combines what Afrikaners call *boereraad* (folk medicine and beliefs) with witchcraft and her own brand of sympathetic magic<sup>46</sup> is what emerges. She might recommend a recipe with plenty of turmeric to support the immune system during flu season but will also suggest adding rosemary for protection and healing. It appeared to me that there was a seamless blending of magic and folk medicine and when I spoke to her about it, she did not understand the distinction I had made,

Is there really a difference? *Boereraad* is magic! That is why I don’t even think twice about it. The *boere* might not have called it magic but it really is. And you don’t have to think about this in opposition to medicine and doctors now. This is what came before them, laid the groundwork for them. And we forgot we had this magic. It is old magic. A book of *boererade* is just a *grimoire*, that’s all.

Freya believes that there are many ways to be an Afrikaans woman and that chief amongst these ways is to be strong. She laments how many times she gave into the will of men who she had believed were somehow, as she describes it, “higher up on the food chain” than her. This is why she is so passionate about magic and witchcraft. She believes that it was only once she tapped into this power that waited for her that she truly understood how powerful a woman can be – even if they are “stuck in a very patriarchal society”.

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<sup>46</sup> First coined by Sir James George Frazer, this term refers to imitative magic which is based on the principle that like produces like (Greenwood, 2009)

## 4. Hazel

The oldest member of the coven, Hazel, was born in 1959 in the suburbs of Mpumalanga. Her parents persistently tried to grow their family of three, but after her mother had suffered her eighth miscarriage, decided that perhaps it was best that they did not have any more children. Her father was in any case a very busy man as he was the *dominee* at their local NG Church, and he devoted much of his time to the church and its congregants. This meant that Hazel was often left alone with their domestic worker, Abby, as her mother was expected to stand steadfast at her husband's side. Hazel would often sit in church with Abby and would trail after her at home and help her with odd jobs.

It was Abby that Hazel first told about the people that she saw and heard. At the time Hazel was about seven years old when she first saw a strange man walking through their living room one afternoon. She asked Abby about the man, clearly used to the visits that were often paid to her father. Abby was confused and explained to Hazel that nobody had been around for a visit the previous day because her father was working at the local high school the whole day. Hazel pressed that there was a man there because he asked about her father, but she was too shy to answer him.

This was not the first nor the last time Hazel would see or hear someone that others could not, but she was relatively unbothered by it because none of the people she ever heard or saw stayed very long. That is until one day she was sitting in the church while her father practiced his sermon for the following morning. Hazel explained that she saw a man standing behind her father and his face slowly started to shift and change until he did not look human anymore. He reached for her father while she heard a low sinister laugh and she cried out to her father to run. Instantly the figure disappeared, and her father called Abby to remove Hazel and chastised her for disrupting him and screaming in public.

He said I wasn't being an *ordentlik* little girl. I was terrified for his life. It looked like this thing was going to gut him.

After Abby had calmed her, she told her what she had seen in the pulpit and Hazel said that even at that young age, she saw knowledge and fear behind Abby's eyes. Unbeknownst to Hazel, Abby had spoken to her mother about not only the figure in the pulpit, but all the other stories that Hazel had told of men and women passing through their home as well as all the whispers she had heard. One night, Hazel's mother strangely accompanied Abby while she

put Hazel to bed and the two women broke the news to Hazel that she was *met die Helm gebore*<sup>47</sup>. Hazel's mother explained that God thought that Hazel was special and trusted her with a gift to commune with "the other side". However, she made Hazel promise not to tell her father and to wait a few years until she had better control of it before she brought it up with him. Hazel continued to confide in Abby about her visions and did not really discuss the matter further with either of her parents.

At about the age of sixteen, Hazel travelled to the Northern Cape to visit her paternal grandmother for her birthday. She spent most of her time there in the kitchen with her aunts and cousins helping to put together meals for the family. She remembered that her grandmother would often remark that they should add more garlic to dishes as it would prevent illness, more rosemary to the rice to bring peace and restful sleep, and salt to keep away evil. Hazel decided to speak to her grandmother about her visions as she had the sense that there was more to her than the wisdom that accompanied age.

One afternoon, when everyone was preoccupied with braai preparations, Hazel accompanied her grandmother while she fed her ducks and goats. Hazel explained what she saw and what her mother had said it was and that she did not quite agree. Her grandmother scoffed and said that what happened to Hazel was as far away from a gift from God as someone could get. Her grandmother explained that she had visions too, so did her sister, her mother, her great-grandmother and just about as far back as their female family line went. All the women on Hazel's father's side of the family were afflicted, explained her grandmother.

"Ons was vervloek. Almal van ons" sighed Hazel. [We were cursed. All of us.]

Her grandmother explained that many years ago, when the Voortrekkers left the Cape, her family had settled on a piece of land that actually belonged to one of the indigenous tribes that inhabited South Africa. After the family established a farm and settled in, the tribe returned and demanded that the family vacate the farm. The family refused. The tribe told the family that they would suffer a dreadful fate if they did not remove themselves, but the family drove off the tribe with threats of shooting them. That night, all the women in the family fell ill. Those who were pregnant lost their children and the rest suffered with visions of their fallen comrades who had not survived the trek. The women were not able to fall

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<sup>47</sup> Translated as 'you are born with the caul'. This is an Afrikaans folk belief that God has bestowed upon a person a gift that enables them to receive messages or see figures that originate from the spiritual realm that could either aid the living or help them in the future.

pregnant again. From then, all the women in their family struggled tremendously with visions as well as with miscarriages and infertility.

According to my grandmother, they tried to destroy our family for their insolence. We couldn't bear children any more than we could stop these nightmarish visions. We were supposed to die out.

However, her grandmother continued, the family continued on through the male line but every so often, when a female was born, she was born cursed. Hazel's grandmother said that one of the workers on her parent's farm would mix a *salfie* (a medicine) that momentarily stopped the visions, but they always returned. She had hoped the curse would die with her because she had a son, but it appeared to skip a generation. She apologised tenderly to Hazel and offered advice that Hazel still returns to today,

*Boerevrouens het sterk skouers, ons is gemaak om die wêreld to dra. Want ons kan*  
[Afrikaans women have strong shoulders; we are made to carry the world. Because we can].

Hazel returned to Mpumalanga with a lot on her mind and found herself in conflict with God. Why would He allow this? Were the Afrikaners not His chosen people as her father had repeatedly preached? Was God even out there? These kinds of questions rocked Hazel's world and she found herself drawn more than ever to Abby – she believed Abby to be the only person who would understand her problems. Abby had remarked to Hazel one afternoon that her own mother often spoke about the white family that she worked for and that she helped them with ailments – perhaps she would have a remedy for Hazel. Abby promised to ask her mother when she returned to her home for the Christmas holidays.

However, Abby never got the chance. Towards the end of Hazel's matric year, Abby fell very ill and no medicines seemed to have any effect on her health. Hazel's father prayed every night and her mother called a new doctor every morning. Sadly, Abby passed, and Hazel was devastated.

Silent tears slid down Hazel's face while she told me, "it felt like my mother died. I'm ashamed to say I did not cry as much for my own mother's death as I did for Abby, but we've resolved that since. I couldn't stay in that house a minute a longer. Not without Abby. So, I packed my car after finals and left for Pretoria. My parents understood and never really tried to stop me. They knew how I felt about Abby."

On the morning that Hazel left, she was driving along the main road and saying her silent goodbyes to the hills and fields she knew well when she suddenly had to slam on her brakes. Out in the middle of the road was an enormous tortoise, about the size of a manhole cover. Hazel pulled over and made sure the tortoise crossed safely. On the other side of the road, she sat with the tortoise for a while.

And then it hit me. Abby always told me when she died, she wanted to come back as a tortoise. I always squealed with laughter when she said it, but she was actually leaving me a message – one that only I could understand. That was Abby on the road that day, saying goodbye. I'm so glad I got to see her one more time. I knew then that there was so much more at work than what my father had taught me in church.

Hazel settled in Pretoria and was working in the city at a bank. She learned how to cope with her visions and tried to find books in libraries that might have shed some light on her situations, but to no avail. She told me, quite nonchalantly, that men came and went in her life and she knew that once she told them about her visions they would not stay long. She joked that she actually used it to get rid of a few of the less desirable ones.

In Hazel's late twenties, she visited a gynaecologist for a routine check-up when her doctor noticed an anomaly. After a few days she heard back and was called into her doctor's office. He explained that when she ovulated there were no eggs being produced which meant that she would never be able to fall pregnant. He went on to explain her alternative options, but Hazel said she stopped listening. Her grandmother's story of the curse and barren women returned to her mind and she felt as if the world was against her.

It's the one thing we're supposed to be able to do. Our bodies are designed for it. I didn't know what it meant for me as a woman.

Hazel's voice was thick with emotion.

In the years following her diagnosis with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS), Hazel had to learn how to accept herself and she did this through grounding herself in nature. She argued that women are intrinsically connected to nature, but that she learned over time that this was in fact a strength, not a weakness. She said that she closely followed the waxing moon, the changing of the seasons, and the blooming of flowers, all in an attempt to find peace with her body that did bloom or wax, but that only withered and waned. She never settled down with a husband because none of the men that she had relationships with could understand that she

could not and did not want children. For a long time, she said that she was an angry woman and was at war with herself because those markers of womanhood that she had grown up with – being a wife and a mother – were not an option for her.

As she aged, she managed to make peace with her visions and her body and found new ways to define herself. Friends that had emigrated sent numerous books to her that were all about womanhood and new lenses with which to see it. Some of these books spoke directly to an innate power that was inside each woman and waited, quietly and patiently to be embraced. This power has always been unique to women and some have called it witchcraft over the years. Hazel was immediately drawn to this sentiment and she joked that she “steered into the skid” and welcomed this power as well as this word into her life.

Witchcraft was the reason for me being able to see and hear what I did – I was going to use it then to tap into that power. It’s kind of poetic really – taking that which ruined me and turning it into a source of strength. If I had to be a witch to do that then so be it, being a Christian certainly didn’t help.

Hazel firmly believes that her acceptance of this was the start of her spiritual journey and that the Universe rewarded her for her resolve and strength. She built a career that saw her travelling all over the world and went from success to success that has now resulted in her being able to retire this year. She states unequivocally that she only found true happiness when, about fifteen years ago, she was drawn into a crystal shop that she had never noticed before. Wandering through the store, she suddenly felt a presence so strong that she first believed that she was going to be attacked by something otherworldly. When she sensed that whatever was causing this surge was right behind her, she whipped around and in front of her was a slightly stout redhead that was already reaching out towards her to introduce herself.

I knew immediately that on this plane, only another witch could put out energies like that. I could tell she was *mal*[mad] like me. I saw her looking at the patterns and colours on my dress and knew she thought that this *tannie* was into some wild shit.

After an hour or so of chatting outside the store, Hazel knew that the Universe sent Freya to her so that she would not be alone anymore. Hazel often tears up at the thought of her deep friendship with both Freya and Astrid but says of that moment outside the crystal store that she felt as though she had met a soulmate, she found someone who could help her just like Abby did.

Freya helped Hazel find ways to introduce more magic into her everyday life. Hazel said that one of the first things that Freya told her was that witchcraft was not only for a ‘special occasion’ – it was something to be practiced every day. Hazel became deeply interested in everyday protection from those beings that sought to harm her. She taught herself how to draw protection sigils<sup>48</sup> and would trace them on the inside of her palm or would trace them on her face with her foundation before she blended it out. She even joked about drawing them in the dust that gathered on her car. When I asked her why she did this, she replied that danger – earthly or otherwise – was always present and that it was a witch’s duty to protect herself and those around her. At least once a week, Hazel will waft sage around her home to smoke cleanse it<sup>49</sup> and she usually follows this with a cleansing tea that Freya makes for her.

It is a lot easier now that I am retiring to find time for my craft. Sometimes I don’t know how Freya, with that family of hers, ever finds time to practice. Maybe it’s because I travelled a lot that I struggled. But now I’m home and I can really become the old crone that I knew I always was! And I have the others. I know there are solitary witches out there, but that’s not me. I need Freya and Astrid – and now you too, you know [pointing at me].

Hazel’s craft is not only about protecting herself and those around her, it is about grounding herself in female friendships. Hazel told me many times, both alone and in group settings, that there is something deeper that holds us all together. She is fond of saying that love is old magic and the love between the women in our coven is what makes us all strong witches. There have been a number of times when, as we are leaving Freya’s home on a Sunday, Hazel will press a smooth pebble or crystal into my hand saying that it will keep me safe on my drive home and make sure that my family and I are safe for at least another week.

There were also a number of times that Hazel would stop a meeting on Sunday in order to tend to a spirit that crossed her path. More often than not it was the spirit of an old woman that had taken up residence in Freya’s house<sup>50</sup> whom Hazel would merely coax out of the room. I asked the coven one Sunday morning if they were scared of the spirit and both Freya

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<sup>48</sup> A sigil is an inscribed or painted symbol considered to have magical power.

<sup>49</sup> This is a cleansing ritual that is aimed at driving evil or negative energies out of the home. There has been much debate within the witchcraft community about refraining from calling it ‘smudging’ – a term more people are familiar with. This is because smudging is largely considered to be cultural appropriation (of Native American beliefs) and witches all over the world have agreed to rather refer to this ritual as smoke cleansing.

<sup>50</sup> This spirit was viewed by the coven as non-threatening and they often joked that she was our fifth member.

and Astrid agreed that while it could be unsettling, they were not afraid with Hazel there. I turned my gaze to Hazel, and she smiled knowingly,

My dear, a witch is the thing that so many people are scared of. I know that when I step out of my house that I am the scariest thing I will encounter that day. That *tannie* [the spirit in Freya's house] doesn't scare me.

Femininity is a well of power from which Hazel draws. Having to face early on in her life that she “couldn't be a woman just like everyone else”, Hazel states that she had to make peace with herself before she could move on her with her life. Witchcraft, she claims, is what helped her make that peace. According to Hazel witchcraft is something that is instinctual in women<sup>51</sup> and that it was a way for her to reclaim her womanhood. It showed her that even though she may not be able to bear children, her body moves in cycles with the earth and even though she may not have a partner now, she will have one her next life.

This is my learning life. The Universe put me on this path to teach me something that I desperately needed to know – I am enough, just the way I am. I am magical, just the way I am. I am a woman, just the way I am. It was difficult and I struggled, but rather late than never, hey?

Witchcraft helped Hazel to embrace a way of being that she had not grown up with. Not being able to fulfil the roles of ‘mother’ or ‘wife’ devastated Hazel. Hazel explained that the portion of the Afrikaner community that she was familiar with would have pitied her and thought her to have an empty life with no husband or children, but she sees herself as a “free agent with scope to do whatever the hell [she] wants”. A powerful woman, Hazel states, is one with an uncaged mind.

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<sup>51</sup> She does believe that men can be witches but says that because women are intrinsically connected to nature, it is easier for them to be witches.



## 5. Astrid

Astrid joked that the Universe really had a sense of humour having her be born into a conservative family in the Eastern Cape. Born in 1963, Astrid is the youngest of three daughters and was instantly very different from her sisters. Astrid's mother always told her that where her sisters had been quiet and peaceful babies, she was a boisterous child that cried out often and demanded attention. This continued on into her childhood and she described her childhood as having only brief moments of reprieve between conflicts with her sisters and parents.

As a young child she loved stories about ghosts and magic and always asked the domestic worker, Mama Sara, to tell her stories in the mornings when they were alone while the rest of the family were at work and school. Mama Sara's stories often involved naughty children being snatched away by mischievous *tokoloshes* or ghosts and demons that haunted and taunted people who did not accept Jesus in their lives. Astrid loved these stories and believes that they were the source of her love for horror films and novels. Her sisters however hated these stories and always cried to their mother and asked that she instead tell them stories of princesses being saved by brave knights.

Astrid grew into an ever more defiant teen and, much to her chagrin, was at highschool at the same time as her two older sisters. She was always told that she never behaved like a girl should and was in trouble at school more often than not.

I'll never forget one teacher asked me why my hair was so messy compared to my older sisters. I said it was from chasing boys because I wasn't a *koek*<sup>52</sup> like they were. Five lashes and extra homework and a letter to my parents in my diary! And of course, I was punished when I got home too. *My gat was die heel tyd aan die brand*' [my backside was always on fire].

She faced similar issues at Sunday School and catechism classes. One night while she and her sisters were reading their Bibles, Astrid came across a story in Judges 19 that told of savage men demanding to have their way with an old man's male guest. In his place, they ordered the male guest's concubine to go to the savage men and they raped her all through the night until she eventually died at dawn. This story deeply upset Astrid and she tried to speak to her

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<sup>52</sup> *Koek* is an Afrikaans slang term used to describe a prudish girl that is conservative

sisters about it, but they simply told her that it was better to not question the Word of the Lord. Astrid had resolved to bring it up in her catechism classes the following day but when she did, she was dismissed and told that not all stories in the Bible should be taken literally or so seriously. Astrid categorises this moment as her breaking point and tells of how she protested the answer and said that any time a woman's rights to her body and safety were infringed upon, it is an important matter. One of the other girls in the class took this moment to tell Astrid to calm down because as a concubine, the woman who was raped was not even that important. Disgusted, Astrid left.

Astrid's father and *dominee* [pastor] later met with her at the family home in an attempt to understand her rage and to try and convince her to return to her classes so she could be confirmed in the Church. Astrid point blank refused and when the *dominee* told her that he would not confirm her in the church if she did not finish her lessons, she informed him that she did not want to be part of a church that condoned violent treatment of women. This proved to be too much for Astrid's father to bear and he sent her to bed without dinner. Later that night, Mama Sara snuck some dinner out to Astrid and spoke to her quietly about her day. Mama Sara said that while she hoped Astrid would find her way back to the Lord, she believed that there was always going to be something looking out for her. She gave Astrid a long meaningful look before retiring for the evening.

Astrid's relationship with her father was permanently damaged by her decision to leave the Church. The shame of an unconfirmed daughter proved to be too much to bear and, as soon as she finished her matric exams, he sent her to Pretoria to work at a friend's business. In the weeks leading up to her departure, she recalls her father speaking at length about what *ordentlik* [respectable] girls her sisters were and how they would never struggle to find good husbands, Astrid on the other hand...

In Pretoria, Astrid was living in a flat in Sunnyside and quickly made friends with people who were studying and working at the University of South Africa and discovered horror movies, rock and metal music, banned books and more.

I really went overboard you could say. I was so angry, and I wanted people to know I was angry. I wore dark clothes and read *snaakse* [strange] books in public. I'd been thrown out of a town before, I didn't care if it happened again.

Some of her friends moved overseas for their studies and sent her books about the occult and witchcraft and she consumed them with vigour. She particularly enjoyed the emphasis that was placed on the 'Divine Feminine'<sup>53</sup> and the even divisions between genders.

Astrid heralds the advent of the internet as a critical factor that led to the spread of New Age spirituality and witchcraft all over the world. Specifically, in South Africa, a notoriously conservative country, it allowed people to access new sources of information and learn, especially in Astrid's case, about the world beyond Christianity.

I always thought it would be cool to be witch, but never thought that I could actually be one. You know, in the stories I heard growing up, it was always the witch who had power and who men were afraid of – I wanted that.

Astrid came across a blog one day that spoke specifically to divination and all its various forms. The reading of tea leaves (Tasseography), the stars (Astrology) as well as Tarot reading all appealed to her and she began to research it. Astrid joked that she could not believe that this was something someone could actually do. She became near on obsessed and spent most of her time online researching and reading. At the same time, Astrid began to feel very lonely and isolated. Once again, she became very angry. Whilst online one day, Astrid came across a blog that was run by a witch. This witch wrote that she had chosen to call herself this as it best described how she felt about her spiritual journey and how she related to the Universe

I didn't know you could do that! For so long I didn't know who or what I was but I just sort of realised it then – I was a witch! Or at least I was going to try to be.

Astrid had no shame about calling herself a witch and excitedly told her friends. They laughed at her and she did not take this well. She laments how anger was always her first reaction during this period in her life.

Nobody thought a white woman could be a witch. You know, the Church and its people are very quick to call you a witch but when you call yourself one? They send the men with white jackets. Isn't that strange?

In her mid-forties, Astrid decided to give her anger over to the Universe and felt as if she started becoming herself. She no longer sought to be only controversial and she pulled away

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<sup>53</sup> The Divine Feminine represents the connection to the part of your consciousness responsible for nurture, intuition, and empathy, regardless of your gender.

from some of her less supportive friends. Lonely, but content, Astrid began taking her lunch at odd hours and one day noticed a brightly dressed woman with a mane of curly grey and brown hair sitting at one of the tables in the building's canteen. Astrid knew she wanted to meet this woman but did not want to scare her off by being too overbearing too quickly. There was something about her that said 'different'. Over the following weeks, Astrid moved closer and closer to the woman and one day plucked up the courage to introduce herself. When she did, she was met with a very strange response from the woman,

Took you long enough! My name is Hazel<sup>54</sup>.

The women built their friendship quickly as each suspected the other was a bit 'weird'. It was Hazel who broached the topic first, about a year after they met. She told Astrid that she saw and heard things that were not of this world and that as of late there was a particular man she saw quite often. Astrid, wanting to be supportive, pressed her about this man. Hazel described an older man who was grumpy most of the time and would always demand to know where a woman was when he appeared. He would say "*Waar is sy?*" [Where is she?]. Hazel had no idea who he was making reference to and Astrid had not dealt with spirits much before, so she merely shrugged. Hazel went on to say that he was a bald man, about six foot, overweight and he had a birthmark on his head that looked a lot like the shape of Italy. Astrid said her blood ran cold.

That was my father she was describing. He died around the same time I met Hazel, but I never went to the funeral, I couldn't get leave. He had a heart attack. My mother and sisters were so angry. I tried to forget why they were angry. *Ja*, my father was really bad to me, but he was my father after all.

They realised that he was asking for Astrid every time he appeared to Hazel. Hazel resolved to tell the man the next time that she saw him that Astrid was with her and safe and happy. If he left, then it was most likely that it was Astrid's father looking for her. A few weeks later, Hazel did just that and he never returned.

It was definitely him [Astrid's father]. He probably wanted to say sorry. I could forgive him after that, hopefully he could forgive me too. He probably saw after death that there was a lot more in the cosmos than just the NG *Kerk*!

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<sup>54</sup> Hazel used her real name in the introduction, but I have altered it here.

That is when Hazel told Astrid that she was sure that she was a witch and that she had just met another witch. Astrid laughed and said that she was inclined to agree. It took some convincing, but one afternoon Hazel took Astrid to meet Freya and the three women decided to form a coven that day. Astrid no longer resents her father and has welcomed the female empowerment that has accompanied her journey into witchcraft. She states that she feels represented, important and powerful in this community. Having never settled down or had a family, she regards the coven as her family.

Due to Astrid spending most of her adult life on her own or only having to be responsible for herself, joining a coven was something that she was nervous about a first. Even though the three women got along instantly, and they all wanted to form a coven, Astrid admits to some trepidation on her part.

I just didn't know if it was going to work. People never stuck around for very long in my life, to no fault of their own, just bad timing, I think. But, *ja*. I was very sceptical of three aunties getting together and doing what? I didn't have a husband or children to talk to them about. I didn't travel all over like Hazel. But we figured it out. I just needed to get used to the idea of opening up.

Astrid settled into her role of "fortune teller" quite quickly when she found out that while the other two had been curious about Tarot and the Zodiac, much of it "went over [their] heads". Astrid had decided to start every Sunday meeting with a Tarot spread for both Freya and Hazel so that she could begin to teach them. As soon as they started to learn and gained the confidence to get their own decks and do their own spreads, Astrid started searching for other divining methods. She started reading tea leaves as well as palms and even tried her hand at scrying<sup>55</sup>. She made it clear though that she was not constantly looking into the future as many believe.

Everyone always wants to know if I know what is going to happen to them or if I can give them winning Lotto numbers – which, after ten years, is still not a funny joke. I use divination in order to better understand where I am right now in life. Where am I today and what does the Universe 'think' about that. Am I doing the right thing? Am I making the right decisions? And I have been called out by my cards. I'm sure

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<sup>55</sup> the practice of looking into a suitable medium (such as a mirror) in the hope of detecting significant messages or visions.

whoever reads this will think I'm crazy but it's true! You know you are doing the wrong thing and when you do a Tarot spread, they call you out on it!

Astrid does not live her life completely according to her divination but does say that sometimes she wished she had taken some of the messages more seriously. For instance, before her father's death, she asked her cards if she should try to reconcile with him and the message she got back was that she was going to let a decision made in anger rule her judgement. She never contacted her father before his death and did not get to say goodbye.

While I was conducting my research, Astrid had started to teach Freya how to read tea leaves. Freya said that because she dedicates so much effort to the teas that she makes, she would love to take full advantage of that energy and read the leaves as well. More often than not she does not really see what Astrid is trying to show her and Hazel usually ends up shouting from the patio "Is it a penis again?". Whereas before Astrid would have been angered by a comment like this, she now sees it as a good natured joke from a like-minded friend.

I just want to give them the same sight – and insight – that I have. It helps to know if the Universe is working with you or if it is trying to steer you off a path that may end up hurting you or your loved ones.

Astrid also vests much of her understanding of people and their actions in the Zodiac. When we first met, she did not speak to me much at first and after about an hour of chatting to the others she exclaimed, "A Virgo!", and we were fast friends after that. She is constantly working on charts and diagrams and jokes that she is a regular at the planetarium in Johannesburg. Astrid always travels with a backpack full of dog-eared books and notebooks ready to be filled with new Tarot spreads or charts and her pockets are filled with crystals and dried herbs from Freya. Astrid often wanders in and out of Freya's kitchen (which opens on to her patio) and will sit in the garden looking up at the moon and meditating. She particularly enjoys when we meet at night and she can really see the moon and practice her divination in its light.

She [the moon] really does help. It's just so calming to sit under her light and think about what you're doing. You're not changing the course of time; you're just trying to understand your tiny role in this huge cosmos a little better. Just trying to make sure you're reaching your potential. Just trying to see where you need to go.

Astrid fears the world outside of Freya's kitchen. She speaks at length about all the crime and corruption in South Africa and is very worried that she may lose her job because she is a white, Afrikaans-speaking woman. She looks to divination for how she can protect herself as well as ensure her own success. Around the time of the elections, she spoke endlessly about how something felt off, how she just knew that the state of South Africa was worsening and that she feared what would happen to her and "whites everywhere" if Julius Malema and the EFF won the election. One thing that seemed to have piqued her attention was the debate over recent farm murders in South Africa. This was always a controversial issue as Freya's brother is a farmer after inheriting their father's farm. Arguments between Astrid and Freya were common when farm murders were brought up. Astrid relied heavily on Facebook for news regarding this and would show Freya images of beaten and bruised farmers. Freya always brushed these off as old attacks being circulated in the hype or even falsified information.

Astrid views being a white person in South Africa not as particularly dangerous, but not something that is favourable either. She spoke to me about how she feels like an intruder and the more she learns about colonialism and what apartheid did to black South Africans, the more she feels as if she should "go back to where [she] came from". Where exactly this is, she is not really sure but insists that it is the Netherlands or "somewhere like that in Europe. Where the *boere* came from". Astrid is worried about her position at the law firm where she now works as a secretary. She is concerned that due to her age, she might be replaced by a young black woman. Astrid believes that as an unmarried woman who never had children, she is disposable – she has no children or grandchildren that she needs to provide for, and her employers know this. She believes that because she is only a mere four years away from turning sixty, she is perceived as old and on her way to becoming a burden.

I forget one file in my office or can't remember instantly how to do something on Excel and you see the looks that pass between those boys. They are worried I'm going to do something *dom* [dumb] and ruin a case or lose clients. There is extra pressure now – old and white. I'm worried.

## 6. *Trotse Tower Tannies [Proud, Enchanting Aunties]*

A concern of mine at the outset of this project was that I wanted to understand how witchcraft fits into the daily lives of three Afrikaans-speaking, white women. Due to the very specific political history of South Africa as well as how it was tangled with culture and language, I needed to figure out how these women interpreted their current positions in the country and if they used witchcraft to do this.

It is important to understand the historical trajectory of Afrikaans-speaking people in South Africa and how they interpret and negotiate their current position in the country. In order to understand Post-apartheid formations of Afrikaner nationalism, one must first inspect where Afrikaner nationalism came from and how this history has shaped white Afrikaner behaviours. British imperialists wrote of the Dutch settlers as ‘rural degenerates’ and by the late 1800’s, *the boers* became an “inferior or degraded class of colonist” (as quoted in van der Westhuizen, 2017, p. 26). This was due to their assumed proximity to nature and rural life. Stemming from this came white, English-speaking South Africans conceptions about ‘the Afrikaner’ as being uncultured, simple, and superstitious. These images have still not faded into history and have led to an “inferiority syndrome” that can be found in the Afrikaner population (van der Westhuizen, 2017, p. 27).

In an attempt to combat the aforementioned conceptualisation, a discourse centred on Afrikaner *volkstrots* [people’s pride] was initiated. This nationalist discourse reclaimed how Afrikaners had been portrayed as “unspoilt children of nature” (van der Westhuizen, 2017, p. 29). It transformed images of simple, ignorant, close to nature, and childlike, to markers of Afrikaner innocence, uncorrupted mentality and closeness to God. Afrikaner identity draws heavily on several interwoven discourses which are centred on religious, racial and cultural purity. When the National Party came to power in 1948, Afrikaners were placed at the core of South Africa’s policies and developments and it is well known that they enjoyed privilege for many years. When apartheid came to an end, Afrikaners were faced with an overwhelming existential crisis. Not only had they lost their grip on South African political power, but the fall from grace corroded much of what Afrikaans nationalism stood for. What was once a highly influential ethnocentric narrative was now left confused and with a lack of direction. Many Afrikaners were left with many questions regarding not only how to represent themselves but also how to relate to their new positions and the rest of the South African population. Afrikaner nationalism, apartheid, and Afrikaner identity were, for many years,



practically inseparable. Therefore, the fall of apartheid and the failure of Afrikaner nationalism represented an intense crisis for Afrikaner identity.

### Strength, Security and Sight

As can be seen in the preceding life history chapters, all three women have expressed concern about their current standings in the country, not only socially and how they may be perceived by others, but also concern over the security of their jobs. Each woman has in some way introduced witchcraft into her daily life in order to harness some control over the ever changing and fast paced world she finds herself in. This desire to have some kind of control over the world was explained by George Gmelch in his analysis of superstition in American baseball. He stated that superstition allows for a sense of control over what has been deemed uncontrollable, as well as creating meaning (Gmelch, 1992). While referring to the practice of witchcraft as superstition undermines the true power of witchcraft in the lives of the coven, it is useful to approach the use of magic in a sense of trying to control the uncontrollable.

Across many online platforms, it is often iterated that magic and witchcraft is about exerting ones will over the energies present in the world in order to illicit a desired outcome. It is not about physically altering the matter of an object or bringing something into being that was not necessarily there before, it is about how one can project intent. This is done, for example, in order to ensure that one may be viewed favourably to receive funding for a research project, or to reduce the chance of having an accident when driving to work. This is how many of the spells the women use are intended to work.

### Strength

Freya is primarily concerned with imbuing her kitchen magic (cooking) as well as her other daily magical practices with strength. She feels as though the country is at a particular crossroads where strength is of the utmost importance to any South African living within the borders. She is more often than not concerned about her physical security in her home as well as that of her neighbours. As has been expressed by her husband in her life history discussion, Freya has been teaching women in her neighbourhood how to make protection spell jars. There is an intense fear that because Freya stays in a wealthy neighbourhood in Pretoria that

she, her husband and her neighbours will become targets of crime. She would often watch her driveway for a while after I had arrived and would remark that one never knows who is out there watching how to get in. Freya was particularly disturbed by the men and women who would search through bins for recyclable materials on rubbish collection days. She would roll her eyes over a cup of tea and complain that they were more than likely “scouting” the neighbourhood for where they could break in. Freya also sought to strengthen herself rather than cast numerous protection spells over her home. She compared this to taking one multivitamin pill over several specific vitamin pills. This is where Freya spoke directly to her experience of being an Afrikaans woman. As mentioned earlier, Freya incorporates many ideas from *Boereraad* into her magic and argued that this is what makes her strong – the connection she makes to Afrikaner history.

Afrikaner nationalism heavily emphasised the role of the *Volksmoeder* – the mother of the nation. This was more of a social category than a biological one and oriented itself around the strength and paradoxically limited power of women<sup>56</sup>. The *Volksmoeder* image was forged in the crucible of the South African War when Afrikaans women and children were placed in concentration camps and had to be incredibly resilient in order to survive it. However, this image was later “muted and transformed” (McClintock, 1993, p. 72) and turned into one of a suffering, self-sacrificial and stoic mother. This dual position of strong, but gentle is one that Freya has taken to heart with regard to her specific practice of kitchen witchcraft. She has bound herself to the domestic sphere through how she has chosen to categorise and practice her magic but also uses it as something to empower herself. She serves both a martial role as a fighter (as a witch) but also as a lamenting mother. While the role of gender will be discussed in detail in relation to the analytical concept of *ordentlikheid* in the next chapter, it must be understood that Freya insists that her ability to traverse these two seemingly contradictory positions is due to her understanding of the history of Afrikaner women specifically. These were women who, according to Freya, needed to occupy these two positions because of the harsh conditions they faced as colonisers and as colonised (by the British). They passed on to their daughters the capacity to both protect and be protected. Freya explained this to me using her home as an example of this,

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<sup>56</sup> Women were charged with raising children and teaching them values that were emphasised by nationalism. While women appeared to have a very important role, this was only within the limits of the domestic sphere (McClintock, 1993).

This house and everything in it is mine. My world. But out there, I don't want to face that alone. I need my husband then.

Freya immediately went on to say that it is not as if she belongs to her husband and refers to these ideas of male domination as a stereotypical "old-style Afrikaner belief". This is indicative that Freya is still subject to the Afrikaner nationalist ideals that were discussed earlier, but she is now approaching them from a new point of view. 'Old-style Afrikaner belief' was an interesting concept and it was one that all three women had strong opinions on, especially Freya and Hazel. One 'old-style' practice that Freya keeps alive in her kitchen is that of *Boereraad*. *Boereraad*, as mentioned above, can be understood as Afrikaans folk medicines or home remedies that were especially in vogue when doctors and pharmacies were scarce and far away. There appears to be a resurgence in interest as can be evidenced by the sheer amount of growth *Boereraad*-Facebook groups have enjoyed and the amount of people posting daily on them. Freya believes that *Boereraad* has always been a form of magic but because of the very specific history that surrounded magic and witchcraft in South Africa (such as the one discussed in the *Ritual Readings* chapter) white Afrikaans-speakers did not want to associate themselves with that narrative. By linking her practices to such an old tradition, she lends it some authority in that it has such a strong historical grounding. European witches have done the same with the Burning Times (Purkiss, 1996). The strong historical narrative that sees power and knowledge being passed through matrilineal lines lends itself to the power of the modern-day witch.

### Security

Hazel is one who particularly entertains notions of generational inheritance of power and knowledge. As her life history has shown, Hazel believes that her power comes from her *Boer* ancestors that were cursed by a group of native black South Africans. This curse not only bereaved her of the ability to have children, but also cursed her with visions of the deceased<sup>57</sup>. The externalisation of blame to a historical racial Other by Hazel's family can be viewed as a function of anxiety and honours how Evans-Pritchard (1976) had categorised witchcraft as being used to explain misfortune and adheres to the popular anti-social perception that often accompanies tales of witchcraft. This would also act much like a myth

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<sup>57</sup> Effecting a spell that could curse generations of family would require a lot of energy and power and speaks volumes to the way in which Hazel as well as her family view black South Africans and their relationship with witchcraft. While this aspect is not the focus of this research it is worth nothing here for possible future avenues of enquiry.

of origin in the way that Purkiss (1996) categorised the Burning Times acting as a myth of origin for female subjugation and suffering. Purkiss (1996) states that it is not the historical truth that is important in a myth of origin, but it is the mythic significance that is. The myth must have clear oppositions in that everyone should be able to tell who is innocent and who is guilty. It offers an explanation of paradise lost – a narrative of how perfect life *could* have been. Hazel’s family taught her this narrative and how they had suffered at the hands of black South Africans<sup>58</sup>. This kind of story-telling was at the heart of Afrikaner nationalism too and in fact honours their representations of Afrikaners as “unspoilt children of nature” (van der Westhuizen, 2017, p. 29). Hazel’s ancestors were pure and Godly, until they crossed paths with the racial Other and became spoilt. This can be understood through the model Mary Douglas used in *Purity and Danger* where matter out of place is regarded as a potential source of pollution. Afrikaner nationalism was born – amongst other things - out of this fear of pollution and apartheid subsequently followed.

However, it appears as if Hazel no longer holds the view that her ability to perceive the spirits of the deceased is purely a curse. Through learning witchcraft and new ways of interpreting the world around her, Hazel has come to the conclusion that the curse was only meant to inflict malice on that particular generation of her family. She believes that it is due to matrilineal inheritance that the curse was carried over the generations to her<sup>59</sup>. She has since turned what was a curse, into a skill that she could use in her daily craft and life.

This act of redefining how this phenomenon functions in her life and then using it in her daily witchcraft practices is an act of agency that ultimately empowers her. This agency exists within the constraints of the coven and her family, but it is free within these constraints. These constraints may ultimately be linked to the way in which *ordentlikheid* inhibits Afrikaans women’s behaviour and this will be elaborated upon in the next chapter. The agency that Hazel has over the curse and its power has allowed her to use it for her own spiritual as well as physical protection. Hazel regularly communes with spirit guides<sup>60</sup> who endeavour to keep her safe while she engages with the spirit world. She also invokes them to protect her in her daily life but tends to rely more on her witchcraft practices for this kind of

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<sup>58</sup> Similar thinking and mythical significance was applied to the narrative of the Voortrekker struggle against Dingaan’s Zulu warriors and how Dingaan betrayed the Afrikaners by attacking them after they had negotiated peace.

<sup>59</sup> This is another myth of origin that Purkiss (1996) that centres on the themes of mother-daughter learning acting as a source of knowledge and power in witchcraft.

<sup>60</sup> A spirit guide is an entity that remains as a disincarnate spirit to act as a guide or protector to a living human being.

protection. Like Freya, she makes many spell jars and designs sigils that are aimed at protecting her and ensuring her security.

## Sight

Astrid also seeks security, but more so she seeks sight in the sense of she wants to see what lays in her future and how she can best protect herself. Astrid seeks to have this sight because she greatly fears not only her future, but the future of South Africa. As mentioned in her life history, farm murders and the imagined white genocide in South Africa is one of the great causes of her fear. The imagined white genocide in South Africa is an idea that gained a lot of traction during 2016 and piqued during 2017 (Villet, 2017). It alleges that there is a planned genocide (by the ANC and black South Africans in general) being carried out against white South Africans, especially Afrikaners. While numerous sources have demonstrated that farm attacks have actually been decreasing since their peak in 2001/2002 (Villet, 2017), proponents of the white genocide theory have mobilised on social media to spread ‘awareness’ and have even reached out to United States President Donald Trump for help<sup>61</sup>.

Astrid’s imagination has been captured by this narrative of white victimhood and has even motivated her to investigate whether or not she can go back to Europe – more specifically the Netherlands where she believes her family originates<sup>62</sup>. She asserts that she wants to go back to Europe because “it is the right thing to do”, but Freya told me that she believed it was because Astrid was afraid that she would become a victim of a racially motivated crime. There is a significant and ongoing conversation online around the idea of white people falling victim to the ‘onslaught’ of revenge from those they historically oppressed and this is a conversation that Astrid is exposed to everyday when she is on social media. Due to the fact that Astrid is spending time online to learn about witchcraft, she is exposed to all kinds of ‘fake news’ and white nationalism amidst her browsing<sup>63</sup>.

Astrid uses her craft to protect herself from that which causes fear and anxiety in her life.

Astrid has, in much the same way as Hazel’s family had, made black South Africans a racial

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<sup>61</sup> In August 2018, United States President Donald Trump greatly publicised the ‘white genocide’ in South Africa and significantly furthered its reach into mainstream media discourse after he publicly instructed his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to investigate South African farm attacks (Touchberry, 2018)

<sup>62</sup> She told me on more than one occasion that this is most likely where her family originated before they moved to South Africa.

<sup>63</sup> Whenever I asked Astrid about what she had read online about farm attacks, more often than not it was a shared status she had read on Facebook or a personal blog link she had found on Twitter. She often mistook these for legitimate news sources.

Other that threatens her safety and security. Astrid also perceives a threat to her economic stability. Due to her being, in her own words, an “old Afrikaans tannie”, she is convinced that her boss is looking for a way to fire her and replace her with a young black woman “for BEE points”. Astrid’s circumstances and the way in which she negotiates them can be seen to fit into classical anthropological explanations of a perceivable increase in spiritual insecurity resulting from an increase in economic inequality (Ashforth, 2005). However, the economic inequality in this case is imagined in that it is caused by a belief in false reporting on white genocide and the anxiety that accompanies it. This does not mean that it is not absolutely real to Astrid though. This perception affects how she interacts with both humans and non-human actors that shape her negotiation of the world that she lives in. Her craft correlates with the spiritual insecurity in the aforementioned statement in that when she perceived a threat to her economic stability, she turned ever more to her craft and used magic to ensure that she would not lose her job.

## Conclusion

An analysis of each woman’s life history has yielded the opportunity to start to unpack the complex ways in which they use their craft. What has been notable in this chapter is how they used it to negotiate not only how they relate to their race and the culture that they were raised in, but also with regard to their positions as white Afrikaans-speaking women in South Africa. There is a clear emphasis on myth – whether it is their own or larger narratives that they have learnt from the greater online community – and this is exceptionally important as it reinforces not only their bond but their group identity. Myth acts as a kind of social glue that unites the coven and connects them to a greater historical narrative which in turn grants them more power in their witchcraft.

The women have used their craft to protect themselves in what they perceive to be threatened positions in South Africa. Witchcraft enables these three white Afrikaans-speaking women to negotiate the anxiety that has accompanied the political and economic changes that have been taking place in South Africa, which they experience from positions that have been structured by an Afrikaner, patriarchal worldview. Their gendered positionality – that of white, heterosexual women – is constantly being acted upon by the changing social and political forces. They have also sought to extend their protection and abilities beyond themselves to

their loved ones who, according to the women, are in as much need as themselves. It is abundantly clear that their practices are not ahistorical nor apolitical and they must be understood within the context they are being used. They have reinterpreted their own Afrikaans history and have found a way to relate to it that makes sense for the spiritual journey that they are on. These women are also constantly engaged in a process of becoming. As their world changes around them, so must their witchcraft and this is why it was so important to have an ontological approach to this project. The non-human actors that they interact with become actors of consequence in their worlds and they must negotiate their being in accordance with changes they perceive or experience. Being Afrikaans was something that each woman emphasised, and they are using witchcraft to connect to their culture and history in a new way that enables them to feel safe and in control.

During this chapter as well as the preceding life history chapters, it became apparent that there are many symbolic points of analysis as well as structural binaries that underpin much of their practices. These will be discussed concurrently in the following chapter as many of the binaries that will be highlighted are themselves symbolic and behave this kind of analysis.

## 7. She is a Force of Nature

The impact of mother tongue has been notable, but what of Mother Nature? The previous chapter highlighted how Afrikaner nationalism, its demise as well as its legacy have led to anxiety in the women's lives. In order to overcome this anxiety, the women have employed witchcraft as their main means of protecting themselves as well as ensuring their prosperity. Their gender is critical to this discussion and will be explored in more detail in this chapter.

While working through interviews and field notes, it became apparent that there were two large binary oppositions at play within the coven. This was male and female as well as nature and culture. Each concept within these binaries was symbolically significant and I found that much of their respective meanings were woven together. It is for this reason that I have chosen to discuss these symbolic meanings and binaries concurrently in this chapter.

Claude Levi-Strauss (2001) wrote that people have the need to classify in order to impose order on aspects of nature, people's relationships with nature, as well as relationships between people. Levi-Strauss argued that a universal aspect of classification is opposition or contrast. Furthermore, he discovered that one of the most common means of classifying is by using binary opposition, such as good and evil, black and white, young and old, female and male. This kind of analysis is helpful in understanding how societies experience tension in certain social contexts. However, it can lead one into making grand claims about how such tensions can construct universal laws. In response to this, Clifford Geertz's (1973) 'thick description' can potentially combat the aforementioned problem as it relates concepts and tensions to a specific society and seeks to understand their meaning in a unique context. As has been iterated in the introductory chapter, I do not wish to espouse a grand theory of how all Afrikaans-speaking witches may relate to the world around them and by combining the two approaches of these anthropologists, I can inspect how larger binaries function within the coven without implying that they may be universal laws.

Using the above, I found that some of the symbols that I had come across formed binaries during the ongoing discussion with the women. One such set was that of herbs and guns. These everyday items took on new symbolic meaning when they were used in a certain way within the context of the coven. Geertz (1973) insists that the ethnographer must be able to explain the context in which words or things are used within a particular group and how these gain new symbolic meanings. It was only after I enacted his other theory of 'deep hanging



out' (Geertz, 1998) that I was able to understand the symbolic nature of herbs and guns. To the uninitiated, a gun is much more powerful than a sprig of rosemary, as it is clearly capable of killing while rosemary is capable only of elevating the roast potato dish in a Sunday lunch. The women characterised the gun as being a symbolic representation for men and dominion on earth. Guns are highly removed from nature and carry with them only the ability to destroy and are associated with anger, authority and aggression. Guns are the antithesis to the female body – she creates life and guns take it away. It can be argued that in this respect Freya, Hazel, and Astrid attached themselves to herbs in terms of this binary. 'Herbs' meant much more than rosemary or sage – it referred to nature at large. Herbs are symbolic of the raw power that Mother Earth has and how she offers it to witches in order to protect and empower them. A gun in this sense is only one-dimensional, where a witch, harnessing nature, can use this power to protect herself and manipulate energies and turn outcomes in her favour. Hazel remarked one afternoon when Freya's husband had come home from hunting that guns were "great for killing a buck but couldn't do much against a spirit".

The way that guns and herbs have been categorised above is indicative of the attitudes that coven members displayed towards nature and power. Where others would view nature as something that is fragile and must be bent to their will, the coven considered nature, and those women who harness its powers, a force to be reckoned with.

*"It's not in our nature to be *ordentlik*"*

The issue of gender was brought up at my very first meeting with the coven. They spoke at great length about the *Malleus Maleficarum* and how they viewed it as singling women out and initiating a violent attack on them. This segued into a discussion regarding the Burning Times and how many witches view it as a deliberate attack by 'The Church'<sup>64</sup> on the mounting importance of women in society. Astrid explained that women were healers and midwives in the 15<sup>th</sup> century who had knowledge that men did not and that this in turn threatened men's position and power in society. Also, due to the advent of global capitalism and its affinity with the patriarchy, women were being increasingly marginalised. The

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<sup>64</sup> In many of my meetings, the coven would refer to 'The Church' without really explaining which church or denomination of Christianity they referred to. After some discussion they clarified that they meant Christianity in general. This is a very broad generalisation that proved difficult to work with, but I did not want to alter their words or force my own need for specificity in this regard.

accusations of witchcraft levelled against women were borne out of a male desire to destabilise rising female power. She also said that she read that it was the testimony of many male doctors that sent female healers to the pyre. Freya added that women were viewed with suspicion because they outlived men even though they were ‘supposed’ to be more frail. She surmised that this was most likely because they were confined to the home and did not interact much with disease and war. Hazel also argued that the witch hunts were highly profitable for courts, lawyers and judges. During trials, people had to be paid for bookkeeping, seizing and escorting the accused, holding them in a cell, as well as feeding them. She also added that the accused’s property and assets were seized by the courts.

Whether or not any of the abovementioned issues are strictly historically accurate is not of importance here. What is important is that they believe it to be true and it in turn informs how they relate to the history that they have attached themselves to<sup>65</sup>. A lot of emphasis was placed on gender during my initial meetings with the coven. They were sympathetic to men who are witches<sup>66</sup>, but stated that they believed witchcraft was something that came more naturally to women. They argued that this is due to matrilineal inheritance of knowledge and power as well as the social group memory that women experience. Not much more was ever discussed about male witches and these kinds of conversations that were focussed on gender tended to take the shape of an ‘us versus them’ binary. Men were generally represented as an oppressive force that had to be overcome. Freya spoke to me about this one day when her husband was away on a hunting trip,

He is a good man; he swallowed a bitter pill when I chose this path. I know he doesn’t like it. It is just not what is expected of a good Afrikaans wife. I’m supposed to be making *vetkoek* for the church and *ja* and amen everything he says. I just can’t do it. Sorry, not me.

I brought up the idea of a ‘good Afrikaans wife’ with Hazel and Astrid because neither of them had ever been married and they agreed with Freya. Both Hazel and Astrid said that because they had been anything but ‘*ordentlik*’ their entire lives, they were never in a position to become a good Afrikaans wife. They had, in essence, ‘spoiled’ their chances but were not particularly perturbed by this.

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<sup>65</sup> By virtue of being women, they are subject to social group memory (as discussed in *Ritual Readings*) and this is how they attach themselves to this historical narrative.

<sup>66</sup> There is talk on Tumblr and Reddit that the term ‘witch’ be treated as a gender neutral, but it seems as if there is still some resistance to this by some in the community.

The ethnicised respectability (being *ordentlik*) that each woman had often referred to, such as being a ‘good Afrikaans wife’, could in fact be seen as a symbolic function of the gender binary that they find themselves tangled in. By viewing this meaning making process in this way, I was able to take what would have otherwise been a very broad tool of analysis (binary oppositions) and make it highly specific to the context that they lived and practiced witchcraft within. The male and female binary is one that immediately spoke to the paper *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* that Sherry Ortner (1974) had written. Ortner (1974, p. 67) states that “the secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet, within that universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of woman are extraordinarily diverse”. As I mentioned above, the specific cultural conception and symbolization of women in the context of our coven can partially be understood through the work of Christi van der Westhuizen and her writing on *ordentlikheid* (ethnicised respectability) among Afrikaans-speaking women. Ortner’s (1974) work provides a structural framework through which *ordentlikheid* can be understood as a highly localised and specific function of the gender binary that she explores.

### Good Afrikaans Women

Ortner (1974, p. 68) presents the aim of her paper as seeking to “expose the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women”. She explains that this logic is highly persuasive and that this is the cause for people’s continued subscription to it. She argues that part of this logic is genetic determinism<sup>67</sup>, but that one must extend an argument beyond it and see that universal female devaluation stems from the universal human condition. She argues that ‘woman’ is being identified with something that every culture devalues and is of a lower order than existence itself. Ortner (1974) states that it is only ‘nature’ in the most generalised, conceptual sense that fits this description. She goes on to say that in opposition to ‘nature’, ‘culture’ is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms and that in order to do so, it must bend and control the givens of ‘nature’. Given this distinction that can conceptually be drawn between ‘nature’ and

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<sup>67</sup> This argument chooses to focus on men being the naturally dominant sex due to them have ‘something’ genetically inherent that women in turn lack. It is this lacking that would make women naturally subordinate and in general satisfied with their position because it affords them protection and opportunities to maximise maternal pleasures (Ortner, 1974).

‘culture’<sup>68</sup>, one can postulate that the second-class status of women can be attributed to their symbolic association with nature. This is opposed to men, who are in turn associated with culture. Ortner (1974) posits that part of the reason for women being associated with nature is their natural procreative functions specific to their body, such as menstruation and pregnancy. Traditional social roles, such as raising children and other tasks associated with the domestic sphere, are imposed on women because of their bodies and its functions.

*Ordentlikheid*, when viewed as a specific cultural conception, demonstrates how Ortner’s large ideas and concepts can be observed on a more specific and smaller scale. Due to the position that women’s association with nature puts them in, they are bound to the domestic sphere and charged with maintaining Afrikaner families, manners and providing moral strength and care to the Afrikaner nation. Ortner’s (1974) examination of women’s association with nature and the control that is often exerted over them is supported by van der Westhuizen’s (2017) inquiry into how *ordentlikheid* polices Afrikaans-speaking women’s bodies and their behaviour. The separation of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ is a large universal fact to which *ordentlikheid* attaches. In doing so, it becomes an example of one of the “extraordinarily diverse” symbolisations that Ortner (1974, p. 68) claims can be found all over the world.

Sunday meetings were often punctuated with tales of not being ‘*ordentlike* Afrikaans women’. Over the course of my time with the women, it appeared as if *ordentlikheid* had little to absolutely no effect in their lives and that they were not even very worried about coming across as women who were not *ordentlik*. It is the way in which the women regard nature and womanhood which has in turn informed how they structure their lives around witchcraft. As Geertz (1973) has already illustrated, a group’s underlying ideological principles can only be exposed when the core symbols around which a group is organised can be understood. I found that there were many unspoken ways in which the women represented themselves as witches who were not *ordentlik*.

Our meetings that were held on Sunday mornings while the rest of the community were at church was one of the first deeply meaningful symbols that came to mind. It is the ultimate act of rebellion for these women and they are drawing a hard border between them and their former Christian lives. Our meetings could be seen to run parallel to Sunday church services.

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<sup>68</sup> Ortner (1974) does state that the categories of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are conceptual categories and that one can does not find a boundary between the two states of being in the actual world.

We too read from a ‘good book’ but our version was Freya’s *grimoire* which could be argued to stand in opposition to the Bible. This binary of Bible and *grimoire* is testament to the permanence Freya wants to evoke regarding her separation from the church and Christianity. She has put pen to paper and filled pages and pages throughout several notebooks about her craft, her personal power and her emancipation from male rule. Freya does not hide her *grimoire* and I have often come across it on her coffee table or open on her kitchen counter. It is a public statement, for all those that came into her home that she is her own woman and not controlled by anything – or anyone – other than the cycles of nature that she is tangled in. She does not have to say she is not *ordentlik*, she shows it at every chance she gets.

Similarly, Hazel and Astrid found ways to demonstrate that they were free from the constraints of *ordentlikheid* too. They wear brightly coloured clothing and jewellery that is either homemade or bought from witchcraft shops online. It is plain to see that they are different. They do not want to be confused for someone’s wife, they want people to look at them and know instantly that they are witches. Neither felt as if they did not ‘achieve’ femininity by not marrying or having children. The markers of a ‘good Afrikaans woman’ that *ordentlikheid* reinforces are largely ignored and quite casually at that. Geertz (1973, p. 14) states that ethnographers should not seek to “generalize across cases but to generalize within them” and that we should do this only when understanding where to situate these cases. He also advises that we should acknowledge that these cases are not static and are subject to change – but such is the nature of the witch. Always adapting and changing in her process of becoming.

Levi-Strauss’ (2001) writing on binary enabled the binaries present in the women’s life histories to be made plain – such as male and female, church and coven or good and evil. This in turn illustrates how those tensions associated with binary classification impact the women and how they choose to respond to it. Their connection to nature and how they use it to strengthen their bond with each other in turn informs the relationships they form with people outside of the coven. When Hazel explained how her connection to nature informs how she interacts with men, she demonstrated how binaries specifically function within the social context of the coven. Hazel said women have a unique and powerful connection to nature. Our bodies move with the seasons and phases of the moon. We are biologically designed to have access to a power and energy that lay and waited for us in nature – almost as if it was set aside specifically for women. Freya emphasised that men do not have this kind of connection and that is why they have to work harder on their witchcraft.

It appears as if essentially the same logical foundation that Ortner (1974) uses for her inquiry into the secondary status of women is being used here and instead of concluding that women's association with nature put them in an inferior position, it becomes something that empowers women over men. If Ortner's (1974) work is considered to be part of the second wave of feminism, then the coven's interpretation of what their connection means to them and the impact that it has on their magic is very much in line with how third wave feminism sought to open up for discussion the issues that the second wave had manifested (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000)<sup>69</sup>. The impact of this kind of thinking has had consequences for how *ordentlikheid* (does not) function in their lives. *Ordentlikheid* is a local, contextualised function of the nature and culture binary and requires the binary to be in effect in order for it to control Afrikaans-speaking women's bodies and behaviours. If the nature and culture binary and its respective gender associations are not structurally kept in place by Afrikaans-speaking women and men, then *ordentlikheid* has no social-structural arrangement to attach itself to. If this arrangement does not exist then women cannot be controlled nor be policed by *ordentlikheid*.

This structural rearrangement of such an influential binary helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the symbolic meaning of their actions and how even their smallest acts were loaded with meaning (Geertz, 1998). Their life histories demonstrated that tears were a powerful indicator of change in these women's lives. Tears were transformed from markers of female weakness and fear, into markers of strength and resilience that accompanied their very specific experiences of being Afrikaans-speaking women who had to separate from their church that did not support them. Their tears at the beginning of each of their stories signalled their fear and confusion. However, when they made the decision to break from their churches and call themselves witches, the tears they cried signalled their separation and start of a new spiritual journey. It was the beginning of their reinterpretation of who they were not only as witches, but Afrikaans-speaking women. The women also made a conscious choice to gather as a coven on a Sunday morning. Before becoming witches, their Sunday mornings were governed by *ordentlikheid* and all the behaviour and control that it entailed, but by choosing to now practice their craft on a Sunday morning they confirm not only their intolerance for *ordentlikheid* and all it represents, but also firmly establish their distance from 'The Church'

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<sup>69</sup> It remains a matter of debate whether the notion of first, second and third waves is a useful or accurate way of understanding the history of feminism, but I have chosen to use it here in order to clearly show the difference in how the coven has chosen to interpret the same ideas that Sherry Ortner has.

and the male associations they have made with it. They have established a new community and cycle that views womanhood and its association with nature as something strong and powerful. There has also been a new claim of authority made over the domestic sphere. Freya is especially active in this regard, due to her being a kitchen witch, but Hazel and Astrid are redefining what it means to be a woman in the home. The home is transformed from a marker of female domesticity and subjugation into a place where the women practice their craft, enact agency and have control over their surroundings.

## Conclusion

From what I have observed and learned – and continue to learn – from the coven, it is apparent that they subvert *ordentlikheid* and the behaviours that are expected of ‘good Afrikaans women’ by not allowing their connection to nature to weaken them, but to in fact empower them. Each member of the coven believes that their connection to nature gives them power that men could never have because of their established proximity to nature. If one considers that *ordentlikheid* symbolically supports the secondary status of women and the classic gender binary, then it has no control over women who do not subscribe to inherent biological and cultural weakness. The rearranging of a large and highly influential binary has allowed for engagement in a deeply symbolic meaning making process which has in turn seen coven members reinterpret their respective pasts. This has in turn fuelled their magic and power in the present day. While large conceptual categories such ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ cannot be separated as neatly as they have been in Ortner’s (1974) work, this way of thinking has proven to be very useful in finding a fruitful way of applying the work of van der Westhuizen (2017). Establishing a connection between these two works was something that I had initially doubted, but ultimately proved the only way to unpack very complex understandings of gender in a highly specific context.

## Conclusion

As has been iterated throughout the previous chapters, I have not attempted to espouse with this project a grand theory of how all Afrikaans-speaking witches interpret and act upon the worlds they find themselves a part of. Rather, I have attempted to demonstrate that large ideas and analytical concepts that often can lead one into making grand claims can be applied to a highly specific context fruitfully and without exaggerated claims. These large ideas clearly have an effect on people and by showing how smaller groups interact with and translate these ideas to their own specific contexts, we can gain insight as to how these ideas are drawn down into and function in the real lives of people on the ground.

I was presented with a lot of data while writing up and I chose to focus on very specific issues as I felt as if they were at the forefront of the meetings I had with the coven, the interviews I conducted with them as well as what I observed online. This is by no means a complete analysis and there is still much that can be said from just their life histories alone. Neither should the chapters presented throughout be considered separate from each other. There is overlap in discussion as the issues I have chosen to present are complex and entangled. Nor are they the totality of what can be said, and we have only begun to scratch the surface how white Afrikaans-speaking witches negotiate their craft in the context of the past and present.

Freya, Hazel and Astrid perceive themselves to occupy vulnerable positions in South Africa. Having grown up during the apartheid era, they have had to transition to a differently ordered and structured society that, while they supported and protested for it, did cause anxiety when they realised the extent of the changes and how it would impact their lives personally. Witchcraft enables these three white Afrikaans-speaking women to negotiate this anxiety extend their protection and abilities beyond themselves to their loved ones who, according to the women, are in as much need as themselves. The preceding chapters have shown that their practices are not ahistorical nor apolitical and they must be understood within the context they are being used. They have not only reinterpreted their Afrikaans history to find a way to relate to it to their own magical practices, but they have also attached themselves to a global and centuries old myth of female devaluation. The emphasis that they have placed on myth is exceptionally important as it reinforces not only their connection to the greater witchcraft community (online or in person) but also their group identity as a coven of witches.



Their subversion of *ordentlikheid* and the behaviours that are expected of ‘good Afrikaans women’ stems from their refusal to allow their connection to nature to weaken them. They perceive their gendered association to nature as something that in fact empowers them.

*Ordentlikheid* is a highly specific and localised symbolic support for the secondary status of women. It is fuelled by the gendered binary that positions women as support and nurturers to men. If this binary is not adhered to, then *ordentlikheid* has no impact as it has no larger idea to attach itself to in order to shape behaviour. Each woman has told a story that has shown how they have been able to engage in a deeply symbolic meaning making process that has seen them reinterpret their histories, gender and magical abilities.

Due to the impact that magic and witchcraft has – and continues to have – on coven members’ lives, my approach to this project has been to treat the witchcraft in these women’s lives as real because it has real effects in their lives and impacts the decisions they make. It is for this reason that I never sought to either prove or disprove their magic. I wanted to understand their realities and their experience of their world. In this regard I find myself in agreement with Jeanne Favret-Saada and the retrospective she wrote that I mentioned in *Witchcraft 101*. She states that the implicit ontology in anthropology allowed her to explore non-verbal, non-intentional and involuntary communication. Due to my willingness to accept the women’s teachings, I was able to learn so much not only about how they use witchcraft, but how they understand its role in their everchanging lives. These women are also constantly engaged in a process of becoming. As their world changes around them, so must their witchcraft and this is why it was so important to have a consciously ontological approach to this project. While I always approached this project with an ontologically oriented method in mind, I did need to remind myself of how non-human actors shape the worlds – both this and any beyond – they find themselves engaged in.

This project has only begun to explore the ways in which one can explore how Afrikaans-speaking witches negotiation of the past and present contexts that they find themselves exposed to. I hope to continue this project into a PhD as I feel that this warrants a lot more attention.

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