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## A Feeling in their Bones: Issues of Deciphering Animal Ritual in the Archaeological Record among the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree

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## **Abstract**

Whether religion and ritual are elements of past cultures that can be studied effectively by archaeologists has divided experts for some time within the discipline. This paper examines specific animal rituals from two mobile hunter gatherer groups from Canada's North, the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree, in relation to Colin Renfrew's 1985 book *The Archaeology of Cult*. In this paper I seek to demonstrate that the archaeological concepts and methods put forth in Renfrew's (1985) work, related to analyzing religious and ritual contexts in large scale sedentary societies, cannot be neatly applied to Northern mobile hunter gatherer groups because of the nature of their movements across the landscape and their unique ritual relationships with animals. By going into detail describing, and subsequently analyzing the practical implications of the animal rituals and beliefs held by the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree, it is my goal to call more attention to the archaeological study of small scale mobile societies and their ritual practices that defy conventional methodologies for discerning and analyzing ritual in the archaeological record.

## **Keywords**

mobile hunter-gatherers, Naskapi Innu, Eastern Cree, zooarchaeology, animals, ritual, religion

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Dr. Chris Ellis, who encouraged me to write this paper even when I was unsure of my ability to synthesize a remarkably small, but hugely fascinating body of knowledge. Also a big thank you to my family and friends for their tireless editing and support.

## **A Feeling in Their Bones: Issues of Deciphering Animal Ritual in the Archaeological Record among the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree**

**Arwen M. Johns**

### *Abstract*

*Whether religion and ritual are elements of past cultures that can be studied effectively by archaeologists has divided experts for some time within the discipline. This paper examines specific animal rituals from two mobile hunter gatherer groups from Canada's North, the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree, in relation to Colin Renfrew's 1985 book *The Archaeology of Cult*. In this paper I seek to demonstrate that the archaeological concepts and methods put forth in Renfrew's (1985) work, related to analyzing religious and ritual contexts in large scale sedentary societies, cannot be neatly applied to Northern mobile hunter gatherer groups because of the nature of their movements across the landscape and their unique ritual relationships with animals. By going into detail describing, and subsequently analyzing the practical implications of the animal rituals and beliefs held by the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree, it is my goal to call more attention to the archaeological study of small scale mobile societies and their ritual practices that defy conventional methodologies for discerning and analyzing ritual in the archaeological record.*

### *Introduction*

It has been a long held view by some that archaeology is inherently unsuited to address religion and ritual due to its focus on material culture (Rowan 2011). However this is changing, and with the responsible usage of ethnographic and historical documents more archaeologists are beginning to see the

potential to understand ritual through their work (Insoll 2004; Kyriakidis 2007). Fogelin (2007:56) notes that this is, and should be, a multidisciplinary undertaking, with viewpoints from cultural anthropology, religious studies, and sociology being incorporated into the interpretations put forth by archaeologists in an effort to theorize the material outcomes of intangible aspects of culture.

With this information in hand, archaeologists such as Barrowclough and Malone (2007) and Whitley and Hays-Gilpin (2008), now believe it is possible to do the archaeology of religion and ritual, and there has been movement away from referring to all material viewed as religious in nature as only being strange and/or non-functional. This new shift in focus has brought to the fore studies on domestic, or small-scale ritual, that suggest religious and secular rituals are not mutually exclusive, leading us to question how ordinary objects and actions become ritualized in the first place (Fogelin 2007). As I will demonstrate though, using both Renfrew's (1985) *The Archaeology of Cult: The Sanctuary at Phylakopi*, and case studies from the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree of Canada's Northeastern Subarctic, theories of ritual cannot be readily applied to different spatial and temporal contexts without encountering both theoretical and interpretive problems. While addressing these issues is the main focus of this paper, I will also revisit Durkheim's (1995) notion of the sacred and the profane, focusing on the grey area between these two representations.

### *Background*

It should be noted that Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree cultural groups are still in existence today, and that their lifeways have changed since the writings of the ethnographies utilized for this paper. There are still continuities though, each group still possessing an intimate relationship with the

variable environments they now occupy and the animals they share them with. I would like to make it explicit that the information regarding the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree describes lifeways that existed before these groups were forcibly settled in communities by missionaries and government programs (which in some cases was only a few decades ago). Finally, as with the use of any historical documents and ethnographic data, interpretations must be made with caution. It has been shown repeatedly that these documents can be unreliable accounts, often shedding more light on colonial bias than the true nature of the cultural traditions recorded.

For the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree groups, the relationship between themselves and animals had become intensely ritualized at the time of Henriksen's (2010) and Tanner's (1979) ethnographies, but the past composition and lifeways of these groups makes doing "their archaeology" much more difficult. They were highly mobile, with many of their animal rituals fixated on lack of waste, and their ideology permeating all aspects of their societies. This makes the ritual context all the more important in these cases, because it is often the only way to distinguish between secular and religiously used artifacts and animal remains. Caribou were very important for these groups (especially the Naskapi Innu), and will be of primary focus here. I will examine elements of animal rituals from both the Naskapi Innu and the Eastern Cree, and discuss how these may appear in the archaeological record, if in fact they do at all, in the context of Renfrew's work *The Archaeology of Cult* (1985), which deals with locating religion and ritual during excavation at a Bronze Age town called Phylakopi on the island of Melos.

It has been theorized (Hawkes 1954:161) that claims about the religious and spiritual life of past peoples are the hardest inferences to make of all, implying that the belief systems are almost inaccessible via the

archaeological record. Others like Renfrew (1985) believe that there is nothing problematic about this matter because ancient peoples created many monuments which we can easily identify as religious. As I will demonstrate however, this does not apply so readily to most mobile hunter gatherer groups, who leave comparatively few traces on the landscape. Renfrew (1985:1) would have us believe that the real issue is not the lack of material, or difficulty in recognizing it, but that few have even attempted to develop a methodological approach to the subject. I believe Renfrew's work, while valuable when dealing with large-scale sedentary societies, has comparatively less merit when examining small-scale hunting and gathering groups like the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree. I will discuss the reasons for this in relation to some of the types of animal rituals being performed.

Humans feel the need to materialize the intangible, leading religion to often be expressed through performance which leaves its mark in the archaeological record in the form of ritual paraphernalia, iconography, and sacred spaces (Rowan 2011:1). This makes archaeology an appropriate avenue for studying religious beliefs. According to Durkheim (1995) the sacred is idealized and part of a transcendent and often dangerous realm, including things like religious beliefs and rituals. Objects that have been deemed sacred are often separated from the "everyday" profane realm, which Durkheim (1995) viewed as capable of contaminating the sacred. When the line between the sacred and profane becomes blurred however, things become more difficult to disentangle because ritual and mundane activities become interconnected. This is one of the primary problems when trying to decipher the remains of animal rituals conducted by these subarctic hunter-gatherer groups because butchery, consumption, and disposal of the remains, could be at once a ritual and an everyday

activity. Animal rituals are more susceptible to interpretive issues because the majority of zooarchaeological assemblages are fragmented and heavily impacted by taphonomy, which previously led to a focus on only certain types of deposits (namely articulated animal remains that appear to have been buried as part of ritual, where human intervention in deposition is obvious) (Davis 1987). This narrow focus on animal remains from particular contexts has led to the further conceptual division between sacred and domestic spaces, which is problematic when trying to take a holistic view of animal use in ritual (Angelo 2014).

I will begin now by outlining the similarities between Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree ideology before delving into the mechanics of a few of their rituals and how they are translated in the archaeological record. As well, I will critically examine how useful Renfrew's (1985) work is in this interpretive context with this specific culture type.

#### *Naskapi Innu and Cree Belief Systems – A General Overview:*

Irimoto and Yamada's suggest in *Circumpolar Religion and Ecology: An Anthropology of the North* (1994:50) that generally there are two elements that go hand-in-hand in Northern hunter gatherer cultures, the first being personal (private) rituals for the daily killing of animals and secondly, subsistence oriented around animals. The authors go on to postulate that there may be a functional correlation between the two, because for these groups survival depends on animal foods and many aspects of life are focused on their procurement. Hill (2011) argues that this heavy reliance on animals had led many Northern groups to view animals as "other-than-human persons", imbuing them with a sense of agency, and other human characteristics. As a result, for the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree,

interactions with animals take on a dynamic and depth that transcend Western understanding. Western cultures, broadly speaking, often see animals as objects, so it is important to be able to see past these conceptions in order to take the artifacts (in this case animal remains) and to look at their deeper symbolic and ritual meaning accorded to them by the relevant cultural group. Significance and meaning are socially constructed, so it is the job of the archaeologists to find its contextualized material expression.

Caribou and other prey animals were viewed as especially powerful, with many similarities to humans, and as a result they were afforded a special position within the worldviews of many Northern populations, ranging from the eastern to western Arctic and Subarctic regions (Hill 2011). Interactions with animals were based on a foundation of mutual respect and ideals of reciprocity, with animals and humans fulfilling obligations to one another for fear of punishment. Irimoto and Yamada (1994:51) report that there is enough data to demonstrate that ritual taboos were used as non-physical tools essential for the successful exploitation of animals, which were viewed as supernatural beings. Prey animals were seen as being obliged to "give" themselves to hunters that acted properly by treating their remains with respect and who lived in accordance with all taboos, so it should not be surprising that animal ritual taboos were a salient aspect of both Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree culture. Each group believed that if taboos surrounding the treatment of the flesh and bones of the animal were broken they would secure no more of that particular species. The animal spirits would know they had been disrespected, and would no longer cooperate in reciprocal relationships with the hunters (Henriksen 2010). There were many sanctions, some of which included rules about how animal products were to be shared

equally among families to further reinforce the relatively egalitarian nature of these societies (Feit 1995). Potter (1997:353) notes that in groups without strong leadership (like the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree as a result of their egalitarian values), communal rituals and sharing were key integrating forces, providing a sense of social cohesion between small-scale groups and family units.

Animal rituals characteristic of Northern hunter gatherer groups commonly contain three elements: bringing home of game animals, rituals to honor the animals, and lastly ritual disposal of the remains (Irimoto and Yamada 1994:54). For the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree, the ritual disposal of bones involved placing them on platforms, in trees, or hanging the bones from the limbs of trees, which preservation allowing, is something archaeologists can recover. The preservation of bones in northern areas can be exceptional, but in cases where they are hung or left above ground, bones would be vulnerable to a number of taphonomic factors related to weather and scavengers who may displace the bones from their original ritualized context.

Potter (1997:354) writes that determining to what degree different aspects of communal ritual were emphasised in certain cultures is a question that may be answered in part by determining how accessible such rituals really were to *all* members of the communities. Particularly suited to this type of question is zooarchaeological data, which when used in conjunction with other lines of evidence (material remains including ritual paraphernalia), can help establish where ritual occurred most frequently within a community. That being said, locational consistency is a problem with the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree because of their high levels of mobility. Even if the context of the ritual was the same in each camp (say a specific hunter's tent), the location may only be used once at a given campsite, making it

much harder to recognize the repetitive nature that is often attributed to ritual. The next section of this paper will deal with how bones are treated in specific, albeit highly similar, rituals among the Naskapi Innu and Cree.

#### *Bone Treatment in Rituals – Scapulimancy and Ritual Feasting:*

The remains of animals are often excavated from numerous contexts on an archaeological site, such as middens, burials, house-floors, and as isolated bones, in the cases of the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree however, ritually significant bones can be found on platforms or hanging from trees (Hill 2013). Most animals, generally, are found in a state of disarticulation and in a non-burial context, which can hinder analysis of whether they were ritually significant or not. However, the unique ritual deposition recorded historically and in modern ethnographic accounts for these groups helps mitigate this problem. Bones found on platforms or hung in trees were usually displayed near the kill site or at camp, and because of their “special” context, are far less likely to have their ritual importance overlooked, or to be taken as everyday refuse (Speck 1935). A problem may arise because the Naskapi Innu and Cree believed *all* animal remains needed to be treated in accordance with taboos, so we are forced to ask where best to draw the line between secular and religiously associated remains, if a line can be drawn at all. We cannot effectively exclude any remains from being involved in ritual, so the best we can hope for is to find bones in specific, unmistakable ritual contexts, so as to be sure of the ritual nature of the remains at least in these special circumstances. This too can be problematic because it forces us to categorize and create dichotomy between ritual and domestic space that may not truly have existed in the minds of the individuals we study (Angelo 2014).

### *Scapulimancy – A Form of Divination*

To facilitate the reception of messages from the spirit world is the goal of all divination in general terms, and the materials these messages are transmitted through must be treated with the proper respect (Tanner 1979). For the divination method of scapulimancy, practiced by both the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree, the transmitter of such messages was a scapula (shoulder blade) of a specific animal. This type of divination was part of a linked set of rituals related to humans' relationships with animals, because in each case it was animal bones being manipulated to facilitate action on the part of the hunters, and bones that were displayed for the spirits in thanks (Tanner 1979: 12). The use of symbolically potent caribou bones in distinctive divination rituals may make this practice easier to distinguish in the archaeological record. Scapulimancy divination was practiced in different contexts among the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree, but the treatment of the bones was the same, as well as their intentions of facilitating a connection between themselves and spirits.

For the Naskapi Innu, the scapula was viewed as the most "truthful" of animal bones and before it could be used for purposes of divination it had to be properly prepared (Moore 1957: 72). This involved stripping all meat from the bone, which was then boiled, cleaned, and hung to dry, before a small piece of wood was split and attached to form a handle at the neck of the scapula (Moore 1957: 70). Speck (1935) noted that the type of bone used was also highly significant, and hunters were better served by using bones from the animals they were seeking. The Naskapi Innu almost exclusively used caribou scapula in their divination because this was the animal they most often desired to hunt. The scapula had to be held in a certain position during the ritual, usually in reference to the local environment so it could be

regarded as a blank chart of the group's hunting territory at a given time. The ritual involved holding the scapula by the handle over hot coals until the heat caused dark burn marks (usually spots) and cracks, which could then be interpreted (Moore 1957). No one had control over the results of the burning, so the ritual effectively removed the responsibility from one individual if the group was unsuccessful in hunting, making it an unbiased randomizing device (Moore 1957:71). It was reported to Henriksen (2010) during his field work, that this type of divination was only undertaken during times of extreme uncertainty over where to best look for caribou. Essentially the ritual mobilized them to hunt during times of food shortage and crisis that could otherwise increase indecision and caused even greater danger of starvation.

During his fieldwork Tanner (1979) noted four different kinds of scapulimancy (*mitunsaawaakan*) practiced by the Mistassini Cree. All of these methods used porcupine scapula and each was conducted to reveal a particular future event, making it somewhat different from what was practiced among the Naskapi Innu. In the past, caribou scapulae were preferred, but at the time of Tanner's fieldwork the people did not regard anyone as possessing sufficient power to use them after their last shaman died, demonstrating how powerful caribou were. In line with this preference, large scapulae have been viewed as especially powerful and valuable, and in most cases were hung separately in a tree and not laid on the bone platforms with the rest of the remains (Tanner 1979:123). These large elements were commonly reserved for use in only the most dire of situations, and in some cases could be used in multiple rituals within a single day.

The burning of the scapula largely followed the method of the Naskapi Innu, with one minor difference being that the bone was at times hung from the frame of a

snowshoe and then burned to represent a nearing journey. After each burning, the bone was taken around by a child to each tent so all members of the group could view the results and draw their own conclusions, though interpretations followed a general pattern (Tanner 1979). The inedible parts of animals were still thought to possess the animal's spirit, and often hunters were viewed talking to the scapula during the ritual, asking the spirit to fly around the land, reporting back what they saw (Tanner 1979:130).

### *Ritual Feasting*

The way ritual feasts were conducted by both groups is similar. Usually there was a single leader for each gathering who ensured everything went as planned and was in accordance with taboos; cleanliness and lack of waste were of paramount concern. In both cases the animals were processed and cooked on mats to ensure any scraps could be disposed of in the proper manner, and none of the remains were fed to the dogs (Tanner 1979; Henriksen 2010). Even the inedible parts of the animals had to be accounted for, and collected to be burnt in the stove on which the meal was prepared. This extreme caution was exercised because it was believed that starvation may have resulted if an individual misstepped and disrespected the animals during the course of the feasting rituals. For the Mistassini Cree, it was reported that the most sacred parts of the animals such as the cranium, scapula, and antlers, were given to specific hunters to be displayed in trees, while others were made into tools.

The feast was called *Mokoshan* for the Naskapi Innu, and it was held only to please the caribou spirit (*katipinimitaoch*) to ensure luck in future hunts (Henriksen 2010:35). It can be viewed as the expression of their willingness to complete obligations to the caribou, with everyone in camp taking part either directly or indirectly. The male hunters

occupied central roles, and boys who had killed their first caribou were permitted attendance to the processing, whereas women and younger children were allowed in only later to eat with their husbands and fathers (Henriksen 2010). All bones were scraped clean of even the tiniest morsel of meat, and long bones were smashed to extract the marrow, and then pounded into paste to be boiled. The fat clumps and the broth were saved for consumption and the remaining bone fragments were burned in the stove (Henriksen 2010). It was not uncommon during *Mokoshan* for as many as thirty caribou to be processed for one feasting event.

### *Implications for the Archaeological Record – Why Renfrew's Work Cannot Be Applied to Mobile Hunter Gatherers*

Before moving into a critique of Renfrew's *The Archaeology of Cult* (1985), I will clarify and comment on some aspects of ritual mentioned above in relation to their incorporation into the archaeological record. For both the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree, the bones of animals had to be treated in a certain way during butchery. Bones were generally not allowed to be broken during the initial process, and members of these groups were very skilled in butchering animals, learning to strike between the joints to limit the amount of damage inflicted on the bones in order to show the greatest amount of respect for the carcass (Speck 1935:123). Due to the fact that all animals were ritually treated in this way, it is of no use to archaeologists to examine the bones for significant evidence of differential treatment during butchery that could be expected when animals are being used for either purely secular or ritual purposes. The patterns of butchery left on bones may vary depending on the "style", skill, and experience of the individual doing the butchering. The ritual treatment of all animals in relation to the

taboos against dogs having access to the remains also precludes looking for evidence of digestion on the bones as an indicator of the use of the animal. The Naskapi Innu according to Speck (1935), believed that animals find it terribly debasing to be gnawed on by dogs, and that the use of dogs to hunt effectively betrayed them by granting humans an unfair advantage.

The sheer scale of ritual feasts like *Mokoshan* give hope that we may be able to determine the ritual nature of a hearth deposit based on the exceptional number of bones alone, but I caution against such optimism. I find it reasonable to suspect that if hunters went to such trouble to collect every scrap, they would be equally as careful ensuring that fragments burned in the stoves were mostly, if not completely, destroyed. Breakage, burning, and other processing methods also would weaken bones, causing them to be more vulnerable to taphonomic processes, leading to further preservation issues.

Renfrew (1985) states that identification, excavation, and interpretation of ceremonial centres is one of the most challenging undertakings in archaeology, and that nothing can safely be assumed by the excavator because there is no larger body of theory governing the archaeology of religion. While there have been advances in the study of ritual archaeology since his writing, I would still tend to agree that there is not, and perhaps cannot be, such an overarching theory of ritual archaeology without ignoring specific cultural context and abandoning relativism. Renfrew (1985) disagrees with archaeologists who rely mainly on ethnographic documents to draw conclusions about ritual components of sites, rather than being confident in what the archaeological record tells them. This is not to say that he devalues or does not advocate for using ethnographic and historical data, he simply suggests that these resources should not be used as crutches by archaeologists. I would

counter this by stating that realistically, due to the nature of the animal rituals of the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree, we would not be able to infer much about their religious practices if we were solely, or even mostly, to rely on data from the archaeological record. This is because so much of their rituals related directly to subsistence and may not be recognized as ritual as a result, and *Mokoshan* is a relevant example here. Rarely would an archaeologist's first thought upon finding bones in a hearth, be that they were used in a ritual, because of their stereotypically mundane nature. Without the special context afforded by bone platforms or hanging in trees, there is no way of deciphering which remains were used for what purposes without referring to the ethnographic literature to give us a starting point (luckily there is extensive ethnographic and historical documentation of these groups). As mentioned earlier in the paper however, these accounts must be used with a certain amount of caution for reasons related to colonial and modern ethnographic bias, unintentional or otherwise. Renfrew (1985:11) defines religion as follows:

“[...]Action or conduct indicating a belief in, or reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power...Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship”.

Renfrew views this definition as especially useful because it distinguishes between belief and cult, faith and practice. Such distinctions are not so easily made among northern hunter gatherer groups, for whom all actions are related in some way to their belief system, making their landscape and interactions therein especially sacred.

Domestic or “everyday” ritual is never easy to recognize archaeologically according to Renfrew (1985:15), but he feels secure in stating that it will usually depend on the interpretation of “special” places where ritual conventionally occurs, or of equipment (paraphernalia), designated for use during the course of ritual. This is the part of *The Archaeology of Cult* (1985) that I find to be the most inapplicable when dealing with most mobile hunter gatherers, especially Northern groups like the Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree. For these groups, the places where rituals occur are transient in the landscape, and rituals mostly take place within what would be considered the domestic sphere, with no way to distinguish between sacred and secular space (with the exceptions of bones hung in tree stands which are seen as protective and significant places on the landscape). Without the ethnographic and historical record, we would be hard pressed to recognize many Naskapi Innu and Eastern Cree ritual elements, for example the burnt scapula used in divination, commonly given to children as a toy as was recorded with the Mistassini Cree. Renfrew (1985) also believes that for the best interpretive results, we should limit the discussion to evidence from a single site, with no reference to other examples, and to a period of just a few years. This is not possible in the cases of mobile Northern hunting and gathering groups, who move multiple times in a season, reducing occupation length in one location to nothing close to the years that Renfrew views as ideal for interpretation.

Renfrew does recognize in *The Archaeology of Cult* (1985) that it is not impossible for ritual to be conducted within a domestic unit, and that the location of ritual itself does not define it as domestic or communal; this is defined by the degree of community participation. As was demonstrated above, this is most often the case for the Naskapi and Cree, where ritual

feasts take place in a hunter’s tent, and Renfrew admits that these situations are considerably more problematic, although he only mentions them in passing. He makes the suggestion that to better recognize these domestic ritual spaces, we should focus on house units because they are easily compared to others across a site or region. Once again however, this is not applicable to Northern hunter gatherer groups, who lived in temporary shelters that leave little behind in the archaeological record. As well, their taboos against wasting animal products makes it even less likely that there will be much refuse to be found marking the location of a tent.

I do agree with Renfrew (1985) when he states that context is everything, because single indications of ritual action are rarely enough evidence to make confident judgements, and this is especially true for the material being dealt with here: natural objects with symbolic significance. As well, he notes that sacred places for ritual do not have to be man-made, and can include a number of natural features on the landscape, with emphasis only on the permanent nature of these spaces. I believe this is important for all archaeologists to keep in mind, and it may be especially relevant to the Naskapi Innu who commonly made their camps in the barrens near stands of trees, which were also used in ritual during bone hanging. I stress though, that whether these were even permanent locations for this group is questionable, because surely these areas were used more than once by different families over the years, but they were not a location that was usable on a regular basis because of their mobility in search of caribou.

### *Conclusion*

With all of the above issues taken into account I believe that it is a reasonable conclusion that, while Renfrew’s *The Archaeology of Cult* (1985) is a suitable

resource for consultation regarding methods for recognizing ritual in large-scale sedentary societies, it is a poor reference for those looking to examine the ritual remains left by mobile hunting and gathering groups. All of the elements listed by Renfrew as making sites good candidates for this type of analysis are not present in any meaningful way for mobile, small-scale societies. With more work in specific spatial-temporal-cultural areas that ensures all aspects of the archaeological record of hunter gatherer groups and beyond can be properly investigated, new doors will be opened by archaeologists with regional ritual theoretical orientations.

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