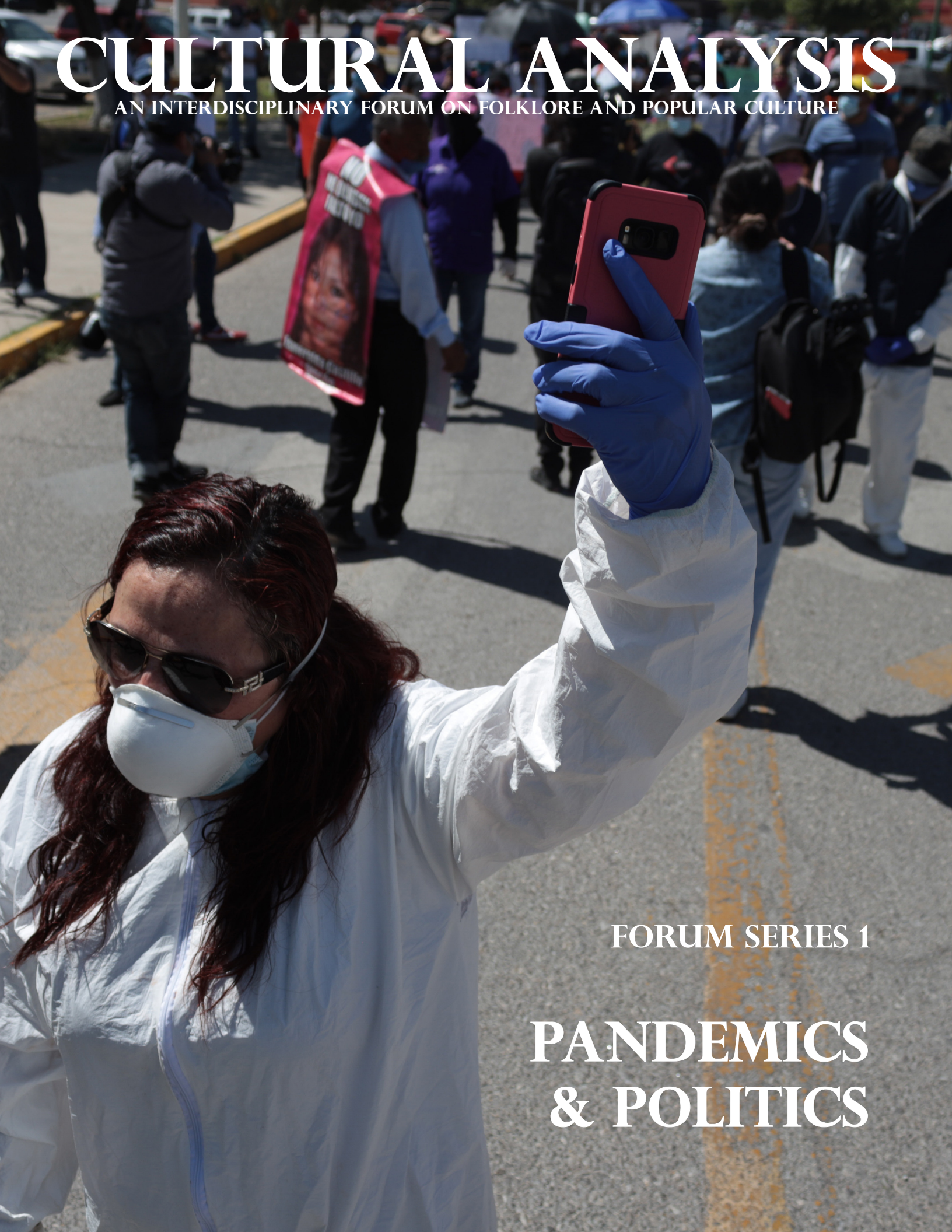


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Essay

The Folkloric Roots and Pandemic Popularity of the QAnon Conspiracy Theory

Levi Bochantin & James I. Deutsch

Smithsonian Center for Folklife & Cultural Heritage
USA

The words most frequently used in the mainstream news media to label the QAnon movement are “baseless conspiracy theory.” One of the earliest such instances appeared in the *New York Times*, which described QAnon as “a fringe movement that discusses several loosely connected and vaguely defined—and baseless—conspiracy theories” (Bank et al. 2018). Nearly three years later, the *Washington Post* referred to QAnon as “The baseless conspiracy theory, which imagines Trump in a battle with a cabal of deep-state saboteurs who worship Satan and traffic children for sex” (Harwell et al. 2021). Certainly, from any rational perspective—such as these two internationally respected newspapers—QAnon has absolutely no basis in fact. From a folkloristic perspective, however, the QAnon movement seems far from “baseless.” By borrowing and updating beliefs that have been shared among “the folk” for millennia, QAnon’s tenets display a base that is deeply rooted in folklore. In this article, we trace some of the folkloric motifs found in QDrops to explore how QAnon adapts them in our twenty-first-century sociopolitical landscape and to demonstrate how these dangerous folk beliefs often thrive in times of uncertainty, political unrest, and isolation.

Precise definitions of folklore often seem elusive. For instance, the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* lists twenty-one definitions from an impressive array of anthropologists, folklorists, and literary scholars (Leach 1949, 398–403). The American Folklore Society presents on its web page eleven definitions, noting that because the subject is so “large and complex, . . . it is no wonder that folklorists define and describe folklore in so many different ways” (American Folklore Society 2021). For our purposes, we have consolidated other definitions to say that folklore consists of cultural behavior, beliefs, and knowledge that are passed from person to person or within members of a group without continual corrective reference to a fixed source. Cultural behavior, beliefs, and knowledge include everything from ballads, folktales, jokes, and legends to baskets, foodways, quilts, regalia, rituals, and much more. Fixed sources include books, recordings, and websites, which may themselves be sources of folklore, but not if “the folk” keep going back to a fixed source to correct themselves on how the joke should be told or how the quilt should be stitched.

Most expressions of folklore have positive connotations. For example, the Smithsonian Institution celebrates folklore through its annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, its non-profit record label of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, and many other initiatives. However, we also know that the folk have long employed folklore—

in the form of racist jokes and pejorative stereotypes—to denigrate and demonize members of other groups. Such is the case with adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory.

QAnon Background and Context

The recorded beginning of QAnon traces back to the first anonymous post by “Q” on 4chan’s /pol/ board (short for “Politically Incorrect”) on October 28, 2017. Short-hand for Q-level security clearance within the Department of Energy, “Q” established themselves as an insider voice leaking coded intelligence to the public that is up to the people to decipher. The overarching conspiracy of QAnon posits a corrupt “deep state,” a shadow government that runs the United States and governments around the world, featuring members of the Democratic and liberal elite, Hollywood stars, and philanthropists. According to QAnon adherents, this “deep state” is abducting, trafficking, abusing, and murdering children, siphoning a chemical from their blood called adrenochrome to either use as a drug or to extend their lifespans. At the helm of the fight against the “deep state” is former U.S. President Donald Trump and those, including “Q,” who are working within the government on the former President’s side. Although this is still the core conspiracy, QAnon has proven receptive to other conspiracy theories and has adopted many under its umbrella, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Ethan Zuckerman describes QAnon as a “big tent conspiracy theory, a meta narrative that knits together contemporary politics and hoary racist tropes with centuries of history behind them” (2019, 4). John Bodner, Wendy Welch, Ian Brodie, Anna Muldoon, Donald Leech, and Ashley Marshall note how QAnon possesses conspiracies that “tend towards specific micro-conspiracies” which, eventually, all become interconnected (Bodner et al. 2021, 147). By combining history and more recently accepting COVID-related conspiracy theories under a “big tent,” QAnon has spread rapidly. The belief that 5G towers are spreading the disease, government lockdowns are a first step towards a communist takeover, or that COVID vaccines contain microchips allowed QAnon to evolve from its orthodox beliefs and broaden its appeal, even to international audiences (Lawrence and Davis 2020, 9).

QAnon’s conspiratorial roots also link to its predecessor, PizzaGate, a conspiracy theory that first arose towards the end of the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle (and almost a year before the first QDrop), on October 29, 2016. PizzaGate, similar to QAnon, first began as a post on Facebook that accused former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and disgraced former representative Anthony Weiner of running an international pedophile ring (Robb 2017). This quickly evolved into many others expanding the conspiracy theory, linking the pizza restaurant Comet Ping-Pong in Washington, D.C., to the alleged ring, which led to an armed man breaking into the restaurant on December 1, 2016, and firing a rifle (Robb 2017). Despite PizzaGate yielding no evidence of being a part of a child trafficking ring, it remains a part of the QAnon narrative. Unsurprisingly, characters and themes related to PizzaGate feature heavily in QAnon, with links to Clinton and Weiner being established from the very first QDrops, i.e., anonymous posts by “Q” on websites such as 4chan and 8kun (formerly 8chan).

Differing from traditional conspiracy theories, QAnon actively survives and multiplies through its users' creations and their spread on social media sites. One of the defining features of QAnon and QDrops is the strong requirement for participation by users to develop their own conclusions and add to the conspiracy itself. Rather than provide the conspiracy directly, QDrops notoriously provide "crumbs" for users, often in the form of several questions, cryptic wording, or changes in word format (Zuckerman 2019, 6-7). Journalists and scholars have described this as the "gamification" of conspiracy theories, with part of the allure tied to decoding the messages online with others in a multiplayer format (Davies 2020; Bodner et al. 2021, 148). Because of the importance of users creating their own conspiracies and coming to their own conclusions, social media plays a vital role in QAnon's existence. Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum conclude that this "new conspiracism" gains legitimacy not so much by proving how the theories are correct but rather through repetition on social media sites with likes, upvotes, and retweets (2019, 52). The amount of online traction a particular theory receives, or whether it's picked up by high-profile members within the community (including responses by "Q"), play a key role in the acceptance of the theory within QAnon canon.

In 2021, QAnon entered a peculiar position with Donald Trump out of the presidency. There have been no QDrops since December 8, 2020; according to the site QAlerts, "Q strategically goes dark for days, weeks or in some cases months" (QAlerts). The lack of QDrops does not mean that followers have given up the conspiracy, however. Most prevalently, evidence from the January 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection has shown several instances of QAnon belief among those participating in the event (Garry et al. 2021, 160-61). Additionally, there are fears that QAnon adherents may become further radicalized through shifting towards more extreme beliefs and groups (Wong 2021). Election-related conspiracies that Donald Trump unfairly lost the 2020 U.S. presidential election due to widespread voter fraud, in addition to the success of QAnon adherents in local elections across the United States, continue to breathe life in QAnon's relevancy, even with the absence of new QDrops (Bergengruen 2021). Combined with the absorption of COVID-related conspiracies, QAnon is here to stay for the immediate future.

QDrops and QAnon conspiracies

The primary purpose of the information that "Q" disseminates through QDrops is to lead followers on a grand narrative of corruption and evil at the root of the U.S. government. However, as noted earlier, many of the QDrops do not explicitly spell out the conspiracies. Instead, cryptic messaging, codewords, and questions encourage readers to go on a digital scavenger hunt and come to their own conclusions. In earlier QDrops, though the participatory elements are still present, "Q" takes more time developing their purpose, attributes, and goals, as "Q" is supposedly an individual(s) on the inside of the system. Take, for example, the fifteenth QDrop posted on October 31, 2017:

There are more good people than bad. The wizards and warlocks (inside term) will not allow another Satanic Evil POS control our country. Realize Soros, Clintons, Obama, Putin, etc. are all controlled by 3 families (the 4th was removed post Trump's victory). (Q: #15)¹

Through this post, "Q" establishes their position within the conspiracy as well as some of the fundamental conspiracies of QAnon, providing exposition to both character and plot. Firstly, "Q" sets forth a struggle between a "good" and "evil" force within the government, which eventually becomes synonymous with a battle between light versus darkness. This plot includes several named antagonists and a broadly yet ambiguously defined protagonist. Secondly, "Q" reiterates their "insider" knowledge within the government through using code words that are supposedly only used by those fighting for good on the "inside." Thirdly, some base conspiracies are introduced to followers: past administrations that practice Satanism are still prevalent throughout the government and are being fought by "good" insiders; liberal, Jewish, and/or foreign elite are the adversaries; and Donald Trump is implicitly recognized as a savior. The "3 families" referenced by "Q" in this post likely refer to George Soros, the Rothschilds, and the Saudi royal family, who each receive their respective code names in QDrops ("+", "++," and "+++" respectively) and are integral for future Q-canon. This, however, is not initially clear to the average reader, introducing participatory elements for newcomers to do their own "research" in order to fully understand the QDrop. Finally, as we will explore later, antisemitic roots seep into QAnon conspiracism, playing off age-old conspiracies of a Jewish elite pulling the strings behind the scenes. In this case, institutions such as "governments, science and the media [...] are ascribed an open or hidden 'Jewishness' – also meant as the embodiment of modernity, freedom, equality, liberty, rationality" (Rafael 2021, 38).

In subsequent QDrops, more far-reaching conspiracies put forth QAnon's staple beliefs clearer, such as child abductions, elite pedophile networks that operate worldwide, and Satanism practiced within elite circles. Additionally, these conspiracies begin drawing from prominent folkloric motifs that provide a familiar narrative for followers to read and accept. This is exemplified in the twenty-ninth QDrop posted on November 1, 2017:

Some things must remain classified to the very end. NK is not being run by Kim, he's an actor in the play. Who is the director? The truth would sound so outrageous most Americans would riot, revolt, reject, etc. The pedo networks are being dismantled. The child abductions for satanic rituals (ie Haiti and other 3rd world countries) are paused (not terminated until players in custody). We pray every single day for God's guidance and direction as we are truly up against pure evil. (Q: #29)

Rather than more cryptic wording and the posing of several questions seen in previous QDrops, this post more bluntly presents some of the core beliefs and attitudes of QAnon. Most notably, this is the first direct mentioning of the widespread child abduction and child sacrifice conspiracies that QAnon is best known for. These two

conspiracies, not having any basis in reality on the scale that “Q” is suggesting, are simultaneously two common folkloric motifs: R10.3 (Child abduction) and S260.1.1 (Child sacrifice as religious rite).² The latter motif is especially rooted in folktales; biblical Jewish legends, as collected and chronicled by Louis Ginzberg in the early twentieth century, feature stories of the Egyptians enslaving the Israelites and sacrificing their children to idols (Ginzberg 1910, 250). In Irish folklore, child sacrifice appears in the story of a woman who, unable to shed blood for Saint Martin, takes blood from her own child’s finger, but unintentionally causes her child to bleed to death (Súilleabáin 1952, 329). QAnon adapts this motif into an evil force that practices ritual child sacrifice for Satanic purposes, though this Satanism is often poorly defined and its evil connected with sacrifice. “Q” not only connects Satanic rituals and sacrifice with the elite and “deep state” through written posts, but also through memes, pictures, and imagery. An October 21, 2020, QDrop of a doctored image of CNN anchor Anderson Cooper and his family when he was a child shows some alleged Satanic imagery and connects his family to the conspiracy (Q: #4914).

Further, “Q” introduces the reader to a broader unfolding grand conspiracy, playing off past accusations towards elites, implicating that North Korea is not a sovereign state and countries across the globe are a part of the conspiracy. The North Korea conspiracy in particular develops as a key example for QAnon of the international dynamics of the “deep state,” with claims in later QDrops that the country is a puppet state of the CIA and ran by the Obamas, and that the Iran Nuclear Deal was a corrupt measure that put uranium in the hands of North Korea to defend the conspiracy (see Q: #39, Q: #50, and Q: #258). This instance of conspiracy draws back to Richard Hofstadter’s “paranoid style” of American politics, where there exists “a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character” (Hofstadter 1964, 14). Moreover, the mentioning of Haiti not only draws in Hillary Clinton and the Clinton Foundation’s “allegations of misdirected, misapplied, or just plain missing funds” in the country, but also “reinforces the Pizzagate assertion that Hillary Clinton is a pedophile bent on harming vulnerable children” (Bodner et al. 2021, 155-6). Lastly, the post returns to the struggle between “good” and “evil” with an added layer of religion, prayer, and prophecy. Both Christianity and biblical prophecy become essential elements of QDrops that “marries an appetite for the conspiratorial with positive beliefs about a radically different and better future” (LaFrance 2020). Connecting reoccurring biblical prophecy with a familiar paranoia of the apocalypse causes one to live “at a turning point: it is now or never in organizing resistance to conspiracy” (Hofstadter 1964, 30).

Religion, Antisemitism, and Prophecy

The religious and apocalyptic motifs present within QAnon conspiracism are incredibly far-reaching and widespread. Most predominantly seen and reported are phrases such as “Trust the Plan,” referring to the believed undercover operation happening currently within the government; “The Storm,” the ultimate rapture-esque event when hundreds of alleged elite are ousted, rounded up and summarily executed (the phrase

“We Are the Storm” is also used to signify the grassroots nature of the conspiracy); and “The Great Awakening,” or the utopia that followers believe the world will enter once the world is aware of the crimes perpetrated by the political system, which leads to a form of salvation. What this salvation looks like to followers, however, varies greatly in nature and scope, though common beliefs “include the unveiling of previously concealed cures for diseases and a financial reset that includes widespread debt relief” (Lawrence and Davis 2020, 6).

Moreover, there are several other religious motifs of style repeated throughout QDrops. Some of these take the form of words or phrases, such as “Dark to Light,” which is repeated countless times throughout the years and implies that the crimes of the cabal will eventually be revealed to everyone (this is coincidentally Motif N270, Crime inevitably comes to light), as well as an on-going battle between light and darkness. “Q” also makes a habit of repeating scripture from the Bible, both short excerpts and entire passages. Again, these passages often fit in well with QAnon’s narrative, such as the repetition of Ephesians 6:10-18 on nine separate QDrops with snippets used in images and memes elsewhere. The passage, “The Armor of God,” involves the apostle John telling Ephesus that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). In these ways, repetition of scripture and religious motifs provide a familiar, moral basis for QAnon that allows it to spread and find a place within religious circles.

In addition to the motifs of child abduction and child sacrifice is V361, Christian child killed to furnish blood for Jewish rite. More commonly, this is referred to as the blood libel, accusations that Jews would kill Christian children in a form of ritual murder, and that their blood would be used for religious practices (Teter 2020, 4). The blood libel’s antisemitic origins trace back to twelfth- and thirteenth-century England with William of Norwich in 1144 and Little Hugh of Lincoln in 1255, whose deaths led to accusation and persecution of Jewish communities. This antisemitic folklore has persisted for centuries, reappearing across countries and cultures, wielded prominently in Nazi propaganda in the twentieth century, and continues to adapt to the present day (Teter 2020, 2–4). As mentioned previously, such antisemitic motifs are well established within QDrops and QAnon conspiracism, playing a key role in the most prominent QAnon conspiracies while adapting to the twenty-first-century internet landscape. The conspiracy of the elite cabal siphoning a chemical called adrenochrome from children directly ties back to such antisemitic blood libel folklore. Though “Q” never outright mentions or faults Jews directly, the purpose of creating an “other” remains the same; as Jan Rathje concludes after examining post-Holocaust conspiracy ideologies, “antisemitism and conspiracy ideologies command the same structures and functions” and “cannot simply be separated from one another” (Rathje 2021, 46).

Parallels to antisemitic folklore and conspiracies are staples of QDrops and QAnon conspiracism. The nature of QAnon being an external global conspiracy, run and operated by wealthy Jewish figures like George Soros and the Rothschilds, harken back to a “Jewish World Conspiracy” (Rathje 2021), and new iterations of blood libel

appear in the form of adrenochrome conspiracies. Besides these, “Q” uses additional phrases and symbols that have implicit antisemitic roots. Phrases mentioned previously like “the Storm” and “The Great Awakening,” while having religious connotations, are difficult to untangle from Nazi-era language of *Der Stürmer*, *Sturmabteilung*, and *Deutschland, erwache*. Moreover, QDrops frequently put parentheses and brackets around words and names similar to the “echo” hate symbol, used by anti-Semites online to denote a person, place, or thing is synonymous with Jews (“Echo” 2021). One example of this is “Q” frequently using double or triple brackets around “RR,” codename for former Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who is Jewish (see Q: #1457, Q: #1496). “Q” also has responded to several users who consciously and purposefully use the “echo”; in QDrop #998, “Q” responds to a user’s question with the “echo” around the word “roths” (implying the Rothschild family) and posting an antisemitic caricature of a Jewish man wading in Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and Hungarian blood. In another instance, “Q” responds to a user who puts Planned Parenthood, a women’s health organization, within the “echo,” simply asking users to look back at QDrops on Planned Parenthood and that they are “working to END. EVIL.” (Q: #909). Thus, in addition to the underlying antisemitic motifs prevalent throughout QAnon conspiracism, anti-Semites are not only actively participating in developing the conspiracy, but also receive attention and validity directly from “Q.”

Finally, several motifs of Prophet (M301) and Prophecy (M300) are abundant throughout Q-conspiracies and are essential to the QAnon narrative. This appears most evident in the figure of “Q,” who passes down information and seemingly knows the future, being described by some as a “postmodern prophet” (Burke 2020). However, equally prophetic is the established narrative of Trump’s sacrifice of his pre-presidential life in order to fight the alleged child sacrifice and deep state conspiracies. “Q” articulated this in clear language within three weeks of the first QDrop:

For the coming days ahead. Ask yourself an honest question, why would a billionaire who has it all, fame, fortune, a warm and loving family, friends, etc. want to endanger himself and his family by becoming POTUS? Why would he want to target himself and those he cares about? Does he need money? Does he need fame? What does he get out of this? Does he want to make the US/world a better place for his family and for those good and decent people who have long been taken advantage of? Perhaps he could not stomach the thought of mass murders occurring to satisfy Moloch? Perhaps he could not stomach the thought of children being kidnapped, drugged, and raped while leaders/law enforcement of the world turn a blind eye. Perhaps he was tired of seeing how certain races/countries were being constantly abused and kept in need/poor/and suffering all for a specific purpose. Perhaps he could not in good conscious see the world burn. (Q: #153)

In classic “Q” fashion, this post asks the reader a flurry of questions for them to consider. However, these operate less as questions and function more as statements that define a prophetic rise of Donald Trump to the presidency and Trump as a sort of destined hero (Motif Z254). Interestingly, “Q” also creates an international dimension to QAnon through implicating that Trump has given up his past life to fight a

worldwide evil. As Michael Barkun notes, an essential aspect of conspiracy belief is its “attempts to delineate and explain evil,” with “an organization made up of individuals or groups [that] was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end” (Barkun 2003, 3). Additionally, “Q” further defines the conspiracy of child abduction and sacrifice by providing a name for the evil that is underpinning it—“Moloch,” invoking more connotations to Satanic evil. In doing this, the problem becomes clearer and more simplified; as Bill Ellis writes, “the act of *naming* such a social threat allows people to put a name, a face, and an agenda onto a poorly defined problem” (Ellis 2000, xvii). Of course, more figures deemed both good and evil are named throughout QDrops, such as those listed in Drop #15, and many are given codenames. For “Q” and adherents, Trump becomes a prophesized figure whose life has destined him for the presidency and his role of ending evil.

The elements of religious and antisemitic folklore are perhaps two of the most important elements for QAnon’s success. In the post-Trump era, QAnon continues to be popular among Evangelical circles. In one CNN report, an Evangelical pastor testifies that Evangelicals who believe in the eventual return of Jesus Christ to judge humanity for its sins are more easily able to “make the jump” into believing a prophetic “Q” and the return of Donald Trump “to judge the wicked” (General and Naik 2021). Indeed, the arrival of Donald Trump to the presidency and the Q-established narrative of his material sacrifice to save the world from the sins of a cabal make QAnon’s parallels to Christianity and biblical motifs of prophecy apparent. This, in addition to similarities between apocalyptic narratives and that of the Great Awakening’s vision of judgment, help provide an age-old basis of the end times for Q-adherents. All the while, anti-semitism reappears throughout QAnon conspiracism whether followers recognize it or not; as Lawrence and Davis note, this antisemitism is further “promulgating an ancient form of prejudice, and has the potential to radicalise converts towards Jew hatred” (2020, 11). Though today’s conspiracism may feel novel, it actively makes use of old motifs and tropes seen throughout history and gives them a new face.

2020 as Lived Reality

One of the most common labels for 2020—even verging on cliché—was that it was “unprecedented” in the sense that the year’s events were “never before known or experienced; unexampled or unparalleled” (Eubanks 2020). Another common label was to call 2020 “the plague year,” referring not only to *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) by Daniel Defoe about the bubonic plague in 1665, but also to 1918, the worst year of the influenza pandemic. Along those same lines, some observers also likened 2020 to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, which Susan Sontag had insightfully described as a plague that is “understood as inflicted, not just endured” (Sontag 1988, 89). Moreover, as Sontag explains, “Plagues are invariably regarded as judgments on society,” which we interpret “as a sign of moral laxity or political decline” (Sontag 1988, 90).

As this article indicates, the beliefs that serve as the foundations for conspiracy theories such as QAnon are hardly unprecedented; rather they are hundreds of years old. However, the interpretation that the plague of 2020 is one that was inflicted on

society due to moral failings or declines is one that corresponds closely to the tents of QAnon and other extremist perspectives. Just as Sontag predicted, the blame for plagues is invariably directed at some “other” group, often the “despised and feared minorities” (Sontag 1988, 90).

Explanations for this blame include much that is anecdotal and journalistic. For instance, skateboarder and podcaster Adam Crigler told the *Washington Post* that “The pandemic has made more people want to blame someone else because they’ve lost their jobs or they’re lonely” (Fisher 2021). In that same article, political operative Ian Bayne explained that “People are isolated, alone, and they need to express their true selves. I don’t know why we’re surprised that there’s more extremism now. People came to our rallies [against masking] because they craved the human interaction” (Fisher 2021).

The results of opinion polls confirm much of this anecdotal evidence. According to an NPR/Ipsos poll conducted in late 2020, significant numbers of Americans shared beliefs that are both highly extremist and accusatory. For instance, more Americans than not believed that a laboratory in China created COVID-19. And only 47 percent of those polled were “able to correctly identify that this statement is false: ‘A group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media’” (Newall 2020). The remaining 53 percent were either unsure if it was true or believed it to be true.

Beliefs in “Satan-worshipping elites,” as well as other conspiracies that connect to religious and apocalyptic motifs, have waxed and waned substantially over time. Accordingly, any attempts to connect causes with effects from a reliable historical perspective is difficult. That being said, the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice made the year 2020 one of the most troubling in decades. The cauldron of 2020’s anxiety, uncertainty, political unrest, and isolation produced a plethora of dangerous folk beliefs, which we believe are neither baseless nor unprecedented.

Notes

- 1 All QDrops throughout this article are retrieved from the site *QAlerts.app*. The number in the citation indicates the QDrop number as indicated on the website.
- 2 All motifs referred to in this article come from Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955-58).

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