

The Trials of Artemis: Community, Ritual and the Land

Kimberly Ross

The Trials of Artemis is a ritual event which was started at Kaleidoscope Gathering in its first year at Raven's Knoll. In it, any women of the community who wish to participate take up a series of challenges in order to determine who amongst the candidates will carry the title of Huntress for the following year, the symbolic protector and provider of the community.

Since ritual is generally considered the domain of religion or spirituality, particularly in the context of land such as Raven's Knoll, I also wish to share my own perspective on its importance. As someone who does not have faith-based beliefs, I feel it is important to address why I became involved with the pagan community and many of its rituals.

The Importance of Ritual, Community and the Land

I have always been a humanist, rather than a spiritualist or believer, and many have asked what I see in a spiritual community or why I participate in, or organize, rituals in the pagan community. I have also been a strong supporter for pagan-owned land within my chosen community, and some have been puzzled by that.

My answer to these questions begins with my studies of anthropology, and that I see community as one of the most important things people need to have. A place where a community can build their dreams, can assemble without restriction, and which can be modified to fit the needs of that community, is particularly beneficial. I feel that dedicated land is especially important for pagan communities, who are oriented to nature, and for those of us who share a sense of wonder in the natural world, if not the same spirituality. Raven's Knoll fulfills that need for the community, and I am proud to be a part of forging some of the new traditions that make it a unique space.

In that light, for a community to be cohesive and functional, few things are more important than ritual. It fosters bonding between members of the community, aids individuals in their journeys of personal growth, and contributes to a united sense of purpose. It reassures people that they are not alone, that they share a commonality with others. It helps to ease the pain and discomfort of change or loss. It helps us feel a sense of unity and accomplish tasks that none of us could achieve alone. It can help us resolve problems, or bring concerns to light. It can help us to heal, to end a phase of our life, or to begin a new chapter.

Understand that ritual is a broad term to me, and encompasses many habits and events, not necessarily spiritual in nature. A morning cup of tea or an established way of ending the day is a ritual. An event at a particular time and place is a ritual. For me, these rituals include a weekly meeting with fellow writers, a bi-weekly game with friends, a monthly full moon get-together, christmas dinner with my family, and attending Kaleidoscope Gathering each year. A more specific attendance ritual for me is that every time I go to Raven's Knoll, I visit the bonfire space.

Any gathering or action for a specific reason, be it formal or informal, ceremonial or casual, is a ritual. A sumble in the heathen tradition is less formalized, while an opening ritual for a festival or a coming-of-age ceremony is more formally structured, according to its tradition, but they are all ideally structured to serve their purpose.

For me, ceremonial ritual is about purpose; it drives us and motivates us. Whether that purpose is as simple as bringing order and inclusion to the members of the community, or as complex as sharing grief over loss or building strength to overcome obstacles. The formal elements of ritual have always been less important to me, as long as the ritual structure inspires the participants' thoughts and brings them together.

There are a few occasions which stand out in my mind as illustrations of community and the importance of ritual within it. One of these occurred just after a sumble I had attended. It came up in conversation with a few of the other participants that I was not spiritual, and one of my friends asked politely why I attended sumbles if that was the case. My reply was that a sumble was one of the best community building rituals I had ever come across, and that was why it held value for me. She and the few others there accepted my perspective in stride, recognizing that our motivations were much the same, despite our differences. This is one of the many reasons why I regard the pagan community as my community, despite the absence of spirituality on my part.

I first began to understand the importance of formal rituals many years ago, though. An accident occurred one night around the bonfire at a festival, and people were injured. Throughout the next day, I heard people not only discussing it, but dwelling on the negative feelings this had caused to be associated with the bonfire itself. I was driven to remind people that the bonfire was a place of celebration and love. I didn't want to make people forget about the injuries, or that fire must be respected and well tended, only that there was still happiness and warmth to be found there, that it did not have to be tainted by unhappy events.

A few friends helped me cobble together a cleansing ritual which we performed at dusk. As ceremonial rituals went, it was quite informal. The purpose of the ritual was to cleanse the space of fear and negative thoughts in the minds of the festival participants. It was impromptu, so not many people were there, and only a few more drifted in as we proceeded. We waved them in as we went, and finished with a happy-toned, uplifting chant about fire.

As the bulk of the festival participants showed up, the mood was tentative, but as word spread of the cleansing ritual that had been performed, the mood improved. Between the ritual and people's natural resiliency to misfortune, the night continued in the spirit it was intended to. Whether one believes in the spiritual power of ritual or not, the act of drawing people's attention to a common goal, even just the knowledge that it had been done, brought members of the community into a common purpose and intent, to reaffirm the celebratory nature of the space.

I have run or helped to organize many other rituals and events since then, all of which have been aimed at contributing to the community as a whole. Many have focused more on intent than formal elements, and some have not been ritualistic at all except in their aspect of traditional repetition.

Whether it is the Trials of Artemis, the Women's Warrior Circle, a yearly discussion of anthropological topics relating to the theme of Kaleidoscope, or a new tradition of a fire keeper's weekend at Raven's Knoll, these all have an aspect of ritual to me. They all bring people together with the goal of adding positively to the community as a whole in one way or another. They are all events which are held in a certain time and place, and they all call Raven's Knoll home.

The symbolic importance of Raven's Knoll to the community that populates it is valuable even to those of us who hold no beliefs. It is about community, and a place in which we can come together to support and celebrate each other. It is a place where traditions can be formed with a sense of permanence and collective identity, where rituals take on greater meaning because of the dedicated purpose of the land.

How the Trials of Artemis Began

For the Trials of Artemis, we wanted to create something for a specific purpose; a ritual, but not one bound to habit, nor one that was rigidly formalized. Even the name was carefully chosen after much deliberation, to convey that this was a challenge, but also an acknowledgement of prowess and skill. We wanted to structure a space where women could explore aspects of themselves that are often neglected. Not the nurturing, domestic, craft-oriented, sensitive aspects, but the fiercely resolute, innovative, clever, strong, and powerful aspects.

It began as a conversation between my good friend Elaine and I, but it took some years before we were able to fully form the details of what was needed, and set to doing it. Elaine came up with many of the ideas for the first set of challenges, and between the two of us we ironed everything out to run almost smoothly. The first year it happened was the first year Kaleidoscope took place at Raven's Knoll, which seemed an appropriate time and place for a new tradition to be born. It almost immediately took on a life of its own, and we knew that we had gotten the right idea.

I don't know about Elaine, who was only there for the first year, but from the time I took over the organizing of it, to the time I handed it off to the huntresses and elders of the community, I have fielded many questions, comments and critiques about the Trials. Foremost amongst these was the assumption that it was merely the women's equivalent of the Stag King Competition. While it does fulfill a similar niche for its participants and the community as a whole, the Trials have their own distinct philosophy.

The Trials of Artemis reflect a rejection of socially accepted gender roles, as well as celebrating qualities that typically are less encouraged for women. The challenges are aimed partly at countering stereotypes, with an emphasis on celebrating a whole and complete woman, who can unselfconsciously relate her abilities and accomplishments, who can lead, protect, provide for, and understand her wider community. It is based on modern principles of equality, past egalitarian ideologies, and on the accomplishments of historical women who are often neglected in history texts. Drawing on the past for inspiration is an important part of this ritual for me, as part and parcel of the desire to inspire people in the future with our actions.

There is a wealth of historical and archaeological information to draw on as far as excellent women role-models are concerned, from pre-historic times right up to the modern day. Some are well known, such as Boudicca, who led her people against the Romans, or the politically powerful Queens of medieval Spain, who shaped the course of their nation. Hatshepsut of Egypt, and many powerful matriarchs of influential Italian families, such as the Borgias, are also familiar names. Less well known are the women warriors and leaders, whose graves have been discovered across the breadth of Northern Europe and Eurasia. Many of them were assumed to be male based on the items found with them, until further analysis was performed.

Many less well known women recorded by history were leaders of their people in times of war as well as peace. In the 1st century, Veleda was a leader of the Rhineland tribe of the Bructeri. She led in both the political and spiritual arenas, serving as an arbiter during negotiations between Rome and Cologne and acting as a prophetess for her tribe. The Roman writer Tacitus underscored the connection between her roles in military and religious life when he described her as

“a maiden of the tribe of the Bructeri, who possessed extensive dominion; for by ancient usage the Germans attributed to many of their women prophetic powers and, as the superstition grew in strength, even actual divinity. The authority of Veleda was then at its height, because she had foretold the success of the Germans and the destruction of the legions.”

Respected and powerful women are also reflected as deities or important figures in the mythologies of many cultures; Isis, Kali, Athena, Astarte, Frigga, the Fates, the Valkyries, the Morrigan, and of course, Diana or Artemis.

Artemis, of the Greek pantheon, is a goddess of the hunt, the wilderness, the mistress of animals, and the protector of girls and women. She is depicted as a master of the bow, and a hunter of unparalleled skill, but also associated with childbirth. She was chosen as the namesake of the ritual because she embodies the idea that being a strong, fierce, independent hunter and being a caring protector are not incompatible roles. These are ideals to which all people can aspire, be they men or women.

Without wanting to really delve into gender politics too much, a small mention is unavoidable. Particularly for women in our society, strength, pride in accomplishment, and independence are qualities that are not valued often enough. One of the intents of this annual ritual is to explore and encourage these attributes, and it has not been without its obstacles. On several occasions, men in the community have offered unsolicited advice on how to conduct the ritual, where they would not have had it conformed to more conventional aspects of femininity.

While I realize the good intentions behind most of them, these people are often blind to the idea that women, even in this community, very much need to cultivate their own personal agency. One of the many purposes of this ritual is to do this as women, for women, without the need for aid or advisement of men. It is an expression of capability and autonomy in the face of wider social discrimination that we come together and demonstrate our prowess.

This sense of equality and independent authority is at the heart of the Trials. Even the name reflects the reality of overcoming assumptions and expectations. It hearkens back to legends and myths where the huntress was as respected as the hunter, and where the warrior woman needed no man's approval to be who she was.

The Trials of Artemis

The Trials are meant to choose the best among the community; she, who among many skilled and talented people, is chosen to be the symbolic representation of strength, resourcefulness, capability, truth, and wisdom for the community as a whole.

The challenges themselves vary widely, but are designed to determine certain qualities in the candidates. Some are individual trials, while others involve working with a group. Some are more competitive, with objective scoring, while some are judged more subjectively on the participant's actions or words, but the ultimate decision of who is to be the Huntress falls to the elders of the community who oversee the ritual.

Some of the trials test for physical prowess and skill, such as running, archery, or throwing. Others seek out resourcefulness and innovation, by crafting objects or hunting tools from the surrounding environment, finding symbolic items, or exploring ways to accomplish goals with few materials.

Cleverness and wisdom are also sought for, by solving riddles, thinking creatively and overcoming physical obstacles through intelligence. Another set of trials cover personal confidence and the participant's ability to express themselves and their ideas well.

Throughout, the elders observe for less measurable traits such as leadership, integrity, sense of community, and conviction. In the end, the title of Huntress may not go to the strongest or the fastest, but to the woman who is most capable and embodies the qualities that are needed in a protector, provider, and role-model for her people.

Though the Trials of Artemis consist mostly of the various challenges, a part of it is more ceremonial, serving to unite the would-be huntresses in their shared experience, strength and sense of community. Below is an example of one of the formal ritual portions used in the past for the Trials of Artemis. It does not emphasize any particular spiritual path, though it includes elements from several, in order to be as meaningful to every participant as possible.

We gather here to honour the memory
and the traditions of our ancestors,
and the women who came before.
We come from Artemis, Diana; the mighty huntress.
We come from Boudicca, warrior queen,
from Sekhmet, the vengeful hunter,
and from the Valkyries of the north.

We keep alive the tradition of women who have been strong,
who have been wise, who have protected and provided for their people.

We do this to honour those who came before,
and to inspire those who will follow.
To the huntress of yesterday; hail!

From the past, to those who stand ready,
feel the spirit of the huntress flow through you.

We connect to the energies of the earth,
that our roots grow deep,
that we stand fast in all weather,
that we have the strength of stone.

We connect to the energies of the air,
that we hear the voices of our people,
that we move like the wind,
that we speak the truth.

We connect to the energies of the water,
that we feel the pulse of our people,
that we know patience,
that we wear down all obstacles.

We connect to the energies of the fire,
that we can light the way,
that we can act with passion and conviction,
that we burn to reach higher.

Feel the world flow through you;
let it fuel you with strength, patience, truth & passion.

Final Thoughts

The experience of being involved in this ritual, and many others, has been both fulfilling and enlightening for me. I am proud to have been able to help establish a new tradition based on the principles of the community that now calls Raven's Knoll home. These principles of acceptance, love, equality and celebration of individuality are what drew me to this community so many years ago. Though sometimes we can lose sight of these qualities from day to day, they are always there. Rituals can help remind us of why we pull together, and why differences are to be treasured, not feared. Being part of a community reminds us that everyone has something to contribute, and everyone needs support from time to time. It reminds us that we are stronger when we help each other, and weaker when we are divided by strife.

I hope to see the Trials of Artemis continue to grow as a proud tradition that will celebrate the strength of women and foster admirable ideals. Many of the women who have so far borne the title of Huntress are inspiring people, protecting those who need it and providing strength and care for the community, and that is what this is really all about.

Bio

Kimberly is a freelance copy-editor, a biological anthropologist, a linguist, a humanist, a seeker of knowledge, and a master of all things flammable. She has been a member of the pagan community for over 20 years, and was a long time staff member for Kaleidoscope Gathering, first as the Fire-keeper for 10 years and then as a flying monkey. Her interests are many and varied, and include learning, teaching, making things out of wood (not always for burning), archaeological digs, debating philosophy, and basking in the sun. Her long term goals include helping people to better understand each other through explorations of language, ritual, and culture, and retiring somewhere warm where she can have great big fires whenever she wants.