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World Druidry: Seasonal Festivals in a Globalizing Tradition

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A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Mount Haemus...

I first proposed this Mt. Haemus lecture in April of 2018. My plan was to conduct a survey "to explore the ways in which Druidry, as a globalizing path of nature spirituality, has evolved as it spread beyond the traditionally Celtic lands of its origin and took root in other countries and cultures of the world." The survey would also seek "the spiritual common core of contemporary World Druidry that is able to transcend local culture." This I have done; but I never dreamed that my simple questions, tossed out into the world like so many pebbles, would start an avalanche.

When I set out to ask the Druids of the world about their spiritual beliefs and practices, I expected no more than perhaps 60 to 100 responses to such a lengthy questionnaire (189 items, organized into 42 sets of questions, including 18 open-ended/essay questions, probing into: Druids' physical, social, and cultural environments; their social and cultural identities; their theological beliefs, ritual practices, and celebrated holidays; and the factors which had influenced their development as Druids). If I was lucky, I thought I might receive 10-12 responses each from several different countries, to allow for some analysis of international variations. In the end, over 1000 Druids requested copies of the survey, and 725 Druids completed it. And they wrote reams. I was simply buried in data — both vast quantities of numeric data and 1500 pages worth of first-person narratives about the theological beliefs and religious life experiences of 725 living Druids from all over the world.

Never again shall I underestimate the need for members of a new religious movement to tell their stories to a sympathetic audience. Neither shall I underestimate their desire to understand themselves, and the others of their religious tradition. Honoring the depths of their reflections, and the hours these Druids must have spent to articulate their stories, meant I owed it to them to conduct a thorough analysis of the entire data-set, and to present the full findings of that analysis, using as many of their own words as possible. That work took me three full years, and resulted in a 336-paged book, which now bears the title originally proposed for this paper, "World Druidry: A Globalizing Path of Nature Spirituality."

It is not possible for a single paper to do justice to even a fraction of the material that is presented there, and so I must limit the scope of what I present here, today. In this space, I shall discuss how world Druids celebrate "Seasonal Festivals in a Globalizing Tradition."

Abstract

Druidry, as a contemporary, nature-based, new religious movement, has been growing and

spreading rapidly since the early 1990s. Druids now reside in 34 countries, across six continents, and inhabit 17 unique biomes, in addition to the mistletoe and oak filled temperate forests depicted in history and fantasy. As a nature-reverent tradition with high holidays based upon a cycle of seasonal celebrations, this begs the question: How can Druidry maintain a spiritual common core across so many, diverse ecological contexts? This paper explores the pertinent data from the *World Druidry Survey of 2018-2020* — the first, large-scale global effort to collect, interpret, and learn from the stories of practicing Druids all over the world — to assess the ways in which Druid seasonal celebrations diversify, and to identify the universal themes in Druid festivals and celebrations, which serve to identify the Druids of the world as part of a coherent religious tradition.

The Traditional Druid Wheel of the Year

According to the traditions of Neopaganism in general[1], and contemporary Druidry in specific[2,3], there are eight seasonal festivals each year, with one festival occurring every 6-7 weeks. This *Wheel of the Year* is generally portrayed as a circle with eight spokes. One set of crossing spokes points to the solstices and equinoxes of the solar year. A second set of crossing spokes points to the cross-quarter celebrations, which coincide with key moments in the agricultural year.

The Wheel of the Year begins with Samhain (c. Nov. 1st), is celebrated at the time the first hard frost of the year sends flora and fauna into winter hibernation. It is traditionally a time to honor the dead, our ancestors of blood, spirit, and place. The Winter Solstice (c. Dec. 21st) celebrates the rebirth of the Sun, with rituals of kindling light in the darkness, such as bonfires, candle-light vigils, and singing up the Sun, at dawn. Imbolc (c. Feb. 1st) is associated with snowdrops, the very first flowers of the year, and the birth of new lambs. It focuses on spiritual renewal, and on kindling creative fire for new works in the year to come. Vernal Equinox (c. Mar. 21st) marks the start of spring. It is a moment of balance, when daylight triumphs over darkness. Symbols of the season include eggs and rabbits, and the first green shoots, and Druids sow seeds, both literal and metaphorical. Beltane (c. May 1st) celebrates the rapid re-greening of the land, when hawthorns and apple trees are in bloom. There are Morris and Maypole dances, and Druids celebrate life, love, and passion, and vibrant new growth. At Summer Solstice (c. Jun. 21st) they celebrate the peak power of the Sun, a time of warmth and abundant flowers, herb harvests, and ripening berries. Celebrations include bonfires and celebratory feasts. Lughnasadh (c. Aug. 1st) celebrates the start of the grain harvest. It is a time for bread baking and cider making, when Druids begin to harvest the fruits of their year's labors. The Autumnal Equinox (c. Sep. 21st) marks the start of fall, when fruit and nut trees offer up their bounty, leaves take on their autumn colors, and then begin to drop. It is a time of thanksgiving, and a time to prepare for winter, which arrives with the return of Samhain.

These festival descriptions will be familiar to most practicing Druids. Rituals appropriate to each are taught by all of the Druidry teaching orders. They appear in most how-to books about Druidry. However, according to the results of the *World Druidry Survey*,[4] only 47% of world Druids actually celebrate these festivals; 26% celebrate only a subset of them; and the

remaining 27% of world Druids do not celebrate any of them. The question is: Why?

The World Druidry Survey

This question would have been impossible to ask, let alone answer, before the results of the *World Druidry Survey* were in hand. Lacking a large, and truly representative dataset, earlier descriptions of contemporary Druid seasonal festivals were, of necessity, based upon limited data, and often biased by ease of contact, or local, Druid group affiliation. They may have accurately described the beliefs and practices of the subset of Druids who lived in a certain region, or attended a particular gathering; however, 63% of practicing Druids have never attended a public ritual or gathering.[5] Furthermore, a standardized set of seasonal celebrations, based on the seasonal cycles of Britain, was likely to vary in utility to Druids residing in other ecological contexts. Painting a clear picture of both the global variations and the universal themes to be found in Druid celebrations of the Wheel of the Year, required better data.

The *World Druidry Survey* was developed as a convergent, mixed-methods research design.[6] This means that the research project included both qualitative (story-based) and quantitative (things you can count) research strands, the data-gathering for which was pursued simultaneously. Data gathering for the project was completed by way of a long-form questionnaire designed as a hybrid of typical, categorical (check-box and rating scale) survey-style questions, interspersed with open-ended, essay-style questions of a kind more typically associated with interview research.

The benefit of using this kind of mixed-methods approach is that one is able to gather data that allows for both breadth and depth in analysis, in a relatively short span of time, and within a very limited budget. The categorical data allows for objective measurement and statistical analysis of demographic distributions, as well as the prevalence and/or strength of beliefs and behaviors that might be expected of a population. The open-ended/essay questions allow for deep exploration of participant motives, religious experiences, and individual variations in religious belief and practice. In addition, simultaneous collection of two types of correlated data allows for triangulation within each participant's responses, to verify and clarify meanings, and to check for completeness within a participant's responses.

In addition to general research design considerations, it was important to consider potential biases caused by my status as a participant-researcher in the project, and to ensure that data-gathering, analysis, and reporting were completed in a manner that was credible, valid, transparent, and useful.[7] In order to make any credible claims about how Druidic beliefs and practices vary, and what they have in common, it was necessary to target as broad and varied a population of Druids as was possible, given high levels of uncertainty regarding the overall number of Druids on the planet, and their geographic distribution. This meant that a diverse group of Druids in leadership positions would be needed as advisors to the project.

Project advisors for the *World Druidry Survey* included Geoff Boswell and Aurora Stone, Trustees of The Druid Network, Gordon Cooper, Grand Archdruid of The Ancient Order of Druids in America (emeritus), Philip Carr-Gomm, Chosen Chief of The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids (emeritus), Philip Shallcrass and the Circle of elders of The British Druid

Order, Rev. Jean Pagano, Archdruid of Ár nDraíocht Féin, Malcolm Brown, of the newly founded Isle of Wight Order of Druids, and several members of the World Fellowship of Druids — scattered about the globe. They provided the necessary feedback to ensure that the survey questions were unbiased by my own, narrow experience of Druidry, and formulated in a manner that would be equally welcoming and inclusive of many diverse approaches to Druidry. They helped me locate and contact Druid groups and solitary Druids in different regions of the world, and encouraged participation among the Druids of their various communities.

Druids whom I had never met worked heartily on behalf of the *World Druidry Survey*, spreading the word and encouraging participation. The survey announcement was posted and re-posted on Pagan and Druid social media accounts. It was published in magazines, such as *Dryade*, and *The Wild Hunt*. It was discussed on Druid internet forums, and at private Druid gatherings, at which stacks of paper questionnaires were distributed to attendees.

The questionnaire itself was made available in six languages (English, Portuguese, Spanish, French, German, and Dutch/Flemish), and in multiple formats (paper, PDF-forms[8], and via SurveyMonkey web interface), so that Druids around the world could read and respond to the questions in the language and format with which they felt most comfortable. All survey questions were phrased in a neutral manner. Closed-ended questions included options for, "none of the above," and, "other (please specify): ___," with spaces provided for participants to add choices that I had failed to include, and to answer questions that I had failed to ask. In every decision pertaining to wording and tone, my goal was to encourage all Druids, of all types and affiliations, to participate in the survey and share their stories. The key was to demonstrate that everyone's personal experiences and perspectives were valued, and that there was no "right/wrong", or "better/worse" answer to any question. Care was taken to protect the privacy and safety of all participants, as well, and to keep all survey data secure.[9]

The response to the *World Druidry Survey* was overwhelming. Complete responses were submitted by 725 Druids, hailing from 34 nations, across six continents, and representing 147 Druid groups, along with 131 unaffiliated, solitary practitioners. The response distributions were diverse along lines of age, gender, ethnic identity, level of experience with Druidry, and cultural and ecological context of practice. There was more than enough data to allow for the use of robust, mixed-methods analysis tools to paint a vivid picture of the modern religious tradition that is World Druidry.

Responses to all open-ended questions were coded for conceptual content according to established best practices[10], with code words or short phrases used to identify both anticipated categories and emergent themes. Coded excerpts from Druids' narrative responses were then sorted into response categories, which were analyzed and reported using frequency counts for each code, along with thick descriptions, illustrated with quotations pulled from among the relevant responses. This method of reporting allows readers to decide the extent to which they agree or disagree with my interpretation of the qualitative data.

When analyzing cross-tabulated codes and demographic data, to check for the statistical significance, if any, of observed, qualitative variations in sub-group practices and beliefs, I

used chi-squared tests of independence[11]. For this study, I chose $p \leq 0.01$ as my threshold for statistical significance, which means: if I discuss a difference between Druid subgroups, I am at least 99% sure that the apparent difference is due to something real, and is worthy of discussion.

As we delve into the survey data most pertinent to Druid seasonal celebrations, it is important to bear in mind that the results I present here — surprising as they may be — are not based upon my personal opinions or theories, but on a rigorous analysis of survey data. I am but a messenger, presenting the thoughts, opinions, and religious practices reported by the Druids of the world.

Seasons in a Globalizing Tradition

Let us return now to that troubling question: Why do so few Druids celebrate the traditional festivals of the Wheel of the Year?

The "traditional" Druid Wheel of the Year is based upon the seasonal cycles of nature, as manifest in the British Islands and Ireland. As Druidry spreads to distant lands — especially to those characterized by ecological biomes as varied as the deserts of Australia and the American Southwest, or the humid sub-topical wetlands of Florida, or the tropical rain forests of Brazil, or the temperate rain forests of the Pacific Northwest, the agricultural symbolism of the traditional wheel loses its relevance, entirely. Even within Britain itself, there can be significant variations in the timing of seasonal changes.

For a few Druids (~1%), adherence to tradition mattered more than a connection to the land, sea, and sky of the region in which they lived. However, this was far from the norm. Local variations in the Wheel of the Year turn out to be quite common among the Druids of the world. Some variations involve simply shifting the timing of festivals to better align with local seasons. This is frequently done when the four seasons arrive somewhat earlier or later than tradition dictates. In such cases, Druids describe a process of watching for particular seasonal "firsts," and celebrating them upon their arrival, for example:

> *"I celebrate weather-related firsts. By that I mean the First Thunder of Spring, First Buds, First Mud (after frozen ground), First Turn of the leaves, First Frost, First Snow... that sort of thing. I don't think my symbolism is particularly novel — growth, change, letting go... birth, death, rebirth at various levels."*

> *"Less so particular days like Beltane, but more marking of seasonal changes - time of snowdrops, time of bluebells, etc. Also, birds - time when the lapwings return to the moors is a particular one."*

> *"[I] prefer to live and work more closely attuned to my immediate environment. For example, I had a small thanksgiving ceremony for Lughnasadh on the actual date, but my real harvest only occurred at the end of March as I gathered in the last of my tomatoes, beans and pumpkins. I had an impromptu thanksgiving ceremony in my*

vegetable garden."

In many cases, simply changing the timing of celebrations proved inadequate. When either the physical or cultural environment in which a Druid practiced was sufficiently different from the lands in which the modern traditions of Druidry were born, Druids reported adding, subtracting, or entirely reinterpreting the celebrations of their Wheels of the Year, *wildcrafting* their holidays from their relationship, with and connection to Nature.[12]

Celebrating Cycles of Life, in Nature

The majority of world Druids (76%) use the concept of the Wheel of the Year as a gentle, cyclical reminder to go outside and connect with nature. It is only this act of nature connection that brings real meaning to the festivals of their Wheels of the Year, however formally or informally they choose to celebrate them — as one English Druid concisely explained:

> *"I am not sure if the festivals have specific spiritual meaning to me. Rather, they mark the passage of time through the seasons and through life. They are how I connect with the Natural World and recognise I am a part of it. I am a part of the spirituality that is Nature."*

The act of nature connection either reinforces and enriches the symbolism of the traditional Wheel of the Year, or encourages wildcrafting of observances, rituals, and celebrations.[13] If we use the term *wildcrafting* to denote both ritual wildcrafting in foreign (i.e. non-British/Irish) ecologies, and the process of observing and verifying the extent to which Druid ritual and festival traditions are reinforced by the local ecologies of the traditional lands of the ancient Celts, then survey data indicate that 52% of world Druids wildcraft their Wheel of the Year celebrations, rather than relying on pre-scripted rituals.

For Druids resident in the British Islands and Ireland, where the traditions of modern Druidry were originally developed, this wildcrafting often takes the form of more deeply connecting with physical landmarks (hills, wells, standing stones, or henges with long tradition), or the physical manifestation of the traditional seasons, which are actually a living part of these lands. Wildcrafting here is also supported by local cultural traditions and festivals, which similarly derive from the local landscape, as Druids described:

> *"I tend to celebrate the traditional Wheel of the Year, as it was developed here in the UK and matches the climate pretty well (although climate change is making some festivals like Imbolc come earlier than the 'calendar date'). I celebrated the following holidays: Imbolc, when the first snowdrops appear; Spring Equinox; Beltane, when the hawthorn is in blossom; Summer Solstice; Lammas, when the wheat is being harvested; Autumn Equinox; Samhain, when the first frost appears; Winter Solstice/Yule. For each of these I did a solitary Druid ritual except Lammas where I was at a Pagan camp and did a group ritual. I also tend to cook seasonal food and*

make time to go walking and observe what nature is doing around me. Where possible, I try to celebrate by natural signs [and] *not* [by] *calendar dates. The holidays for me represent the cycle of nature, and by celebrating them I am bringing myself into greater attunement with nature."*

"Well... West coast of Ireland, what to say more?... Wet, windy and misty most of the year. A perfect atmosphere to connect to the true Celtic spirit and to the magic of the elements. We live on a peninsula which contains 4,000 standing stones, forts and mounds. It is a fabulous ground for the revival and practice of the old ways. The land is very powerful and its beauty breathtaking. We live in total tuning with Nature. For instance, we celebrate Bealtaine when the Hawthorns blossom, the Winter Solstice when the sun rolls down the hill and sets between a row of standing stones on a particular hill, or Imbolc when snow drops and lambs make their appearance."

"[I] *try to go along with as many local folk customs as possible, such as the Pace Egg in spring and the Rushbearing in summer. These holidays are primarily observing seasonal changes in the natural environment of my home, which I find helps me to live in a healthier rhythm with the changing length of the day."*

For Druids resident in other countries and cultures of the world, these reinforcing cultural and ecological elements are absent. The cognitive dissonance caused by the mismatch between local geography and tradition encourages Druids to wildcraft their rituals from the local landscape. Druids generally begin this process by studying the local climate and seasons, for example:

"The wheel is focused on the traditional 4 seasons, which don't match with my climate [in the Sonoran Desert]*. I've slowly been trying to develop my own wheel, with celebrations tied to my work in the garden and landscape and recognizing the changes that* [I see] *throughout the year."*

"In Aotearoa New Zealand we have very different native trees and while we honour the oak and other northern hemisphere trees, our own native trees have greater power and resonance. One of our members has created a New Zealand tree Ogham."

"Australia - Mediterranean climate. This makes the onset of winter like spring, when flowers occur and things become green. Wheat is planted and grows over winter... very different. Kenya - "spring" is in the wet seasons, of which there are two. in both cases the seasons are driven by rain, not sun. that is the biggest difference to Europe. [I celebrate the 8 festivals], *but reversed for southern hemisphere and acknowledgement of the local processes at the time."*

While the surface features of these wildcrafted celebrations may vary, it is interesting to note that the spiritual and philosophical framework that supports them is still closely tied to the Celtic Druidry tradition. This is seen in the ritual framework, and in the kinds of spiritual metaphors that Druids read in the natural world around them, as they explained:

> *"I always recognise the solstices and equinoxes using those names. And will often see there being a summer / spring / winter / autumn quarter. I do recognise the times of Samhain and Beltaine for their more esoteric meanings. Symbols I attach to all these tend to natural movements within my environment, so natural patterns of flora and fauna."*

> *"Even though we are northern, temperate, and not a desert, we are still very different from the environments and nature cycles that gave rise to the traditional Celtic Wheel of the Year. We are not even truly 'Mediterranean' here, as our weather never gets warm enough. And so, I rewrote our Wheel of the Year, and created new symbols and celebrations, in accordance with the actual seasons where we live. For example, we do not remember ancestors at Samhain time, because that is when our first rains arrive, and it is a time of joyous rebirth; we have our ancestors' celebration at the autumnal equinox, which is our peak fire season, the time of greatest death and dearth.* [...] *We do observe most of the traditional symbolisms of the Druid wheel of the year, but in a different order, and at very different times of year."*

> *"I* [...] *interpret the seasonal shifts in my own manner. I usually observe each event with a fire outdoors, meditation and divination, and food offerings. I observe the seasonal shifts as metaphors for internal emotional or spiritual changes."*

By regularly connecting with the natural world, at least eight times, throughout the year, Druids become deeply familiar with their land, sea, and skyscapes, noting the patterns of the seasons passing. For some, the point of the Wheel of the Year is simply to observe nature, celebrate the seasons, meditate upon the spiritual metaphors evident in those seasons, and offer praise and gratitude to Nature. Druids wrote, for example:

> *"Give thanks all year to The Universe / Collective Unconscious / God(dess) for the remarkable seasons and the different aspects that we can experience. For nature in all of her amazing splendour. For the magic all around each and every day if we just take time to look, feel, and hear."*

> *"I did have a special meditation and coffee and a sweet treat, fruit-based pie generally, and sit outside on the first day of each season. Summer was at the beach with iced coffee and cold-cuts. I say thank you to the ocean and the sky and the winds, the sun and the moon and then usually walk barefoot into the water or around the woods for a time."*

"The wheel of the year goes on around me and I live it quietly. I do not specifically celebrate them; I just note them as they go by."

For other Druids, the point of the exercise is to attune the activities of one's life to the natural cycles of nature, using natural metaphors observed in the land, sea, and sky as a guide to spiritual life, thus improving one's ability to grow and thrive, in harmony with the natural world. Survey responses of this type included the following:

"I often find that spontaneous informal rituals, usually going outdoors and noting some sign of the season, is more meaningful to me than following a script. The meaning or intention is to draw myself into harmony with the cycles of the natural world."

"I acknowledge the changing of the seasons by changing my lifestyle to suit. Winter I rest or repair hedges and trees as sap is down. Spring I become more active fitness wise, Summer I work long and hard. Autumn I recuperate and repair myself."

"I have specific rituals (adapted from the AODA curriculum) that I perform for each holiday, and I change my altar with the changing seasons. I also see the seasonal holidays as being symbolic of the year of my life, with corresponding activities and practices that help me to stay spiritually connected to the seasons. I see it like breathing in and out through the year."

Frequently, this act of spiritual nature connection also involved a habit of detailed seasonal observations. When asked to describe their local climate and seasons, 11% of Druids merely named their locations, and 57% offered very general descriptions. However, for 32% of Druids, the descriptions of local seasons and environments contained a level of detail that could not have been realized without years of careful observation and study. Druids kept diaries chronicling their nature observations; they logged seasonal observations in spreadsheets; and they wrote poems, odes to the changing seasons, and the natural world around them. Their survey responses demonstrated in-depth knowledge of seasonal weather patterns, prevalent wind directions, endemic plant and animal species, and the timing of specific animal migrations. They wrote of the precise timing of changes in the colors, smells, qualities of light and humidity, and so many other fine details of the normal seasons for their areas, as well as the specific ways in which those seasons were shifting and changing as a result of climate change.

This kind of detailed response was common among Druids of the British Islands and Ireland, the seasons of which were the original inspiration for the Neopagan Wheel of the Year, for example:

"Torbay, Devon, UK. Four seasons but tending to be earlier with spring and warmer

winters than my native South East of England. Devon is a large county with two coast lines, being affected by coastal mists. Inland they might be a-blaze with sunshine but on the coast here we're living in a cloud. Today it was sunny in Paignton but I could see a brownish mist in the bay between us and Torquay. Being in the west of England it tends to be very wet compared to the East. I moved here in mid-March, early spring and the flowers were definitely further ahead here than back East. The central part of the county is high: Dartmoor. The bogs can be treacherous and people lose their lives in them. The only snow I saw when I lived in Exeter in the 1990s was on the rooves of cars that had come down off the moors. We never got it further down towards the coast. Having said that it snowed heavily in Exeter this year. Torbay and the surrounding countryside is interesting in that you have agricultural and grazing land a mile inland, with all the wild flowers and deciduous trees you expect to see in the English countryside: oak, alder, holly, hawthorn etc, and then you have the urban coastal strip where the remnants of a flourishing 19th and 20th century tourist trade has left a legacy of mature, or in many cases, elderly more exotic palms, fancy evergreen oaks, cedars and a lot of Scots Pine. I haven't been observing for long here so I can't really comment on the length of the seasons but only these general thoughts. My memories of my time here in the 90s was of a LOT of rain and as a result the greenery was intense and vibrant compared with the savannah of the Kent coast. Devon was all lush green grass while 'home' was dry brown pastures. Birdlife here seems more varied. I even saw a song thrush the other week which I haven't seen in Kent in decades. Sadly, the Herring Gulls, Wood Pigeons and Ring-necked Parakeets seemed to be driving everything else out back in the East."

This level of detail in nature observations was also prevalent among Druids of northern, continental Europe, eastern Canada, and the northeastern portions of the United States, all of which have similar climates and seasonal cycles to Britain, for example:

"Winter [in Canada] *goes from October to April. We feel climate change here. December, January and February used to be quite cold here between -20°C & -30°C. Now -16°C is cold and we get 7°C in the middle of January. The Mountain Pine beetle is having a devastating effect on the pine trees here because it no longer gets cold enough to slow them down. Spring arrives usually mid-April, but for me it's not official until I see and hear a Robin. Things don't green up until mid-May. The Waxwings arrive and eat all the rowan berries in the trees in front of my place — it's a sight and a half to see 100+ birds in 3 trees. June is the beginning of summer. Here we notice climate change too. We used to get weeks at a time of 30°C, now were lucky to get a few days all summer that hot. Summer here brings out the urban rabbits, and their babies — which bring out the coyotes. It's odd and sad to see a coyote running across a major parking lot, kilometers away from any green space. The end of summer is my favorite time, I love going for drives in the country and seeing canola field after canola field, the brightness of the yellow against the green is awesome! Fall arrives about mid-September. The leaves start turning yellow, By October, the*

leaves are red, the bunnies are white, and by Samhain there is usually snow. We go from not being able to see Orion in the sky to seeing him most of the winter."

One might expect Druids living in places with climates and seasons very different from those of Britain to rely on books, rather than observations of the natural world, in order to maintain a heart-felt connection to a cycle of seasonal festivals and celebrations derived from a foreign land. However, the opposite turned out to be true.

World Druidry Survey data showed that Druids from climates different from Britain's are significantly more likely (58-59% compared to 32% for Druids overall; $p = 0.00$) than other Druids to include detailed, seasonal, nature observations as a key component of their Druidry practice. In addition, the level of detail and specificity reflected in their descriptions of the local environment was much higher than that of other Druids' descriptions. This was particularly true of Druids in Oceania, and for the 17% of world Druids who live in biomes where seasons are driven by cyclical variations in precipitation, and in terrestrial and atmospheric moisture, rather than by variations in temperature and light. Examples of landscape descriptions from Druids in non-traditional biomes and climatic zones included:

"New Zealand has a temperate climate so the seasons are not clearly defined. We have also been known to experience four seasons in one day. Summer is heralded by the flowering of the Pohutukawa tree and the song of the cicada. It is a time to gather honey and cut the hay. Late summer brings the first harvest of corn and wild blackberries, as the godwits prepare to fly north. Vineyards [are] *covered* [with] *grape vines, ready for vintage. Autumn is a time to harvest the kūmara and corn, as the evenings close in when daylight saving ends. Through the Winter we rest, celebrating the rise of Matariki (Pleiades) and the Māori New Year with feasting, mulled wine. Spring is the time to plant the kūmara for the following year, the song of the long-tailed cuckoo can be heard as the shining cuckoo returns from Hawaiki, along with the godwits from Alaska. The kowhai tree is in flower, the whitebait are running."*

"According to the local Noongar people [of Australia], *we have six* [seasons]. *Birak (Dec-Jan): hot and dry, the blue tongue goannas come out out of hibernation and Jarrah often flowers. Bunuru (Feb-Mar): Warm to hot, Marri tree flowers, Zamia palms begin to fruit. Djeran (Apr-May): Ant season, cooler and pleasant but often no rains yet, sheoaks flower, bankisas blossom. Makuru (June-July): First rains, cold and wet, Acacias bloom, grass grows. Djilba (Aug-Sep): Growing season, weather changeable, wildflowers begin to proliferate in the bush, Magpies begin to swoop. Kambarang (Oct-Nov): Wildflower season, warming, rains drying up, Christmas trees (Nuyutsia) flower, as do the red and green kangaroo paws."*

"We have five [seasons] *in the Sonoran Desert. The additional season being foresummer drought in May and June is exceedingly hot and dry but the saguaros*

bloom. Then summer comes with the Summer Monsoons (Las Aguas) and explosive thunderstorms and haboobs. Some wildflowers bloom with the temporary water almost like a second spring. When the dryness returns and the air begins to cool, fall is in season, and the backyard begins to grow. The Winter Monsoon brings gentle rains (Equipatas), and our garden flourishes. Spring warms up the desert again gradually and palo verdes and wild- flowers bloom."

In addition to simply paying closer attention to what was going on in nature, Druids focused on detailed nature observations were significantly more likely to celebrate all eight festivals of the Wheel of the Year. In fact, the habits of detailed nature observation, and wildcrafting seasonal rituals were the two most important factors when predicting the likelihood of a Druid celebrating the seasonal festivals. These habits were more influential than Druid group membership, or even spiritual nature connection, as evident in the statistically significant intergroup variations in the likelihood of Druids celebrating all eight festivals:

- 47% of Druids, overall;
- 53% of OBOD members ($p = 0.01$);
- 55% of Druids focused on spiritual nature connection ($p = 0.00$);
- 60% of Druids focused on detailed nature observations ($p = 0.00$); and
- 62% of Druids focused on wildcrafting their seasonal celebrations ($p = 0.00$).

These numbers suggest that nature connection, nature observation, and spiritual wildcrafting — all of which serve to deepen a Druid's personal relationship with the land, sea, and sky of the place in which he or she happens to live — are the most important factors encouraging Druids to regularly celebrate the festivals of the Wheel of the Year.

This raises the question: if Druid Wheels of the Year are wildcrafted, in what ways, if any, do the resulting festivals correspond to those of the traditional, Celtic Wheel of the Year? In what ways do they differ? As noted earlier, 52% of world Druids wildcraft their Wheels of the Year, to some extent, but for those in northern and western Europe, this act of wildcrafting generally reinforces traditions, or results in only minor shifts in timing. What happens when wildcrafting takes place farther afield?

Druidry's Wildcrafted Wheels of the Year

Variations in local ecology, culture, social customs, and myths and lore can all play a role in wildcrafted Wheels of the Year. However, nearly all Druids still rely upon the idea of a cycle of eight festivals, spaced 6 or 7 weeks apart, throughout the year — even if not all are celebrated. The aspects of the seasonal celebrations most likely to change are the signs of the passing seasons in nature, and in some cases, the spiritual symbolism associated with those signs. In addition, non-traditional social and cultural contexts often lead to blended traditions incorporating elements from each participating tradition. To illustrate the ways in which such

variations are manifest abroad, let us take one more journey through the Wheel of the Year, this time starting with the Winter Solstice, the most commonly celebrated of the traditional eight festivals.

Winter Solstice

As a solar festival marking the return of light in the darkest time of the year, the Winter Solstice generally maintains its symbolic meaning, when celebrated in other localities. However, the celebrations are often adapted and blended with other cultural traditions, such as Northern feasting rituals, or celebrations of astronomical events — particularly in the Southern Hemisphere, where the Christmas season occurs at Midsummer. In locations that differ not merely by hemisphere, but also by the ecological cycles, and seasonal markers evident in nature, the emphasis may be on rains and harvests, rather than on the cycles of light and dark. Examples of survey responses that support these themes included the following:

> *"Yule (Winter Solstice) - Dec 21 - Celebrated in Grove tradition as the Norse Yule, including a Sumbel to honor the gods with boasting, toasts, and oath-making. We like to fill the longest night with drink, song, laughter, and good company."*

> *"Yule is* [...] *in the height of summer, so activities that I traditionally associate with* [it] *aren't appropriate. So I made it an astronomical event - this is where the orbit is, this is the continuation of the cycle."*
> *"Season of Heart (Winter Solstice, end of June) New Moon, time to seek shelter again, it's cold, windy and raining too much to be outside, a time of harvest and hearth, to stand by and to celebrate around the fire, and also to journey inward, to seek the inner light that shines a path through the darkness, of breathing in. A time to restrict one's diet, and direct attention inward."*

Imbolc

Imbolc is the first festival to show significant variations in both seasonal markers and symbolic meaning. Where winter weather is more extreme and longer lasting, Imbolc is a meaningless date in the midst of the hard freeze. In these places, Druids more often focus on the mythology surrounding Brigid, patron deity of the holiday. For Druids in warmer locations, where lambs and snowdrops might be absent, but other herbs and first flowers are sprouting, the symbolism of "earliest signs of spring" may still hold, but the specific plants and animals celebrated will vary with the region. For Druids in biomes where the world never freezes, and seasonal cycles are defined by patterns of moisture, rain, fog, fire, and drought, Imbolc might celebrate the arrival of monsoon rains, and the purification and revival of the land, or on planting crops in newly rain-drenched land. Examples of such responses included:

> *"I feel very detached from Oimelc here in Minnesota.* [...] *Nothing grows amid a dead frozen world, blanketed under two feet of snow. I associate Oimelc more with crafts and hobbies. My Grove has scheduled a robe-making party, and I will bring my*

sewing machine and other supplies to participate."

"Imbolc is my favorite as spring is returning, but in my area, there are no sheep, so I tend to time this celebration to three things that first emerge here: ryegrass, daffodils, and sofwood blossoms."

"I'm making adjustments as needed. For Imbolc I plan to shift to a focus on the winter monsoon and link that to purification, light, and water."

Vernal Equinox

Celebrations of the Vernal Equinox also change due to variations in winter's severity and duration. In far northern climes, where variations in day length are at their most extreme, the symbolism of the vernal equinox, when daytime finally overtakes nighttime in duration, is a powerful cause for celebration, as is the desire to see an end to winter. In areas ruled by moisture-driven seasonal cycles, the Vernal Equinox is sometimes seen as a shift from the cool, rainy season, to the hot, dry season. It can also be seen as a time for feasting and a celebration of warmth and fertility, similar to Beltane celebrations elsewhere. Blending the traditions of the vernal Equinox with other local cultural traditions leads to yet other kinds of celebration. Druid responses illustrating these themes included:

"[In Sweden,] *Spring is celebrated with making a huge bonfire and singing, from sunset and into the night. Prior to the Spring equinox, we bring birch branches into the house and decorate them with coloured feathers."*

"Arapyaú ('New Year'- Spring Equinox, end of September) Crescent/First Quarter Moon, time to celebrate new cycles, beginnings and ends, end of the rainy and cold season and start of the dry and hot one, a time of activity, of pruning and active care, of breathing out and going outside. A time to feast and celebrate!"

"A time for festivity and celebration for it marks the beginning of a new phase, the beginning of the triumph of light. In ancient Māori society, the rising of the star Aotahi (Canopus) announced the arrival of Spring, together with the flowering of kowhai, rangiora and kotukutuku, the plants of the fourth lunar month spanning September and October. The flowering of the kowhai signified the fish are getting fat and a sign for kūmara planting to begin."

Beltane

The focus on fertility and fecundity at Beltane is celebrated in many places around the world, though wildcrafted celebrations may involve myths derived from different cultures, or natural symbols taken from different ecologies. However, Beltane may be altogether reinterpreted in regions where the seasons are either much slower or much quicker to reach their peak levels of spring warmth and fertility. Around the first of May in some places, the

ground and ice-filled rivers are only beginning to thaw, and so the focus in not on peak fertility, but rather, on the first signs of spring, and spring planting. In warmer areas, Beltane marks the end of the first season of warmth and growth, and is a time of harvest celebration. Examples of survey responses supporting these themes included the following:

> *"To the Māori, this was Whiringanuku, the fifth month, when ka whakaniho nga mea katoa o te whenua i konei ('all things now put forth fresh growth'). A good flowering of ti kouka (cabbage tree) is said to be a sign that a long, fine summer will follow. Beltane is the third of the Spring celebrations in the Druid tradition. The invigorating energies of spring growth are flowing at their strongest through the earth, and indeed through us too."*

> *"Beltane usually involves some sort of baptism in the ice-cold river.* [It] *is celebrated when the apples blossom."*

> *"We celebrate the arrival of the salad fairies, as our first harvest of the year begins."*

Summer Solstice

Opposite the Winter Solstice on the Wheel of the Year, the Summer Solstice traditionally focuses on the longest day, and the time of the Sun's peak power. For Druids who live in far northern regions, this is the moment of peak warmth and fertility, and the celebration may be like a belated Beltane. For others, whose physical and cultural environments differ from the traditional, the symbolic meaning may be maintained while using localized mythologies, and signs and portents in nature. Finally, for Druids in moisture-driven climes, the Summer Solstice focuses on the transition from cool, wet seasons to hot, dry seasons that are often fraught with severe storms and natural disasters, such as hurricanes and wildfires. In these areas, Summer Solstice celebrations often include concrete preparations, meditations, and prayers for protection from the dangers of the incoming season. Examples of such responses included:

> *"Midsummer* [in Sweden]. *You dance - often there are at least 2-3 circles around a pole that is very phallic and dressed in flowers and leaves. Dance until you are tired, then have a dish made with seafood or fish of some kind. Dessert is fresh berries - and a lot of drinks... At night, maidens and bachelors pick 7, 9 or 11 different kind of flowers (it varies what people want but it is always an odd number), lay them under their pillow, and if they are lucky, they will see their future spouse in a dream."*

> *"Summer Solstice honours Ranginui (Sky Father) and Tamanuiterā (Sun King). A world peace-working at this time of greatest light is led by the children bearing candles (the Sacred Flame)."*

> *"I celebrate the sun at its height and the energies of joy and manifestation; I also*

often ask for protection from drought and hurricanes and flooding associated with this time of year."

Lughnasadh

As the first of the traditional harvest festivals, Lughnasadh typically focuses on the grain harvest. While harvest may still be the theme in other parts of the world, the nature of the harvest will often vary. In many of the warmer, wet-dry climes, the essential nature of this holiday changes, since the natural world may be between harvests, in a lean time, or even in a dying time, rather than a time of harvest bounty. Examples of such responses included the following:

"Lughnasadh is celebrated when fireweed blooms, and the blueberry harvest begins. At Lughnasadh we have a special community garden party."

"In the European grain cycle of wheat and barley, it is the beginning of harvest, and the first loaves of bread are offered to the Great Mother. In the Māori cycle of the kūmara, [the sweet potato] is not yet harvested; in fact - far from being a time of plenty - it is te waru patote, the lean month, when the staple crop is at its scarcest."

Our rituals at this time are more mundane than symbolic. We refresh and restock all emergency supplies, pre-pack our bug-out bags for the fire season, review all emergency preparedness procedures, and set out water and food for the wildlife, to help comfort them through the dying time. The timing of this festival coincides with the first day of really hot weather — after the summer fogs fade — which may be before or after August 1. With luck, we get all this done before the wildfires actually arrive."

Autumnal Equinox

The Autumnal Equinox, which is traditionally the time of the fruit harvest in Europe, may celebrate an alternate-crop harvest in other climes. It may also be a time of planting in some regions, as the hot, dry season yields to the cool, wet season. In yet other places, the Autumnal Equinox is a time of death and dearth, reserved for communion with ancestors. Examples of such responses included the following:

"The Autumn Equinox represents a time of reflection and contemplation of how the balance of light and dark tips at equinox and, as we now enter the dying time of the year, the mysteries of life and death. This is when we make the transition from outer to inner, from above to below. At harvest, European and Māori symbolism is similar. The rua, or underground kūmara pit, is a symbol that parallels the European imagery of the return of the seed to the earth. The stories of Persephone, Pani, and the Mabon all follow this theme."

"Araymã ("Old Year" - Fall Equinox, end of March) Waning/Last Quarter Moon, time to prepare, to care for the health of the house, if a nose or roof is dripping, end of the dry and hot season and start of the rainy and cold one, also a time of activity, this time to plant seed and sapling on the ground, waiting for the rains to come, of breathing out and going outside. We plant the corn at this time, so it can be ready for the St. John festivities in June. Another time to feast!"

"At this time of year, when wildfires and smoke blanket our landscape, the animals are dying of thirst and hunger, and all native plants are drought dormant, we observe our equivalent to the traditional Samhain."

Samhain

While some Druids connect with ancestors of blood, place, and spirit earlier in the year, most do so as part of their Samhain celebrations. In wildcrafted traditions, this often focuses more clearly on ancestors of place. For Druids in regions where growing seasons are longer, this is often the time of the final harvest, a time for thanksgiving, and harvest celebrations. And for some Druids, this marks the end of the "dead" season, with the return of the rains after summer drought. Examples of survey responses illustrating these themes included the following:

"We invite the Ancestors to our Circle. We welcome the spirits of those who migrated from the Savannah, and all the subsequent migrations undertaken that brought us to be living in this blessed land of Aotearoa."

"This is near the end of the gardening year, for the first autumn frost generally occurs within two weeks either side of this date, and winter resident birds like juncos and white-throated sparrows have arrived. I meditate on the harvest, not just the garden harvest but [the symbolic harvest of] *what I have learned and accomplished during the past year. I spend the time between this date and the winter solstice calculating garden yields, writing down my accomplishments for the past year, and beginning to consider what I want to accomplish in the following year."*

"We stop everything to go outside and dance and sing to welcome the first measurable rains of the year — a joyous moment of rebirth, as the danger of fire season is finally over. [...] *We hold our Thanksgiving Feast at this time, celebrating not only the bounty harvested from our family's farm, but also the safe harbor the rain brings to all those who survived the year's wildfires."*

Universal Themes in Druid Festivals & Celebrations

Despite the many ways in which Druid seasonal celebrations vary around the world, there is still a common thematic core that unifies Druidry's Wheels of the Year: the celebration of

physical and spiritual gifts bestowed by the living Earth, at the moments when Nature first heralds their arrival. These gifts may arrive at different times in different regions, and the sequence and frequency of these gifts may also vary, but the nature of the gifts, and the reverence for their perceived sources is shared.

Druids celebrate moments in which hope is rekindled. That may be the moment when the waning sunlight of autumn changes to waxing light at midwinter. It may be the time of the first thaw, or the first flower pushing up in spring. It may be the time of first rain after a drought, or the return of life-giving monsoon rains. Whatever form the metaphor of hope takes in the natural world, Druids perceive it as a sign to be inspired, to reawaken to new possibilities, and to work to cultivate their inner spark of light.

Druids celebrate times of planting, be it of crops in the field or projects of the hands and heart. They bless their seeds, and tools, and soils (both the physical and metaphorical). They prune and clear away the deadwood, plant their seeds, and cultivate their projects and plantings, to bring their harvests home.

Druids celebrate moments when the Earth offers up an abundance of unbidden blessings. This typically occurs when a perfect combination of sunlight, moisture, and warmth causes the world to explode in glorious, flowering, fertility. At such times, the presence of beneficent nature deities and spirits of place become palpably real for Druids, and indeed, the entire world of faerie seems to open its doors to friendly visitors.

Druids celebrate a multitude of harvests: vegetables, fruits, and grains from the garden, and fruits of creative, personal projects. They share the bounty of their harvests with acts of charity to their wider communities, of both of human, and other-than-human kinds.

Druids reverently observe the moments when the living Earth is dying, or falling dormant for a season. This may happen at the first hard frost, or at the start of a wildfire season. At such times, Druids honor those who have lived, and died, and gone before, for their roles in connecting the past with the future, for the lasting fruits of their labors in life, and for the wisdom they may yet have to convey.

Druids observe and respond to the moments when Nature dictates a time of rest and retreat, withdrawing from the outer world, for a fallow time of reflection and rejuvenation.

The specific moments of celebration are generally based upon careful observations of the natural world, and a process of forging deep, personal relationships with nature. Rather than celebrating a symbolic cycle of theoretical seasons, the majority of world Druids connect with their local, natural environments first, and wildcraft their celebrations, adapting them to fit the realities of their local, physical and cultural environments.

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