CELEBRATE THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

TRICKSTERS AND TREES

Travelling into the Void

- Covid-19 - A Rite of Passage
- The Power of the Trickster

Trees of Power

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- Southern Italian Women’s Witchcraft

Tibetan Death Rituals

Healing and Illness

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So, here we are, another year, and the pandemic still evolves, a very good wakeup call to the fact that we cannot do things as normal and that there have to be some major changes. I hope you are doing OK and life has not been too difficult. Life is a tricky thing, the only certainty - so they say - are ‘death and taxes’, but I would add another to that list - ‘change’ as nothing is permanent, except change of course.

But change is a chance for growth - ‘what does not kill you makes you stronger’ another saying goes. Certainly change enables us to step into being bigger people, with more awareness and maturity, and those change points - where everything seems to fall apart and dissolve - are natural ‘rites of passage’ which many cultures formalise.

So our first article is about the cultural ‘rite of passage’ we are currently in now, thanks to a tiny virus - which, if we collected every single virus pathogen in the world together, would not actually fill a coffee cup - yes folks, something that small in the scale of things has done all this.

It won’t be the only ‘rite of passage’ our culture has to face, and humanity has faced many in the past (and some would no doubt say has not matured very well through them either). It’s tricky; and that is why there are tricksters in every single cultural cosmology in the world, as the trickster stands outside of the culture and reflects back upon it, so we can see it - hopefully - in a clearer way. That is just what our little virus friend is doing for us, holding up a mirror to us.

So, we need shamans; we need witches; we need tricksters and clowns; we need all those who can help our culture gain a deeper understanding of the great cosmic dance it - and all of us as individuals within it - are being asked to move to at this time. We all need help to be reminded and know that all will change, that death and taxes and change will come to us all and all that is around us, and it will happen all in the most perfect way.

Blessings to all Beings
Nicholas Breeze Wood
The Corona-19 Virus Pandemic as a Cultural Rite of Passage

Eddy Elsey

Covid-19 arrived on our shores little more than a year ago, and it already seems as though life prior to the mania, that sprouted from its appearance, is a fading memory. A good lesson in how fast things can change, and the fragility of life.
There are many ways to look at the situation that is now unfolding, but one thing that has kept coming back to me - a lens through which I have chosen look at the upheaval caused - is through the process of initiation.

There seems to be an almost romantic idea that initiation only exists in traditional cultures, and I won’t deny the truth to this. Ancient rituals of initiation do feature much more prominently in these cultures than in ours - at least in terms of shamanistic and animistic beliefs. But what we have to untangle from that projection, is that initiation is not just a ritual; Initiation is, at its core, a natural force.

An initiatory ritual exists when a container is built around this natural force, which allows it to be magnified and wielded in a way that will - hopefully - allow the initiate to be reborn safely on the other side.

Traditionally, these rituals are incredibly challenging rites, and they have to be; it takes an incredible amount of pressure to bend, mould and reshape the human psyche. In communities that still place a high importance on - and often have a non-negotiable participation rule in these rituals - the pain and hardship experienced is worth the risk that the rite entails.

In cultures highly concerned with literal survival, dropping childhood fantasies and becoming - as they say - a ‘useful’ member of your community is essential. The initiatory ritual provides each initiate with the tools and knowledge that they need to become part of something larger than themselves, and to put the culture’s needs before their own. They become absorbed into the collective organism of their community and therefore invested in its ability to thrive.

In Western culture, these compulsory rites of passage are a distant memory; especially within a pagan and spiritual context. But the human need for initiation is still very present within us as people. I would go as far to say that it is in our bones.

So, although we may lack the traditional containers and symbols that allow a community to build a somewhat dependable ritual space, the natural forces of initiation will find us - one way or another. And that is exactly what I feel is happening with Covid-19. We have been sprung into a shared cultural initiation.

At the beginning of any initiation comes severance.

This is a split from ‘ordinary’ consciousness, which tears us away from the world as we know it. The familiarity of our surroundings seems to vanish into thin air - and
Above: the God Loki, the trickster from Norse Mythology from a 1966 Marvel comic book

The Trickster in European Folklore and Mythology
Heather O’Brien

Folklore is rife with allegorical tales of tricksters who roam the wilds and the spaces in between, influencing people and gods alike with cunning skill.

Tricksters shape their attributes at will, ranging from a pre-eminent creator being, to a jester, scapegoat, inventor of tension and sometimes a bringer of helpful resolve. Tales involving them are engaging and anticipatory adventures, with abundant lessons that predominantly focus on morality, carefulness of action, the value of adhering to established social structures and the taking part in community mindedness.

Throughout folklore, cautionary tales often incorporate a trickster who serves as antagonist to the overall lesson of the story, even at their own expense. Whether featuring as the focus of these cautionary tales, animus, anti-hero, or even deity, the trickster appears as a central element and counterpart in much of European folklore and myth.

The role of the trickster is one of congeniality at times, and they are a source of humourous prudence regardless of codified normative behaviour. Tales featuring them have been handed down both orally and in literature from one generation to another, passing down lessons and wisdom that reflect a certain worldview and landscape.

Tricksters can safely venture into the realms of the taboo, while still dwelling in the worldview of the culture which embraces their presence. The tricksters’ influences can be found in stories which have endeared nostalgically over the years; whether it is a wily fox, a sly wolf, a folk hero, or a god - or a variety of characters in between - certain themes run inherently among trickster persona and the tales that they inhabit.

Esoteric in nature - whether anthropomorphised or not - the trickster commonly cultivates a specific, and perhaps otherwise undiscovered wisdom and insight. The trickster is often able to cross boundaries, being a teacher of lessons in mindfulness who bridges gaps between discord and order.

Yet, the trickster challenges these areas as well, stepping outside of constraints, and representing itself as a creature of method who is sly and cunning, skilled and resourceful.

The trickster, flexible in their ability to change form, can be female or male, animal or land spirit, or anything else they will them self to be in order to exert their influence.

LUST AND THE TRICKSTER

In the post-modern age, folklore is increasingly becoming more aware of the feminine influence and the cultural reflections that are found in ancient stories, both from literate and pre-literate societies. This greater awareness allows us a wider lens with which to examine the role of the female trickster and their personality, and how similar characteristics are applied to both male and female tricksters.

While female beings are not always prominently featured in discussions relating to the trickster, undoubtedly their elements of cleverness and skill are represented in fascinating tales, such as the bawdy old woman Baubo in ancient Greek mythology, who jests with the goddess Demeter.

Upon the loss of her daughter Persephone, Demeter is understandably distraught; and it is Baubo’s ability to invoke laughter that distracts Demeter, thus providing a moment of healing and perspective, provided by intentional comic relief.

The role of women as healers is profound throughout ancient texts, and certainly humour and
The generally recognised definition of shamanism begins with the statement that ‘the shaman is chosen by the spirits.’

So what happens when the person who is chosen by the spirits as a shaman is born and raised in a culture that not only has no understanding or awareness of shamanism, but which doesn’t even recognise the underlying animistic foundations from which shamanism emerges? This is the quandary some of us find ourselves in today.

The root of the problem is that while the traditional shaman is supported by the culture into which they emerge, our current Western culture doesn’t even recognise the term, much less the role. There is much more confusion than there is understanding around the most basic practices of the shaman, confusion propagated both by the new age movement and by well intentioned, but misguided attempts to reconnect with our spiritual heritage by appropriating the spiritual traditions of aboriginal peoples.

To answer this call from spirit to shamanise is to face an uphill battle against the misconceptions and ignorance of those around us.

Many of those in the West who are familiar with the idea of the shaman don’t seem to be able to recognise the difference between elements of shamanism and the cultural trappings of the traditional communities in which the shaman practices. This leads to a number of hard and fast beliefs, ranging from ‘a shaman shouldn’t call themselves a shaman’ to ‘a shaman never charges for their services.’

In addition, there are those who believe that shamans can only be called within the context of a traditional society, and never in the post-tribal cultures of the West. This clearly flies in the face of the animistic foundations of shamanism, assuming that the spirits who choose the shamans either don’t actually exist, or that they are somehow limited to working only within the cultural boundaries of certain peoples.

The ideas that shamans don’t call themselves shamans, or that they don’t charge for their services, reflect the nature of some of the communities in which they are found, though only some shamanic cultures have such strictures.

These are generally closed settings, in which everyone pretty much knows everyone else. When someone is good at something, everyone will know this soon enough. Because of this, there is no need to go around claiming to be able to heal others; either you can, and word will get around, or you can’t - and likewise, word will get around. Also, in such settings, most exchanges of goods and services are done without money, because it is unnecessary.

When Michael Harner attempted to create a Western ‘core’ shamanism, he lifted cultural elements like these, along with shamanic practices, because he didn’t seem to be able to differentiate between the two. This is understandable, considering that he was attempting to understand the role and experience of shamanism from the outside in, without having been chosen to do so. In spite of this, he
The Tibetan, after the age of forty-five, knows that his life will not last much longer and begins to think of his next existence. He places a rosary upon his wrist, walks with solemn and thoughtful tread. From now on, he is seen circling prayer stone piles in his spare moments and goes more and more into retirement. Slowly, inexorably he becomes a hermit in the midst of ceaseless activity. If the family is of sufficient means the parents can spend their final years in prayer and meditation in a room of the home. The average length of life is very low and few live beyond sixty; with such shortness of life it is evident why those around forty-five think they are old and begin to prepare for the grave.

The ‘Wheel of Life.’ Yama the god of death holds the wheel of rebirth, showing the six worlds we can be reborn in after death; a god, a pride-filled demi god, a hungry ghost always hungry, a bestial animal, a human, or suffering in a hell world. Life in each world lasts different lengths of time, but eventually we die again, and get reborn in one of the worlds.

The wheel is turned by the emotions we live our life by - called the ‘three poisons’ - represented by the three animals in the centre; the pig - ignorance; the cockeral - pride; and the snake - hatred.

These are the possible rebirths a soul travels through in the unenlightened cycle of lives - samsara - and also the worlds we are in every day of each life; sometimes we live like a god, sometimes as an proud demi-god, sometimes as an dumb animal, sometimes as a needy hungry ghost, stuck sometimes in a hell world, and sometimes as a human being seeking our liberation.
To the Tibetan, death is viewed dispassionately, a necessary process that bridges the transference of the soul from a worn-out vehicle, to a new one. Death is a break in the continued existence of the soul, which must wander in the bardo, before being reborn in the body of a new being which may be human, animal, insect, god, or demon. The form which it will assume depends upon the balance of deeds and misdeeds which prevail at the time of death.

The lama is the most important functionary in sickness and death. In sickness he performs the ceremony to cure the patient, and if hope of recovery is gone, or the patient dies suddenly, the lama immediately switches over into the ritual for the dead. In this rite, the monk sets into motion the elaborate ceremonies to entice the soul of the deceased from the body, plucking out a hair to let out the soul.

Immediately after death the lamas are asked to pray for the deceased without charge, but following this prayer the continuance of ritual depends upon the gifts of the family. The object of the after-death ceremonies is to erase the sins of the deceased and to direct the soul out of the body and through the dark regions of the bardo into being reborn as a man, or as a god, rather than in the lower form. To insure this, the name of the deceased is written upon a gyang, an umbrella-figured shield with charm words, topped by a ceremonial scarf.

The first rites are to entice the soul to leave the body and enter the gyang. During the chanting the son of the deceased holds the gyang in his hand, and while gazing at it he prostrates himself before it. This ceremony lasts about half an hour. Food of the kind which the deceased was accustomed to eat is presented to the gyang, and at the end of the ritual the food is taken out and burned.

Among the poor, the gyang ceremony is held on the third day, and the gyang is burnt in the evening. People of more moderate means will have perhaps two gyang rites, the last being on the fourteenth day. The rich have the gyang rite on the seventh day, and on every seventh day this is repeated, six more times which requires forty-nine days for completion. The chanted

If the body is to be hacked up, pieces are cut off with a sword and thrown into the river. If the body is to go whole, the hair is unbraided, and the corpse pushed into the rushing waters. Braided hair might obstruct the release of the soul from the body.
The American writer on paganism and druidry D.J. Conway wrote that according to Irish legend, the Tuatha Dé Danann [The People of the Goddess Danu] were a race who lived in Ireland long before the Milesians arrived. The legend says, that the Tuatha Dé Danann learned their great wisdom and magic during their travels in the East and Greece, before they descended upon Ireland, and that they were highly skilled in magic.

The earliest reference to them is in the 'Lebor Gabála Érenn' [The Book of Invasions], a collection of poems and prose compiled in the C11th. The book states that after they were banished from heaven, because of their knowledge, they descended on Ireland in a cloud of mist. The legend continues to tell that they disappeared into the hills when overcome by the arrival of the Milesians.

The Lebor Gabála Érenn, although fictional, treats the Tuatha Dé Danann as actual people, and they were regarded as so by native historians up until the

Above: the Dark Hedges, an avenue of beech trees in Northern Ireland, made famous by the Game of Thrones TV series

Right: the Tuatha De Dannan in the painting 'The Riders of the Sidhe' by the Scottish painter John Duncan (1866-1945)

This influenced Peter Jackson's Elves in his film 'The Fellowship of the Ring'
In the small mountain villages and countryside of Southern Italy, there still lives a magical female tradition shrouded in mystery. These women are called Janare (singular Janara), and in popular folklore they are considered witches, devoted to the darkest and most evil of practices.

This dark reputation is mainly because of the Catholic Inquisition, and the works of a C17th Jewish doctor, who described them as devil worshippers. But in actuality, these women were, and still are above all, peasant healers and seers, capable of entering the world of invisible things. But as free women, the Janare have been seen historically as dangerous for the patriarchal peasant society of Southern Italy.

Some scholars have identified them as the remnants of an ancient caste of priestesses who historically were associated with the goddess Diana, but rather than priestesses, their heritage seems to allude more directly to an animistic paradigm. The Janare through their lineages have preserved and passed on an ancient, natural knowledge.

The form of the Janare tradition, and its underlying spirituality, are much more primordial and archaic than the official pagan religions of ancient Rome, and I would argue that the roots of their tradition probably date back to the times when the Samnite and Oscan peoples lived in that region of Southern Italy, before Rome and its Empire arose, and these Southern Italians were conquered by the Romans, to be brought into their Empire.

When Rome took them over, like many ancient traditions, the Janare coexisted with the religions of the ancient Romans, and also the new religion that followed, the advent of Christianity.

**BENEATH THE SACRED TREES**

Legends and traditions say that the Janare would meet in the countryside near the city of Benevento, in the region called Campania, under their sacred walnut tree, to practice their ‘dark rituals,’ which according to Christian tales included kidnapping and tormenting children, torturing animals, casting the evil eye, ruining crops and casting deadly spells called fatture.

But if you look beyond these negative and superficial stereotypes - which have been present throughout Europe against all such ‘witches’ since the early medieval period - you will discover a very different reality.

The Janare are above all *dominae herbarum* - ladies of the herbs - skilled in healing, and knowledgeable about the magical and ritual properties of plants.

Also, their tradition has always been associated with a tree. Starting from the famous ‘Walnut of Benevento,’ a legendary walnut tree which stood on the banks of the Sabato River in Benevento. The tree is said to be the place where witches from across Europe came to gather, and where the Romans practised rituals devoted to the Egyptian goddess Isis, who had a Roman temple there.

Every popular tradition that acknowledges the presence of the
Silk is a natural fibre which has been used in textile production for thousands of years. It has long been prized for its unique shimmering appearance, which is caused by the prism-like structure of the fibre.

The best-known silk is obtained from the cocoons of the larvae of the mulberry silkworm, but silk is actually produced by other insects and arthropods including some bees, wasps, ants, silverfish, mayflies, beetles, lacewings, fleas, flies; and of course from spiders.

These beings are rarely used to make commercial silk, with the exception of spiders; as some zen - the ritual shawls used by Tibetan tantric ngakpa practitioners - are often traditionally made from, or contain spider silk. Spider’s webs were used also as a wound dressing in ancient Greece and Rome, and some early European artists used them as a base for painting upon; if you search on Youtube even today, you will find videos instructing you how to use webs as a base for miniature paintings.

Silk was first developed in ancient China, and silk fibres have been found in soil samples taken from two neolithic tombs, which date back around 8,500 years. The earliest surviving actual silk fabric discovered is around 5,700 years old, and was used to wrap the body of a child in a tomb in Xingyang, in what is now Western China - although at the time Xingyang was not actually part of China.

An ancient Chinese legend says that an Empress called Hsi-Ling-Shih, Lei-Tzu, now more often known simply as Lei Zu discovered the secret and was the first to produce silk.

Lei Zu was said to realise the special property of silkworms while she was having a drink of tea beneath a mulberry tree one afternoon. As she sat there, a mulberry silkworm cocoon fell from the tree into her hot tea, where it slowly unraveled, releasing the thread. The silk thread was said to stretch right across her entire garden, and in the centre of the ball of thread she saw the moth’s small cocoon, and realised that this insect was the source of the silk.

She was astounded by the discovery, and persuaded her husband to give her a grove of mulberry trees, where she domesticated the worms that made these cocoons. She is attributed with inventing the method of joining the very fine filaments from each cocoon into a thicker thread, strong enough for weaving; and of inventing the first silk loom too.

Lei Zu is a popular figure of folk worship in China, even to this day, and she is known as Can Nainai - Silkworm Mother

Silk was considered a sacred, and very special material by the Chinese. For many centuries its use was reserved for Emperors, who used it in their robes and for other textiles. They also gave it as gifts of power and prestige to others. Gradually however, the use of it spread throughout all of Chinese culture, and the fabric was traded to many regions of Asia and beyond. The famous ‘Silk Road’ was established in order to trade silk to faraway places, including Rome and Europe, and also in order to carry goods from Europe and other places - such as Mediterranean red coral - back to China.

Because of its texture and lustre, silk rapidly became a popular - albeit expensive - fabric in the many areas that Chinese merchants were able to reach; for instance, chinese silk thread has been found in the hair of a 3,000 year old Egyptian mummy.

Because of silk’s astonishingly important potential for generating wealth and power, the Chinese kept the knowledge of its production a secret, and tight to
their chests, however the knowledge spread out slowly, first to Korea, around 2,200 years ago; and then to the ancient Central Asian Kingdom of Khotan, around 1,950 years ago; and to India, around 1,800 years ago.

Silk was astronomically valuable in medieval Europe, which drove European explorers and traders to seek its secret, which eventually reached Europe around the year 1100, although silk remained a valuable commodity even after its secret had been discovered. One single yard of silk fabric cost the same as a horse, or a cow, during medieval times in Western Europe.

**SILK FOR THE SPIRITS**

In Islam it is *haram* - forbidden - for men to wear, or even sit upon silk; although for women it is permissible. Men get away with this by using silk to decorate clothing with trims of it, or wear it as accessories, as this is not considered to be ‘wearing silk’; therefore a silk shirt would be *haram*, but a silk neck tie - because it is not regarded as a garment - is deemed permissible. People can be very strange sometimes.

However, because of the value and rarity of silk, it has been used for sacred items in many other traditions for a long time. In Europe the medieval church used it for fine vestments and for the wrappings of precious relics, and in Judaism the traditional prayer shawl - the *tallit* - has often been made from silk, and it has traditionally had other uses as well. However, the sacred traditions who have used silk most are those closest to China, namely Taoism, Buddhism and Shamanism.

**A RICHNESS OF COLOURS.**

The colours of silk became important in these traditions, as different colours often represented
The ‘Tara’ Brooch

County Meath, Ireland
Diameter 87mm
Pin length 320mm
C710 - C750

The brooch was found in Ireland in 1850, but, despite its name, it is not from the ancient sacred site of Tara. The name was given to it by a jeweller who thought it would help him sell some copies of the brooch, which he’d had made.

It is made of cast silver, which has been gilded on both the front and rear. The gold filigree panels depict both animal and abstract motifs, separated by studs of glass, enamel and amber. Attached to it is a silver chain made from plaited wire.

The brooch was said to have been found on the beach at Bettystown, in County Meath. The woman who found it claimed it was in a box, buried in the sand, although it was more likely that it was found inland, and she claimed it was found at the beach to avoid a legal claim by the landowner. Eventually it was sold to a Dublin jeweller, who gave it the name it is known by now.

It is a priceless example of early Christian period Irish art, from just before the Vikings invaded Ireland, and is now on display in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.