

# Happy Borrower From the World's Rituals

By ANDREW JACOBS

TODAY may be dedicated officially to the Man from Galilee, but as millions of Americans plug in their Christmas lights and fire up their Yule logs, Donna Henes knows they will be paying homage to a much older tradition. For Ms. Henes, an "urban shaman" and rituals consultant from Brooklyn, the Christmas lights — and Hanukkah candles for that matter — are descended from primordial ceremonies marking the winter solstice, the darkest day of the year. "The Christmas tree is essentially nature worship," said Ms. Henes, who had to stop herself from using the P-word — pagan — because "people have a problem with it."

Not that Ms. Henes (pronounced HEN-ess), 53, won't be spending much of the day in front of a tinsel-draped fir. "I celebrate everything," she said, seated in her Prospect Heights loft surrounded by Thai and African icons, an altar to Our Lady of Guadalupe and shelves of frankincense, patchouli root and other soul-cleansing substances. Hola the cockatiel squawked, Bud the mutt yapped, and a chant-and-drum soundtrack added to the other-worldly atmosphere. Was the recording a Hopi ceremony? "No, just some New Yorkers marking the fall equinox," she said.

For 24 years Ms. Henes has been putting city folk in touch with mother earth. She teaches world religion in public schools, lectures about planetary abuse, and orchestrates annual egg-balancing extravaganzas at the World Trade Center to mark the vernal equinox. She proudly displays a citation from Mayor David N. Dinkins honoring her skill to communicate "cosmic consciousness."

But her celestial awareness may have been off kilter on Monday night, when Ms. Henes and 32 other heathens were detained at a deserted Staten Island beach as they celebrated the winter solstice with a bonfire. Charged with trespassing and fined \$50 each, they spent part of the evening at the 122d Precinct house, where — their painted faces speckled with glitter — they say they were subjected to snickering and rolled eyes. "It was very upsetting," said Ms. Henes, who had organized the \$28-per-person outing and rented a yellow schoolbus trimmed with Day-Glo ribbons.

City officials are quick to point out that the incident should not be interpreted as an assault on religious freedom. "The whole thing could have been avoided if they had applied for a permit," said Edward Skyler, a spokesman for the Parks Department. Indeed, the agency held its own solstice rite across from the Plaza Hotel that night while a fire marshal kept a close eye on flames spitting from a modified barbecue. (In years past, the Parks Commissioner, Henry Stern, has attended the event dressed as a druid.)

The New York Civil Liberties Union, which is asking for the charges to be dismissed, says the incident reflects the Giuliani administration's intolerance for



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Donna Henes, an "urban shaman," has been putting city folk in touch with mother earth.

those outside the mainstream. "In the past, the police might have told these people to break it up and go home," said Norman Siegel, the executive director. "Now if they think you're weird, they haul you down to the precinct and make you a criminal."

Monday's run-in with the police wasn't the first for Ms. Henes; she tussled with them frequently during the civil rights and anti-war battles of the 1960's and 70's. "Believe me, I've seen the cops act more obnoxious," said Ms. Henes, who speaks with the flattened vowels of her native Cleveland. Her father, a scrap metal dealer, was an observant Jew, and her mother, a real-estate executive, was "as rational as the day is long." She says she got her first whiff of alternative religion at her ethnically diverse elementary school, which inspired her to build a private meditation shrine in her attic.

At 18 she moved to New York, traipsed around psychedelic St. Marks Place, and joined the freedom marches down South.

Later she taught art in the New York City school system.

Her marriage to the cosmic realm began in 1975, when a friend gave her an American Indian weaving that she placed over her face. The resulting revelation, she said, was not unlike Albert Einstein's discovering the theory of relativity. "I instantly understood how everything in the world was interconnected," she said.

IT wasn't long before Ms. Henes became a full-time shaman, known by admirers as Mama Donna. She began traveling to the world's more spiritual landmarks, from Jerusalem to Palenque to Stonehenge, and visited dozens of cities as a part of her Chants for Peace/Chance for Peace tour. For a fee, she creates rituals for weddings, baby namings, memorial services and even corporate events. During full and new moons, she leads drumming rituals in her living room. Thankfully her loft, on the top floor of a 100-year-old former public school, is well insulated from its neighbors.

On Tuesday afternoon, the place was still strewn with tambourines, drums and a bucket of sand — accoutrements from the previous evening's interrupted event. Ms. Henes wore an embroidered Nepalese hat, a Mexican scarf and an armful of beaded African bracelets. "I'm a multicultural fashion show," she said with a laugh as the phone rang — yet another concerned friend outraged over her brush with the law.

But Ms. Henes remained calm, saying she was in no mood for vengeance or angry words. "I don't want to turn what happened into a big political statement," she said, as the weak afternoon light faded.

Does she have anything to say to Mayor Giuliani? "Merry Christmas," she said. "And one more thing. It would be lovely if he dropped the charges."