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Worshipping the Inner Goddess

How a Lafayette mom is leading East Bay “witches” to celebrate their “divine feminine.”

BY MARTHA ROSS



On a warm September evening, Leilani Birely, the high priestess of the Lafayette-based Daughters of the Goddess temple, and about a dozen of her “sisters” gathered at the Berkeley Marina for one of their monthly circles. They chose a patch of grass behind a grove of trees, where they hoped to find shelter from the incoming fog and wind.

Birely was easy to spot in the dwindling twilight. Half Hawaiian on her mother’s side, she has a bright smile and long, flowing dark hair. The event was to celebrate Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility and motherhood. In the center of their circle, the women created an altar by laying out a cloth. On top of it, they placed flowers, candles, scented oils, herbs, and figurines representing the deity.

They began by calling to the spirits of the directions, turning first to the north, then to the east, south, and west. As the fog rolled in, the women beat drums, sang, danced, and praised Isis’ nurturing powers. Birely, trained in the hula, moved sensually to the song’s lyrics: “The river she’s a flowing, flowing and growing. ... Mother, carry me, your child I will always be, Mother carry me, down to the sea.”

At different points, the women shared personal triumphs and received applause and whoops of affirmation. One woman declared herself queen of her own destiny. Another celebrated her ongoing sobriety. A third, who wore a long peasant skirt and looked to be in her early fifties, announced that she had stopped bleeding—meaning she was postmenopausal and could call herself a “crone.” In the goddess world, this is an honorific term that connotes a woman of great maturity and wisdom.

Throughout the ceremony, the women described themselves as pagans, Wiccans, and, yes, witches. Some used the “W” word jokingly or self-consciously, but others shouted it out.

Birely proudly calls herself a witch, though she acknowledges that the word is charged. Some temple members, she says, have been shunned by families or harassed at work after they “came out.”

Conservative religious leaders see goddess worship as a gateway to the dark side. For others, “witch” conjures Hollywood horror movie images—women in black robes, stealing away in the middle of the night to a forest clearing to sacrifice an animal and chant to Satan. Even more liberal-minded observers wonder if these modern-day witches dislike men or have taken feminism to a New Age extreme because they hold female-only circles, call themselves “womyn,” and celebrate their menstrual cycles.

“I’ve never met a devil worshipper,” says Birely, who explains that the rituals are designed “to get back into a culture where women and our sacred

mysteries are honored.” Women need their own space “away from the male gaze” so they can feel safe in finding their own power, she says. A witch is nothing more than a woman “empowered to make her own choices in her life.”

Although this particular ceremony included goddess worshippers from Marin, Oakland, and Berkeley, the temple’s core 25 to 30 members are East Bay suburbanites like Birely. She is a one-time stockbroker who is married, lives in a ranch house in Lafayette, drives an SUV, and has two teenage daughters. She started her temple to offer a way for women to bond that is about more than “let’s get together to have a glass of wine.”

Birely’s path to goddess worship came out of a journey of self-discovery. Although she grew up in a Catholic family on the East Coast, faith was never at the forefront of her concerns. Birely was always a freethinker and proud of her biracial ancestry, but stayed on the more conventional route of upward mobility, studying business in college, and entering the male-dominated world of high finance in the late 1980s.

But becoming a mother—the most “scary but powerful” job in the world—upset Birely’s ideas about identity, success, and faith. “I felt I was being called to something,” she says.

That something was what she refers to as her “divine feminine,” which became easier to pursue when she and her husband, an environmental engineer, moved from the East Coast to Lafayette in 1991. Birely says they liked the Bay Area’s tradition of nurturing progressive ideas, including the forms of spirituality to which she was drawn.

Birely volunteered for La Leche League, the international breast-feeding support group. She also took classes in women’s studies at Diablo Valley College and then earned a master’s degree in women’s spirituality at New College of California. Her course work encompassed “magick” and the female deities of early nature-based faiths, including those of her Hawaiian ancestors.

According to the history Birely now teaches, emerging monotheistic religions, such as early Christianity, marginalized pagan faiths. The male-dominated hierarchies denigrated women’s status in society, persecuted those who challenged the status quo, and defined witches, the healers in ancient cultures, as evil.

Spiritual freethinkers revived goddess worship in the mid-20th century. One was Z Budapest, a Hungarian-born witch who lives in Oakland and helped popularize the modern women’s spirituality movement. She became an inspiration for Birely.

Birely hosted her first summer solstice circle in 1996. Since then, her temple has grown to include more than 1,000 people internationally on its e-mail subscription lists. In 1998, she experienced one of the greatest honors of her life, when Budapest anointed her Dianic High Priestess during a ceremony in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Like any church minister, Birely counsels members in crisis and presides at weddings. She also runs classes for women who want to learn more about witchcraft, building altars, and casting spells. Patrice Erickson of Concord, one of the temple’s two priestesses, says that casting a spell is like offering a prayer or engaging in meditation, to “bring focus to a particular issue in your life you’re working on: looking for a job, buying a house, physical healing.”

Birely says her husband has been supportive throughout her journey. Not all women are so lucky. Some husbands and boyfriends find it hard to accept this female-centric faith. Birely contends that her sisters bring “such a wonderful energy back into their relationships, their mothering. It turns out to be an advantageous situation for the men in their lives.”

As for her own mothering, Birely included her daughters in ceremonies when they were younger but didn’t push them to participate as they turned their attention to friends and school activities. “They know this is Mom’s thing,” she says. “They’re happy for me.”

Recently, her oldest daughter, who will be a college sophomore, has come back to the circles. Similarly, a couple of teenage girls have started coming with their mothers to temple events.

Birely is delighted to share her faith with a new generation. That’s her purpose: to help other women, young and old, draw personal strength from learning about goddesses and “women’s sacred heritage.” She says: “We don’t all need to embrace it, but we should at least be taught it.”

The temple’s biggest event of the year, the annual Spiral Dance, will be held October 30 at Orinda’s Masonic Temple. The event, intended to honor the ancestors and celebrate Halloween, typically attracts more than 200 women from all over the world. If you want to attend, visit daughtersofthegoddess.com.