

COMPARING STORIES: EMBRACING THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

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Abstract / Résumé

This paper examines two oral traditions: the Anishnaabe and the Irish Celtic, and the roles that their languages and stories play in their respective spiritual traditions. In order to appreciate these spiritual traditions, one needs to see that *mythos* is more basic than *logos*. *Mythos* may be seen as a more effective medium for interpreting and experiencing spirituality encoded in what is commonly referred to as the “oral tradition.” What we intend to demonstrate in this paper is that the *sacred* is *inherent* in the stories themselves. The stories today, having been transformed into literature, continue to act as a conveyor of the sacredness within language and within the story itself. Literacy merely makes accessible the oral stories for Indigenous peoples whose languages have been decimated.

Le présent article examine deux traditions orales, la tradition Anishnaabe et la tradition celtique irlandaise, ainsi que le rôle de la langue et des histoires dans leurs traditions spirituelles respectives. Afin d’apprécier ces traditions spirituelles, il faut voir que le *mythos* est plus fondamental que le *logos*. Le *mythos* peut être considéré comme un médium plus efficace pour interpréter et vivre la spiritualité codifiée dans ce qu’on appelle couramment la « tradition orale ». Le présent article vise à démontrer que le sacré est inhérent aux histoires elles-mêmes. Ayant été transformées en littérature, les histoires actuelles continuent d’être des voies de transmission du caractère sacré intégré dans le langage et les histoires elles-mêmes. L’alphabétisation facilite l’accès aux histoires orales des Autochtones dont la langue a été décimée.

For thousands of years, singers and storytellers have wondered about the relationships between real and imagined worlds, between life and art.... And many of our conflicts across cultures come down to a disagreement over whether stories and songs create or merely communicate thought and feeling.¹

J. Edward Chamberlin.

The aim of this paper is to examine two oral traditions: the Anishnaabe and the Irish Celtic, and the roles that their respective languages, and stories play in their respective spiritual traditions. Scholars of comparative religion, such as Mircea Eliade and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, attempted to find commonalities in religions, so as to better understand the nature and function of religion in human life. What I intend on doing in this paper is to add to the comparative religion literature by comparing the Algonquin traditional legend, *Amik Anishnaabewigoban* [When Beaver Had Human Form] with the traditional Celtic story *The Voyage of Maelduin*. How might such a comparison support or not support Joseph Campbell's claim that, after exploring dozens of cultural themes through story, universal themes are likely to be found in other comparisons of the over six thousand cultures in the world?² More importantly, how might these shared themes relate to Storytelling and the Sacred?

Members of the Anishnaabe tradition and other interested readers often feel bound to make interpretive statements about the moral of a particular story and how a particular story might relate to the sacred. From even a cursory analysis of the traditional Anishnaabe story, we can see that the teller creates a convincing performance of the narrative, rich in discourse features and useful for the enjoyment and instruction of his audience. Certainly such taken-for-granted, unanalyzed expertise on behalf of the speaker supports what Joseph Campbell writes, about what he considers to be the basic functions of Indigenous legends and myths. He writes:

What human beings have in common is revealed in stories—stories of our search for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and understand our story. We all need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death. We need to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are (5).

My interest, however, is not with linguistic features of these stories, but with thematic ones. What similar themes are at work in the Anishnaabe story "When Beaver Had Human Form," and the Irish Celtic story of

“The Voyage of Maelduin”? There are a number of themes at work in both stories, which shed light on culture-specific ways of relating to one’s spirituality, one’s sense of Who am I and Where do I fit in the big picture?” Themes found in traditional stories can tell us those kinds of things and today we can still learn from them. First, allow me to present both stories here.

The Anishnaabe story is recounted by Okinawe, a respected Elder from the Algonquin community of Pikogan, Quebec, who sheds light on the relationship between human persons and other-than-human persons, in this case between humans and beavers. The story is “When Beaver Had Human Form” and goes like this:

A beaver, transformed into human form, marries a woman. He convinces her that they must move elsewhere, though on the journey he travels ahead of her, making bridges for her across every river and stream that he encounters. At one river, however, he forgets to make a bridge, and when he goes back to find his wife, he discovers her tracks leading into the water. Following her into the river, the two decide to stay in the water. They adopt a beaverine lifestyle, build a dam and reservoir. They have children. After two years, the beaver has a premonition of people coming to kill them. This vision is realized, and the beaver and his wife escape by using a stick to move the net placed in their way, though all their children are killed.

The Voyage of Maelduin, presented by Caitlín Matthews, is an illustration of spirituality in story that embraces soul and spirit, showing its inherent power. The journey of Maelduin, the *immram*, is a voyage of Maelduin’s boat.³ The text was transcribed in the eighth or ninth century and is considered the earliest immram story. The original language of the story is Old Irish, now found in the modern Irish Gaelic still spoken in the Irish-speaking [Gaeltacht] areas of Eire. The story involves the son of a warrior who leaves his land in search of solace and visits a series of islands where each experience encountered equates to the journey taken in life. The nature of the experiences are an inner journey, but also for special voyagers such as shaman, it has an interconnecting characteristic to “many-coloured worlds.”

The story begins with Maelduin, a son born of Ailill Ochair Agha, a great and generous warrior and an abbess of Kildare, who had been raped by Ailill in a youthful raiding adventure. Ailill was killed before Maelduin’s birth and the baby was sent for fostering by the Queen of the Eoghanact who raised him as her own son. Maelduin was strong and handsome and was skillful in games. One day he is taunted by one of his

peers about his parentage and confronts his foster-mother. The Queen took him to the abbess but told him his father had died long ago. Maelduin returned to his father's kindred and was welcomed by them. One day in the graveyard of a church, he met Briccne, a monk who challenged him to avenge his father's murder. Intent on vengeance, he learned the best approach was by the sea. He consulted the druid, Nuca, to seek wise counsel, who instructed him in the building of a skin-covered curragh [boat] and told him to take seventeen companions to attack the enemies. His three foster brothers swam out to join the crew, changing the numbers; so sailing from Ireland their fate became altered. After crossing the ninth wave, hugging the coastline [considered to be the magical boundary of the land, beyond which was another country] they reached the first island. The first island seemed to promise triumph and the men rejoiced, but this act is what caused the wind to blow and their boat left the coastline and became lost at sea. Maelduin saw this implication and told the crew to rest their oars and trust to God; however, he blamed his foster-brothers for their appearance as changing his course. The story of his inner journey began in a process that became enlarged as he entered each island. The islands numbered thirty-three, which I believe also to be symbolic.⁴

Both stories contain at their heart the theme of journey. There is an external journey. In the Irish Celtic story related by Caitlín Matthews the hero Maelduin and his three brothers head out to sea in their curraghs and visit many islands. Each of the islands has a different topography and a different kind of experience to enjoy or avoid. In the Anishnaabe story of "When Beaver Had Human Form," the hero embarks on a journey, across a vast land and many times needing to cross over waters. Bridges have to be built and then, eventually, a dam. One could argue that on the surface in both stories Maelduin and Beaver are looking for a place to live, a kind of Promised Land. It is interesting how the themes of journey and home connect here as they do in the spiritual traditions of so many cultures.

But both stories involve water. In the Irish Celtic tradition, the Otherworld is over water and generally to the West where great mysteries of the gods, immortality, and the empowering sources of the spiritual quest are found. The sea symbolizes the origins of life, as it does in almost all mythic traditions. As Matthews writes, "To return purposefully to the sea" and voyage towards "discovery is a significant act" of returning to "the womb of the mother in order to be reborn or mystically transformed" (14). To voyage on the sea of life is to discover and find oneself, to understand one's own unique immram (17). In the Anishnaabe story "When Beaver Had Human Form" there is also a water theme—the

Beaver and his wife have to enter the water, which Beaver dams, so as to harbour all the power of water. (Actually, so that she might cross, too!).

So both of these stories are about an inner journey. There are tests. Maelduin and his men have to fight many obstacles and monsters as well as resist their own inner demons such as lust and greed. Beaver has to battle his way through many natural obstacles, rescue his wife from drowning and then escape the enemies who have come to kill him.

These journeys in both traditions, I believe, can be seen as a kind of Shamanic quest. Shamanism is perhaps a modern term in the West but it does refer to the reality that some go to the Otherworld to learn some deep truth. Beaver was good at adapting to his environment, but he needed to learn to not forget his loved ones. He did escape with his wife, but their children were killed. Maelduin went to the Otherworld filled with hatred for the men who had killed his father, he needed to learn that vengeance might have satisfied him in a superficial way, but it still would not have closed the door to this dark force in his soul. Maelduin needed a transformation of the soul from hatred to kindness, from anger to friendship. In short, Maelduin needed to be healed in the deepest sense. And healing I believe is the purpose of the Shamanic journey to the Otherworld.

Closely related to this is the notion of forgiveness. Maelduin and his men eventually returned home and they meet the men who killed his father. There is no bloodshed, rather the expression of goodwill and exchange of friendship between the two clans. Reconciliation obviously has replaced the initial hostilities. The theme of reconciliation is not so evident in the Anishnaabe story. However, there is forgiveness I would argue. Beaver forgot to build a bridge for his wife and she fell into the water. In spite of this, they did end up together, so to me reconciliation must have taken place (in the water).

The journey, then, is a central theme in the two major stories that I have considered from these two ancient oral traditions. A second major related theme is symbolism of the circle, which conveys the cyclical nature of their mythical world views. In both oral traditions, every part of life involved cycles—the seasons of nature, the seasons of human life, the cycles of sun and moon and formations of the stars. Thus the spirituality of these two traditions involved a deep holism—to be well meant living in synchronicity or balance with everything and every one else.

Much of my research for this paper has been based on my personal experience, which led me to spend time in the areas of Sudbury-Manitoulin Island, Ontario as well as the Outer Hebrides Islands of Scotland. As an emic researcher, this allowed me to gain insight into the

integrated circle of life that expresses the spirituality, at the heart of the mythical world view of both oral cultures.⁵ The circle is at the core of the traditional oral “way of seeing” the world, because, it is a representation of the renewal and constant movement of all life. This circular movement can be seen explicitly in the design of the Celtic knot pattern found on Irish Celtic High Crosses, stones guarding sacred passages as at Newgrange, and on the beautiful jewellery designed by ancient Celtic smiths.

Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (1993) discusses the curved nature of journey of life in the Celtic tradition in terms of the Celtic knot. He writes:

What is particularly striking about them is their sense of constant movement. The lines may constantly double back on each other and return where they started but the overall impression is of a purposeful frustrating repetition. There are many detours and diversion but ultimately there is a sense of surely and securely reaching a destination. If that destination is in fact to arrive back at the same place where we started then that is to recognize with T.S. Eliot that ‘What we call the beginning is often the end and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from. (83)

This belief and experience that all of life involves cycles of time, growth, birth and death, of circular change became obscured and then rejected totally by a “scientific way of thinking and seeing,” that motivated the development of Western industrial civilization and modernity in general. This radical change has led to a spiritual vacuum, with growing numbers of people today in the West searching for answers to some fundamental existential questions, such as “Who am I, where do I fit, if at all, in the nature of things?” Some in the West indeed have embarked on a quest for meaning and spirituality, which might link them to the natural world and cycles. Looking at the primal [early] way of “seeing” the world as found in the Anishnaabe and Celtic oral traditions, one can find a beacon of light to meet this human need for a more natural order [the order of holistic cyclical world view] understanding of things. In the mythical world view of these two traditions language and story were the venues conveying a living spirituality not found in the modern world, which has been dominated by the logos, or by scientific empirical thinking, a patriarchal orthodoxy in most religions with a hierarchical ecclesiology passed down from the Middle Ages. Language and story are only valued in written form, so that the power that underlies them has been lost. Peter O’Dywer’s history of Irish spirituality attests to the changes imposed by the Roman church onto the oral peoples of Ireland, devastating their language, culture and world view.⁶

James Dumont, fourth degree Mide healer, says that if we wish to understand Native myth and legend, we “must be willing” to accept there is a different way of “seeing the world’.” Furthermore, he states that if we are willing “we must make an attempt to ‘participate’ in this way of seeing” or we may not fully understand the view of the world seen through stories. Dumont adds that this way of “seeing” the world is “not confined to a certain group, but is a comprehensive, total view of the world and is essential for harmony and balance amongst all of creation.” To illustrate this “primary kind of vision” he shares a story he learned from a “Midé Shaman from Minnesota.” Dumont relates the story as follows:

In the beginning, while the races still lived together as one, each of the races had to come to a decision as to what direction he would choose. During this time White Man and Red Man found themselves walking together along the same road. At some point in their journey they came to a division in their path. One of the two possible roads before them offered knowledge and growth through accumulation and mounting of all that could be seen ahead (a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree-vision). This is what White Man chose and he has developed in this ‘linear’ and accumulative fashion ever since. The other road ...offered a whole and comprehensive vision that entailed not only vision before but also vision behind (a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree-vision). This was a circular vision that sought to perceive and understand the whole nature of an object or event—its physical reality as well as its soul. The Red Man chose this road and he has developed in this circular and holistic way ever since. (75)⁷

I would agree with Dumont that the ancient Irish Celtic peoples—modern Western humankind has followed a road, which is linear in nature and where only half of the vision needed to live is recognized. This is the road of Western Christianity with its partial vision grounded in logos, in logic, reason, straight and critical thinking. Spirituality, however, is a realm of experience that is neither logical nor decipherable by reason because it relates to the soul. And the soul, as we learn from these two ancient traditions, cannot be disconnected from any human being—but is an integral part and the foundation of what it means to be human. In these two ancient traditions the soul, heart, mind, body and will are interrelated and they move and grow with the seasons of life and nature.

Journey of Transition in Spirituality

The concept of journey is basic to understanding the mythical world view of Joseph Campbell in his work on journey as he talked of the

hero's journey. In the ancient traditions I have examined it is the concept of journey that best expresses the cyclical nature of individual lives and the history of a people.

The cycles in the journey of life are expressed in every transition. For example, William Bridges has theorized that, in a new beginning, one first experiences an ending. Bridges writes, "endings are, let's remember, experiences of dying. They are ordeals, and sometimes they challenge so basically our sense of who we are that we believe they will be the end of *us*" (109-110). He cites Mircea Eliade, "In no rite or myth do we find the initiatory death as something *final*, but always as the condition *sine qua non* of a transition to another mode of being" (110).⁸ Dumont and Matthews show how transition relates to the sacred in journey of Anishnaabe and Irish Celtic stories, which led to the seeking of new vision.

Bradley discusses the 'Power of Imagination' [pp. 84-99] and its *enemies*. This point relates to the objective of my paper, which is to show how through examining language and story and by comparing spirituality in the Anishnaabe and Irish Celtic oral traditions, that one can address the question as to whether orality expresses the spirituality more efficaciously than literacy. The preponderant use of logic and reason, I believe, has distorted and repressed the power of the imagination and with this loss has come insensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life. It is important to remember what was the original central source of religion in the West and the mystery embraced therein. Bradley speaks of the need for re-mystifying and re-interpreting Western Christianity, invoking encouragement to understand its innermost mystery. He writes:

Two powerful if contradictory trends threaten the integrity and perhaps even the survival of contemporary Western Christianity. One would turn it into a highly abstract and conceptualized academic discipline appealing only to intellectuals while the other would reduce it to a series of shallow emotional slogans. In both cases what is at risk is an understanding of the element of mystery which is at the heart of the Christian faith. (84)

Bradley's alternative to this dilemma is that Celtic Christianity may offer what we need to hold a faith unencumbered. To do this, would need an "approach," which is "rooted in the imagination," which he says was a "marked characteristic" of their faith (84). The imagination, then, was recognized as a prime component related to Irish Celtic life and perceived as "natural" to Anishnaabe peoples, as told in the stories by Basil Johnston.

Something else that was misplaced from early spirituality, which is

noted by Edward C. Sellner, (1993) *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*: that being the spiritual mentor. He relates this to Thomas Merton's, *The Wisdom of the Desert* and the desert Christians of the third and fourth centuries, "who acted as spiritual guides." He writes:

The 'spiritual leaders of the early Celtic [church] who lived from the fifth through the eighth centuries' were 'men and women' who 'were influenced significantly by the earlier stories and ministries of the desert Christians,' primarily lay people who lived in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt. While the desert Christians referred to their spiritual guides as *abbas* (fathers) or *ammās* (mothers), the word the early Celtic Christians used to describe their own tradition of spiritual mentors was *anamchara*, Gaelic for 'friend of the soul' or simply 'soul friend.' (8)

The *anamchara* fulfilled a role in community, amongst a circle of people who held a common belief in a spiritual way. While Irish Celtic in nature, a similar principle was and still is upheld in Anishnaabe community, where an Elder [one who though considered spiritually wise, may not necessarily be elderly] using the Seven Grandfather and/or the Medicine Wheel ancient sacred teachings, would seek spiritual counsel and wisdom. I will now illustrate briefly this ancient way of "seeing" the world, looking through the lens of two culturally different eyes, yet substantially similar in their vision of life.

Ways of Seeing the Journey Through Anishnaabe Eyes

Referring to the differences within the "primary" vision, Dumont says it "seems" as if "this difference in vision has been at the source of the" later difficulties between the two peoples and cultures. To bring some light to "this way of seeing," Dumont suggests following the "Ojibwa man" into the story of the "Ojibwa's present viewing of his world by seeing how an Ojibwa boy experiences a dream-fast at the very critical pubescent stage of life" (76). Dumont's article is compacted with original concepts of the "primary vision and historical structures," which cannot be explained here due to space limitations. However, what is important is the idea Dumont presents in explaining the "total way of 'seeing'," which "recognizes two different realities" but more importantly makes the point that the Anishnaabe saw the circle of life as the centre of their mythical world view (79). This primary vision is taught in the use of the Medicine Wheel where can be seen all the peoples of the world on the same circle.

The Irish Celtic way of "seeing" the world, I believe, could be summed up in three lines in the "Celtic oath of the elements" [because it shows

an innate trait of Celtic temperament]. Matthews says in writing about the “Celtic World”:

We will keep faith until the sky falls upon us and crushes us,
until the earth opens and swallows us,
until the seas arise and overwhelm us. (8)

My own cultural insight, I believe, helps me relate with the tenacious persistence of the integral strength and spirit contained within those lines. However, I will draw upon Matthews’ theme about the “Celtic dead” and briefly upon Nigel Pennick’s idea of the Celtic cyclical view of nature, to explain more fully the way the ancient Irish Celtic people saw their world.⁹ I use Matthews’ theme because I think it touches an uncommon way of viewing Celtic life that many authors do not give emphasis to very often. She illustrates the concept of death from an oral Celtic tradition that saw “death as the other side of life, with its own particular maps, customs and existence”; and represents, what she says:

Old spiritual traditions of the earth that preserve a healthy sense of alternative reality. Such traditions as the Native American, the Sami (Lapp) and Shinto have a concept of the integration of life and death with nature. This concept was also once part of our own north-west European tradition. (4-5)

Part of this oral tradition about life and death is “one collection” of spiritual stories, the “immrama, meaning ‘mystical voyages’ preserved by poets, story-tellers and druids who regulated and enriched society by the recitation of traditional lore in the form of stories” (5). Matthews says the “Celtic Otherworld” provided a “reality” close “to and sometimes overlapping ordinary reality” with no duality in this theory; saying further, “each soul contains its own judgment” the “Otherworld is a mirror of this world, so our individual experience of the realm beyond death is influenced by our actions in this life.” The life lessons learned on the “immram” [journey] and the “beings” and “challenging scenarios” encountered, represent “the threshold guardians” that were there to “guard, guide and challenge” in teaching about death, as well as be used for “those facing critical decisions or problems, to help them ‘cross over’” (6-7). This Celtic tradition of the Otherworld “is a place of heightened reality where the great gods dwell, and where the fullness of personal potential is revealed.” With its early vision of alternative realities, it assisted the ancient Irish Celtic to see the world in terms of a circle of life journey.

Pennick explains the Celtic way of seeing the world in ‘pagan’ times as their understanding the world “of existence” as having “a cyclic nature, and that there is a direct continuity between the material world and

the Otherworld.” He says, the “Druidic teachings” coming through the “Welsh tradition, recognized that there is an unseen world that interpenetrates and affects the visible world.” Furthermore, he writes:

Human beings can understand things as having three levels: the physical, the spiritual, and the symbolic. Thus, Celtic culture was integrated with nature, and expressed itself through the multiple possibilities of life itself.... Recognizing that the whole Earth is ensouled, the pagan Celts venerated many gods, goddesses, and spirits, both local and general.
(68)

Both Matthews and Pennick illustrate, the interrelation of life to death and the Otherworld, which bring together a Celtic way of “seeing” the world, which included the ancient Irish people. By juxtaposing the two cultural ways of seeing the world, namely, that of the Anishnaabe and Irish Celtic, there can be found a comparable cyclical pattern of the way in which they viewed and envisioned the world.

Analysis by Comparison of the Two Traditions

I have shown that at the heart of Anishnaabe and Irish Celtic traditional peoples is a particular way of seeing the world based on an ancient and mysterious respect for the earth and its early vision of spirituality that moved cyclically in the lives of the tribes and clans. I will reflect some examples of the circular themes within those two traditions.

Storytelling was the means of conveying truth and wisdom, and transporting one to another reality where the imagination, allowed one to journey into the future through the Otherworld, even though in another sense one was still rooted in the now. Stories in these ancient cultures had a circular pattern, which had no beginning or end because they were always being offered to enrich the lives of those listeners, who passed the cycle on to others. Traditional stories have passed on legend and myth for thousands of years maintaining cultural insight and tradition and a deep living sense of continuity with the past.¹⁰

Edward Benton-Banai tells the story of Anishnaabe creation and how the Ojibwa received their name.¹¹ Basil Johnston passes on the sacred journey of life stories, using the four-story cycle to teach Anishnaabe religion, history and the continuation of the circle of life journey, which includes beings in the imagined spiritual reality.¹² Chamberlin reveals the essence of stories and songs to show the meaning they give to cultural identity, not only to the Gitksan Wet’suwet’en but also to all Indigenous peoples.

Alwyn and Brinley Rees explain the four Irish story cycles to reveal the history and culture of Ireland with the deep spiritual intonations in

journey both here and into the spirit realm.¹³ An exposition of cultural legends and myths told by John and Caitlín Matthews (2004) attest to the cycle of spiritual traditions preserved by the Irish Celtic people through oral stories.¹⁴ Caitlín Matthews (1992) relates the story of the immram sea journey to explain the cyclical journey in voyage to the Otherworld related to vision in this world.

The *history* of the Anishnaabe is culturally unique to their way of life, which Dumont outlines in his telling of the 'primary vision' and is carried through the mythos of cultural tradition, re-created through ceremony, ritual, songs and music that are held in their spiritual world view or way of "seeing" their world. The Sacred Clown has had a spiritual role historically in forming an important part of Native culture and portrays the Path of Life (Beck, Walters: 297).¹⁵ The colonization effect of English imperialism interrupted the spiritual belief patterns of the Anishnaabe by the assimilation policy of taking away Ojibwe language and its ceremonial customs of practicing Anishnaabe spirituality, thus robbing them of their mythical world view with its cyclical pattern of belief.

O'Dwyer's written span of fifteen hundred years of spirituality in the history of the Irish peoples tells of the inherent circle of world view and culture that continues to carry the people, especially in the Gaeltacht areas of Eire. Irish mythos conveys the spirit of the people, embedded in their language, stories and their circular world view. Also destroyed by English imperialism, the Irish language became outlawed; however, the traditional spirituality with its cyclical patterns conveyed orally, continued through a vast array of poetry, songs, music, dance, and spirit of the Irish peoples. The Irish wit and humour, thought not perhaps as sacred, yet evidenced in their history through other cultural oral forms such as drama, fiction and in one recent film has upheld the masses in times of tense national conflict.

Customs, traditions and *culture* are predominant too in the spiritual life of the Anishnaabe. Benton-Banai tells of the Sweat Lodge Ceremony, made to re-create the event of re-entering Mother earth, whereby entering the lodge, to pray and receive a ceremonious cleansing carried out within the steam from the heated 'Grandfather' stones in the centre of the lodge, is used as a time for spiritual renewal. The earth as mother is the nurturer of life and purifies those who enter the lodge for healing. Entering through the open eastern door, you sit in the circle of darkness where a conductor will lead you through the cleansing ceremony. Traditional botanical medicines used in the ceremony are an initial offering of tobacco in the sacred fire just outside the lodge and for the pathway leading to the door the women gathers fresh cedar as a votive offering (84-87). This custom is a brief example of the cultural tradition wherein

the circle with its four seasons is central to the spirituality of the Anishnaabe people.

Pennick also writes about the Scottish Celtic custom of the Sweat House. It was considered a place of healing where one could re-enter the womb of the mother represented by the earth, to go through a ritual of inner cleansing. These two healing custom illustrations in either culture are a case in point of Eliade's (1959) writing, about symbolism in Indigenous cultures to re-create the origin of myth through the enacting of ritual in a place of sacred importance, such as in a spiritual re-birthing ceremony.¹⁶

Land holds a sacred affinity with time for the Anishnaabe and is seen as having "geographical and sacred boundaries," with symbolism "ceremonially and functionally" perceived and practiced in different ways among Native North American tribes. Each tribe's perspective and cultural identity is linked intrinsically with its environment (Beck, Walters, 67). Chamberlin perhaps best expresses the ideology of what land means to the Anishnaabe by presentation of what it means to the Gitksan, who were trying to reclaim their ancestral land, in a recent land claim action in British Columbia.

Chamberlin writes:

It happened at a meeting between an Indian community in northwest British Columbia and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The Natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn't understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally one of the Elders put what was bothering them in the form of a question. 'If this is your land,' he asked, 'where are your stories?' He spoke in English, but then he moved into Gitksan, the Tsimshian language of his people—and told a story.

All of a sudden everyone understood...even though the government foresters didn't know a word of Gitksan, and neither did some of his Gitksan companions. But what they understood was more important: how stories give meaning and value to the places we call home; how they bring us close to the world we live in by taking us into a world of words; how they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart. They also understood the importance of the Gitksan language, especially to those who do not speak it.

The language sounded strange; it made no sense to most of the people there. But its strangeness was somehow

comforting for it reminded them that stories always have something strange about them, and that this is what first takes hold of us making us believe. (1)

That is, what I believe, land to be, to oral traditional Anishnaabe people. It is the home in “story” and the place of ceremony in their *belief*, lived out in their customs and cultural traditions!

Ireland is a land of spiritual footprints that are truly reflected in the cultural arts of their soil. Immersed in story, poetry, songs and music, to name a few, land holds the mystery of inherent Irish spirituality, with tributes to part of that spirituality still visible in the megalith circles and stone high crosses scattered across the Irish and other Celtic landscapes of Scotland, Wales and England. Of the land’s sacredness to Irish Celtic people, John O’Donohue, offers an example:

Ireland is a land of many ruins. Ruins are not empty. They are sacred places full of presence. A friend of mine, a priest in Connemara, was going to build a parking lot outside his church. There was a ruin nearby that had been vacated for fifty or sixty years. He went to the man whose family had lived there long ago and asked the man to give him the stones for the foundation. The man refused. The priest asked why, and the man said, ‘*Céard a dhéanfadh anamacha mo mhuintíre ansin?*’—that is, ‘What would the souls of my ancestors do then?’ The implication was that even in this ruin long since vacated, the souls of those who had once lived there still had a particular affinity and attachment to this place. (19)¹⁷

Land holds the unseen in the Irish Celtic imagination and has an intrinsic interrelation to time.

The concept of *time* is central to the Anishnaabe world view in its identity and rootedness to a holistic cycle and the natural environment. Inherent here is a traditional belief that Joseph Epes Brown names as “a vision of qualitative process in life and thought” that is “observable and experienced in all the forms, beings, forces, and changes of the surrounding natural world; and at the center of all change, as at the center of all phenomena, there is recognized the indwelling Presence of ultimate Mystery” (119).¹⁸ A holistic form of spirituality such as this, he believes, contains the “rhythm of the cycles of the cosmos, the sun and the seasons, recapitulates the cycle of human life as it moves from birth to death.” As well as, this traditional cycle sees that “death inevitably returns to or rejoins life, so that the cycle may continue” (119-120).

Pennick uses a Welsh Bardic Triad to address the Celtic perception of time; he writes: ‘*Three things which cannot be finite: God, expanse,*

and time.' Time according to the Celtic year was marked by the four seasons and the activities that were involved in those seasons, "such as herding, planting, and harvest" (99). Of Celtic time keeping, Pennick also gives "an *ancient Irish saga*, *The Intoxication of the Ulaid*," which he writes, "tells how they used to tell the time at night by the position of the stars: 'It was then that the Cú Chulainn said to Lóeg, son of Rianganbur: 'Go outside good Lóeg and look at the stars, and determine when midnight has arrived...'" (98). The Celts did observe the "rising of the sun" and related to the "solar time of year," with celebrations at "midwinter" and "midsummer" as well as at the equinoxes and solstices. The cycles of the cosmos and the seasons were thus celebrated in customs and traditions, which were all associated with spirits and the gods of their cultural tradition (100-101). What can be seen clearly is that the entire *belief* system of a spirituality within Celtic world view revolved around their experience of cyclical time.

The value of the 'Living Tradition' in language and story cannot in any way be separated from spirituality. The Anishnaabe and the Irish Celtic spiritual beliefs that we remain connected to a Creator, God [Spiritual Being] who in creating the earth and human life, has remained in connection with us through an holistic cyclical world view, has kept alive a traditional spirituality that is interrelated to the Great Source of life. Therefore, language and story continue to feed the breath of life to our spirit and soul on a daily basis. Along the life journey through time and change and education, we have lost a natural order of spirituality and spiritual insight that was inherent in the Irish Celtic and Anishnaabe people.

Conclusion

The problem in the West relates to Christianity, and Judaism before it, being a historical religion, life flows on a continuum from Creation to the End time when God will sum up history. This led to the concept of linear time and perhaps the concept of progress too. So with linear time, the present is separated from the past and the future. The present is always radically now. Moreover, the sacred realm is outside linear time—either occurring at the end or beyond this time. Linear time has led in the modern world to a diminishment of attachment to the past and a profound anxiety about the future. The present is thus filled with novelty and temporary meaning. Dualism becomes with linear time—one's body and mind resides in the temporal spheres and one's soul beyond. So wholeness of life and wholeness of culture and the spirit is lacking.

These two cultures, the Anishnaabe and the Irish Celtic hold inspiring examples of a way of living spirituality in a healthy and efficacious

manner. The integrity and strength inherent in the primary and cyclical vision of spirituality of life, remains visible today, I believe and has been proven through the strong survival of these two Indigenous cultures. Contained in the “living voice” tradition, which holds the vitality in an integration of natural psychology and philosophy that is personified through its particular spirituality, it remains connected and alive.

Notes

1. These lines are included in ‘Reality And The Imagination’ in discussing story and art as a form of reality, p.135. J. Edward Chamberlin, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* (2004) is a book about ‘Finding Common Ground’ while looking at questions of cultural conflict.
2. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*. By Introduction of Bill Moyers, Ed. Betty Sue Flowers. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
3. Caitlín Matthews, *The Celtic Book Of The Dead* (1992).
4. However, space does not permit me to enlarge upon each experience, but one can imagine the idea of life process, as each encounter became a teaching experience. Maelduin’s triumph came in his return where in facing his enemies, he is able to use the gift of inner passage and forgive his former enemies (18-41).
5. Emic Research is experienced as a cultural member perspective, or from being integrated into such a society where one receives a somewhat insider perception.
6. Peter O’Dwyer, *Towards a History of Irish Spirituality*, ts. Carmelite Order, Gort Muire, Dublin 16, 1992.
7. Taken from a reprinted article ‘Journey to Daylight-Land: Through Ojibwa Eyes’ in *The Laurentian University Review* 8, Vol. III no.2 (1976).
8. *Transitions* (1980). Bridges is writing about the changing passages experienced in human life.
9. Nigel Pennick, *The Sacred World of the Celts: An illustrated Guide To Celtic Spirituality And Mythology*. Rochester, VA: Inner Traditions., 1997.
10. Peggy V. Beck, A.L. Walters and N. Francisco, *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*. Tsaille, AZ: Navajo College Community Press, 1996, (67-78).
11. The story is included in *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway*. Hayward, WI: Indian Country Comm., 1988.

12. This Anishnaabe story cycle is included in *Ojibway Heritage*, Toronto: McLelland, 1976.
13. Their recounting of the Irish story cycle is written in *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1961.
14. *The Encyclopaedia of Celtic Myth and Legend: A Definitive Sourcebook Of Magic, Vision, And Lore*. Comp. By, Ed. By, Trans. By John and Caitlín Matthews. Connecticut: Lyons, 2004.
15. The relationship Sacred Clowns have to sacred knowledge in Native North American tribal society is considered to be fundamental to a way of life. They portray "limits and boundaries of the world by going beyond them, acting in a non-ordinary way...and...they contrast ...with the orderly ritual directions and sacred worlds." Beck, Walters, p.297.
16. *The Sacred And The Profane: The Nature Of Religion*. Trans. By Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, pp.100-106.
17. *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. New York: Harper, 1997.
18. *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian*. New York: Crossroad. 1982.

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