

# Elf-locks, Lúfa, and Wichtelzopf

A Personal Reflection on Matted Hair Traditions and Heathenry

by

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Matted and knotted hairstyles have been part of human cultural expression, probably ever since the naked ape evolved long head hair. Hairstyling is a way virtually all human societies have embodied social identities and displayed them to communicate those identities to themselves and others.

This essay focuses specifically upon how matted and knotted hairstyles were used historically by cultures that inspire modern Heathenry. In this piece *matted and knotted hairstyles* will be called *locked hair* for simplicity. And, for those who are unaware, *Heathenry* is a new religious movement that seeks to revive the religious and spiritual practices of pre-Christian Germanic and Scandinavian cultures in a modern-day context.

By way of introduction this essay will first describe some methods for locking hair, then present some ethnographic and historical examples of hair locking traditions grounded in spirituality: Hindu, Rastafari, and Plains First Nation. The main purpose of the paper is to discuss two historical traditions of hair locking in areas of Germanic cultural influence; that related to *oaths* and warrior culture, and that related to belief in *elves* (alfar, fairies). I present some historical examples, providing my interpretations, and personal reflections.

There are many different methods for creating locked hair. They are not all the same hairstyle. What they all have in common is that the techniques applied

result in binding strands of hair together into dense matted bunches, of a rope-like character. I will refer to this as *locks*.

To ground the reader, following are few of the different methods of creating locks. These methods will be referred back to later in the paper, where more examples are provided. (A few examples are provided, but only where these ethnographic examples are not discussed later in the essay.)

The most basic way to form locks is through the *freeform* method, also called the *neglect* method. This involves doing nothing but simply never combing your hair. It works most efficiently on long hair and hair that has natural waves or curls. *Plating* refers to when one big lock forms out of most of the hair growing from the head. This should not be confused with *plaiting* (more on that below). *Twisting* and/or *rolling* are both methods use to form locks. This method can be in combination with another method or on its own. It is a technique very much like traditional techniques of hand-made rope making, in which strands of fibre are rolled between the hands or between a hand and another body part (often the thigh).

Modern terminology for creating locks include the *twist and rip method* and the *back combing* method. Both methods are used to quickly create the tangles and knots that form more slowly naturally in hair. However, the method carefully places the tangles so that locks form in an organized and predictable manner. *Crochet* is a category of fibre craft whereby one needle with a hook on the end (crochet hook) is used to create fabric by interlocking loops of fibre. This method is often used to tighten or maintain locked hairstyles.

*Plaiting* is a general term used for the braiding of hair. In some local and historic use, there is a nuance that a *plait* is a form of braid that is more permanent. This usually occurs because the weaving together of bunched strands of hair is further entangled by dividing and recombining sections of bunches of hair as new bunches of hair during the weaving process. (This has similarities with the *twist and rip* method.) The method, thus, can result in locked hair. In the *crochet* method the hair is bound to itself with strands from the locked hair.

In contrast, there are methods for *binding* hair with things that is not hair growing from your head. This can be done as part of another hair treatment process through the use of *binders*. These binders often served another adornment purpose, in addition to forming locks, often colouring the hair. Examples include, ancient Celtic hairstyles created by bleaching and stiffening the hair with a soap-like product containing wood ash lye, or Maasai warriors dying their hair red with root extracts and red ochre. Another method of creating locks through *binding* is using introduced fibres to ensure the hair is *bound*. This is an evolution of merely tying back hair. In this method fibres are introduced to bundled hair, as either strands within bundles and ties to keep bundles of hair matted, often both at the same time. Examples include, ancient Semitic traditions

of bound hair from Egypt to Persia to the Judaic tribes, as well as the locked hair of the Spartan warriors of Ancient Greece. Sometimes these hairstyles were transformed into wigs, which were essentially headdresses of locked hair.

Before I talk about historic Germanic and Scandinavian matted hair traditions, I would like to briefly outline some ethnographic and historical examples of hair locking traditions grounded in spirituality: Hindu, Rastafari, and Plains First Nation. In this way, living traditions can be used as ethnographic comparators to assist in the interpretation of the Germanic and Scandinavian materials.

*Hinduism* is a very broad term for related religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism and Heathenry share very ancient roots, as both religious traditions share one of their roots in the Yamnaya culture of the Eurasian steppe, home of the Proto-Indo-European culture ("PIE"; c. 3,300–2,600 BCE). One of the very oldest of Hindu spiritual strata is that of the Vedas, which preserve more PIE characteristics than other strands of Hindu religious expression.

The Vedic scriptures provide the earliest known mention of matted hairstyles. In this tradition of matted hair, the style is generally created through twisting and rolling methods, but sometimes also involving the neglect method or binders (such as river mud, or the ashes of cow dung or cadavers). This style of hair is called *jata* (जात) in Sanskrit. In Hindu culture, the hairstyle marks a person as a *sadhu* (sādhu, m.; sādhvī or sādhvīne, f.). This is a religious role for someone who renounces the worldly life to live as a mendicant or ascetic to follow a life of spiritual discipline. For many, the *jata* are reflective of an identification with the matted, ropy hair of the god Shiva, the Destroyer, who has the same hairstyle. They root in the ground like a tree, when He is deep in meditation. They also represent the flowing rivers of the holy Ganges (Ganga) watershed. They are symbols of disregard for earthy pleasures and goals, an expression of contempt for vanity.

As souls preparing to achieve mokṣa (liberation), *sadhus* are set apart from regular society. They are liminal figures, ones who have cast aside all previous social roles (i.e., jobs and family) they might have had to become an ascetic. Although they have outcast themselves, in a manner, they also fulfill an important community religious function and a role in folk Hindu spirituality. One interesting custom is that these holy people can confer both banes and blessings on alms givers, just as the cunning people of pre-modern England.



A Vaishnava sadhu in Kathmandu.

(By Wen-Yan King - Flickr, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2198855>)

*Rastafari* is a new religious movement that began in Jamaica and spread through the African diaspora in the Caribbean, rest of the Americas, and the world. There are a few structured traditions, called mansions, of Rastafari brethren and sistren. However, because the movement is un-dogmatic, there is much diversity in belief and practice.

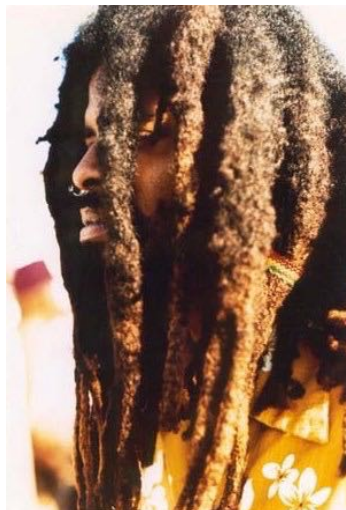
Rastafari is an Abrahamic religion that associates the person of Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, with an Afrocentric reading the Old and New Testaments. Since its origins in the 1930s Howelite community, the Rastafari movement has developed a distinctive *roots culture*, that draws from African diaspora folk tradition, black nationalist intellectualism, Ethiopian art and holy writings, as well as Biblical interpretation.

The matted hairstyle called *dreadlocks* are a defining feature that many Ras people use to mark their identity as a person who follows an *ital* (Rastafari) way of life. Many Rasta, particularly those of the Nyabingi tradition, form their dreadlocks naturally using the freeform method. Other Rasta use the twisting method.

Many Rastafari teachings are passed orally. There are many different origin stories for the emergence of this hairstyle and what it means to the people that wear it. Leonard "The Gong" Howell started preaching in 1932 in Jamaica. He founded a religious community that was a rural religious commune of sorts. However, Howell never wore dreadlocks. The early community of Howell did, however, have close contact with Indo-Jamaican labourers, from whom they took over the informal production and sale of cannabis in the local area. (This cultural influence is notable in how Rastas still use Hindi terms for forms of cannabis, ganja and charras, quite often.) Passages from the Bible are reasoned by Rastas to

refer to matted hairstyles belonging to inspiring Biblical figures that are important in Rastafari culture; most often cited are the locks of Samson and the vows of the Nazarene. The earliest wearing of dreadlocks by Rasta appear to be by a 1949 group called Youth Black Faith. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s African anti-colonial struggles inspired Rastafari. Some of these figures included the Mau-Mau rebels who wore a twisted matted hairstyle. At the time, the newsreels describe this hairstyle as “dreaded locks,” which is where the modern Rasta name for the hairstyle may have come from. The Mau-Mau wore their hair in this way partly due to the pragmatics of living as guerrillas, but also as a sign of belonging to an age-grade warrior society.

A key element of Rastafari culture is a critique of colonialism and oppression, which seeks to develop power and self-respect through a Pan-African ideology and, in some forms of Rastafari, collective unifying agape and philia (called one love). Many Rasta see their dreadlocks as a marker of African identity, as a symbol of someone that lives a wholesome and natural life (livity), a sign of solidarity with the oppressed, and as a mystical source of spiritual strength.



Rasta man with tuff dreads.

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The matted hair traditions of Hinduism and Rastafari are very well known in the present day. They are both living and vibrant social traditions that involve the wearing of matted hair. However, there are many, many other matted hair traditions that are either historic and not actively practiced today or are rarer and not well known. One of those traditions is that of a number of *Plains First Nations*.

Within many First Nations cultures today, teachings are transmitted that long hair in men and boys hold important dimensions for both their spiritual importance and as a marker of ethnic and cultural heritage. In some present-day

spiritual traditions, and very commonly in pre-Colonial times, different social roles or life events would be displayed through personal adornment and grooming. Thus, age-grade groups or identities might be marked by hairstyle.

There are images of a number of First Nations peoples that displayed matted hair styles. The most numerous appear to be amongst the Plains Cree tribes. From a study of the images that still exist it appears that the hairstyle was formed through a combination of plaiting and the freeform style. The matted hairstyles seem to be most associated with men who served as warriors for their communities. As with the Mau-Mau, the matted hair may have been a style that was pragmatic for the rough travel required in Plains warfare, but may also have been part of ceremony associated with the warrior identity. Unfortunately, there are not many written sources on the tradition, either on the Plains or amongst other groups. Also, because the Plains were one of the last First Nation cultural areas to be fully colonized, it may just be that evidence for this type of practice may be easier to uncover for this cultural area.



Cree chief Pitikwahanapiwiya with locked hair, 1885. He was also known as Poundmaker; born in Rupert's Land, near present-day Battleford; the child of Sikakwayan, an Assiniboine medicine man, and a mixed-blood Cree woman, the sister of Chief Mistawasis.

(By Historical Photography - Pinterest, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=58980410>)

*Cultural appropriation* is a term that describes the adoption of elements of one culture by members of another culture, which is more accurately termed cultural exchange. Respectful cultural exchange is part and parcel of living in a multi-cultural world, and a requirement for people of mixed heritage. On the other hand, the term cultural appropriation is also commonly used to describe what might more accurately be termed cultural misappropriation. This is when a dominant culture appropriates a practice from a minority culture. It can be

considered a violation of collective intellectual property and has often been a feature of acculturation and colonialism. This is particularly true for artifact types or cultural traits that require a specific social context in the culture of origin, but whose meaning are transformed—and not respected—in the dominant culture.

The difference between the two is the contrast in power held by the social groups undertaking the exchange and the meaning different populations give to the culture trait being exchanged. The ancestors of most black Jamaicans were forcibly removed from nations of West or Central Africa as slaves. Although it is a bit unclear, it appears that Rasta may have mainly reasoned the meaning of dreadlocks from East African rebels and a nativist, Pan-African reading of Semitic religious texts. All of which have roots in very different parts of Africa or the Middle East. It was not a continuous cultural tradition, but one that was adopted. It was adopted by an oppressed people identifying with other oppressed peoples and a strong independent black nation (Ethiopia) that adopted an Afrocentric reading of a Semitic monotheism. Therefore, this was an example of cultural exchange, not cultural misappropriation. In the Indian sub-continent, the Vedic religion of a PIE descended culture mixed with other native spiritual traditions to form Hinduism. In this cultural exchange it may be that the Vedic culture was carried by invaders who became a higher caste than local populations. I could find no evidence from which source this matted hair tradition was borrowed, from the Vedic side or the native spiritual traditions. Due to the power imbalance, the historic borrowing of matted hair traditions from one direction might have been cultural misappropriation in the present day. However, I have no idea what the actual situation was. Similarly, there is not enough published information to make any comment on the matted hair tradition of Plains First Nations peoples.

In our post-modern age, the age of identity in late modernity, the determination of what, and what is not, cultural misappropriation can be extremely acrimonious. This lack of agreement on what constitutes cultural misappropriation can happen because of a lack of reflexivity regarding power relationships, or a lack of understanding of the nuances of the cultural practice being borrowed. Cross-communication also results from the fact that people can express and embody many different identities at the same time, so it can be difficult to determine which has power and which is powerless in every instance. This can be complicated by the fact that some identities may be dominant (such as being white or settler) while others are minority (such as being Heathen or mentally ill). I have written this essay, in part, to avoid misunderstandings of the practice and intent of matted hair in a Heathen religious context.

As a new religious movement, Heathenry is itself a cultural critique. It embodies a critique of power relationships, both of secular and Abrahamic

ideologies. A common narrative is that historic Heathen religion was eliminated by forced conversion to Christianity, promoted at the end of a sword by the upper classes to consolidate their interests. It is also a modern religious movement to which historical practices are very important, many of which are fragmentary due to a thousand years of Christian hegemony.

In the following sections I will outline historic spiritual practices of populations to which modern Heathens look to reconstruct their spiritual traditions. The reader will observe some social and anthropological parallels of these Scandinavian and Germanic practices to Hindu, Rastafari, and Plains First Nations matted hair traditions, such as liminality, outsider status, spiritual power, and apotheosis. While they share these similarities, the beliefs and traditions associated with them are specific and unique.

There are two related spiritual traditions involving matted hairstyles that were practiced by *early medieval Scandinavians*, *Roman Era Germanic tribes*, and *early modern East German* communities. In the first case, the practice was written down by non-Heathens either during Christian times about pre-Christian practices or by Romans about German practices. In the second case, folkloric practices may be survivals of pre-Christian patterns of belief.

These two examples were selected from a number of other European matted hair traditions. These traditions include that of Italian practitioners of *stregheria*, various Wild Man costumes and myths, Roman Era hair treatments of Celtic tribes, amongst others. I will not review these examples because modern Heathenry reconstructs its practices solely from the pre-Christian religiosity of the Germanic tribes (which includes the Scandinavians) or later non-Christian folklore reasoned to be survivals of pre-Christian belief.

There are three accounts of the same matted hair practice, two are historic examples, one Scandinavian and one German, while another is a Scandinavia mythological example. All three describe a hairstyle associated with a particular type of vengeance *oath*.

The Old Norse, both men and women, were very well known throughout Europe for their careful personal grooming. This featured carefully cut, washed, and styled hair, often involving extensive combing and brushing. They also had a custom of publicly washing their hands before taking part in feasts of both social and spiritual significance (such as *sumbel* and *blót* feasts). These events were central to both the secular and religious life of historic Heathen communities.

Let us look at some passages that describe the context of this matted hair tradition. The first is a passage from the *Völuspá* in the Poetic Edda.

*Þó hann æva hendr*



*né höfuð kembði,  
áðr á bál um bar  
Baldrs andskota.  
En Frigg um grét  
í Fensölum  
vá Valhallar -  
vituð ér enn, eða hvat?¹*

He never washed hands,  
never combed head,  
till he bore to the pyre  
Baldr's adversary—  
while Frigg wept  
in Fen Halls  
for Valhøll's woe.  
Do you still seek to know? And what?²

*Baldrs Draumar* also describes the action of the god Váli, born to achieve vengeance for the killing of the god Baldr by Höðr and the machinations of Loki:

His hands he shall wash not, his hair he shall comb not,  
Till the slayer of Baldr he brings to the flames.³

There is an older account by the Roman historian Tacitus, in *The Histories*, that describes a practice of a Germanic tribes-person:

Then Civilis fulfilled a vow often made by barbarians; his hair, which he had let grow long and coloured with a red dye from the day of taking up arms against Rome, he now cut short, when the destruction of the legions had been accomplished.⁴

The most famous Viking Age example is that of Haraldr, reputed to be the first king to rule the entirety of Norway. In *Harald Harfager's Saga*, Harald said:

I make the solemn vow, and take God to witness, who made me and rules over all things, that never shall I clip or comb my hair until I have subdued the whole of Norway, with skat [taxes], and duties, and domains; or if not, have died in the attempt.⁵

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¹ Eysteinn Björnsson's edition

² Ursula Dronke's translation

³ Ben Waggoner's translation

⁴ *The Histories*, Book 4, ch. 61.

⁵ Ben Waggoner's translation

It took Harldr ten years to fulfill his oath. During that time his hair became very long and matted. In good Old Norse fashion, he was given a nickname, *Harldr lúfa*. The term *lúfa* is translated as ‘matted-hair’ and it seems to be an Old Norse word uniquely used for this hairstyle. Thus, it could be translated as Harald Matted-Hair.<sup>6</sup> When he finally achieves his oath and cuts his hair, he was known as *Harald hárfagri*, translated as Harald Pretty-Hair or Harald Fair-Hair.



Harald Fair-Hair, in an illustration from the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*.  
(Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=232993>)

There are also numerous images whose figures have hairstyles that may be representations of matted hairstyles of this kind. They appear on some bracteate and coins, across a wide geography and period of time. Here I would like to highlight the motif, probably best represented on the early Anglo-Saxon coins, minted in Viking Age Denmark, called *Woden sceatta* or *monster sceatta*. These small metal objects depict male heads with long, flying, wild, ropy hair. They are generally considered to be representations of the god known variously as Woden or Odin, chief god of the Germanic pantheon.



These are two early-medieval silver sceats of anonymous ruler, dating to the period c. 710-740. The images are identified as Woden. The coins were likely minted in Ribe, Denmark, but collected in the United Kingdom.

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The Germanic peoples appear to have had various tradition of warrior societies bound together by common living, common cause, and specific

<sup>6</sup> A more modern, colloquial, and cross-cultural translation would be Harry Dread-Head.

religious rites. Earlier forms appear to be similar to bands of upper-class youth, that lived outside of the regular social order. They would eventually be absorbed by more organized war bands from their society. Groups on this continuum are often termed *männerbund* in German. Anthropologists have noted that the social form is common to many people around the world, often those that are pastoral, hold wealth in livestock, and have warrior cultures. They are often called age-grade cults or warrior societies, or something of the like. In the case of Europeans, we see social forms such as this associated with PIE cultural areas. There are many examples from Celtic legend and myth, as well as Germanic. Amongst some tribes, the youth would be required to live in certain places (not the village, but the wild forest), to dress in a certain way, wear a particular hairstyle, etc. Certain feats might be required to demonstrate worthiness to return to regular society. In at least one case it is documented that the youth would be required to kill a member of an enemy people before being allowed to take their place amongst the warrior adults of their own community.

Someone who could not attend community feasts and be part of the social relationships cemented at these kinds of events, would stand outside of the regular social order. This is what not being able to wash one's hands would do. The matted hair would mark them with an outsider status, but also make that person unattractive as a marriage partner, since the society they lived within put so much stock on well-groomed attractiveness with regard to courtship and arrangements of marriage. Thus, taking a vengeance oath would essentially place a person in a similar social position to that of a member of a youthful *männerbund*.

Odin is a god of royalty, the ruling class of warriors, of wars and contests of power, as well as the mystical ability to cross between life and death, taking or giving from either. As such, his worship and symbols (like the bear and wolf) are closely associated with these warrior groups, and thus their sub-cultures.

I am no professional warrior, nor do I plan to run away to join an age-grade organization deep in the woods. I am, however, dedicated to a struggle for virtue and justice, to stand up for what is right by my people, the citizens of Canada and my religious community. I just started a *Ph.D. in Criminology and Social Justice* at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa, Ontario. My research will focus on right wing extremism and its intersections with Neo-Germanic Paganism (i.e., modern Heathenry). This commitment is for four years, during which time I will be on hiatus from my regular job at Public Safety Canada in Ottawa, and will be travelling and sleeping in non-standard places. My battle is to slay hate and eliminate risks of violence to my community. Thus, do I take up the mark of one on such a mission, the *lúfa*.

Although it would take a lot more background to explain properly, I would like to share two personal spiritual interpretations (called *unverified personal*

*gnosis*, or UPG, by modern Heathens). I feel that this manifestation of a matted hair tradition related to myths and practices associated with Odin.

First, to me the *lúfa*, the ropes of matted hair, are symbolic of the roots of the World Tree. This is the tree from which Odin hung, upside down, as a sacrifice of himself to himself, in order to gain the runes (a metaphor for wisdom). It is the same sacrifice those warriors willing to die for a cause make, that the one obsessed and focused to the disregard of all else makes to achieve wisdom. It is Odin's ropy hair in this incident that become synonymous with the roots of the World Tree. It is they that reached down to Mímir's Well, forming the trunks of Hoddmímis holt, from which the future of the next world springs. In a manner, I see the wearing of *lúfa* as a method of personal *apotheosis to Odin* in this aspect of his.

Second, Odin is also associated with shape shifting, the ability to manipulate the *ham* (an element of the Heathen psycho-social framework, or soul-complex). This was generally accomplished to do battle, either in spiritual or physical realms. The religious metaphor for the process of shape shifting was that of wearing a hide or animal cloak. The site of the concentration of shape shifting ability resides in skin and hair, or skin and feathers. It is theorized that ancient Germanic warrior cults, such as Úlfhéðnar (wolf-coats), used animalistic costuming and related ritualistic practices to transform the self. To me the matted hair is a way to retain the power of the most important ham of the human form, that of the hair on the head. Thus, it is a way to become *ham-strong*, charged with the numinous ability to shift shapes and repel spiritual assailants. Physically, it is also a way to retain in one's matted locks the hair that normally would be shed. Thus, one carries the past, and thus one's *wyrd* (fate), more heavily. It is a constant reminder, an actual weight. So, I see this practice as both one designed to gain spiritual power and to commune with aspects of Odin.

After conversion to Christianity elements of Pagan spiritual beliefs and traditions were syncretized or went underground, often evolving into folk-magic traditions. In Germanic cultural areas, these traditions of matted hair styles all related to beliefs associated with the elves, the *alfar*, the fairies. In Old Norse religion, the *alfar* are a species of supernatural beings that are akin to humans. While humanity was created from driftwood, the *alfar* were created from the worms of the earth. They reside in the underworld, Alfheim, in a land that borders and interacts with the human dead, Hel.

In most areas of cultural contact, *alfar* belief was particularly amenable to syncretism with the spiritual beliefs of other ethnicities. In Scandinavia, there was much melding of Finno-Ugric belief, particularly Saami, with that of Germanic elf traditions. In areas of Eastern Europe where ethnic Germans resided, *alfar* belief was influenced by Slavic systems of spiritual belief. In

Western Europe, such in what is now Northern France and the United Kingdom, and even in Iceland and Ireland, belief in elves was mainly fused with Celtic religious frameworks and practices, to create what is often termed *the Fairy Faith*.

Not only does the land of the elves border the land of the human dead, but it also borders our own world of living humans, *Miðgarðr*. There is a permeability between these worlds which is crossed under certain circumstances. This can occur when particular social or spiritual taboos are broken, when emotions are high on either side of the border (such as an elf war or a human in love or rejected in love), at particular places of natural power (such as special trees, hills, bodies of water, mushroom rings, or large stones), or by specialist spiritual practitioners. Thus, interaction between *alfar* and humans was seen to be fairly common, but bewilderingly varied. To me it appears that it is much simpler for a person to interact with the Underworld semi-indirectly through the elves than through either the gods or the human dead.

I will take a look at some of the evidence for elf-belief and matted hairstyles before I discuss how they appear to fit into a coherent model of religious and health beliefs. The first passage is an example of English tradition, from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where Mercutio talks about the Fairy *Queen Mab*:

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes  
In shape no bigger than an agate stone. ...  
That plaits the manes of horses in the night  
And bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs,  
Which once untangled, much misfortune bodes.

The phenomena of night-tangled hair is also described in *King Lear*, where a person with mental illness is impersonated with the phrase "he elfs all his hair in knots." In *Jane Eyre*, a character disguises himself as a Romanichel man with "...elf-locks bristled out from beneath a white band."

Jacob Grimm collected folklore about a similar practice and belief in German-speaking areas of Central and Eastern Europe. He collected at least six examples where people allowed hair that knotted naturally into matted strands to remain, particularly if they formed during sleep. Various supernatural entities were identified as the offender, but most common was the elf or a generic term for a low level supernatural being (such as a wight). Grimm felt that the constellation of beliefs surrounding these *wichtelzopf*, *alpzopf*, *drutenzopf*, *weichelzopf*, *mahrenlocke*, *elfklatte*, and the like, were related to *Frau Holle*. *Frau Holle*, also called *Holda* and many, many other names, is a goddess of the region that still figured as an important figure well into the modern era. Elements of her

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<sup>7</sup> Quote from *Lear*, ii. 3. I love that the terminology used for locking up hair in knots is the verb "to elf."

character may relate to pre-PIE traditions, while she definitely shares characteristics with the Scandinavian Freya, Frigga, and the German Frija. She is a weaver and much of her magic is associated with fibre arts. Grimm collected stories in which she herself is described as wearing a matted hairstyle of knotted locks. Thus, the practice had features of apotheosis.

French folklorists have also described similar belief associated with the lutin (elves, gnomes). I expect this is due to the influences of Germanic tribes and cultures, such as the Franks and others; hence the reason stories of lutin have been common in Northern and Western France.

In Poland, and in nearby countries that also included pockets of ethnic Germans, witches and spirits (however the local elf population is characterized) also caused knotted and matted hair at night. Some scholars have traced this belief to German populations in Bavaria and the Rhine River regions. These strands of knotted hair became called a Polish plait, or *plica polonica* in Latin (if you want to get fancy). They were worn by people of any gender in the Pinsk and Masovia regions into the 1800s.



An example of a *plica polonica*, from between 1734-1766.

(By Creator:Felicità Sartori - [www.wilanow-palac.pl](http://www.wilanow-palac.pl), Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=27100185>)

All of these examples appear to be formed through the freeform method, which appear to have been started as a result of recognizing a knot that formed overnight and that was then not combed out in the morning. Some of them may be matting that formed around braided or plaited hairstyles. Most examples in Poland that are depicted show one lock, either on a person's head where all the other hair is normally trimmed, styled, and combed, or as one large matted lock that forms a plate. The impression given in other Germanic areas was that of multiple locks of matted hair.

Many illnesses and some social problems were considered to be the work of elves. These forms of illness tended to be illnesses with no obvious physical

cause that also affected human mental health or seemed to be resident inside of the head. Sometimes parasitic infections associated with creatures that looked like worms were considered to be the work of the elves (specifically, the *dvargr*). In terms of mental health, melancholy (depression) could be a symptom of longing for return to elf-land, to escape the reality of humans. The symptoms of being 'touched' could also be related to hearing voices, psychosis, night terrors, or other symptoms that made human interaction difficult, such as mania. In terms of what we call physical health, certain fevers, headaches, and migraines appear to have also been associated with elves. These illnesses could be the result of accidentally being shot with an elf-arrow, as a form of collateral damage in an elf battle. It could be a purposeful attack because of a human breaking a taboo, often caused by straying into 'elf territory' without proper magical protection. It could be a spell by another entity, such as a cunning-worker, sorcerer, or witch, working through elf-magic. It could be a result of non-normative interests or inexperience in the application of elf sorcery. In these cases it appears that the matted hair was seen as a continuous, physical representation of the elf-spell, hence, a newly formed connection between the land of humans and the land of elves. If symptoms of any of these sicknesses were present at the same time as a *elf-lock* formed, the maintenance and treatment of the elf-lock could form part of the treatment of the associated illness. I could not find any specific examples of charms, spells, or herbal preparations associated with their treatment that specifically included mention of elf-locks. However, what is universally clear is that the locks were not combed out before the symptoms of the sickness were gone. Instead the hair was only cut and styled regularly again, if the matted lock fell off naturally. Presumably, this was evidence that the elf-spell was broken, that the connection to the land of elves was no longer intact.

There are hints that some cunning folk, sorcerers, and witches were characterized by the wearing of elf-locks. The evidence is spotty, but it makes sense that such liminal magic workers were marked by such a wild, outsider hairstyle because they dealt in spirits and moving through the worlds. From a modern perspective, it makes sense that those specializing in magico-religious treatments also tended to have non-normative psychological experiences of reality, as this would reinforce the subcultural belief systems inherent in these spiritual practices. In these cases, presumably, the elf-locks might be encouraged and maintained, as they were associated with the spiritual status, position, and power of the magic user.

About three years ago I began to experience a number of strange symptoms. They included the cyclic appearance of bizarre swelling and spots on my body (hives), mild fever and headaches, joint pains and hard to characterize phantom pains, along with debilitating chronic fatigue, general malaise, cognitive

impairments ('brain fog'), and depression. The problem became very severe, resulting in my not being able to work for more than a year. I have only very slowly been crawling my way back to health. I am still on a healing journey. I came to understand that my problem was rooted in a *borrelia burgdorferi* infection, known as *Lyme disease*. It has been a struggle to figure out what was wrong, start to treat the symptoms, manage the triggers of symptoms, then try to attack the underlying causes. At my worst I was suicidal. I felt like the walking dead, like I experienced everything through a thick fog, that I no longer physically fit into this existence. It was terrible. I am so glad to have had the support of my family, friends, and workplace to get through this, and to continue to get better.

I started to see a psychologist to develop coping mechanisms for my severe depression, since medication alone was not solving my problems. When they found out I was religious, they asked me if I was doing anything within the bounds of my spiritual tradition to deal with my malaise. I was not. I did not know what to do. I could not think of what god or spirit to seek, what practice to engage in. In the depths of my sickness, I did not know what to do and feared to take a mis-step in case things became worse. I was standing on a precipice; my being was on a knife's edge. I needed to stay living, both literally and figuratively. I needed to do this for my loved ones, and for my future self. It was not my time to go.

As I got better, I reflected on my research into matted hair traditions. I realized that my infection with the wee worms of the Lyme spirochetes had changed my life. They took me to the doors of the dead. I still have them inside me, or at least their echos. I have come to see the mental and physical illness I experienced through the Heathen spiritual lens as an elf-sickness. It created the same types of confusion, mental illness, malaise described as being associated with forms of illness characterized by the formation of elf-locks. Rather than letting the sickness steer my life, I have decided to capitalize on this connection and turn it into a spiritual advantage. Whereas I would comb out the tangles in my long hair during the midst of my illnesses, now I have consciously tangled my hair. Although I am much, much better, I still inhabit a country that borders the dead. I am not cured. If I am to still remain in this country that borders death, the nation of the elves, I will be the one to guide and manage the relationship. The wearing of elf-locks is my way to do that.

There are many different physical methods humanity has used to form matted hairstyles. Such styles are found the world over, throughout history. When they appear they often have a spiritual dimension, often one of liminal or magical association. They are often taken to represent and mark specific identities, ethnic, racial, or occupational. Interestingly, their traditions are frequently characterized by cross-cultural exchange, usually with some implied critique of power, with



some association related to the interchange between life and death. In Germanic spiritual traditions, hair locking is related to oaths, warrior culture, vengeance, and Odin or to elves, magical practice, health, and Hulda (Freya, Frigga). I have interpreted this material and interwoven it with my own personal narrative, a narrative of Heathen identity. This narrative transforms my dedication to countering right wing extremism and my experience of chronic illness into a physically embodied spiritual practice: my elf-locks.

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As this is not an academic essay, I have provided Wikipedia articles in case you are interested in further reading, and to identify primary sources.

Cultural appropriation: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural\\_appropriation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_appropriation)

Berserker: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berserker>

Dreadlocks: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dreadlocks>

Elves: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elf#Elves\\_in\\_Norse\\_mythology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elf#Elves_in_Norse_mythology)

Fairy-lock: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy-lock>

Harald Fairhair: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harald\\_Fairhair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harald_Fairhair)

Hel (location): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hel\\_\(location\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hel_(location))

Mímir: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%ADmir>

Píhtokahanapiwiyin: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Píhtokahanapiwiyin>

Rastafari: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rastafari>

Here a few other references that may be of interest:

Campbell, H. (2008) *Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney*. Hansib Publishing (Caribbean), Limited.

Reaves, W.P. (2010) "Old Norse Cosmology in the Poetic Edda." *Germanic Mythology: Texts, Translations, Scholarship*.

<http://www.germanicmythology.com/original/cosmology2.html>

Waggoner, B. (2018) "Are there any evidence that some 9th-10th century Danes wore dreadlocks as suggested by TV shows like Vikings and The Last Kingdom?" *Quora*. <https://www.quora.com/Are-there-any-evidence-that-some-9th-10th-century-Danes-wore-dreadlocks-as-suggested-by-TV-shows-like-Vikings-and-The-Last-Kingdom>