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A Laboratory of Stories
Teaching and Learning through Community Lore in the Contemporary Esoteric Society Sodalitas Rosae Crucis

This article develops the concept of *community lore*, initially devised by the social learning theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991). In extending this promising but hitherto neglected aspect of their work, this article sheds light on *how* and *why* community lore sustains and propels teaching and learning in the contemporary esoteric society Sodalitas Rosae Crucis (SRC). Ethnographic findings illuminate how the situated, informal community lore becomes a pervasive learning device that underwrites individual and collective learning, as it emerges in small talk, gossip, and cautionary tales, told and shared among members. Furthermore, a dynamic of tradition and innovation is at play within the community lore, as it sustains tradition while also providing a breeding ground for new ideas and practices that lead to innovation. Within the constructive tension between tradition and innovation, I delineate how community lore works as an educational resource, with explanatory value for situated learning, especially within esoteric communities of practice.

Introduction

Over almost three years (2019–21), I carried out an anthropological study of teaching and learning in a contemporary esoteric society in Sweden by becoming a student and initiate as a part of fieldwork. The society in question, the Sodalitas Rosae Crucis (SRC), was founded in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2002. SRC perpetuates the teachings of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an esoteric society instituted in nineteenth-century London, and is often regarded as one of the most influential occult societies to date (Bogdan 2007, 121; Butler 2011, 16; Owen 2004, 52). Since its inception, SRC has branched out with temples in several countries, but my ethnography concerns the branch in Stockholm called Temple III.

Through an initiatory system of six consecutive degrees, SRC offers an education in ceremonial magic, with each degree unlocking new teachings and practices towards spiritual attainment, the aim of ritual magic in this context. In SRC, learning ritual magic is *socially* sustained and supported in formative relationships between peers and tutors aligned with the joint pursuit of spiritual attainment. Performing rituals together is a fundamental part of this social engagement, as is sharing stories, often in the form of anecdotes and small talk. This article will analyse shared stories that emerge within a practising community and often stay there, making it hard to study without membership. This *community lore* is an essential aspect of situated learning, as members share and learn from these stories, but often in implicit ways.

This article will propose that community lore operates in two broad ways: 1. *it sustains tradition* by communicating core values and tacit understandings within the

community, and 2. *it provides space for creativity and innovation*, as a laboratory for experimenting with new ideas and practices in informal and playful ways.

This is related to how ritual magic is taught and learnt in a society like SRC.

Contrary to what popular culture might suggest, an individual is rarely born a ceremonial magician. Instead, it is something one becomes, often through the educational process called *initiation*, accomplished through consecutive degrees that resemble a university degree system. SRC has six degrees, where a member begins as a *Neophyte* and proceeds to *Juniorus*, *Theoricus*, *Practicus*, *Philosophus*, and *Adeptus Minor*, which grants entrance to the second order of adepts, the *Solis Alati*. Each degree comes with its designated curriculum, practical and theoretical lessons and homework, and specified learning outcomes tested in examinations, which, if passed, make the candidate eligible for initiation into the following degree. As is evident from this infrastructure, education is an inherent element of becoming a magician.

With a few notable exceptions, teaching and learning have not been made an explicit focus in the anthropology of religion, nor in the academic study of esotericism. Within the former, a group of scholars advanced a perspective on "learning religion" in the anthology *Learning Religion: Anthropological Approaches* (Berliner and Sarró 2007a), where the editors underscore that "the precise way religious concepts about supernatural beings are acquired and practices linked to them are learnt has remained largely understudied by anthropologists" (Berliner and Sarró 2007b, 7).

Social and relational aspects of teaching and learning in esoteric societies are emergent between the lines in several previous studies pertaining to the study of esotericism (Luhrmann 1989; Greenwood 2000;

Granholm 2005, 2014; Lycourinos 2018). The anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann plainly states that "magicians present magic as the consequence of long and patient learning" (1989, 253). Learning is a prerequisite for her main theoretical finding, the so-called "interpretive drift", a psychological process that explains how "ordinary, well-educated, usually middle-class people" (p. 7) come to believe in magic: "they learn to find it eminently sensible. They learn to accept its core concept: that mind affects matter, and that in special circumstances, like ritual, the trained imagination can alter the physical world" (p. 7). While teaching and learning remain an implicit theme here, Luhrmann's subsequent works (2020; Luhrmann and Morgain 2012) employ a perspective on learning more explicitly, as she deals with *inner sense cultivation* and ways to train individual imaginative faculties, characteristic to several *religious* educational systems (in contrast to learning within secular education).

Explaining innovation is a current concern within the field of esotericism studies, as is evident in a recent anthology, where the editors frame innovation in terms of how "an idea is produced through a reassessment of tradition, and the result is an innovation upon it. Consequently, we affirm that innovation is a mechanism of negotiation whereby an idea is either produced against, or adapted from, an older set of concepts in order to respond to a present context" (Hedesan and Rudbøg 2021, 8). I suggest that teaching and learning show similar traits and add to the account of how and why innovation occurs: existing teachings and practices, perpetuated by teachers, are transmitted through teaching and learning, where they respond to situated conditions such as the circumstance of a given student and her needs. For example, a student misunderstands, negotiates, forgets, and intentionally skips certain

parts of instructions, exercises, and teachings. Undoubtedly, an essential aspect of the survival over time of any group – religious or not – is its educational activities. Transmitting tradition, practice, knowledge, and know-how all depend on teaching and learning, as perplexed beginners become seasoned experts, and a perceived tradition lives on in practice. However, what is taught is not always what is learnt: a dynamic of change and formation is at play as students integrate and manage what they learn by variously perpetuating, rejecting, reinterpreting, and synthesizing teachings and practices. They make the culture of practice theirs, and, as I discovered through my fieldwork, negotiations involved in teaching and learning partly occur within stories shared and created among community members. The life stories its members tell about themselves, and the stories that the community tells about itself, emerged as an essential part of teaching and learning, providing a resource of recipes, standards, and ethos that proved instrumental in learning achievements (Cejvan 2023).

To sum up, even as previous research on ritual magic and initiation indicates that education is a common denominator of these practices, a perspective on teaching and learning is seldom explicitly found. My contribution in this article consists in developing this perspective, connecting it to the current concern of innovation while simultaneously demonstrating how social learning theory can be utilized in the field of religious studies. By explaining how *community lore* functions as situated learning, I contribute to social learning theory by extending the narrative element inherent in Lave and Wenger's original approach, as well as developing new lines of inquiry in the study of contemporary esotericism, where perspectives on teaching and learning are still scarce. Informal stories told and retold within esoteric currents are sources seldom found in historical and ethnographic research into esotericism. In highlighting this situated, social story-telling, this article contributes to insights concerning the importance of teaching and learning through stories shared and created within communities of practice.

Ritual magic as social learning: theory and method

To get access to the ritual practice of Temple III, I became a fully initiated member, as it was only as an initiate that I would be allowed to carry out participant observation. This method became more immersive than anticipated: membership entailed hours of solitary ritual magic work.[1] I also carried out semi-structured interviews during fieldwork, part of which are analysed in this article. These were mainly conducted in Swedish and have been translated into English, lightly edited for clarity. Interview transcripts are written in narrative format to convey the interview scene more fully, and I rely on the material already published in my doctoral dissertation (Cejvan 2023).[2]

1   Furthermore, the pedagogy of SRC emphasized self-reflection through careful journalling and written reports. As I produced such texts for emic review, they also became data for analysing my learning process as an initiate. Thus, in meeting the specific conditions of this field, I found myself involved in auto-ethnography (Jones et al. 2013), fundamentally drawing on my experience as a student of magic.

2   While I use the ethnographic data initially presented in my doctoral dissertation (Cejvan 2023), the argument that community lore sustains tradition and innovation is new to this article. Before initiating fieldwork in Sweden, my research project underwent ethical vetting by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, as is the standard procedure.

I approach my material through the lens of the *situated learning* theory introduced by the anthropologist Jean Lave and the computer scientist Etienne Wenger in their seminal work *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (1991). They emphasize the co-participatory dimension of learning and understand it as an integrated feature of *all* social life, even where learning is not the intended outcome: "learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (p. 35). The situated, social setting where learning takes place is termed *a community of practice*, defined as "a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98).

In this article, I will develop a promising but hitherto neglected aspect of their theory: the educational dimension of making stories. I build on the term *community lore*, introduced by them only in passing, in a discussion of how communities talk within themselves, as their shared language on their ongoing practice, and the way to speak (pp. 107–09). In what follows, I begin by dividing *teachings* and *community lore* to distinguish between formal and informal narratives. Then, based on my ethnography, I examine the educational aspects of community lore, further emphasizing how it both maintains tradition and challenges it through innovation.

Teachings are official, sanctioned texts, of which some are SRC-specific and some are part of a broader Golden Dawn tradition.[3]

Teachings include curriculum, manuals, and official texts, some publicly available on the website (Sodalitas Rosae+Crucis et Solis Alati 2002–22a), such as the journal *Splendor Solis* (2002–22b). While teachings are predominantly written down, it should be mentioned that SRC also practises what they call "the oral tradition", which I regard as a part of the teachings rather than the lore, as it is a recognized constituent of what candidates are supposed to be taught by the order. Teachings are characterized by the purpose of supporting ritual magic skills and educating initiatory advancement in a formalized and explicit way.

By contrast, *community lore* is significantly more ubiquitous, as it consists of a multitude of other narratives, not as defined as the teachings. Furthermore, community lore is characterized by its *exclusiveness* in that it is only accessible through social interaction among initiated members. I think Lave and Wenger hinted at this in their emphasis on the "talk within" the group and how community lore shapes and signals membership, supporting "communal forms of memory and reflection" (1991, 109).

Because of these traits, community lore is not as visible as the teachings, especially not to outsiders, which makes it harder to research. Studies that rely on official publications and written materials tend to lose the verbally transmitted knowledge and miss out on the community lore, which, I argue, is an important (often unrecognized) educational resource in communicating tacit knowledge and values – but simultaneously a laboratory where new ideas can be toyed with, before turning into more formal teachings. I suggest that what eventually becomes teachings and then is perceived as "tradition" might have started as community lore. In SRC, one venue for this transmutation is the member journal

3   For example, the extensive Golden Dawn material was collected in Israel Regardie's publication (1937).

Splendor Solis, where teachings, story-telling, and creative outputs, such as drawings and poems, intermingle.

Community lore and teachings are each of a different character and serve different purposes. Formal teachings, such as by-laws, impart declarative, procedural knowledge about order standards, rules, and regulations. At the same time, community lore instructs in the way of practice, what is permissible and authorized, more subtly and engagingly disclosed than by-laws, manuals, and curricula. It teaches, in practice, "how, when, and about what old-timers collaborate, collude, and collide, and what they enjoy, dislike, respect, and admire" (Lave and Wenger 1991, 95). Based on my ethnographic material, I will explore the educational dimensions of community lore, with particular attention to how it enables both innovation and tradition.

Re-telling ritual: inviting creativity and humour

When I interviewed Lily, an Adeptus Minor in Temple III, and Tommy, the founder of SRC, the community lore soon surfaced in their collaborative story-telling. The following excerpt concerns the staging of a Star Wars-themed ritual back in 2009, during one of the annual SRC gatherings. It serves as a case both of how the community lore is communicated spontaneously in social interactions and how such narrations implicitly inculcate the values of the community.

Preparations for the Star Wars ritual had begun half a year before the gathering, planned as a surprise for the rest of the members attending. The ritual was firmly based on the script for the lengthy Neophyte ritual of initiation, but the officers were assigned corresponding characters from the movies, and the traditional robes and regalia were substituted for self-made Star Wars costumes.

The ritual was launched with Tommy rising from his chair during the evening dinner, announcing that he was greatly disappointed in the ritual performances he had witnessed so far. He warned that the order had lost its focus, effectively killing the mood for everyone except the members who were in on the prank. As it happens, he continued, he knows just the ritual to put things right again: So, robe up and gather in the temple. Light the candles and the incense, and "we will show you how the ritual is done for real". When everyone had gathered in the temple, the pranksters blasted out the "Imperial March" from the Star Wars soundtrack, and the ritual began:

> "As the Emperor, I enter first and present all the officiants[4] that have Star Wars/Golden Dawn names," Tommy says. "So, we have …"

> "… HegeLeia," Lily interjects.

> "HegeLeia, who is Hegemon. Then Kerux was Chewbacca, so it became Kerchubacca. And then when I entered …"

> "… Stolistes was the R2-D2-robot with the officiant in a cardboard box painted as R2-D2," Lily adds. "Then he had a plant sprayer inside [to purify the temple with water]." Lily imitates the sound and starts laughing.

> "Was a real candidate initiated?" I ask.

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4   In SRC temples there are seven ritual offices, each with different tasks and symbolism. The three chief officiants are the *Hierophant*, the *Hiereus*, and the *Hegemon*. The remaining four are the *Kerux*, the *Stolistes*, the *Dadouchos*, and the *Sentinel*.

Tommy nods. "[A Hierophant from another temple] was initiated."

"As Neophyte?"

"As Neophyte."

"Wasn't he already a Neophyte?" I wonder.

"He was higher than that, but …" Tommy starts laughing. "But then we went like, 'the Force is not strong in you!'" More laughter. "The initiatory trial being, inevitably, that he had to fight the Death Star and then …"

"… a beachball with a plastic weapon," Lily interjects, laughing.

"Yes. The educational point of it was [to show] how we can utilize archetypal concepts and make a ritual out of them. Because even if people sat and laughed so hard that they were about to die, there was an educational point in everything we did."

"Did it also happen magically at the same time?" I ask.

"Yes!" Tommy starts laughing.

"So, it wasn't just theatre, but a ritual?"

"Yes, it was an actual ritual," Tommy confirms. "Then a member from the Oslo Temple, who is big, long-haired, and furry, had Chewbacca pants. As Chewbacca then, he was Kerux and got a ritual [script] because he was supposed to say his lines in English, then it was," he imitates Chewbacca's garbled speech, "but goes around and does just what he is supposed to do in the temple. And Immanuel had performed a pentagram [ritual] built on Star Wars-theme with …" Tommy breaks off in laughter.

"Light sabre, sound effects and …?" I suggest.

" … all that and remade into different Enochian tablets … we really had poured *hundreds* of hours into it all, so it didn't turn into theatre, but became a way to view an initiation, but in a very humorous and fun way." (Lily and Tommy 2021, 01:00:37–01:03:18).

In the above exchange, Tommy narrates how the playful ritual was created with serious intent, mirrored in all the effort put into staging it, beginning half a year in advance. The intended learning outcome for the surprised community was to show "how we can utilize archetypal concepts and make a ritual out of them", as he relates. However, a lesson is also taught in *retelling* the event to those not there. Through Lily's and Tommy's joint story-telling here, the listener learns not only about the versatility of archetypes and the doctrine of correspondences but also about the value of humour, creativity, and play in the order. This learning outcome might be entirely unrecognized by the story-tellers themselves, as learning is, in Lave and Wenger's words, "an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (1991, 35). I regard community lore as a core element of situated learning, as it implicitly transmits group identity and values that lead to shared understandings within the community. These values can be entirely unwritten – or tacit – as is the case with humour, which is never stated as a value in the bylaws or rituals of SRC yet still emerges as a pervasive value through the way Tommy

and Lily emphasize it, sharing their tale *of* humour *with* humour.

Cautionary tales and the value of tradition

The community lore harbours not only success stories but cautionary tales as well, sometimes explicitly told and sometimes only alluded to, often concerning the trope of "initiation gone wrong". These are stories of initiates who, for various reasons, failed. Occult publications, read by members, are rife with such lore. In the Golden Dawn tradition, Dion Fortune's sentiment on the dangers of faulty techniques exemplifies this well:

> The initiated adept is exceedingly careful what he does when he is working with these potencies because he knows that he has always got the Qlippoth in the background. The uninitiated occultist goes ahead gaily, juggling with such Names of Power as he has picked up from the innumerable books on the subject now available for the general reader, thinking that if he does not invoke the demons he will not get them. He forgets that every planet is a Jekyll and Hyde. Consequently, ceremonial magic has got a bad name owing to the unpleasant frequency of untoward results, just as surgery got a bad name before the days of Lister. It is the imperfect technique that is the trouble. (Fortune 1992, 94)

Boundary work against the faulty techniques of other societies is also reflected in the original Golden Dawn material. In what appears to be a boundary work against spiritualism, an oath never to be hypnotized is sworn in the Neophyte initiation ritual, on the rationale that she must not lose her willpower. Golden Dawn was both demarcating against other mediumistic and clairvoyant practices and emphasized the importance of the kind of deliberate training which Golden Dawn offered:

> The properly trained clairvoyant need have no fear that he will thereby expose himself to the powers of evil. It is the untrained natural clairvoyant who is in danger. Training will give him knowledge, discipline and protection, such as will protect him from the onslaught of the averse powers. (Regardie 1989, 456)

Cautionary tales such as these implicitly convey a didactic concern of taking things in the proper order and at the right pace. As formalized in the by-laws, there is a minimum number of months that a candidate must spend in each degree, partly for didactic reasons, parsing out the course content at a pace that allows for reflection. Lily voices its importance:

> the best you can do is to make haste slowly. You still have to have continuous progression, but it doesn't have to go crazy fast; that's the way it is. Because those who go too fast, they often miss a lot and, above all, a certain tendency I see with those who work their way through the degrees as fast as shit, they are the ones who become these egotistical monsters. (Lily 2020, 00:27:23–00:27:45)

Warnings such as these inculcate the idea that magic does, indeed, have real effects, to the point of danger. As we saw, it can feed into boundary-work strategies: a wrong technique that is the issue in *another* society. The cautionary tales could even explain, to some extent, why the system is slow to change: cautionary tales teach what

happens to those who deviate from the perceived correct way of doing things and relate how correct systems are thought to have safety mechanisms, such as didactical pacing, and therefore should not be tampered with.

Initiatory challenges are personified in the figure of the *Guardian/Dweller of the Threshold*, a specific trope in the community lore of SRC and other esoteric societies. This concept began as fiction in Edward Bulwer Lytton's novel *Zanoni* (1842) and after that became a trope in esoteric teachings. From its inception, the Dweller was depicted as a personification of a particularly challenging aspect of initiatory advancement that bars the way for the candidate's progress.[5] When employed in the community lore of Temple III, members understood it in different ways. While Lily's understanding was quite in line with the original conceptualization of the Dweller, Sophia, the Hierophant of Temple III, saw it quite differently:

> The threshold, sure. The Guardian, well, no. … Because "the Guardian of the Threshold" paints the picture of, for me in any case, this tremendous obstacle and if I can only manage to get around it, or overcome it, then I can cross over and then I will enter the next stage. … I have encountered different types of resistance, which I had to overcome. But when I did, I didn't magically enter the next amazing

phase. It was not "now I'm over the threshold!", but rather "that was that", yes, and then there will be a bunch more, a little infrequently, you never know when you will drive into them. And then you must overcome them when they come. Finally, you realise that "shit, now I've come up this mountain, how did that happen?!" Now I'm over the threshold. And then you can see all this stuff you have behind you, scattered over the years (Sophia 2020, 00:47:41–00:50:12)

Sophia's warning of choice was one she had heard from an adept in another Temple: "The mountain is slippery!" Meaning that no matter how far you have come, you can slip and slide down. This warning indicates the most commonly perceived hazard in ritual magic according to my interlocutors: gradual loss of motivation and discipline to continue, which may lead the candidate to drop out rather than advance further up the mountain of attainment.

Yet another type of danger surfaced in my conversations with Einar, a Theoricus in Temple III: *tumble in place*, he called his predicament in the 2=9 degree of Theoricus, drawing on a computer game he had played when he was younger:

> On the Air-level, you must find a way to get levitation powers. You can have a *Ring of Levitation*, you can have *Levitation Boots*, there are different ways. You can drink a potion that turns you into some animal that can fly. Whatever. The point is that if you have forgotten about that the first time you play, as there is no manual for this game, you die a lot. That's why you can play it so many times. So, the first time you get there and don't know this, then you're basically done for. It's impos-

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5   For example, Aleister Crowley's student Charles Stansfeld-Jones employs it to signify his suspected self-delusion of altruism: "Is the idea of coming back to help others (see Sun. Apr. 16) only a form of the Dweller on the Threshold and caused through fear of annihilation or madness?" (Frater Achad 1919, 148)

sible to get to the Air level unless you have a Ring of Levitation. Because you press the buttons to move, and it says: "you tumble in place". And then you get eaten by Air elementals. It has felt a bit like that. Just going, "you tumble in place". It is not that there is any particular obstacle, but it is the opposite; there is no particular obstacle at all. It is just like air.

Olivia: Tumble in place.

Einar: You tumble in place. And it is very difficult to deal with that kind of resistance.

Olivia: Yeah, it isn't concrete; it's not a Guardian on the Threshold; it's not a monster.

Einar: It's like no particular problem, just that nothing happens. (Einar 2020, 01:05:26–01:08:25)

Einar's story illustrates how popular culture, such as computer games, becomes interlaced with community lore and the individual life story. The various tales of initiatory obstacles also witness to the malleability of the community lore as a laboratory of differing perspectives. Einar's description of "tumble in place" expressed what I, and many peers, had also experienced as initiates: the feeling of being stuck, of going in circles.

Experiences, when named and valued, take on new meanings – is it the Dweller on the Threshold, or is it just that you "tumble in place"? Lave and Wenger highlight how telling personal stories in Alcoholics Anonymous underpins identity-making:

Telling the personal story is a tool of diagnosis and reinterpretation. Its communal use is essential to fashioning an identity as a recovered alcoholic, and thus to remaining sober. It becomes a display of membership by virtue of fulfilling a crucial function in the shared practice. (Lave and Wenger 1991, 109)

Community lore can be a reiterative resource in finding a new language for individual experience, as it provides stories and concepts told, shared, and retold within the community.

Wenger's later notion of "paradigmatic trajectories" reflects this as well, as an individual member negotiates her emerging identity in the light of what is deemed possible and desirable, "what counts", communicated not only in prescriptions (such as the by-laws) and teachings (such as the Neophyte ritual script) but in *practice*. By opening the scope of possible attainment to the candidate, the trajectory becomes a "proposal of an identity", which ties in well with the notion of community lore:

Newcomers can engage with their own future, as embodied by old-timers. As a community of practice, these old-timers deliver the past and offer the future, in the form of narratives and participation both. Each has a story to tell. In addition, the practice itself gives life to these stories, and the possibility of mutual engagement offers a way to enter these stories through one's own experience. (Wenger 1998, 156)

The paradigmatic trajectory can be conveyed through community lore, providing a template for the "success story" that helps shaping individual life stories while also providing evidence of old-timers' attainment of the same.

Lore as laboratory: innovating ritual practices

By word of mouth, community lore carries a panoply of tips and tricks concerning ritual magic practice. I heard such advice exchanged between peers over coffee, in chat threads, and even during ongoing rituals. Improving techniques is undoubtedly one venue for innovation to occur. A member tweaks a ritual component and shares it with their peers. Should that particular improvement then take root in the community, it will, over time, become perceived as tradition. The so-called "oral tradition", a recognized way of teaching in SRC, is a venue for this. For example, concerning a recurring ritual technique, my tutor advised me not to follow the script in the curriculum. Instead, she instructed me in an alternative way of doing it, which she had devised based on her experience. Her advice came ringing as a text message to my phone.

Entirely new ritual practices may also take root. I might accidentally have contributed to this when giving each of my interlocutors a small gift of *papier d'Arménie*, small sheets of perfumed paper that are burnt as incense. It was meant as a token of appreciation for their participation in my research. However, half-jokingly, I suggested they could use them for spell-casting by writing their intentions on the small strip of paper before burning it. During an interview a few months later, Rantes, a Juniorus in Temple III, mentioned how he put this gift to work: "remember the small pieces of paper, the incense?"

I nod, and he continues:

It's hilarious because this is probably just my idea, but when you gave me those things, I started to write my intentions. I used to do the rituals, write my intention on the paper, and then burn the paper. It's hilarious, but *everything* I wrote on those papers came true. Everything. So, in my mind now, I keep those papers because it's just like everything that I write here comes true, so I have to keep these …

Olivia: … For special, like really special … [laughs]

Rantes: Yes. But it's really because of things that are almost impossible because I remember that I started with simple things, I started with, like, my intention is this, like, I wrote the paper, and it became true. And then I started to test it, and everything became true. And then, one of the things that I wanted was the Ph.D. …

Olivia: … yeah, you wrote it and …

Rantes: … I was finishing my Masters, and I was just like, I want to get a Ph.D. But it was just like, but I don't think it will be possible. I had many ideas in my mind, and I was just like, I'm just going to test it. So, I actually put "I want to get a Ph.D. before the end of the year". I just put it there. I burned it and I was just like, "it's not going to come true". And then it came true, and I was just like, I need to save this thing; I don't know what's happening here, but I have this ritual. I created my own ritual. I took the ritual from the book, did a couple of things, and then wrote my intention, burned the paper, and then sealed it in a box. So, until this comes true, I keep the box sealed. And it works. I don't know why it works, but now it's like, okay, this is for special situations. For emergencies. (Rantes 2021, 01:36:55–01:39:0)

Upon hearing of Rantes' success, two other peers, Lola and Einar, dusted off their papers for similar spell craft. About a year later, a new candidate, a Neophyte in Temple III, approached me about where to get the papers, as he had heard about them from the others. The use of *papier d'Arménie* exemplifies a new addition to the community lore that also carries an innovation potential: the *papier d'Arménie* is a new practice, serendipitously started from scratch, slowly spreading among peers by word of mouth. Furthermore, it was a practice emerging among junior candidates, not from official teachers, thus indicating how members can seed innovations. Still, I would suspect that seniority increases the likelihood of getting a hearing for novel ideas in the community.

Community lore emerges here with a potential for innovation. The lore concerns not only what senior members do or only perceived tradition in the form of established historical narratives, such as the Star Wars ritual many years ago or what took place in the Golden Dawn heyday in nineteenth-century London. Indeed, community lore concerns historical events, but it also points towards the future by inviting innovation. Furthermore, tradition itself is regarded as animated in SRC: making stories nourishes the community lore to the point of experiencing it as a living entity with the capacity to teach and learn. In closing the argument of community lore as a mediator between tradition and innovation, I will briefly address this aspect of the community and its lore-making.

Community lore and a living tradition

SRC's conceptualization of tradition as a living being – a so-called *egregore*[6] quite effortlessly solves conflicts between tradition and innovation. The *egregore* is understood as the living group soul of the order, thought to have consciousness and agency of its own. It is even attributed the ability to transmit the tradition when needed: if, for example, the order were to fall apart, the *egregore* could step in and ensure that a solitary member's initiation could continue. This *egregore* concept, then, can substitute notions of tradition, lineage, and semi-divine instructing "secret chiefs" of past Golden Dawn perpetuations. With the notion of a *living* tradition, grand historical claims become redundant legitimizations, as the tradition is alive and accessible.

The *egregore* is thought to be nourished by each member's solitary and collective practice. The *egregore* concept stipulates that each member can sustain a mutual relationship with the very soul of the community, tapping into the sum of knowledge and experience of all the members that have participated in it – all of the community lore. Instead of a tradition dictated top-down, it is reversed, from the collective into a teaching entity. Each member's trials and tribulations feed into the tradition, made meaningful by its incorporation into the animated community lore.

Community lore as situated learning becomes yet more intricate as individual life stories and community lore, with the emic animation of the *egregore*, turn into reifications in material objects. Links to the *egregore* are bestowed via secret symbols,

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6   The concept of *egregore* turns up in other post-enlightenment esoteric currents. The influential French esotericist Eliphas Lévi (1810–75) mentions it as creatures from the *Book of Enoch* and as celestial watchers that dwell between the planets (Lévi 1898 [1868]). Later, in the German esoteric order, Fraterinitas Saturni has a collectively created and sustained *egregore* called the GOTOS, assigned to the planet Saturn (Hakl 2013, 44).

"keys", received in the elemental degrees. A so-called "admission badge", a material object, must be crafted in each degree and enmeshed with the *egregore* key through repeated practice. Each grade comes with a new key to further expand the *egregore* for the individual candidate.

The *egregore* is perceived as embodied in the temple tools and furnishings, which led Temple III to ditch the old ones and create entirely new ones as it rose from the remains of the old. During an interview, I asked Tommy, the founder: "You mentioned that you didn't want to take the old regalia with you; what was the reason for that?"

> It was so tied to that *egregore*, which was so torn. So, we felt that we didn't even want to call it Golden Dawn, but create something completely dynamically new, and then we have to – even though we had some amazing Hierophant sceptres, banners and altars and all of that, we left everything behind and had a creative summer and autumn in 2002 when piece after piece was laid out, "Well, who wants to make the banners? Who wants to make the Kerux staff? Who wants to do this and that?" (Lily and Tommy 2021, 00:04:37–00:05:15)

Here, Tommy conveys how the *egregore*, the communal spirit, is anchored in the tools to such a degree that they must be made anew when the community of practice is transformed into a new temple and organization. The desire to make all the tools anew indicates how the community's sense of identity is harboured in its material reifications. The ritual tools and their histories are entangled with community lore. Similarly, individual objects can also support the sense of community, as every candidate makes the same hand-crafted ritual tools, sharing similar sighs over the complicated and time-consuming efforts involved in making them. When shared, told and retold, individual stories of struggle, perseverance, and completion feed into the community, partaking in the joint pursuit and sense of belonging by making the lore.

Concluding remarks

Based on Lave and Wenger's notion of a lore produced and shared as communities of practice talk within themselves, connected to their ongoing activities, I have argued that community lore operates in two broad ways: 1. in communicating core values and tacit understandings within the community, it transmits and sustains what is recognized as tradition; 2. it provides a breeding-ground for innovations.

We saw examples of how cautionary tales aid in preserving tradition by subtly enhancing values and rationales, notions of what is "best practice" in ritual magic. In cautionary tales, the value of slow progress and the didactics of gradual revelations throughout the initiatory system are subtly taught. While the value of self-discipline is also emphasized in the teachings of SRC, the value of creativity and humour emerges mainly through the community lore, as in the quoted anecdote of the Star Wars-themed Neophyte ritual.

Paradoxically, community lore is also a venue for experimentation with new ideas and practices, as it becomes a laboratory for toying with new ideas, jokes, words of advice, tips, and tricks. Community lore contributes to innovation in facilitating novel ideas to spread through anecdotes and small talk. With the *papier d'Arménie*, we saw a small but epitomizing example of how community lore facilitates innovations to spread.

Individual and collective stories can be told and retold in the community lore for extended periods and may one day become reified in a formal instruction or a ritual tool. The community lore also teaches members other ritual magic aims than the lofty ones of spiritual attainment: how to achieve money, love, and success – and doing so by innovative means such as burning strips of paper. Mundane goals are not emphasized in the official teachings but remain a widely recognized potential of magic that members make use of in times of need, as with the use of *papier d'Arménie* in spell-casting for career success. While teaching tradition and eliciting innovations, community lore constitutes a ubiquitous educational resource for a community of practice.

In highlighting the situated, social story-making that is community lore, this article has contributed insights concerning the importance of teaching and learning through stories shared and created within communities of practice. Thereby, I have extended the narrative element inherent in Lave and Wenger's original approach into more detail. Social learning theory provides a novel angle to the study of esotericism, as well as religious studies in general, where perspectives on teaching and learning are still scarce. ■

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