

Discussion of St. Brigid's Cross as a Complex Symbol

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Abstract: *The discussion of St. Brigid's cross as a complex symbol intends to illustrate the rich cultural implication of St. Brigid's Cross. Beginning with St. Brigid and St. Brigid's Day, the essay firstly introduces the importance of this day. Then it continues to demonstrate the strictly regulated process of making one proper St. Brigid's cross, with some variations included. The straw, the main material to make crosses, has the implication of securing fertility, which is also noted in the essay. Types of cross are generally introduced with pictures for reference. At last, the cross's cultural implications – to protect and to ensure fertility are addressed in detail.*

Keywords: *St. Brigid, St. Brigid's cross, Irish folklore tradition, Quarter day, Celtic studies*

1. Introduction

The interest in Irish Studies has been rising through the years, with tighter diplomatic ties between the two nations. However, the main research area has been focused on Irish literature, or more accurately, on Anglo-Irish literature. Irish folklore, on the other hand, is a non-negligible branch of the multi-disciplinary Irish Studies subject. Though much ignored in China, Irish folklore had a splendid past and is still flourishing in both the field of Irish Studies across the world, especially in Ireland and in the US, and in the contemporary Irish culture and society.

Through folklore, history and stories were kept from mouth to mouth. The custom and legends of the older generations were passed on to the newer ones. We are allowed to have a glimpse of what Irish traditional societies were like, and how those traditions shaped the nation at our times^[1]. Among all the various aspects of Irish folklore, calendar and custom are always loved for beginners, for they are closely-related to our everyday life. According to the folklore, people used the calendar to organize their agricultural activities and pay tributes to the gods. It shares some similarities with Chinese lunar calendar, which might give us Chinese readers an easier access to comprehend the logic. As we have marking days for the start of each season, for instance, the Spring Equinox, the celtic calendar has the quarter days to divide the year into four parts. St. Brigid's Day, the equivalent in celtic calendar to the Spring Equinox, is the background of this discussion.

The essay firstly gives a general introduction of the St. Brigid's Day. This part answers to questions regarding to its importance and history. St. Brigid's Day marks the start of spring, reflecting people's wishes for fertility, growth and safety. St. Brigid is both the name for a pagan goddess and a saint, thus, two strands of traditions are mixed and combined. There are many ways to celebrate the festival, and making St. Brigid's cross is a symbolic move. Then, the tradition of St. Brigid's cross, "cros bríde" in Irish is illustrated in detail. Not only its history, its different types and the cultural implication are demonstrated with figures, records, and narrations. St. Brigid's cross is a symbol for family, cure, protection and fertility, and the discussion regarding to this statement is presented in this essay.

2. The importance and history of St. Brigid's Day

The days that mark the four major divisions of the year are called "Quarter Days", and the traditional year of Irish society is divided by them, with which people use to direct their agricultural activities and to have a general idea of what should be done at certain times of a year. The first one is Imbolc, which is also called the St. Brigid's Day nowadays, marking the beginning of spring and the start of a new year. It is followed with May Day, Lá Bealtaine, calling for consistent labour. Then it is the Lughnasadh, the end of summer, which celebrates the coming harvest. After that, Lá Samhain comes, signifying the end of the whole year. During that, people would rest in that the outer environment is no longer suit for labour, hoping that the long winter would pass soon.

Among them, St. Brigid's Day is what will be discussed in this passage. It usually falls on 1st February. From then on, it is customarily regarded that the barren winter is obliged to come to an end. The weather will become warmer, the days will be longer, with the land becoming softer, which is ready to be sowed. The fisherman will also expect less violent condition on the sea and more harvest on the way. In one word, this day shows people's hope and wish for the coming year.

The reason why St. Brigid's Day has been receiving so much attention and academic enthusiasm is not only because that it is a christianization of one of the focal points of the agricultural year in Ireland, but also because that it is the festival of Ireland's much venerated and loved saint, St. Brigid. In Ireland, the love she received is not less than that of St. Patrick, not to mention she is also the patroness of cattle and of dairy work^[2]. This echoes to the old name associated with the festival – Imbolc, whose basic meaning has much to do with the notion of milking and milk-production^[3]. Dáithí Ó hÓgáin tells us that Imbolc (or Imbolg) literally means parturition, and the celebration of her feast day, is “the synthesis of paganism and Christianity under the name of Brighid, with further additions from continental hagiography in medieval times”^[4].

At this point, it is necessary for us to look back at the history of St. Brigid, and how she became a symbol of Ireland to better understand the significance and inner cultural complexity of this festival. The earliest literary record of Brigid appears to be Abbess of Kildare in the fifth and sixth century. She is said to have a blurred identity of both a pagan goddess and a Christian saint. Thanks to Pope St. Gregory, the old tradition was able to continually observed after Brigit going through a smooth transition from pagan goddess to a Christian saint. In the ninth century, Brigid presented herself as a learned woman who played the role of the goddess of poets. She had two sisters who were respectively regarded as the woman of healing and the woman of smithwork. The triplicated feature of Brigid was thus reinforced. Also, it is worthy noticing that the goddess of poets share the name of goddess of Brigantiae, one of the great Celtic tribes of Ireland, Britain and mainland Europe^[3]. It is speculated that the believers of goddess of Brigantiae settled in south-eastern Ireland, and Brigit is the Irish version of Brigantiae^[5]. As early as in the 8th century, the celebration of her feast spread around the country^[6].

3. The tradition of “cros bríde”

Among all the celebrations of St. Brigid's Day, without doubt, making a Brigid's cross is the most prevalent one. Why the cross is related to saint Brigid has various explanations. Some say that she weaved crosses for her father's health, while the Christians believe that St. Brigid converted a dying pagan chieftain by weaving a cross, which eventually gave him eternal peace^[7]. On that day, or mostly on the eve before 1 February, crosses are made of straw (mostly), rushes or wood. The “cros bríde” (St. Brigid's Cross in Irish) is supposed to be hung up in the dwelling-house, and often in byre and stables as well, to honour the saint and to gain her protection^[8]. After making the crosses, people sprinkle the crosses with holy water, so that the cross can protect the occupants from fire, calamity and sickness^[9].

People attach much importance to the process of making crosses, for they think it's a way to express their firm belief and loyalty to the saint. Thus, the making process is not a celebration at liberty, however, it is required to go through a series of rituals. Séamus Ó Cathain records an account of how the tradition customarily carried out in county Mayo as follows (part of the account): “The man of the house wraps the good long sheaf of straw in a manner giving it as far as possible the rough outline in appearance of a human body. Then he holds it as if he is holding a baby, and puts it at the back door. While the supper is on the table with all inmates are ready to sit in, the man announces that he is about to welcome Brigid in. The man goes out and kneels, and then in a loud voice says to the people inside who are expectant and waiting for the coming request: *Téigí ar bhur nglúna agus fosclaígí bhur súile agus ligigí isteach Bríd*, which could be translated as: Go on your knees and open your eyes and let Brigid enter. Response from within: *Is é beatha*, which would be translated as: that's life, and it is repeated three times. On the third call, the man takes up the bundle, gets up off his knees and comes around to the open door. He comes in with the response: *Maise, is é beatha agus sláinte* (Goddess, may you a healthy life). Then the straw is laid carefully and respectfully against the leg or rail of the table, or under the table. The family then sit down to precede the supper with a short prayer”^[10]. Although there are some variations of the ritual, for example, Ó Danachair claims that usually it's the daughter of the family who represents St. Brigid bringing the material^[9], and some say that the straw is put on the ground with a pot of potatoes on it, in order to make *Brúitin*(poundies)^[11]. The complexity of ritual implies that there were so many people celebrating it so that produced loads of varieties. It is a part of life for the mass.

The reason why people choose mostly straw as the material to weave the cross also has something to

dig. Surely, it is the most available material during the sterile winter. More than that, straw is a symbol of fertility in Ireland. In Séamus Ó Cathain's *The Festival of Brigit, Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman*, he firstly demonstrates the relationship between Brigit and Mary based on Alexander Carmichael's theory. Depicting St. Brigid as a woman with a harrow candelabrum on her head, the story casts her as a "light woman", which is an alias for a midwife. In Ireland, midwife are known as "sop women". Sop is the Irish word for a wisp of straw. The fact that the straw is laid under the woman when the childbirth takes place may contribute to its relevance to a birth scene, thus further be associated with fertility. Light and straw are both regarded as the symbols for fertility and childbirth. In Irish, the pertinence is enhanced by other sayings in Irish like "ón oíche a tháinig mé ar an tsop" meaning "since the night I was born on the straw". Expressions like that build a connection between the object "straw" with the actual process of "giving birth".

4. Types of St. Brigid's Cross

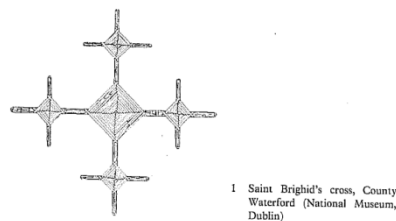


Figure 1: A kind of St. Brigid's cross^[8]

As in most festivals, people need something tangible to repose their interests. In this case, it is St. Brigid's cross, and it embodies much cultural heritage. O Dawd reserves a section for "types of crosses" in his illustration of St. Brigid's Day. In this section, he outlines 8 kinds of crosses categorized by their shape based on the earlier collections, especially the one in 1942, when the Folklore of Ireland Commission circulated a questionnaire about 'The Feast of St. Brigid'^[12]. From his summary, we could know that most of the common cross has four points outward from a square, a carefully woven center. This description is best fit for the swastika kind. For the four outward points, Ó Cathain explains it in his own way. On page 16 of his book *The Festival of Brigit, Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman*, he regards the repetition of four as a symbolism behind the cross itself. "The number of four symbolises the totality of space and time; among its many cosmological aspects are the four cardinal points, the four elements, the four celestial beings (sky, sun, moon and stars)" and the four divisions of time (day, night, month, year)"^[13]. I would add that four is also the number of our seasons, and that is why we celebrate the quarter days—they divide the year into four equal pieces. Maybe the people divide the cross into four parts because they would like to be protected at all lenses. There are many dimensions of time and space divided by the number 4, and it seems that people designed cross with 4 points outward because they did not want to be in the gap. In this way, they are fully protected, at least within the extent they are aware of. One example of St. Brigid's cross is shown as Figure 1.

5. Cultural implications of the cross

Beside the things mentioned above, Kevin Danachair points out the significance of the crosses of protection quite bluntly. He wrote, "In explanation of why the crosses were made and put up, tradition without hesitation answers 'protection'. Protection against fire, storm and lightning is the most usual reason given, but illness and epidemic disease were also held at bay by the cross, while evil spirits could not enter the house where it hung near the door"^[14]. The cross would be hung every year, when a new year comes, without being replaced. When a newly married couple settles in, another new cross would be hung, replacing the old one. A cross represents the wish of being protected for the whole family. This tradition gives out a sense of inheritance, an inheritance of being protected. It is also can be seen as a declaration of the family's loyal and respect to the saint, to prove their qualification for another year's protection. The love for St. Brigid is so intense that after being used, the crosses would not be discarded. The straw or rushes left over from making the crosses, or the sheaf from the Brigit's bed, are commonly used for spencels and cattle tyings. This practice can be applied to multiple creatures – cows, calves, sheep, lambs, horses and foals, etc. By doing this, the animals are free of diseases and dangers, and even the evil magic would do them no harm. It is a good time to tame the unruly animals or bring them to the fair, too^[15].

Beside the general protection of house, the cross also takes the responsibility of ensuring fertility, or more accurately speaking, curing sterility. Sullivan mentioned a practice of making cross with unthreshed

straw and inserting grains of corn in the center of the cross. That a seed being inserted at the heart of a diamond cross is on the record. For areas like Ireland, which mainly rely on potato production (at least for some years), the cross would be attached to the roof of the house with potato secured on a wooden peg. To ensure what has been done could make a difference to the harvest, the grains of the corn woven into the cross and the potato attached to the cross are the first ones to sow. Even the ashes of old crosses are collected from the roof to scatter in the soil to ensure the Brigid's blessings are delivered to the right place. As Máire MacNeil says, 'folk-logic' was, indeed, capable of 'identifying human fertility with the fertility of the crops'^[16]. By ensuring the crops fertility, are they trying to express the hope of being able to have descendants? Perhaps. Considering St. Brigid's image of a midwife, and the particular choice of straw to be the main material, this guess is more likely to be true.

When we talk about the complexity of St. Brigid's cross, the customs of Brat Bríde and the Brídeog should not be ignored. Though in many places they are thought to be separate practices, in other parts of the country, those practices should be considered as constituent elements of a single practice, even with other elements like crios bríde^[17]. These practices, too, have the implication of pleading for protection and blessings from St. Brigid in them. Brat Bríde is a cloth, which could have curative power, especially for headache if blessed by St. Brigid when she passes by. Brídeog, a doll created as an effigy of Brigid, is escorted by a group of boys or girls, called Biddies, to enter houses to send the blessings. The other one just mentioned is crios bríde (St. Brigid's girdle), according to Kevin Danachair, is "a straw rope, some eight or ten feet long, spliced or woven into a loop and with a number – usually four – crosses of plaited straw attached to it"^[18]. Women, men and children go through the rope in different ways for three times, say their prayers and hope to reap the benefit of saint's protection.

6. Conclusion

The St. Brigid's cross incorporates many layers of significance, which derives from the complicated and time-honored St. Brigid. Through learning about her history, her double identity of a pagan goddess and a Christian saint is known. St. Brigid's cross, as the most widely-known symbol of the festival, is carefully woven by straw, rushes or wood. Straw is particular preferred for it is accessible and for its representation of fertility. The process of making a cross is ceremonial and sacred. The multiple shape of the cross illustrates people's wisdom of creating and reserving. The cross's complexity is mainly demonstrated through its symbolism of number four, its protective feature, the inner intention of fertility, and other customs related to that. These elements and features constitute a whole to present the cultural richness of St. Brigid's cross. It is a pity that a lot of the customs are fading, which is a great loss for the Irish traditional culture and the repertoire of world's culture.

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