

<sup>22</sup>Notiz 9, *GEV III*, S. 510.

<sup>23</sup>Notiz 9, *GEV III*, S. 410.

## ***DEISIDAIMONIA*, ‘FEAR OF THE GODS’: Function and Form of Traditional Folk Beliefs in Wales Today.**

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This paper is based primarily on research and fieldwork undertaken in Wales during 1964-89 as part of the author's work in the Welsh Folk Museum. Over 3000 informants have been interviewed on the subject of folk narratives and traditional folk beliefs. Of these informants some 400 were recorded on tape, amounting to about 600 hours of recording, mainly in the Welsh language, and containing some 18,000 items of folklore. Much information has also been recorded on paper, and in the form of student's essays and replies to questionnaires. The subject is discussed under the following four main headings:

1. Continuity: Ufology and parapsychology.
2. ‘Ancient mental heirlooms’. Why believe?
3. Current folk beliefs in action.
4. Form and Function.

### **1. Continuity: Ufology and Parapsychology**

One of the most common attitudes today is that it is not *proper* to believe in some of the old beliefs and practices of our forefathers. People are afraid of being regarded by others as ‘superstitious’, ‘stupid’ or ‘old-fashioned’. Somehow, it is not fitting in this modern age to cling to such ‘childish’ beliefs and customs. Many traditional folk beliefs, rites and ceremonies have actually died out. It seems that there has been a general decline in magic. Yet, in Wales, as elsewhere, there are many people who still believe, or want to believe, in magic and the reality of another world, especially when their own insight and experience fails them, or, to quote Malinowski, when ‘chance and circumstances (are) not fully controlled by knowledge’<sup>1</sup>. It is one of the myths of the scientific age that people are not so superstitious as they used to be. People think that science can disprove many of the old folk beliefs. While this is true in a number of cases, what is also obvious is that many folk beliefs are either adapted or

they reappear in a kind of pseudo-scientific guise.

In Wales, as elsewhere, man's innermost desires and fears remain almost the same through ages. He is still as anxious and doubtful as ever about his future, and constantly endeavours to explain his own existence and place in the Universe. He wishes to avoid evil and is afraid of tempting Fate. More than anything, he desires to invite fortune and experience life's joy and blessing. George Giford's words, published in his *Discourse of the Subtill Practices of Devilles by Witches and Sorcerers* as early as 1587, are still as relevant today as they were 400 years ago: 'For this is man's nature, that where he is persuaded that there is power to bring prosperity and adversity, there will he worship.'<sup>2</sup> The following declaration in *The Triall of Maist. Dorrell* (1959) is also very relevant: 'If no devils – no God'.<sup>3</sup>

Even with the advance of learning, folk beliefs still persist and flourish. With the great sociological changes and technological developments of the twentieth century, old beliefs are adapted and new beliefs created. The main function of these folk beliefs, however, may remain unchanged from century to century. The Loch Ness Monster has long attracted the attention of the world, but recently some people have believed that there is a similar monster also in Llyn Tegid, Bala Lake, in Gwynedd, North Wales. Man's fear of the unknown, his preoccupation with the mystery of life, and his powerful imagination have not changed since time immemorial, as demonstrated also in one other subject which has attracted much attention recently, namely ufology, the study of unidentified flying objects.

During the Spring of 1977 a wave of UFO activity was reported in an area in Dyfed, South-West Wales, that became known afterwards as 'The Welsh Triangle'. UFO enthusiasts from all over Britain came to investigate the astonishing series of events, often referred to as 'The Dyfed Enigma'; schoolchildren made drawings of the unidentified flying objects and space robots; people talked of seeing fiery airborne discs disappearing into rocks, and silver-suited entities walking across fields and peering through cottage windows; the 'extra-terrestrial hypothesis' (E.T.H.) was discussed with fervour; and books and numerous articles were written on the subject.<sup>4</sup> It seems, therefore, that a new folk belief has developed, namely 'that there are aliens out there watching us'. Of course, the fact that the area is a centre of secret military activity for both British and American forces could well have a bearing on this matter.

Why all the sudden interest in UFOs, and especially since 1947 with Kenneth Arnold's legendary sighting of a number of airborne discs while flying across the state of Washington? Peter Brookesmith, editor of the journal *The Unexplained* has suggested two reasons. First, UFOs caught public attention just as governments were seriously considering space exploration for the first time.

Secondly, the sighting in 1947 happened shortly after the appalling destruction and suffering of the Second World War and the dropping of the first atomic bomb - 'people felt deeply insecure about their own future and the future of humanity'.<sup>5</sup> It could be argued, therefore, that belief in UFOs reflect man's inherent fear. It is an expression of one of his oldest desires, namely the desire for peace and security. The belief also vividly illustrates the human imagination at work, man's great thirst for fantasy. Yet, one must remember that his involvement with the fantasies of another world is often a way of defining our own world.

Today there seems to be a renewed interest in the paranormal and in psychic research. The numerous and popular columns in the press, for example, testify to people's preoccupation with astrology and horoscope reading. Parapsychology, too, has become a recognised subject, with young people in particular taking a keen interest in the study of extra-sensory perception (ESP) in its various forms: telepathy; precognition or premonition; clairvoyance (abnormal faculty of seeing what is out of sight); paroptic vision or 'eyeless sight' (the ability of seeing through skin); psychokinesis (PK) (the ability to tell the history of objects by merely holding them). The same interest is shown in séance meetings; fortune telling; palmistry and somatomancy (the power to read various signs on the human body); tarrot cards; and *Deja vu* (French phrase meaning 'already seen').

The desire of our forefather's children for a taste of adventure, magic and the supernatural world was satisfied by listening to fairy tales, heroic tales and tales of wonder. Today the same desire is satisfied by such popular television programmes as: *Dr. Who*; *Star Trek*; *Batman*; *The Six Million Dollar Man*; and *Wonder Woman*; and by such films as *The Omen*; *Ghost*; and *Dracula*. The most recent Welsh space super-being to appear on television is Superted, created in 1984 for S4C, the Welsh Television Channel. 'No adventure is too dangerous, no location too exotic, no joke too funny Superted, the ordinary teddy bear with a secret magic word'.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. 'Ancient Mental Heirlooms'. Why Believe?

In brief, therefore, what functions do folk beliefs fulfil in the twentieth century? Why do many people in Wales, as elsewhere, still cling to traditional folk beliefs - these 'ancient mental heirlooms', as Wayland D. Hand ably described them?<sup>7</sup> Why are new beliefs still being created today and old beliefs adapted? In venturing to answer such questions, the following five factors may be considered.



1. *The Devil at Corwen Fair*, Gwynned, North Wales. from a black and white illustration by Ifor Owen, Published in *Y Pethe*, a book of reminiscences by Llywd o'r Bryn (*Y Bala*, 1955).

## 2.1. Cultural heritage

One fairly obvious reason is that we are brought up with them. Like an heirloom, a piece of personal property that has been in the family for many years, they are cherished and handed down with respect from one generation to the other. ‘This is what my mother used to say ...’ ‘My grandfather always believed that ...’ Many people today do not actually believe as their parents and grandparents did, yet many of us are afraid or unwilling to dismiss the ‘old superstitions’ outright – just in case.

As children living on an upland farm in the parish of Llangwm, Clwyd, North Wales, during the forties and fifties, a high proportion of the beliefs mentioned in this article were known to us, and my eighty five year old mother still believes in many of them today. We were told, for example, not to ‘cross’ – to pass – one another on the stairs; not to put shoes on the table – even new, clean shoes; and not, under any circumstances, to open an umbrella in the house. We were warned not to touch a dandelion flower (*Taraxacum officinale*). We were told that it was poisonous, and touching it would cause your hands to be covered with scab. We called it in Welsh *blodyn crach* (‘scab flower’). There was also a belief that touching it would cause a child to urinate in bed, and one popular name for the dandelion in Welsh is *blodyn pi-pi-yn-gwely* (‘urinate-in-bed flower’). Furthermore, we were strongly advised not to venture too near a badger. Should it bite you, we were told that it would not release its hold until it had heard a bone cracking. There were things too were expected as children to do. For example, eat bread-crusts in order to secure curly hair.

Children also, of course, disseminate folk beliefs amongst themselves from one generation to the other. We believed that it was dangerous to open our mouths widely if there was a toad nearby – in case it would blacken our teeth. To cure warts on our hands, we were told to rub them with a snail and then bury the snail in the soil or hang it on a thorn of a hawthorn bush to die. Another related cure was to rub the warts with bacon and then bury the bacon in the soil. If these two cures failed, we were advised to ‘sell them for a penny’ to the first passer-by. These folk rituals are based on an old belief relating to the magical transference of disease – the belief that it is possible to transfer disease or ailment from one body or matter to another. As the snail or bacon rotted in the soil or on the hawthorn, so too the warts rotted away on the hands and disappeared.<sup>8</sup>

We seem to accept without question many of the beliefs and superstitions introduced to us at an early age. For example, red hair signifies temper. The number 13 is considered unlucky. The numbers 3 and 7 are lucky. *Tri chynnig i Gymro* (‘Three chances to a Welshman’) is one popular saying. If a child is persistently ill, it is believed that it ‘will turn for the better’ at the age of 7. It was

also once believed that every person had a 'new body' every 7 years.

Some beliefs are so popular that they have become part of our everyday language and practices. If in doubt, or when we wish to ensure good luck, we say 'touch wood!' – again, just in case! Some people may explain this saying by suggesting that it refers to the wood of Christ's cross. Few associate it with the much earlier primitive ritual of embracing a tree to evoke the blessing of the wood spirit. A gypsy family in the town of Brecon, in Powys, South Wales, still carve a piece of wood, known as 'touch wood', and sell it for 50 pence<sup>9</sup>. To most people today, however, merely uttering the two words is deemed sufficient, without actually touching wood. We may no longer cross our fingers when faced with an evil omen, such as seeing two crows on our paths, but 'cross fingers' is still a common saying and practice amongst children and adults to prevent bad luck and to 'hope for the best'. Similarly, children and, to a lesser extent, some adults still make a sign of the cross when making an oath. The sign of the cross is combined with such sayings as: 'Crist-croes' ('Christ-cross'); 'Cross my heart'; 'On my oath!'; and 'Ar fy marw!' ('If I was to drop dead' – I'm telling you the truth!). As children in Llangwm, Clwyd, North Wales, we had our own rhyme:

*Crist-croes, tân poeth!* 'Christ-cross, hot fire!

*Llosgi mhen a llosgi nghoes!* 'My head will be burnt any my leg will be burnt' – 'I'd better be telling the truth, otherwise I will go to Hell to be burnt!'

*Ymgroesa!* and *Ymswyna* ('make a sign of the cross') were also formerly common remarks amongst adults.

As has already been mentioned it is considered unlucky to open an umbrella in the house or to walk under a ladder. Such superstitions are introduced to us at an early age. We usually never question why such practices are believed to be unlucky, or we may offer a more practical and rational explanation, often without realising that their origin is deeply rooted in man's sacred beliefs and customs. The triangle formed by a ladder being laid against a wall was held to signify the Trinity. To walk under the ladder, therefore, was to walk 'through' the Trinity and was a sign of disrespect. Similarly, because of its shape the umbrella, or parasol, was naturally associated with the sun, and it was considered an ill-omen to open it anywhere else but in the presence of the sun, that is, outside and not inside the house. This belief appears to have 'developed in the East where the umbrella or sun-shade was used by Royalty'.<sup>10</sup>

Often we cherish folk beliefs and superstitions and store them in our minds and in the subconscious, although, as already suggested, we ourselves might not wholeheartedly believe in them. Many people who half believe in them, or do not believe at all, are often unwilling to dismiss them completely – 'in case there is something in them'. They often act as vehicle of thought and have a

symbolic and poetic value. For example, red petals symbolise blood, and it is a current belief that red and white flowers should not be mixed together and taken to hospital, because the red and white colours are identified with blood and bandages.

## 2.2. Aesthetic qualities

Secondly, some folk beliefs are cherished because of their aesthetic qualities. They are poems in miniature: *Daear dan eira – bara*. ('Land under snow – bread'); *Glaw ym Mai sy'n fara drwy'r flwyddyn*. ('Rain in May is bread throughout the year.')

Like proverbs, they are easily remembered, because they are usually brief and concise and express a comment or observation in a pleasing verbal form.

Occasionally the sense of symmetry is heightened by the use of rhyme, which has also an important mnemonic function. For example:

*Nos Glan Gaea:*

*Bwgan ar bob camfa.*

(‘Winter’s Eve: a bogey on every style.’)

Welsh folk beliefs relating to nature and weather lore are particularly rich in the use of rhyme. For example:

*Gaeaf glas:*

*Mynwent fras.*

(‘A green winter: a fertile cemetery.’)

*Niwl y Gaea:*

*Arwydd eira.*

(‘Mist in Winter: sign of snow.’)

Exhortations are a common feature of folk beliefs. Often an instruction, a command or a cautionary advice is given to do this or that, or not to do this or that. ‘Rewards are often a part of the promise, or, contrariwise, discomfiture or punishment for disregarding the taboo’.<sup>11</sup> Common use is made of such introductory elements as: ‘always’, ‘never’, ‘don’t’, ‘if’, ‘unless’ (unless you do this or that...).

Often the folk belief is a declarative sentence expressing a single idea. For example: ‘Fairies fear iron’; ‘Rain drops are the tears of angels in heaven.’ The comment or observation in many folk beliefs, however, especially those relating to ominal and casual lore, is expressed grammatically in a cause and effect relationship. For such beliefs the Swedish scholar Eskeröd proposed the following structural pattern. For beliefs relating to causative behaviour, that is, when the subject of the subordinate clause (man, animal, etc.) acts in a certain way to ensure a desired result, he has suggested the sequence: *causans – causatus*.<sup>12</sup> For example: ‘Keep a Bible under your sleeping-pillow (*causans*)

and you will not have dreams (*causatus*); ‘If a child places a tooth under the pillow before going to sleep (*causans*), by morning the Fairies will have replaced it with a silver coin piece (*causatus*).’ In the field of ominal lore he has suggested the sequence: *ominans* – *ominatus*. For example: ‘If it rains on St. Swithin’s Day (15 July) (*ominans*), it will rain for 40 days (*ominatus*).’ ‘If bubbles appear on your coffee (*ominans*), you will have money (*ominatus*).’

### 2.3. Imagination

Thirdly, folk beliefs reflect man’s vivid imagination and constant need for fantasy. Zola’s famous dictum about literature is also relevant to folklore. It could be adapted and paraphrased as follows: ‘Folklore is fact refracted through human temperament, and enlarged upon by the wondrous and inexhaustible powers of the imagination’.<sup>13</sup> But involvement with fantasy and the irrational is not just merely a means of entertainment and escapism into another world, it is also a means of defining man’s place and role in this world. Though man may be more educated today, his preoccupation with the irrational remains strong.

### 2.4. Duality

Fourthly, folk beliefs reflect man’s duality, what Eugen Mogk has called *Doppelmensch*. Man is a combination, on the one hand, of cultural conditioning (*Kulturmensh*) and, on the other hand, natural instincts (*Naturmensh*).<sup>14</sup> As Saint Paul’s Epistles vividly depicted the struggle between mind and body, soul and flesh, so too present day folk beliefs reflect man’s dual personality and his constant struggle between good and evil, the rational and the irrational.

### 2.5. Deisidaimonia: ‘Fear of the gods’

Finally, folk beliefs reflect man’s constant fear of the unknown, what the Greeks called *deisidaimonia*: ‘fear of the gods’, ‘superstition’, a subject already mentioned when discussing belief in UFOs. Although many folk beliefs reflect man’s need for entertainment and fantasy, the majority ‘fulfil the Aristotelian requirements for tragedy, namely to evoke fear and pity in the viewer.’<sup>15</sup> Numerous beliefs are not only poems in miniature, but they are also sermons in miniature. They have a similar function to cautionary legends (*frevel sage*), and they correspond to the modern paradigm of social control. Whilst proverbs usually teach in an indirect manner, folk beliefs express an opinion or observation in a more direct manner.

If the moral code is broken or the ethical conduct infringed, punishment follows. Man must not challenge fate. There is one tree in the Garden of Eden



whose fruit must not be eaten. This is a prominent theme in Welsh folk beliefs and legends. There are Fairy ‘rings’ – green circular patches of land – which must not be ploughed up. There is treasure under stones and *cromlechs* which is not to be disturbed. We are reminded of the words of Oedipus, the tragic Greek hero:

*For when we think fate hovers o'er our heads,  
Our apprehensions shoot beyond all bounds.*<sup>16</sup>

We are reminded also of the words of John Brand in his classic work, *Popular Antiquities* (1813): ‘In all ages Men have been Self-tormentors, the bad Omens fill a catalogue infinitely more extensive than that of the good’.<sup>17</sup>

People today may not openly confess their belief in witchcraft and the evil eye, yet there are many who are constantly afraid of being cursed, and it seems that the words in the Book of Proverbs (XXVIII, 27) still have a relevant message for us in the twentieth century: ‘He that giveth unto the poor shall not lack; but he that hideth his eyes shall have many a curse.’ As Iona Opie and Moira Tatem have recently written: ‘We have fears so deep they might be said to be instinctive: the fear of disobeying old taboos, of tempting fate, of retribution, of darkness and its denizens.’<sup>18</sup> Fear of death, illness and suffering, infertility, miscarriage, curse, insecurity and poverty – these are some of the fears which are just as real today as ever.

Many folk beliefs and superstitions are based on *mea culpa* reasoning: a feeling of guilt – it is ‘my fault.’ Welsh people brought up on the Bible were well aware of the Old Testament teaching of ‘justice over three generations’. There was once, for example, a deep fear amongst pregnant women that if a child was born with a hare-lip, that child’s children would also have the same deformity. Similarly, if a pregnant woman made fun of a hare-lipped child it was believed that she herself would give birth to a child with the same deformity. It was formerly believed too that a birth-mark was the result of a woman being frightened during pregnancy.

There are also certain people – especially very religious people – who still believe in divine wrath. Natural calamities, such as lightning, are said to be God’s judgement to punish the evil. Even the atomic bomb is regarded by some religious fundamentalists as being part of the ‘grand consummation’ of things, as forecast in Matthew, Chapter 24: ‘For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time; no, nor ever shall be ...’ (verse 21).

### **3. Current Folk Beliefs in Action**

To further illustrate the tenacity of certain traditional folk beliefs in Wales today we may refer to the following five examples of current beliefs in action.

They also, needless to say, reflect modern man's instinctive fears.

### 3.1. 666 – the 'number of the beast'

Some motorists have recently refused the figures 666 as a car registration number. They regard 666 as an ill-omen. It is, they argue, the 'number of the beast', referred to in the Book of Revelation, XIII, 18, in the Bible: 'Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundreded, threescore and six.' Many are the tales of strange experiences and accidents which have occurred to motorists who believe that the 'satanic plate' cursed their driving. In the Spring of 1990, therefore, as a result of numerous complaints, officials at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority in Swansea decided to withdraw the number: 'to avoid the possibility of troubling road-users in the future.' Following the decision, one newspaper heading read: 'Lucifer's number sparks plate ban.' It also quoted a Church in Wales spokesman: 'Everybody fights against the devil, and it is good to see that D.V.L.A. in Swansea are taking people's religious feelings seriously.'<sup>19</sup>



*'The number of the beast' Ann Wilson of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority in Swansea, south Wales, with a car number plate said to include the 'mark of Lucifer'. Photo: The Western Mail, 1.11.1990.*

‘The Omen’ series of horror films, shown on television about this time, certainly contributed much towards people’s concern for the 666 sign. Many drivers, in particular, confessed that they had been horrified by the films, based on the theme of the strange evil power of the man born with the ‘mark of the beast’. *The Number of the Beast* is also the title of a song and sound disc by the pop-music group *Iron Maiden*.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.2. Horse skulls

At one time horse skulls were placed in the foundation of houses, farm buildings and churches in the belief that they protected such buildings against ghosts and evil spirits. The custom is well documented in Wales. For example, in 1982 five horse skulls were discovered in the foundation of the walls of an old cowshed on the farm of Garth, Llanilar, in Dyfed, South-West Wales. The five skulls were eventually re-buried, according to the strong wishes of the local people and members of the Garth family themselves. ‘I am not a superstitious person’, commented Mr. Rowland George, ‘but I respect old traditions.’<sup>21</sup>



*Horse skull charm.* Five horse skulls discovered in the foundation of an old cowshed on the farm of Garth, Llanilar, Dyfed, south-west Wales. Photo: Arvid Parry Lones.

Shortly after the discovery of the skulls, Mrs. George flew to Canada, contrary to the advice of one local man who had strongly suggested that it would be ‘unlucky’ for her to fly ‘before the skulls had been re-buried.’ And, indeed,

on the return journey, shortly before departure, there was a warning that a bomb had been planted on the plane, and a man suspected of terrorism was later remanded in custody. Like her husband, Mrs. George is not superstitious, but she 'asks herself sometimes: did she receive a warning in Toronto Airport – a little reminder that the skulls had not yet been re-buried?''<sup>22</sup>

### 3.3. The broom

In many countries the broom has long been regarded as an apotropaic agent to keep away the devil and evil spirits and to ensure a happy home. It used to be one of the first items to be brought into a new house and, usually, a broom placed at or near the doorway was thought to be a sure way to cut short the visit of an unpleasant company.<sup>23</sup> In some cultures stepping or jumping over the broom can entail evil consequences. For example, if a pregnant woman steps over a broom it was believed that the umbilical cord may become knotted around the baby's neck. For a single woman it meant that she might become pregnant before marriage.<sup>24</sup> Generally, however, stepping or jumping over the broom was a certain way of ensuring a happy married life. *Priodas ysgub*, a 'broom' or 'besom wedding', was once a fairly common practice, at least in some parts of Wales – with the couples jumping over a broom placed usually across the doorway into the house.<sup>25</sup> In Wales, as elsewhere, children, in particular, are still being told tales of witches riding broomsticks at Halloween. But apart from this popular tradition, it would appear that not many Welsh people today think that the broom has anything to do with old folk beliefs and superstitions.

Yet, from the recent attitude of the inhabitants of one village in North-West Wales, it seems that certain people still associate the broom with supernatural powers. In the Summer of 1990 a newly married couple came to live in the small rural village of Trefor, in Gwynedd. They confessed to be 'followers of the old Celtic Religion' and 'worshippers of nature'. Jumping over the broom had been part of their marriage ceremony. In September the same year the husband wrote to the Gwynedd Education Authority to complain that the headmaster of the local school had warned the children not to go past the couple's home. He also threatened to take the headmaster to court and demanded £500 in compensation for 'blackening his character and turning the whole village against him.' The main cause off all the trouble was the broom which the couple ceremoniously kept outside their home and which had been stolen. They were worried that so many malicious and untrue stories were being told about them. It was alleged, for example, that they worshipped the Devil. It was even suggested by some that they sacrificed children and ate babies! The couple had issued a warning that the stolen broom could be 'dangerous in the wrong hands, because of the power in it.' To the local inhabitants of Trefor, however, the broom

symbolised witchcraft and evil. 'We have never experienced anything like this before', they complained, 'it's terrifying.' Indeed, some of the villagers reacted by placing the Bible in the window of their homes.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.4. 'Churching'

'Churching' was once a common custom. It was believed that it was unlucky – 'not the thing to do' – for a mother who had just given birth to a baby to visit someone else's home, unless she herself had first been to church or chapel. This custom – based primarily on the ancient belief that it was unclean to give birth to a baby and on the desire to give a formal thanksgiving for the safe delivery of a child – is not generally practised today. Some people, especially chapel and church members, may still respect the old belief, although they do not any more adhere to it strictly. However, the report of an occurrence in Gwent, South-East Wales, seems to be an exception.

In 1978 a group of a dozen or so mother approached the vicar of Liswerry, Newport, believing that 'it would be unlucky for a woman to go to anyone else's house after having a baby, unless she had been 'churched'.' The vicar replied by writing in the parish magazine: 'I thought that the custom of giving formal thanksgiving for the safe delivery of a child had virtually died out ... I am certainly not against churching in the normal way. The urge to give thanks is a wholesome one – as long as the motives are wholesome. But what I am against is the old-fashioned and meaningless superstition that I have found here ... I thought that it was a bit odd that the young mums who requested it seemed often to be in an uncommon hurry to 'have it done', as they put it ... Be that as it may, the Church doesn't deal in lucky charms.'<sup>27</sup>

### 3.5. 'The woollen yarn disease'

Mention has already been made – when discussing the cure of warts – of the ancient belief in the magical transference of disease. One of the earliest and most widespread methods on both sides of the Atlantic for the symbolic diagnosis and removal of disease was the practice of ritual measurement.<sup>28</sup> It dates from the time of Pliny the Elder, if not before. The patient would be measured with a stick, fibre, string, yarn, or any other kind of cordage. As Wayland D. Hand has suggested, it seems that the unit of measurement itself acts not only as a marking device, but also as a 'sort of intermediate agent, or *Zwischenträger*, to which the disease is communicated in the process of measurement.'<sup>29</sup> For example, a stick used for measuring the patient was afterwards either thrown away or nailed to a tree or other vertical stationary object, according to the notion that the disease would be removed symbolically by the simple process

of contagious magic.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in some descriptions of the ritual measurement for the cure of the disease in Wales the woollen yarn was afterwards thrown into the fire,<sup>31</sup> although this does not seem to be the general practice.

Also very important was the notion that ‘the unit of measure, the length marked, or the area circumscribed, somehow prevents the ravage of the disease beyond the confines measured.’<sup>32</sup> Folk healers in Wales have testified that the process of measuring was itself a means of ‘breaking the disease’ (*torri’r clefyd*).<sup>33</sup>

In Wales it was the woollen yarn, not the stick, that was used for measuring patients, and the disease is known as *clwyf yr edau wllân* (‘the woollen yarn disease’). The illness was usually associated with some form of depression. Often it was called *clefyd y galon* (‘heart sickness’ - in the figurative sense). There is testimony also from some areas (in Mid-Wales, in particular) that the woollen yarn disease was a complaint said to resemble consumption or tuberculosis (T.B.) (*diciâu*, English ‘decay’), caused by witchcraft. Occasionally the disease was associated with ‘love sickness’.

In addition to the measuring ritual, the patient would often be given a potion to drink, usually beer, brandy, gin or other alcoholic beverage, mixed with saffron flower (autumn crocus, *Colchicum autumnale*) for yellow colouring.

The tradition of the woollen yarn disease seems to have persisted longer in Mid-Wales – in the former counties of Cardigan (Dyfed) and Montgomery (Powys), in particular – than in other parts of the country. Today there are two or three persons alive who are known to have either performed the woollen yarn ritual in the past or who still continue the practice.<sup>34</sup>

One of these is Sarah Maud Hughes from Carno, in Powys.<sup>35</sup> Many people suffering from depression visit her, although she does not have to treat the patient in person, and much of her curing is done on the telephone. All she needs to know is the patient’s full name and date of birth. The lineal measure she uses is the cubit, that is, the distance from the elbow to the outstretched middle finger. She places one end of the yarn on her own elbow and measures to the tip of her middle finger three times. The thread – which must always be of Welsh wool – is then marked. After some time she repeats the measuring ritual. If the yarn has contracted or extended by the second or third measuring, she is able to tell that the patient is still suffering from the disease. She continues the measuring process until, hopefully, the thread corresponds exactly to the first measurement, at which point she knows that the patient is on the road to recovery.

#### 4. Form and Function

It is not always possible or desirable to classify folk beliefs into various

distinct categories. Such categories often overlap and can at times be misleading. However, for the sake of clarification and a better understanding of the function of folk beliefs, in particular, they are discussed under four very general categories. The majority of the beliefs and superstitions referred to either continue to be believed by some people or are at least known by many.

#### 4.1. Taboos. 'Things you must not do'

Such taboos relate to the notion that if a certain action is taken, it will result in bad luck. There are certain things, therefore, which 'must not be done' – just in case. Mention has already been made of actions such as crossing on the stairs; opening an umbrella inside the house; placing shoes on the table; and mixing red and white flowers. Some also believe it to be unlucky to cross knives on the table; to give a knife or a pin to a person as a gift; to bring a twig of white hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) or bluebells (*Endymion nonscriptus*) into the house; to button one's coat from the bottom up; to wear green clothes; to point at the rainbow; and to kill various birds, such as the dove, a Robin redbreast or a wren:

*Y sawl a dynno nyth y dryw,  
Ni chaiff weled wyneb Duw.*

(‘Whoever destroys a wren’s nest, will never see God’s face.’)

Because of the instinctive fear of misfortune, disease and death, it is not surprising that beliefs and superstitions relating to marriage, pregnancy, birth and upbringing of children are numerous. For example, the belief that on her wedding day the bride should never arrive in church or chapel ahead of the bridegroom is still widespread. At one time it was also believed that a pregnant woman should not tie the string of her apron too tight in case it ‘strangled’ the unborn baby. It was considered unwise to rock an empty cradle; to step over a cradle when the baby was inside, or to pick up the baby too often, because it was said this stunted the child’s growth. Neither should a child’s finger nails be cut before it reached its first birthday, otherwise it would become a thief. This may be a variation of an earlier belief that to cut a child’s nails was to ‘cut’ – to stunt its growth.

The concept of limited good, introduced by the anthropologist George M. Foster, is a fairly common theme in folklore.<sup>36</sup> In some countries, for example, it is believed that there are only a limited number of hits in a baseball bat. Similarly, ‘only a limited measure of human vitality is believed to reside in any individual.’<sup>37</sup> This explains the concern that an older person sleeping with a child would ‘sap off the child’s vital essence.’<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in Wales, as in other countries, young people were warned that excessive masturbation could lead to blindness or impotency.

Another taboo, and a sure way of tempting fate, was 'to speak too soon'. Dreams, for example, should never be related to others 'too soon', if ever. In Welsh legends concerning the Fairy gift of money to human beings, once the recipient of the money disclosed its source to any one else, the flow of wealth ceased immediately. Yet another sure way of tempting fate is to hang up a new calendar before the end of the old year. It is unwise to 'take too much for granted'. It is not for us to know whether we live to welcome the new year, or, indeed, even the next day. That is one reason why such sayings as *All being well, God willing!* and *Os byw ac iach* ('If alive and well') are still in common use.

#### 4.2. Rituals and charms

Numerous beliefs and superstitions relate to the performance of certain practices and rituals either to invite good fortune – to seek good luck – or to protect against evil. Because man is afraid of assuming too much, in case this leads to misfortune and suffering, he endeavours to passify the fates and to disarm evil. Rituals and practices include: throwing salt over one's left shoulder; spitting on one's shoes when one sees a white horse; giving a person a lump of coal at the opening of a new business; placing money in one's pocket at the first sight of a new moon; leaving a house through the same door as one entered; putting a coin in a new purse; and putting a silver coin in the hands of a baby to bring good luck both to the child and the donor.

Like the belief in 'touch wood', 'cross fingers', and making the sign of the cross, spitting and whistling are also regarded as common apotropaic measures. One spits to express anger and whistles to show that one is not afraid of the dark. Similarly, the belief in the necessity to baptise babies is still surprisingly strong. Many Welsh legends and memorates illustrate people's former fear that a healthy human baby could be exchanged for a peevish, dwarfish Fairy urchin, especially if the baby had not been baptised. The poker or fire tongs would often be placed across the cradle to protect such babies. Although there have been no accounts of Fairy changelings for a very long time, and although people today do not believe that newly born babies are unclean and in need of purification, even non-churchgoing parents continue to bring their babies to be christened, because 'it is the thing to do.' Nurses and doctors working in hospitals can also confirm the strong wish of many parents to have their babies christened immediately if a critically-ill child is in danger of dying.<sup>39</sup>

As Iona Opie and Moira Tatem have pointed out the church formerly had a 'sympathetic understanding of the wish for supplementary occult aid, and to have used the 'magic' of their own religion to alleviate anxiety and suffering ... Bibles were fanned in sick men's faces, communion wine was recommended for



whooping cough, women bathed their sore eyes with baptismal water.<sup>40</sup> To the majority of Christians, old pagan religions are usually treated as superstition. Today, many people even regard a belief in God and certain aspects of the Christian religion as superstition. Yet, many people are afraid and unwilling to dismiss outright the belief in God. 'There must be something', they say. Furthermore, like non-churchgoing parents who wish to have their children christened, the majority of people still wish that their loved ones be given a Christian burial.

It was once a firm belief in many countries that the curtains should be drawn during burial, and especially if the funeral procession passed by one's house. According to one explanation, if this ancient practice was not respected, another death would follow. Others endeavour to explain the custom by suggesting that it was a means of keeping the 'evil spirits' of the dead out of one's own home. Today, those mainly elderly people, including my own mother, who still 'draw the curtains' (*tynnu'r llenni*) say that they do so out of 'respect for the dead'.<sup>41</sup> This rational reason seems to explain also why so many people at funerals today still wish to have a 'last glance' at the coffin, once it has been lowered into the grave. But in former times 'even the elemental fear of death, shared by primitive and civilised man alike, is believed to be banished by the act of touching a corpse or by kissing it.' One belief still respected by some people is that touching the deceased's forehead with a hand or kissing it is a means of alleviating sorrow.<sup>42</sup>

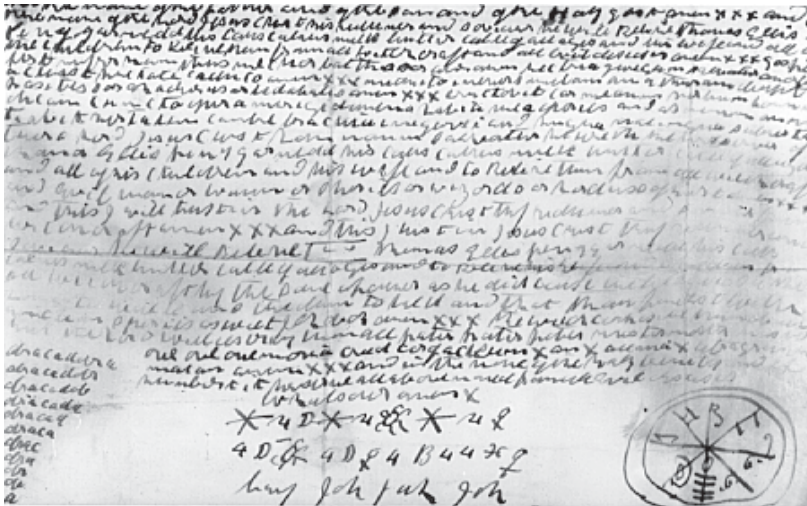
Certain customs and rituals are practised unconsciously without realising that their origin may be deeply rooted in primitive beliefs. For example, we usually stir our tea clockwise, from right to left. Why not anti-clockwise? One possible explanation for this practise (as with other things done in a clockwise direction) is that we are instinctively following the course of the sun.<sup>43</sup>

Having discussed a few of the customs and rituals practised to abate fear and to seek good luck, reference must also be made to the important and similar function of charms. Since the beginning of history it has been a custom for man to protect himself and his family against all kinds of evils, fears and inhibitions by the use of numerous charms or amulets. Horse skulls, brooms and corn dollies were used as apotropaic agents. Christmas greens – the mistletoe, in particular, and a wishbone, were hung over doorways to promote courtship and marriage and to ensure thriving crops. *Llysiau pen-tai* (lit. 'roof-top plants'), house leek (*Sempervivum tectorum*) were said to protect the house against lightening. Certain trees also, especially the holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and the rowan tree, or mountain ash (*Scorbus aucuparia*), were planted near the house. Some informants interviewed in Wales mentioned the belief that the Devil was hanged on a branch of a rowan tree. A more common belief mentions that

Christ's Cross was made from the wood of this tree and that the red berries signified his blood. Even today care is taken, for example, by the Forestry Commission workers, not to cut a holly tree unless it is absolutely necessary.

Because of the fear of poverty, misfortune, disease and death and the general belief in witchcraft, farmers in some parts of Wales visited the conjurer or wise-man, known in Welsh as *y dyn hysbys* (lit. 'the knowing man'). In return for a sum of money the wise-man would write a charm on a piece of paper in almost illegible handwriting and in a mixture of Welsh, English and Latin. It included a prayer on behalf of the bewitched animals or a blessing to protect animals from being bewitched; the abracadabra; and, finally, various signs of the zodiac. The charm was then carefully placed inside a small bottle known as *potel y dyn hysbys*. The farmer had to ensure that the bottle was hidden in a building where the animals were kept, and the cork was on no account to be removed. There is an example at the Welsh Folk Museum.<sup>44</sup> Another similar bottle is still carefully preserved in a farmhouse near Llanfair Caereinion, in Powys, Mid-Wales. The family firmly maintain that the bottle should never be removed or opened, because the spirit of the Squire of Bryn Glas (the evil spirit which troubled the farm) is forever imprisoned within.<sup>45</sup>

The *dyn hysbys* tradition was particularly strong in the Llangurig and Ponterwyd districts of Mid-Wales. The custom seems to have gradually died



**Charm against witchcraft.** Charm written by a wise man to protect the animals of a farm near Llanidloes, mid-Wales, against witchcraft. Photo: Welsh Folk Museum.

out in the 1940s. However, it is rumoured that one or two farmers in these areas still pay a nominal sum of money to a surviving member of *the dyn hysbys* family.

The most common charm still visible today on many doors of houses and farm buildings is the horse shoe. A horse shoe given as a gift had to be displayed in a conspicuous place, or else the luck would disappear. Horse shoes were fixed on doors with the two points usually facing upwards, so that it 'holds the luck' (*dal y lwc*). Some people believe that the horse shoe brings luck because it usually has seven nail-holes in it – a lucky number. In some countries the horse shoe was placed with the two points facing downwards. Its shape, therefore, signified heaven and the universe. Initially, however, the horse shoe became to be regarded as an important protective charm, not so much because of its shape, but also because it is made of iron, a metal purified in the fire during the process of its shaping.

Today silver covered cardboard horse shoes are often presented to the bride on her wedding day. Here we notice a distinct process of rationalisation which is also relevant to many other folk beliefs and customs. We could mention, for example, two further wedding customs to ensure good luck. The throwing of confetti over newly-married couples and tying old shoes and cans on their going-away car are both common practices. In former times a child's shoe was also frequently hidden in houses, especially in walls behind and around the fire-place. Many such shoes have been discovered recently in older houses in Wales.<sup>46</sup> Such shoes had a symbolic value as part of a fertility rite. Similarly, with the present custom of throwing confetti at weddings. Today: rose petal paper and, occasionally, rice. Yesterday: wheat – once again as an organic part of a fertility rite.

### **4.3. Man's destiny: omens and premonitions**

Numerous folk beliefs relate to man's destiny and his efforts to explain nature together with his own existence. They relate, in particular, to ominal lore – the interpretation of omens and signs to foretell the future, so as to avoid evil, poverty and suffering, and fulfil the great desire for security and prosperity. Many of the beliefs reflect a time when 'human beings lived in closer proximity with nature than they do now, and believed in an *anima mundi*. In those days the sun and moon, fire and water, flora and fauna were accorded a religious respect.'<sup>47</sup>

With man and nature in harmony, it was at one time the custom in Wales, as elsewhere, to inform the bees when there was a death in the family. People regarded the forces surrounding their lives with universal fear and respect. They were concerned about the changing aspects of nature – the flight of

birds, winds and clouds (nephomancy) – because such changes also foretold the changes which might happen to them in their own life time.<sup>48</sup> If a black raven dropped a feather near one's home it was regarded as a sign of good luck. A good crop of nuts indicated that many children would be born during the year. A swarm of bees in May betokened a good harvest of hay. A July swarm suggested a needy winter. The twelve days following Christmas were once known as *coel ddyddiau* ('omen days'), and it was believed that the nature of the weather during these days foretold the nature of the weather for the forthcoming twelve months.

To the countryman a bad harvest could endanger his whole livelihood. He was, therefore, very concerned about the forthcoming weather, and long before the days of radio and television and the work of professional meteorologists he had inherited a centuries old tradition of self-forecasting the weather prospects and predicting the nature of the months ahead. These prognostications were expressed in brief, concise statements or comments which are pleasing to the ear and easily remembered.

Wales is a country particularly rich in such sayings and proverbial lore. Hill rain gleaming in cloud-rift sunlight, once known as *Dysglau Marsli* ('Marsli's dishes'), is a sign of fine weather. One common sign of rain is to see a dog eating grass. The sun setting behind a wall of cloud (*machlud rhwng cist a phared*, 'sunset between chest and wall') also signifies rain. To see clusters of cloud of white hue (known as *traeth awyr*, 'sky beach') is another sign of bad weather. A 'blue flame' (*tân glas*) in the grate at winter-time is believed to foretell snow. Snow in January is 'food for the soil'. 'If Christmas be green, Easter will be white.' 'If March comes in as a lion, it will go out as a lamb.'

Other omens relating directly to man's daily life include the following: sugar falling on the floor is a sign of happiness; the number of plum stones left on the plate at the table signifies how many lovers you would have; a twist in one's belt suggests that you will lose your lover. Tea-leaves, of course, have long been used for fortune-telling. One custom was to place a large tea-leaf found floating on the surface of a cup of tea on the back of the left hand and strike it with the back of the right. If the leaf stuck to the right hand, it meant that you would have a new lover or would marry during the year. Each unsuccessful try indicated a one year period of waiting. If you were fortunate enough to have money in your pocket at the time of hearing the cuckoo for the first time during the year, the money had to be turned over in the pocket and then you would have money throughout the year. An itching nose signifies that visitors are coming to one's home or that someone is talking about you. If the itching is on the right side, they are talking about you spitefully. If a grave is left open over a Sunday it was once believed that another member of the family would soon

die.

Circular enclosures play an important role in folk belief.<sup>49</sup> Witches and magicians drew circles and stood within them, calling the name of the Trinity three times. One former cure for measles was to draw a circle on the floor and place the patient to stand inside it for five minutes. Similarly, it was once believed that the complete circling of the body around the waist with shingles (called in Welsh *yr eryr*, 'the eagle'), signified death, and today it is still very much feared and regarded as dangerous.

Signs and omens of good luck include the following: a black cat; a gap between one's front teeth; sun shining on the ring during the wedding day; a spider descending on one's clothes; to see the first lamb of spring, especially if the lamb is looking at you; a birth-mark – the higher it is on the face, the greater the luck; to pick up a lost glove; and to discover a four-leafed clover (*Trifolium*). A baby born with pre-natal teeth was considered lucky and was believed to be able to commune with ghosts.

To see one crow is considered lucky; to see two, unlucky. It is also considered unlucky to put the wrong shoe on one's foot in the morning. It means that one would be doing clumsy things all day.

People in former times were ever-conscious of the brevity of life. Infant mortality was high, and fear of disease and death very real. Consequently, in the folk mind 'nature itself is made to know this tragedy and to have a part in making a death known to the living in advance'.<sup>50</sup> The various forms of premonitions, portents or prognostications of death in the Welsh folk tradition are numerous. They include the following: a) *cannwyll gorff* ('corpse candle'). Pale candle light following the same route the corpse would take from the home of the doomed person to the cemetery; b) *toili* (from *teulu*, 'family'): a phantom funeral. Informants have testified to being able to recognise the persons carrying the coffin and leading the funeral procession. Often those who have experienced such a premonition felt as though they were being pressed to the wall or hedge by the passing procession; c) horse and carriage disappearing up a tree. Again those who have experienced this apparition described how they had to move quickly to one side to let the horse and carriage pass; d) *y ci du* ('the black dog'). An unusually large spectral black dog with fiery eyes, also formerly known in some parts of the country (Glamorgan, South Wales, in particular) as *Ci Annwfn*, 'The Underworld Dog'. The spectral black dog was also often regarded as a 'guardian angel'. It accompanied persons, especially those of good character, on a lonely road at night; e) *deryn corff* ('corpse bird'), seen hovering around the house or tapping on the window. Birds regarded as harbingers of death included: the white owl, the dove, the pigeon and the robin; f) *tolaeth*, the sound of a coffin being prepared in the carpenter's work-

shop at night, with the light on, but no carpenter; g) *cyhiraeth*, a doleful cry proceeding from the home of a sick person to the cemetery; h) a dog howling in the night; i) a cockerel crowing in the night; j) the sound of hymn-singing in the sky directly above the home of the person about to die; k) a swarm of bees leaving a house for no apparent reason; l) Bats suddenly appearing inside a house; m) a circle of light around the face of a sick person; n) to dream of a funeral; o) swarm of rats seen rushing in towards a house; p) to see one's own ghost; q) *lledrith* ('illusion'), the apparition of another living person; r) to see the ghost of a headless horse.

With many folk beliefs relating to death omens we again notice the process of rationalisation. There are beliefs which were once considered as premonitions of death, but later simply regarded as signs of misfortune or bad luck. These include: a) the sound of a bell in one's ear; b) a robin singing out of season; c) flowers, and the apple tree in particular, blooming out of season; d) a mirror or glass breaking – the ensuing bad luck would continue for seven years; e) doors opening for no apparent reason; f) clocks stopping for no apparent reason; g) the sight of four magpies together.

For workers such as coal miners, quarrymen and sailors who followed hazardous occupations, the daily fear of accident and death was very real. Risking their lives in perilous surroundings and continuously working in fear of the unknown, it is not surprising, for example, that the Welsh coal miner's belief in the supernatural was, until the beginning of the twentieth century very strong. The various prognostications which foretold of death or disaster at the colliery were numerous. A miner would often remain at home if he or any member of the family had dreamt the night before of an accident. Being late leaving for work was regarded unlucky and many miners would not dare return home if they had forgotten anything. There were, on the other hand, certain signs on the way to work early in the morning which caused miners to return home in fear, such as meeting with a woman or a cross-eyed person and seeing a particular bird crossing their path, especially two crows. If the candle in a glass jar which the miners carried with them to work went out, that was another ill omen.<sup>51</sup>

Many South Wales colliers would not commence new work on Friday, a day of bad luck, often referred to as 'Black Friday'. This was especially so on a Friday preceding a holiday. On this day miners in Gwent complained of having 'the old black dog' on their shoulders, a kind of evil spirit which caused illness and accidents. Miners in North and South Wales coal-fields would stay away from the pit on Good Friday and, to a lesser extent, on New Year's Day.

Phantom funerals were often seen in coal mines before an accident, and the robin, the dove and the pigeon were 'corpse birds' seen before the Senghennydd explosion in Glamorgan, South Wales, 14 October, 1913. This was one of the

worst disasters ever in the history of British mining. 439 miners were killed.<sup>52</sup> Some indication of the numerous omens of death inside or outside a colliery may be had from a brief reference to what happened at the old Morfa Colliery, near Port Talbot, South Wales. In the 1880s a miner saw the fierce ‘hounds of the underworld’, known locally as ‘The Red Dogs of Morfa’; phantom coal train drawn by spectral white horses; strange lights or ‘corpse candles’; the ghosts of workers who had long been dead; a white dove; and rats swarming out of their usual haunts. The loud noise of falling earth and piercing cries for help were heard, and the sweet rose-like perfume of an invisible ‘death flower’ filled the colliery. So terrified were the miners with these strange happenings that on the Monday, 10 March 1890, out of 420 workers usually on the morning shift, 170 had stayed at home. On that very day there was an explosion at the Morfa Colliery and 87 men died.<sup>53</sup>

Preachers and moralists made use of portents of death to forewarn people: ‘Be prepared to meet thy destiny.’ They were also ‘useful sanctions in getting men to amend their lives, to become responsible citizens and to reconcile themselves to the Lord.’<sup>54</sup>

#### **4.4. Mystery of life and death**

Premonitions remind us of the fourth and final category of folk beliefs to be discussed, namely those relating to the mystery of life and death. Much of the lore refers to the living dead – ghosts and other apparitions, including metempsychosis: the belief in reincarnation – the migration of the soul at death into a new body of the same or another species. A number of informants have testified to seeing the ghosts of their beloved ones recently departed. One very religious widow from Borth-y-gest, Gwynedd, North Wales, for example, described how her former two husbands had reappeared to her on a number of occasions. She also described in detail how her deceased favourite pet cat, Chicko, reappeared to her at night about once a month for three years. She had carefully noted the dates in her diary. She heard its long, piercing purr; she felt its warm body against hers; and she could even feel the wetness where the cat had licked her cheeks. At the end of the tape-recording session she remarked (referring to her former husbands and cat: ‘They are supposed to come, aren’t they? If you have faith in God, they do come’.<sup>55</sup>

A belief in ghosts seem to be still strong, as reflected in the numerous books, in both Welsh and English, published since 1978.<sup>56</sup> Young people, in particular, take a keen interest in seance meetings, and in this motor car and jet age there are often reports of motorists who have experienced unearthly visions while travelling at night. A typical example relates to the ‘strange man of Aber-big’ seen by motorists on the road which leads from Aber-big (Aber-

beeg) to Cwm, in Gwent, South Wales. One newspaper account was entitled: 'Strange happenings on a dark deserted road: a Gwent man tells about a chilling experience he had recently'.<sup>57</sup> 'The Vanishing Hitchhiker' legend has also been recorded in Wales, as in the case of Gerald Mason, Blackwood, Gwent.<sup>58</sup>

A recent Welsh language television programme which featured poltergeist cases in mansion houses in both North and South-West Wales created much interest.<sup>59</sup> Every year there are reports of houses and offices said to be troubled by ghosts, and the services of certain 'qualified' persons are acquired to dispel



*'Dryciolaeth' A ghostly apparition. From a painting by Hugh Hughes in his book (Yr Hynafion Cymreig (Carmarthen, 1815), (based upon The Cambrian popular Antiquities, Peter Roberts, 1815.)*

such unsociable beings.

One person who has for many years visited a number of troubled houses in North Wales is the Rev. John Aelwyn Roberts, former Vicar of Llandegai, near Bangor, who has just described his work in a highly popular book, entitled *Holy Ghostbuster*.<sup>60</sup> In recent years he is usually assisted by his friend Elwyn Roberts, a well-known poet, who acts as a 'medium'.

In South Wales one person whose services are often required for 'ghost busting' is Tina Laurent from Port Talbot. She is the secretary and founder-member of the 'Ghost Search Society' and describes her occupation as E.V.P. (electronic voice phenomena) lecturer and 'ghost hunter'. She is a member of the Society for Psychical Research (S.P.R.); the American Association of Electronic Voice Phenomena (A.A.E.V.P.); the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (A.S.S.A.P.); and of the College of Psychic Science (C.P.S.).



Belief in ghost and spiritualism, as the belief in Fairies, remind us of one central theme in folklore, namely the supernatural passage of time.<sup>61</sup> To express man's desire for such eternal bliss is one of the principal functions of folk beliefs. He has always longed for the 'lost paradise'; the 'still centre' of the mystics; and the land 'flowing with milk and honey', as described in the Bible. In his mundane daily life on earth he desires to taste the bliss of everlasting life, so that he too can proclaim with Peter in his Second Epistle (111,8): 'One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as one day.' He desires to be taken to the Island of Afallon (Insula Avallonis) where King Arthur was gently carried to be healed of his wounds, or to the ever-green, ever-young land of Tir na n-Og of Irish and Celtic tradition.

There is more to man than mere flesh and blood. In the midst of grief and suffering he can and will occasionally be able to rise as a Phoenix from the ashes to be born anew. Then he shall proclaim with Dylan Thomas: 'And Death shall have no dominion'. Although aware of his own mortality, man's greatest desire is to experience the wonder and bliss of life, to see as he has never seen before, and to hear, even for a short while, the pleasant song of the Birds of Rhiannon, as portrayed in one of the eleven classic tales known as 'The Mabinogion'.<sup>62</sup> Throughout the ages magic and the belief in the supernatural has delighted and sustained the spirit of man, for, to quote Alwyn and Brinley Rees, it has 'the power to breach the constraining boundaries of the finite so that the light of eternity may transubstantiate that which is commonplace and fill it with mystery'.<sup>63</sup>

To our forefathers the other world of the Fairies was full of that mystery. It was a place of joy and beauty, peace and tranquillity, love and kindness, and everlasting life. Today in Wales the belief in Fairies has more or less died out. Yet, man's constant longing for a taste of the other world of magic, the eternal moments of truth and joy and heavenly bliss, is as strong as ever. Such a desire has been well expressed by two informants from Gwynedd, North Wales. First, Martha Williams, Llandanwg:

*'And yet, you know, it gives you some kind of joy to think about it, even if there is no truth in it (that is, the land of the Fairies). I've always had a high regard of my life as a child. I've had a very happy life, although I had to start working as a very young child. I've always been happy. Everybody has been very kind to me, even today in my old age.'*

*'Perhaps the Fairies still exist, but that nobody sees them anymore?'* (RG)

*'Yes, I'm sure they do! We are the Fairies' children!'*<sup>64</sup>

Secondly, Robert Owen Pritchard, Betws Garmon.<sup>65</sup>

‘But this is what they used to say (about people of Fairy descent):  
“One of those nobody ever saw any of them dying – the Fairies would  
come to take them away before you could see them ...”’

‘Do you think that there is a possibility that its true?’ (RG)

‘I don’t think that there’s any truth in it, as such, but there are  
certain things – say now heaven and hell – well, I tell myself: “If  
there is such a place as heaven, I’d rather be there than in the other  
place!” Similarly, it does no harm if some things give you pleasure,  
well, why not believe in them.’<sup>66</sup>

### Notes, Literature

<sup>1</sup>A reference to Branislav Malinowski’s theory of magic, quoted in Jahoda, G. *The Psychology of Superstition*. London 1969, pp. 127-128.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, K. *Religion and the Decline of Magic. Studies in Popular Beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England*. London 1971, xviv.

<sup>3</sup>*The Triall of Maist*. Dorrell, 8. Quoted in Thomas, 1971, p. 469, see op cit.

<sup>4</sup>See Paget, P. *The Astonishing Account of U.F.O. Sightings in the Corner of Wales Known as The Welsh Triangle*. London 1979; Pugh R. J., and Holiday F. W. *The Dyfed Enigma. Unidentified Flying Objects in West Wales*. London, 1979; Evans H. *Dyfed Enigma: The Story of the “Welsh Triangle.”* In: *The Unexplained*, 1984, No. 1, pp. 18-19.

<sup>5</sup>Brookesmith, 1984, pp. 6-7.

<sup>6</sup>*Superted Petalgraft Demonstation Limited and SAC*. Cardiff 1984, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Hand, W. *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions. A Compendium of American Folklore from the Ohio Collection of Newbell Niles Buckett*. Boston 1981. Introduction, Vol. 1, pp. xxv-LVIII.

<sup>8</sup>See Hand, W. *Magical Medicine. The Folkloric Component of Medicine in Folk Belief, Custom, and Ritual of the Peoples of Europe and America*. Berkeley 1980, pp. 17-42. Ch. 2, ‘The Magical Transference of Disease.’

<sup>9</sup>Miles, D. P. Photograph of “Touchwood.” In: *Llafar Gwlad*, 18, 1987-1988, 11 (Journal of the Welsh Folklore Society).

<sup>10</sup>Waring, Ph. *Dictionary of Omens and Superstitions*. London 1978, p. 239.

<sup>11</sup>See Note 7, Hand 1981, p. xxxix.

<sup>12</sup>For a detailed discussion of his ideas, see Brown, F. C. *Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. 1952-1964, vol. VII, pp. xxii-xxiii. Also Note 7, Hand 1981, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.

<sup>13</sup>Hand, W. D. ‘The Fear of the Gods’: Superstitions and popular Belief. In: Coffin, T. P. (ed). *Our Living Tarditions. An introduction to American Folklore*. New York, London 1968, pp. 219-220; see Note 7, Hand 1981, p. li.

<sup>14</sup>E. Mogk, ‘Wesen und Aufgaben der Volkskunde’, *Mitteldeutsche Blätter für*

*Volkskunde*, 1 (1926), 17-24. See also Note 7, Hand 1981, p. xxv.

<sup>15</sup>See Note 7, Hand 1981, p. xxxvi. See also Note 13, Hand 1968, pp. 215-227.

<sup>16</sup>See Note 10, Waring 1978, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup>Brand, J. *Observations on Popular Antiquities*. Vol. 2, London 1813, pp. 449-450.

<sup>18</sup>Opie, I, and Tatem, M. *A Dictionary of Superstitions*. Oxford 1989, p. viii.

<sup>19</sup>*The Western Mail*, 1.11.1990.

<sup>20</sup>E.M.I. 5287. I wish to thank my son, Llyr Gwyndaf, for this reference.

<sup>21</sup>*Y Cymro*, 12.X.1982. Report by Lyn Ebenzer, under the title: 'Penglogau ein Hofergoeledd?' ('The Skulls Of Our Superstition?')

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>See Note 7, Hand 1981, p. xliii

<sup>24</sup>*ibid.* p. xlii

<sup>25</sup>Gwenith Gwyn, 1928, 149-66. For the custom amongst the Gypsies, see Thompson, T. W. Ceremonial Customs of the British Gypsies. In: *Folklore*. 1913, No 24, pp. 314-356.

<sup>26</sup>Information based on oral testimony and newspaper reports and letters published in *Y Cymro*, 19.IX.1990; 3.X.1990; 10.X.1990.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in *The Western Mail*, 6.VI.1978.

<sup>28</sup>For an excellent discussion of this subject, see Note 8, Hand 1980, 93-118 (Ch. 7 'The Magical Containment and Transfer of Disease', and ch. 8, "Measuring" with String, Thread, and Fibre: A Practice in Folk Medical Magic.)

<sup>29</sup>See Note 8, p. 94.

<sup>30</sup>See Note 8, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup>See Jones, T. G. *Welsh Folklore and Folk Customs*. London 1930, p. 133. Testimony of a folk healer from Pontrhydfendigaid, Mid-Wales, who practised the woollen yarn treatment until her death in Glamorgan, South Wales, in 1923.

<sup>32</sup>See Note 8, Hand 1980, pp. 93-94.

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Note 31, Jones 1930, p. 133.

<sup>34</sup>Some of these informants have been recorded on tape by my former colleague at the Welsh Folk Museum, Dr. Anne E. Williams. For an account of folk medicine in Wales, see her article 'Folk Medicine in Living Memory in Wales' In: *Folk Life* 1980, No 18, pp. 58-60.

<sup>35</sup>Sarah Maud Hughes was filmed for S4C television programme, 'Hel Straeon', 5.IX.1990.

<sup>36</sup>See Foster, G. M. Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good. In: *American Anthropologist*, 1965, No. 67, pp. 293-315; Foster, G. M. A Second Look at Limited Good. In: *Anthropological Quarterly*, 1972, No. 45, pp. 157-64.

<sup>37</sup>See Note 7, Hand 1981, p. xlvi.

<sup>38</sup>*Op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup>For example, my own brother and sister-in-law arranged for their third born son

to be christened in St. Asaph hospital, Clwyd, 1 November 1969.

<sup>40</sup>See Note 18, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>41</sup>Cerrigydrudion village, Clwyd, North Wales.

<sup>42</sup>Oral report by Elery Gwyndaf, who remembers this custom from Glyn Ceiriog, Clwyd, North Wales, where she used to live.

<sup>43</sup>See Note 18, pp. ix-x.

<sup>44</sup>W.F.M. 63.152/19.

<sup>45</sup>Gwyndaf, R. *Chwedlau Gwerin Cymru*. Welsh Folk Tales. Cardiff, 1989.

<sup>46</sup>See, for example, storage items W.F.M. 75.388; 83.115; 86.155 and 86.176.

<sup>47</sup>See Note 18, p. ix.

<sup>48</sup>Knowlson, T. Sh. *The Origins of Popular Superstitions and Customs*. London 1930, pp. 1-12; see also Note 10, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup>See Note 7, p. xxxvii.

<sup>50</sup>Op. cit., p. xxxv.

<sup>51</sup>Davies, L. Aspects of Mining Folklore in Wales. In: *Folk Life*, 1971, No. 9, pp. 79-107.

<sup>52</sup>Brown, J. H. *The Valley of the Shadow*, 1981.

<sup>53</sup>Trevelyan, M. *Folk-Lore and Folk Stories of Wales*. London, 1909, pp 47-58; 178-194; 280-291.

<sup>54</sup>Jenkins, G. H. Popular Beliefs in Wales from the Restoration to Methodism. In: *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 1977, nr 27, p 446.

<sup>55</sup>Mary Humphreys, born 1914. Recorded 8. 1. 1977, storage item W.F.M. 5239-40.

<sup>56</sup>In English, see Underwood, P. *Ghosts of Wales*. Swansea, 1978; Barber, Ch. *Ghosts of Wales*. Cardiff, 1979; Pugh, J. *Welsh Ghosts and Phantoms*, 1979; Pugh, J. *Welsh Ghostly Encounters*. Llanrwst, 1990; Brooks, J. A. *Ghosts and Legends of Wales*. Norwich, 1987; Jeffery, P. H. *Ghosts, Legends and Lore of Wales*. Cambridge (s.a.).

<sup>57</sup>South Wales Argus. 23. VII. 1980, p 4. I would like to thank Thelma and Barry S. Webb, from Llanhilledd, Gwent, for this reference.

<sup>58</sup>Tina Laurent's letter to R. Gwyndaf, 16. I. 1988; MS. W.F.M. 3531/1-9; Brunvand, J. H. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker. American Urban Legends and their Meanings*. New York, 1981.

<sup>59</sup>Y Llinyn Arian, S4C, 31. XII. 1990.

<sup>60</sup>Roberts, J. A. *Holy Ghostbuster. A Parsons Experience with the Paranormal*. London 1990. See also, W.F.M. recordings 4483-5, recorded on November 1, 1974.

<sup>61</sup>Motifs F 172 and F 377

<sup>62</sup>Jones, G. and Jones, Th. *The Mabinogion*. Everyman edition. London 1949, pp. 25-40.

<sup>63</sup>Rees, A. and Rees, B. 1961.

<sup>64</sup>B. 1884, recorded on November 1, 1968, storage item W.F.M. 2002.

<sup>65</sup>B. 1904, recorded on February 26, 1975, storage item W.F.M. 4526

<sup>66</sup>I would like to thank my wife Eleri Gwyndaf and my colleagues Joyce Stokes and John Williams-Davies from the Welsh National Museum for their help.

## **THE IMAGE OF THE COSMOGONIC SACRIFICE IN THE ARMENIAN HEROIC EPIC ‘SASNA TSRER’(‘THE DARE DEVILS OF SASUN’)**

Tsovinar Harutyunyan. Yerevan, Armenia.

The Armenian heroic epic was created in the tenth century under the influence of the struggle of Armenian people against Baghdadian caliphate. It was created in one of the south-western regions of the Historical Western Armenia - in Sasun. The first writing about the epic was published more than a hundred years ago, in 1874. As a true popular work created during the stress situation for the national fortune, the text of the epic absorbed the innermost and sacred traditions of the Armenian people, which stretched the sources of world outlook and world perception of our distant ancestors. In connection with the conversion from heathenism to Christianity on account of the state religious reform in 301 AD, many of the heathen traditions were exterminated, but a part of them nevertheless survived, re-formed outwardly in a Christian way.

Both in best patterns of the folklore texts and in the text of our medieval, unreservedly Christian epic one can find some perfectly idiomatic fragments. The versatile (onomastic, semiotic, ethnographic, etymological, archaeological) analysis of these fragments enables us to decipher the relics of the ancient mythology and cult of the definite cultural region, including the fore-motherlands of the Indo-European, Semitic and other peoples. The main task of our research is the detailed comparative analysis of all textual displays of the epic. The first step of the analysis is the exposure of the contextually survived motives about the creation of the world by means of the dismemberment of the primordial virgin-chaos sacrifice and about the cyclic recurrence of the renewal of the cosmocreative process.

So, the text of our epic is the folklore-poetical narration with a definite structure. The epic consists of four large divisions; each division delineates the biography of a representative of the mythological dynasty beginning from the fore-mother Tsovinar up to the last representative Mher the Younger. The first,