

## HOLIDAYS CONNECTED WITH PAGANISM IN BELARUSIAN AND BRITISH CULTURES

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The aim of the research is to identify the peculiarities of ceremonies and customs in Belarusian and British cultures and to find out their similarities and differences.

It's an indisputable fact that lots of contemporary customs and traditions of every nation have deep roots back in ancient times and therefore they are the reflection of its history and psychology. National traditions are mostly preserved in everyday and holiday culture. Thus, acquaintance with traditional holidays and rites helps us to know this nation's culture, art and literature and understand its soul better.

The hypothesis of this work is – Present-day Belarusian and British festivals have their roots in primary pagan understanding of time as a cyclical phenomenon and, therefore, have a lot in common.

Many standard dictionaries define the word "pagan" as being a person who is not a Christian, Jew, or Muslim. But, this definition conveys practically nothing about Paganism itself.

The common characteristics of paganism include:

1. Polytheism - the belief in more than one god.
2. Animism - the belief that all natural objects and phenomena such as plants, animals and rocks, have spirits and can influence human events.
3. The belief in the immortality of the spirit and in the unending cycles of the Seasons and life itself: birth, death, and rebirth.

Before the coming of Christianity, the various peoples of Europe practiced their own local religions. After the Romans adopted Christianity the older religions continued to be practiced only outside of the city, in the countryside. That's where the word "Pagan" comes from. It means "country dweller or villager" in Latin. By the 1300, almost all of Europe was Christian. Old gods had either been transformed into saints or declaimed as devils. Pagan practices were either absorbed into Christianity or forbidden.

Before the comparison of pagan holidays there was a necessity to define who the Slavic and the Celtic Peoples are. The Slavic Peoples are an ethnic and linguistic branch of Indo-European peoples, living mainly in central and Eastern Europe. The historical Celts were a group of tribal societies, which by the later Iron Age had spread to the British Isles and much of Central Europe.

Unfortunately, it is possible to judge about the Slavic and Celtic mythology only by secondary written folklore and material sources as there are no first-hand records for its study. But it's obvious that religion played a significant role in their lives, giving its way to various rites, customs and traditions. On the basis of archaeological and folklore remains, it is possible to reconstruct some elements of pre-Christian Celtic and Slavic calendar, particularly major festivals.

Such holidays as Imbolc, Litha, Samhain and Yule were taken from the Celtic culture and Maslenitsa, Kupalle, Dzyady and Kalyady – from the Belarusian culture. With all alterations among details that depend on local conditions, there are main elements of the ceremonies and beliefs that repeat.

After studying Slavic Maslenitsa and Celtic Imbolc we can say that these two traditional festivals have a lot in common:

1) their main aim is to celebrate the end of winter and to mark the beginning of long-awaited spring. Slavic Maslenitsa takes place during the last week before Great Lent. And Imbolc is held on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February in Ireland and Scotland;

2) the holidays are almost the same according to the origin of their names: Maslenitsa is derived from the word "maslo" which means butter or oil in Russian and Imbolc comes from the Irish word which means 'ewe's milk';

3) both Maslenitsa and Imbolc had special rituals and the lightening of bonfires took central part in the celebrations. The Celts lit fires to increase the power of the Sun. And the Slavs burnt straw effigies symbolizing winter.

As the facts of the past show, the solstice was very important to people in the past, especially in the northern hemisphere because without the summer Sun they couldn't have grown the food they needed to stay alive. So again, we can see the connection between Slavic Kupalle and Celtic Litha, both associated with the Summer solstice, when the Sun is at its highest point in the sky.

1) their celebrations are held almost at the same time. Nowadays Kupalle is celebrated on the night on the 7th of July. But the Slavs used to celebrate it on the shortest summer night – on the 23 of June - according to the old calendar as well as the Celtic Litha took place on the 21st of June;

2) both the Celts and the Slavs celebrated these festivals with bonfires that would add to the Sun's energy: the Celts would set large wheels on fire and then roll them down a hill to prolong the longest day while the Slavic people danced and jumped over the fire, trying to defeat the evil;

3) summer Solstice was also the traditional time for gathering magical and medicinal plants in both cultures.

Comparing Celtic Samhain and Slavic Dzyady we have revealed the following common features:

1) Honoring the dead was an important spiritual practice for the ancient. So, these festivals have the same meaning: to commemorate the dead relatives.

2) Samhain is the Feast of the Dead which is held on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October and Dzyady is celebrated on the first Saturday before St. Dzmitry day.

3) To celebrate Samhain the Druids built huge sacred bonfires and brought harvest food and sacrificed animals to share a communal dinner in celebration of the festival. Ancient people lit big bonfires and the whole community gathered round them to warm, eat and communicate. The Slavs cooked special ritual food for Dzyady dinner called Kutzya. As the rule, the whole family would sit down at the table and recall the best character traits of the departed relatives and their good deeds. When the meal was over, the remaining food was left on the table for the deceased whose souls, according to popular belief, would come at night to eat and drink.

The comparison of Slavic Kalyady and Celtic Yule led to the following results:

1) Both festivals are related to the winter solstice, the period of the year when nights are the longest.

2) Ancient Celts worshipped the Sun and saw it as a wheel that changed the seasons. So, the word Yule comes from the word meaning this wheel as well as the name Slavic Kalyady comes from the word "Kola" connected with the wheel of the year.

3) To celebrate this natural phenomenon the Slavs cooked ritual suppers called 'Kalyadnaya Kutzya' as the symbol of immortality. At the same time the Celts would cut the mistletoe and would give it as a blessing. They believed that the sun stood still for 12 days in the middle of winter and during this time the Yule log was lit to defeat evil spirits and bring luck for the coming year.

4) So, no doubt that the main aim of these pagan holidays is also the same: to get rid of everything bad and to begin a new life with joy and optimism.

After analyzing these pagan holidays, we came to the conclusion about the similarity of customs, ceremonies, and beliefs among the peoples of the British Isles and Russians and Belarusians. Actually, holidays were not derived from each other. The pagans thought that Natural world was cyclical, and they tried to harmonise their lives with those natural cycles. So, they had a series of festivities that followed changes of nature and seasons. Thus, the hypothesis for this research work had been proved.

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