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Frith Beyond Faith: Blót as a Means of Community Bonding

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Abstract:

The ritual known as blót is a major form of worship within Heathen religious communities, performed to celebrate specific turning points in the solar calendar and to commune with deities of the Norse pantheon. Blóts originally entailed the offering up of sacrificial flesh and blood, followed by a communal feast and drinking ritual (sumbel). As part of a reconstructionist movement, Heathens today have revived and adapted this ritual to suit their modern needs, and though the practice of animal sacrifice remains largely in the minority today, other forms of material sacrifice, along with the elements of communal worship, drinking, toasting, and feasting, remain key components of a modern blót. Most of the extant research on blóts has focused on the ritual's structural and procedural elements and the way(s) in which it constructs the relationship between the deities and worshipers, but comparatively few studies have given significant attention to the communal aspects of blóts. Using exploratory ethnographic research methods and content from a series of interviews, this paper seeks to examine the ways in which the blót ritual, grounded in Heathen religious practice, serves an outwardly secular and non-exclusively Heathen community, with an eye towards how it reinforces community values and bonds. The blót, beyond participants' personal religious beliefs, represents the creation of a unique "sacred" space set apart from the participants' concepts of the mundane, and designates a potentially transformative space wherein the elements of personal vulnerability and peer witness ultimately serve to strengthen the coherency of the community.

Introduction

The evening of December 21st, 2024 is a frigid one for Western North Carolina. Having just arrived at a small farmstead in Old Fort, North Carolina, I trudge up a sloping dirt path beneath a darkening sky with hands buried deep in my coat pockets, attempting to steel myself against the gusts of freezing winter wind that mercilessly buffet the area. It's not long before the crunch of loose gravel beneath my boots is overtaken by the sounds of intermingling voices up ahead, interspersed with frequent shouts of excitement. At the top of the driveway, a lively crowd has assembled in a large circle. Some are dressed in ordinary winter attire—sweaters, hoodies, jeans, and beanies—while others have donned kilts, furs, cloaks, and handmade leather belts that hold a drinking horn or knife sheath at their side. They're all in the midst of cheering on a brief sparring match between two sword-wielding individuals kitted out in modified fencing masks and heavy, padded gambesons. Hoots of laughter and applause ring out as one fighter emerges victorious, having successfully defended his claim to the prize he'd selected from a pile of gifts at the base of a small pine sapling. Known as "Viking Gift Exchange" among this crowd, this unique form of the holiday gift-exchange game "White Elephant/Dirty Santa" makes for a raucous kickoff to the evening's Yule festivities.

This eclectic gathering is composed of members and friends of the Warriors of Ash,[1] a Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) school based in Asheville, North Carolina. Loosely organized in 2015 and officially founded in 2016, the school's mission is to "[revitalize] martial techniques developed over centuries by weapon masters of their time" by "[applying] historical source material, body mechanics, and modern combat attitudes to create a community with the freedom to learn the art together."[2] Some of the classes offered by WoA include instruction in German and Italian longsword techniques, quarterstaff, Skeggox (Viking-age bearded axe), single-handed weapons such as the saber, rapier, and messer, and universal shield theory "applied from buckler to rotella, targe to skjoldr."[3]

Officially, the school espouses no religious affiliation, but the fact that a few Heathens[4] are among the founders comes as no great surprise to most, considering the

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[1] The school's name is abbreviated "WoA" (pronounced "WOAH-uh") by its members, an acronym that will be used frequently throughout this text.

[2] Warriors of Ash. "About Us." https://www.warriorsofash.org/

[3] Ibid. "Classes." https://www.warriorsofash.org/classes-1

[4] Heathenry (or Heathenism) being "a modern pagan reconstructionist religious movement whose practitioners align themselves with ancient Germanic and Norse cosmology;" Jennifer Snook, "Reconsidering Heathenry: The Construction of an Ethnic Folkway as Religio-Ethnic Identity," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and*

group's Northern European aesthetic touchstones and areas of historical and martial focus. Beyond sporting a stylized Yggdrasil (the sacred "World Tree" of Norse cosmology) as the primary component of its logo, adorning weapons and shields with runes, and adopting a "Warrior Code" of ethics once derived from Heathen sources,[5] WoA also hosts at least one yearly blót—a ritual practice representing a major form of worship within Heathen communities. In these communities, blóts may be performed for a variety of purposes, on a variety of scales, and with varying frequency, but in general are held to mark specific turning points in the solar calendar, connect with deities for the purposes of worship or divine guidance, and strengthen the overall communal dynamic.[6] In WoA's case, the blót is the culminating event in the community's celebration of Yule—a midwinter holiday observed by various modern pagan religions around the time of the Northern Hemisphere's winter solstice. As the sun begins to set on the appointed day, invited participants gather together for a night of feasting, drinking, and gift-giving—activities common to many winter holiday celebrations, religious or otherwise—but also to gather around a fire in community to hear tales from Norse mythology and participate in a blót.

Structurally and spiritually informed by Heathen religious practice and values, yet adapted to a secular community context and requiring no religious affiliation or belief

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Emergent Religions 16, no. 3 (2013): 52–76. The term "heathen" has long held a negative connotation in the English language, often being used to refer to individuals who are not of the Christian faith in a manner ranging from condescending to outright hostile. The adoption of this term by practitioners as a self-designated, positive identity label may represent a kind of reclaiming. However, it should also be noted that a wide range of designations exist within this broad classification of practitioners—some highly specific to certain traditions or groups—and, in turn, an equally wide range of preferences for certain labels over others exists among them.

[5] While the current "Warrior Code" used by the school is of the group's own invention, the school's original code of ethics was in large part taken from the "Nine Noble Virtues" (NNVs) adopted by various Heathen communities. As three interview participants explained, the origins and implications of this list of values have become contentious subjects within Heathen spaces due to their codifiers' associations with Heathen groups espousing white-nationalist ideologies, and the resultant implications behind some of the "virtues" included, having been developed under these abhorrent ideological contexts. WoA leadership was disturbed to learn of this unsavory connection, and as such, in accordance with the group's commitment to inclusivity and motto of "Our Shield Wall Shields All," decided to abandon their use of the NNVs, instead opting to develop their own list of community values. While some trace elements of the NNVs may remain (such as an emphasis on respect for others), K. believes any remnants are broad-reaching traits that can be found in many contexts, and notes that the current code, encompassed by the acronym "WARRIOR," was much more so inspired by the United States Army's LDRSHIP model.

[6] Stefanie von Schnurbein, "Believing and Doing," in *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Brill, 2016), 106–07.

on the part of its participants, WoA's Yule blót occupies a curious position between the religious[7] and the mundane. Regardless of whether or not the participants themselves perceive the ritual as religious in nature (and there certainly exist a variety of perspectives among the participants on this matter), the blót is characterized by the construction of a ritual space that is markedly "different" or "sacred" through a variety of physical, visual, and auditory cues, and serves the express purpose of collectively celebrating and supporting its participants as a community. The construction of this unique communal ritual space provides a setting wherein participants can express vulnerability, creating a potentially transformative space that facilitates the affirmation and strengthening of community bonds.

Methodology and Literature Review

The focus of this project emerged from observations I made while attending WoA's annual Yule celebration in December of 2024 as a participant-observer. Having a few friends and acquaintances in the school myself, I had regularly attended tournaments and public events hosted by WoA since 2022, as well as two of their Yule celebrations before the 2024 Yule gathering. I had long been curious about what degree of depth there was, if any, to the school's Nordic aesthetics and possible Heathen influences, and was initially interested in focusing on Heathenry as it might relate to the group's martial arts focus—specifically, whether or not the Heathen members of the school felt their spiritual values influenced their martial practice, and vice-versa. However, my observations of the school's Yule celebration and blót led me to instead direct my focus toward the ways in which Heathen values and religious practice might be interfacing with WoA's culture as a community.

Primarily employing ethnographic methods, my research utilizes field notes taken during the event proceedings, as well as commentary gathered during a series of later one-on-one interviews with various members of the Warriors of Ash. These interviews covered a variety of subjects, including members' varying degrees and types of involvement with the school, their experiences at the Yule gathering and thoughts on the proceedings, their own religious inclinations, etc., and were conducted primarily in an in-person setting with some additional correspondence through instant messaging apps, and one via video-chat. Interview participants were informed of the project's general

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[7] The terms "religious" and "spiritual" sometimes connote different modes of engaging with the sacred to different people. Generally speaking, the former is often perceived as referring to institutional religion and indicates formality or the presence of dogma, while the latter holds connotations of personal experience and relationships to the sacred which are not necessarily governed by any particular religious institution. However, the nuance regarding the precise differences between these terms, as well as the problematic nature of assuming an inherent dichotomy between them, is both too complex to fully elaborate here and largely inconsequential for the purposes of this paper. As such, I will generally default to the term "religious" to encompass both matters of religion and spirituality here, but acknowledge the complexity surrounding the popular connotations of these terms.

topic and scope beforehand, and will be referred to here by initial only. Additionally, I have included excerpts from the Warriors of Ash website where relevant, and referenced a presentation document on Heathenry written by one of the groups' founding members, though this text is not directly cited for the purpose of maintaining anonymity. Through these methods, my aim is to examine the roles of WoA's Yule celebration and its religious ritual elements in this officially non-religious community setting, with an eye towards exploring the construction of ritual in otherwise "secular" spaces.

As will be discussed in the following section, the religiosity of the Yule gathering is somewhat ambiguous. One consequence of this is that the task of defining "outsider" and "insider" perspectives in the context of this event involves a good deal of nuance, and often participants cannot be cleanly associated into either category. In my own case, I am neither a dues-paying member of the Warriors of Ash school, nor do I claim the term "Heathen" as a personal religious label; by these parameters, I am technically an "outsider" both to the school itself and to Heathen ritual practice. However, my continued presence at WoA events, as well as the mere fact of my participation at Yule—which is open by invitation only—means that I might be considered an "insider" to the school's community in a broad sense. Put simply, many people expected to see me there. My circumstances in this regard were not unique, however; several other attendees occupied a similar position as spouses or "plus ones" of active members, while others were former members of the school who no longer practice martial arts, but are still thought of as part of the community regardless. This is not to mention the ratio of Heathens to non-Heathens in the space, how many attendees were newcomers, etc.—data which I did not survey. The blurriness between insider and outsider perspectives acknowledged, I have chosen to incorporate my own sensory observations of the proceedings in establishing context, but focus primarily on the interview participants' reported thoughts and feelings in constructing analysis.[8]

In conjunction with analysis of my own findings, I also reference existing research on Heathen religious identity and practice, and on ritual spaces. As scholars like Jennifer Snook and Stefanie von Schnurbein note, a large subset of the extant scholarly literature on the subject of Heathenry is focused on examining issues of identity politics within Heathen spaces and communities, with particular attention given to the discourse

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[8] The issues of positionality and objectivity are important topics of discourse within the fields of anthropology, religious studies, and other fields in which scholars frequently employ ethnographic research methods. I have acknowledged here a few examples of the ways in which defining one's position in relation to one's subject can be complicated by a range of factors. How this pertains to the idea of objectivity is equally complex, but scholars like Lila Abu-Lughod have pointed to the problematic nature of scholarly objectivity, both as a concept and as a value upheld within academic spaces, through a feminist lens. Her argument that "all knowledge is partial and from an embodied perspective… There is no such thing as a study which is not situated" is broadly applicable, and particularly relevant to studies such as the one I have conducted. See Abu-Lughod, "Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?" *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 5, no. 1 (1990): 7–27.

surrounding racially exclusive perspectives within Heathen communities, and the tension between folkish vs. universalist attitudes.[9] While an important topic of research that is indeed necessary for providing a comprehensive understanding of the movement as it exists today, this issue represents a relatively minor area of focus within the scope of this project.[10]

Of more immediate relevance is the work that has been done on Heathen ritual practices, specifically blóts. Descriptions and explanations of the procedural elements of blóts and other Heathen rituals can be found in many works on Heathenry (Snook, 2014; Schnurbein, 2016; Pizza, 2015). Michael Strmiska (2007) illustrates the ways in which blóts can vary procedurally and functionally between different groups in his work on the emerging role of animal sacrifice in a minority of Heathen reconstructionist groups, noting the "flexibility of modern Nordic Paganism, in which different groups and members find different ways to accommodate the ways of the past to the conditions of the present."[11] However, most research on blóts is, understandably, grounded explicitly in the context of Heathen worship—in which the participants of the ritual are generally unified in their intent to worship a specific deity or group of deities—and as such most

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[9] For a complete definition of these terms, see Snook, "Glossary of (American) Heathen Terms," in *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 212-14. In short, this refers to an ongoing conflict between various Heathen groups over whether or not Heathenry should be considered accessible exclusively to those of Germanic ancestry. While its scope is too complex to convey here, this issue is heavily entangled with conceptions of Heathenry as an ethnic folkway, and with the adoption of Heathenry by groups which espouse overtly racist, white-nationalist ideologies. For another extensive study, see Schnurbein (2016).

[10] Nevertheless, I feel it worth noting that topics related to these issues were eventually raised, unprompted, by all but one of the interview participants during the course of their interview. It was clear that the school's Nordic aesthetics and loose connections to Heathenry had raised eyebrows on more than one occasion, and that the commonly held public (mis)conception that "being a Heathen, or even just someone with an interest in Germanic history and Norse mythology, likely means they're also a Nazi" is one that members of the school have to push back against and be especially wary of unintentionally playing into. One member, K., explained how the WoA council strives to signify their stance as an inclusive space that actively rebukes hateful and discriminatory ideologies through their adoption (or disuse) of particular symbols. Another member, Z., expressed concern for how newcomers belonging to marginalized groups (POC, LGBT+) might feel when confronted with the group's aesthetics, considering some of the unsavory associations surrounding them, and stated "We want to be very vocal about our beliefs…if you want to use those symbols [referring to runes and other forms of Heathen symbolism], you need to be one of the first people to stand up and clarify what you're about."

[11] Michael Strmiska, "Putting the Blood Back into Blót: The Revival of Animal Sacrifice in Modern Nordic Paganism," *The Pomegranate* 9, no. 2 (2007), 178.

discussion of the functional aspects of the ritual is undertaken with regard to how the ritual serves the dynamic between the participants and said deities. I found comparatively few studies which focus on the communal aspect of blóts, as well as the function they serve for the *individuals* comprising the community performing them, which is part of what this project aims to explore.

In framing this exploration, ritual theorist Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* proved to be particularly useful. *Communitas* refers to the unique bond or relationship participants share within a ritual space, partially as a result of the liminality the space is imbued with during the ritual's proceedings. According to Turner, *communitas* is "almost everywhere held to be sacred or 'holy,' possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency."[12] In the context of WoA's Yule blót, *communitas* is generated and experienced not by a group of individuals unified by shared religious belief, but through their collective affirmation of one another as community members, represented by their physical presence and participation in the blót ritual.

Frameworks: Heathen Roots, Secular Branches

In exploring this topic, it's necessary to provide some context to the community for which this event serves, and to acknowledge its occasionally "religiously ambiguous" nature, for lack of a better term. The Warriors of Ash is primarily built around members' shared interest in European martial arts and history, and while the school is not a Heathen organization, the inclusion of Heathen-inspired elements in WoA's general presentation is not entirely coincidental, nor is it superficial. Prior to the school's official founding, one of its founding members, M., was the head of a local Heathen organization, for which he hosted meetups, organized study groups on the *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda*,[13] and conducted intermittent blóts on his own property. However, as turnout to these meetings began to dwindle—particularly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—and as several of the regular attendees, including M. himself, were becoming more consistently involved with the then-burgeoning martial arts school anyway, M. decided to dedicate the majority of his energies to helping run and grow WoA instead. For M., this represented less of a pivot away from his prior role to an entirely new one, and more of a merging of two spheres of his life that were already beginning to overlap; his values and practice as a Heathen came with him to WoA. As M. explained:

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[12] Victor W. Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure,* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 128.

[13] The *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda* comprise "the central texts of Heathenry" that contain accounts of the Norse myths as recorded (and interpreted) by the Icelandic historian and poet Snorri Sturlson in the 13th century.; Snook, "Glossary," 211.

> It was totally intentional. You can kind of think about it like a [Christian] church volleyball team, for example—anybody can join, but you're still probably going to have people praying before practice in a room with a cross hanging up on the wall somewhere…We wanted to incorporate some elements of our [Heathen] culture [into the school]—so [another founding member] and I definitely had that kind of model in mind when we were developing [WoA].

Using the "church volleyball team" analogy, M. expressed the integral nature of his Heathen worldview and practice in his contributions to the school, but emphasized the group's openness to all. To M., Heathenry espouses a worldview in which actions, not beliefs, are paramount. This idea is succinctly conveyed in M.'s personal motto: "I'm a Heathen—I do what I want." Despite the cheeky turn of phrase, the statement is not meant flippantly, but rather literally:

> I have to take action to create the reality that I want—what I want to see [for myself], what I want for my family… What I *want*, I *do*—I *do* what I *want*.

The "family" M. refers to here is not limited to blood relations, but extends to one's "chosen family" as well, or the community one chooses to be a part of. Taking action that benefits one's community and maintains its stability is implied by the concept of *frith* (lit. "peace")—an idea in Heathenry "[describing] the complex relationship of mutual obligation, commitment, and responsibility that members of a group have toward one another in order to preserve the established social order of a kindred or tribe."[14] For some, like M., *frith* also indicates the actual relationships *themselves*, suggesting the inseparability of close bonds and the idea of responsibility towards safeguarding and nurturing them.

Functionally, what this means is that differences in one's personal religious persuasion from that of another member of the community are relatively unimportant in the grand scheme of *frith*; rather, it is one's (right) actions towards others, and one's active participation in building and maintaining community that ultimately matters.[15] In this sense, one's *frith* need not necessarily be composed of other self-identified Heathens; the concept's value can be imparted to others and embodied without their needing to subscribe to the religious system from which it hails.

Such appears to be the case with WoA's development; the understanding of community through the Heathen lens of *frith* informs M.'s personal relationship to and

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[14] Snook, "Glossary," 212.

[15] For M., this idea extends to Heathenry broadly, which he personally sees as "more of a culture than a religion" due to its lack of institutionality or enforceable dogma: "You don't even have to believe Thor is *real*…There's no strict set of rules here, no higher governing body—no one who can tell you 'you're not a real Heathen.'"; As Schnurbein (2016, 105-6) attests in her fieldwork, the notion that Heathenry is "based on a worldly ethic of action and not on a belief in supernatural beings" and represents a "philosophical worldview and cultural tradition based on practices that should be preserved, revived, and transformed" is increasingly common, but has long been fuel for debate among Heathen communities.

vision of WoA, but he certainly isn't the only member for whom the significance of WoA's deeply communal nature now resonates. Multiple interview participants of varying religious identities noted that while it was their interest in martial arts that initially drew them to the school, it was the strength of and dedication to the community they found in WoA that kept them coming back. H., a member of the school since 2022 and a recent appointee to the WoA council (board of directors), drew a parallel between his observations of WoA's level of community engagement and his own prior experiences with Christian church associations:

> I found that in some ways [WoA] has functioned for me in the way that [Christian] church associations have in the past…I'd never been in a martial arts group that did things like organize meal trains for its members when they're sick or going through something, or help them move—things I always associated with church fellowship…I was missing that kind of community when I found WoA.

R., a member since 2017 who served on the council until 2024, and who jokingly referred to himself as WoA's long-time "token Christian" when asked about his religious identity, similarly compared the atmosphere and function of WoA gatherings like Yule to attending fellowship meetings at the Christian churches he has attended, acknowledging the underlying religiosity of some elements of the event, but emphasizing the overall communal aspect:

> It's like at a church potluck—there are some religious things going on, but it's not a *purely* religious thing. With [WoA's] Yule, yeah, it's a Heathen thing, but it's for and about whoever comes—and if you don't wanna drink the mead, you don't gotta.

The same participants also mentioned that they had attended other martial arts schools of various disciplines, but none possessed the same spirit of community that WoA exhibited, nor embraced the same level of equality and mutual encouragement between members:

> R.: [WoA] is formal enough to have a class instructor, but there's no "Oh, I'm a *red* belt, you're just a *green* belt" kind of attitude… There's a sort of democratic element, and you're not held back on what you can learn by rank… There's an element of camaraderie, of supportive competition.
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> H.: I think a lot of other [martial arts] groups often have this kind of caricatured emphasis on hierarchy, where respect goes up the hierarchy… whereas WoA is much more pluralistic and reciprocal. There's no "loyalty to the teacher" or "loyalty to the group" criteria in [the Warrior Code].

After repeated expressions of a felt sense of community throughout multiple interviews, it became clear that for members of the school, WoA is more than just an ordinary sports club with a niche focus. Given the importance of *frith* to its founders, I would speculate that the school's Heathen roots have likely played a role in fostering

WoA's communal atmosphere to a not-insignificant degree, regardless of the school's ultimately secular focus and objective. Similarly, I posit that WoA's annual Yule blót, structurally and spiritually grounded in Heathen religious practice, yet carried out in a manner accessible to all of the school's members, serves as a means of both collectively celebrating, reaffirming, and reinforcing that communal atmosphere.

Yule: "The Longest, Darkest Night of the Year"

Usually celebrated on or around the time of the Northern hemisphere's winter solstice, Yule is a midwinter holiday of Germanic origin that has been adopted by a variety of modern pagan religious groups, often observed as a part of the cyclical "Wheel of the Year" framework.[16] Traditions may vary between different groups that observe the holiday, but most celebrations involve the sharing of a meal, drinking, and gift-giving in some form, in addition to the group's own personalized rituals. This is true for WoA's Yule celebration as well, which follows a pre-planned agenda, on which the main activities are the potluck, Viking Gift Exchange, story time featuring tales from the *Eddas* and the lighting of the Yule log, the blót, and—for any guests who are still present and awake—"fourth meal," a post-midnight feast typically featuring freshly grilled and roasted meats, much of it from animals raised on the farmstead. Of these events, different interview participants pointed to different activities as being their "favorite" of the evening overall, but most pointed to the blót as the event that defines the gathering. On its importance as an event, K. explained:

> The Yule blót predates any other traditions we have at WoA. Also, it's one of the only truly "serious" [traditions] we do…It's one of the few things we actually plan far ahead of time.

Similarly, R. noted that while the blót is "not necessarily the most *fun*" part of the evening, "it's definitely the most meaningful." C., a relative newcomer to WoA and the Yule gathering, said she had gleaned this impression in advance of attending for the first time:

> I was excited—I had heard there was a special energy to it…that [Yule] is not just an ordinary Christmas gathering.

Z., a member since 2019 and a recent appointee to the council, associated feelings of both "exuberance" and "reverence" with Yule:

> It's a celebration—we're gonna get through the darkest, longest, coldest night of the year by partying our asses off, but there's a part of the evening that gets

[16] Ronald Hutton, "Modern Pagan Festivals: A Study in the Nature of Tradition," *Folklore* 119, no. 3 (2008), 253.

> pretty reverent and somber [referring to the blót] too…I always make sure I'm being reverent, because this is a really special moment and I want to honor that.

In the following subsections, I detail the event proceedings from the "story time" portion of the evening through the blót, and look at the way(s) in which the group's gathering together demarcates a ritual space wherein the participants' physical presence and verbal response to one another is the primary means of carrying out the ritual's purpose.

Gather 'Round the Fire: Viking Story Time

Well after sunset, once the sky has turned to pitch, everyone is eventually summoned back outside the house, where guests have been mingling, feasting on an array of indulgent potluck offerings, drinking (lots of) mead and other spirits, and waiting on late arrivals to the party. At the summoning shout from down the hill, the guests start wrapping up their conversations, finish scarfing down the food on their plates, and begin re-equipping their protective winter clothing before leisurely trickling back out into the cold night air.

A short distance from the house, a bonfire has been heating up, crackling and sparking away as a few volunteers take turns shuffling the logs about and adding new kindling. It's a beacon of light and sorely-needed warmth in the dark, cold clearing, and will be the centerpiece of the rest of the evening's activities. Over the next ten minutes or so, everyone gathers around the fire in a large, but fairly tight circle, arranging their camp chairs, blankets, and log benches as close to the heat of the flames as safety allows. As M. takes his place in the circle of participants, several volunteers carefully lower the year's Yule log into the bonfire, where it settles with a shower of sparks and plumes of fresh woodsmoke.

Donning a headlamp for a book light, M. opens his copy of the *Prose Edda.* In his booming orator's voice, he launches into a reading of the stories of the god Baldr's death, the binding of Loki, and of coming Ragnarok—their themes of darkness, mourning, and the eventual return of the sun (associated with Baldr) making them appropriate choices for a Yule reading. It is at this point that the raucous energy of the crowd finally quells somewhat; with everyone seated around the fire, eagerly listening as the stories unfold, the atmosphere begins to take on a quieter, more contemplative tone. M.'s dramatic reading is met with various signs of engagement from his audience, from laughter, to the occasional quip about a character's choices, to the accompanying thrum of one member's steel drum—a unique and spontaneous addition to this year's proceedings, which was quite well-received by the rest of the group.

Though listening to someone read stories aloud might be considered a mundane affair in any other context, this activity, as a precursor to the upcoming blót, acts as a kind of ritual in and of itself. The group's coming together and encircling the fire marks the area as "different" from the rest of the property, as C. noted:

> It's difficult to describe, but there was a kind of sacredness to it—it felt like we were in a bubble, like nothing else existed outside of us…It felt ancient in some

> ways, listening to stories around a fire together that had been being told for centuries.

Along with the auditory accompaniment of the steel drum, C. also pointed to the "visuals" of the event as being highly conducive to her experience of the event and space as "sacred," noting that the surrounding darkness, and being "unable to see beyond the light of the fire and the circle" served to lend a "mystical, magical feeling" to the shared space—something she had not anticipated, but expressed an appreciation for. As she explained, discussing the way this "magical" atmosphere, or "moment in and out of time,"[17] made her feel:

> There was a sense of heightened emotion and intimacy…It was one of those rare moments where I felt like a kid again.

C., who identifies as a "pretty strict atheist," acknowledged that she knew some participants were likely relating to these stories on a religious level, but explained that her personal lack of religious inclination did not interfere with her ability to engage with the experience:

> [For me] it's not really about believing in the *story*, but the messaging behind it…Everyone can relate to it on their own terms, but as part of a community experience.

Other participants who had attended the Yule gathering in the past expressed varying levels of emotional response to the stories themselves, and to hearing them told aloud, but nearly all referenced the activity as one of the evening's "unskippable" events. As K., a member since 2017 and former council member, noted, M. reading from the *Eddas* has always been an item on the evening's agenda since the very first Yule gathering was held, suggesting both its belovedness and its importance in staging the rest of the evening's proceedings.

As M. concludes his narration, the thrumming of the steel drum finally ceases, leaving the ring of guests momentarily together in silence, accompanied by nothing but the popping of the fire and the rustling of wind through the trees. The stage has now been set for the blót—the defining event of the evening.

Blót: Boasts and Toasts, Sacrifice and Support

After a brief recess, everyone circles around the fireside once more, their drinking horn, Solo cup, or water bottle freshly topped off with their beverage of choice; mead is traditional, of course, but it's not required that participants' drinks be alcoholic—some underage participants and those who don't imbibe alcohol on principle are here, too. M.'s booming voice once again summons everyone's attention. Having confirmed everyone has a drink in hand, the blót officially begins. M. jumps right into things, spending little time on introductions. He talks about the significance of coming

[17] Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," 96.

together on the longest, darkest night of the year to celebrate the fact that this community has made it through another year. From this point on, the sun will gradually make its return, and we'll all make it through the last days of winter. Intermittent shouts of "Hail!" fill the pauses in his speech.

It's at this point that M. opens the circle for sacrifices. Though in an explicitly Heathen blót, there would be no question as to who the intended recipients are, here the question of who or what the sacrifice is made "to" is ultimately left open ended for the individual participants, and there are no real requirements for what's eligible to be tossed into the roaring fire— just as long as it holds some significance to the sacrificer. Sometimes, it's something that holds personal significance or sentimental value, sometimes it's an item that the sacrificer made themselves by hand, and sometimes it's an object meant to represent something abstract that the sacrificer wants to "give up." Sometimes, there's an explanation given, sometimes a simple "I'm ready to let go of this," suffices. In all cases, the atmosphere is solemn as participants take turns approaching the fire's edge. Not everyone present participates in this part of the ritual, but those that do note the seriousness with which they approach the task, such as Z.:

> It's your opportunity to let go of something you're holding onto metaphorically or physically… I put a lot of effort into thinking about [what I'm going to throw in] beforehand. I want to be able to let things go when I need to, and I throw something into the fire every year.

That Z. considers this particular moment and place his "opportunity" to "let something go," as opposed to any other time or place, suggests the significance of the community setting, where the eyes of his friends and peers are on him as he makes his sacrifice. Indeed, the presence and witness of others is a crucial component of what makes the blót powerful for many, particularly with regard to the next portion of the proceedings—the boasts.

During this stage, participants take turns speaking before the group, the order of speakers moving clockwise from M.'s position. The participants' task is to proclaim a "boast"—something that the speaker has achieved during the past year, and something that they want to accomplish in the new year going forward.[18] Despite the connotations of the word, this "boasting" isn't about bragging in an arrogant or competitive sense; rather, it's about proclaiming one's intended actions before the community, so that they can support the speaker's efforts going forward, and hold the speaker accountable to their word. As Z. explained:

> There aren't a whole lot of spaces where people are asked to speak aloud their intentions for the year…[the blót] is really "your time" to help manifest them, or

[18] The activity appears to be a form of *sumbel*, a "drinking ritual in which those gathered cement bonds of friendship, form alliances between kindreds or tribes, and show respect to one another by public displays of gift giving, toasting, and praises to deity as well as those gathered" which is usually considered distinct from blót in the context of Heathen religious practice (Snook, 2015. 214). This term, however, was not used by M. during the proceedings, nor during the course of his interview, suggesting a verbal distinction is not of great importance in this particular context.

> crystallize them in your brain. There are even fewer spaces where immediately after [sharing] everyone is there to show their immediate and unconditional support for those things.

Functionally, the action is as much about forming a sense of internal accountability as it is about creating a force of external accountability, as K. explained:

> Do I always remember every single thing that everyone said around the fire? No, but I remember what *I* said for sure, so it's kind of an accountability thing. [She pauses in thought.] You know, I actually just realized I don't even do resolutions on New Year's anymore—that's already happened [at Yule] by then.

It's not all about the positives though; along with personal triumphs and accomplishments, plenty of participants preface their boasts with stories of personal loss and tragedy, major life upheavals, physical and mental suffering, and ever-growing anxiety for the future. Witness from the community provides an opportunity not only for creating a sense of accountability for the future, but for offering collective support in the present as well. Multiple participants expressed an appreciation for this structured opportunity to express vulnerability in front of others—something all expressed difficulty finding space for in their day to day lives:

> Z.: It's a deeply personal and vulnerable moment…I think that's one thing everyone can agree that's lacking in modern society, is having a space to know they're supported unconditionally, so experiencing [affirmations of support] can be pretty powerful.
>
> K.: I find the blót to be good for helping me get to know the people around me a lot better. It's hard to start difficult conversations at fun events, and [the blót] is about making a space that gives you the freedom to flex between someone's accomplishments and someone's tragedy…It's structured, but there's a lot of room for vulnerability on the table. It's a permission to be vulnerable around your friends—a lot of places don't provide that.
>
> H.: I think part of what makes the blót powerful is the willingness to share sorrows and burdens that we often try not to put onto other people…To have a space where you're not souring the mood [by doing so] and are fully participating is pretty powerful in that way.

This, I would argue, is where Turner's *communitas* is fully realized, in this temporal space wherein the social norms that govern what degree of vulnerability is acceptable to display are momentarily suspended. R. explained that the blót, as a "rare instance of socially acceptable public vulnerability," was for him in some ways reminiscent of sharing prayer requests at church, albeit in a very different environment. At the end of each participant's turn—and intermittently throughout their speaking, whenever emotionally resonant topics arise—they're met with a ring of raised drinking vessels and shouts of "Hail!", often followed by words of encouragement from someone in the group.

It's an "aggressively supportive"[19] atmosphere, wherein one's personal victories are celebrated as "everyone's victories,"[20] and one's personal tragedies are given collective attention. Simply being present in this space, at this moment, hearing a crowd of affirmative shouts in response to one's words, freely given without fear of judgment, is what this is all about. As M. told me, discussing the subject of why he chose to continue performing this ritual for this group of people, regardless of anyone's personal faith: "It's about giving every person there a voice."

Conclusions

In the course of my interviews, I asked questions both about Yule broadly and questions which treated the different activities of the evening as distinct from one another. Interestingly, however, a few of the participants tended to use the terms "Yule"[21] and "blót" interchangeably, despite the latter being one component of the evening—a specific ritual occurring within the larger context of the event. I'm inclined to think it's not just a mere slip of the tongue, but an indicator of the ritual's significance to this community. K. recounted that during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the school had to close to abide by social distancing policies, she still felt it was important to hold the blót in some form. The socially-distanced version of the ritual the group held with only a handful of members present wasn't the same, but K. said she felt it was important not to let the tradition "die."

> It acts as this 'end-of-the-year glue' that keeps the community together; we do other things together all the time of course, but the Yule blót has gravity in a way that nothing else does.

K. also mentioned that a number of attendees are individuals who haven't been actual members of the school itself or attended classes in a long time—for some, not in years—but who still make an effort to show up at Yule regardless; their participation, for her, reads as a way of signifying they are still part of the community, a way of saying: "I'm here—I'm not going anywhere."[22]

It's worth noting that even within this group, however, a range of perspectives exists regarding the ritual elements of the blót, and a few voiced some ambivalence towards those that "look" overtly religious, albeit for very different reasons. Z., an atheist with an affinity for non-theistic Satanism, expressed some concern that optics of the ritual might present a potential source of discomfort for newcomers with "religious baggage," as well as for those still cautious about the group's Nordic aesthetics in

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[19] R. Interviewed by author, 8 March 2025. Swannanoa, North Carolina.

[20] M. Interviewed by author, 12 February 2025. Asheville, North Carolina.

[21] This referring to WoA's Yule, not the holiday conceptually.

[22] K. Interviewed by author, 25 February 2025. Swannanoa, North Carolina.

general. R., a Christian, on the other hand, noted that ritual elements can also become superficial or represent distractions, if not implemented carefully:

> From a purely theological standpoint, I kind of waffle on it—I think it's fine, it's cool, as long as things don't get overly focused on the ritual itself rather than what it's supposed to serve. Like baptism in Christianity, you can get overly focused on the minutiae.

Regardless of these feelings, however, both R. and Z. expressed positive feelings regarding the blót overall. R. clarified that he doesn't experience any personal tension in participating as a member of another faith, in part because of the flexible nature of participation ("there's nothing really required—some things I may not do, and that's fine"), but also because he recognizes the underlying value of the ritual: "I may not see the same *religious* value as some participants, but I see the value in the purpose of the ritual itself."[23] Similarly, Z. said that on the whole, he finds nothing wrong with "enjoying and participating in ritual spaces," especially adaptable ones like WoA's blót—a quality which "meshes well" with his personal values of respecting choice and bodily autonomy—even while acknowledging that some of the trappings of ritual could be potentially problematic in certain instances. For Z., what's important is that the ritual creates a space wherein "people are able to express their authentic selves."[24] H. expressed a similar sentiment:

> I appreciate very much the way M. can bring in the invocation of the sacred in a non-exclusive way—the space of ritual and ceremony to draw on, whether it's pagan traditions or something else, in a way that's not asking others to sign up for a religious tradition. It's a time when we can unabashedly talk about the deeper, most important things, and by marking it off as sacred space, you make a place where people can go deeper and be more vulnerable.

Understanding the significance of ritual practices for the communities that perform them can involve more than their faith-based structures and metaphysical architecture, but their impacts on the individuals participating, and in turn the inevitably changed dynamic between them as a community that results from that performance. Efficacy is not solely experienced by those for whom the ritual serves as a religious experience or divine conduit, such as in this case study. *Frith*, despite its uniquely Heathen context, can be cultivated by all of WoA's members via participation in the blót, regardless of whether or not the term is adopted, or even known, by each and every individual, and regardless of their own personal religious belief. One's unique voice, given and heard in support, generates feelings of safety and trust for participants, and one's physical presence in the circle before the fire reaffirms their status as a member of the community. As R. succinctly put it at the conclusion of his interview:

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[23] R. Interviewed by author, 8 March 2025. Swannanoa, North Carolina.

[24] Z. Interviewed by author, 3 March 2025. Asheville, North Carolina.

We’re [WoA] a mishmash of m********ers who are all here for the love of martial arts, but also a love of each other.

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