

## Reflections on “Borrowed Magic”: Gendered Epistemologies, Ritual Authority, and the Politics of the Sacred at AAA 2025

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### Abstract

This Letter to the Editor critically engages with the “Borrowed Magic” roundtable held at the 2025 American Anthropological Association (AAA) Annual Meeting, reading it through the author’s research on the Goddess cult as a device for historiography and theology. The letter examines the unresolved tension and resulting theological aporia between the “woman-centered” symbolic continuity of Goddess traditions and emerging non-binary frameworks. It further analyzes the generational conflict between authority rooted in long-term embodied practice and performative, aesthetically driven ritual forms circulating in digital environments. Discussions on the anti-colonial ethics of “research refusal” in bio-archaeology and the reproduction of historical knowledge through multimodal methods, such as sonic alchemy, are integrated into the analysis. The letter argues that contemporary spiritual communities are not merely ethnographic objects but active “laboratories of epistemology” where authenticity, memory, and gendered power are continuously renegotiated.

**Keywords:** Gendered epistemology, Ritual authority, Goddess cult, Politics of the sacred.

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## "Ç(alınan) Büyü" Üzerine Yansımalar: AAA 2025'te Cinsiyetlendirilmiş Epistemolojiler, Ritüel Otoritesi ve Kutsalın Siyaseti

### Öz

Bu Editöre Mektup yazısı, 2025 Amerikan Antropoloji Derneği (AAA) toplantısında gerçekleşen "Ç(alınan) Büyü" başlıklı yuvarlak masa oturumunu, yazarın Tanrıça kültürünü bir tarih ve teoloji yazım aracı olarak ele alan araştırmaları ışığında değerlendirmektedir. Metin, Tanrıça merkezli geleneklerin "kadın merkezli" sembolik sürekliliği ile yükselen ikili olmayan (non-binary) çerçeveler arasındaki çözümlenememiş gerilimi ve bunun ürettiği teolojik aporiayı incelemektedir. Ayrıca, uzun süreli tecrübelerle dayalı otorite ile dijital ortamda dolaşıma giren performatif ve estetik odaklı ritüel biçimleri arasındaki kuşak çatışmasını analiz etmektedir. Biyo-arkeolojik bağlamda sömürgecilik karşıtı "araştırmayı reddetme" etiği ve sonik simya gibi çok-modlu yöntemler üzerinden tarihsel bilginin nasıl yeniden üretildiği tartışılmaktadır. Çalışma, çağdaş manevi toplulukların sadece etnografik birer inceleme nesnesi değil; otantiklik, bellek ve cinsiyetlendirilmiş iktidarın sürekli müzakere edildiği aktif birer "epistemoloji laboratuvarı" olduğunu öne sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Cinsiyetlendirilmiş epistemoloji, Ritüel otoritesi, Tanrıça kültürü, Kutsalın siyaseti.

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To the Editor-in-Chief,

I am writing to offer some reflections on a roundtable session I attended at the 2025 American Anthropological Association (AAA) Annual Meeting. The roundtable session was titled “Borrowed Magic: Multimodal Representations of Women’s Witch Practices as a Hauntology for a Feminist Decolonial Manifesto on Spiritual Healing,” and it was held on 22 November 2025 in New Orleans. Organized by Dr. Rosie Reed Hillman, with contributions from Linda Annunen, Helen Cornish, Lilith Dorsey, D. Ferrett, and Jane Ward, the session brought together anthropologists, feminist theorists, visual ethnographers, sound scholars, and practitioners of magic in a multisensory and multimodal scholarly encounter. Conceptwise, it was an unusually dense yet vivid conversation. Through ethnographic film, sound, performance, archival inquiry, and ritual experimentation, the panel explored how contemporary women’s spiritual practices negotiate history, embodiment, healing, and political meaning within feminist and decolonial frameworks.

The session was situated at a productive crossroads of feminist theory, decolonial critique, politics of knowledge production, and alternative historicities. Through these multimodal methods, the contributors reflected on how contemporary magical practices “borrow,” inherit, or actively fabricate pasts. More specifically, the panel examined the intersections between magical consciousness, Goddess traditions, bio-archaeological ethics, and emerging ritual modalities, asking how feminist healing practices might navigate these entanglements without reproducing the very colonial, patriarchal, or essentialist frameworks they seek to resist. Although the thematic ambition was undeniably expansive, the session nevertheless managed to sustain a coherent conversation across these domains.

My engagement with this session is shaped by my positionality as a historian of religions and a scholar of cultural production. My doctoral dissertation, *Bir Tarih ve Teoloji Yazım Aracı Olarak Tanrıça Kültü* (The Goddess Cult as a Device for Historiography and Theology, 2021), examined how “the Goddess” and narratives of prehistoric matriarchy have been cyclically reconstructed in the modern West as tools for producing alternative histories, legitimizing political imaginaries, and

articulating new theological frameworks. Earlier this year, I extended this research in my monograph *Tanrıçanın Tarihini Yazmak* (*Writing the History of the Goddess*, İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2025), which analyzes how contemporary feminist spiritualities generate invented traditions, and negotiate the politics of evidence, embodiment, and authority.

Because my work interrogates precisely the kinds of epistemic operations of borrowing, myth-making, affective historicity, and gendered sacrality that animated the session, the roundtable offered a compelling site through which to reassess these dynamics in a contemporary, multimodal context.

In my dissertation, I argue that from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century, the Goddess cult and prehistoric matriarchy were not merely “revived” but were continuously re-created as discursive instruments for producing new histories and new theologies. The study reconstructs, in a chronological and analytical manner, how diverse intellectual, political, and spiritual projects have instrumentalized the Goddess in order to legitimize existing systems, or to critique them, or to imagine alternatives. I further identify a set of core problematics that remain unresolved in contemporary Goddess and Pagan discourses: the epistemic status of prehistoric matriarchy theories, the question of gender, the critique of binary hierarchical value systems, the problem of a gendered God, and the entanglement of the Goddess cult with colonialist frameworks and its political instrumentalization (Özel Çiçek, 2021, p. 3). These questions were, in different registers, clearly at stake throughout the AAA session.

The session itself brought together several distinct yet converging contributions that collectively illustrated how contemporary engagements with magic, history, and feminist epistemologies exceed disciplinary boundaries. One presentation was framed in explicitly poetic terms (“Together we seek the material freedom of a violent past in search for a hopeful future. I become the oracle, the door between the decoder that they seek”). It cast the researcher as a mediating figure, a kind of “treasure hunter” navigating the diffuse “pastness” embedded in ritual and landscape. Another paper, grounded in bio-archaeology, focused on the Liberated African Burial Ground in Rupert’s Valley, St. Helena, and

interrogated the ethical limits of working with human remains shaped by the violence of the Atlantic slave trade. A historical-ethnographic contribution revisited modern witchcraft's Gardnerian inheritance and the subsequent move away from foundationalist, pan-European fertility narratives rooted in Frazerian evolutionary schemes of magic and religion. The final presentation on eco-feminist sonic alchemy introduced newly invented Beltane rituals performed in a Cornish stone circle, weaving together agriculture, Methodism, Cornish folklore, and magical practice through sound, movement, and elemental imagery. This work sought to unsettle the fertile/barren binary and to revalue perimenopausal, menopausal, and postmenopausal bodies as sites of ritual authority and generative knowledge.

Across these diverse contributions, a set of interrelated analytical concerns emerged with particular intensity: the persistence of binary constructions of the divine; the growing prevalence of non-binary reframings of the Goddess; ageism and generational asymmetries in the transmission of ritual knowledge; the recurrent appeal to unverifiable ancestral or "folk" authority as a mode of unchallengeable epistemic legitimation; tensions between digitally mediated knowledge and forms of learning grounded in long-term embodied practice; the marginalization of premenopausal and menopausal practitioners; the widening gap between spectacle-oriented, performative engagements with ritual and practices rooted in sustained discipline, responsibility, and spiritual accountability; the circulation of epistemic fragility and misinformation; the ethical problematics of research refusal; and, finally, the emergence of expanded, multimodal conceptions of history.

In addition, despite the thematic diversity of the session, one analytical concern emerged as structurally central to nearly all interventions. In the discussion that followed the panel, I raised a question concerning the persistence of binary depictions of the Divine and the ways in which these representations increasingly function to dislocate the Goddess from the specific cultural, ritual, and symbolic ecosystems historically constructed within Wiccan and related Goddess-centered communities. I further asked how binary gender frameworks continue to reproduce this displacement; either through patriarchal reduction or through certain forms of contemporary overcorrection.

In response, panelists articulated two principal dynamics. First, they emphasized that toxic masculinity continues to suppress Goddess-based traditions through patriarchal narratives that delegitimize feminine divinity and re-inscribe hierarchical models of the sacred. Second, they observed that some non-binary reinterpretations, while (*might be*) emerging from emancipatory intentions, *could* inadvertently reproduce forms of cultural erasure by abstracting the Goddess away from her specifically feminine, historical, and ritual genealogies. In this latter case, the concern expressed was not with metaphysical plurality as such, but with the potential loss of woman-centered symbolic, political, and embodied continuity that originally structured many Goddess-centered spiritual formations.

Certain contemporary reinterpretations particularly those that privilege radical abstraction over historical, ritual, and political specificity, also risk severing the figure of the Goddess from womanhood as a locus of spiritual, symbolic, and communal meaning. Such detachment destabilizes the very theological and ritual motivations that animated early Goddess-centered Wiccan formations. Therefore, while several practitioners noted that the Goddess may be understood as metaphysically non-binary, they nevertheless insisted that she "must still be recognized as female" within the symbolic, mythological, and political grammar of their traditions. This view implicitly affirms a dual ambition: the commitment to embrace the metaphysical plurality alongside the safeguarding of the feminine dimensions that constitute the Goddess's historical and ritual coherence.

Yet, one dilemma persists: Despite acknowledging the structural force of the problem, panelists expressed significant difficulty in articulating any viable modality of reconciliation between contemporary non-binary reconfigurations and the woman-centered foundations of Goddess traditions. Their hesitation exposed a deeper unresolved tension between political alignment with current gender discourses and epistemic fidelity to the internal architectures of these traditions. The result is an open aporia rather than a synthesis, one that continues to shape contemporary Pagan negotiations of (and in some cases, dictations on) gender, authority, and spiritual legitimacy.

This tension resonates strongly with the concerns I develop in my dissertation, where I argue that debates around the Goddess cannot be separated from “the issue of gender and the critique of the binary hierarchical value system” and from “the problem of a gendered God” (Özel Çiçek, 2021, p. 3). Feminist theologies and theologies initially emerged through an inversion of existing symbolic hierarchies, privileging the feminine divine over the masculine as a strategy of epistemic and spiritual resistance. However, as I argue, this inversion often remained structurally bound to the very binary logic it sought to subvert, ultimately reproducing a reversed but intact gendered metaphysics rather than dismantling it. From a Butlerian perspective, this reveals the persistence of regulatory gender norms even within emancipatory theological projects, while Haraway’s critique of essentialism and her insistence on situated, relational knowledges further complicate any claim to a universally stable feminine divinity.

From this perspective, contemporary non-binary reconfigurations of the Goddess function not merely as metaphysical claims, but as politically charged interventions into the symbolic economy of gender. The tension between woman-centered Goddess traditions and non-binary reconfigurations thus does not simply reflect a political disagreement. It additionally exposes a deeper epistemic struggle over whether gendered divinity can be theorized beyond both essentialist femininity and abstract post-gender dissolution. The Goddess remains suspended in a paradoxical space: simultaneously mobilized as a figure of feminist affirmation and destabilized by the very critiques of binary ontology that feminist and posthumanist theory have helped to articulate.

One of the most striking tensions that surfaced during the session centered on ageism and the generational politics of knowledge. Several older, menopausal, and postmenopausal practitioners spoke candidly about the erosion of their authority within contemporary Pagan and magical communities. They contrasted decades of embodied practice, ritual risk, and communal accountability with a growing culture of performative engagement. This is what one participant described as ‘LARPing’: rituals enacted primarily for aesthetic display and social media visibility rather than for transformative or ethically consequential practice. As

one discussant remarked, many younger practitioners gravitate toward visually communicable but spiritually low-risk rituals, while actively avoiding baneful or coercive ritual practices (like black magic) that require sustained ethical responsibility for their consequences.

This critique was closely connected to what was described as a reliance on unverifiable ancestral or "folk" authority: the tendency to invoke an ancestral lineage ("this is what my grandmother did, therefore it cannot be questioned") as a form of unassailable epistemic legitimation. In this formulation, "folk tradition" operates as a mode of unverified personal gnosis that resists both scholarly scrutiny and communal accountability. While participants acknowledged that personal and familial narratives carry significant affective weight, they nevertheless insisted that such narratives cannot be universalized as authoritative traditions when they eclipse rigorous historical, comparative, and disciplinary inquiry.

This paradox was further sharpened through a striking analogy offered by one practitioner: "I love peanuts. Peanuts will send some people to the hospital." The point was clear: no single experiential "recipe" can be generalized as universally normative. This critique resonated with comparable debates in African Traditional Religions, where early ethnographers frequently recorded misinformation, sometimes deliberately offered to outsiders. In such contexts, the distinction between what is historically verifiable, what is strategically withheld, and what is creatively invented remains persistently unstable.

Participants expressed concern that many *self-identified* witches and Pagans "do not actually do any research," instead relying on algorithmically amplified voices on the social media rather than on sustained study or relational learning. Speakers repeatedly contrasted knowledge formed through "knowing one's people" (within covens, elder lineages, teachers, and long-term communal practice) with internet-derived knowledge circulating as decontextualized information. Several speakers described a marked shift from apprenticeship-based modes of learning, in which ritual skills, cosmologies, and ethical responsibilities are acquired over years of guided practice, to self-directed forms of engagement mediated by digital platforms and algorithmic circulation.

The personalization of religious experience in Wicca, and its simultaneous claim to ‘tradition’ without a clearly traceable historical lineage, raises a further question: what does it mean for a movement that explicitly rejects monotheistic models of authority to find itself entangled in its own regimes of continuity, legitimacy, and transmission?

In this sense, the appeal to unverifiable ancestral authority mirrors a broader epistemological desire, shared by practitioners and scholars alike: the impulse to anchor one’s position in origins that cannot be challenged. The AAA session made visible how ageism and generational rupture intensify this dynamic. Younger practitioners, equipped with unprecedented access to digital knowledge, may bypass both archival research and elder authority, while elder practitioners may underestimate the genuinely new forms of collectivity and transmission emerging within digital cultures. What emerges, therefore, is not merely a conflict of generations, but a fundamental struggle over how spiritual knowledge is authorized, transmitted, and ethically stabilized in the absence of shared institutional grounding.

The AAA session thereby complicates dominant methodological assumptions by insisting that forms of authority grounded in long-term embodied practice, intergenerational transmission, and sustained ritual accountability must be taken seriously as epistemic resources in their own right; precisely the forms of authority that are increasingly threatened both by algorithmic visibility regimes and by generational skepticism toward elder knowledge.

The bio-archaeological contribution to the session, which engaged Tuck and Yang’s framework of research refusal, introduced a crucial ethical dimension into the discussion of knowledge production. Working with the remains of “liberated Africans” from Rupert’s Valley, the presenter argued that not all data ought to be recovered, displayed, or circulated, foregrounding refusal and redaction as active ethical practices rather than as absences. This intervention resonates directly with longstanding critiques within Pagan and Goddess studies, particularly where practitioners and scholars draw upon Indigenous, African, or colonized

spiritual pasts without adequately confronting questions of consent, sovereignty, and epistemic violence. As I argue in my dissertation, one of the enduring problematics of the Goddess discourse remains "its entanglement with colonialist imaginaries and its use as a political tool" (Özel Çiçek, 2021, p. 3). Read against Frazer's evolutionary paradigm, which situated non-Western religions within a primitivist hierarchy (Frazer, 1922), the St. Helena paper reframed ethical historiography as an imperative of restraint, calling for a suspension of the desire to know, appropriate, and translate all spiritual pasts into contemporary symbolic economies.

Where the bio-archaeological paper foregrounded ethical limits and refusal, the eco-feminist "sonic alchemy" project moved instead toward expanded historicities through sound, movement, and elemental ritual. Drawing on figures such as Ithell Colquhoun and Pauline Oliveros, the project staged experimental Beltane performances centered on peri- and postmenopausal embodiment, deliberately unsettling the fertile/barren binary that underwrites both agricultural and patriarchal imaginaries. As I argue in my own work, second-wave feminist engagements with the Goddess generated both a new spirituality and a new horizon of women's social legitimacy, yet this horizon has always remained structurally ambivalent, simultaneously emancipatory and vulnerable to new forms of symbolic containment (Özel Çiçek, 2021, pp. 277–281). Read in this light, the sonic-ritual experiment does not claim ancient continuity but instead exemplifies what I describe as a modern narrative of the Goddess: one that openly stages new rituals, new myths, and new embodied epistemologies. Rather than dismissing such practices as fantasy or celebrating them uncritically, feminist anthropology is thus invited to approach them as laboratories for rethinking how histories are sensed, enacted, and co-created.

Rather than merely revisiting familiar debates on authenticity and invention in Paganism and Goddess spirituality, the AAA session opened up a far more entangled analytical terrain. It illuminated a complex terrain in which binary depictions of the Goddess (could or couldn't) coexist with

non-binary reframings; where ageism, generational gaps, and appeals to unverifiable folk authority destabilize epistemic legitimacy; where menopausal practitioners struggle for visibility within an attention economy; where the ethics of research refusal confront the impulse to know at all costs; and where expanded historicities through sound, ritual, and ecological attunement force a reconsideration of what counts as historical knowledge.

My long-term engagement with the Goddess cult as a historiographical and theological device has increasingly persuaded me that we cannot simply “trace how the Goddess cult has progressed through history”; rather, we must “set out and analyse in an impartial and scholarly manner the historical, social, and theological structure of the modern narratives about this trajectory” (Özel Çiçek, 2021, pp. 3–4). The AAA session demonstrates that such analysis must now also reckon with digital circulation, sensory practices, and intergenerational tensions. Therefore, contemporary magical communities emerge as active laboratories of epistemology, where questions of authority, authenticity, gender, and memory are continuously renegotiated, rather than being mere objects of ethnographic description.

I hope these reflections contribute to ongoing conversations in feminist anthropology, religious studies, and the anthropology of knowledge. How we study belief and construct the past, how authority, legitimacy, and embodied expertise are negotiated under conditions of digital circulation, political polarization, and generational rupture would benefit from these discussions. I offer them in the spirit of collegial dialogue, from the vantage point of a historian of religions who has been shaped by these debates both intellectually and personally. At stake, ultimately, is how we understand the gendered politics of spiritual authority in the contemporary moment.

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