

Article

The Power of the *Bruxa*: Resistance, Empowerment and Transreligiosity in the Everyday of Contemporary Pagan Women in Portugal

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Abstract

The figure of the witch (*bruxa*) has been historically and contextually diverse, often shaped by gendered perceptions. With the rise of the feminist movement and Contemporary Paganism, the term ‘witch’ transformed into a powerful symbol of resistance and empowerment for women. It became a tool for women to challenge social expectations and assert their agency, embodying a subversive stance that promotes personal strength and social critique. Drawing on ethnographic research with Portuguese women who identify as both ‘pagan’ and *bruxas*, this article explores how embracing this identity is an everyday act of resistance, following the framework of anthropologist James C. Scott. Furthermore, the article argues that this affirmation is also transreligious, as proposed by anthropologists Eugenia Roussou and Anastasios Panagiotopoulos, since it encompasses spiritual, religious, political, and socio-environmental dimensions that intertwine in women’s daily lives and identity formation. Both approaches highlight how women within contemporary pagan circles reinterpret and reshape traditional elements—using spiritual and political processes to confront structural challenges. The term ‘*bruxa*’ is a form of empowerment and resistance that blurs the boundaries between the spiritual and the political, providing ways to understand and cope with their anxieties, amid ongoing socioenvironmental crises.



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1. Introduction

The imagery associated with the concept of the witch has been varied, intricate and gendered, frequently linked to spiritual and religious practices. Anthropology has produced a substantial body of scholarship regarding the theme, demonstrating that such representations are distributed through time and space, highlighting the sociocultural relevance of these representations beyond the notions of superstition or rationality (Stein and Stein 2015). Evans-Pritchard’s (1976) seminal work among the Azande has provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between witchcraft, sorcery and magical practices in the context of Azande society. In contrast to the notion of witchcraft as mere superstition, Evans-Pritchard’s research emphasises the role of these practices in addressing specific challenges faced by the community in their daily lives. Favret-Saada’s (1980, 2015) analysis of the accusations and explanations of witchcraft on the Bocage has further expanded our understanding of the complexity of these phenomena.¹ Simultaneously, witch-hunts from the 16th to 18th centuries in Europe have been of significant

importance in the creation of images and understandings of those who were persecuted, predominantly women. From the second half of the 20th Century, these women have been reinterpreted by contemporary pagan, feminist and ecofeminist movements as subversive and power figures in European contexts (Federici 2018; Purkiss 1996; Zwissler 2018b). These movements' influence has resulted in the introduction of new meanings to the term, connected with empowerment and resistance, providing alternatives to androcentric and institutional approaches to religion, spirituality and politics, characteristic of contemporary spirituality and religion (Fedele and Knibbe 2013, 2020).

Therefore, this article explores the ways in which women in Portugal who engage in contemporary pagan religiospiritual practices also identify as *bruxas*,² a term that signifies a multifaceted process of personal, spiritual, and political empowerment and resistance. It will analyse how this identification can be interpreted as an everyday act of resistance, manifested in subtle, symbolic and ideological forms that do not pose a direct threat to the structural power, yet nevertheless constitute acts of defiance, affirmation and agency in the everyday lives of these women (Scott 1989). It is also argued that it can be understood as a transreligious way of being in the world, that takes into account that “during their vernacular life, individuals live their religiosity interactively and multiply, following flexible religio-spiritual itineraries, and handling their beliefs and performances in an open and creative manner, transgressing religio-spiritual frontiers” (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 626). This assertion, as *bruxas*, combines spiritual, sociocultural, and political dimensions in the daily lives of these women trespassing perceived boundaries. The two approaches elucidate the intricate and innovative manner in which women in contemporary pagan milieus are reinterpreting and conceptualising the structural elements that impact their lives through spiritual and political processes.

The data presented is based on findings from my PhD research³ between 2018 and 2023 and from the post-doctoral research within the project ReSpell-Religion, Spirituality and Well-Being: A Comparative Approach to Transreligiosity and Crises in Southern Europe⁴ between 2023 and the present date. The research has been conducted in Portugal with groups and solitary practitioners of Contemporary Paganism conducting fieldwork, interviews, participation in rituals and accompanying their everyday life, all the while pursuing a reflexive methodological approach (Salomonsen 2004). The majority of the participants identify as cisgender women between the ages of 20 and 70 years old, from different socioeconomic backgrounds and educational levels, and I have known them or followed their work for some years. My interlocutors primarily reside in the Lisbon metropolitan area, with some exceptions residing in the central region of the country. The commonality among the case studies examined in the article is the identification of the women as both ‘pagan’ and *bruxa*, and the acknowledgement that this identification constitutes a form of resistance, both on a personal level and as part of their engagement and celebration of the Earth and healing processes. This dimension emerged during interviews and in fieldwork moments, in which I accompanied my interlocutors in their homes and everyday religious and spiritual practices in different months of 2024 and 2025 while researching their use of plants and art and handicrafts to promote their healing and wellbeing.

It is therefore argued that the reclaiming of the word ‘*bruxa*’ for themselves represents an everyday form of resistance and empowerment. This is both a means of making sense of their gender and embodied experience, and enabling contact with the world they inhabit and the social and environmental issues that affect their everyday lives. The affirmation of *bruxas* as a term of empowerment and resistance puts into question distinctions between the spiritual and the political, becoming transreligious, which is significant in the context

of the prevailing sociocultural and environmental crisis affecting people's lives, providing meaning and a way to make sense of their anxieties.

First, a definition of Contemporary Paganism and its feminist inspirations will be provided. Then, I will examine the mobilisation and construction of the *bruxa* image within the Portuguese context. This will be followed by the presentation of ethnographic accounts of three women who identify as *bruxas* and 'pagans'. The conclusion of the article will be a detailed analysis of how the affirmation as *bruxa* is an everyday form of resistance and a transreligious way to be in the world.

2. Contemporary Pagan Witch and the Feminist Witch—The Emergence of the Witch as a Spiritual and Political Symbol

The concept of the witch has manifested itself in diverse forms across a variety of historical and sociocultural contexts. In the context of this article, which is focused on Portugal, the meanings that permeated the European context will be the primary focus. The historian [Ronald Hutton \(2018a\)](#) examines these meanings through time in Anglo-Saxon contexts. During the medieval period, ecclesiastical authorities employed the term to denote all manifestations of magic, designating them as demonic in nature. This term encompassed a wide array of magical practices, including divination, healing, and malevolent magic. During the early modern period, the elites employed the term to denote any practitioner of magic, whether malevolent or benevolent, and they condemned it as being associated with diabolical activity. The popular perspective predominantly associated it with harmful magic, distinguishing it from benevolent practitioners who were referred to as 'wise men and women' or 'cunning folk'. As the 20th century began, a shift occurred in the interpretation of the term, leading to the emergence of novel meanings that further complicated an already intricate definition. These meanings were employed by Contemporary Paganism to denote practitioners of nature religions and spirituality. Additionally, a meaning connected with self-realisation and liberation emerged, primarily used by women as a form of personal empowerment in feminism and ecofeminism ([Hutton 1999; 2018b](#)). These two approaches have led to novel conceptualisations of witchcraft and its practitioners. It continues to be a source of disruption and resistance to social norms, as well as a means of interpreting issues, misfortunes and instability, and of re-framing their place in the world, as is advocated by the feminist approach. Simultaneously, the process is characterised by ongoing inquiries concerning the physical, emotional and spiritual healing of these women.

The term 'Contemporary Paganism' is a broad label used to refer to a variety of heterogeneous religious and spiritual nature-based polytheistic, pantheistic and/or animistic groups, currents, paths and movements. These movements draw inspiration from European pre-Christian traditions, as well as from oriental and indigenous teachings and feminist, ecofeminist and environmentalist movements ([Pike 2001; Harvey 1997](#)). Despite this heterogeneity, some common principles unite the paths under the label of Contemporary Paganism. The first and most widely accepted of these is the concept of nature as a sacred and sentient entity that sustains and guides human lives. Contemporary Pagans adhere to a seasonal festive calendar, acknowledging the rhythms of nature's cycles and the transformations that occur in life ([Rountree 2012](#)), which fosters their involvement in political actions and ecological and environmental concerns ([Martins 2023a, 2023b](#)). The movement also acknowledges the Divine as both feminine and masculine, thus diverging from the monotheistic androcentric perspective of the Divine.

In addition, ritual and myth play a pivotal role in these movements. Myth provides a foundational framework for moral and ethical principles, thereby facilitating learning and comprehension of experiences. Ritual, on the other hand, serves as a means of celebration and distinction between the everyday and the sacred. This is achieved despite an underly-

ing recognition that all forms of life and daily practices have the potential to be considered sacred (Magliocco 2014). The employment of magic is a recurrent theme that serves to differentiate these groups. Even though magic is not universally embraced by those who identify as 'Pagan', it nevertheless permeates their lived practices and daily lives. The term 'magic' is defined as "the ability to change consciousness at will", following the hermetic definitions provided by Aleister Crowley, a 20th-century English ceremonial magician. Magic is thus understood as a form of participatory consciousness in the world (Greenwood 2019). It is therefore argued by contemporary pagans that magic constitutes an inherent force in nature and an organisational principle of the cosmos that can effect transformation, and that it is to be found in every living being. It can be employed, manipulated, elevated and directed with specific objectives that can bring the practitioner closer to the sacred, and consequently lead to changes in themselves and the world (Magliocco 2015, p. 654).

In the contemporary pagan milieu, a plethora of spiritual currents and paths have been delineated, encompassing a diverse array of beliefs and practices. These include, but are not limited to, Druidism, Heathenry, Azatru, Witchcraft, Wicca, and Goddess Spirituality. In Portugal, some of these currents can be encountered, predominantly Wicca, Druidism and the Goddess Movement. In light of the country's predominantly Catholic religious and cultural background despite growing religious pluralism, the presence of Contemporary Paganism in Portuguese public space remains marginal.⁵ However, it has been observed to have grown in recent decades. The non-institutionalised dimension of the movement, which is not recognised by the Portuguese state, as well as a tendency for solitary practice, secrecy due to fear of reprisal and different approaches, are some of the reasons that make it difficult to ascertain the number of people who self-identify as contemporary pagans (Fedele 2013, 2015; Martins 2023b). Most Portuguese contemporary pagans live in metropolitan areas, despite some choosing to live in less urbanised areas, and adapt their practices and rituals to these places, while at the same time choosing to conduct their rituals in places such as forests, groves or archaeological sites.

Witchcraft, also known as Wicca, is a prominent form of Contemporary Paganism. Gardnerian Wicca was established during the 1950s by Gerald Gardner, who portrayed Wicca as a religion centred on fertility. The rites employed within this tradition are rooted in metaphors that are connected to natural processes such as birth, growth, maturation, reproduction, death and regeneration (Magliocco 2015, p. 652). The focus of this tradition is the figure of the God and Goddess, practised within covens, and is considered to be an initiatory path. It is an influential path within Contemporary Paganism, and it was the first path that the majority of my interlocutors encountered. They used it as a basis for the religious and spiritual lived experiences they followed throughout their lives. The formation of feminist Wiccan groups⁶ was a significant development of Wiccan practices. These groups subsequently adopted a goddess-oriented approach, contributing to the emergence of the Goddess Movement. The feminist shift within Contemporary Paganism provided a structure that these emerging movements could follow, which recognised female sacredness as emancipatory. Simultaneously, it was among the first to evoke the archetype of the witch, who, from this perspective, is regarded as a priestess and thus occupies a position of authority (Feraro 2013).

The Goddess Movement asserts the existence of a Great Goddess, a divinity immanent in the world that can be found on the Earth, on the landscape, on the seasonal cycles, on the Moon, on the cycle of life and death, and the human body, and on the different stages and ages of women (Luhmann 1993). As is well documented, the Myth of the Matriarchal Past was a significant influence on several feminist spirituality groups in the 1970s (Eller 2005; Magliocco 2015), and in the 1980s, their engagement with these theories "shaped their commitments to environmental issues as part of radical feminist magical politics.

They invoked a feminized nature and divinized Earth in response to the eco-feminist critique that oppression and exploitation of nature and women go hand in hand.” (Pike 2019, p. 135). The feminist movement, as noted by Zwissler (2012, 2018a, 2018b), was searching for religious traditions that could serve as an alternative to the androcentric and institutional ones that were predominant at the time. This approach situates women at the core of the narrative, thereby conferring a sense of empowerment upon them. However, this perspective has been met with criticism from academic circles, who have challenged the notion of these societies being matriarchal, citing a lack of substantiating historical, archaeological and anthropological data to support it (Eller 1991, 2000, 2005; Ruether 2006). The feminist turn to spirituality and religion was of great importance, not just in the context of Contemporary Paganism, but also in the emergence of the New Age movement and holistic spiritualities. Despite being the subject of criticism that has been described as individualistic, narcissistic, and creating and serving a spiritual marketplace that reflects the consumerism of capitalism, the focus on the self can also be said to be relational, since it has the potential to effect change in traditional notions and roles associated with gender, for instance (Feraro 2019; Longman 2018; Fedele 2013, 2015; Aune 2015).

Therefore, the reappropriation of the term ‘witch’ by feminists in the 1970s and 1980s signalled a significant shift in its connotation and usage (Mies and Shiva 2014; Zwissler 2018a; Salomonsen 2002). As Silvia Federici (2014) has asserted, the feminist movement brought new highlights to the process of witch-hunting, and some feminists began to identify themselves as witches, who were adopted as a symbol of feminine rebellion and resistance. It is acknowledged by feminist scholars that the majority of women who have been persecuted and killed challenged the prevailing power structures. Federici (2014) highlighted how land enclosure, privatisation, and the control over women’s sexuality and reproductive capacities—viewed as productive forces—were linked to the persecution of women. Feminist scholars have shown that this persecution aimed to strip women of their medical and therapeutic practices and to reinforce the patriarchal nuclear family, occurring during the rise of biomedicine and capitalism. Socioeconomic transformations led to increased poverty and inequality, disproportionately affecting elderly women, who were not merely victims but actively resisted oppression through magical practices, curses, threats, and seeking independence and sexual liberation rooted in community respect for their healing roles (Whaley 2011).

The process of re-signifying an image of subjugation and oppression as a symbol of resistance provided women with an alternative image of power from which they could draw and ascertain their rights. Today, the phrase “We are the granddaughters of the witches you couldn’t burn” has emerged as a salient political statement, manifesting in various forms such as demonstrations, social media posts and manifestos.⁷ This motto is employed by women in a variety of settings for a range of purposes, some of which are political and others spiritual. In certain instances, it is employed for both spiritual and political purposes, yet the image it conveys remains one of resistance and empowerment.

Therefore, the persecution and witch trials from the 16th to the 18th centuries were essential for Contemporary Pagan and feminist movements’ construction of political and religious meaning (Orion 1995), since the

negative stereotype of a socially malignant, un-Christian woman with dangerous, disruptive power was reinterpreted by Western Feminists and revised into the more positive images of a free, solitary woman living on the edge of the woods and of society, who might be a herbalist or, a midwife, a woman often relatively sexually liberated for her times, who was persecuted for her transgression of patriarchal social norms (Anczyk and Malita-król 2018, p. 210).

From a feminist standpoint, it can be argued that this concept provided a significant argument for women's emancipation (Federici 2018), which cannot be disregarded when analysing the lived experience of women.

Notwithstanding the recognition of the importance of female emancipation by certain Wiccan groups in Portugal, and the use of the term '*bruxa*' is accepted, the influence of feminism in the movement is not universally acknowledged (Cordovil 2020a, 2020b; Martins 2023a). Furthermore, it should be noted that not all Goddess-oriented groups and people self-identify as *bruxas*. The vast majority of my interlocutors engaged in the practice of the sacred feminine and leading goddess-oriented practices in Portugal, however, are known to utilise the term '*bruxa*' in the process of deconstructing the superstitious image of the *bruxa* that is still prevalent in the country. Prior to analysing how interlocutors are employing the term '*bruxa*' as a means of resistance and transreligious identification, it is imperative to comprehend its usage within the Portuguese context. Despite the fact that it is not significantly divergent from the images previously examined in this section, it is imperative to consider its particularities in order to comprehend my interlocutor's positionality.

3. *Bruxas* and *Curandeiras*—Portuguese Tensions Between Harm and Healing

Catholicism has a deep religious and cultural influence in Portugal (Dix 2009; Teixeira 2019). From the 16th to the 18th centuries, Portugal experienced less intense witch persecutions compared to other European countries like England, Germany, France, and Spain. Although the Inquisition and Holy Office prosecuted many people—both women and men—on accusations of heresy and magical practices, there was no large-scale witch-hunt or mass executions typical elsewhere (Paiva 2002). Accusations of *bruxaria* and ongoing surveillance of related practices were actively monitored in Portugal, and the Inquisition and Holy Office targeted people accused of practising *bruxaria*, superstition, sorcery, and making pacts with the devil, many of whom were healers or held other occupations. Some people were accused multiple times, undergoing numerous trials, with most accused being lay people, including enslaved people. Despite the scepticism of the intellectual elite, who trusted divine protection and Church remedies, these practices were widespread among the general population and aligned with similar beliefs in Spain and Italy, encompassing healing, divination, protection from misfortune, and love-related magic, especially in urban areas (Caro Baroja 1966; Magliocco 2004; Perdiguero 2004; Paiva 2002; Leão 2021). An analysis of inquisitorial trials revealed that most accusations were rooted in community-based conflicts and personal relationships—neighbours, family members, or clients—highlighting the social bonds and complex interpersonal dynamics underpinning accusations and disputes within local communities (Paiva 2002).

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the complex relationship with accusations of *bruxaria* in Portugal persisted without central institutional persecution, instead being maintained through social interactions within communities. Ethnographic and historical records of the 19th and 20th centuries reveal a rich tapestry of beliefs, stories, and practices surrounding *bruxas*. The analysis of these accounts dispels the misconception that such beliefs belonged solely to the illiterate rural population, showing their prevalence in both rural and urban contexts (Pedroso 2023). The accounts about the knowledge of healers, often transmitted orally, included magical and pharmacological remedies used to address ailments (Braga 1986). Therefore, accounts from the mid-20th century depict beliefs and practices where people seek support from local healers (*curandeiras*) when conventional biomedical systems options fall short, or when misfortune puts into question their stability and daily lives.

In his study of a peasant community in Alto Minho, João de Pina-Cabral demonstrated that beliefs in *bruxaria* were closely linked to gender relations, with women perceived as practitioners aiming to seduce men through their physical allure. These accusations stemmed from latent fears about female sexuality and its threat to moral and social order, especially during times when traditional divisions of labour, such as during harvests, were temporarily suspended. The term '*bruxa*' was understood to refer both to women with supernatural knowledge and powers—often believed to have made pacts with the devil—and to people who could counteract misfortune through ritual practices, with envy often cited as a catalyst for social discord (de Pina-Cabral 1989). On the other hand, Cristiana Bastos' research in Algarve in the 1980s revealed that *bruxaria* functioned as a system for understanding and combating disease and misfortune, often perceived to be originated in envy from close social or kinship ties. This belief system articulated relationships of jealousy, rivalry, and conflict, framing illness and health as interconnected within a system of social tensions and beliefs (Bastos 1985).

Further ethnographic accounts, such as Oneto Nunes' study of Arte Xávega, illustrate that during the 1990s, people turned to *bruxaria* to dispel '*má-rodá*', recurring harmful misfortunes believed to be caused by envy or ill-wishing. People sought the help of *bruxas* to end spells that threatened productive activities and resources, often linked to social tensions and conflicts rooted in family or community disputes. The practice served as a way to address the perceived source of misfortune by framing it within local beliefs about envy and relational harm (Nunes 2005). More recently, Susana de Noronha's work with women recovering from cancer highlighted how *bruxaria* remains a vital interpretative resource, especially when biomedical explanations fall short. For some, supernatural and religious beliefs provide a more comprehensive understanding of illness, offering not only explanations for disease but also effective means of resistance and protection rooted in local cultural models (de Noronha 2022). Therefore, the role of *bruxaria* in Portuguese society is closely linked to narratives about illness, misfortune, envy, and social tensions, within a broader Catholic context that associates women and *bruxas* with the devil and evil. It reflects a dichotomy where *bruxaria* is seen as the cause of harm, while healers and *bruxas* possess knowledge to counteract these forces. Today, *bruxaria* is often viewed as superstition, but it still elicits fear and confusion; however, feminists and contemporary pagans are reclaiming the term and redefining its meaning. This process involves navigating the complex sociocultural implications of the term, which will be further explored in the following section.

4. Navigating Being a Contemporary Pagan *Bruxa* in Portugal

As previously demonstrated, the perception of *bruxas* in Portugal has historically been shaped by notions of healing versus harm. Healers and *bruxas* had different understandings and played different roles, which persist to this day. However, Contemporary Paganism and feminist resistance have transformed the way women engage with the word '*bruxa*'. They are seeking to restore its positive connotations as a healer and challenge misconceptions. Those identifying as 'pagan' and *bruxas* constantly strive to redefine and salvage the term, while others remain cautious about its use outside these circles due to potential misunderstandings and prejudices. The following accounts from my interlocutors, women of different generations, shed light on this complex relationship with their identity.

Morgana is a woman in her 60s who defines herself as a free thinker. She was born into a working-class family in a village in the littoral centre of Portugal. Like the majority of the Portuguese population, she was raised as a Catholic. However, for her, it did not make sense. She shared that

I was catholic, mandatory, because everyone at home was catholic. I mean, my mother was a '*bruxa encartada*'⁸, my grandmother was the midwife of the village. But everything that they did was against *bruxas*, attention, no confusion there. Was everything against the *bruxas*. They were *curandeiras*, they were midwives, they were I don't know what else, but everything was against *bruxas*. They had that Catholic upbringing, right?⁹

The Catholic upbringing of Morgana and her mother and grandmother is indicative of the tensions between the *curandeira* (healer), who was held in high regard by the community, and the *bruxa*, a term that was pejoratively used. Despite the similarity in their respective areas of expertise, the distinction between them proved to be a pivotal factor in the eventual acceptance. When I inquired as to whether she had acquired any form of vernacular knowledge (Bowman and Valk 2014) from her grandmother and mother, she responded that she did not:

I started to grow up, I reached adolescence, and in my arrogance, because I was studying in the city—to be dumb—I thought my mum was an ignorant, village fool, and I was scared to death. I said to my mum 'One day everyone will say we're the *bruxa's* children!' I was scared to death (laughs) that they would say we were the *bruxa's* children, so I didn't want to! I made sure I didn't learn anything from my mum.

At a certain point in her life, Morgana was ashamed that the vernacular practices and knowledge of her mother would associate her with the negative social image of the *bruxa*. I inquired if she now called herself *bruxa* and identified herself as such; she told me that she did not like to affirm herself as anything except a free thinker, due to all the labels she already had in her life. Interestingly, throughout our conversation, she emphasised the importance of the role of the *bruxa* and *bruxaria* to the world, and even reclaimed the word *bruxa* to herself several times. Throughout her life, she changed her understanding of vernacular knowledge and the meaning of the word, perceiving the positive spiritual aspects of reclaiming this word and mobilising it in her connection towards the world. For her, being a *bruxa* is being connected to nature, and therefore having the responsibility to protect it, act when necessary and resist patriarchal and capitalist interests.

Like Morgana, Medeia brings us this complex relationship between her identification as a *bruxa* and the Portuguese sociocultural understandings that mapped her upbringing. She is a Portuguese woman in her 40s. She was born and raised in a village in western Portugal, situated approximately 45 km from the capital, Lisbon; she comes from a working-class background and divides her time between her full-time job and being an artisan, studying plants and healing crystals. It was during her pregnancy that she first encountered the term 'Paganism' through literary sources on Greek and Roman mythology, history and popular novels. This prompted her to undertake further research into Contemporary Paganism, the sacred feminine and *bruxaria*. However, she came across vernacular healing as a child when she played at a friend's grandmother's house. This woman was recognised as a healer within the community and was consulted to address various health concerns. In the exploration of her spiritual path, Medeia began to transcript her neighbour's recipes, meticulously documenting the properties of the plants that she could still recollect.

Her family, except for her brother and cousin, as well as her colleagues at work, are not privy to the spiritual and religious practices to which she adheres. The assumption is made that she is Catholic. The word '*bruxa*' is recognised by Medeia, yet she only employs it within contemporary pagan and esoteric spaces, where she feels comfortable and at ease since:

I am with people who speak the same language. Now, speaking next to the parents, no. It's just crystals, I speak of energies; use the necklace [with pagan symbols like the pentagram] because of the history. You try to turn it around. I'm not going to talk about *bruxaria*, I'm sure they would die of heart failure. 'No, it's the energy and stuff.' For my father, since it's all modern, it's the same for him. I only talk about these things with people like us. If I talked about *bruxaria* at work, the next day you'd see a bonfire burning! I'm the one who sells the crystals, the incense. . . they know I like the Gods, but the word Paganism, they do not know what it means.¹⁰

Throughout our conversation about what it means to her to be a *bruxa*, she mentioned this intricate relationship several times: on one hand, her pride about being a *bruxa* and finding in this word an empowering dimension; on the other hand, she expressed concerns regarding the social constructs associated with it, which, in her perspective, are often shaped by misunderstanding and a negative stereotype that engenders fear and discrimination. Within the context of her village, she perceives a heightened risk associated with this identification, thus prompting her to introduce a distinction between the *bruxa* and the *curandeira* (healer). She mentioned that the term '*bruxas*' was seldom employed in her village; the term '*curandeira*' was the preferred choice: "I heard that word [*curandeira*] a lot. There are 2 or 3 who still do things, that I know of, who are still alive. Because when I was little, there were 2 or 3 in every village. Every village had one. Some were just for the family. And there were others where people from far away, from Lisbon, came in person to do the cures."

This distinction is transversal in the Portuguese context, as demonstrated by the ethnographic accounts of the last section. *Curandeiras* (healers) were held in high esteem due to the vital services they provided to those seeking treatment for their day-to-day health concerns. This was particularly evident in regions where access to medical professionals was limited or the population was highly isolated. Concomitantly, the *bruxa* was perceived to possess malevolent intentions, which were sought when disputes arose among neighbours or family members, or when confronted with misfortune, as previously outlined. Despite the possibility of a shared set of practices and knowledge, and occasional identifications, the perception of one as dedicated to healing and the other to harm is indicative of the social distinction of the two (Maria and Carvalho 2008).

I asked Medeia if she ever identified herself as a *curandeira*. Interestingly, she mentioned, "I identify more as a *bruxa*, don't I? I have no problem saying to myself, 'I'm a *bruxa*'. I feel comfortable saying 'I'm a *bruxa*', rather than the word *curandeira*." However, people who look for her knowledge about plants and in other holistic therapies perceive her as a healer even if she does not see that word in herself: "Yes, yes. As a *curandeira*, yes, yes. Or the woman of the energies, which is the same thing, I'm the woman of the energies, the *curandeira*, never the *bruxa*."

However, it should be noted that the social images of the *bruxas* do not invariably have a negative impact, at least within the family context. Lykaia, despite concealing her religious and spiritual inclinations in her professional life due to previous negative experiences, was accepted and encouraged by her family. Lykaia is a 30-year-old Portuguese woman. She holds a degree in artistic practices and is a Tarot practitioner, herbalist, writer and artist. She combines these activities with her full-time job. She defines her spirituality as comprising two distinct paths or faiths. She identifies as a pagan, an animist and a *bruxa*, yet she does not exclude her Gnostic and Christian upbringing, incorporating them into her daily practices. She perceives correspondences between Christian and Pagan deities, thereby integrating elements of both into her spiritual practice. Lykaia opened the doors of her home to me and showed me how she lives her spirituality. Within the bedroom dedicated

to her spiritual and creative practices, she showed me and talked about each element of her practice, encompassing her altar, tarot decks, literary works, musical compositions and artistic creations. I asked when she started studying *Bruxaria*. The predominant influence was that of her grandfather, who, throughout her childhood and adolescence, persistently referred to her as a *bruxa* and bestowed upon her all that was associated with *bruxas*. It was evident in her voice profound joy and affection, as she shared with me that

He [her grandfather] used to tell me stories about *bruxas*, and he told me to write this on the first page. It was my grandfather who told me to write this: 'I'm part of this book because I'm a *bruxa*!' And I love this book. I have such affection for this book [her first book about *bruxas*] (. . .). So my grandfather gave me everything with *bruxas*. (. . .) It was my grandfather who instilled in me the whole world of *bruxas*. It was he who bought me the Wicca book that gave me a short introduction to Wicca, and then from Wicca, I got into traditional witchcraft. And it was a very natural thing. *Bruxas* weren't bad to me, *bruxas* were always cool to me, they were always good, they were always. . . My grandfather used to paint *bruxas* for me, as me, as my mum, and he used to say that we were all *bruxas*, so *bruxas* were always family to me. They were normal people, I was never scared or anything, nor was I ever told that *bruxas* were bad. Nothing like that.¹¹

These childhood experiences paved the path for her practice and identity, and she identifies being a *bruxa* as just being herself:

It's just being me, being a woman, being a person who is in touch with nature, who sees beyond what is visible, and who really understands how things work, not just how things can benefit our lives, but how we can also benefit the whole world, looking after what is already here, looking after people, saying prayers for them, holding vigils, everything that is the work of a *bruxa*, can be for the benefit of someone, or something bigger than the *bruxa* herself (. . .). *Bruxaria* has helped me to find the confidence to use my resources to protect myself, to do good for others, to do good for my home, and for my family. And to be present in the world, looking at it for what it is. (. . .) *Bruxaria* made me look at everything, and realise that things gave me back a human look, trees, plants, people's intentions. Everything has an energy, everything around us has one. . . It's human and spiritual at the same time. And I think *Bruxaria* really connected me with that. For example, a person who isn't inside this world isn't able to look at a tree as an ancestor, isn't able to look at a prayer as... as a method of resilience and somatic therapy, of rooting. (. . .) I think that being a *bruxa* is just being an animist pagan woman who does spells.

As demonstrated in the accounts above, the affirmation of Morgana, Medeia and Lykaia as *bruxas* is associated with their contemporary pagan and *bruxaria* paths and engagement and celebration of nature. Simultaneously, the sociocultural comprehension of Portuguese vernacular practices is also instrumental in this identification. According to my interlocutors, *curandeiras* were held in equal esteem and yet were often misinterpreted, and they possessed a form of knowledge that was deemed crucial to be preserved and imparted. They further asserted that this knowledge had the potential to exert a favourable influence on the world if it were to be acknowledged, which they tried to incorporate and resume in their lives. This is notwithstanding the pervasive superstitious and negative perceptions of the term '*bruxa*'. Finally, and most pertinently, for a generation such as that of the 20 s and 30 s, it is imbued with a profound feminist meaning and resistance dimension as it was presented by the feminist movement. In their everyday lives, being a *bruxa* is an act of resistance and a transreligious way of being in the world.

5. Conclusions: Resistance, Empowerment and Transreligiosity

As demonstrated, the process of self-affirmation as *bruxas* is associated with a number of positive aspects, despite the presence of misconceptions and cultural stereotypes concerning *bruxas*. However, as can be discerned from the aforementioned voices, this affirmation can function as a counter-hegemonic narrative concerning women and power, thereby constituting a form of resistance. As demonstrated by numerous scholars, power relations are of pivotal significance in the context of contemporary religion and spirituality. Religion, spirituality, politics and power are all part of a relational and globalised process, which goes beyond the perceived separation between spirituality as private and politics and power as public (Handelman and Lindquist 2013). Therefore, “taking seriously what goes on in the private domain also means recognising that the personal and the private are intricately linked with the political arrangements of our societies” (Fedele and Knibbe 2020, pp. 12–13).

The influence of power in Contemporary Paganism is no exception, particularly when it is inspired by a political movement such as feminism and ecofeminism. Power can be mobilised in this context to define magic¹² and its perceived capacity for transformation. It can signify empowerment, and it is associated with leadership roles, their reinforcement and contestation. Furthermore, it takes into account how structural powers such as capitalism, neoliberalism and patriarchy impact the everyday lives of contemporary pagans. It is evident that these dynamics manifest in the practices of identity and agency in everyday life (Martins 2023a). Consequently, this gives rise to the emergence of practices of resistance.

A considerable body of work on the subject of resistance in Anthropology has been produced (Wright 2016)¹³. The work of James C. Scott (Scott 1985, 1989, 1990) has been of particular analytical significance. Scott’s contributions have focused on the concept of “everyday acts of resistance”, which he examines both in individual and collective actions. These forms of resistance differ from those that are a threat to the power holders and/or are visible forms of dissent, such as social movements, revolutionary groups or other forms of organised political opposition. Daily manifestations of resistance are characterised by their subtlety and relative safety for the individual concerned. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognise that this does not imply an exclusive individual responsibility. Rather, it is facilitated by tacit cooperation, in addition to the symbolic and ideological dimensions that constitute an integral component of the resistance process. Ideological domination has been demonstrated to result in the emergence of dissident subcultures, which, in their everyday forms of resistance, resort to the utilisation of rituals, folk tales and religious myths. Such practices function as hidden transcripts that facilitate the process of symbolic defiance and affirmation (Scott 1989).

My interlocutors’ affirmation as *bruxas* can be analysed as a form of resistance, conceptualised as an “everyday form of resistance” (Scott 1989), and as a means of engaging with and contributing to the world, maintaining a connection with it. This approach is also seen as a way of rebuilding a world before socioeconomic and environmental crisis. My interlocutors’ approach may not be characterised as either direct action or confrontational resistance. However, through their affirmation, it becomes evident that they can transform this approach into a form of resistance in their everyday lives, as illustrated by their testimonials. For Morgana, the practice of *Bruxaria* makes sense to her because “it is a natural form, a spiritual form so connected to nature. I believe that what enchanted me the most, in the midst of all this, what moves me, is the passion I have for nature, for the Earth, you know? That’s what drives me, my passion for the earth.” And in her opinion, this important connection with the Earth has been lost and “so, I think, for me, the importance of the *bruxa*, (. . .) is precisely this: to re-establish the connection with the Mother Earth.” Furthermore, for her, being a *bruxa* is not

just assisting your clients back home, you know? She's the one who, in her house, quietly, peacefully, in the middle of the forest, goes to work for the whole of humanity, and it's an inglorious job that nobody knows about. (...) It's taking care of the dead in these monstrous wars that are going on, it's working because of the fires, it's working because of the volcanoes, it's working because of the floods. Well, it's the inglorious labour that nobody knows about. That you do quietly in your house, and nobody thanks you for it, and nobody knows you for it. But that's the biggest job, which is basically done incognito.

Morgana's comprehension of the role of the *bruxa* was concomitant with the spiritual and magical dimensions of her practices. As Magliocco notes, the use of political magic as a form of resistance for magical practitioners provides them with "oppositonality while creating community, allaying anxiety, and strengthening resolve. Magical acts can be read as performances of resistance against both power regimes and feelings of powerlessness in the face of authoritarianism" (Magliocco 2020, p. 64). It is therefore evident that the work of the *bruxa*, as perceived by Morgana, is connected to this power for transformation before feelings of hopelessness before socioenvironmental issues.

For Medeia, identifying as a *bruxa* represents a form of resistance, stemming from her belief on prevailing prejudices and the absence of a supportive environment for her to articulate her identity in public spaces. This is further exacerbated by the pervasive negative stereotypes associated with identifying as a *bruxa*. The act of self-identification as *bruxa* is conceived as a form of empowerment. Power is inextricably linked to processes associated with identity affirmation. In the context of Contemporary Paganism and other spiritual practices, empowerment has been discussed extensively as one of the main features of these movements (Heelas 2008; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; de la Torre 2018; Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Teisenhoffer 2013), in which "people explore their freedom and self through their spiritual, religious and magical practices, since these provide a language and a way to achieve the transformation in themselves and the world that they seek" (Martins 2023a, p. 190). Therefore, "empowerment results in increased awareness of one's own effectiveness which is to say personal ability and power to become co-creators of reality by exercising one's willingness and active participation, from which the sense of individual and social responsibility derives" (Palmisano and Pibiri 2020, p. 60).

In empowerment processes, images of perceived weaknesses are often reclaimed and recast as images of power (Luhmann 1993). The image of the *bruxa*, in addition to the evident spiritual identification, is incorporated into this process, as evidenced by the feminist use of the word discussed at the beginning of the article, and elucidates the reason why Medeia feels empowered when using the word '*bruxa*' to describe herself. The stance adopted is both political and spiritual, aiming to effect reforms in the prevailing preconceptions and forces that exert an influence on the daily lives of women as both pagan and *bruxas*. Medeia conceals elements of her identity due to the sociocultural preconceptions, recognising that in her village, where people perceive Catholicism as the sole viable religious affiliation, she is unable to self-identify as such, perceiving that "we have to live in a wardrobe over there". Despite these external perceptions and fear, she feels comfortable using the word for herself. When asked what she felt, she answered, her eyes shining and clear pride in her body language, that

I feel powerful, I feel good, I feel strong, I feel... how can I explain it, like a warrior with power. It's not the power to change an object, it's that I feel important. Because the word brings me... let me see if I can find the right word... It fills me with strength. (...) It fills me with pride. I feel proud. I feel good. It's like that, like I'm a warrior. 'I'm a warrior!' In this case, it's 'I'm a *bruxa*!'. And it feels good.

Lykaia's perspective aligns with that of Morgana, and yet the influence of a feminist approach is more evident in her narrative and worldview, as well as in her identity as a cisgender woman. For her, the role of the *bruxa* is of paramount importance in the contemporary world, which she perceives to be characterised by a series of deeply troubling events, both social and environmental. This perception has had a significant impact on the manner in which she engages with her spiritual practices. It is her conviction that

If more people had an animist, pagan point of view, or if they were *bruxas*, as they have to revere the place (...), Our Place, the Place with the big P, the Earth where we live without these buildings, without any of this. The land is cared for and revered differently, and we might have the resources to care for the forests differently, to think about intensive olive groves in a different way, eucalyptus groves in a different way, we could find ways to be much more activist here. Being a *bruxa* is also being an activist, completely, because we have a way of... we value things so much, we value things so much that we can't conceive of doing anything to damage the soil and all its inhabitants, just for the sake of our own, of what we try to get of value from these places. That Place already has value (...). So being a *bruxa* also has a very animist aspect to it, and something else, the feminist aspect. We're going through times when absolutely heinous things are being done to women by men. It's not all men, but it's always men. It's always men! (...) Okay, we're lucky enough to meet good men, but not all men are good. Maybe with more *bruxas* and more people, (...) *bruxes*¹⁴ in general, I think we'd have a completely different sense of responsibility towards each other, towards nature, towards our actions.

Lykaia's testimony provides a comprehensive overview of her understanding of the role of the *bruxa* as a form of everyday resistance deeply engaged in feminist and environmentalist stands. The perspective of these three women extends beyond a mere spiritual affirmation, encompassing intricate social, cultural, environmental, and political factors that can be interpreted as a manifestation of transreligiosity. The conceptual boundaries between these dimensions are contested, elastic, porous and fluid (Panagiotopoulos et al. 2024) in the lived experiences of the contemporary pagan women presented. In the process of affirming their identities, relating to the world, and making sense of the socioeconomic, political, health and environmental crises that are affecting their lives, people are resorting to religious and spiritual practices. These practices provide the physical and symbolic space in which they can enact their identities, contest the sociocultural context they belong to, and the social demands placed on them regarding who they can be, how they can act, and what they can decide about their bodies.

In the case of Morgana and Medeia, a departure from the customary practices of their institutional religious background within Catholicism was evident. However, the influence of this background persists, manifesting in the perception of their affiliation to it by those in their immediate social circles. Lykaia, in contrast, has demonstrated a commitment to integrating her past religious and spiritual experiences into her present practice, thereby illustrating the fluidity and interconnectedness of her spiritual and religious journey, since "transreligious practices are inherently vernacular and are performed during everyday life in a creatively embodied, mindful, pluralistic manner. They often happen on the margins, but they predominantly re-draw or, even better, withdraw the religious margins, by cutting through, across and over the borders between, but also within, institutional religion and alternative spirituality" (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 625).

Simultaneously, all three women recognise a word that is lauded with dense and various meanings, both historical and contextual. However, it has been re-signified as a symbol of resistance and empowerment by the spiritual and religious movement with

which they are involved, as well as by the feminist and ecofeminist movements, that inspired them implicit and explicitly, and the contemporary pagan movement.

Through their identity, rituals and magical practices that take place in their daily lives, as well as political stands, both implicit in their narratives and explicit in the ritual work they do, they are finding a way to resist when faced by the uncertainty and socioenvironmental anxieties aided by a subversive image that brings them power. This amalgamation has the potential to overcome the perceived boundaries between spirituality, religion and politics, which have proven to be problematic in the past. The utilisation of a transreligious framework facilitates the consideration of multifaceted dynamics, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. As evidenced by the accounts of these women, the language of resistance, both personal and collective, is profoundly intertwined with their lived spirituality and political stance and in their connection with the Earth and in their agency. In certain instances, these connections are explicit, while in others, they remain implicit. However, this aspect plays a pivotal role in their engagement with the world and their assertion of both personal and collective rights during periods of crisis and subsequent uncertainty.

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Notes

- ¹ The research was conducted in the European context, Portugal, which is considered to be part of the so-called Global North. The reference to the foundational works of Evans-Pritchard and Favret-Saada is part of the literature review on the theme of witchcraft in Anthropology, rather than the theoretical approaches adopted by the author, considering the context in which the research takes place.
- ² *Bruxas* is the Portuguese term for “witches”. Throughout the article, the author will apply the terms “witches”/“witch” and “witchcraft” when referring to other contexts besides the Portuguese one, and to the literature review; however, the author chooses to maintain the term in Portuguese to accentuate local definitions when speaking of the Portuguese context and when it is used by the interlocutors.
- ³ PhD scholarship financed by FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P., grant references SFRH/BD/138893/2018 and COVID/BD/152766/2022.
- ⁴ Financed by FCT—Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P, reference number 2022.01229.PTDC.
- ⁵ In the context of Portuguese Contemporary Paganism exist a latent tension with Christianity. The romanization of the Peninsula Iberica and Christianity’s expansion are perceived to have transformed supposed pagan celebrations and festivities, as well as banned domestic cults and destruction of local temples. There is not enough historical and archaeological information about these pre-Christian religious practices nor about a supposed pagan survival, being related to issues of power (de Pina-Cabral 1992). However, the revival movements of the 19th century and their admiration for ancient Greek myths and a broader sense of nostalgia was of great influence for the emergence of the Contemporary Pagan movement in the 20th Century, that combined these approaches with a desire to connect with nature (already manifested by the Romantic movement) and the counter-cultural

movement characteristic of the 60s (Hutton 1999). All this was also included and adapted to the Portuguese Contemporary Pagan movement.

6 The Reclaiming Tradition and Starhawk are an influential example of this turn to feminism within the contemporary pagan movement (Salomonsen 2002).

7 This phrase first appeared in Tish Thawer fantasy book, *The Witches of BlackBrook* (2015) and have since then be part of feminist protests (Toon 2021).

8 Can be loosely translated has a “hidden witch”.

9 Interview with Morgana, April 2024. The following quotations are from this interview.

10 Interview with Medeia, March 2025. The following quotations are from this interview.

11 Fieldwork and interview with Lykaia, October 2024. The following quotations are from this interview.

12 The use of magic as a form of resistance is also of great importance in the context of Contemporary Paganism (Magliocco 2020; Asprem 2020). The emergence of contemporary pagan witchcraft is deeply related with notions of egalitarianism, personal freedom, anti-authoritarianism, social freedom sharing the view that the sacred is immanent in the material world (Magliocco 2020, p. 45).

13 Abu-lughod (1990) calls to the attention that not all forms of resistance are built not necessarily an opposition but rather a reflection of power structures. Not all processes of identification are necessarily disruptive or in opposition to hegemonic ideologies; rather, they are relevant in the context of women’s lives and collective interactions in their affirmation as resistance.

14 *Bruxes* in Portuguese is the used to imply a more inclusive and non-binary language to go beyond the gender binary found in *bruxa* and *bruxo*. While in English the word ‘witch’ can be used inclusively, in Portuguese is not the case.

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