

Halloween Customs in the Celtic World

UWM Center for Celtic Studies Halloween Inaugural Celebration

UWM Hefter Center, October 31, 2001

Bettina Arnold, Co-Director CCS, Associate Professor of Anthropology

Night of the spirits; Feast of the Dead; New Year's Eve; the year's turning; Calends of winter; Summer's End; one of the "joints of the year"; beginning of the barren time; day of divination; festival of the harvest; doorway into the new year; Mischief Night; Punky Night; Samhain; Nos Calan gaeaf; All Hallow's Eve. These are all descriptions of one of the most important seasonal festivals of the Celtic world, the night of October 31, this evening, Halloween. In Wales it is known as Hollantide, in Cornwall Allantide, and in Brittany Kala-Goanv. Samain's equivalent on the Christian calendar is All Saints' Day, introduced by the Catholic church partly to supplant the pagan festival of the dead.

Halloween's counterpart is the other great "hinge of the year", April 30, Beltain or May Day Eve, which marks the beginning of summer. To understand the significance of these seasonal festivals, we need to step back in time for a moment, closer to the food production cycle than most of us are today. In pre-Christian Europe, most important holidays were celebrated on the evening of the day before the actual date of the transition from one season to the next, since the easiest way of measuring the passing of time was by observing a complete cycle of the moon – the origin of the English word "month".

Samhain was the end of summer and the beginning of the new year. It coincided with the rounding up of the herds for culling and penning, the storing of crops, and the beaching and repairing of fishing boats and gear, all in preparation for the coming winter. Warfare officially came to an end at Samhain, partly for practical reasons related to weather, but raiding, especially of cattle, seems to have peaked between Michaelmas (September 29) and Martinmas (November 11), at least in the Border region of Scotland, where we have 16th century accounts of such activity during this time. Herds under cover are concentrated and easier to steal, whereas before Lammas (August 1) the cattle were dispersed in the high shielings. According to one official writing in the 16th century, at Samhain “are the fells good and drie and cattle strong to drive”. Night rides across landscapes like the Border region in Scotland looked a lot less attractive by Candlemas (February 2), due to the foul weather and the weaker state of the cattle. So Samhain was known in some, but not all, Celtic regions as as the feast of peace and friendship, during which no weapon was lifted. Hunting in Scotland also appears to have been limited by law to the period from Beltain to Samhain, in order to give the deer and especially the wild pig, a chance to breed. Samhain coincides with the onset of the breeding season of the wild pig, which lasts from November to January. The pig, wild or domestic, was thus the “sacrificial” animal of Samhain, and it is the pig that is associated with tribute from clients to lords: The Irish law tracts specify that “the name of the food that is carried to the lord before Christmas... is the Samhain pig.” The Catholic Church added its own explanation, depicting St. Patrick as giving the original Samhain pig to St. Martin, in gratitude for his tonsure.

Animals that might not make it through the winter were slaughtered at Samhain, to be consumed in communal feasts associated with the festival. The pastoral basis of the two halves of the year shows up in the terms used to describe food: meat was called “winter food” while dairy produce was called “summer food” or “white meat”. The timing of Samhain coincided with the availability of large stocks of food after the harvest, which is why this was the time that political assemblies were called, fairs and regional markets were held, horse races and other competitions were organized, and religious rituals were celebrated to mark the passing of the old year. According to the Irish sources, the Assembly of Tara, the seat of the High King of Ireland, the most important of the oneachs, or fairs, was held on Samhain. Alcoholic beverages such as mead and beer would also have been available in large quantities at this time of year, since the period just after the harvest meant a surplus of grain was available for the production of alcohol, which had to be consumed quickly in the days before refrigeration.

The evening of the day before a new season marked a boundary in time in the Celtic world. Thresholds and boundaries, in both time and space, were important to the Celts, as can be seen in the archaeological as well as written sources. Prehistoric burial mounds often are surrounded by ditches, post rows or stone walls, as are churchyard cemeteries. Such boundaries work both ways – they protect the dead from the living, and vice versa. On Halloween, according to Celtic tradition, the boundaries thin out and dissolve. The mounds of the dead – the sidh in Irish – are thought to open on Samhain. The association between Halloween and ghosts and spirits today comes from the Celtic belief that it was at this time of transition between the old year and the new that the barrier between this world and the Otherworld where the dead and supernatural beings

lived became permeable. Humans could be tricked into passing through to the other side, and might not be able to return to the world of the living, while the inhabitants of the supernatural realm were thought to be able to pass more easily into our world.

In Brittany, the dead were said to return to visit their friends and relatives on Halloween, expecting to be entertained. In Ireland, people didn't leave their houses on Samhain unless they absolutely had to, and they stayed clear of churchyards. If you heard footsteps behind you as you passed a churchyard at night on Halloween, it was best not to turn to look, for the dead would be on your tracks. Speaking of which -- a word of advice -- stay clear of dinner at the Lake Park Bistro tonight -- there's a Native American burial mound in the park not far from the entrance to the restaurant, and who knows whether or not the dead make ethnic distinctions!

In Wales, food would be left outside the door to propitiate the dead, doors were left unbolted and the hearth was carefully prepared before bed for the visit by dead relatives. In Scotland, Halloween was a night of mischief and confusion. The spirits of the dead were impersonated by young men with masked, veiled or blackened faces, dressed in white or disguises of straw. The boundary between the living and the dead was obliterated together with other divisions, including the separation of the sexes, expressed by cross-gender dressing: boys dressing as girls and vice versa. The general disorder was intensified by mischievous pranks, including moving farm equipment and livestock and bombarding the houses of the ungenerous with cabbages pulled at random from gardens. In Cork a procession of young men blowing horns and making as much noise as possible would be led by an individual calling himself the White Mare, wearing white robes and some version of a horse's head. The whole world became on this one night like the town

in the TV show “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” – an entryway for the spirits of the Otherworld. Trick-or-treating is a modern day holdover of the practice of propitiating or bribing the spirits and their human counterparts roaming the world of the living on that night. Pumpkins carved as jack-o-lanterns would not have been part of traditional Halloween festivals in Celtic Europe, since pumpkins are New World plants, but large turnips were hollowed out, carved with faces and placed in windows to ward off evil spirits.

The idea that the “treats” we give children today may be a watered-down version of some darker sacrificial destruction of objects and possibly people has been suggested by some scholars, who cite references to human sacrifice in Classical accounts and the bog-bodies of northern Europe as evidence of such behavior. At the same time, caution is indicated. Certainly there is an association between Samhain and death – the old year, after all, is seen as dying on this day, and in that space between its death and the rebirth of the year on November 1, ritual sacrifices of all kinds could have been seen as especially effective. Think about it – the whole point of a sacrifice is that you want the object being sacrificed to pass to the world of the supernatural as quickly and efficiently as possible, carrying your request – for a blessing, a curse or what have you – with it. What better time to send a sacrificial e-mail to the gods than on the day when the barriers between this world and theirs are wide open! Winter itself is symbolical of death – the power of good is seen as in decline, with all nature turning against humans, who, abandoned to the divinities of darkness, turn inward to protect themselves and their livestock against the elements. In Cornwall, Scotland and Brittany, November is the black or dark month, and death is very much part of that designation. At the same time,

there is also an association between the dark period and regeneration, for all the social arrangements for the coming year were planned in the dead of winter. (Notice that we don't use the phrase "dead of summe".) During this period people busied themselves with the work of forming and renewing the social bonds that produced kinship organization, patron-client relationships, and war. Warfare may have stopped on Halloween, but future hostilities were planned in the dark hours of winter beside cozily glowing hearthfires.

Halloween also marked the beginning of the time when nobles and kings required their dependents to 'quarter' their servants, animals and mercenaries. A good example is the seasonal movements in Ireland of the warrior bands known as *fian*:

The men of Ireland would house and feed the *Fian*/from Samhain to Beltaine, and in turn the *Fian*/ would preserve order and prevent wrong-doing for the/ kings of Ireland; also they protected and guarded the/coast of the kingdom against the invasion of/foreigners.

As Nerys Patterson has put it: "The quartering of the *fian* closed the season of true warfare, and opened what we may call the season of plotting." Lords and kings traveled the countryside expecting to be hosted by their clients and dependents beginning at Samhain, which is also associated with the paying of debts and obligations. Lords could demand their winter tribute at any time after Halloween, and there was significant pressure on the farming population to provide lavish feasts for their patrons. This would be the equivalent of having John Norquist come knocking on your door without warning, expecting you to put him up and feed him and his staff and family for a week or more before moving on to some other lucky family. Samhain also was considered a time when

rulers were especially at risk. According to one of the Irish law tracts, “It is the poet’s duty to be with the king at Samhain and protect him from enchantment.”

As the historian Ernest Renan put it in his Essays: “Of all the peoples the Celts, as the Romans also recorded, have the most precise ideas about death”. What Caesar said on this subject in the 1st century BC was “Natio est omnis Gallorum admodum dedita religionibus” (“The whole Celtic people are greatly addicted to religion”). He also reported that it is at this time of year that the Gaulish Dis Pater, the god of death and winter’s cold, was especially worshipped. This addiction to religion seems to go back a long way, judging by the sheet-bronze Celtic calendar found in France at the site of Coligny in 1879. A lunar system of reckoning the changes in the seasons and keeping track of their passing, it dates back at least to the 1st century AD, and lists a festival named Samonios as the beginning of the year. As an artifact, it represents the Celtic seasonal round in material form, and it marks agro-pastoral festivals like Samhain as well as auspicious and inauspicious days for the purposes of divination.

Space and time were both bounded in important ways in the Celtic world. Territories, like seasons, had to have their boundaries ritually redefined every year, as the English tradition of “beating the bounds” to keep public footpaths open still demonstrates today. Such paths are considered in the public domain even though they run through private lands – they cannot be owned, because they are boundaries between “real”, legally owned, spaces. Liminal zones, spaces between one place and another, were considered outside time, literally “otherworldly”, and this idea extends into the Christian era in the British Isles, as various traditions show. Unbaptized children, for example, were often buried in boundary fence lines, suggesting that such places, like the

unbaptized child, were not really “of this world”. In another example, stiles, sets of steps or ladders where one can cross a fence line, are described in several Celtic cultures as the favorite perches of ghosts. In Wales, Halloween is the night when there is a “phantom on every stile”. The dead and the living were thought to be able to communicate at the boundaries between this world and the next, and some kinds of spaces were seen as places where such meetings were especially likely.

Where physical boundaries, such as fencelines and stiles, were links between the worlds, transitions also existed in time, and these periods of temporal liminality were especially perilous for the living. Crossing the boundaries imposed by seasonal divisions was considered risky, as seen in the ban on eating fruit or grain harvested after Samhain. A Catholic priest describing his boyhood in Connemara describes this custom as follows:

On November Eve it is not right to gather or eat blackberries or sloes, nor after that time for as long as they last. On November Eve the fairies pass over all such things and make them unfit to eat. If one dares to eat them afterwards, one will have serious illness. We firmly believed this as boys, and I laugh now when I think how we used to gorge ourselves with berries on the last day of October, and then for weeks after pass by bushes full of the most luscious fruit, and with mouths watering for it, couldn't eat it.

There are other examples from the Celtic world of this taboo on crops or harvesting of food after Halloween. In Wales, the grain harvest, even in bad weather, was supposed to be in by November 1; in the Welsh laws no one might claim compensation for crop damage after that date.

This is also the reason divination, or fortune-telling, is practiced during these liminal festivals: they were literally “doorways” into the Otherworld and in the case of Samhain, a window into the New Year, so that if you said the right words and did the right things, you would be able to see what the future would bring. Marriage divination was one of the most common and popular examples of this practice: apple bobbing, eating or peeling an apple in front of a mirror by candlelight are some examples. The Scottish poet Robert Burns lists a number of additional marriage divination practices associated with Halloween in the footnotes of one of his poems related to that holiday. Here’s an example: “This charm must also be performed unperceived and alone. You go to the barn, and open both doors, taking them off the hinges, if possible; for there is danger that the being about to appear may shut the doors, and do you some mischief. Then take that instrument used in winnowing the corn (grain), which in our country dialect we call a “wecht”, and go through all the attitudes of letting down corn against the wind. Repeat it three times, and the third time an apparition will pass through the barn, in at the windy door and out at the other, having both the figure in question, and the appearance or retinue, marking the employment or station in life, of your future spouse.” So if you just happen to have a wecht lying around at home, go forth and winnow if you want to know whom you’ll marry! In Ireland, in another form of divination, people would choose from small cakes speckled with raisins or currants called *barmbrack* [*bairin breac*] containing a ring or a nut to determine who would be married and who would live singly. The connection between Halloween and marriage divination is also seen in the perception that Samain time was thought to be most favorable for a woman to conceive a child, and fertility rituals were traditionally associated with this festival as well. Other

customs were a bit more ominous: in Wales, if you had the courage to stay in the church porch until after midnight, you would hear the names of all the people who would die in the coming year being called out. There was always the chance that you might hear your own name, so this was not for the faint-hearted.

In addition to divination rituals, fire is part of all but one of the four major Celtic seasonal festivals (the exception being Imbolc, or January 31), and bonfires were traditionally lit on Samhain as part of the festivities. The re-lighting of housefires was part of the Samhain practices, with the Halloween bonfire serving as the source of renewal for the hearthfires of the individual households, a clear representation of the communal nature of the festival and the importance of community to Celtic peoples and indeed all early, food producing cultures who were dependent on their neighbors and relatives for survival in times of trouble.

It is appropriate in this sense that we are gathered here at the year's turning to celebrate the creation of the Center for Celtic Studies at UWM, because the Center is on the threshold of a new year as well, and we will need the support and good will of everyone here tonight to make this program the success it undoubtedly can be. In the meantime, let's not forget that seasonal festivals are a time to share food, make music, dance, and consume alcoholic beverages. Just remember – when you go to your car later, if you hear footsteps behind you, don't look back!

Sources consulted:

Fraser, George MacDonald 1995 *The Steel Bonnets: The Story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers*. London: Harper Collins.

Patterson, Nerys 1994 *Cattlelords and Clansmen: The Social Structure of Early Ireland*.
Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Rees, Alwyn and Brinley Rees 1961 *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and
Wales*. London: Thames and Hudson.

O'Driscoll, Robert (ed) 1981 *The Celtic Consciousness*. New York: George Braziller.