

# FEBRUARY 1<sup>ST</sup> IN IRELAND (IMBOLC AND/OR LÁ FHÉILE BRIDE): FROM CHRISTIAN SAINT TO PAGAN GODDESS

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**Abstract:** Like in many countries of Europe, the 1<sup>st</sup> of February (*Imbolc, the Brigid's day*) in Ireland marks the beginning of Spring and is connected with some fertility rites. In old rural Ireland the people spent time watching hedgehogs (to see one was a good weather sign), preparing and eating special food, making straw girdles and caps, putting red ribbons on their houses (Bride's cloak), making special Brigit's crosses and straw dolls, called Brideog, to visit a sacred spring which had a magic healing and anti-sterile power (wells and springs, worshiped in pagan Ireland, were prohibited by St. Patrick), and finally singing protective charms. In modern urban Ireland all these rites remind in the past, but the Brigid's day is not forgotten or abandoned. In this article, the author tries to outline three main 'tracks' of the old tradition: 1. Pseudo-folkloric (fake-lore): singing, dancing, making crosses, storytelling etc. 2. Pseudo (Vernacular)-Catholic: early mass and pilgrimages to the places connected with St. Brigit, especially – sacred wells. 3. "Neo-paganic": special dresses, red ribbons, ritual dancing, fires, divinations of the future, bath in the sacred water etc. (in the most part – performed by women). Collecting material for the classification, the

author outlined a special new direction of ‘shared spirituality’ representing presumably a new mode of collective behavior in modern urban societies.

**Keywords:** calendar rites, February 1<sup>st</sup>, Imbolc, Ireland, neo-paganism, protective charms, pseudo-folkloric tradition, St. Brigid

In present-day Ireland and Scotland the First February is connected with the name of St. Brigid of Kildare. She is one of three greatest saints of Early Irish Christianity, who lived in the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries – St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, St. Columba, who introduced the Christianity to the Picts of Scotland, and St. Brigid. The feast of St. Columba, 9 June († 597), is somewhat abandoned among the general public in today’s Ireland, while St. Patrick’s day, on the contrary, now has become an official public holiday in Ireland, celebrated with parades, music, songs and dances. In addition to Ireland, this holiday is also celebrated in the USA and even in Russia. Now, it has become a very popular event but actually has little to do with the Irish saint himself, with his cult and his life. The beginning of this festive tradition dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it is only in 1903 that the day of March 17 was formally declared to be a national festival in Ireland. As for St. Brigid’s Day, *Lá Fhéile Bríde*, in modern Ireland it is a well-known, very popular and important festival, but it is not so easy to reconstruct its origin.

## Imbolc and Its Connections with Saint Brigid

Arguably, it is St. Brigid’s Day, also known as Imbolc, that may be the most archaic festive day within the traditional Irish calendar. It originated from calendrical rites of the Neolithic farmers, who “had to develop a calendar to suit their conditions, to determine the time to sow and the time to reap, the time to send cattle to summer pasture and the time to make all secure against the winter storms” (Danaher 1984: 22). Indeed, this brief sketch of the four crucial farming phases is the clue to the main four Goidelic festivals of the pre-Christian era: *Samhain* (on the night of November 1), *Imbolc* (February 1), *Beltaine* (May 1) and *Lughnasa* (August 1). Today, the festivals of *Beltaine* and *Lughnasa* remain within the domain of ethnography and folklore studies, while *Samhain*, better known under the name of *Halloween*, has become a “horror” festival of great popularity, perhaps, not unlike a functional equivalent of Medieval carnivals. However, none of them, save for *Imbolc*, is related to any

Christian saint (which seems to be quite natural). It is only *Imbolc*, or St. Brigid's Day, that is strongly associated with the Christian cult of St. Brigid of Kildare (the late 5<sup>th</sup> to early 6<sup>th</sup> century).

It seems all the more unusual, given that not only the exact date but even the year of St. Brigid's death is unknown (see – Ó Riain 2011: 125). Yet the tradition of commemorating her on February 1<sup>st</sup> is attested as early as the Middle Ages. Thus, the *Martyrology of Oengus (Féilire Óengusso)*, dating from the Early Middle Irish period (10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> c.), but containing some archaic forms “which point to the Old-Irish period” (Stokes 1905: xxix), mentions February 1<sup>st</sup> as the day of St. Brigid:

<i>Mórait calaind Febrai</i>	They magnify February's calends,
<i>Fross martir már nglédenn,</i>	a shower of great, pure-coloured
<i>Brigir bán balc núalann,</i>	martyrs: Brigit the fair, strong,
<i>Cenn cáid caillech n-Érenn.</i>	praiseworthy, chaste head of Erin's nuns.

(Stokes 1905: 58)

However, the glosses to this fragment, written perhaps in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century, specify that Brigid's symbolic number was eight:

*Tri ochtmada Brigdi .i. a gein I n-octmad uathaid, a caille I n-ochtmad .x., a bás I n-ochtmad .xx.*

Brigit's three eight, to wit, her birth on the eight (of the month), her veil on the eighteen, her death on the twenty-eight (Stokes 1905: 64, 65).

Presumably, February 1<sup>st</sup> was somewhat artificially “established” by the Church in order to supersede and supplant the pagan Imbolc rites, just as was the case with Samhain transformed into All Saints' Day: “In pre-Christian times it was undoubtedly also a folk festival, and the early missionaries probably turned the old pagan feast into one of religious significance” (O'Neill 1977: 98). Indeed, this idea has been already articulated by Seán Ó Súilleabháin, an authority on folk customs of Ireland: “St. Brigid's Feast, February 1, was originally an important prechristian festival, occurring as it did at the time of the start of agriculture work” (Ó Súilleabháin 1967: 66). This is likely true, given that even a superficial comparison with the traditional annual rites of European peoples confirms it. Thus, for instance, a widespread Balkan festival of St. Tryphon (Trifon Zarezan, also on February 1<sup>st</sup>) is believed to have originated with the Greek pagan cult of a fertility god called Sabazius, who was also identified with Dionysus (Megas 1958: 55–56).

In many cultures, February 1<sup>st</sup> has been seen as the beginning of spring – not so much as the day when the warmer season begins, as the day when daylight hours become visibly longer. It is the day when nature seems to awaken from the winter sleep, which, at the level of popular metaphor, is associated with animals' arousal from hibernation (think of the famous *Groundhog Day*). Thus, in Italy, where winter is believed to end on February 2<sup>nd</sup> (the day of Candelora), in the morning of that day, the first bear is expected to go out of its den, and if the weather is cloudy and warm, the bear heralds the end of the winter by roaring (Corso 1955). In Ireland, presently lacking bears, both of their functions (weather prediction and spring heralding) were performed by hedgehogs:

*To see a hedgehog was a good weather sign, for the hedgehog comes out of the hole in which he spent the winter, looks about to judge the weather, and returns to his burrow of bad weather is going to continue. If he stays out, it means that he knows that mild weather is coming (Danaher 1972: 14).*

The present-day Irish do indeed celebrate February 1<sup>st</sup> both as the first spring day when nature awakens from sleep and as the day of St. Brigid. There is no doubt about it, one cannot be sure that this was also the original day of the pagan Imbolc, apparently superseded by St. Brigid's Day already by the Middle Ages. This day represented one of the crucial points of the annual ritual cycle that was supported by the evidence from saga narratives. Thus, for instance, in the Old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle-raid of Cuailnge*) we see a kind of 'formula' describing a fixed period of time:

*Ón lúan re **samain** sainriuth cossin cétaín iar n-**imbulc** níra chotail Cú Chulaind risin ré sin...* (TBC 1967: 59, 2159-60)

for from the Monday before **Samain** exactly until the Wednesday after the festival of spring (translation by the editor! – T.M.) Cú Chulainn had not slept in that time...

As the author of the Introduction in the *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* rightly pointed out, for the pre-Christian tradition, the date of February 1<sup>st</sup> is a tentative reconstruction. Imbolc "marked midpoint between 1 November and 1 of May" and at the same time – must be placed "between the Winter solstices (21 December) and Spring equinoxes (21 March)" (Monaghan 2003: xiv). That is, the date of the pagan festival is, in a way, speculative, however, it is also supported by some evidence from later Medieval glosses.

See, for instance, an interlineal gloss in the saga fragment cited above, clearly a later interpolation: iar n-imbulc – iar fel Bride – *after the Day of Brigid*.

There is still less ground to imagine how exactly the Irish people would celebrate this day in the pre-Christian era. Unlike Samhain, opening the dark winter season, Imbolc is only rarely mentioned in them and even then, no description is given. The abundance of ethnographic data on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February rites in various parts of Ireland comes from much later time, not before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while truly pre-Christian traditions related to this day can only be speculatively reconstructed through parallels with similar archaic pagan calendric rites known from other cultures. As, for instance, Graham Webster wrote:

*Imbolc or Ómelg [was] celebrated on 1<sup>st</sup> February. It was based on the old pastoral lambing season and therefore had powerful fertility associations. Little is known about it, presumably as it was mainly practiced by the women and carried out in secret, away from profane male eyes (Webster 1988: 32).*

Webster, in part, relied on the evidence for the Roman Lupercalia (celebrated in mid-February), but mostly drew his conclusions “by making a connection with the goddess Juno, one of whose many epithets is *februa*” (see Ó Catháin 1999: 243)

What is even more curious, there is no substantial evidence that the 1<sup>st</sup> February festival was related to the pagan goddess Brigit, the namesake of the Christian saint.

The 10<sup>th</sup> century *Glossary* composed by the king-bishop Cormac mac Cuilennáin has two different entries: *óimelc* (n 1000) and *Brigit* (n 150). The entry on *óimelc* (imbolc) is the following a short text:

*Óimelc .i. ói-meilg .i. isi aimser andsin tic ass cáirach (Meyer 1913: 86).*  
*óimelc* – sheep milking, that is the time the sheep’s milk comes, milking.

In a work specifically regarding this term, Eric Hamp notes, ‘We are not told what the role of milking was in connection with the feast’ (Hamp 1979/80: 106). Hamp’s identification of *imbolc/óimelc* as ‘a word based on an old pastoral or husbandman’s term’ is further developed by S. Ó Catháin, who writes:

*Food-production is, indeed, is a key element: the production of food, however, is not by nature a one-off kind of affair, but rather a systematic, continuous process, involving, certainly in the case of livestock, the*

*successful scheduling of reproduction of animals from year to year*  
(Ó Catháin 1999: 243).

Thus, according to the widely accepted interpretation of Cormac's gloss, the festival of Imbolc would basically open the sheep-milking season, which symbolically represented the beginning of a new farming season, linked with the onset of a new daylight year and the coming of spring. This is likely to be true. But how exactly could it have been related to a pagan goddess?

## Saint Brigid and Pagan Celtic Goddess Brigit

Very little is known about Brigit as pagan deity. I suppose, all mentions of the Goddess Brigit that appear in Medieval sources can make a short list.

The first of these sources, Cormac's *Glossary*, lists "Brigit" as one of three sister-deities, each a patron of an important sphere:

*Brigit .i. banfile ingen in Dagdae. Isí insin Brigit bé n-exe .i. bandea no adratís filid. Ar ba romór ⁊ ba roan a frithgnam. Ideo eum deam uocant poetarum. Cuius sorores errant Brigit bé legis ⁊ Brigit bé Goibne ingena in Dagda* (Meyer 1913: 15)

Brigit, i.e. the poetess, daughter of Dagda. This is Brigit the female seer or woman of insight, i.e. the goddess whom poets used to worship, for her cult was very great and very splendid. It is for this reason that they call her (the goddess) of poets (poetarum) by this tide, and her sisters were Brigit, the woman of leechcraft and Brigit, the woman of smithcraft, i.e. daughters of Dagda

The Middle Irish tract *The Book of the Invasion of Ireland* also mentions Brigit, but her characteristics differ here:

*Brigit banfili, ingen in Dagda, is aicci ro batar .i. Fea ⁊ Femen da dam Dile, diata Mag Fea ⁊ Mag Femen* (LGE IV: 132)

Brigid the poetess, daughter of Dagda, she it is who had Fea and Femen, the two oxen of DÍl, from whom are named Mag Fea and Mag Femen.

The saga *Battle of Mag Tuired*, a piece of pseudo-history relating to the conflict between the Tribe of the Goddess Danu and Fomorians, yields yet another bit of information about Brigid-Brig. She is again called the daughter of Dagda, but the story rather indicates her poetic inspiration and skill:

*Tic Brich 7 caines a mac. Eghis artós, goilis fodeod. Conud andsin roclos gol 7 egem artos a n-Errinn. Is si didiu an Prich sin roairich feit do caismert a n-oidci.* (Stokes 1891: 94, 96)

Then Brigh comes and bewailed her son. She shrieked at first, she cried at last. So that then for the first time crying and shrieking were heard in Erin. Now it is that Brigh who invented a whistle for signalling at night.

Except for some later glossaries, these three fragments present the only available information about the pre-Christian goddess. First, she was a daughter of the god Dagda; second, she had two oxen; and third, she had two sisters and she indeed was a poetess. This information is surely not sufficient for making conclusions on a pagan cult of the Celtic goddess. This evidence is unrelated to spring rituals and does not yield any clue allowing to link this character with St. Brigid of the Christian tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Yet one unknown adds up to another unknown, creating a kind of myth, or, rather, mythologeme, permeating not the Medieval monastic tradition or folklore, but today's academic research.

As Brian Wright writes in his book *Brigit. Goddess, druidess and saint*:

*While there is no direct mention of any **fertility** attributes in the case of the goddess, the fact that she is celebrated at Imbolc, a festival connected with the end of winter and the birth of new life, suggests she did have a fertility role, and her possession of two oxen may be significant* (Wright 2009: 7).

At the same time, the renowned British archeologist and historian, Barry Cunliffe, in the book *The Ancient Celts*, proposed a similar idea:

*The next festival, Imbolc, which took place on 1 February, is less well known (comparing it with Samain, the 1 November). In all probability it was associated with the goddesses Brigit, a goddesses of **fertility**, learning and healing. In Christian mythology the Celtic Brigit became a saint: her festival falls on 1 February and is still celebrated widely in Ireland* (Cunliffe 1997: 189).

The given ‘formula’ with two unknowns has only one solution: the connection of the fertility function with February 1<sup>st</sup> and the fact that the pagan deity and a Christian saint bore the same name, Brigit, could automatically create an illusion of their identity.

Moreover, some motifs from early lives of St. Brigid, likely of pre-Christian origin and linked with some pagan deity, are automatically projected onto the figure of Brigit the Goddess. As Miranda Green points out in her book *Celtic Goddesses*:

*Little is known in detail about the goddess Brigit. There is a danger of creating a picture of her pagan role from the information we have of Brigit as a saint, because certain elements of her life as a Christian holy woman appear to be pre-Christian in origin. An example of this is the saint’s magical association with fire, which has given rise to the deity being identified as a fire-goddess (Green 1995: 198).*

Indeed, the motif of miraculous light mistaken for fire, absent in the scarce evidence of the pagan Brigit, is reiterated in many earlier lives of St. Brigid of Kildare.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for instance, the compiler of her early Irish life *Bethu Brigte* (c. 800) mentions, among her other early miracles, the miraculous appearance of light:

*Lae n-and I suidiu luid Brocsech do bleogan ⁊ ni fácaib nech inna taig nisi ind noeb-ingin tantum ina cotlad. Co-naccatar ro-las a tech dia n-eis. Fa-reith in tuath. Anda leu nicon airsitis cli fri alaile. Fo-gabar a tech slan ⁊ ind ingen ina cotlad (Ó hAodha 1978:1, l. 2-5)*

One day in that place Broicsech went to milk and she leaves nobody in her house except the holy girl who was asleep. They saw that the house had caught fire behind them. The people run to its aid, thinking that they would not find one house-post against another. The house is found intact and the girl asleep.

However, this motif is widespread and can be traced back to the biblical tradition (the apocryphal story of the birth of Moses). Doroty Bray in her *List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints* records the motif “house of saint appears on fire” or “divine light above saint” in connection with fifteen Irish saints (Bray 1992: 125)! Nevertheless, when it comes specifically to St. Brigid, this motif is



seen as originating from pagan cults. Lisa Lawrence, the author of a research work on *Pagan imagery in the Lives of Saint Brigit*, wrote:

*For example, fire was certainly a powerful religious symbol among the pagan Irish, but it is also a key Christian symbol, signifying the presence of the Christian God and especially of the Holy Spirit. When two religious systems interact, a shared symbol can provide a bridge from one religious idea to another.* (Lawrence 1996/1997: 40).

The theme of fire, linked both with a possible pagan deity personifying the coming of the longer daylight hours and with later apocryphal legends about St. Bridgid of Kildare, is a popular motif which gave rise to later symbolic depictions of this character (or, rather, these characters). However, this myth is not a modern invention, but goes back to an earlier time. As early as in the Medieval era, for instance, Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambriensis) in his tract *Topographia Hiberniae* (1188–89), in the section called *Mirabilia*, describes a strange phenomenon of the Monastery of Kildare:

*As in the time of St. Brigit twenty nuns were here engaged in the Lord's warfare, she herself being the twentieth, after her glorious departure, nineteen have always formed the society, the number having never been increased. Each of them has the care of the fire for a single night in turn, and, on the evening before the twentieth night, the last nun, having heaped wood upon the fire, says, "Brigit, take charge of your own fire; for this night belongs to you."*

*She then leaves the fire, and in the morning it is found that the fire has not gone out, and that the usual quantity of fuel has been used.* (Wright 1913: 97).

Later, the motif of magic inextinguishable fire would become popular in folk and neo-pagan tradition related to St. Brigid's Day. And this is quite logical because Imbolc, an actually old pre-Christian festival, was dedicated and is still dedicated to the coming of warm weather and light. Yet these are not the only symbolic meanings of fire (and, one may add, light), since it is exactly the motif that presents a broad field for speculation, or, if we choose a different wording, for deeper interpretation of the symbolic essence of the festival that has been celebrated in Ireland on February 1<sup>st</sup> until now.

## The 1<sup>st</sup> February in Folk Tradition: Lá Fhéile Bríde

But let us return to the evidence from folklore. According to the classic work by Kevin Danaher *The Year in Ireland* (1972), a number of the following activities, characteristic of St. Brigid's festival in traditional farming communities, can be tentatively identified.<sup>3</sup>

We could see which of them are actually connected with St. Brigid tradition, which elements represent innovations or, on the contrary, pseudo-archaization, and which have survived until the present day. So the activities on St. Brigid's Day are:

1. To find good omens for the weather of the future year: the sky must be blue, but a short rain was not unwelcome. "Rain in February is a good Summer".
2. To collect some sea-weeds and old grass 'blessed by St. Brigid' and to use it later to fertilize the crops.
3. To examine the stocks of meals in the house, to count all.
4. To clean the house.
5. To make special food, especially a cake called *bairín-breac*.
6. To make fresh butter.
7. To make the straw figure of Brigid *Brideóg*.
8. To place offerings on the windows as a part of *brideóg* play.
9. To make St. Brigid's crosses.
10. To make *Brat Bríde* and to put in above the door or gate, to make a girdle of Brigid.
11. To make a good fire in the fireplace.
12. To dance and to drink, singing traditional Irish protective 'Brigid' songs.

Items 1–6, in my opinion, need no special comment, because, on the one hand, they have parallels in other traditions, on the other hand, are not necessarily calendar-specific. These rituals seem to be aimed rather at purification of the house and reinforcement of family ties in general. The same applies to 11 and 12. There is very reason to associate these ritual activities with St. Brigid's life (among other things, she is known as a maker of beer and butter, and she could also transform water into milk and not only miraculously keep her livestock safe, but increase its numbers). Though it is a stretch, the theme of milk, in particular, and livestock, in general, can be linked with the above-cited mention of two oxen owned by Brigid of the Tribe of Goddess Danu (see the quote from *Battle of Mag Tuired*).

Items 6 and 7 seem totally unrelated to either St. Brigid or the pagan goddess. Yet they have a number of parallels in other cultures where “religion, folk custom and superstitions concerning agriculture were closely associated” (O’Neill 1977: 99). Naturally, the first parallel that comes to mind is the doll of Shrove (*Maslenitsa*) that symbolizes the expiring winter in many Slavic and Baltic regions. As, for instance, Žilvytis Šaknys writes on it,

*Central and Eastern European agricultural folk traditions have many common features. The main rituals of the calendar festivals are no exception. For example, the essential Užgavėnės festival<sup>1</sup> rites in all the regions’ culture include processions of costumed village youths, parades with horse-pulled sledges, dragging a straw figure (Šaknys 2015: 108).*

However, there are some differences. The Irish *Brideóg*, unlike the Russian *Maslenitsa*, is not burned, likely due to the fact that it has become associated not with the expiring winter, but with St. Brigid herself. After a ritual tour around the village and collecting treats (mainly sweets, but sometimes money), the participants of the procession celebrate the onset of spring, and the doll is seated at the communal table. She is then supposed to be kept until the next year, but actually, as a rule, the straw figure is not so durable and becomes unfit by the next festive season. So she is put in the basement to “safeguard” the house and replaced with a newly made doll. As Danaher remarks, in some parts of Ireland the functions of the straw doll are performed by the most good-looking and well-dressed girl of the village, sometimes – by a female child carried by everyone in turns (Danaher 1972: 24–31).

On the contrary, the tradition of making the so-called *Brat Bride* (“Brigid’s cloak”) seems to be of a local custom. A typical *Brat Bride* is a red silk ribbon, hung out at the porch or at the gate on the eve of February 1<sup>st</sup>. The legend has it that St. Brigid herself, who is walking around the earth on this night, will touch it, and the ribbon will become a remedy against many ailments, especially headache. According to Danaher:

*The general belief was that the Saint, going about the country on the eve of her feast, would touch the brat and endow it with healing powers. Once thus touched it kept its virtue for ever, and many held that the older it was, the more potent it became (Danaher 1972: 32).*

This motif apparently originates from numerous versions of St. Brigid's life, distinguishing her among other early Irish saints by her specific capacity for healing (see Davies 1989; Bray 1992: 125).

Finally, the making of Saint Brigid's Cross (Irish *Cros Bride*) is perhaps the most important part of the whole festival. A little geometrical shape made of straw varies in form across Ireland, sometimes having little to do with a conventional cross. Sharing some traits with the swastika, this shape certainly has its origins in pagan antiquity and bears solar symbolism. Without lingering on this complicated subject, I would only remark that, just as other symbols of St. Brigid's Day, the *Cros Bride* is:

1. Made a new every year and put on the gate or above the door, without removing the last-year cross;
2. Believed to increase its magical protective power over time;
3. Supposed to protect, in the first place, the family, the livestock and the household in general.

The making of St. Brigid's cross required special skills. The straw or the reeds had to be first soaked, then bent in certain ways and dried. With these prepared details then the cross itself would be assembled. Straw processing would begin by mid-January, often performed collectively by the family and their neighbours, which, on this occasion, bore special social and psychological functions. During this job, special incantations or protective charms had to be sung. For example:

*Crios Bride mo chrios / Crios na gceithre gcros / Eirigh suas, a bhean an tigh, / Agus gaibh trí h-uair amach / An té rachas tré mo chrios / Go mba seacht fear a bheith sé Bliain ó inniu.*

Brigit's girdle is my girdle / The girdle with the four crosses / Arise, woman of the house / And go out three times./ May whoever goes through my girdle / Be seven times better a year from now.

In other words, the 1<sup>st</sup> of February itself was not just an important point within the ritualized calendric cycle, but rather an agglomeration of protective structures induced and reinforced through the sacred presence of the goddess or the Christian saint. Put simply, unlike festivals such as the New Year's Day, St. Brigid's Day would actually last throughout the whole year, because sacred objects made on this day were not destroyed (like the Shrove doll or the New Year tree), but, on the contrary, kept with respect and would extend their protective power across time and space. This last observation is worthy of further analysis.

## St. Brigid Day in Modern Ireland

All the elements of St. Brigid's Day festivity are rather relevant for the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century when most fieldwork was done, with the use of special questionnaires and direct observations. Which of them have survived into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century?

This is not, in fact, an easy question to answer, because the present-day attitudes towards traditional rituals (as much as towards the Irish language) vary significantly across Ireland. As, for example, Kate Fenell wrote:

*The effect of losing our language is a subtle shift in our harmony with ourselves. It will not make headlines, but its survival is necessary for our fundamental feeling of belonging and our understanding of who we really are* (Fenell 2004: 33).

The same is true for traditional ethnic rituals. Their revival is a matter of identity, which is especially relevant now as a response to migration waves flooding the island during the last twenty five years. Nevertheless, quite logically and predictably, only a limited recourse to a few isolated elements of calendric rituals is attested, and mainly in the so-called Gaeltacht – regions where spoken Irish survives. For instance, the tradition is preserved on the Aran Islands where community members make a straw doll called *Brideóg* and go from house to house so that St. Brigid could visit each family. On the way, charms or prayers are said (Fig. 1 and 2, photos from 2015).

Usually, the straw from this big doll is later used to make small 'Brigid Crosses' for each family. But this is hardly typical, and in the western, still largely agrarian, parts of the country St. Brigid's Day is losing its traditional traits and being superseded by the next-day church feast, Candlemas – Feast of Presentation of Jesus Christ and of Purification of Saint Mary, also regarded as the day of coming of light in popular Christian tradition.

At the same time, within the state program of Irish language revival, the festivals called *Éigse na Brideoge* (lit.: 'Learning on Bridgid's doll') are held in the Gaeltacht areas of Kerry and Galway in the beginning of February. The name of the symbolic straw doll is rather used for re-creating the pseudo-national spirit. The festivals themselves has little to do with the original 1<sup>st</sup> February celebration. Films about Ireland are shown, lecturers deliver talks on the region's history and geography, and indeed, numerous music bands play. In other words, here is where the issue of national identity merges with the tourist industry.



Figure 1. Traditional Brideg-doll from Aran Islands. From the individual blog and with kind permission of Una McDonagh ([www.doolin2aranferries.com](http://www.doolin2aranferries.com), last accessed on 02.12.2019).



Figure 2. Bridieg procession on InisOirr, Aran. Photo taken 30.01.2015. From the individual blog and by kind permission of Una McDonagh ([www.doolin2aranferries.com](http://www.doolin2aranferries.com), last accessed on 02.12.2019).

Yet, while in the western parts of Ireland the interest in the 1<sup>st</sup> February festival has decreased, the Anglicized urban culture shows in the last years a paradoxical spike in enthusiasm for it, as much as for the characters of St. Brigid and Brigit the pagan goddess.

In the introductory article of the Volume 60 of the *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, devoted to the Ritual Year, the authors propose a very relevant idea that –

*Not only folklorists and ethnologists, but also archaeologists, linguists, sociologists and political scientists can contribute something to the study of the ritual year because the idea of connecting nature and culture seems to be present in all societies throughout all eras of history* (Fournier, Sedakova 2015).

To the above-mentioned interdisciplinary fields I could add social psychology, which has contributed much to the explanation of the processes that take place in the present-day urbanized society in Ireland and perhaps beyond. Or, at least, has attempted to explain them. With regard to the ways of celebrating February 1<sup>st</sup> in today's Ireland, one thing at least is certain: its main social functions of reinforcing family unity and, in a broader sense, neighbourhood, along with creating collective protective mechanisms, has been largely lost. However, this does not mean that engagement with some of its aspects has been lost too. Rather, they have acquired new underlying meanings. Thus, seemingly ornamental attributes of St. Brigid's (or her pagan forerunner?), such as the cross, the ribbon and the doll, and, in a way, the special cakes made of wheat and oat flour, going beyond the "family circle", have become something like national identity symbols and at the same time cultural tourist attractions.

In the first place, it is St. Brigid's cross that has lost its local variability. Today, the predominantly popular version is the one from Donegal (Fig. 3) popularized presumably by its use as the emblem for RTÉ (Radio-Television-Érinn) from 1961. Ahead of St. Brigid's Day, crosses made of straw or even wires (along with souvenir dolls *brideóg*) are widely sold in touristic shops. However, it must be acknowledged that objects do not go beyond that.

As a preliminary attempt at classification of forms that celebration of St. Brigid's Day has taken in modern Ireland, I propose to distinguish the following several branches, the first of which may be called pseudo-folkloric or "fakeloric", presented as if it were really traditional and/or modified for tastes of modern (urban) society.



Figure 3. Saint Brigit Cross (photo by T. Mikhailova).

On this day, Dublin and other Irish cities host parties for children and their parents. The programme for these events includes singing “folk songs” dedicated to St. Brigid, both in English and in Irish, eating ritual cakes, playing folk music and invariably – making together St. Brigid’s cross from preforms made in advance of straw or even wires. Sometimes the Brigid doll, *Brideóg*, is also made, but never carried around the neighbouring households.

Another branch is what I would call pseudo-Christian, so being Christian at first sight, but in fact belonging to the “twilight zone” of folk superstitions (the term by Maartje Draak, Draak 1955: 9–12). The fact is, Ireland has a number of sacred springs with healing water, in Irish usually called – *Tobar Bride*. The most renowned and worshipped is the one near the Kildare monastery (Fig. 4). The cult of these holy wells dates back to pre-Christian times. St. Partick himself, as we know,



sought to ban worshipping them or to “convert” the wells by psalm-singing (see, for instance, Bord 2006: 107). Nevertheless, holy wells are still visited in our days, and those associated with St. Brigid are believed not just to have healing properties, but also cure sterility. When I visited St. Brigid’s Well in Kildare in November 2018, I had a chance to see a man and a woman, apparently a married couple, performing a rite of well-worshipping. Taking some water, they wetted their faces with it and then proceeded slowly along the path marked with five large boulders. At each boulder, they would pause and say something in low voice (Fig. 5). Such visits, originating with Irish paganism, but now reduced to popular superstition, are widely practiced (not solely in Ireland, of course), but their central idea is still addressing the goddess (or the Christian saint) individually. But the 1<sup>st</sup> February practice of collective visits, interpreted as pilgrimages, to such sacred springs, on the one hand, loses its connection with healing context. On the other hand, it flies in the face of the Christian idea that worshipping natural objects is wrong.



Figure 4. Saint Brigit holy well near Kildare (photo by T. Mikhailova, taken 04.11.2018).



Figure 5. A 'fertility ritual' near St. Brigit Well ((photo by T. Mikhailova, taken 04.11.2018).

However, it seems to me that these pilgrimages are taking on another function: they create a kind of intimacy between people who are normally far apart. This, to my opinion, is quite important. Just as the fakeloric parties described above, these events create the feeling of togetherness, cooperation, and, inevitably, psychological connections somewhat compensating for that feeling of home, family and neighbourhood that was a significant, although not necessarily obvious, part of ritual-performing in agrarian communities.

The third branch could be called pseudo-pagan.

The absence of factual information on the real pagan cult of Brigit the goddesses opens up the possibility to invent or 'reconstruct' pseudo-pagan cults that characterize Brigit as the Big mother-goddess.

As I have already noted, February 1<sup>st</sup> in Ireland is not a matter-of-fact day marking the border between temporal periods. This is a day when a whole

system of charms and other attributes expected to provide fertility of cereals and livestock, as well as general well-being of the community, is created. The same principle underlies the rites of the pagan Brigid worshippers who perform them throughout the whole year. But February 1<sup>st</sup>, Imbolc, is indeed the day that is the most emotionally and “extatically” loaded. Thus, for instance, the book by a very popular ‘specialist’ in pagan Celtic religion, Courtney Weber, paints the Imbolc rite as the moment of divination. Within a group of goddess-worshippers, a person is chosen, either female or male, who at the moment has the strongest feeling of ecstatic inspiration. This person is addressed as Brigit. After a sequence of rites that involve water, wax, a burning candle and earth, the “Brigit” makes predictions for the forthcoming year and fortune-telling for each individual (for details, see Weber 2015: 170 ff.). Curiously, the practices described in her book are found not in Ireland, but in the USA where they serve as means of consolidation for the descendants of Irish immigrants “having a healthy dose of Irish in DNA mix” (Weber 2015: 19) and those who share their views.

In Ireland itself, there are also several organizations posing as pagan and shamanic, for whom Imbolc is the day of unity with the goddess. The latter enters the body of a priestess in trance and provides prosperity for earth and humankind. To avoid further dwelling upon this subject, it will suffice to mention the group named *Slí an Chroí* (“the way of the heart”) or ‘Celtic Shamanism’, founded in 2004 by Karen Ward and John Cantwell. The group is quite popular, broadly advertising themselves on the Web and renowned for showy public rituals (the official website: <http://www.slianchroi.ie/gallery/htm>, last accessed on 02.12.2019).

## **The *Light of Brigid* and Collective Spirituality**

The fourth, and last branch — somewhat close to neo-paganism — is what I would call alternative spirituality. This includes, for instance, a Kildare organization called *Solas Bride* (“the light of Brigid”), established in 1992 and located on the road of Tully near *Tobar Bride*.

This organization has a long history from the year 1807, when six nuns gathered in Tullow and became the first ‘Sisters of Brigid’. Surely, the history of this Centre deserves special investigation, but now I am focused on its social attitudes and positions: the centre is welcoming people from every religious

background, letting its door open for discussions on the issues of spirituality. They also share their common activities with neopagans who celebrate Imbolc/ Saint Brigid's day as well as the Brigidines. The Centre seems to represent a union or a combination of modern traditions and historical past. In 1993, it has revived the old tradition of the perpetual Brigid fire and is oriented in the hospitable aspects of the Irish saint. At the same time, their efforts are aimed at bringing together members of all religious denominations, as well as non-religious people. Their goal is re-creating collective spirituality through collective meditation, singing, dancing and communal prayers to the Supreme Being. There is no trance, divination or secrecy surrounding the community. On the contrary, the Centre is open for everyone (see the official website of the Centre: <http://solasbhride.ie/event/feile-bride-2019/>, last accessed on 04.09.2019).

What do they do, then, on St. Brigid's Day? Actually, nothing special: traditional cross-making, tea-drinking, with peculiar cakes and Irish songs. From the numerous photos of various events on the *Solas Bride* website, it seems that most of its members are elderly people, predominantly women, to whom – as one may cautiously infer – the community provides a kind of substitute for that feeling of family and neighbourhood traditionally reinforced on St. Brigid's Day in agrarian communities. This is a way of dealing with loneliness which has become the cost of the modern progress.

“Loneliness is now justifiably a social science topic in good currency!” (Perlman and Peplau 1981: 56), say Daniel Perlman and Letitia Peplau, researchers in social psychology, in the conclusion of their paper written back in 1981. This aspect of motivation of collective behavior, especially on the marked points of the annual cycle, seems to be of interest for both anthropology and ethnography.

## Conclusion

Over recent decades, folklore studies as integral part of general ethnological studies has undergone much change, affecting not only the very object of research, but also its methods. Most notably, such important point as oral transmission lost its relevance due to the serious changes that took place within the whole system of communication as such. Profound changes are also observable with regard to the timescale of emergence and evolution of new spiritual systems that bring together many people, often physically isolated from each

other rather than belonging to ‘natural’ communities, such as family, neighbourhood etc. Deep-rooted archaic cosmological beliefs, reconstructed from ancient rituals, often give way to superficially ‘traditional’ behaviours. Against this background, the emergence of what could be called ‘shared spirituality’ is becoming especially significant, since it is the factor which increasingly serves as a natural substitute of the declining system of social relations and kinship. Blood affinity is being replaced by spiritual affinities, which, in a way, become a response to the challenge of loneliness, one of the critical problems of the modern urban society. However, new beliefs, superstitions and, even more notably, traditions tend to emerge on the basis of old and well-formed ideas, although being subject to considerable change. Considerable, but not unlimited. It is a crucial point to be remembered when one tries to assess the changes taking place in the area of calendar rites which, despite all their variation and astonishing openness and flexibility, are still predominantly linked to specific marked points of the ritual year.

Another stable component that can be identified is a limited set of worshipped, mythologized characters whose images can also vary, but whose names persist. Of course, this is not universally or ubiquitously the situation, so the most interesting cases are those in which the temporal locus and the character’s name persist for millennia, while the background layers are constantly changeable. This is exactly the case of the Irish figure of St. Bridgit and the day of February 1<sup>st</sup>.

## Notes

1 It is worth noticing, however, that the specific motif of food cult, characteristic of the 1<sup>st</sup> February festival, is, in a way, reflected in St. Brigid’s lives: she is indeed said to have devoted much time to cooking, milking cows, raising calves, and also to have been able to transform river water into milk which even had healing properties. Yet there is still no reason to think she is linked to the pagan goddess in any way.

2 On St. Brigid of Kildare see: Charles-Edwards 2000: 428–430 et passim; Bray 1987; McCone 1982; Ritari 2009.

3 Indeed, in different parts of Ireland the elements listed below varied; besides, it is worth adding that the most curious and perhaps most archaic ways of celebrating St. Brigid's Day are attested in Scotland, where, for instance, S. Ó Catháin sees the features of the traditional 'bear feast' of Finno-Ugrian and Siberian tribes (Ó Catháin 1995: 45–46).

4 Lithuanian Shrovetide.

## Abbreviations

LGE – *Lebor Gabála Éirenn. The Book of the Taking of Ireland*. Vol. IV. Ed. R.A.S. Macalister. London: Irish Texts Society, 1941.

TBC – *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Bool of Leinster*. Ed. Cecile O'Rahilly. Dublin: DIAS, 1967.

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