

# “Respect the Stick!”: Material Culture and Alternative Political Models at European Rainbow Gatherings

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## KEYWORDS

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## ABSTRACT

Rainbow Gatherings are one of the earliest forerunners of transformative events, with a history spanning five decades. These noncommercial, cocreated, and inclusive meetings have a global spread, offering radical alternatives to social organization and political processes. This essay examines the alternative political model of Rainbow Gatherings through the lens of material culture studies. The analysis follows an object biography of the ritual artifact known as the Talking Stick, central to Rainbow’s political practices, and explores the meaning of the object in material, symbolic, and instrumental senses. Drawing on ethnographic field work at fourteen Rainbow Gatherings across Europe, the essay concludes that organizational models contribute to the transformational potential of events.

1. Field notes, Italy/Slovenia, 2016.  
Field excerpts and interviews are  
anonymized where informants have  
not agreed to being identified.

2. Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural  
Biography of Things: Commoditization  
as Process," in *The Social Life of  
Things: Commodities in Cultural  
Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai  
(Cambridge: Cambridge University  
Press, 1986), 64–92; David Morgan,  
"Material Analysis and the Study of  
Religion," in *Materiality and the Study of  
Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*, ed. T.  
Hutchings and J. McKenzie (London:  
Routledge, 2016), 14–32.

## "Respect the Stick!": Material Culture and Alternative Political Models at European Rainbow Gatherings

Katri Ratia

The shadows are growing longer as a motley crew of people assemble around a fire pit in a forest. Some are carrying firewood, one hauls a blackened teapot, and another is carrying a wooden staff with ribbons and beads dangling off one end. We are at the 2016 European Rainbow Gathering at the border of Italy and Slovenia, and these twenty-some participants are preparing for a Talking Circle. The participants form a circle around the fire, hand in hand, and chant a drawn-out "Om" in unison. Then, in a fluttering of blankets and sheepskins, the group sits on the ground and quiets down. The staff is handed to a middle-aged woman who smiles, nods, and sets it across her lap. "Dear Family, thank you for coming. I was asked to explain the water situation in the camp, and I feel we have to do something." She goes on to express her concerns regarding the quality of the drinking water that is drawn from a spring nearby. When she finishes, she passes the staff to a man on her left, who holds it upright in front of him as he describes people coming to the Medicine Area with stomach problems.

The staff is passed around the circle and one by one the participants pitch in, presenting practical ideas, ideological considerations, critical questions, and personal experiences. A man questions if the water was tested at the beginning of the event and found safe. One woman speaks about the spiritual aspects of drinking natural water, while another, with a toddler squirming under her poncho, suggests buying bottled water for safety. Other reasons for the stomach bug are speculated, from physiological to "energetic" and "karmatic" explanations that borrow from metaphysical notions of spiritual energy and Asian religious understandings of karma. After many rounds of discussion, several suggestions are made, and some of them are agreed upon. The spring should be tested, and in the meantime, all drinking water at the Children's Kitchen and the Medicine Area will be boiled. A workshop teaching water-filter construction will be held. Volunteers for organizing the tasks and informing the rest of the camp are assigned. But no bottled water will be bought with the collective money, as many participants objected to the idea. Lastly, the participants stand up and chant another "Om" together.<sup>1</sup>

### Rainbow Family and Its Gatherings

In the peripheries of modern nation-states flourishes a radical grassroots movement devoted to ideas of sacred nature and transformation, defined here as a development of a particular kind of social and ecological awareness, to advance what this movement sees as the improvement of human societies. Known as the Rainbow Family of Living Light, its activity consists of organizing inclusive and noncommercial meetings in natural settings. These utopian events are called Rainbow Gatherings, and they aspire to operate without centralized forms of power or a market-type economy.

In this essay, I will examine the alternative political model of Rainbow communities through the lens of material culture studies. I will present an object biography<sup>2</sup> of the ritual artifact known as the Talking Stick (the "staff" mentioned above), which is pivotal to Rainbow's political practices, exploring the meaning of the object in material, symbolic, and instrumental senses. The object

3. I use "event-culture" as defined by Graham St John and François Gauthier as "popular cultural movements for whom the event is not an occurrence held in support of an external cause, but is itself the principal concern of the organisation." "[Burning Man's Gift-Driven, Event-Centred Diaspora](#)," *Revue du MAUSS* 24, no. 1 (January 24, 2015).

4. Elizabeth Perry, "[Transformational Festivals: Where Ecstatic Spirit and Sonic Celebration Unite](#)," *Redefine*, June 18, 2013.

5. Michael Ira Niman, *People of the Rainbow: A Nomadic Utopia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 31; Katri Ratia, *Alternative Spirituality, Counterculture and European Rainbow Gatherings: Pachamama I'm Coming Home* (London: Routledge, 2023).

6. Alberto Ruz Buenfil, *Rainbow Nation without Borders: Toward an Ecotopian Millennium* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Co, 1991), 146; interviews with U. F., 2015, and J. H., 2017.

7. RainbowForum, "[Archive](#)," n.d., accessed January 17, 2022.; Ratia, *Alternative Spirituality, Counterculture and European Rainbow Gatherings*.

8. Stuart Rose, *Transforming the World: Bringing the New Age into Focus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 89; Pew Research Center, "[Members of the New Age Movement](#)," *Religious Landscape Study*, accessed January 17, 2022.

9. Kevin Hetherington, *New Age Travellers: Vanloads of Uproarious Humanity* (London: Cassell, 2000); Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

10. Niman, *People of the Rainbow*; Welcome Home, "[General Info on the Rainbow Family of Living Light](#)," n.d., accessed January 18, 2022.

11. Ratia, *Alternative Spirituality*,

will serve as a focalizing lens for an examination of Rainbow's crafted and ritualized political tradition and utopian aspirations. This essay discusses the social and cultural relevance of the Talking Stick, its use in this event-culture,<sup>3</sup> and the ritual apparatus surrounding it, to show how the Stick is seen to support transformation into a nonviolent and socially just society by defusing and dispersing power and enhancing a culture of direct and personal participation in a horizontal political system.

Rainbow Gatherings are a forerunner of contemporary "transformational festivals,"<sup>4</sup> and in addition to the themes of individual change, the reform and revitalization of mainstream societies are implicit in Rainbow culture.<sup>5</sup> Rainbow's event tradition sprang up in the wake of the 1960s and early 1970s countercultural shift in the United States, launched by antiwar activists with an intent to bring together the various countercultural factions of the era in an autonomous and cooperative event. The first Gathering was in 1972, in Granby, Colorado, and after a decade of recurring Gathering events in the US, the tradition began migrating to other continents via international travelers. The first event in Europe was held at the border between Switzerland and Italy in 1983, organized by Swiss, French, and Italian participants self-described as "countercultural activists" and "members of the alternative press."<sup>6</sup> By 2019, Gatherings were held in every inhabited continent, and the total number of Rainbow events around the globe annually has been, on average, between seventy and eighty.<sup>7</sup>

Each Gathering is constructed according to a five-decade-long tradition. The camp is ideally located on forested or pastoral land and at a distance from urban environments. Gatherers enter the area via an arrival center known as Welcome Home and hike into the Gathering. The camp consists of neighborhoods of participants' tents, interspersed with designated sub-camps providing communal spaces, facilities, and services: the Main Kitchen and storage, the Temple, the Medicine Area, and so on. The epicenter of the camp is a sacralized area known as the Main Fire or Main Circle where a ceremonial fire burns throughout the event.

Rainbow Gatherings form an event-centered tradition nested in the overlapping networks of Western counterculture and alternative-holistic spirituality. Most Rainbow participants come from Western and middle-class backgrounds—a demographic that is typical of alternative-holistic or New Age religiosity in general<sup>8</sup>—but they favor various forms of knowledge, practice, and aesthetics that divert from typical mainstream understandings. Most Gatherers identify with a number of related subcultures, such as Neopagans and those that scholars refer to as "New Age travelers" (Kevin Hetherington) and "new metaphysicals" (Courtney Bender).<sup>9</sup> Many participants also belong to the social margins, such as people without formal education, wage labor, or permanent housing.

Rainbow Gatherings have been described as temporary intentional communities and autonomous zones, since they last for weeks at a time.<sup>10</sup> The Gatherings are co-created (collectively organized, funded, and managed) and participatory, representing themselves as contemporary spiritual gatherings and counterculture utopias. They claim a culture of radical egalitarianism and sharing, shunning violence, commerce, and hierarchical leadership. The culture's focus on what Gatherers see as ideal social forms and the staunch criticism of modern society manifest as an alternative temporary community modeled after their ideas of premodern "tribal" societies.<sup>11</sup>

12. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Cohen & West, 1990).

13. François Gauthier, "Intimate Circles and Mass Meetings. The Social Forms of Event-Structured Religion in the Era of Globalized Markets and Hyper-Mediatization," *Social Compass* 61, no. 2 (2014): 265.

14. Graham St John, "Ephemeropolis: Burning Man, Transformation, and Heterotopia," *Journal of Festive Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 291–92.

15. Rata, *Alternative Spirituality, Counterculture and European Rainbow Gatherings.*

16. St John, "Ephemeropolis."

17. Although Rainbow culture appreciates personal freedom, participants constantly debate topics such as hygiene, the use of intoxicants on site, and bringing dogs to the Gatherings.

18. St John, "Ephemeropolis," 296–97; Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

19. See Ruth Emond, "More Than Just a Bracelet: The Use of Material Symbolism to Communicate Love," *International Journal of Social Pedagogy* 5, no. 1 (2016): 38–42.

This essay is based on extensive ethnographic study of Rainbow Gatherings in Europe, informed by four years of fieldwork at fourteen Rainbow events of different sizes (from a handful of participants to a few thousand) in Switzerland, Italy, Portugal, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia, and Austria. The research took place over the years 2015–18 and includes participant observation, informal discussions, and thirty-three semi-directed interviews. The essay discusses a "migratory" form of Rainbow culture, as it manifests outside of the United States, and describes regional differences when they are relevant.

## The Transformative Potential of Events

Like many "alternative" phenomena today, Rainbow Gatherings seek to catalyze social transformation through individual experiences. This aspect of the Gatherings is rooted in three interrelated characteristics of transformative events. First, these events are "total social facts" spanning social dimensions which include religion, politics, economics, law, morality, aesthetics, and so on.<sup>12</sup> Second, they form dynamic social systems that interact and collaborate, actively engaging participants.<sup>13</sup> Third, they take a temporal and material form, requiring engagement in corporeal and tangible ways. In these ways, as with other contemporary events identifying as "transformational," Rainbow Gatherings involve a conscious objective of producing and facilitating transformative experiences, a characteristic that amplifies the participants' aims and expectations regarding the event.<sup>14</sup> In so doing, Rainbow Gatherings create a material and practical reality that can make even marginal, complex, and abstract ideas real in the frame of the event.

Rainbow participants commonly describe their Gathering experiences as life-changing, and narratives of transformation are a part of typical Gathering lore.<sup>15</sup> The scope, factors, and conditions of these experienced transformations are myriad, but they are all attributed to the event and its characteristics. One of the most important characteristics is the event's role in opposition to the world outside the event's bounds. As Graham St John has found,<sup>16</sup> transformative events involve a marked contrast with mainstream culture, or more accurately, a multitude of contrasting views since event communities are not without internal contestation.<sup>17</sup> St John analyzes transformative events using the Foucauldian concept of *heterotopia* and notes that heterotopias are "experimental sites for ordering society" and characteristically reflexive in offering "socio-political alternatives."<sup>18</sup> In Rainbow Gatherings, this contrast is obvious and definitional, as the Gatherings are consciously presented as countercultural formations. The Gathering community explicitly addresses the idea of being an experienced social utopia and implements alternative practices, especially in the realms of politics, economics, and religion.

The "event-dimension" of Rainbow Gatherings can be best studied via the concrete and practical aspects of the culture and character of the event because the study of material culture examines the meaning of material forms in social processes, and how social reality is grounded in objects and environments. A central current in material culture studies examines what is known as "material symbolism"—the meanings activated by objects and environments.<sup>19</sup> In addition to symbolic meaning, objects involve concrete aspects from the sensory to the instrumental, and hence the material realm has its own avenues of impact and interaction. Participating in an event like a Rainbow Gathering requires a physical experience of an immersive and immediate alternate reality. To create this immersive material reality, recurring event-cultures like Rainbow Gatherings

20. [Welcome Home](#), "Manuals/Mini-Manual," "What is Rainbow," "Questions and Answers," n.d., accessed January 18, 2022.

21. Niman, "Fakelore," in *People of the Rainbow*, 131–47.

22. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

23. Ratia, *Alternative Spirituality, Counterculture and European Rainbow Gatherings*; Cristopher Partridge, "Truth, Authority and Epistemological Individualism in New Age Thought," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, no.1 (1999): 87–88; Graham St John, "Indian Spirit: Amerindians and the Techno-Tribes of Psytrance," in *Tribal Fantasies: Native Americans in the European Imagination, 1900–Present*, ed. J. Mackay and D. Stirrup (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 173–95, and "Tribalism, Experience, and Remixology in Global Psytrance Culture," in *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*, ed. C. Bender and A. Taves (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 249–52.

24. See St John, "Tribalism, Experience, and Remixology," and St John, "Indian Spirit," 176–80 and references cited therein.

develop their own traditions of presentation and practice: rituals, models of organization, forms of communication, material culture, and styles of attire, behavior, and expression—an entire subculture specific to the event, reflective of social bonds and relevant ideological concepts. These traditions are influential elements in processes of constructing identity, community, and culture—and hence, factors advancing the cultural work of the event. At Rainbow Gatherings, the Talking Stick is a prime example of an object that brings together the material, social, and symbolic worlds and contributes to the creation of an immersive transformational event experience.

### Talking, Circles, and Sticks

The Talking Stick can be described properly only within the specific context of the Circle, which consists of Gatherers sitting in a circle and sharing a common focus. A Circle is an emic social institution in the culture of Rainbow Gatherings (I capitalize the word when referring to this Rainbow Gathering-specific institution). Gatherers form Circles for both practical and symbolic reasons. All kinds of collective processes and functions are performed while sitting or standing in a circle, including informal socializing, collective meals, focused workshops, and devotional practices. A circle of people is a typical motif in Rainbow materials like Gathering invitations and affiliated web pages, as the circle is highly symbolic in Rainbow culture. For the Gatherers, the circle signifies a peaceful, inclusive, and egalitarian community, as the following quotes from a Rainbow website illustrate: "we assemble in a circle and, holding hands we seek to treat each other and the earth with respect," "At the Circle we become One," and "We circle for our meals, and councils because we are all equal."<sup>20</sup> For the Gatherers, the circle also strongly alludes to the perceived "tribal" roots of Rainbow customs.

For many Gatherers, a "tribal" identity represents an ideal. Typical conceptualizations of race, ethnicity, and tradition among the Gatherers are meant to challenge what they perceive to be dominant mainstream constructions, establishing alternative understandings. Such attitudes can be problematic and have drawn accusations of cultural appropriation, especially regarding Native American cultures.<sup>21</sup> However, the Family is diverse, and all Gatherers are not involved in "playing Indian," but Indigenous idioms remain influential on an ideological level.<sup>22</sup> In general, premodern and Indigenous societies are seen as socially harmonious, environmentally sustainable, and spiritually advanced, and are placed in contrast with modern, Western ones. These sentiments are mostly present in an idealistic frame where these imaginaries of premodern societies stand for contemporary countercultural ideals.<sup>23</sup> In Rainbow culture, references to "archaic" and "tribal" cultures and their ways function as general legitimating statements, often related to the concept of "natural" described below. At the very least, attributes like "archaic" or "ancient" suggest that the custom or cultural feature is very old and widely recognized. The Circle, like the Talking Stick, is often legitimated by reference to its "tribal" roots.<sup>24</sup>

There are unspoken guidelines concerning Circles in any Rainbow Gathering. When a Circle is formed as a part of a ritual, it establishes a sacralized space. Unless specifically announced, a Circle is always open for everyone, and participants in the Circle are considered equals in the process, even if someone assumes a facilitating or organizing role. The Circle is a ritualistic formation that organizes space and guides attention, behavior, and social orientation. Circles

25. Niman, *People of the Rainbow*, 39–40, 55; Ratia, *Alternative Spirituality, Counterculture and European Rainbow Gatherings*; Welcome Home, "What is Rainbow."

26. Welcome Home, "Manuals/Mini Manual."

27. Niman, *People of the Rainbow*, 50–51.

at Rainbow Gatherings include Sister/Brother Circles (gender-specific peer support), Singing Circles, Drum Circles, Trading Circles (for bartering wares), Vision Councils that decide over the next Gathering event, and more. When there is a need for focused collective communication in a Rainbow Gathering, a Talking Circle is called. A Talking Circle signifies a specific type of ritualized collective discussion in a Circle, and its purpose can be related to a workshop, responding to a crisis, preparing for a collective task, organizing a themed conversation, or a specific consensual decision-making process. A Talking Circle consists of the participants sitting in a circle facing each other and passing a "focal object" (an object that helps maintain a collective focus) clockwise (sunwise). The tradition requires that the person holding the focal object, which in the migratory Rainbow tradition is typically a designated Talking Stick, has the right to speak uninterrupted. Those who break the rule are often reproached by demands to "Respect the Stick!" by other participants. At the 2016 European Rainbow Gathering described in the beginning, the Talking Stick was an unpeeled wooden staff of approximately one meter in length, decorated with colorful ribbons and trinkets.

Important decisions regarding the whole Family require a full consensus, which is achieved through a ritualized process.<sup>25</sup> Typically, the person who called the Circle together explains the need for collective action, and the participants discuss the circumstances in a Talking Circle. When any participant, during their turn to speak, feels ready to formulate a proposition for the decision, they "call for consensus." This means that a defined proposal is stated, and the Talking Stick circulates to the left. The other participants pass the Stick in silence when they agree with the proposition or break the silence by expressing their concerns when they do not. If anyone breaks the silence, the discussion and reformulation of suggestions continues. When the Stick passes around the entire Circle in silence, consensus has been established, and the decision is confirmed. As media studies scholar Michael Niman emphasizes, consensus is a central aspect of Rainbow Gathering Circles, which is apparent in the following quote from a Rainbow website: "Consensus gives every person a chance to be heard and have their input weighed equally. The smallest minority has a chance to change the collective mind if their vision is keener. It is possible that Spirit has given them a message that is presently beyond the perception of the rest of the council."<sup>26</sup>

The process has its drawbacks. Despite the openness, typically only a small minority of Gatherers participate in the decision-making. Even then, Talking Circles can be time-consuming and disjointed, and the consensus process is vulnerable when participants remain obstinate. Creative ways have been devised to mitigate challenges arising from the requirements of inclusivity and unrestricted speech, such as those documented by Michael Niman among the US Rainbow Families: the Circle can appoint designated facilitators such as "gatekeepers" whose job is to update latecomers, and "vibeswatchers" who pause the discussion if it gets heated or disrespectful, recommending a moment of collective exercise, silence, or a group hug.<sup>27</sup> Even with these challenges, most Rainbows believe that the Talking Stick promotes their ideals of a decentralized and direct form of radical democracy. A closer look at the "biography" of the Talking Stick reveals some of the ways that it promotes these ideals, as well as some of the tensions and contradictions involved with its use.

28. Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), and "Material Analysis"; Kopytoff, "Cultural Biography of Things"; Sonia Hazard, "[The Material Turn in the Study of Religion](#)," *Religion and Society* 4, no.1 (2013): 59.
29. Morgan, "Material Analysis," 14.
30. Morgan, "Material Analysis," 30.
31. "[Nature](#)," Oxford Learner's Dictionaries.
32. Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Hugh Urban, *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Alan Levinovitz, *Natural: How Faith in Nature's Goodness Leads to Harmful Fads, Unjust Laws, and Flawed Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).

## Cultural Biography of the Talking Stick

Object biographies are an analytical method of material culture studies, used by archaeologists, art historians, anthropologists, and others who study the relationships of people and objects. These biographies are also employed in material religion, or the study of religion through its material aspects.<sup>28</sup> Religious studies scholar David Morgan has stated that the point of the material approach is to make the material reality "evidential" of religious aspects instead of merely illustrative of them.<sup>29</sup> The method can be extended to cultural domains that are related and comparable to religion, like transformative events or vernacular models of governing and collective communication: "Any object or bodily practice that connects one to forces that protect, heal or nurture is at least on the verge of becoming religious, even if that force is the state, mother nature, human goodness or purpose-driven cosmic principle like ecological harmony."<sup>30</sup>

Following Morgan's method, my analysis of the Talking Stick consists of three main themes: *production*, involving the object's medium, design, and manufacture; *classification*, including the object's function, comparison, and remediation (changes in the object's medium); and *circulation*, which includes the object's deployment, reception, and the ideology or cultural work it serves. Cultural work encompasses the topic of this essay—Rainbow's political tradition—but it is not sufficient to focus directly on that. The object biography method deepens our understanding of cultural work by first analyzing various other features of the object and its interaction with humans, thus ensuring a comprehensive analysis of its role in Rainbow culture.

### The Production of Talking Sticks as Designing with Nature

A volunteering Gatherer (or a group) makes the Talking Stick from dry, unworked, and untreated wood found within or close to the Gathering site. If the Stick is decorated, the decorations range from paint and other markings to attached objects and materials such as feathers, small bones, beads, crystals and semiprecious stones, strings, yarn, ribbons, wire, and small figurines. The material of the Stick carries specific meaning. The wood has been alive and growing in the Gathering location, making the object organic and essentially connected to the local site. It is a product of nature, often including its shape. The Stick can be called "natural" on this basis, but "nature" and "natural" are terms that have extensive cultural meanings going beyond the literal definition of "all the plants, animals and things that exist in the universe that are not made by people."<sup>31</sup>

Here, a short discussion about the concept "natural" and its meanings and connotations is in order—as it is central in Rainbow culture but often not explicitly defined. In the alternative-holistic world view (and the mainstream one to a lesser degree), the whole concept of "natural" should be taken as approaching a religious term.<sup>32</sup> Not only is the term defined by supra-rational ideas and sentiments, but the concept is rarely discussed in any critical manner by the Gatherers. "Nature" and "natural" are accepted as cultural positives without questioning the meanings of these terms. "Nature" and "natural" are broadly used in this sense in Western and Westernized countries in general, and within the alternative-holistic spiritualities in particular, as shorthand for beneficial, positive, and ethical objects and practices across the board: diet and food production, healing arts, philosophy and religion, clothing and accessories, occupational and lifestyle choices, birthing and child rearing, education, and much more. As religious studies scholar Alan Levinovitz

notes, this kind of use of the term is comparable to a theological term, where the “good” that nature represents clearly has moral, ethical, and transcendent properties.<sup>33</sup> For Rainbow Gatherers, then, “nature” has a taken-for-granted quality rather than being seen as something they have constructed. Their attitudes towards the Talking Stick exemplify the construction of nature as an ideal good.

Rainbow Gatherers tend to explicitly contrast natural materials to unnatural materials, which they see in a negative light. A wooden stick could be seen as being of lower or more “primitive” status than a plastic item for example, but for Rainbow participants it is the opposite: these two materials represent completely different cultural meanings. One is of nature, but the other is artificial and synthetic, connoting not the ideas of human mastery over nature or “progress” that previous generations have seen in modern materials like plastics, but an “unnaturalness” that has negative ethical and moral tones. Items like glass beads or industrial metal wire are acceptable as decorations on the Stick—they appear natural when compared to newer materials such as plastics.

The Talking Sticks I have seen range from slender branches of thirty centimeters in length to large staffs of 1.5 meters and more, and they are typically decorated in a rustic and colorful manner. The decorations are concentrated on one end of the Stick, which becomes the top when the Stick is held upright. Often, the Stick’s natural features, such as a distinctive shape, bleaching from the sun, or damage from animals or water, are left visible. The Stick can even be chosen for showing prominent signs of such processes. Sometimes these natural shapes and markings are left to be the only conspicuous visual features of the Stick because “nature” requires no human improvements, but most often the Stick is trimmed to a desired length and shape and decorated. Decorations can be painted, carved, or scorched, with motifs such as animal heads, runes, and geometric shapes. Other typical adornments include wrapping parts of the stick with string or metal wire and attaching small objects, either affixed or suspended. The size and shape of the Talking Stick serve its use and purpose. It is meant to be held and passed from hand to hand. It is also meant to be seen by others in the Circle. It is elongated, fitting the hand, and not too inconspicuous, but not too heavy to be easily handled. Thus, the Talking Stick’s design is practical and, like its medium, markedly “natural,” drawing meaning from the emic understandings of this concept in Rainbow culture.

Any Rainbow participant can manufacture the Talking Stick. According to my field observations, the Talking Stick can be established as early as during the preparatory phase of the Gathering event known as the Seed Camp, to be used in the collective discussions during this period, but the Stick can also be remade later in the event. These choices are up to individual Gatherers, who might, for instance, decide to replace an existing Stick with another, more impressive or elaborate one. Most Gatherers expect that the Talking Stick is produced anew for each Gathering, but there are exceptions to the custom where a Stick from a previous Gathering has been kept by someone, brought back to a Rainbow event, and used again. Reusing a Stick can emphasize continuity, reinforce a nascent local Rainbow tradition, or link distinct Gathering events to each other. In these ways, production of the Stick is frequent, and despite the Talking Stick being an emblematic item with an important political function, the production does not require a special status, skills, or expense from its maker. Rather, it requires an investment of another kind: interest in contributing to the community and serving its needs.



34. Morgan, "Material Analysis."
35. Morgan, "Material Analysis."
36. F. S. Burnell, "[Staves and Sceptres](#)" *Folklore* 59, no. 4 (1948): 157–64.
37. Hope B. Werness, *Continuum Encyclopedia of Native Art: Worldview, Symbolism, and Culture in Africa, Oceania, and North America* (London: A&C, 2003), 295; Peter Frederick Suhm, *Historie af Danmark: t. 1340 til 1375* (Kongelig og universitetsbogtrykker, 1826), 334.

According to Morgan's approach, "an object's design and manufacture need to be in harmony with its medium's affordances for the sake of successful production."<sup>34</sup> In material culture studies an affordance prompts us to think about the relation an object has to its setting. In the ways described above, the design and manufacture of the Talking Stick are intended to harmonize with its medium's affordances for the purposes and requirements of the object—a functional focal object for collective communication that is easy to produce in the circumstances of the Gathering while adhering to the symbolic system relevant for the culture, such as the value given to nature and Indigenous cultural practices that the Stick is modeled on. Analyzing the Stick's production offers important information about its characteristics and the social location of its makers, but the next section will examine Rainbow's broader understanding of the Stick and other, similar objects that play a part in Rainbow's material culture in order to fully understand its cultural significance.

### The Classification of Talking Sticks as "Tribal" Objects

The purpose of "classification" in an object biography is to determine what the thing is understood to be. The Talking Stick's classification demonstrates how it is conceived in Rainbow culture: what kinds of other objects it is related to and possible changes in its medium or format in different contexts. The Talking Stick's most explicit function is to organize collective communication within a Talking Circle. It indicates the speaker in turn, who has the "floor" or the "say," and that all others should listen quietly. As Gatherers see it, the Stick facilitates democratic discussion and decision-making by ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak, uninterrupted and unchallenged while they do so, and that all participants are equally represented in the decision, as the interview quote below illustrates. The Talking Stick has important instrumental functions in the context of a Talking Circle: holding the Stick marks the speaker, visually organizing the situation for all participants. The Stick's movement in the Circle denotes roughly how much time each participant can expect to pass before their turn arrives. The guideline requiring others to listen in silence is intended to create an attentive environment that is supportive of all speakers and their style of expression.

In addition to its function, the comparative context for the Stick is important within Rainbow because it reveals a host of cultural meanings. David Morgan calls the comparison step in an object biography "setting the archive," which he explains as follows: "An archive illuminates the genealogy of family resemblances, revealing important information about where a thing comes from and why it takes the shape it does."<sup>35</sup> A staff or a stick has general cultural meanings including instrumental and symbolic aspects, as staffs have been used universally as weapons and tools as well as ritual objects connoting power and status.<sup>36</sup> In Gatherers' understanding, the Talking Stick belongs to a class of similar ritual objects originating in premodern or even prehistoric cultures, which are made and used in roughly the same way. Rainbow participants might make broad attributions of the Talking Stick being an "ancient" or "tribal" custom, or point to actual examples among Amerindian, African, Oceanian, and European peoples.<sup>37</sup> For the Gatherers, using the Talking Stick signifies following an ancient and Indigenous tradition and confers a sense of authenticity on the Gathering.

There is a narrative circulating among the US Rainbow participants that identifies the Talking Stick as "native" and provides an origin story for Rainbow's use of focal objects. Such a story

38. Interview with F. S., 2017.

39. Suhm, *Historie af Danmark*, 334.

40. Niman, *People of the Rainbow*,  
42–43.

41. Niman, 42.

raises some of the problematic ways in which Rainbow Gatherings claim authenticity through connections to Indigenous cultures. Feather Sherman, one of the “Earlies” (instead of “elders”) of the US Rainbow Family, explains it this way:

In the [US] Rainbow Gathering of 1983, the Vision Council was full of dispute. The argument went on for 36 hours. The conflicts were making some people leave the Council. That’s when one of the Council participants, a Native brother called Clark Viper, said that he wants to share a tradition from his tribe that will help the Family. He was a grandson of Black Elk. The next day, this brother came to the Council meeting with a staff decorated with crystals and a big eagle feather.... The feather was to be passed from hand to hand in the circle, and only the one holding it would have the right to speak, for as long as they needed. So, the Family got this as a gift.<sup>38</sup>

Feather also described the specific ritual instructions for storing and caring for the eagle feather, including smudging it with sage and wrapping it in paper and red cloth. This story establishes an eagle feather as the focal object proper, and the Stick as an ancillary part.

This account of the Talking Stick coming to the Rainbow Family functions for Gatherers as an origin story, attributing the custom not only directly to the famous Lakota medicine man Black Elk, but also as a gift from a Native Rainbow participant to the Rainbow community. In addition to legitimizing the material form of the object, the story also legitimizes its use by the non-Native Rainbow Family, because it was a gift. This origin story is not commonly known among the European Rainbow Family, probably because it recounts an event specific to the US Gatherings and addresses themes that are more acute in the US, such as the relationship to North American Native Nations and accusations of cultural appropriation. European Gatherers might instead refer to speaker’s staff traditions on a general level, or historical European examples such as the Scandinavian *Tingstav*.<sup>39</sup>

The US Rainbow Family has commonly used feathers as focal objects, as Sherman’s account indicates.<sup>40</sup> The object’s name and designation reflect this feature: the US Rainbow Family often calls any focal object “the Feather,” although the term Talking Stick is also known. But the object has undergone variations over the years and as Rainbow has migrated. Most if not all Gatherings outside of the US, meaning the majority of Rainbow events, use a wooden stick as the focal object proper. Names in other European languages are direct translations of “stick” or “staff”: *Bâton de parole*, *Redestab*, *bastone della parola*, et cetera. The material form of the Talking Stick thus changed as the tradition migrated outside of the US, but its function, meaning, and cultural work did not.

In addition to sticks and feathers, sometimes other items are used as the focal object in a Circle, serving the same purpose as the Stick. These variations are purposeful, creative changes that serve specific concerns. In his study of Rainbow Gatherings in the US, Michael Niman describes the US Rainbow Council’s ritual innovation regarding the choice of the focal object in this way:

Although a feather, sometimes attached to a staff, is the traditional “focal object,” more and more Rainbow Councils are substituting randomly chosen objects so as to refocus attention on the speaker rather than the object itself. Arguments over whose feather to pass, and people’s possessiveness about their feathers, have caused problems in the past, inducing various Rainbow Councils to pass bowls, stones, or shoes instead. Bowls, which many Rainbows claim represent “female energy,” are often passed to balance the excessive “male energy” allegedly represented by staffs.<sup>41</sup>

42. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan; and Urban, New Age, Neopagan*.

43. Morgan, "Material Analysis," 25.

44. Morgan, "Material Analysis."

45. On symbolism regarding staffs and vessels, see William Stephen Jackson, *Rerum Fontis: Lectures on Esoteric Symbology* (Magnus Veritas Press, 2011), 260–66.

This account, based on Niman's fieldwork among the US Rainbow Family in the 1990s, portrays an intentional development which is now common in Gatherings around the world. It is an example of deliberate ritual creativity that changes the tradition of choosing a focal object and relates it to a novel symbolic universe. The creative changes express a fusion typical of alternative-holistic tradition-making: ideas of traditional beliefs and practices are supplemented with other sources, creating a mix catering to contemporary notions like "refocusing attention to the speaker" and "balancing the male and female energies."<sup>42</sup>

Here we have two distinct examples of what David Morgan calls remediation, meaning "reissuing of a product in a new medium or format."<sup>43</sup> The first example refers to the transformation of the focal object when it moves from US Rainbow events to events outside the US, where the Feather becomes the Stick. This process seems to be a migrating custom where practical and material elements are transmitted without the full context of history and meaning: the stick, "originally" meant to carry the actual focal object of the feather, gets installed as the focal object itself. Cultural practices within Rainbow are often transmitted without the full "original" context, giving space for variation and reinterpretation. I see this kind of transmission not as a regrettable omission or misunderstanding, but a site for creativity, offering an opportunity for purposeful adaptation to new concerns and circumstances.<sup>44</sup> The feather tradition crafted among the US Rainbow Family, assumedly based on those Amerindian traditions that ascribe meaning to eagle feathers, migrated to Europe where the historical examples for focal objects were, namely, sticks and staffs.

In the second example illustrated by Niman's account, the feather and the stick are purposefully diminished in significance by introducing an idea of multiple possible objects with suitable symbolic meanings, such as vessel-like items signifying "female energy." Here, ritual improvisation is employed to broaden the symbolic expressivity of the focal object, to better suit the aims of the ritual actors. Rainbow's crafted ritual tradition thus includes a version that refers to perceived historical examples, emphasizing ideas of continuity and adherence to "ancient" and "tribal" traditions. In addition, the crafted tradition includes a second version able to respond to the specific circumstances of the ritual event at hand, by involving a ritual object that carries a relevant symbolic meaning. The latter version allows for personalization and adaptation to the specific case or situation, and appeals to the traditions from which the relevant symbolism is drawn, such as Western esotericism and its sources.<sup>45</sup> Creating distance from the initial cultural context of the Talking Stick might be necessary to effectively activate new interpretations, even when identifying the Talking Stick as "native" remains crucial. These aspects of the Talking Stick's biography reveal its ritually constituted cultural meanings and symbolism in relationship to other focal objects.

### **The Circulation of the Talking Stick: Driving Participatory Democracy**

The Talking Stick certainly "circulates" when it is used in Circles, but in object biographies circulation refers to the entire social career of objects being exchanged, transported, and deployed in different arenas and social contexts. Deployment means all the uses that an object is put to and the purposes it serves during its existence, through activities such as trade, collecting, gifting, ritual, entertainment, devotion, and so on. Deployment involves commerce, remediation, and display, and it happens through exchange, as the object moves from makers

46. Morgan, "Material Analysis," 27.

47. Ratia, *Alternative Spirituality, Counterculture and European Rainbow Gatherings*.

48. Field notes, Lithuania, 2015.

49. Field notes, Lithuania, 2015;  
Austria, 2016.

50. See Janne Rantala, "[Magic Hat Economics: Counter-Cultural Ideals and Practices of the Nordic Ting Community](#)," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 21 (2009): 162–81, here 150–51.

to users, traders, owners, and consumers.<sup>46</sup> Rainbow's Talking Sticks have a restricted range of deployment. They are manufactured or chosen by Rainbow participants and given to the Family to use collectively, but they are rarely exchanged beyond that. In some cases, Talking Sticks are kept by individual Gatherers as personal souvenirs after a Gathering is over, and they perhaps end up being displayed, exchanged, or used as ritual objects in non-Gathering contexts.

The Stick is part of a gift economy in the frame of the Gathering: it is produced by an individual or a group of Gatherers and given to the whole community. In this way, the Stick joins the Gathering's economy, consisting of voluntary but reciprocal contributions between the community and its members, producing not only the whole event and all the various things and services it involves (there is no commodity exchange), as well as the social bonds that create the community and the broader symbolic exchange included in the transmission of tradition and transformative ritual work.<sup>47</sup> The Stick is understood to be collective property, and all claims of individual ownership or suggestions of commodification would be seen by Gatherers as preposterous.

The Talking Stick is mostly deployed as a focal object, not only in Talking Circles and Councils but in various other situations of collective communication, where it can be used in creative ways that divert from the absolute freedom of speech required in Talking Circles. The Stick can organize communication in the contexts of education, conflict resolution, therapeutic work, announcements, collaboration, and creative projects. The European Rainbow Family has developed other customs related to the Stick as well. The Talking Stick can be used as a visual signal for getting attention in group situations, usually by lifting the Stick high, as in the following field example:

The Food Circle is in full swing when a young man approaches the Sacred Fire at the centre, carrying the Talking Stick. He raises it up in the air, waiting for the group to quiet down and pay attention to him. Next to me, an older gentleman groans at the gesture. "We are still eating! Have some patience!" he calls out. The younger man lowers the Stick, sets it down and squats next to it, waiting for a better moment.<sup>48</sup>

Typically, a Gathering has a singular Talking Stick linked to the most central location, the Main Fire, but camp locations where collective communication happens regularly might make their own. In addition, temporary versions of the Stick can be established as needed. I have seen Gatherers use objects such as a bamboo flute, a piece of firewood, and a soup ladle as impromptu Talking Sticks.<sup>49</sup> Designated and decorated Talking Sticks are often displayed at central locations such as the Main Fire when they are not in use, for example, propped up against stones demarcating the sacralized fire pit, but temporary ones return directly to their normal roles after use.

An object's "reception," one of the steps of the "circulation" theme in Morgan's object biography, involves signs of the object's physical use, its private and local appropriations, and other aspects of how it is treated. In general, there are two kinds of responses to the Talking Stick: those that show veneration of the object and those that concentrate on the related ideas and principles, even to the detriment of the object itself. Although the Talking Stick is generally treated with reverence, there are examples of contrary trends where the Stick is downplayed as a treasured ritual object and presented as merely a tool for communication.<sup>50</sup> In situations when an

51. Field notes, Portugal, 2016.

52. Interview with T. P., 2018.

53. Morgan, *Embodied Eye*; Morgan, "Material Analysis"; see also Hazard, "Material Turn."

54. Morgan, *Embodied Eye*.

55. Morgan, "Material Analysis," 28. Morgan refers to concepts such as Marcel Mauss's techniques of the body ("[Techniques of the Body](#)," *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 73), Pierre Bourdieu's habitus (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], 82), and Birgit Meyer's sensational form ("[Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion](#)," inaugural speech, Vrije Universiteit, 2006, 20)—meaning the social construction and cultural impacts of how people do even simple things like sitting or eating.

56. Morgan, "Material Analysis," 29.

immediate need for a Talking Circle arises, as in crisis and conflict situations, any stick or another object will be used as a makeshift focal object if there is no Talking Stick readily available. These situations show that communication itself in the expected form is more significant than the prepared and decorated object, as in Niman's account above of the various things that can become focal objects.

In some instances of a kind of anti-reception, the Stick is intentionally destroyed in the context of a Gathering, as a response to unwanted attitudes or its "disrespectful" use. These situations may involve someone throwing the Talking Stick into the Main Fire, as I describe below. The act of burning the Talking Stick makes full sense only in the framework of its intended function, symbolism, and status as a collectively meaningful item. When the principles of allowing the holder of the Stick to speak freely or recognizing them as a full member of the community are disregarded, destroying the Stick becomes much more than just an expression of anger or vandalism. Burning or breaking the Talking Stick in this situation is an iconoclastic protest aimed at the entire community.

The Family has convened for food, and it is customary to share information during this collective moment. A man speaks up, with a bare stick in his hands: "Dear Family, there was a conflict in the Talking Circle last night. There was no respect for the Talking Stick, (and the Stick got destroyed). Everyone is invited to help and bring things for decorating the Stick and we'll make a new one, better and more beautiful."<sup>51</sup>

Other instances of destroying the Stick are related to concerns about unwanted cultural meanings. Gatherers see the practice of producing a new Talking Stick for each event as a meaningful custom, as it prevents the worship of an object. One such participant explained to me that he personally likes to burn the Talking Stick after a Gathering event has ended, to make sure that nobody takes the Stick and turns it into a "relic." He explained this as "blocking the creation of religion."<sup>52</sup> This perspective criticizes typical features of institutionalized religion such as permanent, recognized sacred items, and reflects Rainbow culture's general reproach of religious institutions and consumer culture.

In order to understand the kind of cultural work that objects perform in these examples, I turn to David Morgan's phenomenological perspective that views the object as part of an assembly consisting of the item, its users, and the corporeal interface of the body.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the bodily and cognitive aspects that are involved in the use of the object are parts of the experience, as are collectives of bodies.<sup>54</sup> Objects and experiences related to their use, Morgan says, "help to organize the life-worlds in which people exist" in profound ways.<sup>55</sup> From this kind of phenomenological perspective, political and ritual practices consist of embodied, learned behaviors that help to establish shared ways of feeling, experiencing, and thinking. They help to create social bonds—in this case directly, through the process of the Talking Circle—but also by reinforcing a collective culture. Morgan argues that these customary ways of acting often become unquestioned and habitual: "The techniques of the body that members of society learn become second nature—that is they are consonant with reality."<sup>56</sup> Material culture and practices instill cultural values in our experience of the world, anchoring truths, rights, and wrongs. Analyzing the cultural work performed by the Talking Stick requires looking at the combination formed by the Talking Stick, the Circle, and participants, as well as the interactions between the components.

57. See André Drooger's *Play and Power in Religion: Collected Essays* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), and *Religion in Play: A Manifesto* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014); François Gauthier, "(Re)créer le monde à Burning Man. Jeu, don et créativité rituelle," *Revue du MAUSS* 46, no. 2 (2015): 220–50; and the work of Alain Caillé, cf. Roberte Hamayon, *Why We Play: An Anthropological Study* (London: Hau Books, 2012).

58. Talking Circles are not the only ritualized alternative organizational model in the Rainbow. Other notable examples are found with Rainbow's economy (the Magic Hat) and collective ritual tradition (the Main Fire).

The way that the Talking Stick looks and feels signifies ideas and concepts central to the worldview of the participants, not only through ascribed cultural meanings but also through the tactile and sensory input arising from the physical characteristics of the object. The Stick is, for example, observably organic and "natural," shaping emotional perceptions of the object. The material form lends itself to techniques of visual and tactile engagement involved in the meaning making and in the organizing function of the Talking Circle practice. Through its symbolic meanings, the Stick communicates ideas, norms, and values central to the culture. Evoking emic connotations of concepts such as "tribal" and "natural," the artifact represents (and enacts) ideas of egalitarianism, mutual respect, nonviolent communication, and communalism. In this way, the use of the Talking Stick reflects the core countercultural and "spiritual" values of the movement, and ritual practices involving the Stick express and reproduce cultural identity. In addition, the Talking Stick, together with the essential components of the Circle and the practice of circulating the Stick, instrumentally shape political participation and organize the decision-making process. The artifact and how it is used reflect and constitute Rainbow's ideals: a politics that is open and inclusive, decentralized, nonrepresentational, and dependent on negotiation and compromise aiming at consensus.

## Conclusion

From the Talking Stick's production that shows its (collective, "tribal" and "natural") ideological moorings, through its classification that describes the cultural context (the site of creativity), to its circulation that reveals the instrumental abilities the Stick has, the eight first steps of the object biography (medium, design, manufacture, function, comparison, remediation, deployment and reception) lay the groundwork for the last step regarding cultural work, especially the cultural work of ritual creativity around material objects.

The cultural work of the Stick—driving a radical form of consensual democracy—is accomplished by the symbolic and instrumental abilities that are based on its material and practical properties, and the features of the ritual practices when and where the Stick is used. These properties and features are the elements of ritual improvisation and creativity. Various scholars have posed that creativity requires a certain space or margin among relatively fixed elements of meaning and function, and the Stick exemplifies this: it is at the same time a specific artifact with a designated form and assigned significance, and an immaterial concept that can be employed by using any suitable object as a surrogate.<sup>57</sup> Creative possibilities stem from this flexibility. For example, the choice of the focal object can refer to perceived historical links and their cultural value or a specific symbolic vector such as ideas of the feminine and the masculine. The Stick can be a recurring item that supports the consolidation of group identity, or it can be made anew each time to hinder the development of hierarchical structures or to avoid assigning power to the object itself. It can be circulated among everybody present, or among a chosen set of speakers to enable different foci and forms of representation.

Crafted ritual can establish a compelling method of social organization, at least in the temporary frame of a transformative event.<sup>58</sup> Ritual practices like the use of the Talking Stick in Talking Circles can be functional and meaningful even without the ideological background, and even if for outsiders, they appear pretended, trite, or culturally appropriative. Organizational models contribute to the transformational potential of events, which is reflected in the considerable and

comprehensive cultural work performed by the Talking Stick. The Stick is relevant to Rainbow culture's questions of identity, values, and purpose, and essential to the practical functioning and lived experience of the Gathering events. These symbolic and instrumental aspects of the Talking Stick are potent factors in shaping and understanding the countercultural lifeworld of a Rainbow Gathering.

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