



BOOK REVIEWS: Two New Books on Pagan Ritual

The Spell of Making

Blacksun

Chicago: Eschaton Productions. 1995

Castings: The Creation of Sacred Space

Ivo Dominguez, Jr. (Panpipe)

Georgetown: SapFire Productions, 1996


Reviewed by Diana Tracy

Back in the dark ages when many of us started Wicca, we were starved for knowledge, and, being of the intellectual bent, headed to our nearest libraries and bookstores looking for revealing tomes. What we found were abstruse esoterica only indirectly related to our doings, or decidedly spare recipe books of ‘spells’ and a few rituals. There were few sources that provided satisfactory ‘whole cloth’ rituals, nor were there books that explored the implications and obligations of doing magic.

When Neopaganism began to flower on the late 70s and early 80s, a new generation of books proliferated. Unfortunately, even the best of them tended to be ‘how’ books, with only minimum attention paid to the ‘why’ and ‘wherefore’ departments.

Currently there is another surge of new titles at the local bookstores, and no few of them are on the art of creating ritual. To my joy and amazement, even the weakest of them seem to cover at least some aspects of ethical, spiritual and theoretical issues. Do you suppose this means that we are actually *thinking* about what we’re doing, rather than just doing it? What a refreshing concept!

The following two books are, in my mind, a couple of the best available. Both deal thoroughly with the issues raised by doing magic. One goes deeply into the mechanics of actually creating a ritual from start to finish, and the other focuses




mainly on the creation of sacred space. I had originally thought that I would be judging these books on an 'either/or' basis, but I find that I'm glad to have both of them on my bookshelf.

The Spell of Making by Blacksun could be thought of as a detailed operator's manual for the creation of ritual, full of detail, and complete with a tutorial. Breezy and accessible, this book reads like having a series of fireside conversations with this 20 year veteran of Wicca. Blacksun, is a long time high priest of a large west coast organization (he lives in Seattle), and he has researched and lectured on this subject, as well as refined his ritual making technique in both large and small venues. His first published work on the subject, *The Beginning Elements of Ritual Construction*, has been sold and distributed by Circle for better than ten years; and his series of articles in the old *Georgian Newsletter* concerning ritual-making precede even that. Much of Northwest Wiccan ritual shows the touch of his most competent hand.

Ritual is certainly not unique to just Pagans, and Blacksun's formula could be applied to any religion at all. But his experience as a coven's High Priest for 17 years is used throughout to illustrate the principles and techniques he describes in his book. This makes it not just a dry work of theory for study, but a comfortable read that will give you insight and understanding as well as knowledge. Parts are inspiring, others are humorous, but all are educational and enjoyable.

Though *The Spell of Making* is written as if it were a fireside conversation, beware: this is compact information. Few could read it from front to back without having to put it down several times and mull over the information. Even one chapter a day will keep you thinking long into the night. It is a whole new approach to looking at religious ritual that you won't find in any text book or college course. Even if you only plan to attend rituals, this book will give you insight that will be invaluable in making your participation more magical and spiritually significant than before. And if you plan to create or produce rituals, and you want to insure that you know what you are doing and why it should be done, this information will give you the best chance of making those rituals truly wondrous.

The book is written in three parts. The first part of the book details what religious ritual is and how it works. Blacksun makes a passionate case against casual preparation and production of rituals. He gives specific definitions to various words and spiritual concepts that are frequently used inexactly in the neopagan community. With his explanation of the conscious and unconscious



mind, he explains why and how symbols are used within ritual and how to make our magic real.


The second part of *The Spell of Making* gives a step-by-step ‘blueprint’ of a ritual. Each step (focus, vision, handling energy, cleanup) has a chapter of its own, and much effort is put into explaining not only the ‘hows’ but the ‘whys and wherefores’ as well. Along the way, Blacksun explains what each step is supposed to accomplish and offers familiar examples of how that can be done. As the reader is led from one step to the next, Blacksun shows how each is connected and dependent on the others before it. However, he notes that these

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steps are merely framework; that to build truly great ritual is an art which uses this framework to make something beautiful and spiritually meaningful. As with other arts, time and practice are the necessary ingredients for creating good ritual.

The last section of the book may be the most valuable to those with no mentors who are faced with the task of writing ritual. Blacksun has provided two complete rituals in the Appendices, complete with line numbers. These are rituals that are currently being performed, and have been refined over time. In chapter 14, he goes over one of the rituals line by line, dissecting and explaining what he was writing and why he did it that way. All of the principles and formulas described in the previous chapters of the book are employed, and the reader is given a real, practical look at how they are used in this particular ritual.

In the following chapter, the reader is then led through the process of building a ritual from scratch. Some parts are produced only to be discarded later, as will happen in real creative process. Blacksun discusses his thinking as the ritual-building progresses. The process of development is written for all to see, and the result is a well made ritual that works exactly as intended. Appendix B contains the completed ritual, as actually performed.



This book is not aimed at neophytes. It assumes at least some knowledge of theory and practice, and some experience at least participating in rituals. Although couched in primarily Wiccan terms, it is certainly applicable to the broader Neopagan community, as well as anyone needing to understand the principles of ritual writing.

Castings: The Creation of Sacred Space by Ivo Dominguez Jr. (Panpipe) is an invitation to and an exploration of sacred space. Dominguez is an active member of the Neopagan community on the east coast, and has participated in a variety of esoteric disciplines. This is reflected in his book; although applicable to Wicca, it focuses on a much broader spectrum of traditions, including Quaballah, ceremonial magic, astrology, and the more traditional eastern and western religions.

Castings, like *The Spell of Making*, is divided into sections. The first contains a series of lessons and simple illustrative exercises, the second deals with magical symbolism, and the third is a variety of casting techniques. If you go through this book as intended, following the exercises and castings in order, you will have a very solid foundation for working magic.

The introduction almost put me off. Although filled with good information, especially for the neophyte, I found the language a bit thick and ‘over-scholarly’. However, this was less apparent in the rest of the book.

The first three chapters deal with the self. Inner work that everybody who makes magic should do is laid out in a sensible progression. Issues like inner vision, state of mind before, during and after magical work, and the most important of all, awareness of self are explored using the basic senses as a pathway to understanding. From chapter three, Inner Preparations: “Of all the variables to consider, the quality of any casting is determined, to the largest part, by the internal state of the person or persons involved in the creation of the space.”

Further chapters covering the use of energy, grounding and centering, and immanence and transcendence complete this first section. The information is dense and detailed. More complex exercises build on the previous workings. Definitions are clear, and pros and cons of different actions (“What happens if I don’t ground?”) are discussed.

Next, Dominguez undertakes a discussion of magical symbolism. He shows a wide variety of symbol languages from a variety of traditions, and does a



remarkably good job of showing how they work together as a magical fabric covering all esoteric traditions. He makes it clear that castings can be as simple or complex as you wish, depending on the amount of work you wish to do.

The final section is a series of casting exercises, some designed for solo work, and some for groups. These show Dominguez' ease with moving amongst the many traditions that he's studied. Each working is laid out in detail, including what to expect from a magical standpoint, and what to notice when reviewing the work. Although I must say that I'm not entirely tuned in to all of his modalities, each work does present a different way of manipulating magical energies. A run through all of them would give a practitioner a good solid feel for how the energy is moving during a ritual.

A short chapter is given to working with large groups, including a ritual that worked successfully for their group. A final word about importance of intent during magical work wraps up this excellent book.

Both books are well laid out, and progress from simple to complex information, bringing the reader along with exercises and examples. They both accomplish what they set out to do with aplomb. Neither is a cover to cover read. One should expect to read, work, and then digest the information presented before moving on. My only major criticism of them is their lack of quality bibliographies. Neither of these books would benefit greatly from footnoting, but both should, in my opinion, be providing extensive reading lists. That said, I shall be recommending both of these books to my students.

If you are a third degree Wiccan who has only participated in rituals and has suddenly been required to provide effective ritual for your group, *The Spell of Making* is for you. If you are a Neopagan new to magical work, or if you are a Wiccan from one of those 'boy scout badge' type of groups, and you want to *really* understand what magic is all about, then you'll be wanting to read *Castings: the Creation of Sacred Space*.

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