"The superior learning of witches was recognized in the widely extended belief of their ability to work miracles. The witch was in reality the most profound thinker, the most advanced scientist of those ages. As knowledge has ever been power, the church feared its use in women's hands and leveled its deadliest blows at her."

— Matilda Joslyn Gage

_The Burning Times_ of 1560 and 1650, what has become known as the "witch hunt," spread with Christian missionaries and colonists into the Americas, Africa and other territories. The death rates are shockingly unclear. The high estimates for Europe alone are that 9,000,000 people, 85% of them women, were killed. With them went a way of life that had endured for thousands of years, that of agrarian populations who revered the female and the earth, and perceived all life as sacred and interconnected.

What emerges as the greatest impetus for the "witch hunt" was the response of the Christian Church to resistance to its authority. As the Church tried to expand into rural areas, it found that most people continued to practice their established religion. They persisted in consulting the local wise woman rather than the priest, the midwife rather than the doctor. They also rebelled at Church and State attempts to seize traditional common land, rebellions which, according to historians Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, were almost always led by women. During "the burning times" these women were accused of heresy, then tortured and burned at the stake. Their persecution was a political ploy by the establishments who feared their power.

This film proposes that what led to the persecution of women as witches was the collision of two utterly different cultures and ways of knowing. On one hand, there were the Church and the State, with their emerging values of profit, power, domination and patriarchal authority. On the other hand were the ancient traditions that honored and revered both women and the earth. With the massive burnings, a patriarchal way of life was destroyed. Women's control over their own bodies and reproductive systems became the business of men. Positions of religious authority and political power became exclusively male domains. Women were silenced.
HOW MANY WOMEN WERE KILLED DURING THE "WITCH HUNT?"

The high estimates have been computed from 8,000,000 to 9,000,000. They include the people who were lynched rather than burned, the children who died of abandonment and the high numbers who are assumed to have died or committed suicide while in jails. These figures do not include the vast numbers who died in North America, Mexico, South America and Africa.

Researchers agree that 85 percent of those who died in the witch persecutions were women. This period of our history might therefore be called "The Women's Holocaust." The intent was to break down and destroy the political and spiritual influence held by women at that time.

"The killing of witches was the largest mass killing of human beings by other human beings not caused by war.""  
- Historian Gherhard Schorman  
Der Spiegel D43 1984

The majority of historians of the witch-burning period rarely admit that such a phenomenon took place. The acceptability of witch burning in Renaissance society is evident by its absence in the writings of such prominent and prolific thinkers as Bacon, Grotius, Selden and Descartes who flourished in the early 17th century: the peak period of the "witch hunt."

SOURCES:  
Daly, Mary. Gym-Ecology: The Metaecetics of Radical Feminism.  

Mies, Maria. Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour.  

DEFINITIONS

Today, society equates words and language around the Old Religions with negative images. The following are the original meanings of some of these words.

Witch:  
"The original word comes from the Anglo-Saxon word wicthe, which means to bend or shape. Bend or shape consciousness, and thus to bend or shape events in your life. Essentially, it is the remnants in the West of the old Shamanic traditions — the traditions of developing within yourself altered states of consciousness through meditation and very simple methods like chanting..."

— Starhawk

Hag:  
"'Hag' used to mean a woman who had sacred knowledge. Old women used to be revered because they had this ancient knowledge and passed it on to others. So that it was wonderful to be an old woman."

— Thea Jensen

Conical hat:  
A symbol of knowledge and representative of the cone of power raised by witches at their sabbats.

Cauldron:  
A symbol of the origins of life and the power of women.

Heresy:  
Thought or opinion held in opposition to the Catholic or Orthodox doctrine of the Church.

Peasant:  
Traditionally defined as one who lives in the country and works on the land. The peasant class of "the burning times" can be compared to today's working and poor working class.

Pagan:  
From the Latin pagani, it also meant country dweller. They were the rural people who clung to the Old Religions even after Christianity was well established in cities and among the ruling classes.

Heathen:  
From the Germanic word heiden, "that which is hidden." When the Christian Church forbade the ancient rites of the Old Religion, the pagans continued to practice their ceremonies in secret.

Hallowe'en:  
The last purely pagan festival we still celebrate. It was called Samhain (pronounced sawn) in the Celtic language — the night of the year when the veil that separates the living from the dead is thin. It was seen as a night of magic dreams and divinations when the ancestral dead came back to share their wisdom and to bring sweets to the children of their living descendants.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. During “the burning times,” institutions like the Church and the State blamed women and persecuted them as witches to avoid responsibility for widespread poverty and strife. Reflect on contemporary institutions and their actions in our culture and in others. Discuss similar evasions of responsibility effected by the persecution of identifiable groups.

2. What is the link between the persecution of women as witches and the continued widespread male violence against women? What are the connections between the “witch hunt” and the evolution of feminism and movements related to issues of race and class?

3. How is the content of The Burning Times connected to our current environmental crisis?

4. The “witch hunt” led to the oppression of women as a group, and in particular, to repression and control over women’s sexuality (including contraception, midwifery and abortion). Does the link between the Church, medicine and law still exist?

5. In the film The Burning Times we see that the invention of the printing press aided greatly in the circulation of printed propaganda against women. How do our current print and electronic media contribute to systematic oppression of women and other marginalized groups?

SELECTED READING LIST


Murray, Margaret Alice. The Witch Cult in Western Europe. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921).


RELATED NFB FILMS

Goddess Remembered - C 0189 027
The first film in this series on contemporary women and spirituality.

Adam’s World - C 0189 005

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Part 1 - Gathering Together - C 0190 019
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Part 5 - Priorities and Perspectives - C 0190 023
Part 6 - Through Ignorance or Design: A Discussion of Stereotypes - C 0190 024
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