The expansion of Neopaganism and revival Witchcraft in North America during the last decade has brought about a renewed interest in ethnic forms of folk magic, and a corresponding proliferation of books and websites dedicated to the magical practices of various ethnic groups. Italian folk magic is among those which have received considerable attention. Raven Grimassi, Leo Martello and Lori Bruno are some of the more visible Italian-American Witches who have re-worked elements of ethnic folk magic into vibrant new traditions. The re-discovery (and recent re-publication) of Charles G. Leland's Aradia, or the Gospel of Witches (1890, 1990, 1998), about an alleged Tuscan witch cult in the late 1800s, has also sparked renewed interest in the possible Mediterranean roots of contemporary Witchcraft. Yet neither Leland's material nor emerging Italian-American Witchcraft traditions bear a strong resemblance to Italian folk magical practice as documented in the ethnographic record of the last 100 years. Italian-American Witchcraft or Stregheria traditions differ from Italian folk magical practice in several important ways: 1) Italian folk magic is not an organized or unified religion, but a varied set of beliefs and practices; 2) while it has deep historical roots, it is not a survival of an ancient religion, but an integral part of a rural peasant economy and way of life, highly syncretized with folk Catholicism; 3) knowledge of magical practices was at one time diffused throughout the rural population, rather than limited to a secret group of magical practitioners.

There is a rich body of ethnographic data on folk magical practices and beliefs from Italy, but for the most part Italian-American Witches have not drawn from this in re-creating their traditions. I believe this is mostly because outside a few works of ethnography and history (e.g. Falassi, 1980; Ginzburg, 1983, 1991), there is relatively little material on Italian folklore available to English readers. Many Italian-American Witches do not read Italian, and what little Italian scholarship is available in North America is often difficult to get outside university libraries. And, as I will demonstrate, the context of Italian folk magical practice differs considerably from that of contemporary Italian-American revival Witchcraft, so that materials are not always easily transferable from one system to another. In this article I hope to show English readers a glimpse of Italian folk belief and practice in their original cultural contexts, and to illustrate some of the ways that they differ from Stregheria, or Italian-American revival Witchcraft. Of course, any such attempt, especially in a short article, is bound to be limited in scope. Italian folklore scholarship spans over 100 years and 20 separate regions, each with its own dialects and cultures; this overview cannot pretend to be comprehensive. However, for those interested in Italian folk magic and popular religion, I hope I can provide a point of departure from which to evaluate existing sources and discover new ones.

My own interest in this topic stems from my personal background as well as my field experience. But although I grew up in Italy and the United States and maintain ongoing ties with Italy through frequent visits, I cannot make any claims to a family tradition of magical practice. Most of my knowledge of Italian folk magic comes from ethnographic research and fieldwork in Sardinia, an island off the western coast of Italy where I spent 18 months living in a highland community of sheep and goat pastoralists between 1986 and 1990 (Magliocco, 1993). I approach the study of folk magic from the perspective of my training in folklore and anthropology. I tend to look at the social and economic contexts of phenomena, and to interpret folk practices not only in light of their historical roots, but of their current cultural roles. I look for multiple documentation of the existence and meaning of a custom in order to confirm its widespread practice, rather than relying on a single informant's report. Consequently, my approach differs significantly from authors whose aims lie more in the direction of revival or revitalization.

I want to make very clear that my goal is not to authenticate or de-authenticate anyone's spiritual practice. Contemporary folklorists and anthropologists have recognized that authenticity is always a cultural construct
(Bendix, 1997; Handler and Linnekin, 1983): what is considered "authentic" is a result of how we construe our relationship to the past, and how we interpret that past in light of present concerns. Moreover, all traditions are perpetually in flux as their bearers constantly re-interpret and re-invent them with each individual performance. Revival and revitalization are part of the process of tradition, even when the result is different from the "original" practice itself. Thus all traditions are authentic, and the historicity of a tradition has nothing to do with its efficacy for any given group of people.

Stregheria, or Italian-American Witchcraft

While Leo Martello and Lori Bruno were among the first Italian-Americans to allude to their practice of Italian Witchcraft as a Pagan religion (Martello, 1973:7-14; 1975; Hopman and Bond, 1996:119-126), the real architect of Italian-American revival Witchcraft is Raven Grimassi. His works The Ways of the Strega (1995) and Hereditary Witchcraft (1999) lay out in detail a system of beliefs, rituals and practices which he claims are practiced by North American Witches of Italian descent, but which hearken back to the Old Religion which "survived relatively intact throughout Italy" (Grimassi, 1995:xiv). He accepts at face value Leland's story of Aradia as Diana's daughter and messenger on earth, seeing her as a 14th century revivalist of la Vecchia Religione (the Old Religion). Not content to simply pass on some Italian-American spells and folk practices, his intent is to "restore the original Tradition [sic] which Aradia had returned to the people" (1995:xviii)-that is, to recreate the ancient religion of the Etruscan and pre-Etruscan Italic peoples.

Much of what Grimassi presents is drawn from reliable historical or ethnographic sources: the deities of the ancient Etruscans (what little we know from later Roman texts), the importance of ancestor spirits in early Italic religion, the Inquisitorial reports of the society of Diana and the Benandanti as preserving aspects of pre-Christian belief, legends about the walnut tree of Benevento as the meeting place of witches, spells to turn away the evil eye—all these are a part of Italy's magical heritage. But Grimassi, like many other Neopagan authors, is not primarily interested in an ethnographic field study; instead he attempts to construct a coherent system that contemporary Pagans can adapt for their own magical practice. He presents Italian Witchcraft as consisting of three traditions: the northern Italian Fanarra and the central Italian Janarra and Tanarra (Ianara is one word for "witch" in the dialect of Campania; I could find no evidence of the words Tanarra or Fanarra in any dialect dictionary). One must wonder what happened to southern Italian traditions, especially since the largest percentage of Italian immigrants to North America came from the southern regions. Each is led by a Grimas, or leader (for the record, there is no such word in the most comprehensive dictionary of the Italian language; the closest is the adjective grimo, "wrinkled, wizened" or "poor, wretched" [Zingarelli-Zanichelli, 1977:777]), and organized into groves, or boschetti. The Italian tradition of North America descends from a branch of the Naples-based Tanarra tradition. Grimassi adds a great deal of 20th century Wiccan and magical materials to the folklore he presents, and ties it all together with dubious 19th century survivalist theories and New Age concepts such as reincarnation and self-actualization. To be fair, Grimassi never claims to be reproducing exactly what was practiced by Italian immigrants to North America; he admits Italian-American Witches "have adapted a few Wiccan elements into their ways" (1995:xviii), and acknowledges that he has expanded upon the traditions he learned from his Italian mother in order to restore the tradition to its original state (Grimassi, pers. comm., 1996). But in attempting to restore an ancient tradition, Grimassi has in fact created a new one: a potpourri of folklore, revised history, and contemporary magical practice that bears little resemblance to anything that was ever practiced in Italy, before or after the Inquisition. While it is not my intention to deconstruct Grimassi's Stregheria point by point, I will concentrate, for the purposes of this article, on several major features of his work which make Italian-American Stregheria incompatible with what we know about witchcraft, folk magic and belief in rural Italy from the ethnographic record.
Problems with the Concept of an Organized "Italian" Witchcraft

One of the problems with the idea of a unified organization of Italian Witches is that Italy as a national and cultural entity is a relatively recent construct. Until 1861, Italy as a nation did not exist at all. The peninsula was divided into a plethora of large and small fiefdoms interspersed with Church-owned territories. Communications and travel between the various regions of Italy were difficult at best due to the mountainous terrain and lack of roads. Centuries of incursions and domination by foreign political powers led to the development of very distinct regional cultures and dialects, such that a person from Palermo (Sicily) literally could not communicate with one from Torino (Piemonte). People could not always move freely about between regions because of the wars and political conflicts that divided them. The Italian peninsula could not be said to have anything resembling an integrated culture between the end of the Roman Empire (453CE) and the beginning of the 20th century, making the existence of a secret, organized Italian witch cult nearly impossible.

There was a certain conformity of beliefs about witches and folk magical practices, but on a fairly general level which also extended to other areas in Europe. It is more useful to look at the development of broad culture areas within which one can find a certain range of traits: northern Italy, comprising the regions along the Alps and the coastal Venezia-Giulia; central Italy, consisting of areas in Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, and the northern sections of Umbria and Lazio; and southern Italy, from Civitavecchia (just north of Rome) down to the tip of the boot, including the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. Of course, within these divisions, there exist even finer boundaries, so that each individual region, city, town and small village has its own unique dialect and folk culture. Italy is part of a broader geographic and cultural region encompassing the western Mediterranean; within this area, regional cultures form distinct clusters, so that for example Friuli, which borders on Austria and Slovenia and was long dominated by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, has more in common culturally with Austria and the Balkans than with many other Italian regions. It is no accident that the medieval Friulian folk beliefs about Benandanti documented by Carlo Ginzburg (1983) have analogues in Balkan folklore about calusari (Kligman, 1981). But these beliefs were confined to the area of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, and were not found in other regions of the peninsula. In the same way, we find in the tarantismo of Puglie and the argismo of Sardinia (both ecstatic dance therapies for the bites of venomous spiders) evidence of cultural similarities with the zar possession cults of the north African rim.

Thus Italy is by no means homogenous; each region is unique in dialect and culture, and within each region, there are multiple sub-dialects which are often mutually unintelligible. Just as an example, Sardinia, an island slightly smaller than the state of Indiana, has no less than three major dialects, only two of which are somewhat mutually intelligible, plus Catalan, which is spoken only in the town of Alghero and is completely unintelligible to speakers of any of the three major dialect groups. This makes the development of a unified Italian system of ritual magic, diffused through oral tradition on a popular level, unlikely before the 20th century; in fact, any generalizations about an "Italian" folk culture need to be treated with great caution.

The Survivalist Bias

Like Leland before them, Martello, Grimassi and other Italian revivalists have a tendency to see Italian folk practices as vestiges of ancient religions-either the Etruscan religion (in the case of Leland and Grimassi) or the Greek-influenced religion of the ancient Sikels, whom Martello eventually conflates with the Etruscans (Martello, 1975:144-155). Leland’s survivalism is understandable in a historical context. Late 19th century folklore scholarship was heavily influenced by evolutionist anthropological theories which saw all folklore as "survivals" of primitive practices and beliefs which were destined to disappear under the influence of modernization. But during the second half of the 20th century, anthropologists and folklorists rejected the
racist, ethnocentric theories of unilinear cultural evolution, which had spawned the notion of survivals, and began to document how traditional practices and beliefs changed in response to social transformation. The result was a new awareness of just how sensitive folklore is to any type of social change, and of how all beliefs and practices are products of unique interactions between individual performers and their audiences. More thorough historical research also began to unearth how many customs, which appeared to exist from time immemorial were in fact of rather recent invention (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

The trouble with seeing Italian folk practices as "survivals" of Neolithic or ancient Etruscan practices (besides the fact that relatively little is known about religion in these ancient periods) is that it ignores the many cultural changes which have swept Italy since the early Bronze Age, as well as folklore's extraordinary ability to adapt to cultural change. This is not to deny the historicity of many folk traditions. It is unquestionable that many contemporary customs have their roots in pre-Christian practices of great antiquity.

For example, the people of "Monteruju," the community in Sardinia where I did fieldwork, plant wheat or lentil seeds on Ash Wednesday and grow them in the dark until the Thursday before Easter, when the etiolated sprouts, known as sos sepulchos ("the buried ones"), are placed in brightly-decorated yogurt containers and carried to church. Folklorists recognize in this custom a version of a number of similar ancient circum-Mediterranean practices, from the "Gardens of Adonis" described by classical authors to the small sarcophagi filled with sprouts, which have been found in Egyptian pyramids. The adaptation of this practice to Easter is particularly appropriate, as Christ can be seen as just another dying and resurrecting god, much like Adonis or Osiris. But the difficulty with interpreting this practice only as a survival is that it does violence to the way practitioners perceive themselves. It is important to remember that practitioners think of themselves as Catholic. Monteruvians were furious when the local priest frowned on their Easter custom as a pagan vestige; as far as they were concerned, they were observing Easter with a very concrete symbol of Christ's death and resurrection. The folk practice is similar, but its meaning has changed through the centuries to reflect Christian mythology and values.

The survivalist bias allows revivalists to interpret many ordinary items of folklore as signs of Witchcraft, in the sense of "evidence of pre-Christian practice," and anyone who practices them as a Witch. Thus for example Leland sees the children's rhyme to attract fireflies in "The Conjuration of Meal" as "derived from witch-lore, in which the lucciola [firefly] is put under a glass and conjured to give by its light certain answers" (Leland, 1890/ 1990:107); Martello explains that the mano fica gesture was used by magicians to turn back spells (Martello, 1972:71); and Grimassi interprets the wearing of amulets such as the cimaruta as emblems of belonging to the vecchia religione. But according to this paradigm, most Italians would be considered Witches, a categorization they would vehemently deny.

Practices can easily change to adapt to new belief systems, as the Monteruvian example illustrates. This is not necessarily a sign that practitioners are "hiding" their true pagan beliefs. The presence of folk practices of historical depth does not equal acceptance of the belief systems in which they first existed. Of course, the survivalist interpretation is handy for contemporary Italian-American Pagans, who can find in just about any folk practice maintained in their family evidence of an ancient mystical religion, and who can then claim to be hereditary Witches.

The Influence of the Catholic Church

The ambivalent attitude of Italians towards the Catholic church is sometimes interpreted by revivalists as evidence that their relatives were hiding paganism under a veneer of Christianity. But while this might have in fact been the case in the Church's earliest years, intervening millennia ensured an almost complete penetration of Christian discourse into everyday life.
Before the emergence of the nation-state, the Roman Catholic church was the most important social institution uniting Italians. It permeated almost every aspect of the individual's life from the cradle to the grave, and divided the year cycle into spiritually significant times, which brought the entire community together. So powerful was its influence that nearly all traditional folk magic and healing has a Catholic veneer. In fact Grimassi gives a spell to St Anthony for reclaiming lost objects (1995:201) and another to Sts Peter and Blaise for blessing a holy stone (1999:56), both of which have many analogues in Italian and American folklore archives, attesting to their wide diffusion and popularity. In contrast, Leland's conjurations to Diana, which reproduce, in structure and feel, some Catholic folk prayers, seem to be unique.

Nonetheless, many Italians have historically had mixed feelings about the Catholic Church as an institution. The Church has traditionally been allied with the state and the elite classes, leading many non-elites to see it as collaborating in their economic and cultural oppression. Especially in rural areas, many people practiced folk Catholicism, a syncretic mixture of some pre-Christian elements with a dose of Catholic flavoring, while remaining relatively resistant to aspects of official doctrine, either due to a lack of understanding (until 1962, Masses were held in Latin, which the majority did not understand) or to skepticism about the Church's motives.

Italian folk Catholicism tends to be orthopractic rather than orthodox; relations with God, the Virgin Mary and the saints are quid-pro-quos, and punishment for violated contracts cut both ways. In this context, Leland's conjurations, which strike Pagans today as petulant, demanding and irreverent, are in fact well within the spirit of the tradition. When certain Sardinian villages suffered a drought, the patron saint's statue was brought out, decorated, and venerated until the rains came. But if the rains did not arrive, it was not uncommon for angry villagers to "punish" the saint by plunging its statue head first into the well. We see the same attitude towards divinity in many of the charms and conjurations in Leland's Aradia, which threaten Diana if she does not accede to the conjurer's demands. These attitudes, which reflected clientilistic social relationships in parts of Italy, are completely absent from the works of Martello and Grimassi, where a different, more synergetic attitude between seeker and deity are evident. This new outlook reflects important shifts in social structure and organization between Italy of the late 19th century and today's New Age culture, where an egalitarian spirit prevails even in relations of social inequality.

What of the claim that many practitioners of the vecchia religione hid under the eyes of priests by becoming priests themselves, or by becoming involved in Catholic organizations? Again, this is a slight distortion of what is still a common pattern. In my fieldwork I observed that some individuals were attracted to religiosity in whatever form it took, official or unofficial. These people often became involved in religious fraternities and sororities which maintained various calendar customs and saint's shrines, while at the same time running a lively practice in folk healing on the side. They did not see these practices as incompatible, since their cures all involved some sort of invocation to the saints, although they were well aware that the priest usually disapproved. Still, they did not see themselves as practicing a pre-Christian religion, but as good practicing Catholics who happened to do very sensible things of which the priest disapproved. Their disobedience of the priest did not trouble them overmuch; priests also disapproved of many other ordinary activities, such as drinking, celebration, the use of birth control and premarital sex, in which they also continued to engage. Anticlericalism has always been rife in Italy, especially among men; priests, as voluntarily celibate men with access to local women in the confessional, are objects of mistrust and derision, preserved in countless folk narratives, rhymes and songs.

We have seen how three flaws in the reasoning of Italian-American revival Witches often leads them to make dubious claims or interpretations about the origins of their practices. These include the projection of modern Italian national identity into the historical past; the uncritical interpretation of folklore as "survivals" from a pre-Christian era; and an oversimplification of the complex relationship between official and folk Catholicism.
which can lead to an erasure of Christian elements from popular belief and practice. But Italian culture has a rich body of folk magical beliefs and practices documented in the ethnographic record of the last 100 years. These are the kinds of practices and beliefs brought to North America by the Italian immigrants who arrived on our shores between 1890 and 1960, and which are likely to have survived in the families of contemporary Italian-American Neopagans. They form the basis of contemporary Italian-American revival Witchcraft.

The Context of Traditional Italian Folk Magical Practice

One of the difficulties with adapting folk materials to contemporary practice is that the socio-economic context and worldview of contemporary North American Pagans and Italian peasants are worlds apart. The motifs of self-actualization and fulfillment, the environmental bent, even the "harm none" ethic of contemporary revival Witchcraft are very different from the worldview of Italian peasants. Revivalist works tend to give a rather idealized picture of life in the Mediterranean, which differs markedly from the realities of Italian peasant life.

Italian folk magical practice is rooted in a worldview, which developed in small-scale, rural communities where life was difficult and precarious. Until after the second World War, the bulk of the Italian population resided mostly in small, agricultural towns and villages. They farmed, herded livestock, and, in coastal areas, fished; the majority were contadini, or peasants-sharecroppers who worked for the profit of their landlord. Rural conditions varied widely depending on the region, but for most contadini, living conditions were harsh. In the south, especially, the thin Mediterranean topsoil was depleted by centuries of exploitation. Many families barely eked out a living, and that was during a good year. Bad years, caused by ever-present droughts, brought famine; families had scarcely enough to eat and could not afford to give the landlord his share of the crops or livestock products. While some landlords insisted on payment, leaving their tenants to starve, many simply added the year's share to what was due for the following year. This system left most families perpetually in debt to the landowners. There was often no way out of this feudal arrangement: debts grew until they became impossible to pay off, and children inherited the debts of their parents and grandparents. Families lived clustered in small villages and towns, while the agricultural areas and pastures were scattered at some distance from the town center, requiring a daily commute. Small-town life meant intense social relations, which often became strained, leading to quarrels and feuds. Strong loyalty to the family became a survival strategy. Sicily, Campania and Calabria saw the emergence of secret societies such as the Mafia and the Camorra, which originally served to protect peasants against the depredations of greedy landlords. Households tended to be matrifocal, but socially, women remained under the control of their male relatives, and strict rules regarding chastity kept their movements circumscribed.

Before the unification of Italy, public education was non-existent; contadini were usually illiterate, and relied on oral tradition to maintain their folkways. This makes the transmission of a text such as Leland's Vangelo rather unlikely. Because medical doctors were rare and expensive until 1866, when government-funded physicians were stationed in every small town and hamlet, ordinary people relied on folk healers to cure their ailments and on local midwives to deliver their babies. These women often had extensive knowledge of herbs and their uses, and were able to alleviate a number of minor illnesses, although they could do nothing against the tuberculosis, malaria and Mediterranean anemia that were endemic in the population. Their knowledge was fragmentary and mixed with a good dose of popular magic and folk Catholicism, and death rates remained high. There was a sense that life was a precarious enterprise, full of dangers at every turn; magic was one of many protective strategies people employed to ensure their survival and that of their family members.

Against this background, most peasants maintained a magical view of the world. Their universe was an interconnected whole, and tweaking one part of the fabric was likely to bring about changes in another. Rural people were thoroughly familiar with their environment; each feature of the landscape had its own name and
legends. They knew well how to exploit it—where to cut wild beet greens in the spring before there were other vegetables to harvest, or where to find land snails to supplement their diet. They planted, harvested and butchered according to the phases of the moon and its position in the sky, believing that this affected the success of their enterprises, and therefore their ability to survive in harsh conditions (Cattabiani, 1988). The world was animated by a variety of local spirits, as well as by angels, demons and saints; these beings could be invoked to aid survival, but could also be dangerous at times. Invoking or appeasing these beings was not considered witchcraft, but common sense; it was not limited to a small group of people in a village, but was widely practiced.

The Folkloric Witch

It is nearly impossible to understand Italian folk magic without reference to the evil, malevolent witch, a figure revivalists attribute to distortions of the Inquisition. Yet belief in witchcraft—that is, that certain individuals, both male and female, had supernatural powers to heal or harm—was widespread in all regions of Italy. The witch has always been an ambiguous figure in the popular imagination. On one hand, the witch was essential as a healer and counter-hexer in a society that had little access to, and much distrust of, formal medicine. Yet witches were also feared for their supernatural powers and their reputed ability to do harm. Witches were therefore both real individuals living in communities and frightening supernatural figures, and these categories overlapped considerably in people's minds, sometimes giving rise to specific accusations of witchcraft.

It is clear that many activities attributed to witches were folkloric in nature—that is, no living member of any community, even traditional magic-workers, practiced them. Following Davies' recent work on witch belief in Britain (1999), I call these the province of the folkloric witch—the supernatural figure of legends and folktales. The word strega (plural streghes), from the Latin strix, "screech-owl," is often used in Italian to refer to the folkloric witch, and the word has ancient negative connotations. Pliny the Elder wrote about striges (plural of strix), women who could transform into birds of prey by means of magic, and who would fly at night looking for infants in their cradles to slaughter (Pliny the Elder, cited in Cattabiani, 1994:207-208). The strega therefore is not just a bogey created by the Inquisition, but a dangerous character with deep roots in Mediterranean folklore.

The folkloric witch appears predominantly in legends (accounts about supernatural events that were told as true) and folktales (purely fictional accounts set in a magical world). In Italian folklore she is usually female. Folkloric witches perform feats that are obviously supernatural: they can transform into animals (wolves, hares, lizards and cats are popular choices), fly through the night sky on the backs of animals, tangle people's hair in their sleep, steal milk from nursing mothers and livestock, suck blood from living beings, and torment their enemies by paralyzing them in their beds at night (DeMartino, 1966/83: 71; cf. Hufford, 1982). Folkloric witches' activities sometimes overlap with those of fairies and the dead: in Italian folklore, noisy night raids and circle-dancing in the cemetery or church square are attributed to all three.

Clearly, the folkloric witch is fictional; she represents an embodiment of rural peoples' worst fears, and her actions do not correspond to any real folk practices documented by ethnographers. Nevertheless, the presence of this character in Italian folklore from all regions indicates the ambivalent feelings villagers had towards those who practiced traditional magic and who just might be dangerous streghes.
Il Malocchio, or The Evil Eye, and its Relations

Streghe were especially feared for their powers to give the evil eye, or il malocchio. According to the distinguished ethnographer Ernesto De Martino, much of Italian folk magic and healing centers around the evil eye belief complex, a set of interrelated beliefs and practices focused around the idea that an individual can psychically harm another person through the gaze (De Martino, 1966/87:15). The evil eye belief complex encompassed a range of phenomena, from the often inadvertent malocchio (evil eye) to more intentional magical attacks, known as attaccatura ("attachment"), fascino or legatura ("binding"), and fattura ("fixing") (De Martino, 1966/87:15).

These latter terms graphically suggest the domination of the victim's body and mind by the attacker. One did not need to be a witch to give the evil eye, as it could happen accidentally; but trafficking in the more complex forms of ritual magic necessary to bind or fix another involved greater magical knowledge and intent, and was often attributed to witches and folk healers.

The evil eye belief complex is one of the most widespread in the world, spanning the area from the western Mediterranean to North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. According to most scholarship (De Martino, 1966/1987; Dundes, 1980), the evil eye is the envious eye. The harsh economic conditions under which most peasants struggled gave rise to a worldview of "limited good" (Foster, 1965) in which the good in the world (fertility, prosperity, etc.) was thought to exist only in limited quantity. Therefore, whatever good one had was at the expense of one's neighbor, and vice versa. In the dry Mediterranean climate, good was often associated with moisture: wetness meant fertility, while dryness signified barrenness. In Roman slang, the expression non mi seccare [le palle], literally "don't dry up my testicles," or "don't annoy me," is a current reflection of this underlying system of binary oppositions. Similarly, the Roman slang expression rimanerci secco/a, "to dry up of it," is a euphemism for dying. This symbolic system extended to the human body: youth was relatively "wet," while old age was "dry," and bodily fluids such as semen, milk and blood were symbols of the capacity to reproduce and nurture. Those in a condition of "wetness," or fecundity, were particularly vulnerable to the envious looks of strangers because they had what others did not. Newborn babies, young livestock, new brides, pregnant women and nursing mothers were thought to be especially susceptible. Conversely, those who had cause to feel envy were thought to be able to give the evil eye. In Naples, priests -- men who had renounced sexuality and fatherhood -- and hunchbacked women, who suffered from a disability that perhaps had made them less than desirable marriage partners, were avoided because they were believed to be intrinsic casters of the evil eye, or jettatori in Neapolitan.

The evil eye need not be intentionally given; in many regions, people believe that it can be given accidentally just by admiring something. When I was in the field, I was cautioned never to express admiration for any living thing -- a child, a lamb, even a houseplant! -- without taking pains to remove any evil eye I might have inadvertently placed upon it by touching it and saying che Dio lo/la benedica, "may God bless him/her/it." The evil eye can also be avoided by ritually spitting (no saliva is ejected, but a "p" sound is made three times with the lips) after admiring something, symbolically demonstrating one's possession of surplus bodily fluids to avert the drying powers of envy.

There are literally thousands of spells to turn back the evil eye in Italian folklore; in fact, many of Leland's scongiurazioni to Diana are in fact spells against the malocchio. Grimassi gives two in Ways of the Strega (1995:200-201) and another in Hereditary Witchcraft (1999:56-57). Many cures for the evil eye, appropriately enough, involve water: typically, some matter (wheat seeds, salt, oil, or molten lead) is dropped into a bowl of water and the resulting shapes are interpreted to see whether an "eye" forms. This diagnosis is often the cure as well, although some cures also involve prayers. Often, mothers and grandmothers knew how to resolve
simple cases of the evil eye at home, since children were always falling prey to this folk ailment. More complicated cases require the intervention of a folk healer or specialist. It was far preferable to prevent the evil eye in the first place by using amulets, and folk magical practice throughout Italy, from ancient times forward, is rife with these devices.

Amulets and Protective Devices

It is profoundly ironic that Italian-American Witchcraft revivalists, beginning with Martello, interpret amulets against the evil eye as emblems of belonging to the witch cult, when in practice they are intended to repel witches. Amulets are very common in Italian folklore, and knowledge of their use is neither secret nor limited to a group of practitioners of the old religion.

Since the evil eye is fundamentally about the lack of fecundity, it should not be surprising that some of the oldest amulets against it are symbols of fertility and regeneration. The most obvious of these is the phallus. The phallus was a common motif in Roman art and sculpture, where its purpose was to bring good luck. This custom has persisted in charms and amulets found throughout Italy well into the 20th century. It is most often carved in coral, but can also be made of other materials, and is hung on a charm worn around the neck. Phallic symbols such as fish, roosters, daggers, snakes and keys are also commonly found on protective amulets. Many of these are also euphemisms for the penis in folk speech (e.g. il pesce, "the fish"; l'uccello, "the bird"; and chiavare, "to key', to screw").

The horn or corno is a closely related symbol. It represents the sexual potency of the mature male herd animal, usually the goat or ram. Horn amulets in bronze and bone, identical in shape to contemporary ones, have been found in numerous Etruscan and Roman-era tombs, attesting to its continuous presence since very ancient times (Bellucci, 1983:50). Mediterranean coral, because of its blood-red color, has long been associated with potency and good fortune; horn-shaped amulets were often made of this material, a tradition which continues today. The cheap red plastic horns from souvenir stands that hang ubiquitously from the rear-view mirrors of Italian cars are the modern-day versions of the older coral horns, although they have now become general good luck charms or, in North America, symbols of ethnic pride (Malpezzi and Clements, 1992:121).

The mano fica, a fist with the thumb caught between the bent first and second fingers, is another common symbol found in amulets against the evil eye. The gesture represents the phallus inside the female genitalia (fica), a graphic opposition to the power of the evil eye. Martello alone among the revivalists mentions this gesture. Like the phallus, it can be made of coral, silver, tin, plastic and other materials, and is worn as a charm around the neck, on a bracelet or keychain, or, today, hung on the rear view mirror of a car. The mano cornuta or horned hand -- a fist with the first and little fingers extended -- has long been used as a gesture to avert the evil eye, usually with the fingers pointing upwards and the hand waving side to side. This symbol needs to be deployed with care as it has other meanings, however. Jabbed towards another with the fingers pointing at them, this gesture is a powerful insult meaning "cuckold." I have personally seen a driver leap out of his truck and physically assault another driver who had made le corna (the horns) at him, such was the challenge he felt to his masculinity.

The naturally branching shape of coral lent itself to the creation of multi-pronged amulets. Rare today, these were more common in the 18th and 19th centuries. Since according to the logic of magic, more is always better, each branch of the small coral charms was carved with a different protective symbol. Perhaps it is from these multi-pronged coral charms, as well as from an attempt to craft a likeness of the rue flower, that the multi-branched cimaruta evolved. Cimaruta means "top of the rue [plant]"; these amulets, usually made of
silver or tin, had a different symbol on the tip of each branch. These might include phalli, horns, solar disks and crescent moons (symbols of fertility and increase), fish (a symbol of Christ, but also a euphemistic term for the phallus), a key (to protect against epilepsy, but also a phallic symbol), the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and numerous others. Such charms were generally worn under clothing, and were meant to protect from witchcraft, not to identify magical practitioners as Grimassi claims.

Ruta graveolens or rue, a medicinal herb native to the Mediterranean with emmenagogue and abortifacient properties (Stuart, 1979:256-57), was used by folk healers to treat colic, stomach ailments and skin eruptions. It was so beneficial that it was believed to protect against witchcraft and the evil eye as well. Rue was often combined with lavender in brevi, small packets or bags made of fabric and worn around the neck next to the skin. Mothers often made these for their children. In addition to the beneficial herbs, they might contain garlic, salt, apotropaic stones, prayers, saint's images, ashes from sacred fires (for example, the burned remains of palm fronds and olive branches from Palm Sunday), flowers grown near churches, and of course amulets such as those described above (Di Nola, 1993:14-15). They may be related to the bullae Roman mothers hung around their children's necks (Di Nola, 1993:15), which often contained phallic objects. Grimassi's "Nenta Bag" seems to be a rendition of this tradition in a Neopagan context (Grimassi, 1995:102-103).

In Aradia, Leland includes a conjuration for a holy stone (1890/1990:21) which Grimassi reproduces almost verbatim in Hereditary Witchcraft (1999:55-56). In fact, a number of naturally-occurring stones and found objects were thought to have apotropaic qualities, and were carried in the pocket as protection or incorporated into other amulets. For example, arrow or spear points from paleolithic sites, known as pietre della saetta, were believed to be the physical manifestations of lightning, and to be both the cause of and a form of protection against strokes (Bellucci, 1983:80-85). In some areas of southern Italy, women would find round or kidney-shaped stones of iron-rich clay that rattled from the loose minerals trapped inside. Through sympathetic magic, these became known as pietre della gravidanza, or pregnancy stones, and were believed to protect pregnant women and allow them to successfully carry to term (Bellucci, 1983:92). Pietre del sangue, or bloodstones, were red-spotted jasper thought to stop bleeding if applied to a wound (Bellucci, 1983:87), while pietre stregonie (witch stones) or pietre stellari (star stones), polyporic pebbles whose tiny spots were popularly interpreted as "stars," were thought to protect against witchcraft. These stones were sometimes carved into cross-shaped amulets and combined with figures of Christian saints, the Virgin Mary or Jesus to enhance their powers (Bellucci, 1983:100). Holly (Ilex aquifolium) was known as legno stregonio (witch wood), and was carved into crosses for protection against witchcraft. Once again, rather than being evidence of being a witch, carrying such objects was evidence of belief in the evil powers of folkloric witches.

Witchcraft as Folk Healing

At one time, many villages had a number of folk healers who could cure a variety of illnesses. They ranged from those who cured with herbs, magic formulas and prayers to professional sorcerers who were called in serious cases of magical attack. In practice, however, these practitioners overlapped, since almost any illness could be judged to be the result of a magical working. Folk healers seldom referred to themselves as streghe (although their neighbors might call them such), but as fattuccchiere, "fixers," maghi (masculine plural; singular mago), maghe (feminine plural; sing. maga), "magic-workers." This latter term has nothing to do with the Latin word imago, "image," but derives from the Latin magus, ultimately from the Persian magush, "magic worker, mage" (Zingarelli 1970:993). In Sardinia they are simply known as praticos ("knowledgeable ones," akin to the English "cunning-folk"). Most inherit their craft from a relative, although occasionally a healer will acquire power directly from a saint. This was the case of an old woman in Castellammare di Stabia (Campania), who in the 1970s told a folklorist how she obtained her healing powers as a child by falling into a deep trance.
Her parents believed her dead, but St Rita "touched her mouth, bestowing power onto her" (Di Nola, 1993:40; my translation), and she miraculously recovered. Another folk healer from central Sardinia told a researcher that one could acquire magic powers by going to a sacred place (a cemetery or church) and receiving su sinzale (a sign), although the nature of the sign was not specified (Selis, 1978:139).

Some folk healers worked in a state of trance. DeMartino movingly describes how one such healer diagnosed and treated supernatural illness:

During the course of her recitation [of the prayer], the healer immerses herself in a controlled dream-like state, and in this condition she merges with the psychic condition of her client, and suffers with him: the altered state causes the healer to yawn, and her suffering with her patient causes her to shed tears. When the healer does not yawn or weep, it means that she was not able to discern any spell in effect, and thus her client is not bewitched, but his illness depends on other causes (DeMartino, 1966/87:17; my translation).

In the late 1970s, folklorist Luisa Selis interviewed "Antonia," a 75-year old maghiarja (sorceress) from central highland Sardinia. Antonia reported being possessed by three spirits who helped her with her healing work: a priest, who helped her foretell the future; a physician, who helped her cure illnesses; and a bandit, who helped her recover lost livestock (Selis, 1978:141). Trancing healers and diviners like Antonia demonstrate a clear link with pre-Christian practices that was often recognized by their fellow villagers. About one such healer, an informant of De Martino surmised "... these are people who were born before Jesus Christ. ... [they] know ancient science, and maybe remember something that [they] tell us now" (De Martino, 1966/87:70-71). Trancing healers might be consulted to discover whether an illness was caused by witchcraft, to find lost or stolen livestock, or for love magic; but ordinary people could also possess healing knowledge, often in the form of magic formulas and prayers. In any one village, formulas are secret and proprietary; they belong to individuals in the community. For example, in Monteruju, Tiu Basiliu possessed sa meikina ("the medicine," cure) for warts, while Tia Minnia could cure styres and chalazions, and Tiu Dominigu could cure the evil eye. These people belonged to different families (Tiu and Tia, meaning "uncle" and "aunt," may be used as honorifics before the name of an elder in Sardo), and thus the cures, rather than being concentrated in one individual, would be diffused throughout the population. Healing formulas are passed on from one family member to another at calendrically significant times of year such as Christmas Eve or St. John's Eve (June 23). The owner of the formula passes on the power along with the knowledge; once they have been transmitted, the original owner ceases to practice. Often it is only certain family members who can receive the knowledge; for example, a descendent of the opposite sex, or the youngest daughter. It is commonly believed that folk healers cannot die until they have passed on their knowledge. For the most part, folk healers of all types did not require cash payments, but accepted whatever clients or their families could give.

The nature of folk cures is quite varied; I can include only a small sample here. Many remedies were mixtures of olive oil and various herbs. De Martino reports that in Lucania, wounds and sores were treated with a mixture of olive oil or animal fat and rue (De Martino, 1966/87:38-39), while Antonia, the Sardinian folk healer, treated boils with an infusion of mallow leaves and olive oil (Selis, 1978:143). For maximum efficacy, herbs were to be gathered on St. John's Eve before sunrise.

Many cures demonstrate the syncretism between pre-Christian and Christian content, but perhaps none so clearly as the charms against epilepsy. Epilepsy, known as il mal caduco (the falling sickness), il male di San Donato (St. Donato's sickness) in the south, or il male di San Valentino (St. Valentine's sickness) in the north, was greatly feared and misunderstood in rural Italy, where it had long been considered of supernatural or divine provenance (Di Nola, 1993:114). Iron was considered a protective amulet against attacks, and epileptics often carried iron keys or nails to ward off the illness; but since epilepsy was believed to have a supernatural cause, only the saints could cure it. Bellucci (1983:113-117) presents a series of amulets to heal epilepsy associated with San Donato, many of which show clearly pagan roots. Among the most common are lunar crescents and frogs, originally symbols of cyclicity and fecundity sacred to the goddess Diana. These were
thought to cure epilepsy because the illness was believed to be cyclical in nature, following the phases of the moon. Eventually, in much of the Italian south, these symbols came to be associated with San Donato. As this took place, the amulets began to change: pagan symbols were combined with figures of the saint, who is shown holding or standing on the crescent moon (Bellucci, 1983:116).

Magic and Counter-Magic

Not all magic was healing magic. The ethnographic record is rich with instances of manipulative or aggressive magic, usually in response to claims of sorcery done against the client. Attacchature, fascini, legature and fatture are examples of this type of magical working, and share an emphasis on the domination of the victim's body through attachment, binding or fixing. While an important part of Italian folk magic, these spells are entirely absent from Italian-American revivalist literature, as modern Witches are likely to find them both unethical and disturbing. The structural features of these spells were often similar, whether they were used for love or to cause illness or death. Love spells often involved the manufacture of philters or potions using menstrual blood or semen. In Syracusa (Sicily), a woman would give her straying husband food in which she had placed a few drops of her menstrual blood, usually on Christmas Eve or St. John's Eve (Di Nola, 1993:45). In Naples, a man could gain a woman's affections by mixing a few drops of his semen into her coffee (ibid.).

A number of spells made use of the transformative power of the moment of the elevation of the host during Mass. A Sicilian spell to make an enemy fall ill entails taking a lemon or an orange to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, removing a bit of peel, and piercing it with pins while reciting "Tanti spilli infiggo in questiarancia, tanti mali ti calino addosso" ("As many pins as I stick in this orange, may as many ills befall you"). The fruit is then thrown into a well or cistern (Di Nola, 1993:49; He gives this incantation in Italian and not in Sicilian). A number of spells from Italy reproduce this basic format, with variations only in the object being pierced; in fact this is quite similar to Leland's "Conjuration of Lemon and Pins" (Leland, 1890/1990:29-32). Some scholars interpret these similarities as evidence that the spells may derive from the Roman practice of making defixionum tabellae, lead tablets often stuck with nails and engraved with verses dedicating one's enemies to underworld deities in order to provoke their decline (Di Nola, 1993:42).

Some cases of grave illness are still attributed to magic. As recently as the 1980s, folklorist Luisa Del Giudice documents that her brother-in-law's congenital blood disorder was interpreted by a folk healer in Terracina (Lazio) as the result of sangue legato, "bound blood" caused by a spell put on him by a former girlfriend (Luisa Del Giudice, pers. comm., 1999). This diagnosis points to the fraught nature of social relations in small communities that frequently led to accusations of witchcraft and counter-witchcraft. The folk healer's diagnosis re-opened an unresolved social conflict and raised suspicions about a person—the former girlfriend—who in all likelihood was perfectly innocent of any wrongdoing. This case also illustrates the pervasive idea that anger and ill-will alone are enough to unleash psychic and physical harm. As De Martino demonstrates, folk healers may themselves become caught in this dangerous web:

"... people go to [the folk healer] to have fatture undone; but they also believe the old mage can weave evil spells, especially in matters of love, and occasionally he finds himself in the embarrassing situation of having to undo magic he himself made" (De Martino, 1966/87:71; my translation).

The Fate of Traditional Folk Beliefs

Today, the social changes of the late 20th century have profoundly transformed the self-sufficient, rural villages of Italy and have begun to integrate them into a global economy. In much of Italy, post-war urbanization and immigration stripped the villages of half their population. Legal reforms abolished the old, exploitative land-holding systems that strangled contadini; contemporary agriculturalists practice their trade
only part-time, working in factories or in the expanding service economy as well. Women now fill positions in the labor market and in politics that the emigrating men left empty, and mass tourism, cable TV, and now the Internet have introduced new models of identity and consumption. The old sense of the precariousness of human life has lightened somewhat as a result of better conditions and new opportunities, bringing a decline in evil eye belief and witchcraft accusations. While some customs remain—many young mothers still put their babies' undershirts on inside-out— the explanations have changed: instead of saying this is to keep away the evil eye, my informants now tell me the purpose of this custom is to protect babies' delicate skin from the chafing of the seams. But magic and occultism are not dead in Italy; they are finding new expressions in a plethora of New Age religions and practices, mostly concentrated in urban areas, that build upon Italy's magical heritage (Gatto-Trocchi, 1990).

While many folk beliefs and practices were brought to the New World by Italian immigrants (Malpezzi and Clements, 1992:113-147), few endured among the second and third American-born generations. In part, this was due to language loss; formulas, prayers and narrative cures no longer made sense once the dialect ceased to be spoken. The end of the traditional rural way of life also meant that customs associated with agriculture and pastoralism, the collection and preparation of herbs, and the protection of crops and livestock were forgotten. Italian immigrants' increasing acceptance of a more Irish-American Catholic piety and doctrine, as well as the influence of American education and consumerism, with its ideology of unlimited good, also led to a decline in traditional folk beliefs and practices (Malpezzi and Clements, 1992:131). Belief in the evil eye surfaces occasionally among the American born, but only in times of crisis (ibid., 128).

This state of affairs, along with the lack of ethnographic evidence to corroborate the reports of Martello, Bruno and Grimassi, makes the existence of an Italian witch cult among Italian-Americans extremely unlikely. Even if practitioners were sworn to secrecy, the likelihood of secret societies remaining hidden for long is low; other secret societies such as the Mafia have not been very successful in keeping out of the limelight. What we have instead is the re-discovery, on the part of second, third- and fourth-generation ethnics, of aspects of traditional folk belief and practice, and their transformation by creative interpreters such as Grimassi into coherent magical systems that serve the needs of contemporary people for spiritual connection and a sense of ethnic pride and distinctiveness.

We have seen how the folk beliefs and magical practices of Italy differ substantially from contemporary Italian-American Witchcraft.

Despite some common themes across regions and culture areas, they never constituted a unified religion. Cultural and linguistic differences and obstacles to communication prevented the development of an organized Italian folk religion until very recent times. While the pre-Christian roots of Italian folk magical practice are still quite evident, over the course of nearly 2000 years, it has become highly syncretized with Catholicism, so that it becomes difficult to tease out the pagan elements from their Christian interpretations and uses. Moreover, interpreting modern practices as pagan survivals violates the ways their practitioners interpret themselves, and does not acknowledge important aspects of their own identity and beliefs. We must not confuse Italian and Italian-American anti-clericalism with paganism; these are part of a pattern of opposition and resistance to authority rooted in centuries of hegemonic domination and exploitation. This system of domination created the harsh economic and social conditions under which Italian peasants struggled for centuries; magical practices were an inseparable part of this integrated cosmos. While folk magic could become a form of resistance, especially for women, who had few other means to acquire authority outside the domestic sphere, the relationship of folk magic to the structures of domination was never a simple one; resistance, as Foucault suggests, is inextricably intertwined with the power system that produces it (Foucault, 1984:295). Because it was considered a necessary survival technique, folk magical practice was diffused throughout the population, rather than limited to an elite body of secret practitioners. Specialized
folk healers existed, to be sure, often using trance-healing techniques and inheriting their powers from a family member. Yet these individuals themselves sometimes worked aggressive or manipulative magic, and were subject to the mistrust of their fellow villagers and to accusations of witchcraft.

Even when folk magical practices described by contemporary Italian-American Neopagan writers come from ethnographic sources or family tradition, they are de-contextualized from the traditional way of life in which they once existed. In a contemporary Neopagan context, these items acquire a different meaning—one related to the maintenance of ethnic identity in the face of increasing cultural homogenization. Why and how this is happening in the Pagan community are topics that I continue to investigate.

References Cited


