

An Ontario Heathen Community's Cultural Selection Criteria

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Abstract

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This thesis analyzes the processes and rationales of ritual creation among contemporary Germanic Neopagans (Heathens). It is based on ethnographic fieldwork from May–September, 2023 at Raven's Knoll, a campground near Eganville, Ontario that hosts Heathen festivals. I identify selection criteria used to determine which cultural practices to adopt, adapt, or omit from rituals. I analyze both rituals and selection criteria as configurations or collections of interchangeable components that I call cultural configurants. Leaders and participants assembled rituals at the Heathen festival, Stone and Flame Gathering, guided by five criteria: inclusivity, Lore accuracy (ancient Germanic aesthetics), resonance (feeling right), woo (religious experience), and pragmatism (circumstantial adjustment). Inclusivity and pragmatism dominated, while Lore accuracy determined an omnipresent aesthetic.

Keywords: Cultural dynamics, Germanic Neopaganism, Ritual

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: The Subject of this Thesis

This thesis discusses and analyzes the ideologies and practices of Germanic Neopagans calling themselves Heathens at the Raven's Knoll campground near Eganville, Ontario. Heathens practice reconstructed pre-Christian Germanic religion drawn from the ethnohistoric, mythological, and archaeological literature. In this work, I attempt to answer the question: what selection criteria do Heathens use to determine which cultural practices to adopt, adapt, or omit from ritual?

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at Raven's Knoll (RK) between May 23 and September 5, 2023. Participant-observation and interviews generated most of the data. I focus on identifying the ideals that guide Heathens' creation and experience of ritual.

1.2: Why Heathens? Why Raven's Knoll?

My desire to study Heathens is founded on personal interest in the religion and fascination with the disparity between academic analyses of Heathenry with my own experience as a practitioner. I was interested in comparing my religious development, which is built on critical evaluation of sources of information about past Germanic culture, with other Heathens. I was concerned with some scholars' emphasis on xenophobic origins and expressions of Heathenry (Gardell 2003; Goodrick-Clark 2003; Kaplan 1996, 1997; von Schnurbein 2016), and with how Heathens and other Neopagans

create imagined authenticity through their engagement with the past (Blain and Wallis 2007; Magliocco 2009; Snook 2015). I wanted to engage and go beyond these topics into an avenue that was missing in my survey of the literature: the mental processes and models that underlie the creation of ritual from past and present cultural material.

My personal interest began in 2011, when I learned about Germanic Neopaganism through the art commission page for an artist called Svarta-Perlan¹. Following links on the artist's webpage, I found xenophobic Heathen organizations in the USA. As an agnostic, anti-Christian teenager, I was smitten by the aesthetics of Heathenry, troubled by its overtly racist overtones, and naive to its implicit xenophobia and sexism. Pursuing knowledge about the Germanic past, I discovered tolerant organizations that dispelled the xenophobic myths of the organizations I first encountered. By 2015, I had developed a critical approach to reading sources that claimed truths about the Germanic past before assimilating them into my beliefs; I read primary sources and relied on scholarly interpretations of artifacts, rather than prescriptive contemporary sources. My Heathen religion is rooted in Icelandic literature, with gaps filled in with context from archaeology of peninsular Scandinavia and England. I wondered whether other Heathens undergo similar revisions of their religious belief and practice, and if so, what guides those revisions in group settings.

I was underwhelmed with extant scholarship about ongoing transitions in Heathen thought. Early research largely focused on its xenophobic elements (Gardell 2003; Goodrick-Clark 2003; Kaplan 1996, 1997). Margot Adler (2006:284–285), writing about

¹<https://www.furaffinity.net/user/svarta-perlan-gc/> — webpage inaccessible to non-registered users.

Neopaganism in the 1979 first edition of *Drawing Down the Moon* omitted Heathenry because she found it a vehicle for Nazi ideology. Exceptions to this focus on xenophobia including Graham Harvey (1995) who wrote about Heathen cosmology and Jenny Blain (2002, 2005) who explored revived Scandinavian shamanism in Neopaganism, and geographic legitimization of Heathen practices. Research on Heathenry continues to address its xenophobic elements (Berger 2023; Lawrence 2021a; Lawrence 2021b), with greater emphasis on how Heathens construct authenticity from the past to legitimate their practices and identities (Kitterød 2022; Manea 2021; Smith 2021). I add a novel approach to this body of knowledge. I apply concepts from cognitive anthropology to study emergent religious practice in an Ontario Heathen community. I emphasize the creation rather than the legitimization of culture, and study this process by analyzing Heathens' mental models as filters for diverse and often contradictory information.

1.3: Brief Summary of Findings

I identify five cultural selection criteria that RK Heathens acknowledge using to create effective rituals. I name these criteria inclusivity, pragmatism, woo, resonance, and lore accuracy. These criteria operate in hierarchies that vary between rituals to produce comprehensible and accessible ritual practices.

Inclusivity is active inclusion of marginalized or overlooked people and groups. Pragmatism responds to material and social limitations that restrict ritual performance. Woo favours the behaviours and context that produce religious ecstasy and sublimity. Resonance encourages aligning with ritual participants' sense of meaningfulness. Lore

accuracy seeks similarity between a ritual's performance and mythological references. These criteria overlap and often interact and reinforce the same ritual element.

1.5: Thesis Organization

Chapter Two introduces Neopaganism. I describe three central patterns Neopagans use when determining what is viable for their practice. I address Neopaganism's ideological and cultural history from the renaissance through postmodernism. This chapter closes with a discussion of Heathenry's xenophobic history. I determine that the history of Germanic Neopaganism, including its xenophobic history, have significantly impacted ritual creation practices at RK.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the ethnographic methods I used to collect data and detail the theories that inform my orientation and analysis. I introduce the "cultural configurant" approach to analyzing culture in units that are composed of smaller and larger units. I determine that the cultural configurant concept, which atomizes and categorizes cultural elements according to their relations to other mental and cultural structures, is a valuable theoretical tool to study the cultural selection criteria of RK Heathens.

Chapter Four contextualizes and describes my fieldwork and RK. The emphasis is on the material and behavioural background to 2023's Stone and Flame Gathering. I determine that the material and behavioural history of RK community members significantly influence the ongoing creation of Heathen rituals.

Chapter Five provides an account of the three rituals of Stone and Flame Gathering 2023: The Esoteric, The Jotnar's Funeral, and The Blót. This chapter comprises the data on which my analysis of Heathen cultural selection criteria rests.

Chapter Six describes three explicitly identified criteria that Heathens used when adopting, adapting, or omitting ritual elements. I find that feelings of fit ("resonance"), religious experiences ("woo"), and pragmatism are central criteria Heathens use to evaluate what should be included in ritual, and how to perform them.

Chapter Seven describes all five selection criteria RK Heathens used when creating rituals. I show how these criteria operated in each Stone and Flame Gathering ritual and indicate how they acted according to hierarchies. The cultural selection criteria of rituals were variable according to the intended affect of rituals. However, inclusiveness and pragmatism were prioritized, and the Germanic past provided an aesthetic gloss for rituals reconstructed from multiple traditions.

Chapter Eight concludes that Heathen cultural selection criteria work according to a hierarchy. This thesis presents a unique avenue through which to study Neopagan ritual practice and documents a novel ritual performance.

The following chapter introduces the ideologies, philosophies, and cultural background of Heathenry, setting the stage for my analysis of RK Heathen cultural selection criteria.

Chapter 2: The Philosophies and History of Germanic Neopaganism

2.1: Introduction

In this chapter, I trace contemporary Heathenry's relationship to other forms of Neopaganism, the philosophies and cultural movements that contributed to its development, and its xenophobic origins. I focus on the ideas that influence the criteria Heathens often use to recreate past Germanic religious beliefs and practices. In the first section, "Neopaganisms," I define what Neopaganism is, identify the different ideologies underlying belief and practice selection, and explain how and why they are actuated. In the second section, "Philosophies and Cultural Turns," I follow major shifts that laid the foundation for Heathen thought from the fifteenth century through the twenty-first century. In the third section, "Conservative Occultism," I examine the history of North American Heathenry, focusing on the organizations and ideologies that had, or have, significant influence on its practice.

Heathenry is a collage formed in the eclectic history of Neopaganism. I suggest that recognizing the contributing factors to contemporary Heathenry helps to understand the selection criteria of Heathen individuals and communities. The literature reviewed in this chapter illustrates varying impulses, rationales, and trends that have shaped, or continue to shape, the practice of Heathenry either directly or tangentially.

2.2 Neopaganisms

In this section I define my use of the term *Neopaganism*, identify three ideologies that inform Neopagan expression, and explain how and why those ideologies are actuated. Definitions of Neopaganism have been too narrow in scope to address all possible religions that would fall under the category. However, attempts to categorize and explain the ideologies that influence the development of different forms of Neopaganism have borne fruit. Three ideologies that structure the creation of Neopagan religious forms are traditionalism, notable for its adherence to established conventions, reconstructionism, notable for its attempts to faithfully recreate geographically bounded past beliefs and practices, and eclecticism, notable for its pragmatic adoption of various cultural practices. I use the term *Neopaganisms* when referring to multiple kinds of religions under the umbrella of Neopaganism.

The term *Neopaganism* is derived from the Greek prefix *neo-* meaning new, and the Latin word *paganus*, meaning “country dweller” (Davies 2011:2; Strmiska 2005:2). Historically, the term *pagan* has been defined by negation. Any person who believed in a god or gods other than the Christian God was a Pagan. Alternatively, Paganism refers to polytheistic religions. Neither definition suffices because Christianity is not the only religion to have replaced others, and replaced religions were not all polytheistic. Paganisms include polytheistic religions that worship multiple gods like those practiced in Ancient Greece and medieval Scandinavia, monotheistic religions that worship a single god like ancient Egyptian Atenism (Dodson 2014), and henotheistic religions that

worship multiple facets of the same godhead such as contemporary Hinduism and Lithuanian Paganism (Strmiska and Dundzilla 2005:252). Here I use *Paganism* to refer to indigenous religions practised in past cultures prior to their conversion to an exogenous religion; this definition omits surviving traditional religions such as Hinduism and Shinto, and newly invented religions like Matrixism and Jediism (Cusack 2010:113).

Neopaganisms, in the pursuit of reviving past cultures, often adopt a mix of three dominant ideologies in deciding which cultural elements to adopt or adapt: traditionalism, eclecticism, and reconstructionism. These ideologies are not exclusive and drive tendencies in contemporary Neopagan thought and practice as to who, where, and when to borrow from, what to borrow, and how to borrow it. Neopagans commonly favour one of these ideologies and deploy others as necessary.

Traditionalism relies on a claim towards a maintained authenticity from time immemorial (Adler 2006:43; Truzzi 1974:636). Unlike Hinduism or Shinto, however, traditionalist Neopaganism lacks evidence of beliefs, practices, and artifacts from a living tradition; instead, revisionist history, folklore and myth-making serve to bolster claims to ancient traditions (Baker 1995:172–174; Magliocco 1995:94) According to Sabina Magliocco (2004:34) traditionalism is an important factor in the history of Wicca, one of the original branches of contemporary Neopaganism. Wicca draws inspiration from the works of Gerald Gardner, an amateur folklorist who claimed to have joined a witch coven carrying on pre-Christian British religion in the early twentieth century and spread its practices by initiating others. Traditionalist Wiccan groups tend toward rigid hierarchies and secrecy, likely because they derive from nineteenth century magical secret societies (Magliocco 2004:34). Even as Traditionalist Neopaganisms resist innovation and change,

either due to textual stability or extensive ritual history, there are circumstances under which variation may be introduced and enter into a range of potential variations to adopt (Magliocco 2004:146).

Eclecticism favours picking and choosing according to personal taste or purpose with less regard for consistency among religious elements. Often called “Universalist Neopaganism” eclectic Neopagan ideology is more interested in finding pragmatic solutions to spiritual problems over strict adherence to particular traditions (Strmiska 2005:34; Magliocco 2009:224). Individuals who identify as eclectic Neopagans “do not feel bound ... to the past religious traditions of a specific region as their ultimate frame of reference; instead, they see the traditions only as a provisional gateway into deeper spiritual experience” (Strmiska 2005:20). Both Strmiska (2005:22) and Lesiv (2013:20) see eclectic tendencies in Neopaganism mostly in the British Isles and North America, where ethnicity is de-emphasized as part of one’s religious experience, as opposed to places like Eastern Europe where ethnicity and religion are closely intertwined.

Reconstructionism emphasizes faithfully recreating the religion of a geographically and temporally defined past culture. Reconstructionist Neopagans draw upon primary source materials, like ethnohistoric or mythological literature and cultural artifacts, and secondary source information including scholarly research, to inform their practice. Heathenry typically emphasizes reconstructionism as it draws on resources about pre-Christian Germanic cultures to formulate its practice. Reconstructionists “use sources from the past to aid in the creation of religious, spiritual and ritual experiences and structures that suit the present-day: to draw on the understandings of the past for an improved understanding of the present” (Blain and Wallis 2009:414). How reconstructing

a past culture's religion depends on the modern cultural context and the intended goal. Some Neopaganisms, including Eastern European examples, attempt to reconstruct a pre-Christian religion to extend their national identity in the face of the dissolution of a strong state apparatus and secularization (Ivakhiv 2005:219; Lesiv 2013:64; Strmiska and Dundzila 2005:247). Other Neopaganisms look towards the past to find ethnic roots that, in countries such as the USA or Britain, are downplayed as components of individuals' identities (Gardell 2003:17–18; Blain and Wallis 2008:192).

A reconstructionist Neopagan might attempt to revive the ancient practices associated with the continental Gauls from Julius Caesar's journals but may have to eclectically borrow from their cultural and temporal neighbours, fourth century Bretons, to complete their idealized religious experience. An eclectic Neopagan might dominantly work with a single pantheon while adopting spiritual technologies from disparate cultures. These and other differences indicate that there are multiple Neopaganisms.

2.3: Philosophies and Cultural Turns

Contemporary Neopaganisms are informed by philosophies spanning from the gnostic revival during the fifteenth century Italian Renaissance through twenty first century postmodern thought (Hutton 2019:18; von Schnurbein 2016:18; Drury 2009:14, 21). Some of these philosophies remain entrenched in contemporary Neopagan experience, while others informed Neopaganism's trajectory and shape. In this section, I highlight some of the foundational philosophies and cultural movements that had significant impact on the development of Heathen thought, and trace Heathenry's ideological descent from

other Neopaganisms. I begin with Renaissance Gnosticism, which produced a Judaeo-Christian mystic tradition that laid the foundation for contemporary magic practice. I then discuss the turn away from Christian mysticism and ecstasy during the sixteenth century Reformation period, and how this shift led to growing secularization, and drove scientific curiosity in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment. Following this, I discuss the development of folkloristics and anthropology during the eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantic period, which is notable for rising patriotism and burgeoning nation states built on shared language and narrative. Finally, I discuss postmodern philosophy, which rejects monolithic truth claims in favour of individualist, pluralist, and particularist expressions of “truth”. These philosophies inform Heathenry’s development and ideology.

The Italian Renaissance saw the rediscovery of classical texts preserved in Western Asia that were brought back to Europe through trade and the migration of displaced Byzantine populations (Darling 2008:55–56). Two stand out as texts whose ideas merged with existing Catholic and Judaic mysticism: the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Chaldean Oracles*. According to Lasch (1992:27), these treatises espoused ideas adjacent to and overlapping with Gnosticism, a heretical doctrine that the god of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam is a lesser deity who rebelled against a higher godhead. These two texts became foundational for the Western magical tradition (Drury 2008:21; Magliocco 2004:26). To Renaissance mystics, these magical practices were invaluable to the discovery of new knowledge (Drury 2008:21; Hutton 2021; Luhrmann 1989:277–278; Magliocco 2004:31).

During the fifteenth century, another European philosophical and cultural movement rejected mysticism entirely: the Lutheran Reformation. Reformation Christianity resisted and criticized vernacular and organized mysticism and ecstasy, including those supported by the Catholic church, condemning both as layover elements of Paganism that needed to be excised to properly experience a relationship with God (Magliocco 2004:37). The belief that Catholic mysticism and ecstasy were rooted in past Pagan belief systems remained embedded in reformist Christian thought for at least another three centuries and would appear in anthropological thought and be applied to non-religious parts of culture (Larsen 2013:470–471; Magliocco 2009:227). Another facet of the Lutheran Reformation was the turn away from organized religion, represented by the Catholic church, and towards individual religious study and practice (Gregory 2017:37). This set the stage for growing secularization during the Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Unlike the Reformation philosophy that preceded it, European Enlightenment philosophy rejected spirituality and religion as ways of understanding the world and developing knowledge (Magliocco 2004:163). Belief in God was still common but became peripheral to empirical study of the natural world. The Enlightenment saw the development of the empirical sciences: physics, biology, chemistry, and geology (Porter 2003:4–5). Rationalism, which holds that “reason has precedence over other ways of acquiring knowledge” (Audi 2015:902), and empiricism, which bases knowledge on sensory experience, became foundational for epistemology. This emphasis on science and reason over ecstasy and emotion further diminished the relevance of religion and increased secularism, yet Enlightenment ideals encouraged freedom of religion as an

extension of personal liberty. The ideals of the Enlightenment receded during the nineteenth century Romantic period, which saw philosophies and ideologies rooted in emotion become dominant (Ivakhiv 2005:215; Magliocco 2004:4).

The Romantic period in Europe saw the rise of patriotism rooted in awareness of cultural, linguistic, and historic similarity (Davies 2011:87; Ivakhiv 2005:215; Strmiska 2005:42). During this period, folkloristics and anthropology were developing as academic disciplines to study culture, albeit with marginally different goals (Linke 1997:97–98). Folkloristics was used to bolster patriotism through homogenizing local mythologies into national ones (Baycroft 2012:1). Anthropology, on the other hand, sought knowledge about the human condition through studying others (Eriksen 2013:22–23). Both folkloristics and anthropology provided an ideological foundation for later Neopaganisms (Magliocco 2009:14,54; von Schnurbein 2016: 52).

Folkloristics and anthropology borrowed the Reformation idea that cultural baggage remains from earlier periods. Calling items of such cultural baggage “survivals”, E. B. Tylor (1920[1871]:16) describes them as “processes, customs, opinions ... which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society ... remain[ing] as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture.” The theory of survivals is part of progressive cultural evolutionary theory which describes cultures as moving from primitive to civilized states. Early folklorists saw Pagan history and practice as surviving in the folk or rural cultures of Europe (Hutton 2019:149; Magliocco 2004:50, 2005:58). Early German language folklorists, Herder and the Grimm brothers, sought foundational myths as survivals in their contemporary folklore that could rally the German folk spirit through a conceptual prehistoric and pan-Germanic culture (von Schnurbein 2016:25;

Strmiska 2005:42). Neopagans, as amateur folklorists, rely on this theory to analyze and extract information from not only past sources of inspiration, but also contemporary folk practices that are Pagan adjacent (Magliocco 2006:55). The same tools used by folklorists, including comparative and linguistic analyses, are used by contemporary religious reconstructionists to link mythologies and build monolithic models of past cultures. By doing so, Neopagans justify their adoption of different cultural elements across time and space (von Schnurbein 2016:281).

Eclectic adoption of elements from various times and places reflects twentieth century postmodernism. Postmodernism is often defined as the rejection of modernism: if modernism builds a monolithic access to truth, then postmodernism favours plural truths (MacQuarrie 2001:10). Individual perception and interpretation of phenomena is dependent on the biases, intentions, and history of the person experiencing it. Postmodernism is a subjectivist approach that revels in fragmentation and particularity (MacQuarrie 2001:11–12). Postmodern identities take fragmentary and particular components to construct a self from an array of fragments, like a collage, that is constantly rearranged and changed (Abrudan 2011:25).

The quintessential expression of postmodernist religious expression is New Age Spirituality. New Age Spirituality is a bricolage of cultural practices that individuals adopt to satisfy similar human desires that organized religion does while omitting standardized structure, beliefs, and practices (Hamilton 2000:192). New Age Spirituality is often traced to the 1970s, but Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000:4) identify roots at the beginning of the twentieth century. The core of this movement, often called “the spiritual marketplace” by detractors, is awareness of the immense variety of spiritual beliefs and

technologies available to individuals seeking spiritual sustenance (Hamilton 2000:192). Snook (2015:5) recounts exploring the New Age Spirituality section in a variety of bookstores, both brick and mortar and online, and being met with a dizzying array of subjects that only loosely fit together: “What I found was ... a plethora of New Age advice and instruction on astrology, Runology, UFOlogy, tarot, and witchcraft, as well as dozens of hip, up-to-date spell books for the modern dabbler in the occult.” The postmodern project finds itself in New Age spirituality through the immense diversity of beliefs and practices that can be fit into an individualized collage: New Age spiritualists take and overlay different practices to create new and highly syncretic religions (Hamilton 2000:192).

Neopaganisms participate in postmodernist philosophy by relying on borrowing practices from other cultures and belief systems (Magliocco 2004:235). Individual expressions of religion are prized and the self rather than the community is the primary focus of faith (Snook 2015:5). Neopagans thereby develop unique practices that require no external validation. Sabina Magliocco (2004:203) suggests that ritual has become the central performative genre of postmodernism. The composite nature of many Neopagan rituals and other practices indicate New Age influence, though Neopagans often deny it (Magliocco 2004:86; cf. Berger 1999:5–6).

In summary, what began with the re-emergence of literature and philosophy of ancient Pagan societies turned towards a rejection of then contemporary religious mysticism and ecstasy. When religious mysticism and ecstasy waned, rationalism and empiricism gained prominence and was then rejected by patriotism that drew on emotion and created new mythologies from real and imagined history. An ideology that rejected

mysticism and ecstasy in Catholicism as layovers from a pre-Christian past was adapted to solidify national identities through the belief that contemporary narratives and practices held true information about the past. Neopagans may not be aware of this philosophical or cultural history, but it has significant ramifications for Neopagan practice and belief.

2.4: Conservative Occultism

In this section, I examine the history of Heathenry as an expression of Neopaganism, and its relationship to conservatism and xenophobia. Contemporary Heathenry developed a reputation as conservative and xenophobic through vocal adherents and scholarship that emphasized these expressions. First, I address Heathenry's relationship to the Neopagan movement. Early scholarship about Neopaganisms either omitted Heathenry or emphasized Heathenry's conservative and xenophobic qualities. Second, I describe the origins of contemporary Heathenry, including early twentieth century German nationalism, occultism and anti-Christian sentiments. Third, I address conservative Heathen organizations that developed in the 1970s and 1980s that have had significant effects on the ideologies and expressions of Heathen individuals. Finally, I point to expressions of tolerance and acceptance in Heathenry that contradict its conservative reputation that have been promoted by a-racist and academically oriented communities and organizations. Such liberal views dominate at Raven's Knoll. I highlight these trends among Heathens as impulses that guide selection criteria for the adoption of different inspiration sources, ritual elements, and aesthetics.

Some of the earliest research on Neopaganism presented certain ideological features, including environmentalism or feminism, as universal, yet many of these are not essential to Heathenry. Margot Adler's 1979 first edition of her survey of Neopaganism, *Drawing Down the Moon*, omitted swaths of Neopaganisms including Heathenry (Adler 2006:213). Helen Berger (1999) uses the terms Neopagan and Neopaganism synonymously with Wicca, condemning all other possible Neopaganisms. Scholars in the early 2000s found these early representations of Neopaganisms wanting, and pursued research on non-Wiccan reconstructionist communities. They concluded that Neopaganisms are complex and multifaceted (Strmiska 2005:2; Lewis and Pizza 2009:1).

Yet even research on non-Wiccan communities treated Heathenry as a border case among Neopaganisms. There are two main reasons for this. First, Heathenry is not defined by its ritual practice, contrary to Adler's (2006:29) claim that "belief has never seemed very relevant to the Neo-Pagan movement." Rather, Heathenry emphasizes adopting pre-Christian Germanic myth into daily life (Harvey 1995; Blain 2005:191). Second, in its early days in the 1970s–1980s, Heathen organizations such as the Odinist Fellowship and the Viking Brotherhood were built on xenophobic ideologies and often included far-right, Nazi sympathizers (Gardell 2003:177–178; von Schnurbein 2016:58).

Nevertheless, Heathenry belongs in the family of Neopaganisms. Certainly, Gardell (2003:269) and von Schnurbein (2016:167–168) and Snook (2015:35) found aggressive rejection of monotheism in the Euro-American, exclusionary Heathen groups they studied to be a byproduct of an antisemitic identification of Christianity as a Jewish religion. However, Heathens also make use of a variety of spiritual technologies to perform their rituals including, but not limited to, *galdr*, or sung runes (Blain 2002:53;

Blain 2005:187), *seiðr*, a form of Scandinavian shamanism derived from historic Saami (Blain 2002:136; Blain 2005:199; von Schnurbein 2016:121), and *Blót*, a form of communal ritual sacrifice formerly done with animals but more recently performed with alcohol, intended to develop parasocial relationships with divinities (Strmiska and Sigurvinson 2005:130; von Schnurbein 2016:107). These spiritual technologies are intended to commune with deities and spirits: Heathenry is a polytheistic religion that recognizes the gods of early medieval Scandinavia known as *Æsir* and *Vanir*, and the primal deities or giants of the same mythology known as *Jötnar* (Strmiska and Sigurvinson 2005:136–137; Adler 2006:213; Davy 2021:1). Heathenry in North America is a reconstructed religion of another country. Attempts by European reconstructionists to import their ethnic Neopaganisms like Lithuanian Paganism to North America have not been as successful as home-grown Heathenry due to language barriers (Strmiska and Dundzilla 2005:283).

Like other reconstructed religions, American Heathenry has roots in ideologies about ethnicity and history. It was influenced by early twentieth century attempts at replacing Semitic elements from Christianity with Germanic mythology. After this failed, Germanic religionists rejected Christianity entirely and have since attempted to remove the syncretic Christian elements from preserved literature detailing pre-Christian Germanic beliefs. Early Heathen organizations also formed as a response against New Age spirituality and liberal ideologies that undermined their perceived cultural and genetic heritage.

Early twentieth century German nationalists saw Christianity as a Semitic religion, and their antisemitic sentiments drove them to seek a religion free of Semitic

elements. At the same time, European scholars were translating the Icelandic Sagas, which include narratives of pre-Christian events and practices written down by mediaeval Christians. Von Schnurbein (2016:28–31) suggests that the juxtaposition of Germanic myth and Christianity in the sagas allowed German nationalists to envision Jesus as a heroic, and Germanic, figure. The drive to strip Christianity of its Semitic elements and replace them with Germanic ideals was compatible with National Socialism found favour among members of Hitler's inner circle (Gardell 2003:26; von Schnurbein 2016:45–45).

During the late twentieth century American Heathenry developed as an independent religion, spurred by a rejection of growing spiritualism and liberalism (Gardell 2003:260–261; von Schnurbein 2016:55–56). The first two North American Heathen organizations—the Odinist Fellowship, established by Else Christensen in 1969, and the Viking Brotherhood, established by Stephen McNallen in 1970—promoted political agendas of racial and religious superiority akin to national socialist ideologies, and espoused religious segregation (Gardell 2003:152; von Schnurbein 2016). These two organizations spearheaded the growth of Heathenry in North America, establishing its xenophobic reputation. The Viking Brotherhood would dissolve and eventually be reformed into the *Ásatrú* Free Assembly (AFA), which espoused many similar ideals as the Viking Brotherhood (Gardell 2003; von Schnurbein 2016). Yet the AFA fractured because leaders and members found McNallen's loose approach and emphasis on ethnic identity, antithetical to what Heathenry ought to be in North America (Gardell 2003; von Schnurbein 2016). The result was the division of the *Ásatrú* Free Assembly into two splinter groups; The *Ásatrú* Folk Assembly, under McNallen, espouses the ideals of the *Ásatrú* Free Assembly; The Ring of Troth, under Edred Thorsson and James Chisholm,

espouses an academic and inclusive orientation towards Heathen practice (Gardell 2003; Kaplan 1996:213, 231; von Schnurbein 2016; Snook 2015).

Two Heathen political factions in North America are visible in this split: the socially conservative Ásatrú Folk Assembly and the liberal Troth. This simplification should not be taken as claiming that all Troth members are liberals or all Ásatrú Folk Assembly members are conservatives. The primary division between these two organizations is their orientation towards ethnic identity as a qualification for participation in the Heathen community. The secondary divisions concern other social issues such as gender and sexuality in ritual.

This schism between the Ásatrú Folk Assembly and the Troth manifests in their orientations to their members' intersecting identities and practices. In her ethnography, *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement*, Jennifer Snook (2012:16) describes an e-mail she received from the Ásatrú Folk Assembly rescinding her membership because as a researcher she was associated with assumed liberal leaning academia. This schism is further reinforced in religious practice. Practices such as *seiðr* are often frowned upon in conservative Heathen circles, especially if performed by men. Historic *seiðr* as found in what is known as *The Lore*, a body of literature that describes pre-Christian Germanic past lifeways and beliefs, is often performed by women, while men who do practice *seiðr* are denigrated as perverse and effeminate (Blain 2002:220–222; von Schnurbein 2016:243–244; Snook 2015:137). This belief carries into contemporary conservative Heathenry (Snook 2012; Blain 2001; Blain and Wallace 2006; von Schnurbein 2016). Blain (2002:18) and Snook (2015:137) find that *seiðr* is practised by more women, homosexual men, and trans individuals than by

cis, heterosexual men. The Troth takes on a more postmodern position: its practice is acknowledged as part of the past Germanic spiritual landscape, but it is not an essential component of a Heathen's spiritual collage.

Gardell (2003), von Schnurbein (2016), and Snook (2015) find that Heathens reproduce ideologies of gender inequality according to their conceptualization of historic Germanic women. Contemporary Heathens often cite The Lore and claim that Scandinavian women often experienced high degrees of social and household liberty (Snook 2015:110). This claim finds purchase among both conservative and liberal Heathens, but these groups operationalize it differently: conservative Heathens often use the social liberty of Scandinavian women as a critique against patriarchal domination found in Christianity while simultaneously condemning women to domestic spheres themselves (Snook 2015:108–109). Liberal Heathens might make the same argument against patriarchy but enhance women's roles in religious practice (Gardell 2003; Snook 2015).

Raven's Knoll practices of inclusion and diversity reflect liberal politics, and a small number of RK Heathens are or were members of The Troth. While staunch resistance to Christianity is common among Neopagans (Snook 2015:33; von Schnurbein 2017:89), Christians are welcomed at Raven's Knoll's Neopagan festivals; there is often a Sunday service held there during Kaleidoscope Gathering, the largest Neopagan festival in Canada. Men and women each hold prominent social and religious positions among RK Heathens. There are more *gyðja* (Heathen priestesses) at RK than there are *goði* (Heathen priests). *Seiðr* is practiced by men, including those that identify as cis and heterosexual, as well as women. There is significant resistance to xenophobic ideologies

in the RK community, and individuals espousing those ideologies are frequently turned away; Maryanne (who goes by MA) and Austin, the two proprietors of Raven's Knoll, combat ethnic, religious, and gendered intolerance to the best of their ability.

2.5: Conclusion

Heathenry is one among many Neopaganisms, and shares much of its history with the Neopagan movement as a whole. Heathens are generally reconstructionists seeking to rebuild past beliefs and practices from extant sources about pre-Christian Germanic cultures but often draw from other cultures to fill gaps. Many Heathens, whether consciously or not, combine a postmodernist approach with Tylor's theory that survivals from the past persist embedded in narratives and practices. Early attempts at re-creating a Germanic religion, from which Heathenry draws inspiration, were rooted in xenophobic and socially conservative ideologies. Some contemporary Heathens exhibit these ideologies and others resist them.

The history of Neopaganism, the philosophies and cultural backgrounds that influenced Neopaganism's development, and Heathenry's xenophobic history all factor into the cultural selection criteria of contemporary Heathens. Each of these threads may be pulled apart and studied independently of one another, but their unique weave into individual Heathen experiences, ideologies, and ritual performances contributes to what people find valuable or worth retaining. I endeavour to identify how these various impulses interact to identify the criteria Heathens use to determine what to include and

exclude from their ritual practice. The following chapter describes the methods I used to study these impulses and the rituals they informed at Raven's Knoll.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methods for Identifying Units of Culture and their Selection Criteria

3.1: Introduction

In this chapter, I explain the methods I used to collect ethnographic data and the theoretical framework I use to analyze them. The section “Observation among Heathens,” describes the methods used during my fieldwork on Heathen ritual creation practices. These methods include material observation, behavioural observation, interviewing, and participant-observation. The section “Configurants and Configurations,” describes my theoretical orientation, which treats cultural phenomena such as rituals and beliefs as comprising interchangeable elements. I call these elements “configurants” because they appear in mutually supporting combinations or “configurations”. For example, a greeting ritual may be made up of possible acceptable elements, such as handshakes, kisses, or waves, or utterances such as “hi,” “good day,” or “how are you,” that may be combined in different permutations to meet different conditions or purposes while being recognized as a greeting. People mix and match configurants according to selection criteria that are themselves configurants. I first outline this theory’s basic tenets. Second, summarize the theories that inform it, including Ruth Benedict’s (1971[1934]) cultural configuration, Homer Barnett’s (1953) cultural innovation, Richard Dawkins’s (1973) memetics, Dan Sperber’s (1985) epidemiology of representations, Roger Lohmann’s “creations” (2010) and “spirit groups” (2021), and Roy D’Andrade’s (1981) and Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn’s (1997) explications of schema theory. Third, I identify what I see as five core

features of configurants: first, that they are implicitly or explicitly chosen patterns among potential cultural options; second, that they convey, enact, or reinforce culture; third, that configurants can group in configurations, and configurations can in turn act as configurants in more inclusive configurations; fourth, that configurants can be unstable and prone to replacement or modification depending on their centrality in a configuration; and fifth, that boundaries between configurants are arbitrary and unclear. I also illustrate how configurants operate within and outside my research population by providing examples of cultural patterns that exhibit the five features identified as belonging to configurants. In the concluding section, “Answers Lie between the Configurants,” I argue that the cultural configurant concept presents a unique and valuable way to analyze Heathen cultural selection criteria, which are mental configurations. That is by determining a ritual’s public configurants and those notably absent, identifying their associations and internal compatibility, and comparing them against what Heathens have said are important to their ritual practice.

3.2: Observation Methods

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at Raven’s Knoll, near Eganville, Ontario, in the summer of 2023, where I participated in perennial Neopagan festivals and a novel Heathen festival introduced in June. This fieldwork relied on four of the research methods available to anthropologists, as identified by Roger Lohmann (2006:962–963): material observation, direct communication, behavioural observation, and participant-observation. These methods generated complementary information about the ritual

creation processes of RK Heathens. These data were influenced by my hybrid identity as a practising Heathen, newcomer to RK, and academic researcher. I endeavour to express this data reflexively to acknowledge my positionality in its production and dissemination.

Material observation is used to generate descriptions of the nonliving objects and features that make up the material conditions of a culture. These material conditions inform and reflect its participants' ideologies and behaviours, which may or may not be explicitly acknowledged. Material observation significantly aided my understanding of Heathen ideology and behaviour. The arrangement of shrines across RK property, the arrangement of physical elements within shrines, the artifacts used in rituals, and the motifs and materials of ritual implements are all material observations that I used to complement data generated using other methods.

Behavioural observation examines the intentional movements of actors, including bodily movements and social interactions, to document them without direct interaction with the research subject. Observing ritual behaviour, communication between subjects, and repetitive actions reveals nuances of daily life and habits that the researcher can describe and categorize etically. Observing ritual behaviours provided essential data to identify implicit criteria for cultural configurant selection in Heathen ritual production.

I used two of the kinds of interview outlined by H. Russell Bernard (2006:211–212): informal and unstructured. Informal interviewing is impromptu or in situ questioning without specific regard to formalized research questions or overarching interview goals. Informal interviews are short, specific, and provide immediate answers to questions as they arise. I conducted over 200 informal interviews on Heathens' practice and belief. Unstructured interviewing has a central plan to collect specific data, but no

predetermined set of questions or elicitations. My unstructured interviews opened with a single question about the informants' engagement with a Heathen ritual; as interviews progressed, I often interjected questions prompted by informants' responses. These interviews focused on informants' Heathen ritual production emphasizing idea generation and execution. I conducted five unstructured interviews with *goðar* (ritual leaders), tape recording three and summarizing two in my fieldnotes.

Participant-observation places the ethnographer within the culture to “seek firsthand observation of lived experiences of the participants rather than learn about those experiences through narratives and stories” (Atkinson 2017:78). Many scholars collapse multiple types of observation into participant-observation, including Bernard (2017:344), who suggests that participant-observation exists on a continuum from pure observation, which Lohmann would categorize as material and behavioural observation, and pure participation, which omits or limits observation in favour of intense immersion. My own fieldwork experience was mostly defined as a participant: I entered the field as a solitary Heathen and participated in rituals not only for data, but also for spiritual enrichment. Though this may cast doubt on the impartiality of my data, avid participation in the researched culture can enhance awareness when grounded in the purpose of accurate observation (Bernard 2006:349). I participated in all aspects of ritual process, including preparation and execution. For example, I was a central figure for High Sumbl at Hail and Horn Gathering, where I was one of two people responsible for ensuring that everyone who wished to make a toast or boast over mead could give libations. Participants assembled and sat in a circle, while my partner, with a horn of alcoholic mead, and I, with

a horn of non-alcoholic mead, walked the interior of the circle together and poured mead for each participant to give libations in turn.

Being a practitioner entering a field site with minimal social connections afforded me the positionality being both insider and outsider. My position as a Heathen gave me more ready access to participatory and creative roles. At the same time, as a non-community member, I retained a level of distance that was partly mandated by RK campground co-proprietor Maryanne, who ensured my participation in as many festival activities as possible for data collection. Maryanne asked me to be a Byrele, or horn bearer, for High Sumbl, a toasting, boasting and gifting ritual, at Hail and Horn Gathering. Yet any of my offers to help festival staff, even for ritual setup, at Kaleidoscope Gathering were rejected because I was present to research Neopagan rituals, not how to run festivals. Addressing issues surrounding being a “native anthropologist,” Kirin Narayan (1993:673) states that issues of culture identity are “tangled” and that “a person may have many strands of identification available [which] may be tugged into the open or stuffed out of sight,” which is exemplified in the different approaches to my Heathen/researcher split identity and their invocation at Raven’s Knoll.

The potential biases that can be introduced by researcher positionality are best addressed by reflexively. Charlotte Aull Davies (2007:4) describes reflexivity as awareness and open description of the effect researcher positionality has on their ethnography. I ensured that every person I encountered in the field was aware of my dual identity as a Heathen and as an ethnographer. In some cases, this led to more frequent interactions and information sharing. In others, it precluded deep investigation into some individuals’ experiences, activities, or thoughts. I also frequently shared insights with my

informants, which they confirmed, corrected or sometimes exclaimed “I never thought about it like that,” which prompted further probing. My presence during ritual briefs and debriefs, whether private or public, impacted ritual generation and execution during some festivals. In this thesis, I identify where and how my presence in the field had practical impacts and state my known biases in data collection and reporting.

I approached this research as a solitary Heathen with no ritual practice and no interest in developing one; my aim was to identify the logic my informants use to create their rituals. Based on my experience as a Heathen, a preliminary survey of literature on Heathenry, and awareness of some academic achievements of Dr. Maryanne Pearce and Austin Lawrence, the proprietors of RK, I expected to find a Heathen community whose ritual practice was firmly rooted in The Lore. I hypothesized that my research would be pedantic, and that I would quibble over minor variance between rituals described in Lore sources and those practiced at RK. Instead, I found drastic variance between the Lore and ritual practice. The data this thesis rests upon were selected for analysis because of their striking divergence from my expectations; my informants rely on The Lore, but I was not expecting a wealth of what RK Heathens call “UPG” (Unverified Personal Gnosis) or cross-cultural borrowing in ritual. I am aware that my emphasis on perceived novel or Lore contradicting ritual elements has overshadowed the discussion and analysis of those expected ritual elements.

In sum, I used material observation, behavioural observation, direct communication, and participant-observation in Heathen and other Neopagan festivals at RK to gather data on the criteria organizers and attendees used to select and assemble elements of their rituals. Material observation, behavioural observation, and participant

observation produced data about the actual practice, while direct communication produced data about the explicitly understood rationales and explanations for various practices. My positionality as Heathen, researcher, and RK newcomer afforded me opportunities, such as taking the Byrele role at Hail and Horn Gathering, and restricted others, such as providing help during Kaleidoscope Gathering. Having discussed the methods used to research Heathen ritual creation process, I now explain my theoretical orientation to the data generated from them.

3.3: Configurants and Configurations

In this section, I explain the terms cultural *configurant* and *configuration* and present an overview of the theories and concepts that informed my research. I argue that these concepts help to identify criteria Heathens use to select among options in creating rituals. By treating rituals as configurations made up of configurants that leaders chose for their potential fit with criteria for selection, the components (configurants) and whole (configurations) of both rituals and selection criteria as cultural assemblages become visible for analysis.

The theories that inform my approach have been developed over nearly a century and vary in terms of scope, content, and context. Ruth Benedict (1971[1934]) theorizes cultures as having developed from cumulative choices among options made by individuals and social collectives according to ideal behavioural patterns that she calls *configurations*. Homer Barnett (1953) considers *innovation* in culture as the combination of two or more ideas that were not previously associated, and *configurations* as mental

arrangements of objects that are both products of and producers of synthesis. Richard Dawkins (2016) proposes that culture is composed of easily memorable units he calls *memes* that can combine into meme complexes that tend to transmit together. Dan Sperber (1985) argues that culture's units, which he calls *representations*, are subject to frequent and repeated modification in the process of their reproduction. Schema theory, spearheaded in cognitive anthropology by Roy D'Andrade (1981) and advanced by Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn (1997), models culture as mental templates consisting of networks of associations built up by experience. *Schemas* are a mental processing mechanism that determine the validity and categories of novel sensory or cognitive inputs based on prior stimuli. Roger Lohmann (2010) calls items of culture *creations*, defined as products of minds that can take the form of ideas, behaviors, or artifacts. An example he theorizes is spirit beings, which colonize believers' minds and assemble in mutually supporting *spirit groups* (Lohmann 2021).

Each of these theories provide useful considerations for the cultural configurant concept. For Benedict, culture is chosen, cumulative, and arises at the intersection of individuals and societies. For Barnett, innovation is novel combinations. For Dawkins, culture is composed of atomized parts of varying degrees of complexity that can combine and be reproduced. For Sperber, while culture is rarely reproduced perfectly, representations often remain recognizably intact. For D'Andrade and Strauss and Quinn, schema theory explains the appearance and acceptance of novelties in culture based on their similarity to existing models and associations. For Lohmann, creations undergo multiple translations among ideal, material, and behavioural forms that provide occasion for misunderstandings or intentional modification. Spirit groups can colonize new minds

in concert and take over from the incompatible spirits that previously dominated. From these suggestions and explanations, I synthesized the concept of *cultural configurants*: recursively elementary and elaborated units of culture that represent and order sets of experiences, are chosen and changeable subject to fit and error, and are cumulative.

Contrary to common discourse, culture is not a monolithic entity that people participate in but rather a collective accretion of selective behaviours of socially learned information by individuals (Benedict 1971[1934]:218). These accretions form what Benedict calls “patterns of culture,” which can be described as cultural institutions, beliefs, and behaviours that have been cultivated over a prolonged time. A culture’s patterns are influenced by the material, behavioural, and ideal environment in which the culture develops: “the course of life and the pressure of environment, not to speak of the fertility of human imagination, provide an incredible number of possible leads, all of which, it appears, may serve a society to live by” (Benedict 1971[1934]:16). Limitations based on material reality constrain human potential and imagination to what is possible or conceivable, such as in language where the body serves as the locus for action. In this language example, the human body can produce many more sounds than are used in English, French, or German (Benedict 1971[1934]:16). At some point in the past, individuals selected and elaborated on some articulations and discarded others. This pattern of selection and elaboration, which goes beyond the scope of language, is foundational to the identification of a culture: “identity as a culture depends upon the selection of [possible cultural traits]. Every human society everywhere has made such a selection in its cultural institutions” (Benedict 1971[1934]:17).

I draw three key concepts and a term, though modified, from Benedict's discussion of cultural patterning. First, that culture is selected within environmental constraints. Second: that culture is produced from the intersection of individual and the collective selection of culture traits. And third, that culture can be studied according to common patterns and deviance from those patterns. From Benedict, I also adopt the term configuration to reference the object of cumulative acquisition and integration of cultural features.

When Benedict suggests that culture is selected according to environmental constraints, she means that physical, social, and biological realities all influence cultural formation. However, there are limitations to studying these selections in their accretion. First, it is implausible to study the entire selection chain that led to the current cultural pattern (Benedict 1934:13). Second, "when [a culture trait] is institutionalized, the form it takes follows other grooves of thought than those implied in the original impulse" (Benedict 1971[1934]:25). Adolescence, for example, is elaborated differently across cultures (Benedict 1971[1934]:17). Existing social environmental factors such as the degree of gender role proscription have significant and ongoing ramifications for how culture is practised. The notion that environmental factors limit cultural selection is central to my configurant concept as those factors constrain possible configurant options.

Benedict also describes culture as a product of intersecting collective and individual participation and decision-making: Individuals possesses capacity for dissidence, even as they are limited by the cultural information made available to them in their society. Benedict (1971[1934]:183) states that "no culture yet observed has been able to eradicate the differences in the temperaments of the persons who compose it. It is

always give and take. ... This *rapport* is so close that it is not possible to discuss patterns of culture without considering specifically their relation to individual psychology.”

Contrary cultural or psycho-social expressions are actually “congenial responses” of culture carriers (Benedict 1971[1934]:183).

Interactions among environment, individual agency, and collective action produce variable responses to the same stimulus; the variant responses become cultural traits that people can identify, assess, and evaluate based on their congruence with and their divergence from established culture. Benedict (1971[1934]:31) suggests that because of the range of possible permutations of any given cultural traits it is valuable if not essential to study their interpenetrations. These create much variation. Though two cultures may share multiple traits, the intersections of these traits can create categorically different objects with differing associations and contents. To explain this concept, Benedict (1971[1934]:27–31) draws on the Indigenous American belief in the acquisition of a supernatural power through dreams or visions. These beliefs are largely shared across North American Indigenous cultures, but their integration into each culture varies based on closely related cultural traits. I adopt a similar approach with the configurants concept except, instead of comparing cultural traits across cultures, I identify and trace core features (configurants) of rituals and cultural selection criteria in a single community to observe their dynamics.

Benedict (1971[1934]:36) uses the term *configuration*, which she draws from *Gestalt* psychology to refer to the collective accumulation and organized integration of cultural features into whole cultures. The configuration of a culture can be understood as its overarching ethos or quality that organizes and gives rationale to its myriad and

sometimes contradictory cultural features. I appreciate Benedict's approach to understanding how numerous elements of culture fit together into something apparently more than the sum of its parts. While Benedict uses the term configuration to describe a single organizing principle of whole cultures, I use it at a smaller and more flexible scale to identify organizing structures for bundles of configurants that make up artifacts, behaviours, and ideas.

Homer Barnett (1953:183) also uses the term *configuration* to refer to the combination of ideas in culture, except that for Barnett configurations are "mental activity systems that are somehow the counterparts of external referents," rather than a normative ethos that rationalizes myriad and contradictory cultural expressions. These configurations, he argues, are part of the process of innovation, which is combinative rather than generative. This means that innovation is a fusion of two or more ideas, rather than the absolute genesis of something entirely new. Developments in cognitive anthropology after Barnett's work saw his term *configurations* replaced with the term *schemas*, meaning mental models that are reflected in behavioural and material culture. For Barnett, a configuration is

any unified pattern of experience. Configurations may be large or small; they may be elementary or composite; they may be generic or most specific and discrete. They may be vague ... [and] have uncertain, vacillating, fragmentary or elusive characteristics. But in all cases they are organized; their elements stand in certain definite relationships to one another. [Barnett 1953:182]

The unified patterns of experience Barnett is referring to are repeated sensory or cognitive inputs that are frequent or common such that they become archetypal or prototypical models of the experienced world. Barnett (1953:182) describes configurations as nearly limitless in their possible scope and arrangement because of the extensive range of human experience and understanding. Yet particular configurations, Barnett (1953:183) argues, are normative thought patterns and standards of thought.

Elements of Barnett's definition of *configuration* have become integral to the cultural configurant concept: Like his configurations, my configurants have no definite size, no definite complexity, are fragmentary and elusive, and are organized such that they relate to one another. When I refer to configurations to mean groups of configurants that can themselves act as configurants in larger configurations, it is Barnett's description that I draw most upon. In my formulation, a configuration can be anything from the know-how and action of flushing a toilet to the socially and legally mediated requirements to be Prime Minister of Canada. Complementary to this, configurations can vary in complexity: A configuration may contain a small number of elementary component configurants and represent something highly specific, or it can be composed of many elementary component configurants and represent abstract concepts. That configurations are fragmentary and elusive is crucial to my suggestion that cultural configurant theory be used to study the optional and partly interchangeable components of a configuration, and that those components are arbitrarily defined. Also like Barnett's usage, I hold that configurations (and the configurants that they attract and bundle) exist in relationships to one another and often evoke new combinations or innovations that are implicated by their relationships.

Dawkins's memetics presents an approach to studying cultural change through a genetic analogy. Dawkins treats culture as made up of units that he calls memes. Dawkins argues that memes, like genes, are subject to evolutionary pressures, resulting in a kind of natural selection: Memes with more longevity, fecundity, and copy-fidelity than others have a better chance of reproducing (2006:194). Memes also combine into complexes, or bundles of mutually supporting memes that become stable meme sets (Dawkins 2006:196,199). Dawkins's (2006:192) examples of memes, ranging from tunes to methods for building arches, are not discretely defined or bounded (Borenstein 2004:463; Blackmore 2001:25). Blackmore (1999) equates the meme with the gist of a thing, but Oring (2014:440) points out that a gist, too, is vague. For the cultural configurant concept, I adopt Dawkins's conceptualizing culture as made up of pieces of variable size and complexity that can combine with others and can be transmitted in more or less stable form. I do not make use of his genetic metaphor but find value in an imprecise definition of culture's pieces since that seems to reflect how Heathen ritual iteration and cultural selection criteria work in practice.

I also find useful Dawkins's insight that bits of culture can combine in complexes and be transmitted together, exemplified by Lohmann's notion of "spirit groups". In recognition of this, I call arbitrarily identified pieces of configurants, and their complexes configurations. These complexes, like Dawkins's meme complexes, become largely stable sets of ideas, behaviours, or artifacts that remain relatively closely linked based on their mutually supporting qualities.

A similar development towards the atomization of ritual can be drawn out of ritual studies; writing about the identification of different media within ritual, Ronald Grimes

(2014:232) presents a tripartite structure for discussing ritual: the tradition, the ritual, and the element. In this structure, elements are the fundamental components of ritual activity: actors, actions, times, and places, among other potential aspects (Grimes 2014:237–241). The ritual is a designed assemblage of elements that is composed such that it has form, structure, and meaning (Grimes 2014:232). Rituals form the basis of traditions, which develop, span, and decline across time, or systems, which are dynamic and occur within a space and time (Grimes 2014:232). Each of these levels in the hierarchy “can be disassembled, and they can be cobbled together. Stitched in tandem” (Grimes 2014:232). Thus, Grimes has presented a specific lexicon for the study of ritual units using similar structures as Dawkins proposed for the study of cultural units. Grimes’s tripartite structure for ritual analysis is striking and valuable for its insistence on adopting only three levels of hierarchy and the categorization of element types, but the simplified hierarchy seems to collapse all ritual elements to the same level of importance.

Dan Sperber (1985), using the phrase “epidemiology of representations”, proposes a disease spread metaphor for culture as something that we catch from one another. He suggests examining culture as comprising causal chains of reproduction and transmission of cultural representations that is prone to some modification each time it is transmitted. These representations are either “mental” ideas in minds, or “public” artifacts and behaviours (Sperber 1985:77). An epidemiology of representations is the study of the causal link between the reception, processing, modelling, and reproduction of these representations to explain how some representations remain relatively stable and widespread cultural representations in a group of people (Sperber 1985:75).

Sperber resists Dawkins's suggestion that cultural ideas, in the form of memes, are reproduced stably over time, emphasizing instead that cultural representations are prone to modification each time they are transformed from a mental representation into a public representation for transmission, and back into a mental representation when it is learned (Sperber 1985:75). Sperber (1985:75) suggests that cultural representations that retain their similitude can be called "endemic", which are "properly cultural" and result in traditions, while those that transform quickly can be called "epidemic", which are transient and may be fashions or fads (Sperber 1985:74–75). Successful transmission is a more or less accurate model of the transmitter's intent; perfect mimesis of the transmitter's representation is considered uncommon.

This concern about relative accuracy in reproduction of a representation is a central aspect of the cultural configurant concept. Like Sperber's representations, I propose that configurants and configurations are prone to modification through each reproduction, either intentionally or unintentionally, which invariably affects its reception. Classifying a configuration across its permutations as more or less the same requires that its core, organizing configurants carry a high degree of similitude across those permutations. In the case of the Raven's Knoll Heathen blót ritual configuration, for example, a ritual would not be called blót without the establishment of a wooden pole representing a god (or other ethnocosmological entity) recognized in Heathenry in either one of the sacred enclosures on site, the Æsir Vé or the Jotnar Vé (see section 4.3.1 below). The god (a configurant of the ritual configuration) and the words (also configurants of the ritual) said during a specific blót may vary. But the centrality of

Heathen ethnocosmology and sacred enclosures to blót rituals ensures that any exemplar of a blót remains recognizable as a blót.

There are, however, multiple possible sources and directions for the modification of cultural configurations and configurants, subjected to cultural evolutionary pressures both intentional and accidental. Introduction and permeation of new socially learned information, through processes such as diffusion, the exchange of cultural information across geographic space, can influence the direction of cultural change (Kroeber 1963[1923]:65). It is also possible to lose cultural information through unintentional processes, analogous to genetic drift or random variation, and intentional directed modifications (Boyd and Richerson 1985:9–10). Using blót as an example, the liturgy and idol is subjected to directed modification each year, while the activities of participants is subject to random variation and can introduce new patterns.

Schema theory is a theory of cognition and perception that proposes that people form mental models of myriad things through experiential learning. These models, called schemas, comprise assumptions about typical features of those things that act as tools for processing information. In cognitive anthropology, schema theory has been built on earlier approaches like ethnoscience—documentation of emic categories including types and subtypes through interviews—to model how cultural categories develop, serve as templates that shape perception, and change through ongoing experience (D'Andrade 1995). Schemas are clusters of associated ideas that reside in memory that help identify, categorize, and extrapolate on stimuli (Keller 2015:64). Although schemas are revised in response to contrasting stimuli, they stabilize when multiple, similar inputs over the course of a lifetime further cements the typified qualities of the thing a schema models

(Quinn 2005:38). Schema development and application are largely unconscious and constantly active (Keller 2015:64). Similar models may be shared through social learning among a group of people and thus become characteristic of a group's culture (Strauss and Quinn 1997:49; Quinn 2005:38).

As schemas are prototypical or archetypal mental models of reality, they serve as useful filtering mechanisms for the adoption, adaptation, and rejection of particular features associated with any thing. For example, a schema representing "bird" might include elements like feathers, a beak, and ability to fly. Seeing something flying, one might reach the conclusion that it was a bird even without seeing feathers or a beak. Seeing animals with feathers and a beak that do not fly would challenge the schema's expectation, leading to a change.

I draw from schema theory the insight that culture is organized, grows, and changes by networks of association in minds that link characteristics or qualities that people learn to regard as typical of a broader conventional category. In my terminology, *schema* corresponds roughly to *configuration* and the associated elements or features that make up a schema correspond to *configurants*. A configuration and the configurants comprising it are restricted by their agents' experiences. At the same time, configurations act as templates that shape potential modification. In the blót example I raised above, the arrangement and format of the ritual and its components preclude placing god poles outside the Vé area. A participant would be taken aback in the event that blót happened outside the Vés because of their schema for and configuration of "blót".

Lohmann (2010:216), building on many ideas already addressed in this chapter, proposes looking at culture as comprising *creations*, defined as products of imaginations

that exist in three forms: ideas, behaviours, and artifacts. Lohmann's (2010:215–216) use of the term *creation* is intended to highlight the fact that all culture is created: creations begin as ideas that are translated into behaviours and artifacts that others can perceive and then back into ideas in the minds of others. Echoing Sperber, Lohmann (2010:219) finds that creations are not uniformly stable objects and that they can be “changed or corrupted” through the fallibility of human perceptive, cognitive, and behavioural capacities. Lohmann also sees the potential for creations to develop into new innovations through inaccurate projective interpretation, wherein received ideas are contextualized in ones' own schemas differently than they were in the transmitter's schemas, thus becoming novel creations. Though creations may begin as mental representations embedded in matrices of association, the behavioural and artifactual forms of these creations also exist in complex matrices and “provide fodder for innovations” (Lohmann 2010:219). In this way these creations and matrices accrete, producing traditions and cultures through cumulative layering and ratcheting in causal “creation chains”. In a separate article, Lohmann (2021) builds on Dawkins's idea of meme complexes to point out that in cases of religious conversion, mental models of novel spirit beings as real are transmitted together in mutually supporting “spirit groups”. Thus, the Christian god, devil, angels, and demons are allied against the spirit groups of the religions that they colonize. From Lohmann's theory of creations I draw my characterization of configurations as unbounded associations that include not just mental schemas but behaviors and intentionally modified materials that are networked across multiple minds and continue in broad outline while newly created constituent configurants are added or replace earlier ones. Lohmann's notion of spirit groups as allied cultural belief elements

that compete with other spirit groups and colonize human minds in religious conversion correlates with my model of configurations as complexes of configurants that tend toward stability and mutual support because they are understood as fitting together as part of a more general principle or model.

Here I highlight the notions of cumulative and combinative innovation within an associative matrix as central to the cultural configurant concept: innovations become units that are bound together by association in more complex innovations. Within any given configuration, the configurants that compose it are in relationships with the configuration they help construct and each other. Further, especially if configurants are shared across configurations, they establish relationships between those two different configurations as well. For example, consuming turkey (shared configurant) among family (another shared configurant) at Thanksgiving (configuration) and Christmas (another configuration), generates associations between the two celebrations that are typically replicated. The introduction of new configurants into an existing configuration is a form of innovation that creates new associations and qualities within and across configurations. Yet these associational matrices also restrict the potential for innovation. While it is possible to defy the existing associational matrix of a configuration by switching in a new configurant that would have earlier been seen as inappropriate in that configuration, it produces dissonance akin to the experience of gender-non-conforming people identified by Benedict (1971[1934]:189–190): the creation may be tolerated up to a point but it produces discomfort.

The scholars discussed here acknowledge that culture is a product of choices, that culture is composite, that culture is prone to change, and that it exists as associational

matrices. These insights shaped the lens through which I studied selection criteria for ritual innovations. I have synthesized components of these insights into the cultural configurant concept: a toolkit for analyzing innovations as mutable units whose compositions are channeled by associations deemed appropriate.

I propose that we consider any cultural creation as comprising cumulative, composite, partially stable, and bounded units that are almost infinitely elaborate or specific. I use the terms *configuration*, *configurant*, and *sub-configurant* to arbitrarily refer to creations and their observable components or properties. In practice, segments of cultural information, such as those that have been labeled with terms such as *memes*, *representations*, *schemas*, and *creations*, are themselves made up of configurants. Since configurants group together in groups that support one another tend to be transmitted together, I used the term configurations to refer to such complexes to emphasize that they comprise interchangeable configurants. Cultural configurants may be defined as myriad mutable components of culture that are recursively elaborate or refined in terms of complexity and scope. By this I mean that while configurants are composed of sub-configurants and make up configurations, the sub-configurants have sub-sub-configurants and configurations are configurants in more inclusive cultural configurations. Which label one assigns depends on the point of reference. For example, a researcher might choose to focus on “Heathen ritual” as a configuration, “blót” as a configurant of Heathen ritual, and “drinking” and “boasting” as configurants of blót or as sub-configurants of Heathen Ritual. A configuration may have only two configurants and have central importance, or it could have hundreds and be relatively inconsequential. Configurants are

most salient in observations of behaviours and artifacts where their presence, form, or absence is readily apparent to the researcher.

There are five defining qualities of configurants which I list here with brief examples using an archetypal example of Christmas dinner. First, configurants are chosen cultural patterns, either implicitly or explicitly selected by individuals in a social collective. I use cultural patterns here the same way Benedict (1971[1934]) does: characteristic themes of a culture collectively chosen over its history from among options. The assumption that Christmas dinner (a configuration) ought to be turkey (a configurant), rather than ham (configurant), and paired with potatoes and peas (two configurants) are socially prescribed but selected by the cook. Second, configurants convey, enact, or reinforce, by eliciting schemas, cultural associations that hold together configurations. Children sitting at the kid's table (configurant) during Christmas dinner (configuration) conveys a separation of status and identity (configurations), enacts this separation through its application, and reinforces the primacy of adulthood (configurant of status and identity). Third, any single configurant comprises other sub-configurants to make it meaningful within a specific cultural context; configurants may be sub-configurants of other configurants or configurations consisting of multiple configurants. Christmas dinner is one configurant in the Christmas celebration configuration; it shares relational space with organized gift-giving (configurant) and family time (configurant). In this example, "Christmas celebration" is a configurant in the "Christian holidays" configuration. Fourth, configurants are not perpetually stable components of a configuration; they can be replaced with an alternative that conveys, enacts, or reinforces a configuration's compatible assumptions and ideologies. They can also be removed

altogether when they no longer convey, enact, or reinforce relevant cultural assumptions and ideologies in a configuration. Sometimes there is no children's table at Christmas dinner, either because it is no longer relevant (the children grew up) or little value is placed on separating children from the adults (no information to convey); other times, children sit near their parents instead of a separate table (reinforcing filial relations). Fifth, the boundaries between configurants are typically arbitrary and unclear rather than discrete and absolute.

Configurants are chosen elements of culture that have been either explicitly or implicitly selected by individuals in a social collective. Identifying configurants as chosen patterns draws on Benedict's idea of cultural patterning. As Benedict suggests, there are nearly infinite possible combinations of cultural features that get selected in the development of the "entire" cultures of particular societies and times. Language, for example, has myriad possible sounds produced by the human vocal apparatus; adopting all possible sounds would make speech unintelligible, so cultures adopt different sounds and sound patterns to construct their language (Benedict 1971[1934]:34–35). Some of these selections are conscious decisions, such as the choice to eat Turkey over Ham at Christmas, while other selections are unconscious, such as omitting beef from the possible range of Christmas dinner meals. After people select a configurant, it is subjected to repeated and inconsistent selection and reproduction in which certain component functions and qualities remain intact while others are exchanged or lost according to the reproducer's biases (cultural selection criteria), which are themselves configurations containing ideas about what is correct or preferential in the immediate context. If a vegetarian were to celebrate Christmas with a meal, it is unlikely that they

would eat ham or turkey but might still eat mashed potatoes and peas while the meat is replaced with a suitable alternative—one that is felt to sufficiently meet their cultural selection criteria related to “vegetarianism” and “Christmas dinner” configurations. Should the vegetarian continue this tradition, the protein and its preparation are likely variable configurants. The selection of configurants among those in a society also requires cumulative effort on the part of individuals identifying, preserving, and replicating specific components that fit into both the public expressions of configurations and the private mental expressions of configurations that help arrange them.

I found repeated application of the bias (or cultural selection criterion) configuration I call “inclusiveness.” At Hail and Horn Gathering, inclusiveness was evoked for making all welcome regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and personal dietary restrictions. The sacred communal meal known as Húsel was prepared in such a way that there was food and drink for everyone present. This inclusiveness configuration is repeatedly chosen, as the menu grows every year with more diet-inclusive food options: configurants that enact and reinforce inclusiveness. The collective expression of the inclusiveness configuration as it currently exists at Raven’s Knoll is selected and maintained through interconnections with other configurations. For example, while RK leaders selected the inclusiveness configuration and many of its configurants for regular application, they also selected an “intolerance” configuration. I heard of previous community members who were stigmatized and left RK. Many RK community members say they are inclusive of people with mental health disorders, explicitly selecting the inclusiveness configuration. Yet some sub-configurants of mental health disorders expressed as behaviours, such as adults engaging community children in non-

sexual play, a common coping mechanism for trauma and other mental health disorders (Lokko and Stern 2015:n.p.; Donovan, Sam, and Lagman 2022:n.p.), were rejected from inclusiveness by others. The rationale for this exclusion, as relayed to me, was fear of potential child abuse. Tying this example back to my research question and methods highlights one of the benefits of thinking in configurants: competing cultural selection criteria configurations acting on any configurant can be uncovered according to the discrepancy between what is explicitly expressed about and in a configuration, and what is implicitly omitted from the configuration. In the case illustrated above, the “inclusiveness” configuration competes against another configuration I shall call “safety”. These configurations are typically compatible, but the response to non-sexual age-play reveal incompatibilities between the “safety” and “inclusiveness” configuration. Individuals may not explicitly recognize configurations’ incompatibilities that are exposed by behaviour.

Complexes of configurants, like Dawkins’s meme complexes and Lohmann’s spirit groups, get conveyed together. I call these configurant complexes configurations, after Barnett’s use of the term to describe combinations of ideas, which themselves become configurants in more elaborate configurations. Take a presentation panel at an academic conference, for example. The presentation panel is a configuration of panel presenters, presentation equipment, panel attendees, and papers or slide decks to present. The panel is also a configurant of the much more elaborate academic conference, which comprises other presentation panels, question and answer sessions, posters, ceremonies, among other things. Each of these objects are composed of, and compose, other configurants and configurations. Like meme complexes of memetics (Dawkins

2006:198), the configurants of an academic conference are often transmitted together. However, while memetics predicts high fidelity of copying memes, configurations are more or less accurately reproduced as Sperber (1985:75) describes representations, with certain configurants more stable and central to a configuration.

Configurants and configurations are mutable and often subject to modification. Configurations and their constituent configurants are stable inasmuch as they successfully retain a high degree of similarity with their previous iterations. Cultural information has to pass through multiple forms—what Sperber calls mental and public representations—in a causal chain of reproduction. An idea can only be transmitted to another person by being translated into a publicly accessible form: a behaviour or an artifact. Cultural configurants can change in such translations either intentionally or unintentionally, introducing new variants that may affect their subsequent selection. For example, the seating arrangement of a sacred toasting ritual at Raven’s Knoll called High Sumbl is usually performed in a horseshoe shape, reflecting the arrangement of tables at the Húsel meal that precedes it. At High Sumbl for Hail and Horn Gathering 2024 Maryanne noticed that two of the children present between Húsel and High Sumbl were cold and tired, so she brought a wicker bench closer to the fire for them to lay on. Those returning to the fire saw the wicker bench near the fire and began gathering around the fire, rather than around the húsel tables. This sequence of actions produced a configurant variant that has potential for reproduction; initial responses were favourable. This modification to an existing cultural configuration introduced a variant, and in order for the variant to be reproduced, it must compete with its other variants (Richerson and Boyd

2005:76). Despite initial favourable responses, the High Sumbl of 2024 reverted to the horseshoe seating configuration.

Barnett's and Lohmann's principle that innovation is recombination of existing features provides a suitable explanation of how newly placed configurants in a configuration can replace or modify its existing configurants. This mechanism is explained in schema theory: mental models of the world create conscious and subconscious categories of experience that filter a novel stimulus to either subsume it into existing schemas, modify the existing schemas to fit the stimulus, or dismiss the stimulus as nonsensical or illusory because it is completely incompatible with the existing schemas. If a novel configuration bears little similarity to its predecessors, there is greater risk of rejection. Furthermore, it may be possible to replace a single configurant within a configuration if the replacement conveys, enacts, or reinforces the same or similar information in context as the configurant it replaces. If multiple configurants are replaced simultaneously, they must collectively fill the gaps produced by their removal. Thus the circle of seats at the High Sumbl that modified the horseshoe-shaped seating, although novel, functioned to organize people so that everyone present could interact in the ritual as usual. Similarly, the drinking horn called Friðdrifa, which was used to carry mead during Sumbl, had been removed due to its inoperability on this occasion and replaced with two horns for similar purposes: one to carry alcoholic mead, and another for non-alcoholic. In these examples, two configurants are replaced with compatible configurants that, while changing the ritual configuration's contents, did not undermine its recognizability as High Sumbl.

The cultural configurant approach incorporates and extends the theories that inform it. Benedict acknowledges both the conscious and unconscious modification of culture through the selection of features by individual persons and people in collection. Barnett and Lohmann agree that culture is the collective assembly and reassembly of existing features into new forms. Dawkins proposes that culture is composed of units that both vary in size and combine into complexes that are replicated and transmitted together. Sperber suggests that culture exists in a causal chain that generates modifications every time it is transmitted and reproduced. Schema theory asserts that mental filtering mechanisms arrange, combine, and limit the introduction of novel data into existing mental models. These concepts, applied together to cultural things, synthesize into the cultural configurant concept. It incorporates the potential for creations to be selected. It does not require identifying the most elementary units of culture. It encourages orientation to the endless possibility of elaboration and specification of a single configurant or configuration. It is descriptive, rather than precisely predictive.

Though I am careful to acknowledge the complex nature of culture, the cultural configurant approach to studying Heathen rituals demonstrates two patterns Ronald Grimes (2014:232–233) commonly finds in ritual studies: foregrounding of desired information and the use of a recursive or fractal container metaphor. By foregrounding specific parts of ritual and rendering other elements background or context, I bring specific focus to those elements, or configurants, I analyze. My use of a container metaphor, in the form of configurations, is meant to highlight the interconnected relations between parts and sub-parts of specific wholes while acknowledging the potential relations between parts that do not participate in the same whole. In doing so, I strive to

avoid the pitfall that Grimes (2014:233) often finds in container metaphors: ignoring how culture permeates ritual in addition to being ambiance.

Now that I have explained what I mean by configurants and configurations, I illustrate their utility by applying them to the data presented in Lohmann's (2021) article "Spirit Colonists in New Guinea Minds." In his article, Lohmann describes how Christian spirit beings displaced the belief in indigenous spirit beings among the Asabano of Papua New Guinea in a manner analogous to colonization. Lohmann describes the process of spirit being colonialism using different terms than I have used to describe configurants and configurations, but they represent the same patterns and ideas in their application. Applying the cultural configurant concept to this case highlights the composite nature of Asabano post-conversion religious belief while explaining how such compositions occur when the individual elements that compose them appear to contain incompatible content.

For Lohmann (2021:149), religious conversion involves taking on newly arrived spirit beings. Similarly, configurants are cultural patterns that are selected either explicitly or implicitly; belief in spirit beings is one possible configurant to adopt or select based on explicit and implicit criteria. Traditional Asabano spirit beings became conflated with those of Christianity, including angels and demons. I suggest this reflects the ability of novel configurants to serve the same role as existing configurants in a configuration and replace those configurants without entirely undermining the configuration (2021:149, 153).

Lohmann, citing Dawkins's meme complex concept, notes that spirit beings gather in "spirit groups" that are transmitted and received as a package (2021:149). For example, in Christianity God and the devil are part of the same spirit group and belief in

one implies belief in the other, hence they are mutually supporting. Analyzed in terms of configurants, the adoption of the “God” configurant also meant the adoption of the “Satan” configurant because they are part of the same spirit group configuration that acts as a configurant of the Christianity configuration. Despite representing ideals and forces at odds with each other, they are mutually reinforcing: “groups of spirit beings ... are transmitted together because they support one another, cohere as a group, and form a barrier to incompatible traits” (Lohmann 2021:149). Satan’s existence as a rebellious creation of God, for example, serves for Asabano converts to explain their previous ignorance of God and “rejection[s] of his offer of salvation,” (Lohmann 2021:154). Furthermore, the “Satan” and “God” configurants of Christianity can also be viewed as configurations in their own right, for they are made up of more elementary configurants, such as episodes describing them and their actions in the Bible.

Lohmann (2021:149) observes that as spirit groups compete for “territory” in the same mind, “successful” spirit groups survive in a stable form and “losing” spirit groups are changed, abandoned, or forgotten. This reflects, in my terms, the instability and mutability of configurants. Configurants and configurations are stable to the degree they retain similarity to their original form. It is possible to displace an existing configurant in a configuration with another that has suitable compatibility with the configuration’s other configurants, while simultaneously maintaining the identity of the configuration of which it is part. Over time, an entire configuration can be transformed or lost if its configurants are altered significantly or in sufficient quantity. For example, prior to conversion the Asabano believed that individuals possessed two souls, a big soul responsible for generous behaviours and a little soul responsible for selfish behaviours (Lohmann

2023:149). This dual soul belief is incompatible with the Christian single soul belief, which is required for the Christian myth configuration. To displace the dual soul belief configuration, initially the big soul configurant became associated with God and goodness, while the little soul configurant became associated with the devil and wickedness. Second generation Asabano Christians believed that big souls went to heaven while little souls went to hell (Lohmann 2021:159). By the third generation, the Christian single soul configurant replaced the big and little soul configurants altogether from their position as parts of the human being configuration. Replacing the configurant “propitiating ancestral big souls” with the configurant “prayer to God” to ensure bountiful harvests removed many of the configurants of the dual soul configuration, rendering it moot and replaceable with the single soul configuration of Christianity (Lohmann 2021:158).

Lohmann states that following religious conversion, competing spirits may be co-present but modified by their mutual existence. Lohmann identifies belief in cannibal witches among the Asabano as persistent but modified. After Christian supernatural beings were accepted, cannibal witches became embodiments of Satan’s power that could only be undermined by prayer to God (Lohmann 2021:149). The persistence of ancestral spirit beings (configurants) in the wake of newly adopted beings (competing configurants that are partially incompatible with those they replaced) reflects a selection process indicating that both sets of spirit beings have value for conveying, enacting, or reinforcing greater configurations in the culture. In this example, the configurants that order relations between cannibal witches and deaths remained in place, but configurants

that explain cannibal witches' powers were modified with exchanged sub-configurants that give them increased compatibility with Christian myth.

Configurants like belief in certain spirit beings are selected and modify existing configurations of culture. Selected configurants bundle together into configurations, like Christian mythology. Constituent configurants of a configuration that are mutually supporting and convey complementary information are passed on as a package. When a contradictory configurant is introduced, it is dismissed or altered for apparent consistency with the new configuration; alternatively, the pre-existing configurants may be altered or displaced.

I use cultural configurant theory to help understand the cultural selection criteria of Heathen ritual components. It provides a framework for analyzing each creation associated with a ritual according to its parts and their relationships. The criteria by which people seek out and select ritual elements for inclusion derive from the organization of culture in configurations. Novel configurants are more likely to be selected if they are seen to be consistent with the configurations into which they are incorporated. This is apparent in the example of the "offering" configuration, which is a configurant part of most Heathen rituals that take place in the *Æsir Vé* and *Jotnar Vé* sacred enclosures at Raven's Knoll.

Mead is a sacred beverage to Heathens with its significance drawn from the mythological and ethnohistoric record. According to ancient Germanic myth, mead was brought into being from the death of the being known as Kvasir, the first child of both the *Æsir*, a god-like race led by Odin, and the *Vanir*, a god-like race associated with the natural world. Kvasir was a being of tremendous intellect and creativity who shared his

faculties willingly. Kvasir was killed by two dwarves, Fjalar and Galar, who collected his blood and mixed it with honey to create the first mead, or Suttungr's Mead, which supposedly can turn any who drinks it into a scholar and poet. Poetry and intellect are held in high esteem in The Lore, such that the Æsir, and especially Odin, are prone to verbal battles of wit and cunning. Mead also symbolizes good relations, having been borne from the union of warring tribes. In ancient Icelandic sagas, mead was commonly consumed at special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and after victories in combat. The value of mead to current Heathenry draws upon the associations in these narratives: mead was the source of creative inspiration, intelligence, and peace.

When presenting a ritual offering to the Æsir or Jotnar in their respective Vés (sacred enclosures), it is customary to fill a horn with mead and then pour it onto the earth or a rock. If mead is unavailable, ritual leaders often replace it with wine. The core assumption underlying this substitution is that wine and mead are suitable alternatives because they share derivation from living yeast activity and both are alcoholic and beverages. Austin explained that even the non-alcoholic mead served at Hail and Horn 2023 was sacred because it contained traces of yeast activity, which he stated was perceived as evidence of Alu, or magic. The configurant "wine" can be swapped for the preferred configurant "mead" in the configuration "libation" because, as they share the same sub-configurants of "yeast activity" and "alcoholic" and "beverage" in common. It would be unsuitable for ritual leaders to replace mead with yogurt because the material has to be a drinkable liquid. I have seen personal offerings of kombucha, beer, and liquor at Heathen rituals, but not typically cast or poured onto the offering surface, nor presented by the ritual leaders. Ale and beer are considered special to the gods, but their

significance in the Lore is lower than mead. Similarly, contemporary Heathens do not practice human or animal sacrifice at Raven's Knoll, contrary to some past Germanic-speaking populations like those documented by Adam of Bremen in Uppsala, Sweden. While the "human sacrifice" configurant could still potentially play a central role in the "offering" configuration, it finds itself competing against higher priority configurations, such as the expansive and overruling configuration of contemporary "law" or the "value of human life" configurations.

By analyzing the relationships between observed behaviours and materials, and communicated ideas, it is possible to understand the current reasonable boundaries of a configuration, which are defined in part by selection criteria. These current reasonable boundaries are fluid and contingent on a variety of external, emergent factors. For example, during my fieldwork in 2023, there was tacit agreement that entities with human-like agency, shorthanded here to "gods", would be invoked in their respective *vés*. At Hail and Horn Gathering 2024, the community elected to honour the world tree, Yggdrasil, at Hail and Horn Gathering 2025 breaking with a 13-year RK tradition of honouring a god. Evidently the "Yggdrasil" configurant was deemed sufficiently compatible with the "god" configurant to replace it in the "Hail and Horn Gathering" configuration.

The development of a novel instance of a known configuration raises questions about the selection criteria that lead to the expansion of its boundaries. This example illustrates how my methods and my cultural configurant concept might be used to identify its selection criteria. To determine the real selection criteria that led to this altered configuration, one would tease apart the ideas, behaviours, and artifacts involved in this

decision. After analytically selecting and separating the configurants, a fieldworker would identify possible alternative configurants and determine the discrepancies between the selected and discarded configurants. These alternative configurants can be latent in a configuration, having existed in previous iterations, or they can be unrealized possibilities, explicitly rejected or not yet innovated. An analyst would examine the other configurations that exist in relationship with selected configuration to identify configurants that enable, enact, or reinforce the ideas embedded or implicated in them. By analyzing culture's modular units that I have called configurants and configurations, the relations between creations at many levels of abstraction are more apparent.

I can pull apart the "Blót" configuration, which is related to the "Husel", "High Sumb", and other configurations that are configurants of Hail and Horn Gathering. The *Æsir Vé* is one important configurant, alongside god-poles and a procession for Hail and Horn Gathering Blót. God-poles are one of the most important configurants of Blót, and are selected the year before to ensure that ritual leaders and festival participants have time to plan rituals and assemble necessary tools and resources. I know this because they have been a universal feature since the first Hail and Horn Gathering Blót, and the "god-pole" configuration, with regular modifications, has been repeated in other similar rituals. By identifying the importance of god-poles to the Hail and Horn Blót, one could ask questions of Raven's Knoll community members about their thoughts on the god-pole-less Blót. The *Æsir Vé* is another central configurant to the Blót because the very first Blót involved the creation of the *Æsir Vé*, and each successive Blót has been performed inside its boundaries. If there are concerns that the *Æsir Vé* is under a threat of damage or dissolution, as the *Jotnar Vé* was before Stone and Flame Gathering 2023, an alternative

configurant exists to replace the god-pole configurant in the Hail and Horn Gathering Blót: rebuilding. This chain of identification of configurants across different iterations of the same configuration, both within the immediate tradition and in other traditions where they have been adopted is but one method to locate the selection criteria that led to the current iteration's adoption of specific configurants. It also helps to describe patterns that might not otherwise be obvious. The patterns of interactions among participants who carry individualized ideal forms of a configuration, the mental configurations of ritual leaders guide the construction and selection of configurants for specific ritual configurations, the artifactual configurants such as god-poles, and the execution of behavioural configurations all reflect the criteria for selecting creations to incorporate as configurants in configurations.

3.4: Conclusion: Answers Lie between the Configurants

In this chapter I identified the research methods used during my fieldwork and explained the theoretical construct of cultural configurants that I used to analyze Heathen rituals. Material and behavioural observations highlighted the artifacts and actions used in ritual, while interviewing generated emic explanations and justifications. Participant-observation as a self-identified Heathen encouraged self-reflection on my own criteria for cultural selection and a point of rapport from which to view the ritual creations at Raven's Knoll.

The concept of cultural configurants, synthesized from several theories of cultural evolution and cognitive anthropology, proposes culture as composed of a recursively

elaborated and flexible units labeled configurants. Configurants are made up of sub-configurants and bundle together in potentially ever-expanding complexes or configurations. By applying this model to fieldwork data, the web of relations between ritual elements, and those notably absent, can be described, arranged, and evaluated to identify the range and limits of ritual possibilities. The rituals of Stone and Flame Gathering then become a window through which I “can look through to see how the basic values of culture are symbolically produced and embodied ... and create meaning to the participants (Hornborg 2021:257). The selection criteria for any given novel cultural configurant are generated based on perceived compatibility among potential configurants of a configuration. Moreover, cultural selection criteria can act as configurations in their own right, as when RK ritual leaders compose ritual elements to include configurants of “inclusivity”. With my methods of data collection and analysis laid out, I turn now to a description of Raven’s Knoll, which provides an essential foundation for a discussion of the configurants and configurations of Heathen rituals at Stone and Flame Gathering.

Chapter 4: What is Raven's Knoll?

4.1: Introduction

In this chapter, I provide site context that grounds my analysis of Stone and Flame Gathering (SFG) 2023 rituals. First, I summarize my activities and experience during fieldwork from May 29 to September 25, 2023. Second, I characterize the people who visit Raven's Knoll, especially individuals who significantly contributed to my research as gatekeepers and informants. Third, I describe the spatial organization and physical features of RK, featuring locales discussed in Chapter 5. I end with examples of Heathen rituals practised at Hail and Horn Gathering (HHG), the archetypal Heathen festival at RK. Stone and Flame Gathering (SFG) is modelled after HHG.

RK, often called "The Knoll," is a campground approximately 150 km west of Ottawa. RK hosts various Neopagan festivals from May 1 through September 30. The land was purchased in 2009 by Dr. Maryanne Pearce and Austin Lawrence as a new home for Kaleidoscope Gathering, Canada's largest Neopagan festival that has taken place annually since 1993 (Pearce 2017). The Knoll has hosted many Neopagan festivals beyond Kaleidoscope Gathering, including HHG, a Heathen festival honouring the Æsir (Medieval Scandinavian Gods); Shield and Bow, a feminine-identity only festival; Kornukopia Gathering, a pan-Pagan festival celebrating the turning of the seasons, and, as of 2023, SFG, which celebrates another class of Scandinavian mythological figures: the Jotnar.

4.2: Characterizing My Fieldwork

While living at RK, I was an active participant in social and festive events in which I cultivated relations with fellow campers. Most weekdays were quiet, except during the lead-up to festivals. I spent weeks, including weekends, leading into festivals helping Maryanne and Austin maintain the campground or preparing festival materials. Some weekend nights were spent socializing around the fire.

During my time at RK, I attended all but two festivals: Shield and Bow, and the Bhakti Bliss Yoga and Music Festival. During Shield and Bow, I helped Austin and other volunteers rebuild a shack that operated as a serving area for the RK food truck, called The YAG. For Bhakti Bliss, I volunteered in The YAG for food preparation and serving. For all other festivals I was a regular participant.

I often socialized with regular RK visitors by visiting their tents or trailers during the morning and early afternoon. I had morning coffee with a neighbour behind my tent, who I shall call Santa for his large white beard and tall stature. Santa told me about his time in the military, his experiences with tabletop gaming, and his family. I also frequently met with Orion, a temporary member of staff who lived on-site from the 2022 camping season through the end of the 2023 season. Orion is a writer and member of the Church of All Worlds who formerly edited the Neopagan magazine, *Green Egg*.

Weekends were often working affairs with people who came to help prepare for festivals. My first work weekend, which was the weekend before SFG, I collected fallen branches and discarded them in a cleared lot known as Mirkwood along the western boundary of RK. I spent most work weekends leading up to HHG and KG helping to

rebuild the serving area for The YAG. I helped during SFG too: I worked with Austin to dig out holes for the new god-poles being erected during SFG, and helped transport god-poles from the barn near the RK entrance to the new Jotnar Vé space.

4.3: Understanding the Landscape

RK is bordered by Ontario Highway 60 to the North and the Bonnechere River to the South. RK is 11.1 km east of Eganville, and 8.4 km west of Pikwàkanagàn First Nation Reserve. Decades before it became a campground owned by Neopagans, the site was a telephone pole farm, recognizable by the rows of pine trees that form the northern half of the property. The southern half of the property is sparse pine forest with plenty of sand and crabgrass. Every spring, the site becomes inundated up to the edge of the tree rows as the Bonnechere thaws. This typically inhibits use of the site through the early months of the year. The owners open the site for regular camping and festival activities after the river recedes, usually by the beginning of May.

near the Drumming Fire and terminates at the Archery Field, and contains 10 different shrines dedicated to various Neopagan deities and divine archetypes.

The following sub-sections describe geographical and anthropogenic features that appear in my ethnographic account of SFG 2023. The first section, “What is a Vé” describes a type of Heathen sacred space; there are two vé^s at RK: the Jotnar Vé beginning of the Shrine Trail, and the Æsir Vé at the end. The two sections that follow are descriptions and histories of ritual spaces that feature prominently in my account of SFG: “The (Old) Jotnar Vé,” and “Standing Stone, Keystone Firepit, and the Tree of Nerthus.”

4.3.1: What is a Vé?

A vé is an outdoor space, enclosed by ropes or other identifiable boundary markers, dedicated to sacred activities of Germanic origin (Lawrence and Lacharity 2017:12). The



Figure 4.2: The Æsir Vé. From left to right: Njord, Bragi, Skadi, Freya, Frigg, Odin, Freyr, Thor, Eir, and Tyr. Photo: Logan Elson.

word vé comes from Old West Norse, meaning sanctuary, and is a cognate of words in other Old Germanic languages such as *weoh*, meaning idol, in Old English and *weihs*, meaning holy, in Gothic. Vé commonly appears in place names (Hellquist 1922). In the Viking Age, between 793 and 1066 CE in Northern Europe, vé was applied to any enclosed and roofless place of worship (Lawrence and Lacharity 2017:12).

At RK, a vé is a shrine dedicated to the divinities of Germanic mythology enclosed by a rope or chain strung between nine poles or boundary markers. The nine poles or boundary markers represent the nine worlds of Norse ethnocosmology; which world each pole represents is not currently specified for either the Æsir or Jotnar Vés. Both the current Jotnar Vé and the Æsir Vé have an altar for votives or offerings made from piled stones known as a hórgr. The previous Jotnar Vé did not have a hórgr. Inside these vé, RK Heathens erect god-poles, two to four metres-tall, pine logs carved with a face representing a Norse deity and decorated with symbols of that deity. Thor, for example, is carved with a large beard and a nasal helmet while a wooden mallet hangs with the head down, evoking the symbology of Mjólnir, Thor's Hammer, from The Lore.

Three rules are standard to the Raven's Knoll vé: keep frith, worship no other pantheons within their confines, and maintain ritual cleanliness. The first rule is often directly associated with vé, referred to as frithgards in The Lore (Lawrence and Lacharity 2017:17). The term frith comes from the proto-Germanic word *friþuz* and means peace, friendship, or sanctuary. However, its use in contemporary English outside of Heathenry is either antiquated or obsolete. Keeping frith can best be understood as maintaining peace through the application of friendship principles rather than through the absence of conflict or the regular use of forgiveness (Lawrence and Lacharity 2017:17).

The second rule is implicitly concerned with frith and explicitly intended to minimize disrespect toward gods within sacred spaces designated as their space on Earth. The reasoning for the second rule was described to me with the metaphor of a home: if your friend does not like another person, you would never talk about or bring this other person into your friend's house. An exception to this rule exists for tattoos depicting the likenesses or symbols of another ethnocosmology that regular clothing cannot cover. The last rule, maintaining ritual cleanliness, is primarily concerned with ensuring the space remains clean: cleanliness here refers not to being freshly bathed but to the prohibition of bodily fluid touching the vé or excessive uncleanliness that offends the gods or fellow ritual participants. (RK is a campground; sandy feet or some mud is expected.)

4.3.2: The (Old) Jotnar Vé

The old Jotnar Vé was a shrine enclosed by a manila rope, spanning five one-metre posts and four trees, that hosted three god-poles: one each for Loki, the god of fire and mischief, Hel, the goddess who presides over the dead, and Hyrrokkin, a giantess known for her tremendous strength. The space was constructed around a dirt mound that jutted out into the marshland on RK's eastern border. Hel's and Loki's god-poles stood on the mound, while Hyrrokkin's stood further out in the marsh.

The old Jotnar Vé was built after Loki's god-pole was erected. The pole was carved in 2014 by Jacqueline Thomas (2017:160–161) after she experienced a series of identical dreams indicating that she should carve and erect Loki at RK, in a space that was to become the beginning of the Shrine Trail. Years later, during an HHG redemoot (a

post-HHG meeting to discuss the following year’s HHG) RK Heathens determined that as a Jotnar, Loki would never be raised in the Æsir Vé, despite his alliance with the Æsir and fictive kinship with Odin (Hultquist 2017:155). In response to this prohibition, “friends of Loki” urged the community to create another vé (Hultquist 2017:155). Citing the ninth verse of the Eddic poem, “Lokasenna”,² they rallied enough support to erect a vé around Loki that would also accommodate future Jotnar god-poles, as the Jotnar could not be worshipped at the Æsir Vé without breaking one of its cardinal rules (Hultquist 2017:157). In the process of creating the old Jotnar Vé, it was tacitly acknowledged that building it next to the marsh was problematic; the decision to use trees as boundary poles was a pragmatic response to breaking the only usable shovel in the marsh soil (Hultquist 2017:156).

4.3.3: Standing Stone, Keystone Firepit, and the Tree of Nerthus

Standing Stone, the Keystone Firepit, and the Tree of Nerthus are three sacred landmarks that share a single geographical space (Map 4.1: Star 1). These features are in a clearing between dense forest and open land on the western side of Yellow Brick Road, a path running the length of RK from north to south. Walking south along Yellow Brick Road, one would first see the Tree of Nerthus, an aspen stump covered with a white cloth, flanked by its juvenile clone and surrounded with stones, immediately adjacent to the road. Five metres west of the Tree of Nerthus is Standing Stone: a flat rock slab jutting

²Loki said: “Odin, do you not remember / that when we became blood brothers / you promised you’d not sip any brew / unless it was brought to us both?” (Dodds 2014:97)

from the ground that stands two and a half metres tall. Standing Stone is covered in white, black, red, and yellow ochre handprints of varying sizes, and its flat faces are oriented east and west. There is typically a silver plate at its eastern face, which is used at feasts for ancestor spirit offerings. Five metres west of Standing Stone is the Keystone Firepit: an oblong ring of rocks that segments into two bulbous ends and a narrow middle. During the early days of the festival season, until preparations for the Kaleidoscope Gathering begin, the Keystone Firepit is the centrepiece of an outdoor feasting hall constructed of a series of canopies arranged in a horseshoe shape that opens facing Standing Stone and the Tree of Nerthus.

I do not have access to stories describing the creation of the Tree of Nerthus or the Keystone Firepit, but the creation of Standing Stone is recorded in *The Rites of Raven's Knoll* (Desrosiers 2017:163–165). Standing Stone was a joint project between Raven's Knoll and Thornhaven Grove, a member of the Druid Fellowship Ár nDraíocht Féin (ADF), an organization that fosters and promotes relationships between various reconstructionist Neopagan groups in North America. The stone that would become Standing Stone was found at Raven's Knoll when Thornhaven Grove was planning to create their own stone henge. It was found ahead of the first ADF gathering in Canada, held at Raven's Knoll, at which Standing Stone was erected and consecrated (Desrosiers 2017:163). The consecration emphasized the veneration of a tripartite series of ancestors:

First to be called are the Ancestors of the land at Raven's Knoll, those who lived and took sustenance by the waters of the Bonnechere. Then, the folk call upon the Ancestors of Spirit, those who inspire and teach from beyond the veil. Lastly, the

folk call upon the Ancestors of Blood, those grandmothers and grandfathers going down through the generations ... letting their blood be the link to the first people.

[Desrosiers 2017:164]

The purpose of the ritual was to open a portal to the world of spirits to allow the folk and the ancestors to share community. Contrary to common practice among Neopagans, the ritual was not formally closed; instead of shutting the portal, Standing Stone became a permanent door to the world of the ancestors (Desrosiers 2017:165). Many rituals and festivals at RK, especially Heathen festivals, engage with Standing Stone. Standing Stone became a symbol of connection between people, past and present, which is indicative of the RK community's approach to inclusivity: all are connected through the ancestors, and everyone makes their mark, indicated by the handprints.

4.5: Heathenry at the Knoll: HHG as Archetypal Heathen Festival

HHG is a Heathen festival dedicated to worshipping the Æsir and their close allies, the Vanir. It has become the archetypal model of Heathen festivals at RK, and its ritual formats have been adopted for other festivals, including the first SFG in 2023. In this section, I describe typical HHG rituals and events to contextualize the rituals covered in the following chapter. Two ritual formats, the esoteric rite and the blót, were adapted from HHG into SFG 2023 for their familiarity and tradition; Jaime, the gyðja (ritual leader) and host of SFG, said she used previous years' HHG blót scripts as templates for the SFG 2023 blót.

The first HHG, in 2012, marked the first large-scale Heathen gathering and the creation of the first public place of worship for Heathens in Canada (Lawrence and Lacharity 2017:10). HHG has since been held every Canada Day weekend except 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each HHG is dedicated to the worship of a chosen Germanic ethnocosmological entity whose god-pole would be raised in the Æsir Vé that year. Each HHG comprises regular educational panels, religious rituals, and creative activities. Four rituals anchor HHG: the esoteric (to encourage self-reflection and growth), the blót (to raise a wooden idol called a god-pole in the Æsir Vé), Húsel (a feast), and High Sumbl (acknowledging accomplishments and exchanging gifts). I focus on the esoteric and blót, as these ritual formats were adapted for SFG 2023.

Blót is typically a full day affair that involves preparing and raising a god-pole in the Æsir Vé. The god-pole is often carved in advance, but occasionally carving is completed the day before blót. The morning before blót, the community holds a public event at the Keystone Firepit at which the “foot” (non-carved end) of the god-pole is charred. The god-pole foot charring encourages community participation: manipulating the god-poles so they do not burn requires cooperative effort. After charring, festival participants process the god-pole via the Shrine Trail to the Æsir Vé. There, festival participants raise the god-pole after goðar (Heathen priests or priestesses) flagellate it with a leafy switch, three times each with water, mead, and a water-herb-soil mixture, called Alu, while evoking mythological references to the deity being raised. These three liquids represent elements of supernatural inspiration and creation in Heathen Lore: water is the blood of the first giant, mead is the source of poetic inspiration, and Alu is the

source of magic. Flagellating god-poles with these liquids bestows them with life, inspiration, and magic.

The esoteric rite is less formulaic than the blót. Its form and content are influenced by the deity being raised. Common elements persist between esoteric rites. Most are performed at night, require introspection from participants, and include the delivery of “homework” in the form of a paper slip on which a runic letter of the Elder Futhark, the alphabet used by Scandinavians between 200 and 750 CE, is written (Odenstedt 1990:9). Recipients are meant to interpret their assigned rune according to their life context.

The esoteric rite for HHG 2023, which was devoted to the one-handed war god Tyr, involved symbolically creating *Gleipnir* (the chain used to bind Fenrir, Loki’s wolf child and Tyr’s loyal companion, in myth). HHG 2023 esoteric participants were taken to the Drumming Fire (Map 4.1: Circle C) after sunset, where they were given stinging nettle stalks to process for making cordage. Meanwhile, the gyðja (priest) responsible for the ritual directed participants to consider what it means to “restrain their inner wolves”, using the metaphoric wolf as a shorthand for undesirable traits or behaviours. Participants were then distributed to three stations one by one, where they interacted with people performing mythical roles. The first station was a physical trial: a man dressed as a wolf goaded participants to place their hand “in the wolf’s mouth,” a cooler filled with ice-water, for fifteen seconds. The second station was conversational: a person cloaked in black asked if participants had “betrayed someone” or had “been betrayed,” and then asked for participants to articulate the experience. The third station was confessional: a woman asked participants about a time they “let their wolf out”. When participants’

stories were completed, the woman gave each participant a jar containing an Elder Futhark rune on a scrap of paper.

Both the blót format, and common elements of the esoteric formula found their way into the blót and esoteric of SFG 2023. Detailing the format and formula of each ritual here provides context for the description in the next chapter: While Jaime used past blót scripts as a template for the SFG 2023 Blót, the SFG Blót is missing a fundamental component: the foot charring. The esoteric of SFG 2023 followed similar patterns to other esoterics: it was performed at night, its goðar requested participants devise thoughtful and personally relevant questions, and participants left with “homework.”

4.6: Conclusion

I have situated Raven’s Knoll and its significant sites geographically to provide context for my ethnographic data. I have also detailed the format and features of HHG’s esoteric and blót rituals to establish central elements of Heathen ritual practice that are needed for analyzing the creation of a new festival.

Chapter 5: Stone and Flame Gathering 2023

5.1: Introduction

This chapter is an ethnographic account of rituals held during the inaugural Stone and Flame Gathering (SFG), a Heathen festival held Friday, June 2 through Sunday, June 4 at Raven's Knoll. The festival was hosted by RK and Jaime Darrigade, a *gyðja* (priestess) at RK and in her own Heathen community, Golden Birch Kindred. Dedicated to the veneration of the Jotnar, a class of medieval Scandinavian mythological figures often antagonistic to the Æsir, SFG is the first dedicated festival honouring these figures at RK. This chapter presents my participant-observation experience of three rituals in chronological order. On Friday, June 2 Jaime hosted a ritual called "The Esoteric" to evoke self-reflection. On Saturday, June 3 Jaime and Brynja, (a *gyðja* at RK, responsible for Well and Tree Gathering) hosted two rituals: "The Funeral," celebrating the retiring god-poles for Loki, Hel, and Hyrrokkin, and "The Blot," consecrating god-poles in a vé (sacred enclosure). The chapter provides data for analysis of ritual creation criteria.

SFG 2023 was dedicated to the renewal and relocation of a Heathen sacred enclosure, the Jotnar Vé. In 2015, Heathens at RK erected a vé for the Jotnar along RK's property line, which happened to be a wetland (Hultquist 2017:155). Its god-poles were rotting and falling into the wetland. For SFG 2023, another space was prepared on drier ground. The plan for SFG 2023 was to remove the decaying god-poles from the old Jotnar Vé, destroy them according to funerary practices described in ethnohistoric and mythological literature, and then erect new poles for the same divinities in the new vé.

5.2: The Esoteric – Friday, June 2 2023 at 8:30 PM

Shortly past twilight, about fifteen of us gathered under the canopy of the purple registration hut known as “The Rabbit Hole”. The night was cool and got colder as the sunlight faded. We were at The Rabbit Hole to peruse and potentially borrow ritual wear that Austin brought for festival participants. Large plastic bins and cardboard boxes were filled with Viking Age replica clothing: wool and linen tunics in beige, red, and blue; linen trousers in black and tan; thick leather belts with iron loops; and linen leg wraps of various colours. I did not borrow anything, because I was wearing my personal ritual wear: a red tunic and unbleached linen trousers cinched at my waist with a red-brown leather belt.

Around 9:25, after the sun finally set, Maryanne, a short, older woman with a round face, and co-proprietor of RK with Austin, called to begin the ceremony. I walked with the other festivalgoers towards the Keystone Firepit behind Standing Stone, while Marianne drove participants with reduced mobility in a golf cart. I heard G.B., a tall, wide-set man with a greying red beard, shout “hail” three times from Standing Stone. When I arrived, a dozen festivalgoers were already there, huddled in groups of three or four. As more arrived, the groups broke apart and formed a horseshoe-shaped line that opened facing Standing Stone. It was quiet, but there were whispered conversations between people across the line. Some attendees wore reproduction Viking-age clothing and others mundane clothing; some wore shoes and others were barefoot.

I was conversing with my friend, Shae, a taller, full-figured non-binary person assigned female at birth, about an internal conflict I was having with my, at the time,

patron deity: Loki. I was telling Shae about my silver Loki pendant modelled after the Bitterstad amulet (Cerbing 2016:72), and how every chain or strap I placed it on broke within weeks. Earlier that day, the latest chain came apart where the pendant's bail sat. Shae suggested that this repeated pattern was a message from Loki that I should move on. I resisted but entertained this interpretation.

The night wore on while RK staff searched for golf carts. There was only one golf cart, affectionately named Thor, at Standing Stone, and we needed two others: Freya and Ziggy. It was dark when Austin and Maryanne arrived with the golf carts, signalling that the ritual might begin.

Our gyðja (priestess) Brynja, sporting a mohawk and a green linen dress, circled the inside of our horseshoe. She carried a wooden staff with a gnarled head and decorated with runes. She welcomed us ominously, "The Sorceress of the Ironwood has come to Midgard to offer her guidance and wisdom." She explained that Angrboða, the Jotunn (mythic giant) wife of Loki, would be in Birch Grove. We were to ask the sorceress one question on which we sought guidance. Once we received our answer, we were to leave an offering such as a trinket or valuable in a bowl on the sorceress's left side. If we had no offerings we were to spit into the bowl to offer our "essence" to her.

Everyone was silent as Brynja told us we would process to Birch Grove. Those with mobility concerns would take golf carts, while the rest would walk. Brynja invoked Angrboða with a loud shout, "Hail! Angrboða!" and led the procession up Yellow Brick Road. Brynja was flanked by a woman in a blue tunic who carried a frame drum and stick. She beat the drum in steady rhythm of bass notes with a notable twang as the sound decayed. I followed close behind Brynja near the front. The golf carts followed behind,

and their lights created dancing shadows on the trees and those processing. Apart from the sound of the drum and of footsteps on gravel, the procession was quiet; there were few barely audible murmurs. The combined experience of the rhythmic beats synchronized footsteps and dancing shadows created the illusion of a much larger procession.

I took that time to reflect on my question and my expectations for The Esoteric. It was my first time participating in a Heathen festival at RK and I did not know what to expect. My knowledge of Heathen Lore made me question the notion that Angrboða could, or would, come to miðgarð (Earth). Past Germanic peoples may have practised spirit travel, which they called seiðr, but no Lore descriptions of the practice, to my knowledge, involve spirit possession. To my knowledge, Jotnar (plural for Jotunn) veneration was limited to Loki, which gave me pause about how to properly honour the sorceress, Angrboða.

Halfway to Birch Grove, Brynja called at the top of her lungs so that our entire procession, and Jaime, who performed the role of Angrboða in Birch Grove, could hear: “Hail to the sorceress of the Ironwood! We come!” The procession echoed back with a collective “Hail!” which is a conventional RK practice: It is expected to shout “hail” after something or someone else has been hailed. The procession’s pace and drum tempo accelerated. Murmuring among those present increased to whispers and conversations the closer we got to Birch Grove. Beside me, my informant, Thorir, dressed in a green tunic with yellow trim, stared straight ahead while resting her hand on the axe at her waist.

The procession passed the path to a wood disposal site that RK staff call Mirkwood, and Brynja called out again, “Hail to the mother of three! Angrboða!” which

echoed with “Hail!” Brynja referenced Angrboða and Loki’s three children: Jormungandr, the world serpent that circles miðgarð, Fenrir, the wolf who kills Odin at Ragnarok, and Hel, who presides over the dead in Helheim. The drummer’s tempo and Brynja’s calling sped up, repeating the first call and then the second.

The procession turned off Yellow Brick Road towards Bogside, the road that runs along the eastern side of RK, where the marsh is. Just ahead was a path lined by handheld lanterns lit with tealights. A person stood in the middle of the illuminated path, cloaked and hooded, holding a lantern. Brynja stopped the procession near the Birch Grove, and the drumming ceased. The procession divided into two lines along the treeline. Brynja shared a few quiet words with the hooded figure, then turned to face the rest of us. Brynja welcomed us to the Ironwood, where Angrboða, Loki’s wife, resided conducting divinatory magic. She said that once we had received our answers from Angrboða, we could return to the Keystone Firepit.

Brynja moved to the side of the Birch Grove entrance, standing like a guard. The cloaked person, face obscured, took Brynja’s place at the head of the procession as our guide. The guide asked who wanted to enter the Ironwood first. A man of average height and build stepped forward wordlessly, and the guide extended an arm. The man took the guide’s arm, and they walked into the Birch Grove.

I heard the guide and the man whisper, but not what was said, as they walked clockwise around the grove, which was lined with lanterns placed on the ground. There was a brazier in the middle of the grove, flanked by L, an older woman dressed in blue, who beat a drum in time with the guide’s steps. The man and the guide stopped halfway around the perimeter of Birch Grove, and the man knelt at the foot of a podium, on which

perched an ominous and looming figure. The figure was Jaime, possessed by Angrboða. The man and Jaime exchanged a few words before Jaime placed her hand into his. The man then stood and took the guide's arm again and was led out of Birch Grove. With hands clutched tight, the man wordlessly passed through the procession and returned to Keystone Firepit. The whole process took approximately two minutes.

The guide stood before the ritual participants again and asked if anyone else was ready to meet with Angrboða. A woman approached this time and performed the same motions as the man who came before. When the woman came out, another person volunteered. This cycle continued for about ten minutes before the participants who had yet to speak with Jaime, possessed by Angrboða, became restless. Conversations unrelated to the ritual were whispered, but over a few minutes escalated to moderate volume. When the volume of conversation increased to such a level that Jaime could hear them in the Birch Grove, the guide returned with a querent and sent another into the Birch Grove alone; they turned to the ritual participants who had yet to be seen and chastised us. She said that we "gave those who went first the respect" of being quiet and suggested that we ought to exercise empathy and consider how our experience with Angrboða would feel if we could hear others talking. The guide promptly returned to the Birch Grove and escorted the most recent querent back to the group.

I waited until most participants had already gone before I took the guide's arm and entered Birch Grove. Lamps illuminated the perimeter and a black brazier the centre. A larger lantern cast a faint glow. L beat a frame drum in time with the guide's steps. As we passed the threshold, the guide asked if I knew my task. Although I did, I said I did not. The guide repeated Brynja's instructions. Ahead of me a figure loomed, seated on a

pedestal covered in dark cloth: the high seat. The guide walked me to the figure's foot and withdrew to the shadows at my right. The drumming stopped.

I knelt on one knee and looked up at Jaime who sat cross-legged. She was dressed in black robes with light-coloured animal furs draped over her shoulders. Her face was obscured by a deer skull mask. Leaning against the high seat, on Jaime's left and right, were ritual staves: one wrapped in leather and the other capped with a half-broken ram skull. These staves are the accoutrements of a seiðr-worker, such as Thorbjorg described in *The Saga of Erik the Red*:

she was dressed in such wise that she had a blue mantle over her, with strings for the neck, and it was inlaid with gems quite down to the skirt. On her neck she had glass beads. On her head she had a black hood of lambskin, lined with ermine. A staff she had in her hand, with a knob thereon; it was ornamented with brass, and inlaid with gems round about the knob. Around her she wore a girdle of soft hair, and therein was a large skin-bag, in which she kept the talismans needful to her in her wisdom. She wore hairy calf-skin shoes on her feet, with long and strong-looking thongs to them, and great knobs of latten at the ends. On her hands she had gloves of ermine-skin, and they were white and hairy within (Sephton 2007: Chap. 4).

Performing Angrboða, Jaime leaned forward and looked down at me from behind her mask, breathing heavily. "Who comes?" she asked in a deep voice. I respond with my first name, unsure if my last name is necessary. She shifted and moved on the high seat

with fluid and jerking motions; her body would slowly drift in an arc in one direction, and then sharply jerk in the other. “What is your question?” she asked, and I paused. I am skeptical of possession and divination, but for the sake of participant-observation, I asked my question: “Am I following the right path?” This reflected my insecurities as a scholar, my questioned devotion to Loki, and my relationships with friends and loved ones.

Jaime pulled back slightly before answering my question, as Angrboða: “You are following the right path, but you are held back by your self-doubt. The only barrier to your growth and success is yourself. You must work on it.” She urged me to come closer while she extended a closed hand, palm down. “This is a gift, but it is also something you must think about.” She said as I offered my hand. She placed a small glass jar in my palm and pushed my fingers closed around it. “You may leave,” she said, sitting upright. I did not bring any offerings for the ritual, so I leaned over the offering bowl to my left and spat into it as I had been instructed.

I stood and stepped back. The guide ushered me out of the Birch Grove. I carried the jar into my tent. Inside the jar was a strip of paper with the Elder Futhark Rune *fehu*, meaning wealth, so named as the first letter in the reconstructed proto-Germanic word *fehu* (Page 1987:15).

5.3: The Jotnar’s Funeral – Saturday, June 3 2023 1 PM

It was a temperate and sunny Saturday afternoon. I sat around the Keystone Firepit with a couple dozen, increasingly excited people waiting for the day’s rituals to start.

Back in January, Maryanne had told me about SFG and the plans to move the Jotnar Vé when I first contacted her about conducting ethnographic research at RK. She said that the move was suggested in 2018 as the water level in the adjacent marshland was rising year after year. The old Jotnar Vé was established in 2014 beside an entrance to the Shrine Trail that was later moved further north, leaving the vé largely abandoned according to Jaime and Brynja, who described it as feeling cold and dead.

Conversations began to trail off as Brynja and Jaime, the two goðar (gender-neutral plural for Heathen priests) responsible for the rituals that day, walked north along Yellow Brick Road. Jaime was dressed in a black, long-sleeved, ankle-length wool dress, cinched at her waist with a thin leather belt, while Brynja wore a green, long-sleeved linen dress with a black collar and cuffs. Both carried staves made of gnarled wood; Jaime's was decorated with a ram's skull, while Brynja's was wrapped in leather and cord. Both carried cattle-horn drinking vessels slung across their bodies with leather straps. They approached Standing Stone and stood on either side of it.

G.B. stepped out from the crowd at Keystone Firepit and shouted with enough volume to be heard across RK. He summoned ritual participants to Standing Stone, where the day's rituals would commence.

Jaime welcomed us to the inaugural Stone and Flame Gathering, which she dubbed "the weekend in the Ironwood". She explained that the old Jotnar Vé was no longer suitable as a place of worship due to its proximity with marshland making it inaccessible for a significant proportion of the camping season. She described the day's schedule: ritual participants would process to the old Jotnar Vé. We would then dismantle and prepare the god-poles within for their funerary rites in the Drumming Firepit.

Jaime and Brynja would lead the participants up Yellow Brick Road. A person I will call “L” and another woman followed, beating their drums. We processed in silence, turned onto the trail that led past Birch Grove, and continued towards the Drumming Firepit: a sandy clearing enclosed by two-metre-tall berms surrounding a two-metre-wide ring of stones enclosing a mound of ash (Figure 5.1). As the procession passed the firepit, Brynja and Jaime set their staves against the stones and returned to head the procession. Participants continued past the berms and turned into an unkempt grassy clearing flanked by forest to the north and marshland to the east.



Figure 5.1: View of the Drumming Firepit from the southern entrance. Photo: Logan Elson.

Ahead, to the east-northeast, was the old Jotnar Vé, an enclosed mound jutting to the east and sloping into the marsh. The mound was surrounded by 20 cm thick, 1 m tall, wooden posts and trees. A manila rope was strung through iron rings on the posts and trees, forming a circle with an opening towards the clearing. Inside the circle, two 30–50 cm thick and 2–3-metre-tall pine poles stood on the mound and one stood at the bottom of the slope. The god-poles were carved with identifying features. On the left was Hel,

with a carved face that was half flesh and half skeletal. In the middle was Loki, whose face was minimally carved with simple facial features and a large moustache of curving lines above the mouth with lines carved across it, to mimic threads as depicted in an archaeological find recorded by Cerbing (2016:72) and described by Sturluson (1880[1220]:192). On the right, in the marsh, was Hyrrokkin, whose pole was uncarved with the tip smeared with ash.

Brynja and Jaime stopped at the two posts that mark the entrance to the Jotnar Vé and turned towards the procession, which divided into two, one in front of Jaime, and one in front of Brynja. Jaime pulled a notebook from the folds of her dress, and began to read from it:

We are gathered here today at the Stone and Flame Gathering, for the funerals of Loki, Hel, and Hyrrokkin. Their wooden bodies have died, and we will lay them to rest. We will process their bodies to the funeral pyre to give thanks to Them, say our farewells, and speak of Their deeds into the memory-ale, as those who are remembered, live forever. The vé-bonds will now be removed and wrapped around their masters, to hold safe again, for their last trip to the pyre. Together we will now pull the poles from the ground.

Both Jaime and Brynja stepped into the vé and laid their hands on Hel's god-pole.

Many participants stepped forward to help extract the god-poles. In our enthusiasm, we became a tangled mass. Amidst the pandemonium, Maryanne called for us to stop and hastened to the god-poles. Scattered on the ground around or on each pole

were trinkets, including coins, stones, and jewellery, that had been left there as offerings. Maryanne, with some help from other participants, collected the offerings, including an amber necklace tied around Hel's pole, and gathered them in her dress. She left the vé and the rest of us continued removing the god-poles.

Brynja and Jaime began to remove Hel's god-pole by rocking it back and forth. Austin and another man, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, waded into the mud where Hyrrokkin stood. I joined those removing Loki's god-pole. As our groups struggled to remove the poles, L and the other drummer began drumming. Hel's pole cracked at the base, and with continued effort rocking it back and forth gave out. Participants both inside and outside the vé shouted words of encouragement. Brynja and Jaime, with help from three others, lowered Hel's pole to the ground. The group handling Loki's god-pole tried to pull it straight out of the ground, but it cracked along the base, which had completely rotted. Austin and the man in jeans rocked and rotated Hyrrokkin's god-pole, which seemed loose in the mud. They struggled, but her pole came out in one piece.

The group responsible for Loki's pole, which was the first pole removed, lowered it to the ground before lifting it and trying to carry it from the vé. Jaime stopped us and told us to return Loki so he could be wrapped. We returned with Loki's pole and put it next to Hel's pole, which Brynja and Jaime had laid face up. With Thorir, I helped Austin walk Hyrrokkin from the marsh to the other two god-poles.

G.B., the man in jeans, and Austin then began removing the vé-bond rope from the boundary posts. The rope was old, grey, frayed, and stiff from years in the elements. Untangling it from the rings was tedious. The knot on the final ring, installed into a tree trunk, presented the most difficulty. The tree had grown to engulf parts of the iron ring

and pinned the rope in place. The man in jeans, once the rope was untied, tried to pull the rope through the last loop. The last eight inches would not pass through. Someone recommended that we cut the last section of rope, but we rejected the suggestion because the rope was almost through. G.B. carved into the tree around the ring with a knife. Meanwhile, the man in jeans gave the rope a final tug. It snapped where it touched the iron ring, striking G.B. in the face. G.B. laughed the incident off, and Austin joked that the last eight inches of the rope were Loki's (because of his infamy as a trickster).

The rope was brought to the bundle of god-poles in the middle of the old vé space and wrapped around them spanning end to end. We would be moving all three poles together as a bundle, while ensuring that the vé-bond rope remained fastened around them. Fifteen or so men and women out of about forty participants negotiated how to best carry the god-poles from the vé to the firepit. Seven stood beside Hel's, and eight, including me, stood beside Loki's; Hyrrokkin, the thinnest and longest pole, was balanced between Loki and Hel. We fumbled our hands under the poles and raised them onto our shoulders.

Jaime and Brynja led the pole-carriers from the old Jotnar Vé. The participants that had not joined in removing the god-poles walked parallel to the procession, forming a line on either side. The drummers followed behind, beating on their frame drums. We processed through the clearing and past the berm into the Drumming Firepit. As we approached the stone ring, Brynja and Jaime guided the pole-carriers to set them down beside a tower of sticks and branches that were partially charred and blackened. We removed the vé-bond rope from the god-poles and gave it to Austin. The poles were arranged across the firepit with their faces to the sky.

The goðar stood beside each other, having collected their staves, on the west side of the stone circle. The ritual participants encircled the firepit. The drumming stopped. Both Jaime and Brynja pulled notebooks from their dresses.

Following her script, Jaime began, “We now commit Their bodies to the fire, ashes to ashes dust to dust.” She diverted from the script to explain that due to the fire ban recently enacted, there would be no fire. Instead, we would shave the Jotnar’s faces from the poles and cremate their faces in a cauldron. She gestured to Frost, a man in a red t-shirt and khaki shorts, who stepped into the stone circle with a bark shaver: a long, gently curved blade between two wooden handles. Frost straddled the Loki pole and carved its face with digging, dragging draws of the bark shaver. Frost repeated this process for Hel’s pole and Hyrrokkin’s pole. Before leaving the stone circle, Frost collected the shavings and placed them in the cauldron beside Jaime and Brynja. Brynja then spoke:

Cattle die, and kinsman die, And so one dies ones’s self;
 But a noble name will never die, If good renown one gets.
 Cattle die, kinsmen die, And so one’s self;
 One thing I know that never dies:
 The fame of a dead man’s deeds.

She quoted the *Havamal*, a poem from the *Poetic Edda*, which contains wisdom supposedly given by Odin. Brynja followed with the statement, “We are our deeds, and so long as our deeds are remembered, we will never die. We now share Loki, Hel, and

Hyrrokkin's deeds and honour, and strengthen Their reputation so that They may be well remembered."

Jaime removed the horn from its leather carrier and poured red wine, supplied by Maryanne, into it. She raised the horn toward the god-poles, like a toast. She explained that we would each take turns speaking over the horn to imbue the wine within with our good words, which would then be offered to the Jotnar. We were told that we could whisper over the horn if we were uncomfortable sharing words with everyone present.

Brynja hailed Loki, Hel, and Hyrrokkin, to which those assembled shouted "hail" in return. As the last person finished hailing, Brynja spoke, "I will now pass the horn around so that you may each share a story of the fallen." Maryanne stepped forward from beside Brynja, and explained that, under normal circumstances, we would sip from the horn, but there were some people present who were uncomfortable sharing food and drink with strangers due to risk of contracting COVID-19.

Jaime passed the horn to her left, and people told stories of their relationships with Loki, Hel, and Hyrrokkin. Some devoted praise to all three, and others praised only one or two. Many whispered their stories, and some said nothing, but raised the horn towards the god-poles before they passed the horn. Each story was punctuated by the storyteller uttering "hail," alone, or followed by a Jotunn's name, which was echoed by those assembled. Those who hailed Hel told stories about the deceased, those who hailed Hyrrokkin told stories about resilience and adversity, and those who hailed Loki told stories about mishaps that would conclude pleasantly. One attendee's grandparent had died the Winter before from complications of COVID-19, and they thanked Hel for providing safe haven for their deceased grandparent. A trans person thanked Hyrrokkin,

as a role model embodying physical and emotional strength and handling struggles head on. Loki was thanked for hiding sewing and crafting supplies, which encouraged the storyteller to use different materials better suited to their project.

Maryanne and Austin were the last two to speak. Maryanne said the original Jotnar Vé was proposed by Brendan and Gypsy, who had since died, to make the Jotnar more vibrant and central on the land. Austin said that the Jotnar had planted and cultivated relationships among the community that might never have found roots otherwise. He told of the Jotnar Vé's creation: it was built before KG 2014 to honour Loki, who it had been decided could not be erected in the Æsir Vé but was due respect nonetheless. The Jotnar Vé was a symbol of goodwill between people. Austin bemoaned that the Jotnar Vé had fallen to disuse and disrepair. Passing the horn to Jaime, Austin thanked all present and the Jotnar.

As Jaime took the horn Brynja read from her book, "Good words about fine deeds have been spoken over this horn, and the mead now holds the honor and good frith we have shared. May the Gods and the Ancestors accept this offering, and may we continue to remember Loki, Hel, and Hyrrokkin's deeds. May they be well remembered! HAIL!" The community hailed in response, and Jaime stepped into the firepit and poured the horn's contents beside the now-defaced god-poles as a libation.

Jaime returned to Brynja's side and took over speaking: "It is time. The funeral is complete and our new poles are prepared. We will anoint you all, with the ashes of the fallen with an Eihwaz rune, the axis of spiritual becoming, upper and lower worlds that meet, the rune of life and death." While Jaime spoke, Brynja attempted to start a fire in the cauldron, which I later learned was filled with water and had been used for offerings

at another festival. Brynja tried to blacken the god-pole face carvings. I never noticed, but Jaime and Shae would later recall that Brynja discreetly scooped ashes from the firepit into the cauldron, in lieu of charring the face shavings, which she then mixed into paste for anointing participants. Brynja took a handful of paste and gave Jaime the cauldron and each anointed half the participants. Jaime and Brynja marked each other's forehead with eihwaz before turning to us.

Jaime and Brynja walked around the circle, chanting "Eihwaz" under their breaths, and marked everyone's foreheads with the eihwaz rune. Those with long hair pulled their hair to the side. Many nodded after being anointed. I thanked Brynja as she marked my forehead, then fell silent. When the goðar marked the last person, they announced that we would process to the new Jotnar Vé.

5.4: The Blót – Saturday June 3 2023, 3 PM

Participants in the Jotnar's funeral processed to the space for the new Jotnar Vé, accompanied by a beating drum. The assembly retreated from the firepit towards Birch Grove but turned northwest and proceeded around the outside of the western berm towards the Shrine Trail entrance. We walked through sand and passed the stagnant pond, known as the cauldron, before we arrived at the Shrine Trail entrance. It was marked with scraps of fabric, torn from Maryanne's many old sarongs, suspended on rope hung between two trees (Figure 5.2). We passed under the entrance, and the space for the Jotnar Vé was in front of us.



Figure 5.2: Entrance to the Shrine Trail. Photo: Logan Elson

The place designated for the Jotnar Vé (Figure 5.3) was hidden among the trees and made of them. The god-poles, each approximately 50cm wide and 4m tall, laid beside the holes they would be erected in. Loki's pole, on the left, was carved similar to the old pole: simple linear features that included a moustache, eyes, and a mouth stitched shut. Hel's pole, straight ahead, had a small, but detailed, relief carving that depicted a half skull, half living woman's face. Hyrrokkin's pole, on the right, had a complex linear carving that depicted an old woman and had been smeared with ash and oil paste. A pile of stones was raised haphazardly among the trees. Iron rings were embedded in tree trunks. There were four ceramic bowls laid on the ground. Three bowls were grouped together and filled, one with water, one with mead, and one with water mixed with botanicals and soil, while an empty bowl was placed beside the god-pole bearing Loki's face. Lengths of iron chains were bundled in coils along Shrine Trail, which was demarcated with rotten birch logs.



Figure 5.3: The site of the new Jotnar Vé without god-poles. Photo: Logan Elson

The goðar led us into the future Jotnar Vé, and some followed; there was not enough space for everyone to stand comfortably. Before entering the future vé space, people carrying knives placed them along Shrine Trail, and those wearing Mjólnir (Thor's Hammer) pendants removed or hid them. This behaviour hearkens back to rules established for the Æsir Vé. Vés are places of frið, meaning good fortune or peace, and it is prohibited to carry weapons into their boundaries. Worshipping or displaying iconography of other pantheons, or the enemies of the Æsir, such as the Jotnar, are also forbidden.

When everyone arrived and were comfortable, Jaime began the Blót:

we now stand in the holy enclosure. We are here to make sacred this space, to consecrate a Vé in which to honor the Jotnar, the Utgard, the outsiders. Today we raise god-poles to Hel, Loki, and Hyrrokkin. First, we must dedicate our sacred place by drawing a boundary around this garð, (garð, or enclosure) so that all the

Nine Worlds know that this is home to the Jotnar in Midgard. HAIL!”

All present hailed before Brynja continued, “You see around you nine trees, one for each of the Nine Worlds, from root to branch of the World Tree, Yggdrasil. By sacred water, we will bind these offerings to this place, in the names of Hel, Loki, and Hyrrokkin.”

Brynja and Jaime took one of the filled bowls and carried it between them. They approached a tree with an iron ring at the junction between the vé space and Shrine Trail. They dipped their hands into the liquid and flicked the liquid onto the tree, anointing it, before walking clockwise to the next tree with a ring.

Meanwhile, L taught participants how to sing “Gerda’s Enclosure Song.” The song describes an enclosed garden, and L suggested using it for circle-casting to ritually create a safe space for magical practice. We sung the following song twice:

You are in seeds, you growing green all around
 There is no wind, grasp the fine mist on the ground
 Gone is the sound, ease the way over the land
 Grow in your way, none shall come into my hand
 And my gate is strong, and my wall is high
 There is none but me, holding the key.

L then explained that with a safe ritual space to work in, we would begin the enclosure ritual. The enclosure ritual required that we bless the chain that would encircle the vé; we did so by invoking the giant serpent Jormungandr, Loki’s child.

L led the assembled participants in the invocation: “Jormungandr, boundary maker. Jormungandr guard this vé”, which we repeated until the chain was strung from the first tree Brynja and Jaime anointed to the last. After two trial cycles of the chant, L left the vé space and returned with the iron chain, which she clipped onto the first tree’s iron ring with a threaded chain hook latch. The chant began with few voices, but as it cycled back to its beginning, more people joined. It began with enthusiasm and passion, felt in the variance of voices as people enunciated each word, but it became a drone as everyone’s voices joined in harmony. When L fell into the hole that Loki would be erected in, the chant broke only to resume with the same droning quality. L Joked about Loki’s proclivity for games, which spurred laughter and nodded agreements.

As L attached the chain to the final tree’s iron ring Jaime threw up her hands and exclaimed, “People of Raven’s Knoll! Our holy enclosure has been established! Hail the Jotnar! [G.B.] will now give rest to Sigyn [Loki’s Æsir wife] and hold up the bowl. We ask that all who are able, take turns holding the bowl during ritual. Hail Sigyn!” This was followed by an echo of hails. G.B. picked up the empty bowl beside Loki’s god-pole and held it over Loki’s face carving, evoking Sigyn’s role in Loki’s punishment for killing Odin’s son, Baldur (Dodds 2017:107). In the myth, Sigyn holds a basin above Loki to prevent snake venom dripping onto him; when she empties the basin, venom drips onto Loki, which makes him convulse and create earthquakes. The Blót made use of this narrative to create a participatory element in the ritual that allowed any attendee to perform a mythologically significant task, if they chose, rather than simply observe.

Jaime, Brynja, and two others, carried the liquid-filled bowls to Loki’s god-pole (Figure 5.4) and placed them on the ground. A stockier woman in a black apron dress

followed behind them, carrying a leafy branch. Jaime, Brynja, and the stocky woman stood facing Loki's god-pole.

Jaime began her speech:

After the gods formed all-that-is from the flesh and blood and bones of the Jotunn Ymir³, he fashioned the first man and woman out of wood found lying upon the sand. All humanity is tied to all life and to the gods. It is through the breath of the Galdrafothr⁴, through Ask and Embla⁵, through our ancestors and the land, that these ties are bound. A gift deserves a gift. The gods recognized the folk in a block of wood, so shall we them.

Jaime raised the bowl filled with water to waist height, then spoke again:

When the sons of Buri slew the Jotunn Ymir, his blood became the sea and the waters. Here is the blood of Ymir.

The stocky woman dipped the branch she carried into the bowl of water. She removed the branch and struck the carved face on Loki's god-pole with the wet leaves

³The first Jotunn, and progenitor of all the mythological races in the Eddas (Dodds 2017:26)

⁴Another name for Odin, shares root words in *galdr* (sung runes), and father (Dodds 2014:9). Father of rune magic.

⁵The first two humans, found as driftwood, given life by Odin (Dodds 2017:28).

twice, swiping left and right. She proclaimed, “By the blood of Ymir, arise son of Laufey!”⁶ She dipped the branch into the water again, and flogged Loki’s face again, “By the blood of mighty Ymir, arise trickster!” Once more, she dipped the branch and struck the god-pole, “By the blood of ancient Ymir, arise Lopt⁷! Hail!” Everyone hailed. Jaime returned the bowl of water to the ground and raised the bowl of mead and said, “Here is the mead of Suttungr⁸. Hidden in a mountain, guarded by Gunnlod⁹, wanted by all.” The stocky woman repeated the ritual flagellation of Loki’s god-pole, but the exclamations were replaced, in order, with the phrases: “By Suttungr’s prize, arise son of Farbauti¹⁰,” “by Suttungr’s treasure, arise Cunning One,” and “By Suttungr’s mead, arise mother of Sleipnir¹¹!”



*Figure 5.4: Loki’s new god-pole.
Photo: Logan Elson*

⁶Loki’s Jotunn mother (Sturluson 1880[1220]:91)

⁷Another name for Loki (Sturluson 1880[1220]:91)

⁸Suttungr is a Jotunn whom gave the dwarves, Fjalar and Galar, mercy in exchange for the first mead (Sturluson 1880[1220]:161).

⁹Suttungr’s daughter (Sturluson 1880[1220]:161).

¹⁰Loki’s Jotunn father (Sturluson 1880[1220]:91).

The second bowl was returned to ground, and the Jaime raised the third bowl, filled with water and botanicals and soil. Jaime explained the contents: “Here are the elements of charm and incantation, herbs from our small piece of Midgard and the flesh of Jord¹².” RK goðar call the contents of this mixture Alu, named after runic inscriptions on Germanic artifacts dating to and before the Migration Period, c. 300–600 CE (Macleod 2006:100–101). Scholars debate what the Alu inscription represents, but there is some agreement that it is an instance of early runic magic (Macleod 2006:24). Austin once explained that Alu was the animatedness of things or “the magic of life” that past Germanic peoples experienced when they produced alcohol. The stocky woman thrice dipped the branch into the water, and as she again struck the god-pole exclaimed, “By wort-craft, arise, Lord of Mischief! By golden Alu, arise Shapeshifter! By liquid magic, arise Loki! Hail!” Jaime invited those present to help raise Loki, and many people rushed to assist while others stood back and made space. There was little communication, but the work was coordinated; the bottom of Loki’s pole slid smoothly into the hole meant for it. When Loki’s god-pole was settled into the hole and rotated so the carved visage faced the vé’s center, people packed soil around the pole and stamped it down. In three minutes, Loki was free standing at twelve feet tall. To celebrate erecting Loki, Jaime called out: “Hail Loki, the cunning!” and everyone hailed in response.

¹¹Sleipnir is Odin’s eight-legged horse, birthed by Loki (Dodds 2017:260; Sturluson 1880[1220]:73)

¹²The Jotunn daughter and wife of Odin; mother of Thor; goddess representing the earth (Sturluson 1880[1220]:65).

The poles for Hel (Figure 5.5) and Hyrrokkin (Figure 5.6) were raised in a similar manner. They were each flagellated thrice with water, mead, and Alu the same as the Loki pole was before it was raised. G.B was responsible for anointing Hyrrokkin, while Brynja was responsible for Hel. The epithets and kennings used for Hel and Hyrrokkin were different than those used for Loki but also derived from their mythological narratives. Once all the poles were erected, Jaime and Brynja stood near the haphazard stone pile that stood between Loki's and Hel's god-poles. Jaime encouraged the assembled people to declare their names and their hometowns to

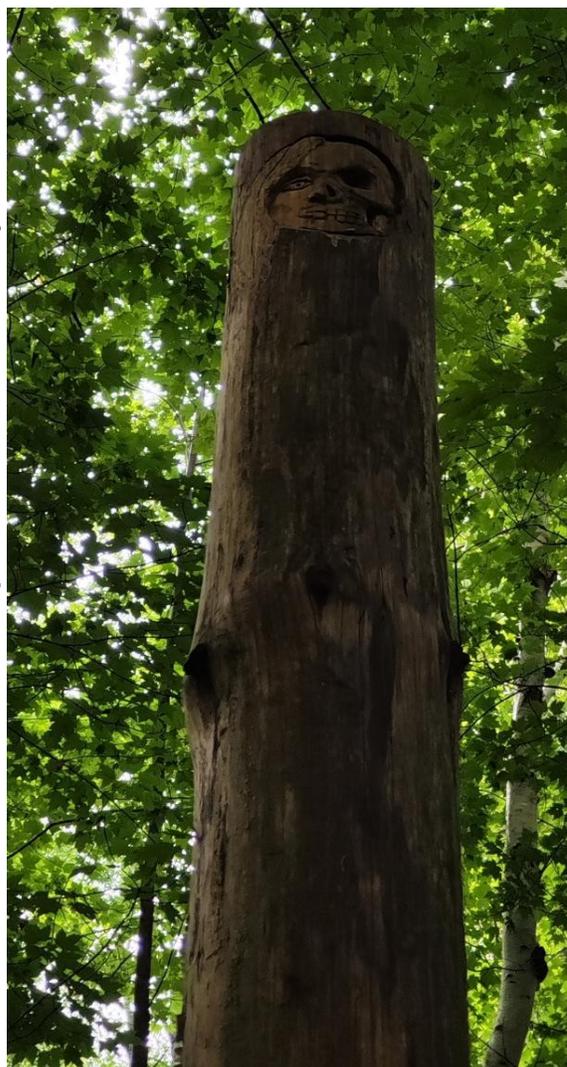


Figure 5.5: Hel's new god-pole. Photo: Logan Elson

demonstrate to the Jotnar they are honoured from near and far. She began by saying her first name, and then "Montreal". The pattern continued along a meandering line that returned to Brynja, who stood next to Jaime. As Brynja finished her declaration, Jaime turned to face the three god-poles and proclaimed that the present Jotnar are worshipped far and wide, and those assembled in the vé were testament to that.

Brynja removed a chunk of meat from a bag at her waist and knelt in front of the stone pile. She then said, "Loki, Hel, and Hyrrokkin! We have brought you gifts! We wish

that you bestow your favour upon us and send fortune in our lives,” as she placed the meat onto the rock pile before retreating. G.B. and the stocky woman brought forth meat and fruit and placed them on the stones. Jaime opened a bottle of mead and poured it onto the stone pile as a libation.

After the first gifts of food and drink were given, Jaime turned to the poles again and welcomed the Jotnar into the space, to RK, and into our thoughts and feelings. She invited them to join those gathered in feast and jubilation so that we may develop stronger relations and connections with them. She hailed thrice but was echoed once. After her short welcome speech, Jaime gave participants an opportunity to give toasts and gifts to the Jotnar. Jaime took a horn of mead from G.B. and made a toast before passing the horn to Brynja, who likewise offered a toast.

Offerings to the Jotnar vary significantly. The Northern Tradition

Kindred, to which L belongs, came with a large plastic bucket of sweet and sour gummy candies that they devoted to Loki, as they share a collective UPG that Loki enjoys sweet



Figure 5.6: Hyrrokkin's new god-pole. Photo: Logan Elson

things. Thorir gave Hyrrokkin a well-used pocketknife that she claimed refused to break despite many years of abuse. Shae gave the Jotnar handmade gifts made from feathers, found around RK, wrapped and bound in birch bark. I offered my Loki pendant to Loki, which I buried among the stones. Others gave food, alcohol, and jewellery.

When all had their opportunity to contribute their offerings and toasts, the ritual concluded. In typical RK Heathen fashion, Brynja stomped on the ground and loudly proclaimed “This rite is ended!” Which heralded applause and jubilation.

5.5: Conclusion

This chapter provides an account of the three main rituals of SFG 2023. I described the behavioural and artifactual elements of the SFG 2023 rituals. The Esoteric, Funeral, and Blót ritual configurations of SFG 2023 incorporate various configurants from Lore sources, non-Lore sources, and contemporary culture. The behavioural and artifactual evidence presented in this chapter is followed by interview data in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Finding Explicit Heathen Criteria

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a snapshot of explicitly recognized selection criteria expressed during interviews. Its three sections reflect common themes repeated during interviews and at social fires among goðar (ritual leaders), including Brynja, Jaime, and G.B. The first section, “Finding What Resonates” concerns how Heathens source their ideas and beliefs. Some select past Germanic cultural forms sourced from well-defined times, places, and languages, while others adopt cultural forms across a breadth of past Germanic cultures or even non-Germanic cultures. The second section, “Pivot,” addresses the performance of Heathen ritual and steps goðar take to ensure the vision and goals of rituals remain intact through uncontrolled circumstances and mishaps. Goðar stressed the importance of participant engagement in rituals and acknowledge that circumstances arise that demand impromptu responses to maintain participant engagement, like shifting from a pyre funeral to burning shaved faces of god-poles in a cauldron, and then pragmatically using ashes from the firepit to make black paste when the god-pole shavings became wet. The third section, “What is Woo,” describes religious awe as experienced and expressed at Raven’s Knoll (RK). Some goðar use the term *woo* for religious ecstasy and catharsis that rituals are supposed to produce; *woo* can also mean religiously coded experiences separate from ritual, like visions of deities.

These data offer multiple layers of explicitly stated rationales for ritual construction experience. They illustrate recurring criteria for selection of ritual elements

that are emic (explicitly recognized by my Heathen informants). Rituals should feel appropriate, or “resonate” by aligning closely with the knowledge and experiences of participants. Rituals are social performances influenced by changing circumstances, and adaptations to those circumstances ought to be pragmatic. Rituals are created and performed to elicit religious awe or excitement.

6.2: Finding What Resonates

For some Heathens I interviewed, what resonates is tightly defined and restrictive, while others expressed resonance with a broad range of experiences. Interviews generated descriptions of sensations and experiences that were synthesized into justifiable explanations for feelings of resonance. I refer to my recorded interviews to illustrate the range of sources, experiences, and aesthetics that my informants found to “resonate” with them.

G.B., a goðar for the Stone and Flame Gathering (SFG) 2023 Blot, described his experience of resonance as akin to liking pepperoni on pizza: “I like how it feels. You know, it just kind of kind of speaks to me saying like ‘I am for you.’ You know, it’s not a ... it’s just a feeling that you get. It’s not anything particular. Like, why do you like pepperoni pizza? I like pepperoni.” G.B. explained that much of what resonates with him either has sentimental value or connects with his life experiences:

So like I was a, you know, soldier or soldier-sailor and one of the things that I do —one of my very dear friends who was medic team lead for years, he carries a—

well, he says it's an athame [ritual knife] or he uses it as an athame. But it's the old Fairburn Sykes combat dagger. I have also acquired one of these and it sits on my altar at home and I use that for any kind of focusing energy. It's—Athames are very old, but they are very widely used in Neopaganism and Wicca, so that's why I use it. ... I'm like a magpie. I like stones, so I find shiny crystals. I find stuff like things that just resonate with me and it's like, "Okay, I want that. I'm putting that on my altar or things that I find or cherished little treasures that people will give to me. And because it's something that you have gone out of your way to give me. And it was special to you. It's special to me. So it sits there.

G.B. admitted to being an eclectic Neopagan with strong affinity for Heathenry. He finds little contradiction with his eclecticism: "Whereas the Norse—Norse practices are not necessarily, like, materialistic. Like, if it's useful, I will use it. Otherwise, it's nothing. Kind of. So, I use little snippets from everyone else." Instead of strictly subscribing to a specific past culture's practices and beliefs, G.B. claims to adopt anything that "feels right."

Despite G.B.'s eclecticism, he strives to be faithful to The Lore. In preparation for the SFG 2023 Blot, Jaime gave G.B. a copy of the liturgy for review, and G.B. took issue with an invocation prepared to honour the Giant Hyrrokkin. Commenting on the disparity between his understanding of Hyrrokkin's description and role in The Lore with the invocation, G.B. said:

There had been a carryover, and it said that, you know, “queen of the dead” and it’s like, no, that’s Hel-like. That’s not right. Can we say, like, “mightiest of giants” because in her lore, when Baldur the beautiful had died, they put him on his ship. It was heavily laden. Nobody could move it as a team effort. They [the Æsir] couldn’t move it. Then they call this one out of the—out of the bog somewhere and she comes along and she shoves it out in one go. Right, like, she is one of the most powerful beings in The Lore. And her story is three lines.

Despite few self-imposed restrictions on the kinds of rituals and artifacts G.B. incorporates into his practice, in this instance he regarded Lore accuracy as an essential criterion in selecting ritual configurants.

G.B.’s expression of resonance is rooted in “feeling right,” in terms of associations between his mental configurations and ritual configurations. G.B.’s mental configurations associated with past experiences drive the eclectic adoption of military equipment and precious stones into his magic practice. Those configurations comprising his knowledge of Heathen Lore provide orientation towards documented myth and culture as important to preserve. For G.B., it feels right to use a combat dagger to focus magic because of his friend and experience in the military, but improper to refer to divinities by characteristics that undocumented and more correctly applied to another mythological character.

Another informant, Thorir, a Heathen trans woman who camped at RK from the weekend before SFG 2023 through the end of camping season in September, is more reserved in what she finds resonant. Thorir is vocally critical of eclecticism, collapsing

temporally and geographically disparate cultures, and syncretic mythology. On multiple occasions she explained that she only draws inspiration from, and finds marginally resonant, those Lore sources written in Old Norse prior to the Christian conversion of the Scandinavian nations. This seemingly restricts her beliefs and practices to those texts composed on runestones in the younger and elder Futhark alphabets, dated to 800 CE or earlier, and some skaldic poetry preserved in later accounts of pre-Christian Scandinavia. For Thorir, finding only these sources resonant is a conscious decision based on a wholehearted rejection of Christian ideology and cultural influence. Thorir was raised in a Christian household, developed a strong dislike of Christian myth and ideology, and finds features of Christianity in Heathen Lore dissonant, such as the use of the Christian liturgical phrase, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” in the SFG 2023 Funeral.

In interviews before and after Hail and Horn Gathering (HHG), Thorir expressed an affinity with a historic warrior class known as the *ulfheðnar*, or wolf-warriors, referred to in “Vatnsdæla Saga” (Thordarson 2007), Þorbjörn Hornklofi’s poem, “Hrafnsmal” (Fulk 2012:91), and “Grettir’s Saga,” where they were called wolf-skins (Bycock 2009:10). “Resonating” with the *ulfheðnar* produced dissonance during the HHG 2023 Esoteric, which Thorir refused to attend since the symbolic act of the HHG 2023 Esoteric was binding the wolf-child of Loki, Fenrir, against his will. Thorir’s mental configuration of the *ulfheðnar*, and its constituent configurant, wolves, inhibited the potential for the HHG Esoteric ritual configuration to feel resonant with Thorir. By aligning herself with the wolf-warriors, the symbolic act of harming a mythically relevant, and sentient, wolf was unconscionable for Thorir. Yet Thorir participated in many other Heathen and non-Heathen rituals at RK during the 2023 festival season, indicating that resonance was not

required for participation in ritual, but significant dissonance, known and experienced ahead of ritual activities, incited non-participation.

I also interviewed the gyðja (priestess) Brynja who was responsible for Well and Tree Gathering (WTG) during the post-HHG cleaning. We discussed the role of The Lore in contemporary practice and the significant gaps in our knowledge of the past. When The Lore is insufficient, Heathens at RK use what is called “Unverified [alternatively “Unusual”] Personal Gnosis,” or UPG: intuitions about aspects of The Lore that have no direct referent but feel internally consistent with it. In the previous chapter I mentioned that someone made an offering of gummy candy to Loki; that Loki eats gummy candy is not mentioned in The Lore, but tricksters’ playfulness can be associated with the joy that comes from eating candy. According to Brynja, UPG forms a small but growing part of Heathen cosmology. She believes that UPG is essential for the growth of Heathenry and that pure reconstruction is a flawed endeavour: “You never know the entirety of the context. You’re guessing, gods dammit!” The existence of individual UPG and divergent interpretations of the Lore reflect convergences of various configurations that members of the community experience as resonance. Brynja suggested that cumulative expression of UPG is essential to make new Lore: “We won’t get lore from our own era unless we listen to each other and check for consistency.” What Brynja means by consistency is that UPG must be communicated and be agreed to; other Heathens must find the UPG sympathetic, in part or in whole, with their own mental configurations of The Lore and for it to be authenticated. Religious innovations receiving community approval as consistent with established mythology are incorporated into practice as if they were primeval (Glaskin 2005).

Lore consistency seems central to RK Heathenry. Conversations about Heathen cosmology, practice, and ideology are frequent during or close to festivals. Following HHG, I spoke with Shae about the relationship between god-poles in the *vés*, god figurines in private shrines, and the gods they represent. Shae described a conversation with another Heathen, in which she proposed that god-poles and figurines are like telephones connecting worshippers and the deities those figures represent. Shae's interlocutor instead suggested that they are manifestations of those gods with independent thoughts and behaviours; these miniaturized gods perceive their environment and report back to their godhead. These ideas express overlapping individual gnoses. Shae, for example, experiences her relationship to the gods like a casual friendship similar to how American evangelical Christians connect with their god (Luhrmann 2012). Shae communicates with the gods as a friend would using colloquialisms. Treating the gods as individuals to be called upon and chatted with mutually reinforces conceptualizing god-poles as telephones and the gods as friends in a common configuration. Divergent ideas about the relationship between divinities and their idols are allowed to co-exist as non-dogmatic individual notions, even in group settings.

What feels resonant may also change over time or between contexts. Altered motivations and goals can make formerly rejected ritual configurants acceptable for use. During a panel on runic magic at HHG, Austin explained that rune reading, like tarot and *galdr* (rune-singing), are inventions of the post-industrial era. In interviews, both Jaime and Brynja explained that years ago Austin and Erik, the head of the Heathen Confederation of Canada, attempted to push for a purely reconstructionist ritual framework remaining true to the Lore, but the community resisted. Yet, while leading the

HHG 2023 Blót Procession, Austin incited the use of *galdr*. While the runes and their names come from the Lore, their use in magic is lost to time. Using *galdr* resonates more with community members favouring a more theatrical and ecstatic approach than those moved by strict reconstruction.

Experiencing resonance (or dissonance) is one way my informants determine the effectiveness of rituals, but what resonates with one does not resonate with all. G.B. finds using a combat knife as a ritual athame resonant, while Thorir finds using an athame, which doesn't appear in pre-Christian Old Norse sources, dissonant. Explicitly stated criteria for resonance may be incomplete, as mental configurations may come into conflict when determining possible adoptions, adaptations, and rejections of ritual configurants. Creating ritual configurations that resonate is a matter of producing consistency with existing mental configurations and minimizing the friction between them. Even the best plans to induce resonance in ritual are subject to emergent and contingent contexts of ritual performance; ritual leaders often must improvise, what Knollians call “pivoting.”

6.3: Pivot

Ritual is performance art that relies on the interplay of contextually appropriate artifacts and behaviours (Grimes 2004:109; Schechner 2003[1994]:613). RK Heathens are intimately aware of the performative nature of ritual and discuss it as such. Like other theatrical performances, rituals require a suspension of disbelief. As T. M. Luhrmann (1989:142) describes for ceremonial magicians in Britain, “suspension of disbelief was a

necessary step toward committed, positive belief. To turn the possibility of belief into active commitment demands that the subject is comfortable with the ‘let’s pretend’ position.”

Rituals can be studied as performances according to multiple paradigms. Richard Schechner (2004[1988]:99,130) conceptualizes performance as “ritualized behaviour conditioned/permeated by play” that may be parsed into categories, such as ritual or theatre, determined by “where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances.” Performances that elicit transformation and are qualitatively efficacious are identified as ritual, while performances that primarily entertain are identified as theatre; there are no pure rituals or pure theatre (Schechner (2004[1988]:130. Another paradigm proposed by Daniel B. Lee (2012:115) instead suggests that rituals are “imaginary performance pattern[s] for coordinating and synchronizing the display of human bodies and other objects within the context of an interaction system.” Within these rituals, participants demonstrate appropriate cultural and ritual rules, and act in ways that are carefully curated to the expected form of a ritual (Lee 2012:133). Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart (2021:148–149) detail two other paradigms: the first conceptualizes ritual performance as products of “scripts,” instructions for how to perform rituals properly; the second highlights the affective power of sensory experience, and embodiment, in the production and reception of ritual performance.

Dialogues surrounding Heathen ritual performance at RK allude to these four paradigms without naming them or developing them at length; Schechner’s (2004[1988]:130) position on the distinction between theatre and ritual and Lee’s (2012:133) suggestion that there is a range of acceptable actions that can be taken within

ritual find ground. The performance of rituals at SFG was suffused with improvisation, aimed at affecting aesthetics of transformation, thus straddling the line between theatre and ritual performance. There were limits to improvisation grounded in both the expected behaviour of ritual leaders and the material conditions under which they performed.

If there is one word that I heard the most frequently in reference to SFG 2023 rituals, it was *pivot*. By pivot, they mean last-minute changes of plans for a ritual. Pivots can happen days, hours, or minutes before a ritual, or even during one. From my conversations with Jaime, Brynja, and Maryanne, I learned that many components of Stone and Flame Gathering were pivots: the Friday night Esoteric, shaving off the faces of the god-poles, and anointing participants at the gods' funeral with the eihwaz rune. Jaime had many stories about pivots at Stone and Flame Gathering, including how she processed the fire ban leading into SFG:

literally at the finish line, it was right at the end....Everything went to shit. ... Well, because....everything with the ritual was all written with fire, fire, fire. And then the day before, M.A.'s texting me....we have a, you know, a fire ban. Now fire bans in the beginning of June is not a thing. ...I've never seen it here. Ever. ... So, this was insane and I'm, like, "What the fuck now? What the fuck now?" So then we had to deal with the drama of that ...we can't burn the poles. Well, then we can't kill the god that's in the pole. We can't fucking burn them. How do we pivot? How do we pivot from this? And like, okay, how about we scrape off their faces, you know? ...that's what made the poles the poles: the faces.

Jaime's original plan for the SFG Funeral was to burn the old god-poles together in the main Firepit, followed by charring the "feet" (base) of the new god-poles using the embers of the pyre. Without a pyre, Jaime wanted to use the god-pole faces in a symbolically equivalent act of burning but encountered another setback:

We scrape off their faces, put their...shavings into this bucket and then, you know, we can burn that...then we can...put the runes on people's heads with the blessings. We're gonna have the ashes.... We get there and then someone has used those bowls for fucking offerings and they've put liquid in it! ... It's performance art. ... And you're like, "We can't let the people see." ... I've worked with a lot of gothi and githya¹³ here at the Knoll and in my years of service ... [Brynja] and I have this, like, awesome, like, vibe between us...things are unspoken and understood between the two of us, and I just looked and I went [looks down and widens her eyes]. And I just went [imitates a double take]. I just looked over and she went [imitates a double take]. I could see her eyes wide, and then ... I just looked at her and I'm using hand signals. ...I'm doing this [imitates using a lighter] ... with my lighter in the pot going. I can just make enough black if we just char the wood a little bit with a lighter. Okay, so they were charring it and then you have like sooty stuff that's already, like, in [the firepit]. ... It worked out. Nobody knew.

¹³as pronounced: individuals at Raven's Knoll do not pronounce goði or gyðja with the voiced "ð" (Eth)

This is one of many instances of impromptu ritual changes in consideration of changing circumstances. Jaime's explicit understanding that ritual is performative, and that performers have a responsibility to the audience to maintain the performance, makes temporary innovations, like those described in Jaime's story above, reasonable alternatives to established ritual plans.

Other rituals during SFG 2023 were subject to pivots. The Esoteric was altered hours before its execution to accommodate more attendees than anticipated by Facebook event confirmations. Feeling as though Stone and Flame Gathering, as a festival, was missing something, Jaime proposed an Esoteric the week before the festival. Her plan did not account for the 40 or so people who arrived for SFG. She wanted to perform a group oracular seiðr in which a small group would be together during the divination. As more people arrived for the festival on Friday, Jaime quickly pivoted to a one-on-one seiðr format that she described as a "drive-thru seiðr." Taking Lee's (2012:116,) position that rituals are communicative spaces that order an appropriate range of behaviour, these innovations are forms of contingent communication: they reveal that play, or at least theatricality and aesthetic consistency, are preferred and expected outcomes of ritual action, and those actions taken to ensure these outcomes are appropriate.

Ritual leaders adapt to changing situations even as plans are being developed. Adaptation becomes difficult with more moving parts and changing human dynamics. It is essential to obfuscate the artifice in ritual to generate the experience of supernatural presence or activity, which requires planning, awareness, and improvisation (Cardeña and Cousins 2010:323–324; Grimes 2021:29). Actions taken to ensure ritual performance is consistent and fluid remain bound by existing mental configurations, yet

improvisationally exchanging public configurants of those configurations allows ritual performers to skirt around unexpected obstacles. That Jaime and Brynja secretly used charcoal from the firepit to create dust to anoint Funeral attendees instead of burning the god-poles and using those ashes to prepare the god-poles' replacements demonstrates the constraining nature of mental configurations: fire, ash, and Heathen Lore remained central configurants around which the ritual pivoted through switching out alternative sub-configurants like charring god-pole face shavings rather than "cremating" entire god-poles. One way Heathens recognize sufficiency of fit of a replacement configurant, like replacing a group seiðr with a one-on-one sequential format, is by anticipating a potential replacement's ability to inspire religious awe, referred to as "woo."

6.4: What is Woo?

RK ritual leaders use *woo* to describe both the stimulus and affect of mystical ecstasy. The stimuli that produce *woo* are often mundane in themselves but their combination in context elicits sensations of sublime holism. One mechanism facilitating *woo* is obfuscating the artifice of performance.

Experiences of *woo* inspired G.B.'s depiction Hyrrokkin on her god-pole: "So I did the research. Love the story [of Hyrrokkin] and then weird woo woo stuff started happening." The night before SFG began, G.B. experienced being forcefully woken. Turning around, he saw an old woman wreathed in smoke. This experience was a kind of *woo* driven by two strands of experience: the old Hyrrokkin pole was decorated only with ash, while the story of Hyrrokkin pushing Baldur's funeral ship provided further material

for symbolic interpretations. This form of woo is often the inciting force behind UPG; it was personal experience of divinity.

Brynja told of different experiences of woo from Well and Tree Gathering (WTG), and of experiences where woo was notably absent. WTG centres on the Procession of Nerthus, a ritual inspired by a description in Tacitus's *Germania* (2009[98]:57–58) that documents the veneration of the goddess Nerthus in which a bust of her was carried on a cart drawn by slaves, culminating in the sacrifice of both the bust and the slaves. During Brynja's Procession of Nerthus, as she described it, the bust of Nerthus, shrouded with cloth, was processed on a decorated hand cart from the Tree of Nerthus by Standing Stone to the Wishing Well at the RK entrance, where it was disposed of, and a stuffed loaf of bread in the shape of a man, called "The Bread Man," was sacrificed.

Brynja recalled particularly powerful WTG performances of past years with titles like "The Year of Grieving" or "The Dirge Year." She noted that the experience of communal woo at WTG is deeply tied to the emotional and spiritual needs of the RK community. Therefore, generating woo with a ritual that is performed according to the same script every year is difficult. During The Year of Grieving there was very little woo, and the ritual felt more "theatrical" than spiritual. The Dirge Year saw typically energetic and dynamic procession chants replaced with sombre chants that felt like dirges.

After HHG, Brynja gave me two stories of her deeply personal experiences of woo from WTG centred on The Bread Man's sacrifice at the conclusion. The Bread Man is an innovation in RK's ritual practice that has undergone elaboration since its first iteration. Originally, it was a stuffed loaf of bread in the shape of a man. Later iterations gained facial features. The Bread Man serves to produce woo in two ways. First, it

becomes impregnated with meaning through the ritual act of preparation, which includes baking, stuffing, and decorating. Through these acts of service, Brynja says, participants create emotional attachment to The Bread Man, which is honoured during the ritual for its symbolic service and sacrifice. Second, the sacrifice of The Bread Man, most often by holding underwater and “drowning,” can produce intense emotions and sublimity.

Brynja first described an early iteration of The Bread Man decorated with facial features. As she plunged The Bread Man into the water, bubbles escaped from its “mouth”, which induced Brynja to reflect on past human sacrifice. That The Bread Man appeared to be breathing and drowning, evoked both feelings of guilt and duty, thus reinforcing the religious experience of the ritual. Brynja’s second story is equally symbolic: during the Procession of Nerthus the year after the suicide of a prominent RK staff member named Gypsy, the Bread Man’s head was eaten by wild animals before it was due to be drowned. Brynja interpreted this event as reflective of Gypsy’s freedom from suffering. When The Bread Man was sacrificed, Brynja recalls it turning white and becoming the consistency of human ashes, which reinforced its association with Gypsy. Brynja’s experiences reflect comforting or “wish fulfillment” anthropomorphism described by Stewart Guthrie (1995:76), in which the anthropomorphized object is treated “as an appropriate target on which to vent a feeling. It is a safety valve for excessive emotional pressure.” The feelings vented onto the Bread Man were grief and hope.

Public ritual configurations like the Procession of Nerthus and The Bread Man sacrifice configurant within it can evoke mental configurations not directly related to the ritual configuration, through incidental similarities. The results of ritual, which vary

according to changing material circumstances, affect which mental configurations are brought to bear in the rituals' interpretations.

Woo is experienced two different ways at RK, and both motivate the creation and performance of various ritual configurants and configurations. There is unprompted woo, such as G.B.'s dream vision of Hyrrokkin, which is not elicited during ritual and becomes foundational for UPG. Unprompted woo may motivate the introduction of configurants, like Hyrrokkin's face, into larger ritual configurations like Blot. Then there is prompted woo, which is intentionally generated from ritual contexts by evoking spiritual mental configurations through performing specific ritual configurants or experiencing their material outcomes, like Brynja's experiences with The Bread Man. Prompted woo is usually the intended affect produced by ritual, like experiencing divine presence at the SFG Esoteric. In both types of woo, public actions and artifacts intersect with mental configurations to induce powerful associations between the mundane and the divine or magical.

6.5: Conclusion

Explicitly described criteria guiding cultural selection can either be relatively broad and loosely defined, like UPG, or narrow and deterministic, like selecting specific times, places, cultures, and languages to source religious material. Understanding Heathen rituals as performance art reliant on improvisation to maintain the appearance of a cohesive and decisive experience reveals that criteria are flexible. Typical practices associated with RK rituals are temporarily discarded to meet practical reality. Even as

performances are maintained, coincidences that occur in the process of intentional ritual action, such as the “breathing” and ashen Bread Man, become embedded in participants’ mental configurations and may continue to guide or influence later expressions of those ritual configurations.

These examples highlight the creative and receptive processes that turn ideas into ritual behaviours and artifacts. By analyzing the correlations and discrepancies between expressed ideas and observed behaviours and artifacts, cultural selection criteria can be ascertained. The following chapter provides an account Heathen selection criteria, with reference to my interview data and the observational data presented in the “What is Raven’s Knoll” and “What is Stone and Flame” chapters, to identify the configurations and configurants of cultural selection criteria that are brought to bear in deciding what to adopt, adapt, or reject from Heathen practice at Raven’s Knoll.

Chapter 7: Heathen Criterion Configurations and the Creation of Ritual Configurations

7.1: Introduction

This chapter identifies cultural configurants and configurations in the ethnographic data presented in previous chapters to demonstrate their operation as selection criteria when Heathens choose and combine ritual elements. I describe the five most influential selection criterion configurations that influence the adoption, rejection, or modification of ritual configurants in assembling complete rituals that were recognized by the Heathens at Raven's Knoll (RK) during the 2023 festival season. I call these selection criterion configurations *inclusivity*, *Lore accuracy*, *resonance*, *woo*, and *pragmatism*. I assigned these labels to categories extrapolated from participant-observation, interviews, and books published by RK. Neither these selection criterion configurations nor the constituent configurants that comprise them are mutually exclusive: a ritual configurant such as mead-drinking may simultaneously satisfy resonance, woo, and lore accuracy.

While RK Heathens distinguish these selection criterion configurations, they treat them as overlapping. Selection criterion configurations represent collections of alternative configurants. Emic selection criterion configurations like lore accuracy are general categories of association that manifest as bundles of specific configurants of rituals and selection criteria. For example, mead-drinking is an acceptable configurant of Heathen rituals and an acceptable configurant of the selection criterion of lore accuracy. In practice, selection criterion configurations are dynamic, irregular, and contingent on

various considerations both internal and external to a ritual's execution. Nevertheless, they follow a consistent pattern prioritizing comprehensibility and accessibility.

I begin with a brief description of the selection criterion configurations and the roles they can take on in producing new ritual configurations. I follow this with sections on how each of the five selection criterion configurations operated in the rituals of Stone and Flame Gathering. I next analyze situations when it was not possible to optimize all selection criteria to assess their relative priority exhibited. I explain how the different selection criteria operated together to create cohesive, comprehensible, and accessible rituals despite contingencies that might have undermined the ritual's goals.

The chapter concludes that although selection criterion configurations and the rituals they are applied to are regularly adjusted to meet new social and material conditions, there is a consistency in their application towards a shared, mutually acceptable, Heathen ritual practice. While the core ancestral Germanic conceit (the lore accuracy selection criterion) at the heart of Heathen festivals served as an aesthetic locus around which other selection criteria usually revolved, it did not always prohibit or inhibit creative borrowing or spontaneous novelty based on the other selection criteria.

7.2: The Criteria for Selection

In this section, I give a brief overview of each criterion configuration. I explain inclusivity, Lore accuracy, resonance, woo, and pragmatism. Inclusivity demands that rituals be inclusive. Lore accuracy expects Heathen rituals to authentically reflect ancient Germanic belief and practice. Resonance incorporates configurants into rituals that “feel

right” to participants. Woo selects ritual configurants that are most likely to induce religious awe in ritual. Pragmatism constrains ritual creation and execution to what is practical according to available resources.

7.2.1: Inclusivity

Everyone arriving at RK is greeted with the same refrain: “Welcome home.” It welcomes campers as part of the RK family regardless of their spiritual path, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnic background, or political affiliation, notwithstanding any beliefs and behaviours borne of intolerance. Most regular campers I met remarked that they felt respected and cared for at RK, and that their idiosyncrasies were appreciated. G.B.said, “If you’re on the fringe and you come to one of these events, you’re welcomed. You’re brought in. Like people are feeding you. People are, you know, ‘Hey, you doing alright?’ ‘You need a beer?’ ‘You want to go for a swim?’” This is a sentiment I heard repeated and observed in practice.

I call this communal urge to warmly include diverse and unfamiliar visitors *inclusivity*. At RK, diversity must be accommodated. More than merely tolerating divergent individuals, inclusivity drives enabling their participation in all facets of RK activity. During ritual processions, those with mobility difficulties are given the opportunity to ride golf carts designated “mobility shuttles.” At Kaleidoscope Gathering (KG), a trio of mystery-cult rituals that cater to different gendered experiences that have, over the years, become more accepting of individuals of divergent sexual presentations. The pursuit of accommodation is an ever-evolving process. The Hail and Horn Gathering

(HHG) Húsel menu, for example, has evolved from a meat-forward affair in its first iteration in 2012 into the diet-inclusive smorgasbord that it is now, where vegan, gluten-free, and nut-free options are honoured at every course of the feast.

Since tolerance necessitates intolerance of intolerance, discriminatory ideologies and behaviours such as fascism and trans-exclusionary radical feminism are discriminated against. Maryanne and Austin take pre-emptive and ongoing action against people espousing intolerance. At a social fire, shortly after Stone and Flame Gathering (SFG), Maryanne confided that during our initial video call, she and Austin had probed to make sure that I was not a Neo-Nazi. Inclusivity provides space for those who experience marginalization to lay those concerns aside and enjoy participating in a community that cares about them.

7.2.2: Lore Accuracy

The Lore Accuracy selection criterion configuration incorporates potential configurants that are not necessarily mutually consistent because they derive from different Germanic cultures, times, and sources. Heathenry relies on sources attesting to or uncovering past Germanic lived experiences as sources of inspiration. This body of work, “The Lore,” underwrites most Heathen religious activity, but I found little consensus among RK Heathens. Thorir excludes any Lore written in languages other than Old Norse or after conversion to Christianity. Erik, a tall, gray-bearded man who acts as the national representative and council chair of the Heathen Confederation of Canada, largely draws on Frankish sources supplemented by Scandinavian traditions to fill gaps. G.B. gravitates

towards the Icelandic gods as represented in the mythological literature but incorporates ritual practice from contemporary Wicca. Austin draws on knowledge about all kinds, times, and types of “Germanic” culture. A range of times, places, languages, degrees of syncretism, source authors, and other factors are vaguely or differently used to identify potential configurants of Lore accuracy.

Ritualists were largely concerned with content, mutual verification, and depth of description rather than selection of specific Lore texts. Well and Tree Gathering’s Procession of Nerthus, for example, is drawn from an extended description of a Germanic worship practice written by a Roman historian, but Nerthus is not known from other sources. When G.B. suggested that the epithet used for Hyrrokin in an earlier Blót script, “goddess of the dead,” was disingenuous and that “strongest of the Giants” was more appropriate, he called upon the content and depth of Snorri’s “Gylfaginning” in the *Prose Edda* (1880[1220]:133–134) and provided mutual verification by highlighting the role of Hel in a Germanic myth tradition. Even in the process of creating new “Lore” from UPG (unverified personal gnosis), novel ideas and experiences are benchmarked against The Lore for to assess their accuracy. The Lore accuracy selection criterion, like the Bible for Christians, both limits divergence while allowing cherry-picking in the diverse Heathen canon.

In some cases, Lore accuracy props up novel practices into Raven’s Knoll Heathenry when they are attached to ritual configurants whose Lore credentials are unquestioned. As described below, the practice of seiðr at RK combines divination, the high seat, and seiðr staff attested in The Lore with elements from other traditions to fill in gaps.

7.2.3: Resonance

The resonance selection criterion configuration favours ritual configurants that are deemed likely to “resonate with” or “feel right” to expected participants and generate a pleasurable affect. People vary in what they find resonant. Brynja endeavoured to make her rituals, like those at Well and Tree Gathering, more resonant by giving participants active duties such as decorating the wagon of Nerthus and applying a face to the sacrificial bread-man. As McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory (2017:5–6) state, “resonance is a process, produced in relations between an object and audience in a specific situation [that is] is deeply rooted in emotion ... heightened emotions can make resonance more likely.” Objects may resonate for a participant temporarily or recurrently, but that experience is mediated by other conditions, whether material, social, or mental, that enable or mitigate the feeling that something is “right.” What resonated with my informants was contingent on context, subject to change, and both drew from and generated emotional experiences.

In assembling the SFG Funeral ritual configuration, Jaime combined Christian and secular funerary configurants, with funerary configurants from Heathen Lore. Giving speeches at funerals is a common secular practice, but stanzas 76 and 77 of the “Havamal” (Dodds 2017:44) invoke sharing words about the deceased. Quoting “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” from *The Book of Common Prayer* (The Episcopal Church 2007:485) although taken from Christian context, was potentially resonant to Heathens because it instantly evokes funerals in North American culture and the mention of ashes

evokes fire. These configurants likely resonated with participants because they fit with the planned use of a funerary pyre and Loki's association with fire.

7.2.4: Woo

The woo selection criterion configuration, named after the word RK Heathens use to describe religious experience, favours religious ideas, behaviours, and artifacts that evoke feelings of wholeness, sublimity, and religious ecstasy. The woo selection criterion configuration points ritualists to choose known, relatively effective triggers of religious awe to incorporate in shared ritual. These include situational and interpretive ambiguity and controlled affective atmosphere.

Conducting ritual at night has the potential to heighten non-visual sensory stimuli and openness to suggestion, and trance because of sensory deprivation, facilitating experiences with religious content (Granqvist and Larsson 2006:321). Alternatively, adding situational or interpretive ambiguity into ritual can also produce woo; in a ritual centred on a question and response pattern, receiving a relevant but ambiguous answer to personal questions can induce feelings of woo. Shae, for example, experienced this kind of woo through the Summer of 2023; leading into and through the blót for Tyr at Hail and Horn Gathering, Shae felt that they were being thrown into situations and conflicts outside of their control. In Shae's Esoteric "homework" and runestone readings; every rune they received was *tiwaz*, the rune associated with the god Tyr. They therefore interpreted each challenging circumstance and divination reading as messages from Tyr.

Reducing ambiguity or altering the affective atmosphere can undermine woo. Revealing the artifice and performance in ritual can make it less psychologically potent; as with other forms of performance, ritual requires suspended disbelief. The performance itself is a controlled affective atmosphere: ritual leaders guide participants to the desired affect using “expressive action and heightened emotion, brought to life through a range of media—music, dance, and the visual arts” (Stephenson 2015:87). Drumming and chanting are common during most Heathen processions at RK. Rhythmic drumming and chanting increase low frequency brain waves associated with dreaming, and can evoke altered perception, including hallucinatory experiences (Winkelman 2010:133–134).

There is subtext to Jaime’s insistence during our interview that ritual participants should not see or recognize impromptu pivoting: breaking the suspension of disbelief can bring participants out of an affective or ritual space, which undermines the experience of woo. Interrupting ritual flow, whether by participants or ritual leaders, can also have an adverse effect on individual experiences of woo; in cases of disruption, ritualists patch with contextually relevant or appropriate commentary on the nature of the disruption, like blaming Loki for L falling in the hole during Blót.

7.2.5: Pragmatism

The pragmatism selection criterion configuration defines as viable potential ritual configurants that exploit available resources to produce a satisfying experience or recover a ritual performance from potential failure. Many RK rituals are composed of resources that are already available on site or otherwise readily brought in. Sometimes rituals are

extended or collapsed according to available space and attendees, such as the SFG 2023 Esoteric, which changed from a planned group seiðr into individual sessions because the ritual site was too small to accommodate the greater volume of attendees.

7.3: Rituals and Their Selection Criteria

What follows is a breakdown of the three rituals of SFG 2023 explained according to how each of the five selection criterion configurations outlined above operated in planning and enacting ritual configurations. I provide examples of ritual configurants selected using each selection criterion. I describe interactions among these selection criterion configurations in each ritual, illustrating contingent hierarchies of importance among its constituent configurants. I also note cases in which a selection criterion configuration was evidently not explicitly active in a ritual configuration.

7.3.1: The Esoteric – June 2, 2023

Esoterics are late-night, therapeutic events that encourage self-reflection through engagement with mythological and magical themes. The SFG 2023 Esoteric, in which festival participants joined in a procession to Birch Grove to query Angrboða, the Jotunn wife of Loki and “Witch of the Ironwood,” is notable for its late addition to SFG 2023. At SFG 2023 and HHG 2023, Esoteric attendees interacted with individuals representing spirit beings and were given “homework”: runes written on paper and stored in glass jars. These esoteric rituals were themed after the deities being honoured that year. The SFG 2023 Esoteric incorporated Loki’s wife Angrboða, and the HHG 2023 Esoteric,

honouring Tyr, incorporated Fenrir, whom Tyr betrayed. The analysis below refers to the SFG 2023 Esoteric.

7.3.1.1: Inclusivity

Inclusivity ensured that any participant who needed mobility assistance would be able to receive it. Volunteers scoured the campsite for two of the three available golf carts. Until all three carts were accounted for at Standing Stone, the ritual was not allowed to begin. This practice is almost universal across RK rituals.

7.3.1.2: Lore Accuracy

The Esoteric used the trappings of the *seiðr* divination ritual described in the *Saga of Eric the Red* (Sephton 2007[1880]) and *Vatnsdaela Saga* (Thordarson 2007) and mixed them with the mythical content of both the *Poetic Edda* (Dodds 2017) and the *Prose Edda* (Sturluson 1880[1220]). The outfit Jaime, who portrayed Angrboða, wore resembled that described in *The Saga of Eric the Red*, and the divination resembles those described in the same Saga (Sephton 2007[1880]: Chap. 4), *Vatnsdaela Saga* (Thordarson 2007: Chap. 44), and the *Ynglingasaga* (Sturluson 2011:10–11). The invocation of Angrboða and the Ironwood (*Jarnviðr*) calls upon their references in the *Voluspa* (Dodds 2017:31) and *Gylfaginning* (Sturluson 1880[1220]:67). In the *Voluspa*, Angrboða is inferred in stanza 40 (Dodds 2017:31):

Eastward, in Jarnvid, an old Jotuness
 suckled Fenrir's litter. And of them all
 a certain one will arise, in a monster's
 disguise—he'll be the snatcher of the Moon.

While Sturluson gives a more descriptive account of the Ironwood and alludes to Angrboða as a witch (a skilled magical practitioner) who lives in the Ironwood, a locale in Jotunheim known for the malignant beings such as trolls who live there. That Angrboða would possess the gift of prophecy is inferred: her status as a witch, along with the divining magic associated with witchcraft that frames the *Voluspa*, suggests that Jotnar can access prophecy. Jaime's insistence on channelling Angrboða comes from these associations and more. During an interview, Jaime suggested that Angrboða and the Ironwood were chosen for channelling because of their close association to Loki, who would be honoured at the SFG 2023 Blót.

The use of Elder Futhark runes as part of the Esoteric "homework" connects the aesthetics of past Germanic language with contemporary magical practice. Many sagas refer to runic magic as powerful charms and incantations capable of changing the material world. The use of runes as homework, however, draws on their names and associated riddles in the Old English Rune Poem, the original of which was lost in the Cotton Library fire in 1731 (Prescott 1997). The use of runes in divination began with nineteenth century Austrian nationalist and esotericist Guido von List's Armanen runes, a modified version of the younger futhark alphabet (Flowers 1988:35; von List

1988[1908]:44–45), and then expanded upon by early contemporary Heathens like Edred Thorson (Stephen Flowers) (Flowers 1984) and Ralph Blum (1985), who treat the runes akin to tarot.

7.3.1.3: Resonance

Jaime formulated the Esoteric ritual’s aesthetics, association matrices, and similarity to other ritual formats to increase its potential resonance for participants. The role of Angrboða in the Esoteric ties into the greater themes, iconography, and narratives of SFG 2023; Angrboða is one of Loki’s wives, and is the mother of the Jotunn Hel, both of whose god-poles would be raised in the new Jotnar Vé the following day. The seiðr practised here was aesthetically evocative of the seiðr of ethnohistoric literature, yet performatively evocative of the Wiccan “Drawing Down the Moon” ritual as described by Adler (2006:18):

the priest invokes into the priestess (or, depending on your point of view, she evokes from within herself) the Goddess or Triple Goddess, symbolized by the phases of the moon. ... In some Craft rituals the priestess goes into a trance and speaks; in other traditions the ritual is a more formal dramatic dialogue, often of intense beauty, in which, again, the priestess speaks, taking the role of the Goddess.

Jaime explained that she had come into Heathenry much like many others documented by von Schnurbein (2017) and Strmiska and Sigurvinsson (2005): she started as a non-denominational magical practitioner, drawing on the breadth of new-age and Wiccan spiritual technologies before becoming disillusioned. Accessing non-Heathen ritual practices is a valuable tool to increase resonance. Austin and Maryanne told me that rituals at RK tend towards common Neopagan practices to bridge the gap between different traditions so everyone feels welcome, but this has the added benefit of making more rituals “feel right” or resonate ecumenically. Resonance depends on the preferences of participants. Some Heathen participants in non-Heathen, Neopagan rituals at RK, including Shae, Brynja, and Jaime, found Wiccan circle casting and elemental invocations to establish a magical boundary boring. Simultaneously, these elements improved the resonance of the ritual for participants who regard these components as integral to satisfying ritual.

7.3.1.4: Woo

Jaime acknowledged the importance of woo in generating the atmosphere of SFG, implying that woo motivated the late introduction of The Esoteric: “On Friday, like, people are just getting in and, you’re like, ‘Yeah, you’re hitting him with the woo!’” To create woo, Jaime used the same elements designed to produce resonance, but enhanced them by performing the Esoteric at night, by incorporating trance-inducing stimuli, and by providing individual, unique, and ambiguous experiences.

Nocturnal performance of ritual produces woo by disguising the artifice of the Esoteric performance: the high seat was nothing more than a reinforced shelf, and Angrboða was Jaime disguised in shadow underneath her animal skull mask. The suspension of disbelief is a powerful tool in the production of woo, and is further enhanced with other stimuli; Jaime requested that L, a Raven's Knoll regular, gyðja and bard, play the drum while Brynja led the procession:

if you could be there drumming while they're coming in, it helps to create a vibe for the people that are coming in. To get them in the right headspace that they're coming to talk to a god. Yeah, and it also helps the person who's channeling to be able to stay in, like, that trance state.

The purpose of altering consciousness in the ritual, as Jaime said, was to prime the participants and assist the performer. While the ritual setup was fungible, such that every person participated in the ritual preamble, procession, and waiting for their turn, each person's experience was emergent. Woo arose from the intersection of directing questions towards "Angrboða," and the ambiguous but seemingly relevant responses from Angrboða and the homework acquired after.

7.3.1.5: Pragmatism

Several pragmatic factors influenced the Esoteric: its location, its format, the materials used, and people's roles. Originally planned for the space that would become the new

Jotnar Vé, a last second realization that holes for the god-poles had already been dug out making that plan dangerous, motivated relocation of the ritual to Birch Grove. When too many participants arrived to make the planned group oracular seiðr possible, Jaime and Brynja pivoted to shorter, individual divination experiences. The decision to feature a channeled Angrboða was made because the shelf that would become the high seat was already available at Birch Grove. Each of these impromptu pragmatic changes are called pivots.

7.3.1.6: Criteria Interactions

The ritual configurants selected for the 2023 SFG Esoteric configuration reveal conflicts, compatibilities, and a hierarchy of selective priority among the selection criterion configurations operating in its creation and execution. Pragmatism and woo were compatible: holding the Esoteric after dark was both practically expedient and provided the obfuscation needed to increase perceptual ambiguity. Pragmatically altering the format to accommodate a larger than expected group, so that each participant asked a personal question of the oracle, was also compatible with woo and resonance.

Conflicts, however, arose between Lore accuracy and resonance, and between woo and inclusivity. While the Esoteric drew on pre-Christian Germanic *seiðr* for divination, the performance was oracular spirit possession whereas The Lore continually describes *seiðr* as a form of spirit travel. The aesthetics of *seiðr* in this esoteric, chiefly the incorporation of Angrboða and the ritual accoutrements of Lore-accurate *seiðr*, minimized potential dissonance. Inclusivity imposed on woo in the necessity for the golf

carts at the ritual site. Woo at The Esoteric is predicated on maintaining sensory ambiguity, but each time a participant required transit back to Standing Stone, the golf cart lights illuminated Birch Grove and the people inside it. Ensuring accessibility was a higher priority than ensuring woo.

7.3.2: The Funeral – June 3, 2023

The Funeral of the Jotnar god-poles described above is the first funeral for Heathen divinities of which I am aware. The Funeral acknowledged the human-like relations and feelings of gratitude that SFG 2023 attendees have with those divinities. It began with the ceremonial removal and deconstruction of the Jotnar Vé that fell into the marshlands, and ended with the mock cremation of the god-poles' faces in lieu of a complete cremation. This was the first performance of a new ritual format Jaime composed, drawing on The Lore and current practices.

7.3.2.1: Inclusivity

Inclusivity extended beyond shuttling disabled participants in golf carts. Jaime expressed worry that her plans for The Funeral might upset people: “I don’t wanna make people unhappy.... Because I’m, like, otherwise, it’s just people afterwards getting pissed off. ‘You didn’t do this right; you didn’t do that right.’ And, like, I’m not a Lokian [worshipper of Loki]. I’m not Rokatru [worshipper of the Jotnar].” Worrying about catering to diverse kinds of Heathen demonstrates part of the inclusivity configuration:

specific groups being affected ought to be considered and integrated, where possible, into ritual construction. Additionally, all members of the community on site, regardless of their denomination or non-denomination, were allowed to participate in the funeral in their own capacity. Those with little Heathen knowledge or belief were free to pass on the horn as it came time for them to speak. Heathens and non-Heathens alike worked together to remove and process with the old god-poles from the old Jotnar Vé to the Firepit.

7.3.2.2: Lore Accuracy

The Funeral drew on mythical and ethnohistoric texts to create a ritual that feels authentic to a northern Germanic heritage. The pyre reflected an honour reserved for the powerful, is rooted in the mythical Baldur's funeral, as described in *Gylfaginning* (Sturluson 1880[1220]:133–134), but reiterated across Germanic literature, such as *Beowulf* (Mitchell 2017:73,183) and early ethnographic texts (Fadlan 2012[922]:49–50; Al-Mas'udi 2012[943]:132). Baldur is a child of Odin and Frigg whose death signals the coming of Ragnarok, an apocalyptic event that ends with the death of the gods. At his funeral, he is laid in his ship and pushed out to sea by Hyrrokkin, making Baldur's ship spontaneously combust. During the funeral rites, Jaime quoted stanzas 76 and 77 from the *Havamal* (Dodds 2017:44). A horn filled with wine rather than mead (Lore-attested as sacred to the gods) was passed around. Austin explained that wine is a suitable alternative to mead in ritual because, like mead, wine contains *Alu*, a term from elder futhark inscriptions on Viking age artifacts meaning roughly “magic” or “life”.

7.3.2.3: Resonance

The experience of resonance at the Funeral hinged on mental configurations of past Germanic culture and contemporary North American culture. Loki, fire, Hel, death, and Hyrrokkin are tightly associated in Heathen mythology, which increases resonance that could be produced from a funerary pyre for them. Charing the Jotnar poles' faces could create resonance with participants mental configurations about past Germanic myth and funerary culture. The use of the phrase "Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust," is evocative of contemporary North American funerals, entering into the vernacular from *The Book of Common Prayer* (Episcopal Church 1875); the phrase also served as a double entendre, as the plan for the god-poles was to burn them to ashes. Another common contemporary funeral practice is the delivery of speeches; speeches were integrated into the Funeral configuration and were heralded by stanzas 76 and 77 of the Havamal (Dodds 2017:44), which claim the enduring spirit of reputation is maintained through good words. Bridging ancient and current customs, while potentially jarring to some such as Thorir and Shae who noted the strange use of Christian liturgy in a Heathen context, created a distinct and authentic feeling of being in a funeral that resonated with many participants and brought them to tears. Some connected the old god-poles with deceased associates or regarded the divinities as friends.

7.3.2.4: Woo

Elements to the ritual evidently intended to produce woo include use of drumming and chanting. Drumming filled the two processions between the firepit and the old Jotnar Vé, which increased in tempo as we closed in on each ritual step's goals. As the speeches for the Jotnar ceased, participants were anointed with the rune Eihwaz while Jaime and Brynja performed *galdr* (rune chanting). Drumming and chanting increase theta and low alpha brain waves, associated with sleep and dreaming, and promote enhanced, altered, or hallucinatory perceptions (Winkelman 2010:133–134). The sensations that stem from this altered brain state were similar to the alert supernatural encounters described by Roger Lohmann (2003:202–205): natural phenomena, such as the wind, were interpreted as supernatural presences.

7.3.2.5: Pragmatism

Pragmatism heavily influenced the Funeral. The core plan required fire, and immediately before the festival, a fire ban forced Jaime to replace the planned funeral pyre for the god-poles. The plan to char the bases of the new god-poles in the embers of the old was abandoned, leaving the new poles more prone to decay. Instead of burning the old poles wholesale, their faces were removed so they could be charred to maintain a semblance of the original plan. The faces were unable to be burned, however, as the vessel meant to

contain the fire was filled with water. Brynja pragmatically used existing ashes for paste to anoint participants with *eihwaz*.

7.3.2.6: Selection Criterion Interactions

The Funeral is a mixture of displaced Germanic funerary practices and proverbs, current North American funerary practices, and last-minute changes in the plan. In the eclectic mix of ritual configurants within the Funeral configuration, compatibility and conflicts between selection criteria determined the priority and completeness with which each was addressed. The fire ban imposed a pragmatic reconfiguration of the Funeral that undermined original configurants that would have increased resonance, woo, and Lore accuracy. Many ritual configurants incorporating fire were planned because Loki is a god of fire, but wet soot had to stand in for fire. The Christian formula, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” was consistent with funerary and fire imagery but was not Lore accurate. Although a mound burial was suggested as a Lore accurate (but labour-intensive and not very pragmatic) way to dispose of corpses, Jaime pushed through retaining a half-baked pyre. The use of the Eiwaz rune was not originally intended, but incorporated participants in the ritual transfer of the gods’ essences in lieu of charring the new god-poles from the funeral pyre.

The use of Havamal stanzas was Lore accurate and also potentially resonant by linking words to actions. The use of *galdr*, despite being anachronistically invented, draws on Heathen Lore while producing woo. References to Loki’s mischievousness in light of ritual pivots simultaneously satisfies Lore accuracy and resonance.

Conflicts between selection criterion configurants also arose. For Shae, who observed Jaime and Brynja frantically pivoting to using the firepit charcoal in lieu of the charred Jotnar's faces, pragmatism undermined woo by making the situation humorously mundane. Impediments requiring rapid responses tended to force prioritization of pragmatism, while attempts to make rituals feel resonant through incorporating familiar but Lore inaccurate culture and accessibility for participants with disabilities produced clashes.

7.3.3: The Blót – June 3, 2023

Blóts at RK are rituals of communion in which participants raise god-poles for veneration and offerings like foodstuffs, jewellery, and stones. The 2023 SFG Blót atypically moved and reconsecrated established Vé and replaced multiple poles. This ritual was modified from existing Blót scripts.

7.3.3.1: Inclusivity

Bearing Sigyn's bowl was suitable for any volunteer. Sharing hard tasks like digging holes and carrying poles enabled most anyone who wanted to contribute to the ritual to join in. Golf carts equalized participation for all.

7.3.3.2: Lore Accuracy

When Austin formulated the Blót ritual configuration for Odin in 2012, he drew upon expansive research for historic precedents (Lawrence and Lacharity 2017). The ritual format has since become increasingly standardized while remaining reliant on the Lore. Enclosing an outdoor space with rope and sacrifices of food, drink, and materials to deities in return for favour are described by Tacitus (2010[98]:39). Nearly a millennium later, Ibn Fadlan (2012[922]:47–48), observed that the Germanic Rus raised decorative poles to their deities within sacred enclosures. These two sources came together to create RK's Blót ritual configuration.

For SFG, aesthetics and myth have more significance than archaeology and ethnohistory. Opting to use chain instead of rope, attached to trees instead of wooden poles as the new bonds for the Jotnar Vé, Jaime created an associative link between the new Vé and the Ironwood. The initial version of the Blót script claimed that Hyrrokkin was goddess of the dead, a claim which G.B. rebutted, and it was revised according to a more Lore accurate phrase. The faces upon the god-poles, excepting Loki, received alterations from their previous iteration. Austin chose the iconography of Loki with his mouth sewn shut, as described in *Skaldskaparmal* (Sturlusson 1880[1220]:192) and depicted in the Bitterstad amulet (Cerbing 2016:72). Brynja, though dissatisfied with the now-common depiction of Hel's dead and beautiful halves split vertically down the middle though the Lore depicts her as dead from the waist down, opted to carve Hel according to the vertically split dead face. G.B., responsible for Hyrrokkin, drew on the giantess's description as wreathed in flame to smear charcoal on a face he saw in a

waking vision the night before. The Trial of Sigyn mirrors the narrative closing Lokasenna (Dodds 2017:107), in which Loki is bound to a rock under the earth and his Æsir wife, Sigyn, holds a bowl over his head to protect him from poisonous venom dripping from the ceiling. These are all aesthetic invocations drawn the *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*.

7.3.3.3: Resonance

Resonance during the Blót was contingent on appreciating overlaps between past Germanic and contemporary Neopagan matrices. There are ritual configurants here that, pending awareness of Heathen Lore, can feel out of place. In consecrating the Jotnar Vé, L sings her composition, “Gerda’s Enclosure Song,” which evokes Wiccan circle casting, a ritual configuration for designating a space for magic, while using the aesthetic trappings of Heathenry. RK Heathens shy away from this kind of performance, but it resonates with other Neopagans. Raising the poles by the same format Austin devised over a decade earlier, has the resonance of familiarity for those who have participated in HHG. For me, the ritual format was foreign: the insistence on three floggings with three different materials did not feel Heathen, but Wiccan, where three is a number associated with power. Shae suggested that the three floggings by three materials was a reference to the number nine, which is a magical number in Heathenry, referencing the nine worlds of Yggdrasil and the nine days and nights Odin hung from Yggdrasil to learn the runes (Dodds 2017:26,53)). Neither Thorir nor I found resonance in the SFG Blót because it felt foreign.

7.3.3.4: Woo

I found little evidence to suggest that woo was a relevant criterion for the SFG Blót, Some participants experienced L's fall into Loki's as woo, or that the silence in the wind as Austin asked if the Jotnar opposed their poles' photos being taken. Excepting the use of chanting during the creation of the Jotnar Vé's enclosure, context and behaviours used to elicit woo, such as sensory deprivation and the use of rhythmic drumming, were absent. Most participants experienced woo from emergent elements of ritual, rather than resulting from intentional ritual design.

7.3.3.5: Pragmatism

Blót Plans to corrode the Vé bond chain in the funeral pyre was undermined by the fire ban, but the chain was installed anyway. God-poles are typically carried in procession from the fire where their feet are charred into the Vé, but they were simply placed inside the Ve's future location.

7.3.3.6: Selection Criterion Interactions

Because the Blót is a longstanding tradition among the RK Heathens, many of the inconsistencies have been ironed out. Pragmatism responding to the fire ban overrode

Lore accuracy, resonance, and woo. However, the many compatible configurants in the Blót, such as using Sigyn's bowl before raising Loki's god-pole, the Lore-referenced pole faces, kennings, and narratives evoked, and the chant to Jormungandr.

7.4: Layering the Criteria

I turn now to establishing a kind of hierarchy for these criteria. Behaviour patterns among ritual leaders and participants highlight priorities in ritual construction and execution. By analyzing interactions among configurants and configurations at the festival scale, a general pattern may be discerned: that accessibility and practical concerns prevail over resonance and woo, while Lore accuracy serves as an aesthetic gloss for a wide variety of non-Heathen ritual configurations.

Inclusivity operated powerfully in all rituals. Mobility shuttles and non-Heathen ritual formats accommodated diverse participants even when they undermined Lore accuracy, resonance and woo. Pragmatism similarly dominated when pivots were necessary. Inclusivity and pragmatism stood above all other selection criterion configurations as essential.

While it is possible to experience woo without resonance, and vice versa, they are mutually reinforcing. While one may not resonate with Angrboða giving divination, one can still experience woo from the Esoteric's combined configurants: drumming, darkness, seiðr, etc.

Lore Accuracy uniquely serves an integral purpose in Heathen ritual as the primary source for ritual practice, narratives, and symbols. The difficulty is knowledge

gaps. Integrating non-denominational Neopaganism creates new Heathen forms that get adopted for their familiarity and then glossed with specific deities. Yet, in every ritual, mistakes in Lore accuracy were immediately corrected upon notice. Thus, Lore accuracy is an aesthetic source of ritual inspiration and meaning.

7.5: Conclusion

This chapter addressed the five criteria for selecting Heathen ritual configurants and their use at Raven's Knoll. I showed their effects and hierarchical interactions in the rituals of 2023's Stone and Flame Gathering. I determined that inclusivity and pragmatism are primary criteria for their relative ubiquity and influence on ritual formats, while Lore accuracy is an aesthetic core around which other configurants converge.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1: Introduction

This chapter summarizes my study and analysis of Heathen ritual creation criteria at Raven's Knoll, and elaborates on this project's limitations, future directions, and value for Pagan studies and anthropology. I identify gaps and shortcomings in my research and suggest how future research could address them. I close with a reflection on how the research that informed this thesis both conforms to and contradicts the hypotheses I had about Heathen ritual creation criteria.

8.2: Summary of Research

The question that inspired this research is: "What criteria do Heathens use to determine what ritual elements to adopt, adapt, or reject?" I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at Raven's Knoll in Ontario, focusing on the first Stone and Flame Gathering festival in 2023 and its constituent rituals. To analyze the data, I developed the cultural configurant concept, which envisions culture as collections of nesting components (configurants) that compose more elaborate collections (configurations).

My informants conceptualized ritual types made up of components that they developed and deployed in preparing for and performing iterations of these rituals. They chose and assembled these components into complete rituals based on their conformity with several recognized ideals or selection criteria. Instances of the same ritual and

selection criterion used by Raven's Knoll Heathens were not identical: they were revised and assembled afresh from among alternative possible components that they judged appropriate. I treated both rituals and selection criteria as configurations composed of interchangeable configurants.

I used the cultural configurant concept to analyze the plans for and execution of the Esoteric, Funeral, and Blót rituals of Stone and Flame Gathering according to five emic selection criteria that I identified in interviews and observed in action. I determined that applying selection criteria is contingent and variable depending on the context and content of rituals, and that comprehensibility and accessibility to contemporary Canadians shaped adoption and adaptation of ritual components that otherwise retained or glossed the aesthetics of Heathenry depicted in ancient Germanic sources.

I conducted ethnographic participant-observation at Raven's Knoll between May and September, 2023, interviewing festival organizers and participants during the Summer festival season. I decided to focus on rituals from a new Raven's Knoll festival, Stone and Flame Gathering, which included a newly invented ritual format that appealed to my academic curiosity and appeared to be an excellent candidate for studying cultural selection criteria and rituals as cultural configurations made up of partly interchangeable configurants.

The cultural configurant concept enabled me to atomize culture into component parts that have relations to one another in more articulate configurations. The purpose of this concept is to parse a holistic perspective on culture into smaller and smaller elements to better understand how culture is built up from the interactions of less complex creations.

The Stone and Flame Gathering included both established and emergent ritual practices. The Esoteric was a shamanic divination. The Funeral was devised to change the location of a sacred site by reverently destroying the contents of the old site. The Blot was dedicated to the erection of wooden idols. These ritual types are adaptations inspired by past pre-Christian Germanic cultures.

I identified five criteria that ritual creators used when creating ritual and thus for adapting, adopting, or rejecting specific ritual elements from their practice: inclusivity, lore accuracy, resonance, woo, and pragmatism. Each criterion is a configuration representing creative impulses and restrictive guides that govern ritual practice. Inclusivity demands that rituals are inclusive. Resonance directs rituals to “feel right”. Woo requires rituals to promote religious ecstasy. Pragmatism expects realism and flexibility.

8.3: Limitations and Suggestions

This study of a single season’s rituals documents dynamic processes in their assembly and performance. However, assessing how these play out over longer time scales would require collecting longitudinal data from the same festival operating over multiple years. Future research on ritual configurant selection criteria at Raven’s Knoll could examine the same rituals across festivals or over time to identify those ritual elements that are more stable or more variable to establish a more accurate representation of the selection criteria at play and their relative influence. Analyses of other festivals’ ritual configurations could also test whether the patterns observed are applied by the same

members of this congregation in other contexts, and by other personnel who compose and perform its rituals. Ethnographic studies of selection criteria among other Heathen groups would allow documentation of which selection criteria are found across all and where groups differ. Based on existing ethnographic literature (Blain 2002; Snook 2015; Strmiska 2005) it is already clear that inclusivity is explicitly rejected among some Heathens.

This research is necessarily confined to a single moment in time, within a single community, and focused on a small subset of phenomena. Nevertheless, the cultural configurant analysis it introduces may be found useful for studying rituals, other cultural productions, and cultures in general.

8.4: Benefits of this Research on Pagan Studies

This is a case study of the role of created authenticity in Neopaganisms. The common Pagan Studies concern for Neopaganisms' fabrication of authenticity (Berger 1999; Cusack 2010; Hutton 2019; Magliocco 2004, 2009; Snook 2015) features heavily in my analysis of Stone and Flame Gathering, identified as the lore accuracy selection criterion configuration. This research reaffirms that Neopaganisms' claim to authenticity is constructed, as I have found that rituals at Raven's Knoll are bolstered with adapted practices that are covered with Heathen veneers to appeal to Heathens and non-Heathens alike. In fact, as my informants have suggested, pure authenticity is frowned upon at Raven's Knoll. UPG (Unverified Personal Gnosis) serves a greater purpose in the creation of new rituals and their constituent elements.

This is the first study that I am aware of to document a Heathen funeral for the gods, a unique ritual performed for the first time at Raven's Knoll. I have crystallized the experiences of those who made and enacted it in writing, where they may be preserved not only for science, but for future Neopagans looking to perform similar rituals.

8.5: Benefits of This Research to Anthropology

This research contributes the cultural configurant approach and a case study of cultural dynamism including documentation of a novel ritual. The cultural configurant concept offers a means of studying culture's interacting parts as neither isolated nor elementary. The cultural configurant concept combines the benefits of many different theoretical concepts and orientations into an analytic and descriptive tool that may be applied in multiple contexts; however, configurants' amorphous conception avoids reifying cultural units. This research illustrates the dynamic nature of cognitive processes that shape the development of culture: the creation and execution of ideas, behaviours, and artifacts are chosen and assembled based on selection criteria that people are aware of.

As a case study of Heathen ritual creation processes focused on the selection criteria for different ritual components, this thesis is, to my knowledge, the first of its kind. It models one way to study how participants in an emergent community understand and express their criteria for including, excluding, or modifying incoming cultural information in their practice. This work moves towards the analysis of addresses how reconstructed ethnic religions navigate the divide between history and contemporary

practicality that Jennifer Snook (2015:51) suggests is missing from Neopagan ethnography.

8.6: Final Thoughts

This research has been driven by my own desire to understand how other Heathens have chosen what and how to practice their religion. I am constantly engaging critically with the sources that found my religious beliefs and practice. I give care to different translations of primary source texts that I interpret: I assess the translation's literary qualities, the translator's and publisher's biases, and the contextual information surrounding the text. I no longer take information on the internet at face value. In 2012, I founded my beliefs on the claims of the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA), a xenophobic and conservative organization, despite my orientation to liberal politics, because they offered seemingly comprehensive, though counterfactual, declarations about past belief. I live with the awareness that my limited knowledge of Germanic languages hinders my understanding of the Germanic past.

From this critical examination of my own beliefs and their sources over the years, I was left in a good position to study whether other Heathens performed the same critical analysis of their own beliefs and practice. What I found among Raven's Knoll Heathens is that they are critical of their beliefs and practice and enjoy learning more about the past. However, there are stable elements of practice, like rune-reading and *galdr* that persist despite my informants' awareness of these practices' relatively recent creation. Their decisions to keep modern innovations was shocking to me as I had been led to

believe that Heathens were reconstructionists (Harvey 1995; Strmiska 2005; Strmiska and Sigurvinson 2005). But my research revealed that Raven's Knoll Heathens' cultural selection criteria are largely rooted in the present.

They are concerned with questions like: How do people feel? Do they feel included? Do they find the ritual material resonates? Are they experiencing connections to divinities? Are they learning about themselves? What I found is that even as the mythological, ethnohistoric, and academic texts about pre-Christian Germanic life and belief served to ground Heathen religious experience at Raven's Knoll, the Lore's influence on their ritual was largely symbolic and aesthetic. However, aesthetics and symbolism are equally important to my informants as the other criteria; they form the topic of conversation, suggest webs of association in ritual, and give ritual participants anchors around which to consider various aspects of their lived experience. RK Heathens often discussed their feelings about ritual in relation to their mythological content and described ritual symbols and aesthetics with warmth and excitement.

Inclusion is, arguably, the most important criterion for Raven's Knoll Heathens; they go beyond what von Schnurbein (2016:7) calls a-racist. Aware of the xenophobic history of Heathenry (Gardell 2003; Goodrick-Clark 2003; Kaplan 1996, 1997; von Schnurbein 2016), they actively reject not just racism, but sexism, ablism, and other forms of bigotry and exclusion. They welcome everyone to Raven's Knoll, and the desire to make all feel welcome deeply influences their ritual practice.

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