din 2/2023 Novus forlag · eISSN 2387-6735

Imageries of Indigeneity in Contemporary Celtic Shamanism

Av Alexandra Bergholm[1]
University of Helsinki

De siste tiårene har vist en voksende interesse for keltisk sjamanisme, både i akademia og allmennheten. På den senmoderne spirituelle markedsplassen viser bevegelsen seg særlig attraktiv for dem som søker å gjenoppdage, gjenerobre, eller gjenoppvekke en tradisjon som tenkes å ha sine røtter i den gamle kulturarven til de keltiske folkene. Denne artikkelen undersøker hvordan billedliggjøringer av indigenitet som sirkuleres innenfor keltisk samtidssjamanisme står i forhold til forskjellige historiske og sosiopolitiske diskurser, hvor betydningen av både "keltisk" og "sjamanisme" er blitt kontinuerlig forhandlet om siden 1700-tallet. Diskusjonen vektlegger det dynamiske samspillet mellom akademiske og moderne vestlige sjamanistiske forståelser av den historiske fortiden, og tar også i betraktning eksempler på hvordan bevegelsens påstander om indigenitet, autentisitet og legitimitet har vært bestridt.

Introduction

The vestiges of Celtic shamanism, fragmented though they are, shine bright and clear, for the Celtic spirit and personality is a fertile breeding ground for shamanic experiences. We could find no better prism than the Celtic soul through which to view the brilliant rays of shamanism, so that we can study them in greater depth and detail, and trace them

[1] Finansiering: Forskingsrådet, prosjektnummer 303429, The Governmateriality of Indigenous Religions

back, individually or collectively, to the clear crystal center. (Cowan 1993, 17–18)

In the three decades following the publication of Tom Cowan's book *Fire in the Head: Shamanism and the Celtic Spirit*, Celtic shamanism has developed into a prominent current of contemporary Celtic spirituality. In this diverse and ever-expanding field, Celtic shamanism flourishes alongside a variety of other spiritual paths—Pagan and New Age, as well as Christian—all of which are distinctly defined by an interest in, and active engagement with, what they perceive as the ancient heritage of the Celtic past (Bowman 2000).

Recent scholarship on Western alternative spiritualities[1] has shed light on the manner in which claims to ancestral tradition have come to function as an essential resource for the construction of religious identities in different socio-cultural settings (see, e.g., Rountree 2015; Kraft et al. 2015; Harvey 2019). Such "indigenizing discourses," to use Paul C. Johnson's (2002) term, draw upon rich repositories of historically contingent notions, symbols, and ideologies, which are creatively reworked to meet the needs of individuals and communities alike. Following Johnson (2002, 312), *indigenizing* in this instance may be understood as referring to specific discursive practices, whereby communities articulate a sense of identity and belonging in ethnic, chronological, and territorial terms:

> *Indigenizing* discourses and practices have as their objective the configuration, at least imaginatively or discursively, of a pure group performing traditional practices on its original homeland. When outsider signs, symbols and practices are relied upon, they are quickly indi-

[1] I have opted to follow Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000) in using this term to refer to the broad array of spiritualities variously included under the headings "New Age" or "Paganism." It has sometimes been suggested that one of the main differences between New Age and Pagan movements is that the former are more forward-looking in emphasizing the holistic development of the practitioner and the anticipation of an era of spiritual realization, whereas the latter are more backward-looking in their orientation toward the historical tradition they are seeking to reconstruct or revitalize. In academic literature the lines between these currents are often blurred, and modern Western shamanism for instance has been variously framed as a New Age and a Pagan movement (see, e.g., Svanberg 2003; Wallis 2003; Znamenski 2007; Kraft et al. 2015), or viewed as being an entirely distinct entity of its own (Townsend 2005).

> genized – given a culturally specific form that makes the outside symbol 'ours', even traditional. (Johnson 2002, 312)

For the present purpose, this perspective is helpful in focusing the attention on the active and self-conscious process of meaning-making, which is employed to create connections between the past and the present, and to legitimate those connections by appeals to tradition and lineage. Thus, although the definition of modern Western shamanism or other contemporary Western spiritual movements as "indigenous religions" remains open to debate (see Tafjord 2018; Cox 2007, 141–67), the strategies by which they "imagine themselves in the indigenous form" (Johnson 2002, 303) are worth analyzing in their own right, as they afford critical insights into the ongoing negotiations around identity, authenticity, and legitimacy in this field, as well as to the inherent tensions marking these processes on both local and global scale (see Owen 2013; Butler 2018).

The present article will illustrate some aspects of this dynamic by examining how this kind of "imagined indigenousness" (Tafjord 2018, 307) is constructed in contemporary Celtic shamanism. In addition to asking the question "what makes Celtic shamanism 'Celtic'?", I am also interested in asking what makes it "shamanic." This second question stems from the observation that while the material circulated and marketed with the label "Celtic shamanism" is predominantly influenced by Harnerian "core shamanism" (Harner 1990), the authenticating discourses that focus on historical continuity are also indebted to scholarly conceptualizations, which have long perpetuated notions of shamanism as humanity's most ancient form of spiritual wisdom (see, e.g., Eliade 2004 [1964]; for discussion, see von Stuckrad 2003; Znamenski 2007). In order to understand how knowledge of the Celtic shamanic tradition is produced and legitimized, and by whom and for what purposes, it is necessary to try and disentangle these different strands by attending to the plurality of ideas and narratives that contribute to the formation of this discursive knot (see von Stuckrad 2013; Vollmer and von Stuckrad 2016; Alberts 2015, 5).[2]

[2] The term "discursive knot," which stems from Foucauldian critical discourse analysis, refers to the ways in which discourses develop within given communicative infrastructures at the

Imageries pertaining to Celtic shamanism are mediated in a variety of forms, including academic and non-academic literature, online resources, course materials, popular culture, and social media platforms. Moreover, the importance attached to each individual's personal experience as a source of knowledge in Western shamanic practice entails that subjective understandings of the tradition may vary, giving rise to a range of interpretations that reflect the diverse backgrounds, needs, and orientations of the practitioners (see, e.g., Townsend 2005). In the following I have chosen to focus on the phenomenon as it is represented in sourcebooks on Celtic shamanism and other publicly available material produced by individuals who claim expertise in the field.[3] It should be recognized that this text-centered approach does not aim to document the lived experience of the followers of this spiritual path, as would be the case in ethnographical research (see Wallis 2003, 22). Instead, it exemplifies how Celtic shamanism is presented in commodified forms in a specific body of material, which has a central role in introducing the tradition to the wider public, and often providing the first entrance point to anyone interested in exploring it further (Jones 1998, 191–92; see also Svanberg 2003, 63–64; Znamenski 2007, 215–17). Since much of this literature is relatively uniform in its treatment of specific source materials as evidence for Celtic shamanic practice, narrowing the scope in these terms facilitates a general overview of some of the main interpretative strategies that are used to support the claims for the tradition's historical authenticity.

"Our own ancestral ways": Celticity and indigeneity

J.R.R. Tolkien (1983, 185–86) once famously quipped that "Celtic" was "a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost

intersection, or entanglement, of several discursive strands (von Stuckrad 2013, 16). As an example of such a constellation of meanings, Vollmer and von Stuckrad (2016, 459–61) mention the discursive formation of "Gaian spirituality," the ingredients of which include "terms such as nature, life, sacredness, evolution, science, biology, values, spirituality, etc."

[3] Especially John and Caitlín Matthews have made a profitable career of publishing books for decades on Celtic shamanism and other related topics. Like other authors, including Trevarthen and Mac Leod, who have an academic background in Celtic Studies, the Matthewses adopt a role of self-identified scholar-practitioners in their work.

anything may come," and many would concur that this statement still holds true today (see, e.g., Meek 2000; Blain 2001; see also Cunliffe 2011). The term that was originally adopted in the early eighteenth century in comparative philology to denote a family of Indo-European languages may nowadays be used to refer to ethnicity, material culture, geographical areas, art, music, and religion, to name just a few examples (see Sims-Williams 1998). Dietler notes that in recent history, the concept of "the Celts" has served a variety of ideological interests, and provided the foundation for "several contrasting, and often contradictory, scales and planes of 'imagined community'" (2006, 239). As a result of the postmodern trajectories of globalization, commodification, and mass-mediation, transnational engagements with "Celticity" are no longer bound by historical, geographical, or genetic constraints, but instead bear witness to new forms of community and belonging, including those in which "being Celtic" is viewed as an elective affinity or a spiritual orientation that is available to anyone (Bowman 2000).

In Celtic shamanism, the raw materials from which "Celtic" has been fashioned are similarly varied, and allow for creative ways of tapping into the idea of ancestral heritage and making it relevant for the present (see, e.g., Matthews 1991; Conway 2001). The pragmatic approach to shamanic practice in many Celtic shamanic handbooks entails that the ancestral tradition is primarily seen as a source of inspiration, and not as something that is only accessible to those who can claim a right to it through blood lineage (see Znamenski 2007, 240–42). A central tenet of the constructed "Celticity" in this context is that its "ethnonostalgic" vision of the past is broad enough to appeal to different audiences, and thus may equally resonate with a diasporic longing for a distant homeland or with a desire to otherwise restore a spiritual connection that has been lost. One teacher describes the clientele of her workshop as follows:

> Several years ago, I was teaching Celtic religion and shamanism at a large holistic learning center. Many of the students were of Celtic ancestry, or felt a connection to the tradition through past lives (reincar-

> nation is an element of the native Celtic belief system). One woman of African and Scottish descent knew nothing about her Scottish heritage. Another woman from India became fascinated with the sound of invocations in Celtic languages, once she had learned Sanskrit and Old Irish were related. An indigenous Taino woman from Puerto Rico told me her people were trying to revive their traditions through the same three methods: archaeology, written accounts, and information from elders (all of which were scarce). She had come to the workshop to learn shamanic journeying to help her in that quest. (MacLeod 2014, 28)

This basic orientation, however, does not contradict the importance given to a more distinct sense of indigeneity, which derives from the notion that Celtic shamanism brings the shamanic practice "closer to home" (Znamenski 2007, 305–20; see also Meek 2000, 30–37; von Schnurbein 2003, 133–36); as one website put it, it is the indigenous spirituality of all "clients with white skin" (Meyer 2022; see Conway 2001, 4).[4] On the one hand, the framing of the narrative in these terms can be understood as a response to the accusations of cultural appropriation and exploitation that Western shamanic practitioners have been facing since the 1980s in relation to the fetishization, commercialization, and consumption of Native American and other Indigenous spiritual traditions (Znamenski 2007, 273–305; Fonneland 2015, 49; see Tafjord 2018, 308–9). On the other hand, as pointed out by Znamenski (2007, 248–50), there are also many practitioners who are themselves critical of the generic and universalizing claims of core shamanism, and want to emphasize that shamanic practice is always rooted in a given locality and culture-bound mythology (see also Fonneland 2015, 37).

With regard to the Celts in particular, the discourse of indigeneity is underscored by the notion that both the Celts and contemporary indigenous peoples share a common experience of colonial oppression,

[4] This statement does not carry any overt connotations of "whiteness" being associated with racial superiority, as it does in right-wing extremist rhetoric, although such sentiments are not uncommon in politically motivated Pagan groups in general. For a discussion of this in the context of Neo-Germanic paganism and shamanism, see Schnurbein 2003.

which has resulted in their cultural and geographical marginalization (Crockford 2010, 147; Blain 2001, 52; Butler 2018, 186; see Meek 2000, 80–2). The conventional narrative pertaining to the Celts envisages several colonizing moments in their history, from the prehistoric period to the present: the expansion of the Roman Empire from the last centuries BCE onwards, which led to the Romanization of Celtic-speaking populations in Continental Europe and parts of Britain; the spread of Christianity throughout late Antiquity and the early medieval period, which accelerated the disappearance of pre-Christian belief systems; the centuries of English and British political dominance and cultural imperialism, during which the native languages and traditions of the Celtic peoples of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland were ruthlessly repressed; and, finally, the globalizing, rationalizing, and secularizing forces of modernity, which have severed the people's connection with their inner selves, their heritage, and their environment (e.g., MacLeod 2014, 28; Cowan 1993, 6–7).

It is important to note that while this gradual process is seen to have caused a fundamental disjunction between the past and the present, the tradition that once flourished is not deemed irrecoverable. Perhaps the most important characteristic that connects all the different variations of contemporary Celtic spirituality, both Pagan and Christian, is their affirmation of the indigenous "Celtic" worldview as being particularly receptive to different ways of connecting with the sacred, which has ensured the survival and continuity of earlier belief systems, albeit in attenuated forms.[5] This sympathetic openness to the numinous, it is argued, is most strikingly reflected in the unique "combination of conservatism and synthesis" (Trevarthen 2003, 12) in the early medieval vernacular sources, as well as in the vibrancy of folk belief in the Celtic areas up until the present day. As noted by Meek (2000, 79–102), the "Celtic spirit" evoked from this perspective is one that is naturally attuned to the intimate unity between humans and nature, and seeks to privilege tolerance, harmony, and simplicity over complexities of social

[5] This view concerning the essentially syncretistic or hybrid nature of early Irish tradition has been espoused by many scholars in the field of Celtic Studies as well, although its premises and implications remain contentious.

hierarchies or religious dogmatism. An illustrative example in this instance comes from Esther De Waal, a well-known author in the Celtic Christian tradition, but the same basic sentiment could equally be shared by followers of other Celtic spiritual paths. De Waal (1997, xiv–xv) writes:

> So I have been brought face-to-face with a world at once very familiar and very mysterious, for I have found in the Celtic a worldview that touches on much that is common, shared, perhaps archetypal, in all human experience. I have become aware of how this way of seeing the world is common to all early peoples, to the traditional and aboriginal peoples throughout the world. […]This discovery of my own Celtic roots has meant that I have also become more aware of the riches of many other traditional peoples. I have found that much in the African or Native American experience speaks the same language as the Celtic, has a shared and common resonance. For I have found in Celtic understanding nothing of the highly individualistic, competitive, inward-looking approach common in today's society. Here, instead, everyone sees themselves in relation to one another, and that extends beyond human beings to the wild creatures, the birds and the animals, the earth itself.

It is possible to recognize in accounts like this one many of the same tropes and dichotomies that have defined the representation of Indigenous peoples as the Other throughout European historiography and fueled the development of an idealized view of so-called primitive man as the embodiment of the values lost by Western civilization (see Geertz 2004; Cox 2007). Such stereotypes have played a central role in shaping the portrayal of shamanism in the West (see, e.g., Hutton 2001; Znamenski 2007; von Stuckrad 2003), but they also have a long pedigree in their own right in relation to the persistent mystification of the Celt "as an abnormally visionary or imaginative being whose mind is fixed to an unusual degree on the spiritual, the occult, or the ideal," as Professor Sims-Williams (1986, 78) has aptly put it (see also Leerssen 1996; Meek 2000, 38–59).

The essential attributes associated with the Celtic "racial character" in these terms began to take shape in the mid-nineteenth century, fueled by the enthusiastic public reception of James Macpherson's Ossianic poems, as well as by the growth of speculative antiquarianism and romantic nationalism, which took a keen interest in the "Celtic" past of the British Isles (Sims-Williams 1986).[6] Driven by the intellectual currents of Romanticism and Orientalism, the perceived geographical periphery of the so-called Celtic Fringe became seen as a realm that assumed a timeless and ethereal quality, inhabited by people who were, in the words of Meek (2000, 50), "pure in form but pre-eminently pure in faith, dwelling apart from the wider world and constantly under threat, while preserving many of the ancient customs lost elsewhere."[7] The way in which these same ideas pertaining to the archaism of Celtic tradition and the intrinsically spiritual tone of their lore continue to hold a lasting appeal is witnessed, for instance, in an encyclopedia entry on Celtic shamanism, which offers the reader the following introduction to "the Celtic mystical worldview":

> Pagan Celtic spirituality perceived that the supernatural otherworlds lie so close to this one that the borders often cross, and that the magical numinous was present in every aspect of their lives and surroundings. Nature was keenly observed by the pagan Celts to obtain understanding of her deepest secrets in both the physical and metaphysical sense, without the aspect of torture, violence, penetration or dismemberment in order to get to it that we find in later western inquiries. […] Folk stories collected between the 18th and early 20th centuries abound in which nothing is merely as it seems to the physical eye. […] On an ordinary walk home, a person might fall into a fairy mound and spend years there which feel like mere hours. […] There are no distinctions made between

[6] Arguments for the "Celtic race" in the nineteenth century drew on physiological race theories as well as comparative philology and ethnology. Influential proponents of the notion, whose works played a major part in the development of the positive stereotype of the "Visionary Celt," included Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold (Sims-Williams 1986).

[7] The "Celtic fringe" denotes parts of the British Isles that have been predominantly populated by Celtic-speaking peoples, including Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall.

> the transcendent and the immanent in their potential for holding divine wonders. These tales clearly suggest a shamanic worldview, with no separation between the physical and the metaphysical aspects of life. (Fields 2005, 2–3)[8]

Remnants of ancient memory: locating shamanism in the historical sources

Before Celtic shamanism began to gain ground as part of the broader field of modern Western shamanism, the possibility of viewing aspects of the Celtic tradition through a shamanic lens had already been explored by Celticists throughout the twentieth century (see Wallis 2007, 108–13). These analyses were based on the same historical primary sources – archaeological evidence, classical literature, and medieval vernacular narratives – that Celtic shamanic practitioners also turn to in order to retrieve traces of their ancestral "wisdom traditions" (MacLeod 2014, 28).[9]

From an archaeological perspective, much of the interest has focused on the symbolism and iconography of Iron Age and Roman-period artifacts, although some efforts have also been made to identify commonalities that could be traced further back in prehistory, bringing much earlier material remains, such as Irish Neolithic passage grave art, within the scope of shamanic interpretation (Aldhouse-Green 2005).[10] Overall, however, it is the classical and medieval textual sources that have received the most attention as documents potentially preserving historical traces of ancient shamanic belief and practice. One of the early scholars

[8] References to this article follow the pagination of the PDF document uploaded online, not those of the original print version.

[9] Additional sources of information mentioned by MacLeod are "the testimony of the living tradition bearers" and "going directly to the spirits for information, guidance and counsel" (2014, 28).

[10] Perhaps no other prehistoric item has stimulated the imagination of scholars and practitioners alike as much as the Gundestrup cauldron, a late Iron Age artifact discovered in Denmark, and its depiction of an antlered, cross-legged figure known by the name of Cernunnos. It is virtually impossible to find a publication dealing with shamanism in a Celtic cultural context that does not use this figure as an illustration, often without any accompanying explanation as to its background or context. Examples of shamanic interpretations of this figure include Matthews 1991; Aldhouse-Green 2005, 172–75.

paving the way for these inquiries was Nora K. Chadwick, who drew a parallel between the poets of the Celts and the Siberian shamans to propose that the fundamental elements pertaining to their role and ecstatic inspiration were essentially the same. The comparison, which brought these seemingly distant figures together "in a common ancient Eurasian tradition of inspired poets, seers and healers who communed with spirit-worlds" (Hutton 2001, 134), anticipated many of the same central features that have later become part of the template of archaic shamanism, especially as disseminated through the work of Mircea Eliade (2004 [1951]). In her book *Poetry and Prophecy*, Chadwick wrote:

> Everywhere the gift of poetry is inseparable from divine inspiration. Everywhere this inspiration carries with it knowledge – whether of the past, in form of history and genealogy; of the hidden present, in the form commonly of scientific information; and of the future, in the form of prophetic utterance in the narrower sense. Always this knowledge is uttered in poetry, which is accompanied by music, whether of song or instrument. […] Invariably we find that the poet and seer attributes his inspiration to contact to supernatural powers, and his mood during prophetic utterance is exalted and remote from his normal existence. Generally we find that a recognized process is in vogue by which the prophetic mood can be induced at will. […] In addition to all this we find a common vocabulary of technical terms which goes back to early times (1942, 14).

According to Chadwick, the most pertinent similarities between the poet-seer and the shaman on a cross-cultural scale lie in their specialized role within their communities, as well as in the specific techniques used to incur knowledge from the supernatural realm. These characteristics, in her view, could in the Celtic context most readily be identified in the figure of the druids, whom the Greek and Roman authors had variously described as religious functionaries associated with teaching, divination, healing, ceremony, and law among the continental Celtic peoples (see Jones 1998).

While the view that the druids could be considered the foremost examples of the native "technicians of the sacred" in the Eliadean sense has gained currency in both academic and popular contexts (see, e.g., Tolstoy 1985; Trevarthen 2003; MacLeod 2014; Aldhouse-Green 2022), the correlation often comes with a caveat, especially with regard to the applicability of both "shaman" as a term and "shamanism" as a category in this context. John Matthews, arguably one of the most prolific authors in the field of contemporary Celtic shamanism, maintains that much of the criticism is misplaced, as both terms are merely intelligible (and more consumer-friendly) ways of referring to a phenomenon that does not exclusively belong to any specific cultural domain:

> I have been taken to task for using the emotive word *shaman* (originating in the Tungusk dialect of the Stepplands) in conjunction with the Celts. This use has been, as I have said elsewhere, a matter of convenience. The nearest words describing a kind of practice which we might call shamanic are *geilt* (inspired madman) in Irish and *awenyddion* (inspired ones) in Welsh. While these would perhaps have been more accurate words to use, I still feel that few people would have responded to courses (or books) on the practice of geiltism (!), if such a word even exists. The term *shamanism* is simply a widely understood and recognised word for what I firmly believe the Celts practised, and what I and those I have taught – among others – continue to practice today. (2002, xiv)

When it comes to the nature of shamanic practice, scholars and practitioners alike have generally been inclined to place less emphasis on the religious role of the shaman, and claimed instead that "shamanism is not so much a theology as an attitude" (Jones 1998, 65; see Cowan 1993, 3). This entails viewing shamanism as an expression of an irreducible element of human religiosity that has always found its manifestation throughout history. The survival of this archaic substratum, to quote Eliade (2004 [1951], 12), is due to the fact that although religious concepts and techniques are constantly changing, with "a recasting, a renewal, a revalorization, and integration of the elements […] of an im-

memorial religious tradition," these processes never obliterate the past completely. One of the consequences of this is that in new historical and cultural settings, survivals of shamanic ideology and techniques may be discerned in contexts where they are not exclusively associated with representatives of a privileged "mystical elite," who "stand out in their respective societies" by virtue of their vocation (see Eliade 2004 [1951], 8). As argued by Jones:

> [T]he archetypally 'shamanic' figures in Celtic literature may be poets, but, with the exception of Taliesin, they are also warriors and kings. In fact, if we look at the explicitly labelled 'druids' in medieval Irish literature, we notice that these figures certainly perform magic, sometimes spectacular magic; they carry out religious rituals, advise kings, proclaim judgments, even induce prophetic dreams. But to the best of my knowledge, there is no tale that tells us of a druid's journey to the Otherworld. In contrast, look at all the figures who *do* journey to the Otherworld: Finn, Oisín, Cailte, Diarmuid, Art, Cormac, Cú Chulainn, Fróech, Conall Cernach, Nera, Pwyll, Pryderi, Manawydan, Predur, Owein, Arthur, Kynon, the list could continue for pages. If we accept, as I think we must, that the journey to the Otherworld is the sine qua non of shamanism, then I think we must look for Celtic shamans not amongst the druids, but amongst the warrior-kings (1998, 82).

That shamanic themes could have survived in the narrative material because they make good stories was also suggested by Eliade (2004 [1951], 214), who claimed that a major part of the "cultural contribution of shamanism" lies in its influence on epic literature, myths, and legends. Thus, stories "in which shamans properly speaking do not figure" could still incorporate a variety of motifs and images that were of ecstatic origin, "in the sense that they were borrowed from the narratives of shamans describing their journeys and adventures in the superhuman worlds" (Eliade 2004 [1951], 310, 510; see Wallis 2003, 118).

The broadening of the interpretative scope in these terms has brought to the fore a wide range of narrative patterns, themes, and mo-

tifs in the medieval vernacular tradition, which have been viewed within a shamanistic frame. This includes many literary figures who, while not portrayed as having a regulated role in their communities like the druids, have nevertheless been considered to engage in "shamanic activities," however those are defined (see Trevarthen 2003; MacLeod 2014).[11] In Celtic shamanic practice, the most potent metaphor in this regard has been the otherworldly journey, which resonates with Eliade's characterization of the seminal typological features associated with the shaman's ecstatic experience, but also with the more practical aspects of core shamanism, in which the primary aim of shamanic work is to teach practitioners the necessary techniques whereby they can themselves "become a seer (see-er), and undertake personally the famed shamanic journey to acquire firsthand knowledge of a hidden universe" (Harner 1990, xxv).[12] From this perspective, the medieval narratives—apart from preserving traces of the "shamanic substratum" in historical terms—have assumed a specific function as "maps" that are used to outline and signpost the cosmic topography of the practitioners' inner journey, combining the universalized features of shamanic cosmology with a symbolism that is also deemed to manifest an "unmistakable aura of 'Celticity'" (Matthews 1991; see MacLeod 2014, 33).

John Matthews notes that although Celtic shamanism uses the primary sources to "enter deeply into the world of the ancient races of the British Isles," it "does *not* seek to imitate or emulate every aspect of Celtic life and attitudes" (1991, 17; emphasis in original). Similarly, Conway maintains that the "essence of shamanism" lies in the manner

[11] Examples of vernacular Irish narratives interpreted from this perspective include *Serglige Con Culainn* ("The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn"), *Forbhais Droma Damghaire* ("The Siege of Druim Damghaire"), *Táin Bó Fraích* (The Raid of Fráech's Cattle), *Buile Shuibhne* ("The Frenzy of Suibhne"), and the tales collectively known as *echrae* and *immrama* ("journeys"). English translations of these texts are available online at Irish Sagas Online (2012–2023) and CELT, Corpus of Electronic Texts (1997–2021). In the Welsh tradition, notable "shamanic" figures include Myrddin/Merlin and Taliesin.

[12] Wallis (2003, 116) points out that the use of the term "metaphor" is problematic when discussing shamanism, because of its limitations in conveying the reality of shamanic experiences, namely, that "to shamans these metaphors […] are real." He nevertheless notes that it may still be useful in describing allusions in literature, for instance, which may have held some earlier significance that later authors were not aware of. Here the "otherworldly journey" could be seen to validly encompass both meanings.

in which the teachings and practices may be utilized in the present to "form a changed self" that may use ancient knowledge "for the benefit of others and the Earth, besides oneself" (2001, 5).

The emphasis on Celtic shamanism as a living tradition reflects the general orientation of modern Western shamanic traditions toward creative engagements with the historical material, which are often sensitive to the distance between the past and the present, and acknowledge the difference between revival and reconstruction (Wallis 2003, 105–6; see also Furth 2010, 6–8; Kraft et al., 2015; Rountree 2015). Recognizing that the practices are not the same as those of the ancestors does not delimit their application from a practical point of view, as the rejuvenation of the ancient wisdom may be pursued in different ways, whether by creating accessible translated versions of the original texts (see, e.g., Matthews 1991; 2002; 2003) or by devising contemporary forms of rituals seen as harking back to historical shamanic practice (MacLeod 2014). The strategies of knowledge production employed in these endeavors, however, are always to some degree incommensurable with academic scholarship. This is because the relative success of the experiential exercise of shamanic journeying is not determined by the historical accuracy of the readings of the material, but rather by the accumulation of personal spiritual insight and empowerment – qualities that ultimately remain beyond the purview of scholarly inquiry.

Contestations of authenticity

Wallis (2003, 80) observes that academics are often dismayed by the way in which contemporary Western shamanic practitioners misrepresent the archaeological and textual evidence to validate their own "invented" version of the past. Legitimating discourses connected to indigeneity and historical continuity are variously met with suspicion or disdain, and occasionally also challenged by scholars who might otherwise be open to the possibility of identifying traces of ancient religious belief systems from the historical material (see, e.g., Jones 1998, 197–208; Blain 2001; Wallis 2003, 113–24).

The issues raised in these criticisms are manifold. Wallis (2003, 113–15), for instance, points out how in contemporary Celtic shamanism, challenges related to the reliability of the fragmentary and highly diverse historical and archaeological records are often bracketed off in order to pursue interpretative avenues that are more speculative, allowing authors to "take a leap in the dark" (Matthews 2002, 5) to seek out underlying meanings that fit their preconceived framework (see, e.g., Fields 2005, 2; Trevarthen 2003). According to Jones (1998, 199–201), the problem moreover lies in the eclectic process of "bricolage" and "syncretization," whereby the Celtic material is freely brought together with elements from Native American and Germanic traditions, and molded to suit the practical aims of Harnerian core shamanism. The main thrust of this critique is aptly illustrated by her characterization of the visualization exercises used in shamanic work:

> These inner quests of the Celtic shaman are fuzzy and warm, exciting but not particularly dangerous, like the pony ride at the amusement park; the magical Otherworld quivers with anticipation when it realizes that you want to come out and play; Balor of the Evil Eye and the Fomoire [demonic beings of Irish mythology] are nowhere to be found, or if they rear their ugly heads you will overcome them with ease. The encounter with the Otherworld basically comes down to sightseeing and acquiring souvenirs, albeit on a spiritual plane. (Jones 1998, 200–1)

Dismissals of Western shamanic practices and practitioners by academics commonly invoke a distinction between traditional and modern forms of shamanism, attributing qualities such as factuality, truthfulness, and genuineness to the former while seeking to demonstrate how the latter falls short of the standard of authenticity (Crockford 2010, 139–40). As demonstrated by Alberts (2015) among others, the basis and utility of such a dichotomy has been increasingly called into question, as scholars have begun to critically interrogate the premises and modalities of the discourses that have shaped and sustained the shamanic idiom from the seventeenth century onwards. This ongoing proj-

ect of dismantling the "edifice of a universal shaman" (Alberts 2015, 82) has among other things thrown into sharper relief the intersections of academic and popular discourses, as well as the sociohistorical contingency of the various knowledge systems, which for intellectual or practical purposes have sought to define what "shamanism" is or should be (see von Stuckrad 2003; Svanberg 2003; Znamenski 2007).

In the context of contemporary Celtic shamanism, negotiations about authenticity bear equal relevance to claims that are anchored in contested conceptions of Celticity and "ancestral tradition." One issue that has been deemed particularly problematic from this perspective has been the notion that anyone can partake of a "Celtic" identity by virtue of spiritual affinity (see Bowman 2000). The sentiments aroused by such claims are summed up by Blain (2001, 47), who describes her reaction to a magazine article that discussed how one Celtic practitioner had come to revive "the ancestor-based spirituality of his own Gaelic heritage":

> I was not merely exasperated, but acutely, blazingly angry. I grew up with both 'Pictish' symbol stones, and the much older cup and ring marks, as part of my heritage, my knowledge of the surrounding countryside, the construction of my consciousness. Now it seemed to me that this was being prostituted, muddled and muddied, by this strange person about whom I was now finding it hard to think politely, who thought he could claim 'Celtic ancestry' and thereby tramp over people's fields at night to sleep in a bronze-age grave […], casually lumping together millennia and cultures.

Blain's response indicates how the parties implicated in the legitimation and authentication of "ancestral tradition" not only include scholars and practitioners but also those to whom ancestry and heritage hold significance as conceptual entities marked by other criteria, whether linguistic, territorial, or ethnic. The use of archaeological sites, such as the Bronze Age graves mentioned by Blain, is one tangible example of how the spiritually motivated actions of the practitioners may come into con-

flict with other interest groups, highlighting the broader societal implications that these engagements with the past may have (see Wallis 2003, 142–94).

Conclusion

Imageries of indigeneity in contemporary Celtic shamanism draw on a fluid set of cultural and symbolic resources. In this article, I have argued that analyzing how the sense of spiritual belonging is shaped and sustained by creative, and sometimes contested, strategies of meaning-making allow for a more nuanced understanding of the complex historical and sociopolitical issues underlying the negotiations of authenticity and legitimacy in this context. As the materials discussed here illustrate, the indigenizing discourses circulated in contemporary Celtic shamanism emerge from a dynamic interplay between academic and popular conceptualizations of what "Celtic' and "shamanism" have been perceived to be. The selective and self-conscious appropriation of these perspectives by the practitioners provides the foundation for the forging of an "ancient ancestral tradition" that meets their needs in the present.

The disentangling of the various strands that have contributed to the discursive formation of "Celtic shamanism" from the mid-twentieth century onwards reveals that many of the claims and tropes defining these imageries can in fact be traced back much further. Bjørn Ola Tafjord has noted how the modes of representing indigeneity among contemporary native faith movements in Europe are inextricably linked with Romantic idealization of "golden but oppressed and almost forgotten local religious pasts" and "grand religious ancestors or rare noble Others who can serve as exemplary guides to (post)modern seekers" in their quest for a religiosity that suits them (2018, 307). This observation pertains equally to contemporary Celtic shamanism, where the backward-looking glance offers Western practitioners the prospect of discovering a simpler, more harmonious, and integrative way of being in the world from "their own primordial backyards" (Meek 2000, 30),

without necessarily claiming that they are reconstructing all aspects of the ancient belief system as it originally was.

It could be argued that the reframing of Celtic shamanism as "a lost cultural tradition now revived" (Crockford 2010, 143), has effectively shifted the attention away from charges of essentialization and appropriation leveled at Western shamanic practitioners with regard to non-Western Indigenous cultures. At the same time, however, it has also continued to reproduce many of the idealized primitivist tropes connected to "the Celts" for centuries, even up to the present day (see Blain 2001, 53; Butler 2018, 188). Of seminal importance in these conceptualizations is the evocative imagery associated with the "Celtic spirit," which in itself is imbued with symbolism that is particularly amenable to shamanistic framing; as Cowan put it (1993, 157), "if the typical Celt has a fierce strain of mysticism, and evidence strongly suggests that this is true, every Celt is a potential shaman."

As many people continue to find the notion of "ancestral Celtic wisdom" appealing in a spiritual sense, it is likely that the issues surrounding historical factuality and legitimacy in relation to contemporary Celtic shamanism are bound to remain contentious, not least because "the personal experience of religion often outweighs the historical or cultural accuracy for practitioners" (Crockford 2010, 154). In this context, authenticity becomes an increasingly slippery – and, perhaps to some extent, futile – category, as the symbols, practices, and discourses that are deemed most powerful continue to assume new forms, and the relevance and validity of the tradition as it is imagined is ultimately measured by "what works".

Literature

Primary material

Conway, D.J. 2001 [1995]. *By Oak, Ash, & Thorn: Modern Celtic Shamanism*. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications. Eighth printing.

Cowan, Tom. 1993. *Fire in the Head: Shamanism and the Celtic Spirit.* New York: HarperCollins.

De Waal, Esther. 1997. *The Celtic Way of Prayer*. New York: Doubleday.

Fields, Tina. 2005. "'Celtic shamanism': Pagan Celtic Spirituality." In *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*, vol. 1, edited by Mariko Walter and Eva Fridman, 469–77. Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio. Accessed August 3, 2023. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312057039_'Celtic_Shamanism'_Pagan_Celtic_Spirituality.

MacLeod, Sharon Paice. 2014. "Immrama: Journeys in Indigenous Celtic Shamanic Practice." *A Journal of Contemporary Shamanism* 7 (1): 28–34.

Matthews, John. 1991. *The Celtic Shaman: A Practical Guide.* London: Rider. E-Pub version.

Matthews, John. 2002 [1991]. *Taliesin: The Last Celtic Shaman.* Rochester: Inner Traditions. Second edition.

Matthews, Caitlín. 2003. *The Way of the Celtic Tradition*. London: Element.

Meyer, Jamie. 2022. "Celtic shamanism." Accessed August 3, 2023. https://www.drummingthesoulawake.com/celtic-shamanism

Trevarthen, Geo Athena. 2003. "Brightness of Brightness: Seeing Celtic Shamanism." PhD diss., University of Edinburgh.

Research literature

Alberts, Thomas Karl. 2015. *Shamanism, Discourse, Modernity.* Farnham: Ashgate.

Aldhouse-Green, Miranda and Stephen. 2005. *The Quest for the Shaman: Shape-shifters, Sorcerers and Spirit-healers of Ancient Europe.* London: Thames & Hudson.

Aldhouse-Green, Miranda. 2022. *Rethinking the Ancient Druids: An Archaeological Perspective.* New Approaches to Celtic Religion and Mythology. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Blain, Jenny. 2001. "Shamans, Stones, Authenticity and Appropriation: Contestations of Invention and Meaning." In *A Permeability of Boundaries? New Approaches to the Archaeology of Art, Religion*

and Folklore, edited by Robert J. Wallis and Kenneth Lymer, 47–55. BAR International Series 936. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports.

Bowman, Marion. 2000. "Contemporary Celtic Spirituality." In *New Directions in Celtic Studies*, edited by Amy Hale and Philip Payton, 69–91. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

Butler, Jenny. 2018. "Entering the Magic Mists: Irish Contemporary Paganism, Celticity and Indigeneity." *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 9 (2): 177–94.

CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts. 1997–2021. Accessed September 17, 2023. http://celt.ucc.ie

Chadwick, Nora K. 1942. *Poetry and Prophecy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cox, James L. 2007. *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions*. London: Routledge.

Crockford, Susannah. 2010. "Shamanisms and the Authenticity of Religious Experience." *Pomegranate* 12 (2): 139–58.

Cunliffe, Barry. 2011. "In the Fabulous Celtic Twilight." In *The Barbarians of Ancient Europe: Realities and Interactions*, edited by Larissa Bonfante, 190–210. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dietler, Michael. 2006. "Celticism, Celtitude and Celticity: The Consumption of the Past in the Age of Globalization." In *Celtes et Gaulois, l'Archéologie face à l'Histoire, I: Celtes et Gaulois dans l'Histoire, l'historiographie et l'idéologie moderne*, edited by Sabine Rieckhoff, 237–48. Glux-en-Glenne: Bibtracte, Centre archéologique européen.

Eliade, Mircea. 2004 [1951]. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Andre utgave. Oversatt av Willard R. Trask. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fonneland, Trude. 2015. "The Rise of Neoshamanism in Norway: Local Structures – Global Currents." In *Nordic Neoshamanisms*, edited by Siv Ellen Kraft, Trude Fonneland and James R. Lewis, 33–54. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Furth, Brett H. 2010. "Celtic Symbols, Celtic Identities: A Folk Histori-

cal Analysis of Symbols in Celtic Ethnopagan Traditions." Unpublished conference presentation, retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/29054955/Celtic_Symbols_Celtic_Identities_A_Folk_Historical_Analysis_of_Symbols_in_Celtic_Ethnopagan_Traditions (accessed 3.8.2023).

Geertz, Armin. 2004. "Can we Move beyond Primitivism? On Recovering the Indigenes of Indigenous Religions in the Academic Study of Religion." In *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, edited by Jacob K. Olupona, 37–70. London: Routledge.

Harner, Michael. 1990 [1980]. *The Way of the Shaman*. New York: HarperCollins. Updated third edition.

Hutton, Ronald. 2001. *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*. London and New Yrok: Hambledon Continuum.

Irish Sagas Online. 2012–2023. Accessed September 17, 2023. http://iso.ucc.ie.

Johnson, Paul C. 2002. "Migrating Bodies, Circulating Signs: Brazilian Candomblé, the Garifuna of the Caribbean, and the Category of Indigenous Religions." *History of Religions* 41 (4): 301–27.

Jones, Leslie Ellen. 1998. *Druid, Shaman, Priest: Metaphors of Celtic Paganism*. Middlesex: Hisarlik Press.

Kraft, Siv Ellen, Trude Fonneland and James R. Lewis (eds). 2015. *Nordic Neoshamanisms*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Leerssen, Joep. 1996. "Celticism." In *Celticism*, edited by Terrence Brown, 1–20. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Meek, Donald E. 2000. *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*. Edinburgh: The Handsel Press.

Owen, Suzanne. 2013. "Druidry and the Definition of Indigenous Religion." In *Critical Reflections on Indigenous Religions*, edited by James L. Cox, 81–92. Farnham: Ashgate.

Rountree, Kathryn (ed.) 2015. *Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses*. New York: Berghahn books.

Schnurbein, Stefanie von. 2003. "Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradi-

tion: A Theory between Ideological Camps." *History of Religions* 43 (2): 116–38.

Sims-Williams, Patrick. 1986. "The Visionary Celt: The Construction of an Ethnic Preconception." *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 11: 71–96.

Stuckrad, Kocku von. 2003. *Schamanismus und Esoterik: Kultur- und wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*. Leuven: Peeters.

Stuckrad, Kocku von. 2013. "Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches, Definitions, Implications." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25: 5–25.

Sutcliffe, Steve and Marion Bowman. 2000. *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Svanberg, Jan. 2003. *Schamantropologi i gränslandet mellan forskning och praktik: En studie av förhållandet mellan schamanismforskning och neoschamanism*. Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press.

Tafjord, Bjørn Ola. 2018. "Modes of Indigenizing: Remarks on Indigenous Religion as a Method." *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 9 (2): 303–27.

Tolkien, J.R.R. 1983. *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, edited by C. Tolkien. London: Allen and Unwin.

Tolstoy, Nikolai. 1985. *The Quest for Merlin*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Townsend, Joan B. 2005. "Individualist Religious Movements: Core and Neo-shamanism." *Anthropology of Consciousness* 15 (1): 1–9.

Vollmer, Laura J. and Kocku von Stuckrad. 2016. "Science." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, 450–71. Oxford: Oxford University Press. E-book: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198729570.013.32

Wallis, Robert J. 2003. *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasies, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans*. London: Routledge.

Znamenski, Andrei A. 2007. *The Beauty of the Primitive. Shamanism and the Western Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Abstract
The last few decades have witnessed a growing interest in Celtic shamanism, both within academia and among the general public. In the late modern spiritual marketplace, the movement has proven particularly attractive to those seeking to rediscover, reclaim, or revive a tradition thought to have its roots in the ancient cultural heritage of the Celtic peoples. This article examines how the imageries of indigeneity circulated in contemporary Celtic shamanism relate to various historical and sociopolitical discourses, in which the meanings of both "Celtic" and "shamanism" have been continuously negotiated since the eighteenth century. The discussion highlights the dynamic interplay between academic and modern Western shamanic understandings of the historical past, and also considers some examples of how the movement's claims for indigeneity, authenticity, and legitimacy have been contested.

Keywords: Indigeneity, Celtic shamanism, Western spirituality, authenticity