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Trolle, Astrid Krabbe

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Article

Winter Solstice Celebrations in Denmark: A Growing Non-Religious Ritualisation

Astrid Krabbe Trolle

The Research Center for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (Folkekirken Videnscenter), Aarhus C, 8000 Aarhus, Denmark; Trolleas@gmail.com

Abstract: During the last decade, local celebrations of winter solstice on the 21st of December have increased all over Denmark. These events refer to the Old Norse ritual of celebrating the return of the light, and their appeal is very broad on a local community level. By presenting two cases of Danish winter solstice celebrations, I aim to unfold how we can understand these new ritualisations as non-religious rituals simultaneously contesting and supplementing the overarching seasonal celebration of Christmas. My material for this study is local newspaper sources that convey the public sphere on a municipality level. I analyse the development in solstice ritualisations over time from 1990 to 2020. Although different in location and content, similarities unite the new solstice celebrations: they emphasise the local community and the natural surroundings. My argument is that the winter solstice celebrations have grown out of a religiously diversified public sphere and should be understood as non-religious rituals in a secular context.

Keywords: winter solstice; Denmark; municipality; nature



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1. Introduction

During the last two decades, Denmark has seen a growing diversification of the public sphere in terms of religious and non-religious presences (Christensen et al. 2019, see also Furseth 2018). The country is often portrayed as one of most secular nations in the world (Zuckerman et al. 2016, p. 79), with a growing number of people categorising themselves as non-religious or atheist (Jensen 2020). In the European Values Survey from 2017, 39 % of the Danish population either consider themselves non-religious or atheist (EVS 2017).¹ This development in non-religiosity reflects similar movements in other Scandinavian countries (Klingenberg 2019; Urstad 2017) toward a more established non-religious identity that does not only exist in opposition to traditional Christianity but rather should be understood as a distinct non-religious culture in its own terms.

According to Lois Lee, non-religion demarcates “a set of social and cultural forms and experiences that are alternative to religion and framed as such” (Lee 2015, p. 13). With this definition in mind, the task for the scholars of religion studying non-religious phenomena is to investigate the different things that anchor secular experience, thereby unearthing “how people and societies may move towards non-religious presents (Ibid., p. 14). Taking the cue from Lee, this article explores novel and local winter solstice rituals as non-religious events that have grown out of the religiously complex layers of late modern Danish society. My aim is to treat these celebrations as a material and social expression of a secular society that seeks new ritual venues by drawing on nature and the local community. The question guiding the analysis concerns the elements of a non-religious ritual—how is the meaningful absence of religion materialised in ritual expression?

Secular rituals are well known from a range of different contexts, from state-sanctioned secular rituals in the Soviet era (Lane 1981; Smolkin 2019) to contemporary rituals of

¹ Interestingly, in a cluster analysis of the Danish sample of the European Values Survey, Peter Andersen, Jakob Erkmen and Peter Gundelach found that the clusters categorized as either areligious or irreligious have been almost constant from 1981 to 2017 (Andersen et al. 2019, p. 255).

mundane affection (Houlbrook 2018; Warburg 2019). Here, ritual efficacy does not rest on transcendent legitimacy; rather, the ritualisation of social practice returns to what Catherine Bell names redemptive hegemony—the strategic and practical orientation of acting (Bell 2009, p. 80) without a religious frame. In a Danish context, official non-religious rituals in relation to life cycle events primarily take place in civil rites at the municipality level or through the Danish Humanist Society. The latter organisation was established in 2008 (Reeh 2015, p. 143). Together with the Danish Atheist Society, the Humanist Society represents a visible and active contestation towards the majority Evangelical Lutheran Church. In the last quarter of 2020, 74% of the Danish population were members of the majority church (Statistics Denmark 2020); of these members, 25% see themselves as non-religious or atheist (Poulsen et al. 2021). The relatively high amount of non-religious orientation within the majority church reminds us to look for non-religious presences in unexpected places. In the Danish case, the non-religious culture finds channels both within and outside institutional church membership. With respect to the ritual and institutional openness among the non-religious Danes, I have chosen to analyse solstice celebrations as non-religious events because they represent social gatherings that bring together a range of different actors, non-religious and religious, within a common celebration of a natural phenomenon—the return of the light.

In Danish, solstice is called solhverv; this terminology comes from the Old Norse words *sowula*, meaning sun, and *hwarba*, meaning to turn. Etymologically, then, solhverv is the turning of the sun.² Solstice celebrations are secular in the sense that religion is not the primary source of authority within the ritual (Lee 2015, p. 39). Rather, solstice celebrations refer to an astronomical condition that occurs twice a year. Because the Earth tilts on its axis, the North Pole is farthest away from the sun during winter solstice. In practice, this results in the sun setting at around 4 pm during December in Denmark. The sun shines for six and a half hours during the shortest days of winter, causing both long nights and seasonal affective disorder (Bille 2019, p. 28). The many hours of darkness have set the scene for several winter celebrations in the northern hemisphere centred on illumination. All have to do with the symbolism of light as well as gift-giving and the presence of evergreens (Gifford 2020, p. 241). One type of celebration of solstice in a Danish context comes from the joy of illumination that mirrors global movement of light festivals (Edensor 2017, p. 110). On a local municipality level, however, the combination of bonfires and solstice seems to be the most prevalent characteristic of the solstice celebrations.

Historically, solstice is a part of the calendric Wheel of the Year in the Old Norse tradition (Hutton 2008). Whereas summer solstice has been celebrated as John the Baptist Day on the 24th of June since the 16th century, the winter solstice celebrations have been appropriated by Christmas (Billington 2008, p. 50).³ Through the modern era, the Old Norse religious symbols and mythology have been integrated into several attempts at building the Danish nation. In the mid-1800s, the very influential theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig recontextualised many of the Gods from the Viking period with the intent of creating common reference points for the establishment of a Danish folk spirit. For Grundtvig, this common past was not religious; it was a poetic frame that could inspire the national consciousness (Bønding 2019). The close connection between a distant and powerful Viking past and nationalism has been a central notion in socialist parties as well. In 1945, the socialist (and illegal) newspaper *Information* noted that the social democratic union Social Worker Enlightenment (Social Arbejder Oplysning) celebrated a socialist solstice party for the people (Danish and German socialists alike), with speeches and a theatre play about how the light conquered darkness.⁴ In other words, the solstice

² The English expression solstice comes from the Latin *sol stelit*, meaning “The sun stood still” (Kalapos 2006, p. 148).

³ John the Baptist Day is also celebrated with bonfires throughout Denmark. In contemporary research, these celebrations have been analysed as expressions of civil religion (Warburg 2013, p. 19). However, as the national element is less pronounced in the winter solstice celebrations, I do not pursue the civil religious perspective further in this article.

⁴ My translation of the original text with the sentence: “..en folkelig socialistisk Solhvervsfest”, *Information* nr. 335, 2 January 1945, 17. The song *Høje Nord, Friheds Hjem* was originally written in 1869 for the student meetings among the Scandinavian youths.

celebrations have continuously been reconfigured for the political purposes of creating civil rituals instead of the traditional religious ones. During the 1930s, solstice celebrations were revitalised as a part of the Nazi Arian vision (Perry 2005, 2010; see also Wingfield 2015). Today, the Old Norse past and the solstice celebrations also speak to radical rightwing groups who celebrate summer solstice by burning symbolic items under the solar cross, such as the flag of the NGO Red Cross. The solstice rituals and the Old Norse tradition draw on a history of contestation towards Christian rituals in recent history. Until 2010, when the solstice rituals started slipping into majority community events, solstice celebrations primarily spoke to social groups with particular profiles such as artists, Viking milieus, radical nationalists as well as winter swimmers.

2. Material and Methods

The research is based on a document study of the local Danish newspapers from 1990 to 2020. I have used the Infomedia archive, which stores every newspaper and media platform in Denmark, to access the entries on solstice festivity “solhvervsfest” (1091 items), solstice celebration “solhvervsfejring” (25 items) and light celebration together with solstice “lysfest”, “solhverv” (120 items) in the local, i.e., not national, newspaper platforms and the available web platforms. I first tested if including the national media platforms would show different results, but as the national media did not add substantial information to the events in the local newspapers, I chose to focus on the news platforms at the municipality and regional level.

The advantage of showing the celebrations through the eyes of the local media is that these platforms often write directly to inform the readers living in a particular geographical area. Therefore, the type of information passed on through local media channels aim to be relatively precise, with descriptions of what local inhabitants can expect from participating in solstice rituals and with additional notes on the events in the immediate aftermath of the 21st of December. In addition, the local newspapers are often circulated free of cost, thereby representing a common source of information that a substantial amount of people read simply because the paper is in their physical mailbox. The disadvantage of studying rituals through newspaper documents is that you lack the ethnographic richness that participant observation and interviews would bring to the study. In this case, the local media detail a non-religious development in rituals oriented towards nature and the local community. Local newspapers are not neutral windows to the truth; rather, they should be considered as one perspective out of many (Bryman 2016, p. 560). They might overemphasise the local community perspective, yet the local newspapers also show us hidden patterns of ritual development in very different geographical locations (Spickard 2017, p. 285). With a focus on non-religious rituals within the frame of the municipality and the local villages in Denmark, I am also interested in showing how the specific geographical area and its organisational structures (municipality funding and voluntary organisations) represent a secular framing of ritual activity. Although the majority church and the state are not separated in Denmark, the municipality with its bureaucratic function can be regarded as a core secular unit, exemplifying the functional differentiation that is very often considered a prominent feature of secularisation as well as modernity (Beckford 2003, p. 45; Dobbelaere 2014). Historically, the municipality replaced the parish as the primary geographical unit structuring the Danish state (Jacobsen 2014), leading to a two-fold system where parish and municipality cover the same geographical areas although with different genealogies and functions. This doubleness is an example of the simultaneous differentiation and entanglement of the religious and the secular in everyday communal life (Oviedo 2019, p. 12). The majority of the solstice celebrations are funded by the municipality where the event is taking place, thereby signalling an outreach that goes beyond religious, non-religious, ethnic and social subgroups—at least, this is often the intent. In this sense, the municipality and the local towns act as a geographically located Habermasian public sphere, a space that anyone, in principle, can gain access to (Furseth 2018, p. 9). According to Tim Edensor, popular sites of assembly also tend to be non-exclusive and with the aim of levelling class and other

social distinctions, creating a form of communality (Edensor 2006, p. 50). The local solstice celebrations aim to build this form of non-exclusive communality in a secular municipality setting. More research is needed to unearth how these Danish solstice events are also ritual assemblages with rhizomatic and multidirectional qualities (Oostveen 2019). In this article, however, my purpose is to give an overview of a novel ritual development from 1990 to 2020.

The case studies presented below take place in geographically different locations. I have chosen these particular cases because they represent typical examples of (1) new celebrations that seem viable over the years, (2) different forms of ritual integration of the natural environment, (3) community oriented non-religious presence. With the porosity and novelty of the celebrations, the cases portray the invention of new traditions within a relatively short time frame (Eade 2020). The limited time span also means that the winter solstice celebrations should be considered a contemporary societal reaction to the immediate natural environment, such as sunlight and darkness, as well as the historic past. The rituals are still too new, though, to say anything about their lasting impression.

Winter Solstice Celebrations from 1990 to 2020

The first finding from the local newspapers is that solstice celebrations were not present locally before the year 2000. The first entry on solstice celebrations is from 1996, and from 1996 to 2000, I could only find five entries. After 2000, more stories on solstice began to emerge, the majority related to placing solstice as a pre-Christian practice.

The second finding is that the rise in non-religious solstice celebrations seems to have grown out of a renewed awareness of the Old Norse past through the establishment of Viking milieus throughout Denmark. The only officially state-recognised Asatru society in Denmark is Forn Sidr, which was established in 1997 and approved as an official religion in 2003 (Forn Sidr 2020, see also Pedersen 2016, p. 352; Warmind 2007). The presence of practitioners of the Old Norse religion also becomes visible in the local archives. The first entries on solstice celebrations in the local newspapers concern Iron Age events in Western Jutland in 2001 and 2002 (Ringkjøbing Amts Dagblad 2001, 2002). From the early 2000s, the number and outreach of Viking milieus grow every year, with markets and solstice celebrations in June and December. From 1990 to 2020, 13 Viking milieus became active in celebrating solstice in especially Jutland, but also Fyn and Sealand.⁵ This number might seem small, but in the Danish context, 13 Viking milieus and their annual events do secure a Viking awareness in the public sphere.

The milieus perform the Viking way of life through reenactments, where people temporarily live at the historical museums. In 2005, the national TV station TV2 aired a popular Christmas calendar called “Jul i Valhal” (Christmas in Valhalla), which brought the Old Norse past into the season of the Christian Christmas while simultaneously underlining the Viking presence in popular culture (Helgason 2018). In the following years, several schools and kindergartens started to celebrate solstice (e.g., Aarhus Stiftstidende 2006). The Old Norse past also became part of an emerging tourist industry, resulting in VisitDenmark naming 2013 “Viking Year” (JydskeVestkysten 2013). The diversification of the religious landscape in Denmark with a pre-Christian religion brought new attention to the multilayered past, something that the regional and national museums have also supported, with several exhibitions about the Vikings and their traditions. This can be exemplified through the recent exhibition in the Danish National Museum on the Vikings (National Museum 2021).

The third finding in the local newspapers is that the municipality celebrations have mainly started as recurring events during the last decade, i.e., after 2010. In all, 35 different public solstice celebrations are mentioned; only seven of these took place before 2010. Of these 35, it is possible to distinguish two types of celebrations. The most common type

⁵ Some of the Viking milieus have been active for a long time. The Vikings at the Viking Center Fyrkat in the middle of Jutland have celebrated winter solstice with an official Viking market since 1995; see <https://nordmus.dk/u/vikingecenter-fyrkat/> (accessed 14 December 2020).

comes in the shape of the local community celebrating the return of the sun light and the natural surroundings through bonfires and procession as we see in the Snogebæk case below. Surprisingly often, the ritualisation includes a procession towards some form of water (the sea or a lake), with the participants moving through their local village to arrive at a large bonfire. As many as 17 out of 35 celebrations included a water element. The second type is mainly situated in Copenhagen, where the local urban dwellers celebrate the turning through performances of illumination inspired by the global phenomenon of light festivals, combining art with urban spaces and entertainment. Light festivals are entangled with neoliberal economics and consumer-invested spectacles (Edensor 2017, p. 111). The most dystopic descriptions remark that these festivals are forms of capitalist regeneration that cater to the creative classes and the search for a consumerist experience of heritage (Florida in Edensor 2017, p. 111). However, the fascination with illumination is not only limited to the densely populated areas. My description of the solstice celebrations in Herning below exemplifies a hybrid between illumination, local community and procession. The non-religious and secular elements are also prominent as a common characteristic of the local celebrations. Following Lee, the rituals are secular as religious traditions and authority are secondary (Lee 2015, p. 39); they are also non-religious as their emphasis on celebrating a natural phenomenon so close to the established Christian celebration of Christmas seems to contest the majority religious dominance of winter celebrations in December. In the following, I will describe two winter solstice celebrations that both represent the first type of local celebration but where the latter case might be transforming into the second type.

3. Localising the Sun in Snogebæk

To the far east in Denmark, in the Baltic Sea, we find a local winter solstice celebration in the small fishing village of Snogebæk on the island of Bornholm. This winter solstice celebration took place for the first time in 2009 after a public meeting with representatives from the local voluntary organisations (Bornholms Tidende 2009). The villagers decided to mark the day in order to make the village more visible for potential new residents. In its essence, this ritual is about strengthening the local community. As one of the initiators tells the local newspaper in 2009, “Now the citizen meetings have finished for the season, we’ll end the year with a party where we’ll help the sun turn”.⁶ Five years later, the same organiser elaborated on the solstice ritual and its intention:

“Eastern Bornholm is the first place where the sun turns, you know, and in addition it’s a really cosy and nice way to meet, in such a small place like this where you live close to nature. Christmas is so hectic, but around the bonfire on the 21st of December people become completely silent and calm for a little while”.⁷

The quotation gives us an idea of what this solstice celebration brings to people, an evening of peace in the hectic December month. From 2009 to 2019, the programme for the day has remained the same, with one exception. In 2013, a procession with torches was added to the event (Bornholms Tidende 2013). Every year, the celebration gathers from 100 to 200 participants, although this number has increased during the last couple of years. Since 2013, the celebration has started in the late afternoon at the parking lot by the local grocery store with a torch procession that ends at a bonfire on the beach. For the organisers, the winter solstice celebration mirrors the summer solstice celebrations. At the fire, the participants sing songs from the national songbook, Højskolesangbogen. Some are psalms, others are aimed at creating alternative seasonal celebrations that contest Christianity. In the local newspaper, two songs were mentioned that both speak directly to the natural

⁶ My translation from Danish: “Nu er borgermøderne slut for i år, så slutter vi med en fest, hvor vi hjælper til med at få solen til at vende” (Bornholms Tidende 2009).

⁷ My translation from Danish: “Østbornholm er jo det første sted, solen vender, derudover er det rigtigt hyggeligt og en fin måde at mødes, sådan et lille sted som her, hvor man lever i kontakt med naturen. Julen er så hektisk, men omkring bålet den 21. december bliver folk helt stille og rolige for en stund (Bornholms Tidende 2014).

environment and the darkness of winter. The first one is a psalm by the aforementioned Grundtvig called “Skyerne gråner” (the clouds fall grey); the second is the song “Vor sol er bleven kold” (Our sun has grown cold) by the author Johannes V. Jensen. Together with the formal lyrical winter testimonies, people also sing a mix of popular songs for children, such as “På loftet sidder nissen” (There’s an elf in the attic). Each celebration includes a poetic reproduction of the village history. Every year, a new poem about the passing year is added, and so the turning of the sun simultaneously becomes a celebration of the specific locality and its community.⁸ While people gather around the bonfire, they consume fish soup and white mulled wine.

The fish soup and white mulled wine resemble the menu for New Year’s Eve as well as the village identity as a fishing village close to the sea. In a way, the culinary choices reflect traditional Christmas celebrations by serving mulled wine yet, at the same time, offering an alternative by choosing white mulled wine (and not red wine that is traditionally considered a Christmas colour) and fish. The sensory experience of participating mixes the traditional Christmas spices with the New Year’s celebration, testifying to the embodied experience of participating in this new ritual.

The Natural Environment and the Local Community

This newly started ritualisation of winter solstice at the eastern corner of Denmark represents a ritualisation of the local environment—both the natural and the social. We find national elements such as the songs from the national songbook, but the main actor in this ritual is not the nation—it is the sun. The most important novelty to this celebration is the close integration of the natural environment and the local history. Unlike the national celebrations at summer solstice, winter solstices are more local and less (civil) religious. This is not to say that the ritual does not incorporate certain religious elements, such as psalms and procession. Yet these elements represent an alternative celebration that redirects the common themes for Christmas. Christmas is a very family-centred event interwoven with affective notions of joy, love and family bonding (Perry 2010). From this perspective, the Snogebæk celebration of winter solstice is a new ritual that reframes the family values of Christmas to include the local community and the natural environment. The physical surroundings of the sea, the sky, the bonfire and the disappearing sun are all very much part of this ritual that, unlike Christmas, takes place outside.

The ritual framing borrows from the Old Norse tradition, which has become well known thanks to the active Viking milieu. However, the Viking past is not reenacted; rather, the participants acknowledge their historical past by creating an invented tradition out of a historic past, giving old material new meaning (Hobsbawn 2012, p. 7). People are helping the sun return, as the organiser explained. The participants achieve this ritually by carrying torches with fire from the village to the sea. According to the theorist of procession, Bernard Lang, processions have four modes. One of these refer to carrying the sacred in a procession to make present and revere the sacred (Lang in Nygaard and Murphy 2017). Applied to the ritual in Snogebæk, people carry fire because the burning sun is the sacred presence that they revere.

For most people, the winter solstice celebration supplements the Christian Christmas—solstice does not replace it. I think this is an important point because the notion of supplement reveals the multi-layered presence of non-religion in a Danish context. Just as many non-religious Danes are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the solstice rituals contest the seasonal celebration of Christmas by integrating certain culinary features of Christmas but placing them in a different context. The actors of the solstice event are not representatives of any religion; rather, the ritual has sprung from citizen meetings in the town and their intention is to celebrate local life and the sun. As a local event funded by the municipality and voluntary local organisations, the celebrations convey a secular arena for

⁸ The local rhymes are framed by the song “I skoven skulle være gilde”, in the local version “På stranden sku’vær’gilde”, an upbeat melody that is often used as the scaffolding for personal party songs (Bornholms Tidende 2014).

the local inhabitants of Snogebæk. Bornholm is known for its many artists, and Snogebæk is a well-off creative township that attracts several entrepreneurs. In this sense, the winter solstice celebration reflects the resourceful entrepreneurship of the local artists in the village. Yet the Snogebæk case also represents the first type of solstice celebration that combines bonfire, procession and village life. Although the ritual has many repetitive and strategic elements, these are not religious. In fact, they are decidedly non-religious as a way of becoming calm in the hectic Christmas month. The local inhabitants of Snogebæk creatively apply the flexible framework of a diverse religious society, where atheist organisations together with Old Norse Viking presence are reshaping the boundaries for the religious as well as the non-religious imaginaries.

4. Illuminating the Lake in Herning

In Herning, in the heart of mainland Jutland, a new winter solstice celebration started in 2016. This event was initiated by the local kayaking community at Fuglsang Lake. The main attraction is when the boats sail out onto the dark lake with light chains attached to the moving vessels. While the boats light up the lake, the non-kayaking participants on the shore walk in a light procession around the lake. The ritual ends with the shore participants singing a winter solstice song as the boats berth.

In 2016, the organisers communicated through the local media that people in the area could participate by meeting up with anything that would illuminate the dark. As the cashier of the kayaking club told the local newspaper *Herning Folkeblad*, “We are welcoming the light. The light is turning now, you know, and if you only have a bike light, then that’s what you’ll bring”.⁹ The idea for the celebration came from two club members who simultaneously and independently wanted to start a celebration of the returning light.

The first celebration started in a very lowkey manner with people meeting up at the storage containers of the kayaking club and forming a procession of lights around the lake. In 2017, the celebration grew, with a gospel choir singing Christmas songs at the end of the event. Around 400 people participated, bringing their own lanterns and torches. Here, the kayaking club cooperated with the nursing home Fuglsangsø Centret, where participants could buy coffee, tea and hot cocoa.

In 2019, more sports clubs joined the celebration. At the first stop by the pier, the dancing team “Footloose” welcomed the participants, and after the procession around the lake, the brass band Ringkøbing Brass Quintet played a small concert (*Herning Folkeblad 2019a*). The organisers invested in light beams around the lake to orient people in the dark. Participants were invited to wear lights on their bodies, underscoring the sports element in this particular solstice celebration as many participants embrace outdoor activities with the use of light gear. The performing sports clubs all displayed distinct objects of illumination. The cyclists wore lights on their bikes, the runners on their bodies, the six sailboats on their masts and sails. Between 500 and 800 people participated (*Herning Folkeblad 2019b*).

Every year, the celebration ends with the participants singing the Danish writer Johannes V. Jensen’s (1873–1950) seasonal song, “Vor sol er bleven kold” (Our sun grows cold), which is also part of the repertoire in Snogebæk. The author wrote a number of seasonal songs for civil rituals with the intention of replacing the Christian rituals. The song has national elements, but it is not religious in any substantial way. Rather, the song speaks to the natural elements and the spatialisation of the national imaginary (*Edensor 2006*). At Fuglsang Lake, the participants also bring their own copies of the song.

Local Community and Illumination

According to the local newspapers, the winter solstice event in Herning is also about celebrating the local community and the voluntary organisational work invested in the sports organisations. In this sense, the ritual celebrates civil society. Winter solstice at

⁹ My translation from Danish: “Vi byder lyset velkommen. Det er jo nu, det vender, og har du kun en cykellygte, så er det den, du tager med” (*Herning Folkeblad 2016*).

Fuglsang Lake also facilitates an outdoor experience, where the lake as a location becomes important for the processional movement and for the aesthetics of the illumination.

The canoes and boats lighting up the lake add a distinct aesthetic quality by illuminating an otherwise dark and liquid space. The placing of the ritual around and in the lake draws on the historic pre-Christian and Old Norse past, where circular processions around lakes or groves were common (Nygaard and Murphy 2017, p. 41). Like the procession in Snogebæk, the participants carry the light around the lake to celebrate the return of the sun, but unlike Snogebæk, this ritual is growing extensively every year. The latest version of the celebration brought a new material feature of spectacular illumination of the individual sporting disciplines. These movements towards illumination instead of fire (Winder 2009) place the winter solstice celebration in Herning closer to the urban and global light festivals of the season than to the incorporation of the environmental awareness that is more present in Snogebæk.

Yet despite their different ritualisations of nature, both cases celebrate the turning of the sun and the local community. In Herning, the event is becoming very popular because you can just show up wearing a bike light on your head while you talk to other locals in the sports organisations. The consumerist aspect often acknowledged in illuminating events is not particularly visible in either of the two cases described. At Fuglsang Lake, you can buy coffee and cakes at the nursing home. At Snogebæk, you can buy fish soup and mulled wine. Because the celebration at Fuglsang Lake is embedded in a sports segment, the actors at the event are not acting as representatives of any religion. They are outdoor sports people engaging their local community in a non-exclusive space. This is further underlined by the fact that the only communal singing is a civil song about winter solstice. The lake and its natural surroundings frame a non-religious ritualization of the sun.

To sum up, the location is important at Fuglsang Lake, although the event itself is more spectacularly aesthetic than the smaller event at Snogebæk which also directs a movement toward the urban illumination events otherwise only found in the capital of Copenhagen. At this ritualisation of the winter solstice, the actors are mainly framed within a sports logic. The outdoor experience underlines the celebration of inventive light gear for the many sports disciplines during the dark winter. Civil society seems to be the main actor, together with the returning sun, at this particular celebration.

5. Conclusions

The main points to be drawn from the local newspapers are that the two cases of winter solstice celebrations grow out of a religiously diversified public sphere with the advent of atheist, Humanist and Viking presences from the early 2000s. After 2010, the new religious presences have been integrated into novel rituals of solstice celebrations in every corner of Denmark. Overall, the solstice celebrations fall into two categories: (1) local, communal and embedded in the natural environment, (2) local, communal and oriented toward the performative and spectacular. The case of Snogebæk is covered by the first type of celebration, while the case of Herning is moving from the first type to the second type. The sensory experience of participating in these local and communal events outside in the natural surroundings emphasises the centrality of geography. Many of the celebrations are connected to water. This is hardly surprising as Denmark is a nation of islands, yet with solstice as the central element, location becomes important. Snogebæk marks the most eastern edge of Denmark, while other local celebrations mark the southern and northern limits of the Danish geography. Neither Snogebæk nor Herning present their ritualisation of solstice as religious, nor are there any religious actors directly involved in the ritualisation. In a few of the 35 solstice celebrations, you find priests from the Evangelical Lutheran Church, but they are newer central actors. Rather, these rituals testify to the local-level ritualisation of a diverse religious and non-religious landscape. As such, they can be viewed as non-religious rituals that represent alternatives—as well as supplements—to Christmas celebrations in December.

The two cases both readdress the affective family-oriented Christmas setting to include the local community. In fact, the local community seems to be the main producer as well as recipient of these rituals. The winter solstice celebrations are also gaining popularity because of their flexible form. They are neither religious (with a substantial definition) nor national. On the contrary, the Old Norse inspiration accommodates a heterogeneous and multi-layered understanding of the local public sphere. The meaningful absence of religion (Lee 2015) finds a non-exclusive ritual outlet through the symbolic and concrete turning of the sun. With the sports communities at Fuglsang Lake and the decidedly local feeling (with poetry and fish soup) at Snogebæk, the winter solstice celebrations bring something new into the Christian season of Christmas. The different celebrations feature many of the same elements, such as a light procession and the geographical closeness to water. Yet they speak to different social groups, although many of them, local and public as they are, simply aim to facilitate neighbourly sociality. By centring rituals on the sun and the local community, the new appearance of winter solstice rituals testifies to the religiously diverse society with its renewed environmental awareness and flexibility. Although not yet a national phenomenon, the suddenness of non-related winter solstice events speaks to the turn towards a more general environmental awareness of the natural surroundings paired with a diversified religious landscape where non-religious expressions find many forms.

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