**Samhain Observation and Participation Report**

In interest of non-Abrahamic religions, I wanted to experience the Pagan holiday Samhain for this project. Samhain is based on an ancient Celtic holiday that occurs around October 31 that marks end of harvest and life as winter approach. In contemporary Pagan customs, it is viewed as a form of the Day of the Dead; a time to reconnect and honor the deceased as the barrier between of the living and dead is thin. Samhain is also serves as a symbolic new year to end something in your life while allowing something new to happen. While Paganism is diverse with its beliefs and members, Samhain manages to gather pagans together to celebrate and to take part in a circle ritual to prepare for the future ahead.

The Samhain observational assignment is more of a continuation from the earlier interview assignment in this course. After the interview, I attended meetings of the Pagan organization at Purdue in order to learn and ask questions about Paganism while being acquainted people who were going of the Sauhain ritual. From interactions with the Pagan organization, I was able to establish an understanding of various concepts of Paganism including Samhain. Without the individuals who were generous and patient enough to aid me in my research on Paganism, I would not be able to experience Samhain in a welcoming manner.

Due to the overbearing view of Paganism as devil worship in the United States, Samhain gatherings are usually a private matter between solitary Pagans who are connected via networks like the organization at Purdue. In respecting the privacy and comfort of the people taking part of Samhain, I refrained from using intensive recording devises or note-taking during the event. As the magic of the circle ritual requires everyone to be involved, there was no way I would just stand outside and take notes without ruining the circle’s energy. In a sense, this is more of a participation report than an observation assignment. While the lack of recording techniques was limited, I understand it can affect the results and interpretation of the Samhain report. The respect and comfort of everyone taking part of the Samhain ritual is my highest priority in this assignment along with obtaining information. After the ritual however, I was able to ask questions freely and establish a better understanding on Samhain.

The Samhain ritual took place Saturday evening at the host’s home somewhere in the rural parts of West Lafayette organized by members of the Lafayette Pagan community. I traveled to the destination via car pool from Purdue in casual wear along with the food I brought to the potluck, a box of Kellogg’s Rice Krispies Treats and the finest clearance Halloween cookies money could buy. Before the starting the ritual, people in casual attire gathered inside the home to prepare the potluck, altar, and bonfire in a casual manner while chatting among themselves. The total amount of people who arrived was around twenty and most of them knew each other from the Pagan community.

When everyone arrived around 6:00pm, we gathered around to discuss the meaning of the Samhain with the priestess of the ritual. We conversed about the element of Samhain of moving on into the new part of life as the old part dies in symbolic terms the coming of winter and of the Temptress, the form of the Goddess enticing an individual to a new direction. Beside the priestess, it was an egalitarian discussion where anyone could voice a concern. After the discussion, the attention was diverted to the altar of the deceased in the corner of the room. In respect for the departed, people brought items representing the dead on the altar: pictures, items that they owned, and symbolic offerings. As everyone paid their respects for their deceased, we left outside to prepare for the circle ritual.

We gathered not too far from the house to the bonfire pit with logs and bundles of sticks. Before we formed the circle around the pit, the priestess, now in a ceremonial robe, performed the act of smudging. Smudging involves burning a rope of sage and bellowing it from a fan onto a person. The purpose is to remove negative energy from a person to ensure effectiveness of the circle. Before I was smudged, I was holding my hands like I was receiving Communion in a Catholic Church. I was told by the priestess to relax, as it was the mood for the ritual. The removal of negative energy and formation of the circle is establishing a communita as everyone and their energy becomes one in the circle. After the negative energy was removed, the bonfire was lit along with four candles that were north, south, west, and east outside the circle. The four directions symbolize an element as north is earth, south is fire, east is air, and west is water. These candles reflected the Law of Sympathy as the elements worked and interacted with one another for the magic of the circle. Interesting, the water candle had trouble being lit, possibly relating its symbolism as the priestess joked about it. Pagans acknowledge that mistakes do happen during the rituals and best thing to do is laugh it off without throwing of the energy.

After the fire and candles were lit, a passage from a book of shadows about the Temptress was read by a member of the circle. A book of shadows is a writing of spiritual experiences and beliefs, either constructed for an individual for the person or printed for others. After the reading was finished, the priestess discussed how the fire represented the lasting flame during the dying times of upcoming winter. As she continued talking, the fire became more intense as it represented the upcoming hopes of the next year while darkness engulfed the area as only the fire and elemental candles were the only source of illumination.

Candles were handed out to everyone to carve two images on each side: what do you want to leave behind this year and what you want in the next year. Once the candles were etched, they were lit by the bonfire or from other lit candles. This moment was the liminality stage of the ritual as the melting candles represented the transition into the new year with a new desire. After the candles were set near the fire, the priestess told everyone to focus their attention to the flame of our candles to allow our future desires to happen. As respects for the decease and the past year were given, the priestess casually told everyone it was time to eat; ending the Samhain circle as celebration and feasting of the potluck began.

As Pagans have diverse beliefs and may practice Samhain differently, the Samhain event I experienced was a mix between concepts between the social rite of intensification and use of magic involving energy, spirits, and nature discussed in the Stein and Stein text. As Paganism is usually a solitary and independent religion as it is frown upon by the Christian dominated population, holiday rituals like Samhain allow Pagans to gather in order to have a spiritual group experience and to establish and reaffirm relationships. The involvement of spirits, nature, and energy invokes a spiritual presence into Samhain. Samhain is also can be considered as a product of syncretism as it is an ancient Celtic religion but has been modified with modern ideas.

While I did not take any notes until the day after since I was enjoying the feast and conversing with people during the Samhain celebration, I learned much about Paganism and Samhain. Samhain did make me respect my decease family and nature while looking forward to the future especially as I prepare to graduate in May. While I may share and disagree on some their beliefs, I have respect for Pagan practices as it allows an individual to develop a spiritual connection and experience that fits for their needs. From my Catholic upbringing and skepticism to religion later in my life, Samhain and exposure to Paganism gave me an appreciation to religion as a personal and intimate affair as it allows pluralist beliefs to exist. From the interview and observation assignments, I was able to learn about a religion that I may have never explored by myself or be able converse with people and their beliefs. I am very thankful for this experience along for everyone who took the time and patience to answer my questions and allow me to experience Samhain.