



\* On Images and Enactments \*

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## Of Holidays that Were Once Holy Days of Artful Expression Precipitating Mythical Status

### Enacting Modes of Knowing the More-Than-Ordinary Status of Concurrent Being & Becoming

Every culture specifies days in the annual cycle that are ‘non-ordinary.’ These days can be understood as ‘departures’ from ordinary or conventional contextings for identity and reality. Time is ‘set aside’ from the routine of ‘daily life’ with its typical activities, pragmatic concerns, and reflexive attitudes. Thus there arises some implicit opportunity to know self and world in less habitual ways. In so far as these ‘departures from the ordinary’ are directed toward attending a ‘more than socially defined world’ they can generate more ‘holy’ or holistic awareness. Rites and ritual enactments that occur on such days can be understood as involving attempts to shift epistemic modes of knowing toward more inclusive, thus mythical awareness. In a variety of ways, these efforts can generate both conceptual and experiential shifts in references for ‘how things really really are.’ Such a shift, if it is to precipitate engagement with the multiplicities of mythically dynamic status, necessarily involves some transgression of ordinary assumptions and socialized order.

Anthropological and psychological studies suggest that days of sacred or holy rites and rituals in archaic societies required such disruptions of ordinary status for their potency. ‘Access’ to the more-than-socially-definable phenomena of radically complex psyche and world evidently derives from both non-ordinary contexting and expression. These efforts to ‘restore’ awareness of the non-reductive manyness of the concurrent beings and becomings of self and world typically involve enactive gestures. An outline of the role artful enactment plays in ‘embodying’ dynamic diversity of mythical status, along

with some examples of historical references for it in traditional holy days. are offered here.

*Artful Displacements of Ordinary Status by Mythically Dynamic Enactment*

Artful expressions, by challenging or distorting ordinarily reductive and habitual ways of perceiving self and world, can shift modes of knowing and interpreting toward more pluralistic and inclusive qualities. This shift is effected by representational styles that precipitate experience of concurrent status or mythical dynamism. This term is used to indicate how formal expressions can ‘make manifest’ the ordinarily repressed interactivity of concurrent being’s radical complexity that displaces the dominance of reflexively reductive knowing. The metaphorically metamorphic qualities of artful expressions make more tangible the dynamic character of radical complexity by posing what can be termed mythical status or dynamism. Mythical status is constituted in gestures, stories, paintings, etc. that somehow precipitate awareness of concurrent being and becoming. It enables knowing by way of multiple, overlapping conditions and identities that are ordinarily ‘known separately’ or not at all. This quality of mythic knowing as ‘knowing through a multiplicity of statuses concurrently’ is a ‘psychical enactment’ that displaces the priority of ordinarily separate status. That ‘internal’ shift in knowing is precipitated by some ‘external’ act of representation or enactment.

As with much artful expression in modernist contexts, the style of expression associated with archaic cultural myths and rituals tends to transgresses or ‘defy’ ordinarily reductive, practically literalistic modes of knowing and understanding. Its combinations of ordinarily unlike or separate categories, such as human and animal (centaurs), its non-linear and metaphorical figurations of causation (magical event), and its overtly symbolic composition of associative meaning (the body and blood that become bread and wine in holy communion), are similar to the effects of even some abstract and overtly symbolic modern art.

Thus mythical representations and ritualized inductions of participation in the radically complex dynamical status of concurrent being and becoming necessarily involve the figurative characteristics of artful representation. When such representation is enacted in rites, rituals, and mythical performances, then the potency of this shift in ‘how we know’ is ‘made manifest’ in body and action, giving it psychical validity by way of embodied gesture. On the ‘special’ occasions of ‘holy’ days, when people take part in such enactments, the social collective is affirming that there can be another valid mode of knowing and understanding than that which predominates in more ordinary contexting. Artful expression becomes the primary mode for knowing self and world when enacted within a socially affirmed aura of essential importance. For such a context to be established, however, a society must somehow accept a significant disparity

between the more reductive modes of ordinary knowing and the mythically dynamic ones of ‘sacred’ or ‘mysterious’ knowing associated with myths and rituals. For the latter to have validity, it must actually be granted an equality or even superiority to ordinary status—at least for the duration of the ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’ context for knowing self and world.

### *From Artfully Mythical Holy Days to Ordinarily Indulgent Holidays*

Historically, a shift in the contexting for artful expression is notable in modern times. In more archaic or pre-modern cultures, the non-literalistic, more inclusive figuration of artful expression tended to be associated with spiritual, religious, mythical, and magical concerns. It has become more often associated with decorative and aesthetic expressions or fantasy-indulging entertainments. There were many days on the seasonal calendars of pre-modern cultures designated for emphasizing mythically artful expressions that precipitated participation in more radically inclusive states of being and knowing. The mythical, ritual, and magical modes of expression emphasized on those occasions constituted distinctive disruptions or displacements of more ordinary, socially structured identity, hierarchy, and reality.

In this regard those ‘extra-ordinary days’ were not simply ‘suspensions’ of the demands of typically pervasive social roles, work, and propriety. The ‘days off’ from the contexting of normative social life can be understood as ‘days on’ for participating in a more complex and inclusive dynamic of relationship to self, others, and nature or cosmos. Such ‘holy days’ of mythical dynamism tended to have certain continuities of theme and style within cultural groups, yet also to manifest considerable local variations. Across diverse cultures, an emphasis upon ‘altered states of consciousness’ induced artful expressions that disrupt normative assumptions about ‘how things are the way they are’ is a consistent element of these extra-ordinary occasions.

Under the pragmatically systematized influences of modernist mass social order, technological industrialization, and pervasive commercialization, artful representations have become, to a large extent, ‘aesthetic commodities’ or products made for sale (or promoting sales) rather than communally provocative expressions of mythically dynamic form. That shift tends to restrict the potency of more dynamically inclusive modes of knowing, along with the access these might provide to experiences of concurrent being’s radical complexities. These thus become subordinated to the dominance of socially ordered statuses for identity, reality, and meaningfulness. Thereby, ‘holy days’ that were once dedicated to inducing some experience of a more extra-ordinary sense of the awe and mystery of supra-social dynamical complexity are de-potentiated. Subsequently, they have become ‘holidays’ of rest and distraction that

indulge ordinary appetites as a way of relieving the stress of subordinating one's sense of self and world to the reductive social order.

Some examples of the historical backgrounds of artful expression and its mythical meanings for some contemporary holidays are provided here.

\*\*\*Further elaboration of these notions in Chapters Two, Seven, and Nine of **Manifesting the Many in the One**\*\*\*

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## Historical References for Mythical Enactment: Samhain and Yule Tide

Brief overviews of some specific origins of these two 'holy days' that have become contemporary holidays are offered here to illustrate how metaphorically metamorphic symbols and enactments were once serious concerns for engaging a 'sacred' experience of more-than-ordinary identity and reality. It is important to note that the terms sacred and holy are associated here not with religious belief but an epistemic and heuristic experience in consciousness of inclusive understanding—or validated knowing of the manyness in/as/of oneness inherent in the radical complexity of concurrent being and becoming.

The contemporary holiday known as Halloween in the United States has a history that traces primarily to Scottish and Irish traditions derived from ancient Celtic cultures. In general outline, this occasion once marked the end of the annual calendric cycle. As such it represented the reorientation of society to the coming of a new year. A central motif to this 'sacred' occasion is found in its references to a 'closeness of the other world.' The extra-ordinary realms of the dead and the ordinary one of the living were considered to be in close proximity at this time of the 'thinning of the veil' that usually separated them. Thus it was a time of artful representations and enactments regarding the participation of extra-ordinary (typically obscured) 'forces' in the ordinary world. Engagements with this prominent theme of mediating relations between the living and the dead exemplify how mythical representations of 'how things really really are' could become socially validated in the context of a 'holy day.'

Figuring such more-than-ordinarily-acknowledged 'interplay' between 'forces' or factors in the world involved the mythical statuses of spirits of the dead, faeries, gods, and goddesses. These suggest trans-morphic or hybridized forms of humanness and consciousness in both recognizably ordinary and extra-ordinary status. In such a manner of representation, memories of actual dead people, the ghost-like presences of

relatively unconscious aspects of the human psyche in ‘the mind,’ and the implicit, seemingly autonomous and intentional ‘forces of Nature’ are all given vivid expression. That formalization emphasizes, or makes more tangible, their potent role in creating human consciousness and the world in which it manifests. Self and society are thusly ‘brought into relationship’ with the diverse and radically interactive dynamics between ordinary sensings of identity and reality and the background complexity these tend to ignore. It can be said, then, that these fantastic engagements with an ‘other worldly status of existence’ are ultimately quite practical as they indicate and mediate the reductive limitations of ordinary status.

The historical references for what has become the “Holiday Season” of contemporary Western societies offers another example. More recently centered around the religious celebration of the birth of the Christian God/Man Jesus, the ‘holy days’ of late December have a historically preceding basis of concern with the Winter Solstice. This period of the year was once known as Yule Tide. Many rites and rituals associated with this aspect of the annual cycle in archaic cultures of Europe devoted attention to a sense of ending and beginning. Through the making of symbols and enactments referring to this theme people could actively ‘take part in’ the eternal cycle of death and renewal exemplified by the opposition of Summer and Winter. In some instances the existing social order was ‘inverted’ or disrupted for a day or more. Such enactment can emphasize the ultimately arbitrary hierarchies of social power and its subordination to the ‘forces of Nature’ beyond its control.

The point of concern in this writing is not that people necessarily believed in the mythical figures and concepts associated with such holy days literally, as ordinary facts, but rather that these provided them a valid context to engage and enact the mythical dynamism that those representations ‘make manifest.’ To ‘make gestures’ toward or about such radically non-ordinary entities and status as ‘the living dead’ or some ‘divine spirit of the New Year’ is to engage conscious in a radical departure from ordinary statuses for identity and reality. Psychologically speaking, a significant degree of seriousness about the validity, if not the ordinary literality, of those extra-ordinary gestures and representations seems necessary to precipitate participation in a mythical dynamism that re-presents concurrent being/becoming.

Obviously, there is a great temptation to assert that the myths, whose mode of representation is metaphorically metamorphic and symbolic, can be interpreted as ‘literal facts.’ In such a move reductive social order ‘claims’ the mythical status as its own. Such is the pervasive influence of more reductive knowing and understanding. However, granting validity to the potency of mythical representation without literalizing them seems to logically require some ambivalence about whether these are ‘actually real’ or ‘not real’ to ordinary perspective. If the radical dynamism that mythical

representations ‘make manifest’ is actual—is ‘of the radical complexity of psyche and Nature’—then in some sense myths must be ‘real.’

Some brief commentary on Samhain / Halloween and Yule Tide / Christmas as holy days / holidays are offered below. The intention of these remarks is to prompt consideration of how mythical enactments were once central to encountering and participating in the ‘sacrality of more-than-ordinary complexity.’



## From Samhain to Halloween Some Notes on the Extra-Ordinary Origins for 'The Night of Fake Fright'

The 31<sup>st</sup> of October, known as Halloween in American cultural context but historically associated with the name Samhain, has a long and varied history as the locus of an important period on the annual calendar. Some of those historical aspects survive in contemporary revivals of the Pagan religious traditions known as Wicca. Notions and practices associated with that history are mentioned here to indicate how such occasions were once engaged as serious alterations or even ruptures in the established dominance of ordinary socialized order, identity, and reality.

### **Samhain**

This name is said to indicate summer's end, or a feast associated with it that honored the Celtic new year, held on the full moon nearest the Autumnal equinox, and later on November 1 of the Romanized calendar. For many Celtic societies it evidently represented the time of year when the Goddess, who 'rules' Summer, trades center stage with the Horned God, dominant in Winter. In other interpretations it is depicted as the death of one god and birth of another.

Described as a celebration of Death in Life and a time to placate the dead with hospitality, it might have been the most solemn of Pagan festivals. Some date aspects of this ritual time to Greek and Egyptian versions. Some depictions indicate it was a day of reckoning, of paying debts and vengeance, a gathering in or counting, settling of quarrels with the living and the dead—thus the "trick or treat" tradition.

As the end and beginning of the yearly cycle, it was viewed as a time of rift in the laws of nature that allows for 'seeing through.' Ghosts and spirits (both the benign and the mischievous) were thought to enter the ordinary world more freely, and the living have more opportunity to 'cross over.' At some historical time, it may have been not one day but a two week 'season' — a 'time all Its own.' Contemporary Halloween traditions are mostly derived from Irish and Scottish traditions of Celtic origin. Faeries, human-like though immortal entities, were considered to be re particularly active at this

time and likely to trick or provoke people at this time. Such 'spirits' were not considered necessarily 'evil' and might even grant humans a boon.

The rise of Christian Religion in Europe eventually resulted in most Pagan rites, rituals, and beliefs being judged as sacrilegious or demonic. What had been a sacred or holy day to Celtic cultures was assimilated into the Christian religious calendar as a day to honor the lives of Christian Saints. Other Pagan holy days were 'overlaid' by Christian ones in this manner. However, popular cultural interest has preserved some of the references of the original Pagan festival. In Mexico, the Christianized holy day of All Saints became conflated with an indigenous one, results in a similarly part Christian, part Pagan inspired event known as Dia del Morte..

### **Dia Del Morte**

The Mexican "Day of The Dead," observed on November 2, combines indigenous Native American notions similar to the Celtic ones. Altars known as ofrendas are set with images, photos of the deceased, and food for the souls of the dead are invited to come to visit. Candles burn all night. Vigils are held in cemeteries. Marriages of a man to a woman's corpse, or skeleton woman, played by a man carried in a coffin, are held in public. The Spirits are invited to 'party.' Images of jolly skeletons proliferate. Music and singing are important and sometimes rowdy or 'jazzy.' This event seems to celebrate a sense of 'death in life' and 'life in death.'

### Metaphorically Metamorphic Figures of Witch, Ghoul, and Man in Black

Witches: The reference for this word are thought to reach back to words for 'female magician' and 'holy.' However, a negative connotation was not attached to this word until Christianization of Pagan cultures occurred. Prior to that the witch is was regarded as capable of extra-ordinary actions associated now with the term shaman. Her broomstick might have been a form of 'magic wand' or "shaman's horse" that carried her to 'the other world.' The pointed hat is said to draw power to her that she sends out from its flat brim to do her bidding. Black soot is thought to have related to flying ability. Witches, like shamans, were regarded as able to 'go up the chimney' or smoke hole to access the spirit world. Smoke from their chimneys 'goes against the wind.' Potions of various potent and toxic herbs supposedly were mixed that enabled their flying. The cult of witches as a positive personification survived underneath Christian dominance for centuries before ultimately succumbing to general demonization. The witches' Sabbath or holy gathering is thought to have been held at the four quarters of the year. These were times for feasting and revelry. Dances were supposedly performed in rings by couples back to back, arms linked, alternately carrying each other.

The Man In Black: The Bum, Hobo, Fool who wears old clothes, has soot-blackened skin, who once led the magical dance disguised as dog, goat, bull deer or cat. This general type was perhaps an 'inter-worldly' and thus metamorphic figure signified by the wearing of raggedy or askew clothing.

The Ghoul or Living Dead: The zombie, vampire, or living dead figure seems a more modern phenomena that appears to be an adaptation of the older sense of the presence of the dead who can 'cross over' into this world more readily on this occasion. Such visitation, once regarded as positive and to be honored, has taken on a fearsome and frightening aspects, probably because of the Christian tradition of regarding spirits or ghosts as demonic. However there is also the historical reference of trickster spirits or faeries abroad at this time that might figure in the more contemporary images of zombies and monsters as well. All these figures suggest a combination of ordinarily distinct categories

and traits: dead and living; humanly conscious but immortal, magically powerful 'other worldly entities' that are still susceptible to being 'tricked' by a clever human.

## RITUALS AND ENACTMENTS

Here is a sampling of activities and practices associated with Samhain and its more recent formulation as a neo-Wiccan holy day. These give a sense of enacting the extra-ordinary character of this 'time between years,' or 'of the meeting of the worlds of living and dead, matter and spirit.'

- \* *Bells*: tolling of bells to guide travelers to refuge, save them from faeries, cast protective spells. This is not a time to be alone in the woods.
- \* *Masks and costumes*: Invocations of Gods, Animals, Spirits and the dead. Masks may be made to be positioned around the gathering's circle and/or worn by dancers. They can help mediate the relations between living and dead.
- \* *Fire*: For Celts this was a Fire Festival similar to Beltane. Bonfires lit to welcome and warm, encourage sun to get through winter, guide travelers on this mysterious night, ward off dubious spirits.
- \* *Divinations*: A time when the veil between worlds of living and dead, past and present is thinnest and so a good time for divining the future: several persons fingers on an inverted Wine glass in a circular alphabet (ouiji board); Tarot readings; rune casting; dripping of candle wax into water to form images for interpretation, etc. Apple bobbing or snapping as a 'lottery for immortality' or luck in the coming year. An important time for dream interpretation. Looking into mirrors and other means of seeing the face or name of the new beloved/mate.
  
- \* A midnight invocation on by putting out food for spirits
- \* Wrong or ragged dressing to amuse the faeries, throw them off
- \* The choosing of a 'priest' and 'priestess,' perhaps by lottery, to be Goddess and Horned God for the ceremonies.
- \* An Altar or Ofrenda where objects and photos relative to the dead are placed with candles. Figures of celebrating skeletons, some edible, a popular motif.
- \* Dancing with unseen spirits that come to visit as well as spirits of animals eaten. Bidding animals 'merry meet, merry part and merry meet again.' Thanking them.
- \* The Feast of the Dead or The Dumb Supper: places set/served for the dead at table.
- \* Cakes and wine set out by the fire-side or in the cemetery for spirits
- \* Welcoming the dead into the assembled circle of the living through the 'Western Gate'
- \* Burning of indigo blue candles to symbolize attaining higher spiritual plane with the rune like a backwards carved Z on it that describes travel between the planes of the material and spiritual
- \* Speaking to the dead through devices or mediums
- \* Daubing the ashes of the Sabbath fire on one as protection
  - Processions of costumed people called "soulers" who walked singing through towns, stopped at houses to request alms for which they would say prayers for the dead. Bakers made soul cakes with currant decorations and 'saumas' or soul mass loaves, one of which was kept in the house all year for good luck. In some places 'soulers' were rowdy and begged for wine and beer. Some processions involved a man in a horse costume and another who officiated known as The White Mare.



"JUHL"

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

A Primer on the Mythical Practices Associated with  
the Winter Solstice, Sacred Trees, Yuletide  
and Christmas

## Origins of "The Holiday Season"

### What is "Yule?"

While in modern times this holiday is referred to primarily as Christmas, many aspects of it have its origins in other, non-Christian traditions. The word Yule is likely derived from the Danish "juhl" or Anglo-Saxon "hweal", both meaning wheel, as in the Wheel of The Year or the circular path of the Sun. Yuletide encompassed a time in the year when the 'End meets the Beginning' as the annual circle/cycle is completed and another one starts. Yule is the time of the Winter Solstice, when the sun is at its lowest position on the southern horizon (seen from the northern hemisphere) and the 'shortest day of the year' occurs. That means the day with the fewest hours of sunlight and longest dark. This is the point in the earth's orbit around the sun when we are farthest away from our source of heat and light.

After the Winter Solstice the Earth begins to shift on its axis in its solar orbit, tipping the northern hemisphere back toward the Sun again so the daylight hours grow longer. This part of the year has been important to most every culture located away from the equator (where the length of daylight hours does not change during the year). This 'extremity' of diminished sunlight offers a vivid moment for observing the 'more-than-ordinary' aspects of relationship to earth and cosmos. The myths and celebrations

associated with Yuletide (the last tide of the year, a “turning of the tides”) are many and complex.

## The Solstice In Pre-History: Telling Time Without Clocks

Archeological evidence indicates that humans began tracking the cycles of the Sun, Moon and stars as long ago as the Neolithic era (20 to 30,000 years ago). The rhythmic waxing and waning of the Moon in its 28 day cycle and the shifting arc of the Sun in its 365 day one are “natural clocks” that measure the coming and passing of the seasons. The Moon’s cycle also resonates in the human body via the monthly menstrual cycle of physically mature females. The Sun has often been regarded as all-important for bringing the abundance of Summer that made life possible in northern and southern latitudes. When all humans lived in deep connection with Nature, the rhythms of the year were important in everyone’s life. Festivals, rites, and rituals were planned around the Sun and Moon cycles. As a result there are two types of calendars, one Solar, like the Roman version used most pervasively today, and one Lunar, like that used in many Islamic and indigenous North American cultures. Early astronomical observations enabled these cycles to be used to time the seasons for hunting, migrating, planting and paying respect to the Earth, as well as our sources of light and warmth. The rituals that evolved around these phenomena served to provide humans with a sense of their participation in the universe and thus a place in it. In some cultures, there was concern that if people did not perform the appropriate ritual gestures then the Sun would not reappear each day, or after the Winter Solstice.

Nature-centered mythical references and rituals established a basis of primal cultures. Continuity of life, and meaning, tended to be experienced in gestural reciprocity with the revolving cycles, in the endless process of death and birth, rather than in a linear sense of time such as the modern world conceives. In this cyclic cosmology, the year’s cycle returns the world to the state of the original Chaos that came before the forces that order “life as we know it.” There was thus a sense of ‘primordial time,’ being a time before or ‘beyond’ the cyclical time of ‘orderly’ Nature. In the logic of this mythical perspective, the primordial time is the time of creation, the time of chaos out of which order is formed. As such, it does not occupy an historical position. Instead, primordial time is ‘always there,’ like another ‘dimension’ of being ‘alongside’ or all around the ordinary time of cyclical Nature. Thus, in so far as the annual cycle has a beginning and an end, there is a moment when it ‘returns to primordial time’ and then ‘begins again.’

Such a notion provided the basis for regarding the Winter Solstice as ‘when time stands still.’ As both End and Beginning, it constitutes a ‘timeless time’ when all order dissolves in the moment between the year that was and the year that will be. Yule is thus a time of ending and so of death, evidenced by how plants go dormant in the cold

weather. And yet, ‘at the same time,’ it is a time of the possibility of another cycle, of the resurrection of life in the returning spring. The power of these seasonal changes that so directly shaped life in archaic pre-modern contexts drew attention to how there was both a relentless order in the cycles of cosmos and Nature, yet also a chaotic unpredictability to the particulars of life within the world these established. The yearly cycle is consistent but weather, the numbers of animals and plants available for food, varied dramatically and unpredictably. In this view Nature is radically complex, both orderly and disorderly all at once. Sacred rituals that evolved around the Winter Solstice thus tended to assert some sense of being subject to and participating in how order is made out of and exists in relationship with disorder or chaos.

Solstice rituals often are understood to have been guided by shamans or persons who ‘played’ the role of some ‘more-than-human’ entity, acting as intermediaries between the material and spirit worlds, order and chaos, realms of ordinary causation and that of some more-than-ordinary intention or power. They led the community in attending to this annual transition to ‘pay respects’ to the ‘forces involved’ and to participate in the new beginning these engender. Those ancient enactments, held on ‘holy days’ dictated by the solar cycle, have become modern “holidays.”

### *Aspects of Historical Solstice Rites*

There are cultures that traditionally mark the end and beginning of the yearly cycle at other times than the Winter Solstice. For some cultures the year begins at the Spring or even Autumn Equinox, when the Sun is halfway between Winter and Summer solstices. Then the dark and light parts of the days are equal. But those that did associate the Winter Solstice with the beginning of the year often had traditions of reverence for the “dying and reborn” Sun. This notion seems to have led to many beliefs in a dying and reborn (or resurrected) divinity. This annually newborn divinity was an assurance that Spring would come, though the depth of Winter was yet to be endured after Winter Solstice. These annually renewed divinities were masculine, such as the Horned god who attended the Earth Mother goddess, dying or being “sacrificed” to her each year to be born anew, as well as ones with similar traits like the Greek Dionysus, Roman Mithras and Attis, and the Norse Baldor.

The Romans named the first month of the year January, after Janus, their god of doorways, portals between Here and There. Janus had two faces, one looking forward and one backward at the same time. This non-ordinary time of ending and beginning was felt to be rich with possibility for change and renewal. Our remnant of these rituals of dissolution and reassessment are modern “New Year’s resolutions.”

*The general pattern of these Solstice/New Year festivals had four parts:*

1. Mortification or undergoing austerities: restricting privileges, surrendering ordinary roles of power or reversing social and hierarchies roles.
2. Purification or exorcism: bad influences and habits in individuals and the community were expelled by fires, bell ringing, loud noises, cleaning with water or investing a “Scapegoat” with these unwanted aspects and then banishing it. This was done literally with a goat set free in the wilderness in one instance.
3. Invigoration and rejuvenation of energies: often by mock combats between personifications of Life and Death, the Seasons, Old Age and Youth, New God/King and Old God/King, Order and Chaos.
4. Jubilation with feasts, merriment, sacred unions and sexuality that reestablished the orderly bonds of Nature and human society.

*Some Examples:*

Akitu, the Winter Solstice festival on the ancient Babylonian calendar, is an example of such a historical festival. It was 12 days long and led by the ruling King as the Son and representative of the Divine.

Day 1. The social order is reversed, the high are the low and the city is plunged into symbolic anarchy representing the Chaos before “The Beginning.”

Day 4. The Story of Creation is recited, telling the struggle between Light and Dark with the divinity Marduk, creator of civilized order, contending with Tiamat, the ‘Dragon of Chaos.’

Day 5. The king is stripped of his insignia of office, struck on the cheek, weeps and must prostrate himself before being reinstated in his kingship.

Day 8. The King leads a procession out of the city to a special New Year House where he, as Marduk, ritually weds the High Priestess, representing the divine consort Sarpanitu. Feasting and celebration follow.

The Roman Saturnalia was a solstice festival dedicated to the divinity Saturn, Lord of Time and reflection, associated with the reflection and the ‘deeper reaches of the soul.’ The days leading to the solstice were filled with play, mocking authority and social hierarchy. Slaves and masters switched roles. A prankster pseudo-king was elected by lot. This period was a remembering of the “Golden Age” when all beings lived in peace with Nature, animals talked, a primordial time before there was war or private property or agriculture. Candles were burned to call back the sun and ward off evil influences.

Mithras, a Sun god, was worshiped in late Roman times on his birthday, December 25. The birthday of the Greek Dionysus was also celebrated on this date by some. December 25 was the date of the Winter Solstice in the old Roman calendar. A later

readjustment of that calendar to make it more accurate shifted the solstice to December 21, as we have it today.

### *Christmas as Successor to Solstice Rites:*

Many different traditions, beliefs and rituals have blended together over the last 2,000 years to create this rich, though now mostly unknown, Solstice heritage. The Christian celebration of Christmas is complemented and supported by these other traditions acknowledging death and rebirth and thus the 'eternal life of the Spirit.' Christ, as the Son of God, is a messenger of the divine with supernatural powers who brings light and hope to humanity just as the new Sun of the coming year was conceived to do. His birth heralds salvation, is attended by a special light or star, as well as animals and the 'kings of men on earth. The themes of ancient Solstice traditions shared by more recent Christmas ones have numerous particular expressions. Becoming more aware of these relations can make one more aware of the mythical dynamism once associated with this 'season of ending and beginning.'

## **Sacred Trees and Other Solstice Symbols**

### *The Trees of Life*

Trees appear to have been revered as holy since pre-history. This pervasive reverence for trees appears in many cultures in images that are collectively referred to as The Tree of Life. There is a great variety of representations of this notion, with trees that hold the sun, stars, animals and humans in their branches. There are World Trees which have their branches in the world we inhabit, reaching for or supporting the sun and heavens while their roots reach into the dark riches of the Earth or Underworld (unconscious) that feeds and supports ordinarily visible Nature and human consciousness. In some versions the trunk of the tree is considered to be the "Axis of the World," or the passage way between 'this' world and those above and below. The World Tree seems to hold everything 'up,' 'together,' or 'in place.'

In myths of the Garden of Eden there was a Tree of Knowledge and a Tree of Life (or Paradise Tree). In one version, when Adam and Eve ate the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge they were denied access to the Paradise Tree by an angel with a fiery sword, and then doomed to a life of toil as farmers. They were expelled from the changeless Golden Age into the realm of Death and Time

Trees are important elements in many tales of death and resurrection. In some stories the

Cross on which Christ is crucified is made from a tree whose seeds came from the Paradise Tree in Eden. Thus it is The True Cross, made from holy wood, wood that grew in the Divine realm. The Cross itself is a Tree of Life in the most elemental form, with its vertical aspect, its trunk, connecting Heaven and Earth, and its horizontal aspect signifying the linear direction of time in the material world. Thus Christ is crucified on this intersection where the mortal and immortal meet, where all mortals suffer to be reborn. The Cross/Tree is also a form of ‘ladder to god.’ Some early representations of the crucifixion actually show Christ hanging on a flowering tree—it is, after all, a death that promises ‘new life.’

Trees were variously regarded as sacred in pre-Roman European cultures, thus the cutting down of one in relation to a ritual was in essence a sacrificial action. The Yule or Solstice, and later Christmas tree is thus a form of ‘offering’ of something valuable to the ‘forces’ active at this time of ending and beginning.

### *Evergreens and Immortality*

Plants classed as “ever-green” offer a rather ‘natural’ symbol of the life that flows from one year, one cycle of ending and beginning, to another. In some old tales, the evergreen was one of the trees in the Garden of Eden, even that one from which Eve picked the Fruit of Knowledge. So “ravaged,” the tale tells that the tree’s leaves shriveled into narrow needles and will only fruit again after Judgment Day. Many cultures regarded the Evergreen as special and some regarded its cones as sacred fruits

Evergreen plants regarded as special include pines, firs, yew, holly, mistletoe, ivy, and rosemary (‘herb of the sun’). The cult of Attis in Roman times symbolized his annual rebirth by cutting down a fir or pine tree, wrapping it in white clothe as if it was a corpse, laying it in a tomb, then resurrecting it three days later. The word for holly in Irish, tinne, is judged close to the Cornish word glas-tin, meaning Sacred Tree. The prickly holly tree which fruits with red berries in winter is the tree of the Holly King in some Pagan traditions, said to be the death aspect of god that also brings new life. Greenery is a prominent element of many religious festivals and offerings. Christ was supposedly welcomed with green Palm fronds.

Evergreens and lights are associated in many Winter Solstice festivals. Light, stars, candles and fires are used to represent the Sun, purification and spirit. Thus it is important in mid-winter rites occurring in the ‘darkest part of the year.’ A special Yule Log was burned on Christmas Eve throughout the cultures of Old Europe with part of it kept to be burned the following year with its successor. There were and still are various Festivals of Lights. Candles were lit and offerings put out in Sacred Groves at Yuletide. During Advent in the Christian holy calendar a crown of candles is used, one being lit

on each succeeding Sunday approaching Christmas till all are alight. The Jewish Menorah, with its sequential lighting of candles, appears to be another relation of light and spirit—as does the modern Christmas tree.

### *The Yule or Christmas Tree*

So-called Miracle or Paradise plays were performed in Medieval Europe on the day before Christmas, which was Adam and Eve Day. An evergreen tree hung with apples was the principle prop for these performances. In some cases there were two trees, The Tree of Life and The Tree of Knowledge, at others only one representing both aspects: The Paradise Tree. When the plays were performed inside the church the tree was surrounded by candles and the action took place inside the ring of light. Ordinary local persons became the extra-ordinary, archetypal figures Adam, Eve and the Serpent.

A Yule Tree in other traditions was a living tree, planted in a tub, and brought indoors during the Yuletide celebrations. This living Yule Tree was not necessarily decorated, being in itself a symbol of eternal life in winter at the end of the year's cycle. The German name for the Christmas/Yule tree is Tannenbaum, meaning holy tree, tannen being derived from terms for the oak tree, which was often considered sacred.

Eventually the various traditions of using trees around the solstice blended to become the Christmas tree of the last 150 years. An early record of a decorated Christmas tree resembling the contemporary one comes from Latvia. A record exists of an evergreen decked out in artificial flowers that was taken to the market place, danced around and then burned in 1510. This event suggests a sort of combination of the Paradise Tree and the Yule Log traditions.

## Tree Ornaments

In 2000 B.C.E. branches decorated with ribbons were carried in processions honoring gods and goddesses of fertility and life in Mesopotamia. Romans decorated trees with masks and artificial flowers in honor of Bacchus. The apples that adorned the evergreen in the Adam and Eve plays have evolved into a myriad of “fruits” on the Solstice/Christmas evergreen. Birds, angels, flowers of spring, colorful spheres and stars (originally made of paper, wax and pastry) came to hang on this version of a Life Tree. Since the Victorian era ornaments have taken forms from nature, imagination and even the industrial world. The Christmas/Yule tree is a veritable cornucopia of life placed in the center of domestic and public places. It often presides over a wealth of gifts, which seem to symbolize the ‘gift of new life or another year.’

The Yuletide Wreath is another ancient symbol of the Wheel of the Year. The wreath is often made of various evergreen boughs and leaves, accented with winter berries, red ribbons and birds. Traditionally hung on or over a door it assures the visitor of hospitality. The wreath is a portal, passageway into the non-ordinary time of the Other World of these festivals.

## **Some Yuletide and Christmas Rituals**

Christmas, like other Solstice celebrations, is sometimes experienced as a moment of an otherworldly or primordial Golden Age. In Serbia it was once thought that the world was 'grafted on to Paradise' at midnight on Christmas Eve. In Breton, people felt that animals could speak on Christmas. Many rituals and ceremonies associated with Yuletide serve the practical purpose of assuring good productivity of the land, plants and animals in the coming year.

Wassailing involved a ritual of anointing apple trees with apple cider while Morris Troupes, who performed during this season, mimed the growth of apples to encourage the trees for yet another year of creative production.

Santa Claus. "Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse . . . " What could bring on such a spell that stills the entire house, indeed, by implication, the world? This poem suggests the coming of sacred time, of some event that overwhelms all normal, daily life. The modern Santa Claus is a figure with roots in many cultures. He associates with the flying messengers from the northern spirit world in some shamanic traditions, and the Greek god Kronos, lord of time and king of the world in the Golden Age who lived at the North Pole, and also the Turkish St. Nicholas who was remembered for his generosity. There was the Dutch Sinter Klaas, the German Knecht Ruprecht who gave children that knew their prayers sweets, Kriss Kringle, Old Nick -- which is a name for Woton, an Anglo/Saxon god similar to the Celtic Holly King. Variations of a Santa Claus figure come in different clothes and colors in different countries, but is typically an old man with the long white beard of age and wisdom, often with holly in his hair and mysterious powers -- putting his finger to his nose he can magically give gifts as he flies above us in a sleigh like the solar chariot of the Sun God, pulled by reindeer which suggest the Horned God of Celtic tradition. He is a messenger from The Other World, dropping down the chimney as no mortal could, visiting without ever being seen, knowing our inner hearts and secret deeds. Not even the mouse knows when he comes.

The 12 Days of Christmas or Yule Feast once commenced on the night of the Solstice and ended on January 1 when the Sun was said to first appear to move northward along the horizon and the daylight hours to lengthen. The Yule Log was once a hard chunk of

oak or ash root that could burn continuously for 12 days. Special foods and feasting are pervasive elements to these festivities.

## The New Year

Celebrations and invocations of the New Year often closed the Solstice rites. The Old Year was seen exiting as an Old Man with the scythe of death in his hands (perhaps a version of the Holly King) while the Child of The New Year appears at this “witching hour” on the 12th day after the Solstice.

Hogamy was a celebration of New Years Eve, that time out of time, the moment in between the worlds, which was regarded with awe by some. It involved a practice of divination to look into the coming year. This in-between time was seriously thought to be a good position from which to see into the future, and even, perhaps, to influence it. Our contemporary revelry holds little of this intensity.

### **Mythic and Ritual Gesture in Contemporary Context**

These brief notes on historical references for the modern “holiday season” bracketed by Christmas and New Year’s Day celebrations are offered to prompt reflection upon how mythical representations and actions were once the primary focus of this ‘time of endings and beginnings.’ For many or even most contemporary people, the traditions that originated these particular myths and rituals are no longer part of cultural life. Even so, it is quite possible to deliberately make such gestures for the purpose of enacting the metaphorically metamorphic style of mythic representation, and thereby participating somewhat overtly in the radical complexity of concurrent being/becoming, Where motive for so doing once came from traditional beliefs, it can no derive from psychological and philosophical notions about a need to enact the interplay of ordinarily reductive and extra-ordinarily inclusive modes of knowing and understanding. Such ritualized activities have a validity derived from a need for epistemic and heuristic complexity that can temper the human tendency to know self, other, and world in reductively simplistic terms.

### **Adapting Old Rites, Images and Ceremonies -- Evolving New**

Many rituals, meanings and images from the various historical traditions that are a part of the Christmas / Yule holy days can be ‘revived’ from the perspective of epistemic and heuristic diversification. Cultural expressions are rarely unchanged over long periods, but rather tend to be continually evolving. There is no one pure form or interpretation of a myth or story, a ritual action or celebration—that would be reductive

and limit the possibilities of mythical dynamism. Even when ritual actions retain the same procedures, the meanings associated with those can change, it can lose vitality and gain it back when experienced in different perspectives. Reading about the many ways rituals have been performed in the past or in other cultures than one's own can be exciting. But shifting one's own epistemic modes for knowing and heuristic models for interpreting meaning seems to require 'active investment' in the making of mythically dynamic gestures. Thus it seems essential that people continue to create and enact their own versions. It could well be said that this is the essential challenge of our cultural time when so much expression is 'done for us' by professionals and those whose main motive is to manipulate consumptive appetites and product preferences. Mythically dynamic cultural life is not a 'spectator sport.'

## Approaching the Extra-Ordinary Associations of Solstice and the New Year

The Solstice, Summer or Winter, as well as the Equinoxes, are occasions to attend the cycles of Nature and Life. Breaking one's normal habits on such days, deliberately seeking a non-ordinary experience of time and place creates openings for new and neglected feelings. There are many external actions that can stimulate more complex awareness of self, others, and world. There are two general aspects to effectively shifting habits of knowing and interpreting toward more inclusive modes. One is to 'do differently' or enact overly mythical representations. The other essential aspect is to consciously establish the purpose of 'seeing, knowing, and understanding' in terms of concurrency's radical complexity. Doing so requires mythical references, but those representations also require a context of validation. In the absence of religious and spiritual traditions, that validity can be granted through asserting a logical basis for the coexistence of exclusively singular and inclusively plural statuses of existence.

'Doing differently' or enacting mythically extra-ordinary gestures can derive from reflection upon any number of more ordinary, habitual aspects of behavior, thought, and feeling. What are the habits in one's life that give the illusion of security, of independence from Nature and Others? How can those be altered to shift one's schedule, where and how thoughts are concentrated during the day, so as to stimulate experience of what is normally passed over or around? What expressive actions or gestures might one make in response to what is not ordinarily acknowledged? Various rather simple questions can provide such opportunities. When last did one deliberately observe Dawn or Sunset? Can one remember the silence in natural or wild settings? When did one last visit a place considered sacred by a culture or yourself? What is the experience of aloneness like when deliberately sought out? How could one "be" with friends or family that would expose feelings ordinarily neglected because of their exasperating complexities?

Holidays are not holy days, in the view presented here, simply because a religious tradition declares them so. Rather, these ‘times out of time’ become ‘holy’ in so far as there are experiences of some extra-ordinary radical complexity. Rather than being opportunities to briefly ignore or forget about ordinary life, there arises a potential to focus on the mysterious, mostly concealed feelings, desires, thoughts, and external phenomena that swell and roll beneath ordinarily calm, controlled, confident surfaces. Exploring neglected values and meanings requires non-ordinary stimulus. It needs the language of gestures and images and sounds that are difficult to validate in ordinarily practical logic.

Attending to the ‘openings’ of the Winter Solstice in ways that provoke extra-ordinary awareness and understanding involves disruption. One can go without electricity, appliances or heat for a day, using only candles for light; spend extended hours in the dark; stay awake all night, observe wild animals in their natural habitats; honor darkness as the region of the unknown, the unconscious, the ultimate source; create and perform gestures around such ideas; give prayers or offerings of food, possessions, words, or music to what ever ‘powers’ provoke some feeling of the radical complexity of ‘things as they really really are.’

Perhaps the most essential element to shifting modes of knowing and understanding is taking a risk, breaking away from habitual contexts of comfort, patterns of thought, perception, and feeling. There is no formula for ‘entering mythical status’ in that it is not a ‘fixed mode of being.’ But it does typically involve some artful making or gesturing to render its qualities tangible. Engaging in such non-reductive expressive/experiential effort can be promoted by group intentions to ‘depart from the ordinary.’ Drumming, singing, dancing and playing cooperative games can break habitual attitudes of restraint, competition, and anxiety over wealth, health, social position, relational status, and safety. Reading favorite poetry or writers on myths, traditions and rituals often enriches the interactive complexity of gatherings. Connections with others, as in a circle holding hands or when dancing or singing typically disrupts ordinary attitudes. In this sense, ‘being uncomfortable’ with one’s self or others can be essential to shift in epistemic and heuristic modes for knowing and understanding.

Reliance upon traditional cultural and religious traditions to order the gestures of a ‘holy day’ can actually limit the potential for significant engagement with extra-ordinary status and concurrency’s multiplicities. If the intention for artful expressions of mythical representation is to ‘experience absolute peace and unity’ then its dynamism will be obscured. Many a religious dogma is reductively singular in attempting to ‘define the truth’ of existence.

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