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BRITISH DRUIDRY AND TURKIC SHAMANISM IN CONTEXT OF PAGAN RELIGION

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Abstract: Article represents Celtic Druidry and Turkic Shamanism together within the phenomenon of paganism. Although both of these belief systems are under the impression of monotheistic religions such as Islam and Christianity today, they are still breathing. When Druidry and Turkic shamanism are compared, it can be seen that, both Celtic and Turkic peoples' perceptions of earthly living and the life after death are similar to each other.

Keywords: Paganism, Celtic religion, Druid, shaman, kam, ritual, hereafter, Tengri.

Paganism is a belief system of longstanding which is based on a reverence for nature and the sacredness of every living soul, whether human, animal, soil, plant or rock. It is formed as living in harmony with the rhythm of the divine nature and it is not based on a liturgy. According to this belief system all beings are the parts of the same chain, so the whole nature is cherished. It rejects the superiority of humanbeings to the nature. Paganism does not show any public buildings for worship. Its temples or shrines are woods, hills, seashores or caves. In a sense, its temple is the whole nature. Also pagan rituals are often held at the turning points of the seasons, at the phases of the moon and at spesific times of transition in peoples lives like birth, marriage and death. Especially moon was thought that it had a huge effect on people's lives, agriculture and hunting. In his work *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, MacCulloch states that: "The Highlanders sowed their seed with a waxing moon, in the expectation of a beter harvest. For similiar occult reasons, it is thought in Brittany that conception during a waxing moon produces a male child, during a waning moon a female, while accouchements at the latter time are dangerous. Sheep and cows should be killed at the new moon, else their flesh will shrink, but peats should be cut in the last quarter, otherwise they will remain moist and give out a power of

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smoke. These ideas take us back to a time when it was held that the moon was not merely the measurer of time, but had powerful effects on the processes of growth and decay” (MacCulloch, 1911: 177).

This belief system can be seen in worldwide especially among the indigenous peoples throughout the world. Paganism also deeply emphasises the equality of the sexes. Pagans honour the divine in variable ways through both masculine and feminine deities. It can be evidently seen in the pantheons of peoples. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word Pagan as: 1) The person who holds religious beliefs that are not part of any of the world’s main religions. 2) Used in the past by christians to describe a person who did not believe in Christianity (The Oxford..., 2006: 1049).

Monotheistic religions maintain a negative and also threatening attitude toward Paganism. However, it can be said that pagan beliefs have always breathed in the world. In his work *The Religion of The Ancient Celts*, MacCulloch states that: “ Time also brought its revenges, for when paganism passed away, much of its folk-ritual and magic remained, practised by wise women or witches who for generations had as much power over ignorant minds as the Christian priesthood” (Ibid: 318).

Also Bonwick clarifies that Druidry has been lived in Britain for ages. Bonwick gives place to Martin who is the writer of *The Western Islands* in 1703, in his work *Irish Druids and Old Irish Religion*: “Martin who wrote his *Western Islands* in 1703, tells us that in his day every great family of the Western Islands kept a Druid priest, whose duty it was to foretell future events and decide all causes, civil and ecclesiastical.” (Bonwick, 2008: 21).

These thoughts are definitely true and logical because both British and Turkic peoples still perpetuate their own pagan originated rituals, whether they enounce that they are belonged to Druidism or Shamanism or not. For example, eventhough there is a serious effect of monotheistic religions, shamanism is very well preserved especially in Turkic-Tatar peoples. For instance in his work *Müslümanlıktan Evvel Türk Dinleri Şamanizm*, Yörük states that: “Kyrgyz people throw some oil or fat to the fire by saying “Bismillah.” (Yörük, 2009: 63). Main shamanic beliefs in Turkic peoples are seen especially among women and in confinement periods, childcare, illnesses, funeral ceremonies and prayers for rain and these beliefs are still perpetuated. Also wish trees and tying ribbons for making a wish is quite common in Turkic culture. Besides animal sacrificing, having respect for the nature, hoping for help from the souls of ancestors, cooking after someone’s death, believing in some supernatural



beings, offering drinks or meals to the fire before eating or drinking, interpreting omens and dreams, believing in astrology and magic spells, imputing sacred meanings to some mountains, trees and rivers are the chief shamanic beliefs in overall Turkic peoples.

In this regard although they may practice different paths and traditions, both Druids and Shamans are parts of the pagan religious system. Apart from the Druids and Shamans, almost all indigenous peoples have their own spiritual leaders. In this sense, Druids can be compared to the Red Indian medicine men, or the Angekoks of the Eskimo (Bonwick, 2008: 13). Bonwick also touches upon an interesting bond. He states that: “Himerlus speaks of Abaris, the sage, from Scythia, but well acquainted with Greek, with this description: “Abaris came to Athens, holding a bowl, having a quiver hanging from his shoulders, his body wrapt up in a plaid, and wearing trousers reaching from the soles of his feet to his waist”. Cicero knew Divitiacus, who professed the knowledge of Nature’s secrets, though regarded as a Hyperborean. Could these have been the Scythians from Tartary, the descendents of the wise men who gave their religion and the arrow-headed letters to Assyrian-Semitic conquerors, who had come down as Turanian roamers to the Plains of Babylon, and whose Chaldaean faith spread even to Egypt and Europe?” (Ibid: 30).

Maier also gives place to an observation of the writer Diogenes Laertius in the third century AD. In his work *The Celts*, he states that: “The Persians, he says, had their magi, the Babylonians and Assyrians their Chaldeans, the Indians their gymnosophists and the Celts their so-called Druids” (Maier, 2003: 61).

In recent years some important developments occurred about Pagan society in the UK. For instance, Druidry has been recognised as an official religion in Britain thousands of years later for the first time. The Telegraph announced the event by Martin Beckford, Religious Affairs Correspondent in October 1 2010. He states that: “Emma Restall Orr, founder of The Druid Network, added: “The Charity Commission¹ now has a much greater understanding of Pagan, animist, and polytheist religions, so other groups from these minority religions — provided they meet the financial and public benefit criteria for registration as charities — should find registering a much shorter process than the pioneering one we have been through”. The BBC News also reported the expression of the Battle Chieftain of the Council of British Druid Orders, Arthur Pendragon. He enounces that: “We are looking at the indigenous religion of these isles — it is not a new religion but one of the oldest”.



MacCulloch's thoughts should be stated here: "Druidism was not a formal system outside Celtic religion. It covered the whole ground of Celtic religion; in other words, it was that religion itself" (MacCulloch, 1911: 301). Of course modern Druidry differs a great deal. But the main reason being that the ancient Druids did not leave any written documents. Because they believed that their stories and practices would lose their mystical value. During the middle ages these stories were compiled and written by monks. And because of the Christian influence they lost their originality. MacCulloch explains that:

"They would not allow their sacred hymns to be written down, but taught them in secret, as is usual wherever the success of hymn or prayer depends upon the right use of the words and the secrecy observed in imparting them to others." (Ibid: 304). He also fills in the background: "These are kept secret, not because they are abstract doctrines, but because they would lose their value and because the gods would be angry if they were made too common" (Ibid: 304).

However, there are some traditions and rituals which are still held by modern pagans. Such as celebrating the seasonal festivals. These Celtic originated festivals are Samhain, Imbolc, Beltaine and Lughnasad. It can be said that especially Imbolc in February 1 and Lughnasad in August 1 are very important for many pastoral communities on the base of fertility. Because the Imbolc is the first festival of spring and it is also the lambing season. Ewes lactates, snowdrops show their face and the days grow longer. Also Lughnasad is very considerable because it is the celebration of harvest and fertility festival. We can see some similar celebrations about the beginning of spring in all pagan originated communities. For instance Newroz is celebrated by Turkic peoples in 21 March every year. Newroz means new day and it represents the beginning of the new year in the natural cycle. For instance, Siberian Khakas people call Chyl Pazy (Yıl Başı) to Newroz in the literal sense of new-year's day.

In order to clarify the Druidry, it is necessary to explain what might be the meaning of the word Druid. MacCulloch tells us that: "Pliny thought that the name 'Druid' was a Greek appellation derived from the Druidic cult of the oak. The word, however, is purely Celtic, and its meaning probably implies that, like the sorcerer and medicine-man everywhere, the Druid was regarded as 'the knowing one.' The Gaulish form of the name was probably druis, the Old Irish was drai. The modern forms in Irish and Scots Gaelic, drui and draoi, mean sorcerer" (Ibid: 293).

The Druids were also highly respected philosophers. About this issue, in his work *The Celts*, Maier states that: "Didorus mentions the Druid as a third



group, after the poets (bards) and soothsayers (Vātēs), and describes them as highly respected theologians and philosophers, responsible for all matters of sacrificial offerings” (Maier, 2003: 62).

In that sense Brisith Druidry and Turkic Shamanism have many similarities because of their being sorcerers, bards, sagacious and also healers in their own society. In his work Shamanism, Eliade says that: “Certainly shaman is actually a wizard and a healer, too. But he is also a person who accompanies the souls (psychopompe) besides he may be a monk, mystic and bard” (Eliade, 1999: 22).

Druids were the supreme power of all religious issues, they also were intermediaries between people and the king. They were even arbitrators. MacCulloch states that: “Druids always accompany the king, and have great influence over him. According to a passage in the Táin, ‘the men of Ulster must not speak before the king, the king must not speak before his Druid’, and even Conchobar was silent until the Druid Cathbad had spoken” (MacCulloch, 1911: 307).

There is the same situation in Turkic peoples as regard as British people.

The word Shaman comes from the Tungus language and it means kam in Turkic-Tatar language. In his work Türk Mitolojisi Ansiklopedik Sözlük, Beydili says that: “The other honorific about ‘kam’ is ‘compeer kam’ (eş kam). It means fellow, companion at arms of the ruler (Hakan) in etatisme. One of the people who carries this name was the father in law of Attila” (Beydili, 2004: 286).

Also it can be said that when important events or ceremonies were held, shaman was absolutely there. Because no sacrificial rituals or ceremonies could be carried out without the shaman’s participation and according to Yörükan, marriage ceremonies are sacred. In the Bilge Kagan Monument’s North side of the Orkhon Inscriptions, Bilge Kagan says that: “I took the daughter of Türgiş Kagan for my son with a grand ceremony”. The importance of the Druids can be seen evidently in myths of the British people. For instance, in the Irish myth The Wasting Sickness of Cuchulainn, the sacred knowledge and the ability of a Druid is clearly glorified. The hero Cu Chulainn ails and only a Druid can heal him. In his work Celtic Myths, Celtic Legends, R. J. Stewart gives place to these mythical verses: “If Fergus, foster-father of Cu Chulainn, were under this spell,

And if, to heal him, there was needed the knowledge of a druid, The son of Dechtire would never take repose Until Fergus had found a druid who could heal him” (Stewart, 1996: 63).

It is also necessary to mention the perception of the world and the life



after death in both Celtic and Turkic peoples. In his work *Celtic Religion In Pre-Christian Times*, Anwyl states that: “Didorus Siculus calls attention to ‘the Druidic doctrine’ that the souls of men were immortal, and that after the lapse of an appointed number of years they came to life again, the soul then entering into another body” (Anwyl, 2010: 45).

Julius Caesar had an excellent observation about the Druids and the Celtic people during his invasion of Britain. He had to make such serious observations to deal with the Druids because they were not only religious leaders but also political authorities among the Celts. In his work *The Religion of The Ancient Celts* MacCulloch gives place to the Caesar’s statements:

“Cæsar writes: ‘The Druids in particular wish to impress this on them that souls do not perish, but pass from one to another (ab aliis ... ad alios) after death, and by this chiefly they think to incite men to valour, the fear of death being overlooked” (MacCulloch, 1911: 334).

For the ancient Celts, modern Druids and also for the Turkic peoples who believe in Shamanism, there are three worlds that existed simultaneously which are existed together to compose the whole universe and the best symbol that represents these three realms of existence is a tree, due to its ability to span the worlds. While hazel and oak are sacred for Druids and British pagans, beech and silver birch is sacred for the Turkic peoples.

In the introduction part of the *Huban Arıǵ*, it is stated that: “Life is endless according to the traditional perception of the world which wears well since the time of the Yenisei Kirghiz who were the ancestors of the Khakas Turks. And this eternal life is a process which contains the spring (birth) and the autumn (death) periods. It takes time in the universe which is composed of the Underworld, Middle World and the Upper World which are telescoped in the vertical dimension, so bring in an entirety and show no sign of hierarchy. The limit of the eternal life is this infinity of the universe” (Huban Arıǵ Hakas..., 2006: 14–15).

Also Yörükan says that, according to Yakut people, death is just like changing the house or moving from somewhere to another place. (Yörükan 2009: 61). Cremation among both Celtic and Turkic peoples also should be discussed in this context. In his work *An Essay on the Druids*, Smiddy states that: “Cremation, for burials, was, perhaps, at a very early period generally practised. It had been introduced, probably, from the feeling of religious reverence entertained by the Celts for fire” (Smiddy, 2010: 60). It is quite interesting that Kokturks and the Huns in Hungary used to cremate their dead, too (Rasonyi, 1971: 28). This



cremation practice most probably results from the belief about the sacredness of fire. All the Altaic peoples specify the fire sacred. Fire fends off the evil souls due to its cleanser attribution” (Ibid.: 31).

It can evidently be seen that, the perception of life after death is very similar in both Celtic and Turkic peoples. Eventhough these two civilizations are so far from each other, there are many common inherited characteristics between them. For instance, the attributed meanings to the Stones. Maier states that:

“The practice, adopted from northern Italy, of placing a stone effigy of the deceased on the top of the burial mound may be connected with a form of the cult of the dead. Perhaps the most impressive Hallstatt era specimen is the effigy discovered in 1963-4 in Hirschlanden near Ludwigsburg. It shows the deceased standing upright, naked, with phallus erect” (Maier, 2003: 22). This issue about the stone effigy on the top of the burial mound is just like the Turkic balbal. In his precious work Tarihte Türklük, Rásonyi states that:

“The stone sculptured images which are named as balbal belonged to the enemies which are killed by the gallant dead while he was alive, is erected to the cairn (kurgan)” (Rásonyi, 1971: 27). Also the Standing Stones, Dunnichen Stone, Cromleches, Adder Stone have sacred meanings in the Druidism. These examples can be associated with the Turkic Standing Stones in Siberia today. All these Stones are stil visited and used with a view to definitely religious affairs and worshipping.

Also the alphabets should be well researched. In his essay OGAM: CELTIC OR PRE-CELTIC?, Griffen states that: “In the British Isles, the Celts developed the ogam (or ogham) writing system, the earliest extant evidence of which is found in monumental stone inscriptions beginning in the fifth century” (Griffen 1). It is wrong to say that the Celts had no writing system of their own, they did not use any writing or ogam was invented by a different civilization. In his essay The Impetus for Ogam and the Issue of Celticity, Griffen argues that: “Philologists define people by the language they speak and by the language they write. The evidence indicates that the impetus for the ogam signary came from motifs of Megalithic art consistent with those in the Isles and that it had already been in place long before people known to be speaking Celtic languages inhabited these islands” (Griffen 7).

This problem is occured in Turkic civilization, too. In the introduction part of the Huban Arıǵ, it is defended that, the old Turkic writing system dates back to the 4th century BC in the Sayan-Altai Mountains and in the lands of the Khakas-Minusinsk (Bengü Su) Valley. If it does not, there would not be any



words like “writing” or verbs like “to write”. So, in the epics of Khakas Turks, it is told that, besides the heroes’ being literate, they write very fast and they are even cognizant of the secret writing system.

Finally, the woman issue should be discussed. In regard of this issue, Druids and Druidesses, Shamans and Shamanesses, gods and goddesses can be handled.

In Turkic culture women is quite respected. The Turkic language should be analysed about this topic firstly. There is no sexism in any Turkic languages. Because there is no discrimination between sexes in Turkic culture. Also the first shamans are believed to be women, so shamanesses are accepted the most powerful spiritual leaders in shamanic communities. Except for this information, in Turkic culture the Kagan’s decision was not valid as long as the Khatun did not agree with that decision. Also the word Tengri does not have any gender. The Turkic families were not patriarchal. Because while the names of relatives on the maternal side are found in Turkic languages such as dayı, tayı, tagay, teyze, kufduk; the names of agnatic relationships are belonged to another age in Turkic dialects (Yörükan, 2009: 48). Women were used to attend hunting festivals, general meetings and economic activities. The role of women in Turkic communities can be accurately seen in Kitab-ı Dede Korkut. For example, a powerful character Dirse Han has not a child and he does not even think about getting married to another woman. Instead of that, he organized the other chieftains of the tribe and they all pray together for a son. Yörükan states that: “In Turkic peoples, all the deities of charity and kindness, Gün Ana who gives light and life, Umay who saves the babies and childs, ‘Ayzıt’ the goddess of girls and women who are in confinement period, Ak Kızlar, Sarı Kızlar are all women” (Ibid.: 49). When we handle the women issue in Druidism, Maier states that: “Gods and goddesses had a significant role to play as givers of fertility, a function which must have been of vital importance for the predominantly agrarian Gallo-Roman civilisation. This applies particularly to the mother-goddesses known as matrons, whose cult is known to us from over 1,100 dedicatory inscriptions and Stone sculptures, mostly from the second to the fourth centuries AD. The matrons are often depicted as a seated group of three richly attired women, holding flowers, fruits, cereals and the like in their hands. Both married and unmarried women are shown as matrons” (Maier 2003: 104).

In his work *The Religion of The Ancient Celts*, MacCulloch states that:

“S. Patrick also armed himself against «the spells of women» and of Druids. Women in Ireland had a knowledge of futurity. In Ireland it is possible



that such women were called ‘Druidesses’. We know also that the British queen Boudicca exercised priestly functions” (MacCulloch, 1911: 316–317). In her essay *The Power of Women in Celtic Society: Female Druids*, Minor gives place to Miranda J. Green’s work *The World of Druids 1997*, she enlightens us by stating that: “Druidesses are most often mentioned through fictional references such as the myth of Finn. He was raised by a Druidess or «wise woman» (term that refers to a females seer) along with another woman by the request of his mother and their «bondwoman», Muirna. «The Druidess and the wise woman taught Finn war craft, hunting, and fishing (the survival arts), and also acted as guards and advisors, warning him of danger.”

The perception of god in Turkic peoples is always argued. Especially the term *Kök Tengri* (*Gök Tanrı*) is often sorted out because of the dualism in meaning. Actually “*kök*” means “blue” and the *Tengri* can mean both the god and the “sky”. So, it is not sure that there is an only god named as *Köktengri* or the word *Köktengri* means “blue sky”. In his great dictionary *Dîvânü Lugâti’t Türk*, Mahmud El-Kaşgârî states about the non-muslim Turkic peoples: “Unbelievers -wrath of God will come upon them- call *tengri* to sky; they also named everything *tengri* that is mighty such as a mountain or a tree and prostrate upon them. They call *tengriken* to a wise man, too” (El-Kaşgârî, 2005: 551).

The Orkhon Inscriptions can be shown as evidence. For instance, on the *Kültigin Monument*’s east side, it is stated that: “*Üze kök tengri asra yagız yir kılındukda ikin ara kişi oğlu kılınmış.*” (When the blue sky was created on the top and the swarthy earth at the bottom, men were brought about between them).

It can be easily seen that the word *tengri* means the sky itself. While the Turks believed in the sky gods, the sky itself was still personified as divine. This religion is definitely polytheistic and pagan originated. So, the researches show that, the efforts to make the old Turkic religion monotheistic is in vain. There is the same complex belief system in British Druidry, too. MacCulloch clarifies that: “While the Celts believed in sea-gods-Manannan, Morgen, Dylan-the sea itself was still personified and regarded as divine” (MacCulloch, 1911: 178).

The similarities between British Druidry and Turkic Shamanism is very clear in context of Pagan religion. These two belief systems both should be investigated thoroughly. It is certain that experts can find many occurrences that are enlightening for the universal human civilization.



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¹The Charity Commission for England and Wales is the non-ministerial government department that regulates registered charities in England and Wales. It answers directly to the UK Parliament.

БРИТАНСКИЙ ДРУИДИЗМ И ТЮРКСКИЙ ШАМАНИЗМ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПАГАНИЗМА (ЯЗЫЧЕСТВА)

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Аннотация: Статья рассматривает кельтский друидизм и тюркский шаманизм в рамках феномена паганизма (язычества). Вопреки мнению о том, что данные религиозные системы в наши дни претерпевают серьезное влияние со стороны монотеистических конфессий, таких как ислам и христианство, они все еще живы. При сравнительном анализе тюркского шаманизма и кельтского друидизма отчетливо просматриваются аналогии в области восприятия кельтами и тюркскими народами жизни на земле и бытия после смерти.

Ключевые слова: язычество, кельтская религия, друид, шаман, кам, ритуал, далее, Тенгри.