

## Bear Feasts in a Land without Wild. Bears: Experiments in Creating Animist Rituals

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Reception of academic debates about animism have led to an increase in the number of people who self-identify as “animists.” Among Pagan animists, one example experiments with a midwinter Bear Feast to embed respect for the larger-than-human world in foodways and rituals. To do so they draw on Indigenous and scholarly sources in processes that might be “indigenizing” in several senses. Sources are drawn into an existing tradition, re-shaping it along more localized and more animistic lines. They also encourage the kind of personhood that is more often encouraged among Indigenous people—i.e. promoting “dividuation” rather than the individualizing of consumer capitalist Modernity. Simultaneously, ceremonies are developed that also draw on / in Indigenous knowledges some mediated by scholars. as well as advancing a post-Protestant, un-Modern re-turn to ritual.

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British Bear Feasts are experiments in developing an animistic ritual complex. They provide scholars of religion with opportunities to observe and consider both the continuing evolution and diversification of the new Paganisms and also matters that coincide with scholarly “turns” to performance, ontology, material religion, vernacular religion and more. In addition, as an increasing number of Pagans now self-identify as “animists”, scholars interested in contemporary religions. are provided with an opportunity to study Pagan engagements with Indigenous people and with academic debates—e.g. about different modernities and about the reception and impact of research.

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The specific question addressed here is whether the emerging Bear Feast tradition and its wider Pagan animist context exemplifies a form of indigenization. A contrast with another, coexistent trend—in which other Pagans promote a universalizing or globalizing vision of their religion—increases the value of exploring the notion of an indigenizing trajectory. Indeed, it will become evident that participants in Bear Feasts are not only aware of the tension between indigenizing and universalizing but are exercised by it in various ways. Although the motivations, experiences and reflections of Bear Feast participants are diverse and fluid, they closely match those tendencies which Paul C. Johnson (2012) identifies as “indigenizing” and “extending.” In particular, they are more of a field of negotiation than an organized albeit dynamic continuum. The nub of Johnson’s argument is that such tendencies, practices and lifeways are processes or projects rather than fixed identities. They contrast with Weberian ideal types in being everyday, dynamic and malleable rather than abstract, bounded and static imaginaries. The Bear Feast tradition attracts attention as a movement that allows us to test the analytical value of the term “indigenizing” in relation to phenomena beyond those which generated Johnson’s concept and argument.

In the following section I offer an orientation to some key terms and their contrasts and varied uses. This begins with a note on the term “indigenizing” as used by Paul C. Johnson. A distinction between “Indigenous” and “indigenous” that is of strategic importance, but not universally applied, leads to an introduction to an additional possibly complementary use of “indigenizing” that has already been applied to contemporary Pagans in Britain. The “new animism” is introduced next, followed by a contrast between the *conceptual* “individuals” of Modernity and the *conceptual* “dividuals” of Indigenous animist ontologies. After considering these terms, I focus on Bear Feasts themselves, based on my dialogical fieldwork with Bear Feast founders and participants since 2008 arising from longer-term engagement with Pagans, particularly British Druids. Two sections are devoted to the origins of the British Bear Feasts. The first provides information about the founders and their inspirations including the influence of my previous and ongoing research among Indigenous animists and aspirations. The second introduces the sources inspiring the Feasts and, therefore, evidencing one kind of indigenizing as Indigenous practices influence Pagan practice. An outline of the way in which the Feasts have been performed will follow. A concluding section considers how these events might be considered to be indigenizing among people who are not Indigenous, especially as they find themselves resisting the powerful call to try to be more Modern.

## Terms

Because I am writing about a religious movement in Britain I have adjusted the key term “indigenizing” to the British spelling, “indigenizing,” unless citing Paul Johnson. I will argue in relation to the Bear Feast participants that, just as among Candomblé practitioners and the Garifuna of Johnson’s work, specific “outsider signs, symbols and practices” are “relied upon” to evolve “a culturally specific form that makes the outsider symbol “ours,” even traditional” (Johnson 2002, 312). It is the evolution of a “tradition” which draws on—and, importantly, draws in—ritual and liturgical elements from “outside” that invite this argument.

Importantly, participants in Bear Feasts do not claim to be Indigenous. My capitalization of “Indigenous” requires explanation. In some contexts, “indigenous” and “Indigenous” might be synonymous and equally useful as references to those communities which self-identify in ways that the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues UNPFII indicates. Indeed, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples United Nations General Assembly 2007*. does not capitalize “indigenous” even when referring to those who are its principal focus. It is equally true that many Indigenous people, and many scholars interested in indigeneity, do not necessarily capitalize the term. However, in wider usage the lower-case “indigenous” points to origins e.g. of persons, oranges or chickens. in particular places at some point in time. If only for strategic purposes, the capitalized “Indigenous” is used here to indicate more specific projects of community or world construction in which colonialization, marginalization and the extinguishing, distancing and other manoeuvres of so-called “Modern Western cultures” are contested. There is more complexity to both uses and considerable debate about them. Two recent works focused on Indigenous religions combining “Indigenous” with a further contested category. exemplify important interventions in such debates: Christopher Hartney and Daniel Tower’s *Religious Categories and the Construction of the Indigenous* (2017) and Greg Johnson and Siv Ellen Kraft’s *Handbook of Indigenous Religions* (2017). This is important in the present context because the possibility being tested is that Bear Feasts might be indicative of an indigenizing movement and an indigenizing of sources by people who might be indigenous to Britain but are not Indigenous in any sense that would justify their inclusion in a book about “Indigenous religions.”

There is, however, another emphasis of “indigenizing” that might be generative. While Johnson is particularly interested in processes by which practices and ideas are brought into particular “traditions,” “indigenizing” can also

point to the importance of locality or localizing. Some Pagans, for instance, most certainly understand their deities usually plural. to be universal, cosmic, or at least present everywhere around the earth. They invoke such beings in ceremonies regardless of where they happen to be. Similarly, some Pagans celebrate the same set of calendrical festivals regardless of actual seasons in their location. However, others “indigenize” in the sense of fitting in with their locality. They invoke deities from local traditions, seek to develop closer relationships with and within local landscapes, and/or adjust to celebrations which honour local seasons. More broadly, some Pagans try to apply the slogan “think globally, act locally” to many areas of their lives. For instance, they seek to source food locally and resist the lure of easy international flights when it is possible to use ground transport. This more geographical localizing sense of “indigenizing” is significant to some regular participants in Bear Feasts and certainly to the founders. It is, perhaps, a resonant theme which underpins (Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis 2007, 10), coining of the phrase “new indigenes” for at least some Pagans.

Another term that has already been used but requires explanation is “animism.” To avoid confusion it should be noted that “animism” is used here in line with ongoing scholarly discussions which have been labelled “the new animism.” This is a usage inspired by Irving Hallowell’s early twentieth century research among the Anishinaabeg in southern central Canada Hallowell 1960. rather than by Edward Tylor’s theorizing about religion 1871. It is not the animism of the Oxford English Dictionary OED and similar works. which continues to insist that animism is “the attribution of a living soul to plants, inanimate objects and natural phenomenon” and/or “the belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe” OED 2018. Terms like “inanimate,” “natural” and “material” assert that this animism is a false belief. The example sentences provided by the OED insist on the folly of both ancient and contemporary “animists.” The spectre of Tylor’s “animism” is clear here both in the parallels with his gloss, “belief in spirits,” and in his insistence that religion and all religions to one degree or another. is defined by the animistic mistake that sees souls and human-likeness in unwarranted places and acts.<sup>1</sup>

The “new animism” proposes something different. It re-examines the acts and ideas of Indigenous and other people to better understand their ontologies, epistemologies, lifeways and/or ceremonies and discourses. I have summarized this animism by saying that “Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is

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1. For more about Tylor and his legacy see Tremlett, Sutherland and Harvey (2017).

always lived in relationship with others” (Harvey 2017, xiii). The pervasive fact of relationship leads to diverse local encouragements to act respectfully towards other-than-human relations. What is new in the “new animism” is not the data e.g. some people’s lifeways or relationships but the approaches employed by scholars involved many of whom are contributors to Harvey (Harvey ed. 2013) and Astor-Aguilera and Harvey (2018). Scholarly “turns” to gender, performance, postcolonialism, materiality and ontology have influenced more relational and more reflexive ways of doing research and of analysing and presenting arguments. Along with the growth in the multi- and inter-disciplinary field of Indigenous Studies, this is the academic context of the “new animism.” Vibrant discussions of what it means to be a person, a relation, a citizen and/or a human have required re-evaluation of the kind of claims expressed in the OED “animism” definition.

Studies of Indigenous ontologies sometimes make good use of yet another contrast that will be employed in arguing that participants in Bear Feasts are indigenizing. Marilyn Strathern (1988) proposed a distinction between Western “individuals” and Melanesian “dividuals.” In contrast to Modern projects of individuation, she demonstrated that Melanesians encouraged “dividuation”: the effort to improve relations on the assumption that a person is not a solitary, skin-bound or bark-bound, scale-bound, etc. being but already necessarily a dynamic interaction of many relations (see Halbmayer 2012). Importantly, Strathern contrasted *concepts* of personhood not descriptive realities. That is, both Moderns and Indigenous people can be either individuals or dividuals or both at different times or in different relations in lived reality but their “cultures”—the sedimentation of locally commonplace or widely shared acts, inspirations and aspirations—shape people in particular directions. If we circle back to Tylor and Hallowell we might say that in Tylor’s “old animism” people are imagined as individuals whose beliefs are definitive, while in Hallowell’s new approach, people are imagined as dividuals whose relations are generative. In the “new animism” which underlies the founding and evolution of the Bear Feast tradition, “What is in question,” as Marshall Sahlins says, “is the character of the relationships rather than the nature of the person” (2011, 13). It is the incitement of dividuation and widening of respectful relations that suggests the possibility that Bear Feasts shape an indigenizing movement, albeit among indigenous but not Indigenous people.

Finally in this section, readers will have noticed that “Western” and “Modern” have already been both capitalized and trapped in scare quotes. They, too, are contested and uneasy terms, as Miguel Astor-Aguilera and I argue (2018, 9).

It is clear to us that “Western” now labels global phenomena and that “Modern” is not an objective synonym of “contemporary” but one way of identifying a project. Or, more carefully if not more precisely, it is a shorthand for a distillation of a heuristic device which, with varying degrees of success, invites open-ended reflection on and discussion of an ongoing and contested ongoing-while-contested. project.

If Bear Feast participants are seeking to dividuate rather than individuate and to improve animistic relations within. the larger-than-human world, a crucial and integral element of their indigenizing is a contest with the project that is Modernity. We will return to that theme.

### Origins of the Bear Feast

The idea for the Bear Feasts originated in conversations between a couple, Corwen Broch and Kate Fletcher, as they made their way from southern England to Santiago de Compostela and Finisterre, on foot apart from the ferry crossings to and from France. Their journey in 2005 could be interestingly considered by those researching the contemporary proliferation and diversification of pilgrims and pilgrimage. For the couple involved, the long walk provided an extended opportunity to further develop not only their personal relationship but also their particular Pagan Druidic understanding and lifeway. This could be summed up as a quest to “live lightly on the land” if not entirely “off grid.” As they walked, they discussed ideas about what might really be “the oldest religion” a common theme among Pagans—considering arcolatry or “bear veneration” to be a prime candidate—and its relation to “the new animism”—including their reflections on having heard a public presentation about my research among Indigenous animists.

As they talked, an idea grew on them: that of expressing gratitude and apology to food animals and plants in a ritual experimenting with bear ceremonies and narratives. In my talk at a Druid camp, as often in my writing, I had cited Te Pakaka Tawhai’s claim that the purpose of Maori religion *could* be expressed as “doing violence with impunity”—i.e. the seeking of permission and the offering of placation to those injured or killed to provide food or shelter to others (Tawhai 1988, 101). I built on this by drawing on Anishinaabe animism partly as presented by Hallowell but also drawing on my short fieldwork visits to reservations within the [USA](#). and on the kinship implications of Darwinian evolution. This led me to emphasize that acts of violence are not only necessary and unavoidable because all beings need to consume others. but also intimate because they involve our co-evolving relations, some closer than others. For instance, Tawhai’s reference to the

digging and serving up of kumara, sweet potatoes, as food for guests was not randomly picked but arose from the intimacy of a shared migration of both Maori and kumara to Aotearoa New Zealand and of the mutuality of their adaptation to that new land. Since kumara have something of the ancestor about them, their consumption requires careful negotiation. That is just a part of Tawhai's argument as I summarized it in the talk which Corwen and Kate considered and discussed.

In case anyone in the audience imagined that it is possible to avoid acts of violence I had noted an implication of human symbiosis with bacteria. The point here is that one cannot avoid committing the violent act of consuming others by taking one's own life as that would also result in the deaths of millions of bacteria. There is no "elsewhere" or "outside" to the food chain or the "cycle of life." Tawhai's provocative phrase "doing violence with impunity" does not provide an escape from responsibility or an excuse for indulgence but indicates the deep value of ceremonies demonstrative of respect and humility. It does not point to an expectation of automatic impunity but to the pervasive stress on inter-species reciprocity entailed in most Indigenous ceremonies.

The serendipitous trajectory of my research experiences see Harvey (2015). led me to reflect on how Maori and Anishinaabe perspectives resonate together. Other researchers have brought Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee knowledges and practices together. For example, the botanist Robin Kimmerer writes compellingly of the pervasive encouragement of respect among Algonkian Nations and of the protocols of the Thanksgiving Address among the Onondaga (Kimmerer 2013, 105–117). What is, perhaps, most challenging about Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies for people of European heritage especially those of pervasively Protestant north European origin. is the sense that ritual is not best defined as "vain repetition" but as enactments of inter-personal—and often inter-species—relationality. Ritual finds its meaning in the communication to performers as much as to recipients. of respect and reciprocity. At the heart of the argument arising from my engagement with the Bear Feast community alongside observation of some other British Pagans. is a recognition that what can be romantic, appropriative and in other ways colonialist, can also be radical and contributory to strategies of resistance to consumer-capitalist Modernity. But that is to get ahead of things.

After their return from northern Spain, Corwen and Kate worked with these and other ideas by researching rituals in which Indigenous animists express gratitude and sought permission from "food persons." Hallowell's

(1926) “Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere.” resonated with them. This is at least in part because of the invocation of “the great bear of the starry heavens” in the opening and orienting phases of many contemporary Druidic rituals. Perhaps also the association in some Pagan mythologies of Arthur “the once and future king” with bears played a role in making bears familiar. It was, however, their research among anthropological, folkloric and ethnomusicological sources that strengthened the potential of honouring bears as key players in their emergent ritual complex.

### Bear Feast sources

As noted, Kate and Corwen’s interests included finding ways of developing their animist practice and localizing lifeway by learning appropriately from others. They were and remain explicit that appropriate learning must be distinct from appropriating. They regularly express the importance of acting respectfully towards the owners and conveyers of Indigenous and other knowledges and practices. Simultaneously, but more implicitly, they express a contrast with other people who are at least perceived to take ideas and ceremonies that have not been explicitly offered or shared, and who tend to see such matters as elements of universally available human patrimony.

Hallowell’s “Bear Ceremonialism” (1926), introduced Corwen and Kate to similar bear-focused rites which were or are performed around the arctic and subarctic north. This led them to explore scholarly texts about bear rituals “all across the North, from the Finns and Sami of Northern Europe, the Khanty Mansi and other Siberian tribes, to the Ainu of Japan and the Inuit of Hudson’s Bay” (Broch and Fletcher 2013, 1). They explored books like Lauri Honko, Senni Timonen and Michael Branch’s *Great Bear: A Thematic Anthology of Oral Poetry in the Finno-Ugrian Languages* (1993), and Juha Pentikäinen’s *Golden King of the Forest: The Lore of the Northern Bear* (2007). Being determined Finno-philic, they read translations from Finnish of the epic *Kalevala* and the folk poetry collection *Kanteletar*. Anthropologies of animism, particularly those that focus on hunting and foodways, were important e.g. Rane Willerslev’s *Soul Hunters* (2007). My own contribution to the “turn” to lived religion (Harvey 2013), contributed to further reflection on the value of thinking about food rites when seeking to understand not only “religion” but also human engagements with the larger than human world.

Among the results of drawing on such sources is the following statement of a mythic foundation for the Bear Feasts:

When we first came to the Northern forests Bear taught us to find food.  
When we starved in the depths of winter the flesh of the bear sustained us.

Teacher and Saviour, his corpse alarmingly man-like when stripped of its warm fur, mystery and taboo surrounded the animal whose name must not be spoken. A child of the Sky God, lowered from on high on a golden chain, he is guest of honour at his own funeral feast. With thanks and messages for his Father, his spirit is sent back to Heaven that he may return and feed us again in our need time. (Broch and Fletcher 2013, 1)

As well as serving to introduce the Feast tradition, the above statement also anticipates its central ceremony. My contention is that it contributes to the possibility of considering the Bear Feast movement to be related to *some* elements of what Johnson calls “indigenizing.” Again, it is not the “configuration, at least imaginatively or discursively, of a pure group performing traditional practices on its original homeland” (Johnson 2002, 312). that is the objective of this network. This is a self-consciously hybrid, improvisational and experimental practice. Rather, Bear Feast indigenizing is the appreciation, learning from and adaptation of “outsider signs, symbols and practices” to evolve “a culturally specific form that makes the outsider symbol “ours,” even traditional” (Johnson 2002, 312). This can now be illustrated.

### **Bear Feast outline**

As consummate performers and teachers, Corwen and Kate knew that ceremonies require communities. Their experiment required extension from their own practice into a shared experience. They inaugurated the first Bear Feast in 2008, attracting nearly sixty participants. The first Feast and those of the following eight years. was held at the Ancient Technology Centre ATC in southern England. This location offered accommodation in reconstructions of ancient buildings such as an Iron Age style roundhouse and a Viking era long-hall. The feast itself and some indoor rituals were held within a reconstruction of a vast Earthouse. From the outside this looks like a small hill or large mound with a monumental wooden entrance. It is based on large Iron Age structures from the Isle of Man as well as on henge monuments and roundhouses. The ATC say that the Earthouse has an immensely heavy roof of earth and this is supported by 21 oak trees, ash purlins and dozens of pole rafters. The bedrock chalk has been terraced inside to give tiered seating. Earthouse is a 200-seat theatre—lit by lamplight and fire-light (ATC 2017; including photographs).

The wider location, close to Cranborne Chase, enabled the purchase of venison from locally shot red deer along with other local produce. It is at the edge of a rural community and has limited light pollution and occasionally entirely clear dark night skies. These are significant contributions to the success of the first years of the Feast tradition.

In each year of the Feast at the ATC the number of participants remained relatively stable at between fifty and sixty people. These sixty were made up of returners and newcomers, many of the latter becoming returners in turn. For reasons beyond the control of the organizers or Bear Feast group, after eight years of annual midwinter events, it became impossible to host the Feast at the ATC. Subsequently, a number of Feasts were held in different locations in southern England and in Wales. More recently, Feasts have been organized in the Orkneys and elsewhere in the British Isles, usually in private homes, or in woodlands owned by participants. Necessarily they have involved smaller numbers of participants in each location but evidence a growing and spreading movement which is disseminating key ideas and practices among the wider Druid and Pagan movements. The Feasts themselves have a common ethos and similar performative structure. A “manual” with an example programme, invocations, songs and other ideas provide a coherence to the emerging tradition (Broch and Fletcher 2013). This is available to those who join the closed Facebook group, to participants in feasts and in response to enquiries.

Bear Feasts are evolving experiments, changing with venue, participants, weather, experience and other factors. When the Feasts have been held indoors or in smaller venues than the ATC, or over shorter periods, the pattern of the first few annual events has been adapted. The manual was never intended to provide a rigid template, but to enable the kind of tradition that is creatively riffed on and from. However, in the early years, the Feasts happened largely as follows using the present tense to aid the sense of movement and participation.

People begin to arrive at the venue on Friday afternoon and, after greeting other participants and familiarizing themselves with the place, begin to join in organizing things. They bring contributions of food and drink to the kitchen. They select and organize sleep places in the longhouse or roundhouse. They familiarize themselves with the location. They begin to adjust to the intensified atmosphere of a long-weekend ritual experiment. One vital element of this is a taboo on speaking the word “bear.” The taboo is rooted in the widespread avoidance practices performed by hunters: not only not naming their intended prey but also replacing words like “hunt” and “kill” with euphemisms like “walk in the woods” and ‘seduce.’ The taboo is frequently broken as it can be among Indigenous hunters. but becomes more carefully observed as the weekend ritual develops. Failure is met with mild and playful ridicule but the taboo has the serious purpose of intensifying participants’ attention and developing their efforts to treat this ritual as more than an

enchanting bonding between friends or a colourful romanticism. In addition, a list of alternative names e.g. “Honey paw.” introduces participants to various sources drawn on to shape the ritual and familiarizes them with elements of songs they will learn and perform in the central rituals.

In the evening, when everyone has arrived, people gather in a circle, around a fire this being midwinter and therefore wet or cold, or both. They introduce themselves before sharing a meal. This is less ritualized than the main Feast. Afterwards, some time is spent learning the Feast’s songs. Although participants are familiar with the broad aims and focus of the Feast, a brief reminder is offered. All of this ‘serves to bond the group together, so people can relax and feel safe and thus more able to appreciate the other parts of the weekend. The setting, firelight etc also help to add a special mood, though we are not really deeply in “ritual time” yet” (Broch and Fletcher 2013, 25).

While it is still dark on the Saturday morning, a gentle but insistent drumming encourages people to emerge from sleep and, if they are not there already, to gather in the Viking style longhouse. They have been encouraged to speak little and quietly, aiding a growing anticipation of an unusual and potentially profound experience. The following is chanted, usually as a call-and-answer between two people:

Where was Bruin born  
the honey-paw turned over?  
There Bruin was born  
the honey-paw turned over  
In the upper air  
upon the Great Bear’s shoulders  
Where was Bruin given birth  
the bear’s cub brought up?  
in a little woollen box  
in a little iron box.  
On the peg of a small cloud.  
How was he let down to earth?  
in a sling he was let down  
in a silver sling  
a golden cradle  
On a nameless, quite untouchable string.

Honko, Timonen and Branch 1993, 184.

Next, the bear hunters are led to the door and offered a blessing based on a Finno-Ugric poem. This includes preparation for the hunt “Forge a spear of magic metal.” and a protective charm “Hide thy claws within thy mittens,

Otso, O thou Forest-apple, That they may not harm the hunter.” The hunters lead the company out to find the bear, hidden in a “den” somewhere nearby. Time is taken over this play-acted hunt but eventually the hunters “find” the den and call to waken the bear from winter hibernation. It is an important feature of the diverse bear ceremonies and of broader hunting traditions that the hunted prey is actually a willing participant. Indeed, they are said to be generous donors of sustenance to weaker and needful humans. Adjusting to thinking differently about those we eat as gift-givers rather than victims. is one of the potential impacts of learning from Indigenous and other knowledges in this context.

The bear wakes. To state what is hinted at in this article’s title—though obvious in reality—as there are no wild bears in Britain the “bear” here is a human in costume. But so are the “hunters” making-believe or making-sense of their relations with those they eat deer or carrots if not actual bears. The bear frightens the hunters but they boldly approach again—this must not be an entirely casual death even if it is gifted. Finally, the bear runs on to one of the spears wielded by a hunter. The bear dies. In the twilight before dawn, with sunlight just touching surrounding wooded hills, the bear skin is removed. Now, at last, this is a real bear skin, originating from Russia over one hundred years ago. Thus, a bear is greeted by the assembled group, honoured with further songs and carried to a place of pride in the Earthhouse for the rest of the ceremonies. As the Bear Feast Manual says, “even though everyone knows this is [all] “pretend” the build up and the imagery is so powerful that you are moved in spite of yourself” (Broch and Fletcher 2013, 25–26).

The Earthhouse is made ready for the feast that will take place later that evening, with the bear skin. in pride of place as most honoured guest. The time between the pre-dawn “hunt” and the evening feast is made good use of. Food is prepared communally and with a heightened sense or awareness of the cost involved to those who gift lives to feed us. There is also time for some playfulness. The hunters for the following year are selected in a series of silly games which also function to keep people warm and, perhaps more seriously, to bond participants together. Laughter breaks down barriers so that people are easier together when it comes to the next round of ritualizing. So does cooking, stacking firewood in the Earthhouse and decorating the ritual space together. In some years, talks and meditations reinforce and renew understanding and commitment to these lifelong processes in which the giving and taking of lives will become more deliberately honoured. As the manual says, this phase of talks and meditations is the most transparent part of the ritual

with regards to its meaning as it is explicitly stated, but it is woven into the ritual as a whole and serves as part of the preparations for our sacred meal (Broch and Fletcher 2013).

That next round of ritualizing is the meal itself, shared in the Earthouse, and both initiated and accompanied by songs, invocations and expressions of gratitude e.g. “All praise, to Him We Never Name: Great Uncle Honey Paw’. Various diets are catered for, and all foods are treated as gifts. The animism of the participants is driven “deeply into the bones” to riff on the title of Ronald Grimes’ book (2000) about rites of passage. by the now inescapable knowledge of consuming other-than-human persons—or relations (Bird-David 2018).

Following the meal itself, the bear is sung back into the larger-than-human world. It is easy to describe what happens but hard to convey its power or impact. The manual says, “the bear skin is levitated with the power of our song up at least that’s how we describe it. out of the Earthouse roof” (Broch and Fletcher 2013, 26). Put differently, the bear skin in a basket is pulled up through the Earthouse’s smoke-hole. But the songs sung at this point enchant participants to see the bear rising on a golden chain and a silver chain, gladly ascending into the heavens. Processing out of the Earthouse, participants gaze if the sky is clear enough. at the Great Bear turning around the Pole Star, and either in hushed awe or with loud acclamations address further thanks to the bear who has taken the place of all food-persons in this Feast and now carries the participants’ gratitude and requests to the larger world. The rest of the evening is spent sharing songs, stories, jokes and conversation around the fires in the Earthouse or in the other buildings.

On the Sunday, participants exchange gifts having contributed via a kind of “secret Santa” system. Then the central fire of the Earthouse is extinguished. People begin to pack up, tidy up and leave. In the following days and months, they use email and social media to share memories, impressions, photographs and impacts of the weekend and of the process of reintegration into everyday life that began with the dousing of the fire and the journey home.

### **How is this indigenizing?**

Participants in the Bear Feast are not Indigenous in any sense that would justify their inclusion in UNPFII events or in the growing scholarly project of Indigenous Studies. While contemporary Paganism the broader context from which most Bear Feast participants come. might be the only religion the English have ever given the world as Ronald Hutton, professor of history at Bristol University, has often said, that type of indigeneity is hardly definitive

or generative. Pagans have, after all, asserted the universality of their deities—venerating the same deities whether they are in Britain or Australia. However, they have also adjusted their festive calendar to local seasonal conditions beyond their origin in northwest Europe. In this it is much like the versions of Christianity that have proclaimed the universality of one deity while adapting to diverse cultural contexts globally. Paganism is not purely “English” in any meaningful sense, being a hybrid formed from many sources and inspirations. In Johnson’s terms (2002), it has certainly “extended” not only geographically but also by diversifying and enculturating in new locations.

However, as capitalized, “Indigenous” can be defined as an explicit and emphasized relation to particular places, ancestries and cultural traditions (see Harvey 2000, 12; Cox 2007, 89; Tafjord 2013, 2017). There are some ways in which Paganism could be said to have indigenized. This is seen in the evolution of Paganism out of an older esoteric tradition. Wouter Hanegraaff has traced the processes by which esotericism was democratized and popularized—and even secularized—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That is, initiatory practices in which people sought self-knowledge and personal improvement became more accessible and less arcane. Ritual complexes were either simplified so that there were less stages or hierarchies. or more eclectic so that people were encouraged to draw on a larger array of resources. In one branch of such processes in the early to mid-twentieth century, esotericism was fused with notions of “fertility religion” and emphases on “nature veneration” to create Pagan witchcraft and other traditions as “nature religion.” Again, this is not yet indigenizing: celebrations of an imagined pristine “nature” were underpinned by a recognizably Modern distinction between human. culture and the nonhuman. “natural” world. However, in the late twentieth century Pagans began to localize and to lay greater stress on ancestral sites, watersheds and ecologies near their homes. In Britain, while large festivals continue to take place at Stonehenge, Avebury and similar places, a proliferation of smaller, more intimate gatherings have developed, including in urban and suburban places, breaking down the romanticism of the nature/culture distinction.

The “turn” to an animism of relationship with other-than-human persons trees, stones, hedgehogs and horses as much as deities and ancestors. and of relationship within larger-than-human place-communities is a more recent trend within Paganism. Perhaps this is an aspect of the kind of “becoming indigenous to place” that Kimmerer (2013, 205–213) struggles with in writing about how settlers in North America might still learn to live differently in those lands:

Maybe the task assigned to Second Man [those who have not yet indigenized] is to unlearn the module of kudzu [an invasive colonizing plant] and follow the teachings of White Man's Footstep (*Plantago major*), to strive to become naturalized to place, to throw off the mind-set of the immigrant. Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you will drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities (Kimmerer 2013, 214–145).

Certainly there are global themes here and they are part of the globalized flowering of Indigenous self-representation and self-determination. However, they are rooted deeply in lands, specific places, locations that are communities in which humans are just one species with gifts and goals.

The Bear Feast tradition exemplifies current trajectories within Pagan forms of indigenization in which belonging to places is emphasized. Indeed, it radicalizes these by encouraging experimentation with ways of enacting animist knowledge of what it means to live as humans among our other-than-human relations. While the term “animism” has been used for some time among Pagans, until recently its dominant meaning was a Tylorian “belief in spirits.” That is, it was used alongside or in contrast with claims to be theistic, polytheistic, atheistic or to identify with other kinds of theological position. The “new animism” mediated by books, talks or blogs, has altered the reference of the term. Many Pagans now use it to refer to efforts to renew respectful relationships with the larger-than-human world. It is part of a larger and ongoing evolution of vocabulary in which, for example, the representation of Paganism as a “nature religion” has bumped up against the understanding that humans and their cultures are as much a part of “nature” as other beings and their lifeways. David Abram's terms “more-than-human world” and “larger-than-human world” (Abram 1996) have gained currency. While Pagans seem always to have had a problem with the term “worship,” they have laid increasing stress on “respect for” the members of the larger-than-human community. These are elements of indigenizing as Pagan discourses and practices become more like those of Indigenous people. The Bear Feast is attractive to many participants precisely because it enables them to experience a ritual complex that develops this indigenizing animist trajectory.

Johnson's clarity about indigenization as processes by which “our” traditions are enriched by reliance on “outsider signs, symbols and practices” (Johnson 2002, 312). is at the heart of the Bear Feast experiment. Participants indigenize by deliberate and careful learning from Indigenous sources. These may

be mediated by scholarly and other texts concerned with understanding animism, hunting rites, ceremonial complexes, and protocols of gratitude. They may be shared directly by Indigenous people at festivals or in social media. They also suggest that Bruno Latour's assertion that "We have never been modern" (1993) needs nuancing. Indeed, Latour has made this provocative assertion more complex by continuing to rail against "Moderns" and their dangerous separatist ambitions—as if humans could really fail to be meshed with all other beings and processes (Latour 2013, 2018). Humans have continued to try to become. Moderns. but sometimes failure spurs people to greater efforts: when we do not fully act on the knowledge that climate catastrophe results from our lifestyle choices we renew our membership of the "Modern" club. However, when we do not fully separate "nature" from "culture" but name our cars, swear at our computers, or insist that we understand our companion animals, then we begin to resist Modernizing. To paraphrase Strathern (1988), we have always been *dividuals*, relational beings—always coming into being as we relate with diverse others.

The Bear Feast is an element of a challenge to Modernity. It celebrates human belonging among other species, as members of a community but also as links in food-chains—both as consumers and consumed. It honours those who we eat rather than treating them as having only limited rights e.g. to only limited suffering. It seeks to develop ways of respecting belonging and multi-species kinship by learning protocols and processes of communicating with and about our relations and acts of relating. In particular, it employs ritual in ways that are distinctly against the trend of Modernity. The ferment of early-Modernity's political and constitutional change that, not accidentally, re-made people into individual citizens owing respect to Nation State rulers and rules was also entangled with religious reformations that rejected ritualizing as meaningless. By placing ritual rather than preaching or writing, at the heart of what Pagans do, something radical had already happened. Pagans had made a post-Protestant, post-Reformation or, at last, post-Modern move. Nonetheless, an undertow often reclaimed ritualizing as a technique for increasing or expressing individual. self-knowledge. However, the Bear Feast goes further and encourages participants to ritualize not primarily to gain better self-knowledge but to re-animate their relations with others. In doing so, these Pagans are becoming more like Indigenous people in encouraging relational *dividuation*.

As Paul Johnson emphasizes, *indigenizing* is a process or project. The adoption and/or adaptation of ways of thinking and acting from "outside" can clash with local, accepted, normative, traditional or "indigenous" ways. This

is exemplified in moments in Bear Feast events in which some participants evidence nervousness or embarrassment about doing ritual. Five hundred years of broadly Protestant polemics against perceived Catholic ritualism make it hard to immerse totally in the playful as-if world of ritual. Ill-fitting jokes or overly self-conscious or individualistic behaviours indicate the impact of Modernizing even on these people who have elected to join an animistic ceremony. That, then, reveals the value of the “silly games” that intersperse more serious but still playful aspects of the event. Although Bear Feast participants are resistant to the seriousness of what Roberte Hamayon calls “God religion”, they are not all yet completely comfortable with the playfulness and indeterminacy of ‘shaman religion” Hamayon 2012. Games at Bear Feast have the effect not only of bonding participants and building a community sometimes glossed as “tribe.” but also of placing people in the subjunctive mood, in the “as if” realm in which dressed up actors and an old bearskin are the bear who feeds people even when there are no wild bears in Britain. Bear Feasts are ritual as defined by Ronald Grimes:

Ritual is the predication of identities and differences metaphors. so profoundly enacted that they suffuse the bone and blood, thereby generating a cosmos an oriented habitat. In rites we enact a momentary cosmos of metaphor (Grimes 2006, 156).

Each Bear Feast is a performance that invites the attention of the larger-than-human community so that thanks can be given for sustenance and other gifts. At its height, the ceremony exceeds metaphor: in a thoroughly un-Protestant manner, there *is* a bear in the hunt, the feast, the food and the sky. In a response to an earlier draft of this article Corwen wrote of the inspiration for the Bear Feast, “It also seemed significant somehow to celebrate the life of an animal rendered extinct through human activity, and the transubstantiation of deer into bear seems to work.” In the Bear Feast ritual encounter, participants become the kind of people whose every meal might reinforce and renew animistic relationality. This is the indigenizing of the British Bear Feast: the process of learning to become more respectful individuals within the larger-than-human world.

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