

# Academic and neo-pagan interpretations of shamanism in Buile Suibhne: a comparative approach<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction



In the introductory chapter to the book titled *New Directions in Celtic Studies* (1999), editors Amy Hale and Philip Payton expressed their concern about the general unwillingness within Celtic Studies to address the array of modern “Celticity” (Hale & Payton 1999, 1–2). Although several scholars have already begun to acknowledge that ‘the constructed nature of contemporary Celtic identities’ in all its complexity is a topic worth studying, critics argue that the field is still dominantly focused on analysing medieval literature by outdated methods of comparative cultural analysis (Ibid, 2, 8, 10). While I personally do not embrace the claims that Celtic Studies as an academic discipline lacks methodological progress and critical discourse, I do agree with the view that modern expressions of “Celticity”, rather than being rejected at the outset as unauthentic or fabricated, deserve attention alongside with the more traditional topics of Celtic scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I will elaborate on this outlook by bringing one aspect of modern Celtic spirituality<sup>3</sup> - the Neo-Pagan reception of the 12<sup>th</sup> century tale *Buile Suibhne* (The Frenzy of Suibhne) - into comparison with scholarly discussions of the same text. Though it is arguable that the academic and Neo-Pagan approaches to early Irish material differ substantially in the aims of their inquiries, I would claim that in terms of literary interpretation, the scholarly and Neo-Pagan views of the tale’s main protagonist Suibhne as a shamanic figure share common ground in their underlying presuppositions concerning the nature of shamanism and the

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<sup>1</sup> The writing of this article has been funded by the Academy of Finland, project number 1211006.

<sup>2</sup> My background being in Comparative Religion and Folklore, I am especially interested in the emergence of the “Spiritual Celt” as a religious phenomenon. Of similar approach to this facet of “Celticity”, see especially Bowman 1993, 1994 and 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The definition and proper use of the terms “Celt” and “Celtic” remains ambiguous among scholars. When speaking of contemporary religious movements I am here using “Celtic” in accordance with the usage of the adherents themselves. Thus I am not committing myself on how Celtic the elements in their belief systems actually are.

transmission of tradition. To illustrate this I will present some readings of *Buile Suibhne* where the tale has been ‘viewed through a shamanistic lens’ (Trevarthen 2003, 25) by keeping the focus on how readers signify the text they study, and how the heuristic categories they use influence their understanding of the tale.

The Neo-Pagan material used here consists primarily of popular literature and websites on the principles and practice of Celtic shamanism. It also includes the dissertation of Geo Athena Trevarthen, which combines academic research with overt Neo-Pagan engagement (2003),<sup>4</sup> and one site offering an overview of shamanism in general (d’Emerys 2001). The books of John Matthews (1991) and Tom Cowan (1993), as well as the web articles of Mara Freeman (1998a, 1998b), Sharynne NicMacha (1998) and Cynthia Danielson (2001) all strive for representing early Irish texts as one source for the practice of Celtic shamanism in the modern world. However, apart from the do-it-yourself guidance on meditation and procedure, most of these Neo-Pagan writings also include an account of what Celtic shamanism is, how it has been transmitted to us and how its adoption can be justified. The argumentation is constructed on interpreting early Irish tales as historical evidence for the claim that native Celtic shamanism once existed and that it has latently survived in tradition down to the present day (Matthews 1991, 3; Cowan 1–2; Trevarthen 2003, 10–11). Thus the tales are used as legitimisation for the view that contemporary Celtic shamanism is revitalising an age-old spiritual discipline, which reflects the ‘deep levels of ancestral memory’ (Matthews 1991, 1–2).

As will be argued in the following, among scholars and Neo-Pagans alike, seeing shamanism as the most archaic and ultimately universal form of spiritual behaviour is the precondition for identifying shamanic elements in early Irish tales such as *Buile Suibhne*. While several other figures of early Irish literature have also been interpreted as representatives of Celtic shamanic practice,<sup>5</sup> the status of Suibhne as the archetypal Celtic shaman is well established, and therefore the tale serves as a natural case study.

The storyline of *Buile Suibhne* can be briefly summarized as follows: Suibhne, king of Dál Araidhe, is cursed by Saint Ronán after his unprovoked attacks against the saint. Following the curse, Suibhne loses his wits during the

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<sup>4</sup> One of her theses is that the evidence of shamanistic worldview in literature can only be understood through personal experience in shamanism (Trevarthen 2003, 49, 51). Her Master’s Thesis on Celtic shamanism, which forms the basis of her dissertation, is available on her website [www.celticshamanism.com](http://www.celticshamanism.com).

<sup>5</sup> Trevarthen, for example, discusses the figures of Mis, Óengus and Cú Chulainn in her dissertation. On scholarly studies on shamanism in Celtic mythology see e.g. Lonigan 1985; in Fenian narrative Nagy 1981–82; in hagiography Melia 1983; in relation to druids and poets Ó hÓgáin 1998.

Battle of Mag Rath (A.D. 637) and flees from the battlefield. He becomes a wild madman (in Irish called *geilt*, pl. *gelta*), who wanders restlessly in the woods, lives in the trees, and shies away from people. As a madman he is able to travel great distances by levitating or leaping, and he also receives the gift of poetry and prophecy. In the course of his life he regains his sanity three times, but loses it again due to the intervention of Saint Ronán or other unfortunate circumstances. Eventually, Suibhne befriends another Saint called Moling, as has been predestined in the tale. Saint Moling writes down Suibhne's story and feeds him on a daily basis for a year. One day when Suibhne is drinking milk from a pile of cow dung at Saint Moling's house, the Saint's swineherd kills him with a spear, due to unjustified accusations that Suibhne has committed adultery with his wife. Before his death, Suibhne receives communion from Moling. He is buried in holy ground and his blessed soul goes to heaven. Suibhne's death is greatly mourned by Saint Moling and his clerics.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of seeing the appropriation of the figure of the *geilt* in Celtic shamanism as a wholly arbitrary outcome of the post-modern reinvention of tradition, I would suggest that the Neo-Pagan views are partly embedded in the scholarly interpretations of the tale and its topic in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Examining the vast amount of research done on the essential meaning of *Buile Suibhne* one is struck by the fact that, despite the variety in their approaches, scholars have continually based their studies on at least two common premises. Firstly, that Suibhne's madness (*geltacht*) as it is depicted in the tale is not actual mental illness or psychosis, but rather a literary metaphor; and secondly, that this metaphor should be understood and explained in terms of some religious frame of reference.<sup>8</sup> In Celtic studies, the notion that many early Irish narratives embody elements of shamanism emerged in the 1980s in line with a general renaissance of the topic across disciplines (Atkinson 1992, 307; Jones 1998, 64), and although

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<sup>6</sup> I have used O'Keefe's edition and English translation of the tale, first published in 1913. All the following references are to the 1996 reprint of the edition, and the numbers indicate the passages in the text.

<sup>7</sup> I have only recently become aware of a paper presented by Annette Peht at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Congress for Celtic Studies, in which she formulates a literary approach to the scholarly reception of *Buile Suibhne*. Based on the abstract (Peht 1999) her methodological stand appears to be very close to my own.

<sup>8</sup> Even Padraig Ó Riain's renowned article on the Irish legend of the wild man (1972), which shifted the focus from the theme of madness to status and liminality, was grounded on Arnold van Gennep's theory of transition rites and thereby gave the metaphor a ritual explanation. Ó Riain stated that many of the characteristics of the basic theme of the tale, the Irish novitiate or person's 'separation from wonted or due status', correlate with the three sections of the *rite de passage* – separation, transition and incorporation – as described by van Gennep (Ó Riain 1972, 205). In terms of religious explanation it should be noted that Ó Riain did not elaborate on any sacred dimension of the behaviour identified by him as ritual.

definitive arguments are beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible that this academic preoccupation also contributed to the simultaneous growth of Neo-Pagan Celtic shamanism.

The objective of the juxtaposition of Neo-Pagan and scholarly interpretations in this article is to highlight the fact that the meaning given to a text is always a result of conscious interpretative choices which reflect the readers' preconceptions and expectations. Since the focus of my analysis is on textual reception, I am not at present concerned with the truth-value of the claims, i.e. with the question of whether there actually *are* shamanic elements present in the tale or not. As this article is part of a work in progress, all the remarks are still tentative rather than conclusive. I will return to this topic in my forthcoming dissertation, in which I analyse the sacredness of the *geilt* and the modern appropriations of the figure in more detail.

#### **A note on terminology: Neo-Shamans, Neo-Pagans and New Agers**

Defining Neo-Shamanism, Neo-Paganism and New Age either as separate entities or in relation to each other is prone to prove problematic, as many scholars have acknowledged. Such elements as the sacrality of the Self, polytheism, centrality of nature (often expressed as animism), opposition to authoritarianism and doctrine, and the influence of various non-Christian traditions have been identified as common denominators, alongside with the general feeling of alienation in the modern world and the ultimate goal of living in harmony with the Self and with nature. Most of these groups have their roots in the 'neo-transcendental' movement of the 1960s and can today be seen as examples of post-modern, urban individualisation and elective affinities (Adler 1986; Heelas 1986; Harvey 1997).

Graham Harvey, who argues that contemporary Paganism should be viewed as one religion among others of the world, draws a distinction between (Neo-)Paganism and New Age. He claims that despite their apparent similarities they share no more common ground than New Age does with Christianity (Harvey 1997, 211, 219, 220). Galina Lindquist includes both New Age and Neo-Paganism within the wider category of New Spirituality (Lindquist 1997, 2), but her attempt to place Neo-Shamanism in this field results in some confusion: first she describes it as a form of Neo-Paganism (Ibid, 3), but later refers to it as 'a path within the New Age' (Ibid, 50; also Johnson 1995, 163). Marion Bowman, in turn, mentions that her informants in Glastonbury, all being adherents of the Celtic spirituality movement, preferred to be called New Agers rather than Neo-Pagans (Bowman 1993, 147).

For the present purpose I am using the terms Neo-Paganism and Neo-Shamanism in order to separate these contemporary phenomena from the historical and ethnographical usage of the words, and consider Neo-Shamanism as one manifestation of Neo-Paganism (cf. Harvey 1997). Fully aware of the pitfalls of generalization and simplification, I see the eclectic and creative attitude towards historical sources as one of the factors in separating Neo-Pagan readings from scholarly ones. As Marion Bowman has noted, strict historicity or the question of “correct” reading is not necessarily the main concern of Neo-Pagans:

Some New Agers and Pagans are trying to reconstruct a Celtic past, some are trying to reinterpret a Celtic past to make it relevant to the present, some are creating or reinventing something about which they know little can be proved but which somehow “feels” right (Bowman 1994, 147).

Clearly, this differs from academic endeavours in which the early Irish tales are studied with sensitivity towards their historical and linguistic background as well as their contextual setting. Another important aspect separating the two approaches is, of course, spiritual. It must be remembered that the religious significance of the past does not depend on historical accuracy (Harrington 2002, 16; Bowman 1994, 148), and my theoretical approach is not meant to belittle this side of the Neo-Pagan appreciation of early Irish sources.

### **Defining shamanism**

When the word “shaman” first became part of the English language at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it referred solely to religious experts among the Tungus in Siberia, identified then by ethnographers as ‘magicians or priests’ (Hammer 2001, 216). While this origin of the word can be seen as a mere historical coincidence, most scholars have taken it as an indication that the shamanism of Siberia and Central Asia represents the ‘classical’ and most complete manifestation of the phenomenon (Ibid, 216; Eliade 1964, 6; cf. Ó hÓgain 1998, 12; Jones 1998, 71).<sup>9</sup>

Today, shamanism is often used as a generic term for religious functionaries in tribal societies well beyond the Northern “core area”. This has transferred the term to a more abstract level and simultaneously turned into a heuristic category (Sjöblom 2002, 142). In using shamanism as a heuristic tool, scholars are working

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<sup>9</sup> According to Åke Hulkrantz (1973), ‘classical shamanism’ includes the following elements: ecstatic trance, soul flight, soul dualism, multi-layered cosmology joined by a world-tree or pole, and auxiliary spirits. He also maintains that shamans belong to hunting societies, similar to the ‘type of society apparently - - represented in the oldest known cultures of prehistoric man’ (Ibid, 35).

with an ideal type. The theoretical model enables the identification of similarities in different cultural contexts, but it also implies making an interpretation of the research object (Ibid, 141). Thus stating, for example, that *geltacht* is a ‘shamanic encounter with the supernatural’ (Nagy 1982–83, 58) means providing a model for how *geltacht* should be understood, but at the same time the difference between description and subjective construction is not clearly articulated (Sjöblom 2002, 127–128, Hammer 2001, 217). A similar problem is evident in Neo-Pagan sources, where the word *geilt* is categorically presented as the native Celtic term for “shaman“ (Danielson 1991; d’Emerys 2001; cf. Matthews 1991, 4–5).

Åke Hultkrantz, who has offered an outline of contemporary approaches to shamanism (2001, 28–32), notes that many scholars still hold on to the original understanding of shamanism as being a ritual technique and belief system exclusively limited to the circumpolar peoples, while others concentrate on the experience of possession as the main characteristic of the phenomenon. Hultkrantz sees the interest in the therapeutic effects of the shamanistic techniques as a quite recent development, and attributes it to Michael Harner’s form of Neo-Shamanism (see also Atkinson 1992, 313–314; Johnson 1995; Harner 1990). Many of the Harnerian themes emphasizing healing in shamanic practice are also encountered in Celtic shamanism in the works of John Matthews (cf. Matthews 1991; Jones 1998, 197–208).

A number of scholars have denied the existence of shamanism as any kind of universal entity, and begun to question the heuristic value and analytic applicability of the concept (Hultkrantz 2001, 31). For example, Graham Harvey claims that shamanism has become a ‘Humpty Dumpty word’, a term made to work hard to mean whatever people want it to mean (Harvey 1997, 107). Atkinson, among others, prefers to avoid generalization by writing of “shamanisms” instead of using a singular category (Atkinson 1992, 308). Some, like Taussig, have been willing to do away with shamanism altogether, stating that it is ‘a made-up, modern, Western category, an artful reification of disparate practices, snatches of folklore and overarching folklorizations, residues of long-established myths intermingled with the politics of academic departments, curricula, conferences, journal juries and articles [and] funding agencies.’ (Taussig cit. in Atkinson 1992, 307).

Nevertheless, there still remains a large group of those, Hultkrantz himself included, who are convinced that fundamentally shamanism is a uniform phenomenon, although cultural and local variation in detail occurs (Hultkrantz 2001, 32). I would suggest that it is this phenomenological stance that many Celtic scholars and Neo-Pagans share, and that it is most probably due to their reliance

on the authority of Mircea Eliade in constituting the characteristics of shamanism. However, it should be noted that while direct references in academic writing attest the importance of Eliade in their research (e.g. Nagy 1982–83; Ó hÓgáin 1998; Jones 1998), Neo-Pagans are less thorough in articulating the theoretical background of their views. In Neo-Pagan sources the influence of Eliade is most accentuated in discussions of the history and definition of shamanism, where this ‘eminent anthropologist’ and his ‘definitive work’ *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* occupy the foreground (d’Emerys 2001; Trevarthen 2003; Freeman 1998a).

Mircea Eliade’s book on shamanism was first published in English in 1964. The title of the book manages to convey unambiguously Eliade’s main theses concerning the nature of shamanism, which have later become the template for defining the phenomenon: being *archaic*, shamanism contains elements that most probably date back to the earliest times of the human race; when defined as a set of *techniques*, it is not seen as a religion per se, but rather as a magico-religious complex within a religion; and finally, the stress laid on *ecstasy* makes trance or altered state of consciousness the religious experience par excellence.

Eliade’s approach to shamanism was determined by certain ontological premises, most notably founded on an idealistic hierarchical dualism of the sacred and the profane. In Eliade’s view, the world of the archaic *homo religiosus* was defined by the separation of sacred time and space from the profane, whereas in the experience of modern secularized man both are essentially homogenous. In this ‘nostalgic antimodernism’ the sacred as a category can either be understood through hierophany, i.e. through a personal religious experience, or as an independent theological concept, fundamentally set apart from profane reality. In both cases Eliade maintained that religious phenomena did not lend themselves to historical or psychological explanation. Instead - being as Rudolf Otto said ‘something wholly Other’ - they could only be interpreted in reference to their own sacred reality (Hammer 2001, 214–215).

Eliade was primarily interested in the power of the shaman to act as a ‘technician of the sacred’ and as a catalyzing figure between the sacred order of the cosmos and the profane world. The same conviction is echoed by Hultkrantz, who says that ‘the central idea of shamanism is to establish means of contact with the supernatural world by the ecstatic experience of a professional and inspired intermediary, the shaman’ (Hultkrantz cit. in Porterfield 1987, 722). But since the religious dimension of the phenomenon was by definition beyond explanation, and the phenomenon itself could never be found in its ‘pure’ or ‘primordial’ form (Eliade 1964, 11), Eliade’s notion of shamanism was bound to remain an ideal construction. In dealing with the historical and ethnographical material Eliade

built a taxonomy by describing separate phenomena and assuming a priori that they pointed to the same category, which, ultimately, was transcendental rather than empirical (Hammer 2001, 217–218).

This method of synonymizing traits from different historical and cultural contexts reflects Eliade's aim as a historian of religion to identify the universal elements of human religiosity that could be traced back to the mythic, ahistorical past. Set in the context of theories of cultural evolution, the project of elucidating the earliest religious form crystallized in identifying shamanism as the most archaic mode of religious belief and practice. Simultaneously it derives from the notion of the primitive peoples as possessors of eternal sacred wisdom, unknown to modern man except in the traces it has left in epic literature and folktales (Hammer 2001, 219–221; Porterfield 1987, 721; Jones 1998, 67–68).

### **Suibhne Geilt as shaman**

Generally speaking, if it goes into a trance like a shaman, wears feathers like a shaman, journeys like a shaman, heals and hexes like a shaman – in short, shamanises like a shaman – it probably is a shaman (Trevarthen 2003, 60).

When analyzing Finn mac Cumhaill as a shamanic figure Joseph Falaky Nagy offered a four-part model of a typological shaman, consisting of 1) the shaman's capability to travel freely between the worlds, for example by flying; 2) his function as the protector of the society and its boundaries from external hostile creatures; 3) his liminality, which makes him a possessor of exceptional otherworldly knowledge that he shares with the society; and 4) his ability to contact and manipulate supernatural forces, while also being vulnerable to their manipulation (Nagy 1981, 303). Although some of these characteristics may be more appropriate to Finn than Suibhne, scholarly and Neo-Pagan interpretations of the *geilt* as a shaman are remarkably consistent with each other in agreeing on the *geilt*'s role as the mediator between the realms of this world and the otherworld, and on the supernatural quality of his knowledge. Following Eliade's definition of shamanism as a technique of ecstasy, Suibhne's madness has been equated with the inspired trance of the shaman, and his restless wandering has been taken to represent either the shaman's ecstatic journey or his initiation (e.g. Freeman 1998a; Beneš 1961; Tolstoy 1985).

In his introduction to the new edition of *Buile Suibhne*, Nagy accredited Nora K. Chadwick with the idea that the marginality and 'the intermediate stage' of the *geilt* could imply shamanic qualities (Nagy 1996, 6). While Chadwick in the article referred to by Nagy (Chadwick 1942b) did not in fact use the word shaman

to describe the *gelta* or their position in the society,<sup>10</sup> she had touched upon the correlation between manticism and shamanism in her work *Poetry and Prophecy*, in which she identified the *geilt* as one type of persons possessing poetic and prophetic inspiration alongside with the *druid* and the *file* (Chadwick 1942a, 5–6). In Neopagan writings, the role of the *geilt* and the *fili* as possessors of supernatural knowledge has occasionally blurred the distinction between the two figures, and these shamanic ‘poet-seers’ appear to have become more or less interchangeable (cf. Freeman 1998a). The importance of liminality in the context of acquiring knowledge has been thoroughly explored by Nagy himself (e.g. Nagy 1981, 1981–82, 1982–83), and therefore I will limit myself to few observations concerning the nature of the otherworld from which Suibhne gains his wisdom.

The shamanistic interpretation of *Buile Suibhne* implies that by losing his sanity Suibhne enters an altered state of consciousness and embarks on a journey to otherworldly realms. This idea is interesting, not only because it presupposes a cosmological schema composed of multi-layered worlds (cf. Jones 1998, 67; Trevarthen 2003, 150; Freeman 1998b), but because the text itself does not explicitly attribute supernatural qualities to the *geilt*’s arboreal habitat. In fact, unlike in a number of examples in early Irish narrative in which a mortal hero visits the otherworld overseas, underwater, or within *sid* mounds (see Carey 1982–83), the tale is consistent in stating that the *geilt* simply takes his abode in natural locations situated all over Ireland. Moreover, the realms in which Suibhne travels are easily accessible not only to other *gelta*, but to normal mortals as well, as becomes evident from the number of people encountered by Suibhne during his wanderings.

However, it is possible to account for Suibhne’s otherworldly journey in more abstract terms, by approaching the *geilt*’s habitat not as a clearly defined otherworld, but rather as a sacred realm separated from and situated beyond the metaphysical borders of the society. This explanation, forming the basis for the *geilt*’s liminality (Nagy 1982–83), draws on the dichotomy between nature and culture by implicitly correlating it with the Eliadean notion of the sacred and the profane. Thus the *geilt*’s transition beyond the border separating the sacred cosmos and the profane chaos makes him part of the supernatural ‘otherness’ and thereby reifies his sacrality.

The point I wish to make here is that both central notions of liminality and the otherworld as presented above are external theoretical constructions, not

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<sup>10</sup> In the article presented by Nagy, Chadwick concluded that the *geilt* should be seen as the ‘back numbers’ of the Irish church, representing ‘those who do not conform, who do not come under an authorised discipline, probably the reformed discipline of St. Tallaght’ (1942b, 151). She later restated her view of *geltacht* as the most extreme form of asceticism in the early Church (1960, 105).

something existing in the actual tale (cf. Sjöblom 2002, 145). Yet in interpretations made from the shamanistic framework, these heuristic concepts are turned into facts, which are simply discovered and described, instead of being presented as analytical creations (Ibid, 147–148). The definition of the shaman as a person who is in ‘personal and interactive contact with the spiritual aspect of the reality’ (Trevarthen 2003, 3), who acts ‘as an agent of the numinous - - between one world and the other’ (Cowan 1993, 9), or ‘mediates with the otherworld powers’ (Ó hÓgáin 1998, 12) necessitates seeing the *geilt*’s retreat into wilderness as something more than a mere escape from society; otherwise the main characteristic of shamanism would not be fulfilled.

In *Buile Suibhne*, separate motifs taken to illustrate the shaman’s journey into non-ordinary reality have additionally played a prominent role in Suibhne’s identification as a shaman. Of these I will now turn to the ornithological symbolism present in Suibhne’s appearance, his ability to fly and his preference for perching on trees, which have been compared to the shamanic ritual costume or metamorphosis, the pervasive theme of soul-flight and the cosmological World Tree.

*Buile Suibhne* conveys several references to the *geilt* being bird-like. In the beginning of the tale Saint Ronán curses Suibhne by praying to God that he would go among the clouds ‘likewise even as any bird’ or ‘be one with the birds’ (BS 9, 10). Later in the text Suibhne repeatedly describes himself as a bird by referring to how feathers have grown on his body, and how his talons are bent and feeble (e.g. BS 40, 60, 61; 23, 45).<sup>11</sup> The *geilt*’s swift movement further contributes to the association of the *geilt* with birds. Regarding Suibhne’s agility, the difference between leaping or actual levitation is made by scholars (Ó Riain 1972, 197), and does not seem significant if both feats are taken to indicate the *geilt*’s supernormal abilities. Although only leaping is specified in the tale, Suibhne’s recurrent ascendance to the sky especially from the top of trees (e.g. BS 15, 17, 35) has established the equation with flying.

The attempts to explain the dominant bird imagery and especially the motif of Suibhne’s plumage have resulted in readings varying between the metaphorical and the literal. Freeman (1998a) ascribes the question of the *geilt*’s feather dress or metamorphosis to ‘the typical ambiguity of Celtic literature’:

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<sup>11</sup> As John Carey has noted, the Irish word *clúmh* can mean both hair and feathers. Whereas hairiness is a common motif in Wild Man traditions throughout Europe, the motif of the *geilt* being feathered does not appear independently of the materials in *Buile Suibhne* (Carey 1984, 101). The text is not uniform in its depiction of the *geilt*, as he is also said to be in rags (BS 21, 27, 45) or totally naked (BS 3–6, 21).

Did they really grow feathers or were they garbed in feather cloaks that made them look like strange huge birds glimpsed between the branches on a dim evening? If a cloak, was it really for protection against the elements, or was it for the flight of the soul into the Otherworld? The feathered cloak used in shamanic practices worldwide was certainly known in Celtic tradition - -.

According to Mircea Eliade, bird symbolism is central in shamanic costumes. The costume is a sign of the shaman's special status, as it gives him the body of an animal that enables the journey to the otherworld. Even in cultures in which the costume does not imitate a bird's shape, feathers are almost always included in it (Eliade 1964, 156–160). Without reference to the motif's possible shamanic background, Chadwick assumed that the *geilt's* feathers could be reminiscent of a feathered cloak (*tugen*) worn by the *fili*, and that the motif could thereby be indicative of the *geilt's* poetic abilities (Chadwick 1942b, 150).

The suggestion of some kind of a feathered dress has been accepted especially among Neo-Pagans (cf. Tolstoy 1985, 145–46; Matthews 1991, 4; NicMacha 1998), but it is possible to regard the association with birds in terms of actual metamorphosis as well. Eliade writes of birds as psychopomps, stating that 'becoming a bird oneself or being accompanied by a bird indicates the capacity, while still alive, to undertake the ecstatic journey to the sky and the beyond' (Eliade 1964, 98). The power of gods and other mythical figures to take animal form is of course well attested in early Irish tradition, and therefore the idea of the *geilt* actually transforming into a bird would not have been foreign to this narrative context. In comparison with the shaman's ecstatic soul-flight, both interpretations are equally plausible.

During the course of his wanderings, Suibhne recurrently seeks refuge and rests in the tops of trees. As mentioned above, living in trees could easily be seen as rising from the bird symbolism, but in Suibhne's case the motif has also been interpreted as stemming from the idea of the World Tree present in some shamanic cosmologies. Eliade, who specified several mythical beliefs concerning the World Tree, noted that it represents the regeneration of the universe and 'the paramount reservoir of the sacred'. Expressing notions of fertility, creation and initiation, it ultimately relates to absolute reality and immortality (Eliade 1964, 271). One would expect nothing less of the centre of Eliade's sacred cosmos!

Neo-Pagan writers in particular represent the existence of a World Tree at the heart of the Celtic cosmology as something axiomatic (cf. Freeman 1998b),<sup>12</sup> but the idea is by no means foreign to scholars either. For example, Brigit Beneš,

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<sup>12</sup> Trees habited by Suibhne and named by him in his poems (BS 40) have been seen to mirror the *geilt's* druidic knowledge of the Ogham alphabet by both Freeman and NicMacha (1998).

drawing on the abundant symbolism presented by Eliade, suggested that *Buile Suibhne* should be read as a description of a shaman's initiation and the novice's ritual climbing of the World Tree, which symbolizes the soul's ascendance to the Upper World (Beneš 1960–61, 313–315, 319–320; Eliade 1964, 125–127). Leslie Jones, in turn, has regarded sitting at the top of the World Tree as an indication of the poet's liminal status and ascribes this position of 'the archetypal poet' in Celtic tradition to 'all poets, magicians and madmen who make their homes in the forest and specifically *up* in trees' (Jones 1998, 74; Tolstoy 1985).

It is impossible to separate the meanings ascribed to nature, zoomorphism, and trees in *Buile Suibhne* from a wider framework of Celtic mythology, but also from the well-established stereotype of the visionary Celt being in tune with nature and the universe (see Sims-Williams 1986). Poets and outlaws inhabiting trees is a curious narrative motif indeed; whether it should be traced back to shamanic worldview and cosmology is up to the interpreter to decide. What remains to be discussed are the explanations of how these shamanic elements have become part of early Irish literature and how they have been transmitted and preserved through the ages.

### **The transmission of tradition**

Whether seen as a primordial spiritual system 'cutting through all faiths and creeds' (Matthews 1991, 1), as 'part of the human psyche' (Cowan 1993, 1), or as an open set of neutral techniques (Trevarthen 2003, 3, 13), universalizing shamanism as a religious phenomenon has rendered it culturally non-contingent (Johnson 1995, 163). By endorsing the idea that shamanism is a mental attitude rather than an actual religion (d'Emerys 2001; Jones 1998, 79; cf. Sjöblom 2002, 143) both scholars and Neo-Pagans have legitimized wide-ranging cross-cultural comparisons in the interest of tracing the earliest pre-Christian strata surviving in medieval Irish narratives. For the former, the primary aim has been to enhance our understanding of early Irish history and worldview, while the latter have eclectically used the texts as sources for personal spiritual empowerment.

The comparative approach, of course, is nothing new in Celtic studies. By the 1980s the discipline already had a long history of tracing the heroic pagan past of Celtic Ireland and identifying parallels especially with India, based on the notion of their common Indo-European heritage. The Indo-European hypothesis was strongly contested by those who saw the sources primarily as literary products of medieval Christian culture. Introducing shamanism to this field, then, added a new dimension to the opposition of a pagan past and Christian present. This is well illustrated by Leslie Jones, who argues that instead of seeing only these two

strata in medieval Irish literature, it should be seen to contain at least three: the deep past, which predates the Celtic culture on the island and includes the shamanic elements; the recent past, being perhaps the Celtic Golden Age, which indicates development in religious specialization and doctrine; and the narrative present, which represents the phase when Christianity has become the dominant form of religious practice (Jones 1998, 94–95).

The notion of shamanism as a latent ‘sedimentary deposit’ (Ginzburg cit. in Jones 1998, 79) or a mentality underlying the evolutionary process of culture is a prerequisite to all interpretations of shamanic survivals in early Irish narratives, but it is by no means unproblematic. Firstly, the concept of culturally shared mentalities is rarely explicitly defined. Instead, their existence in the hidden structures of the mind and their transmission through generations tends to be taken for granted. Moreover, the transmission process itself is regarded as a simple one, which contributes to the idea of tradition as static and resistant to change (Sjöblom 2002, 143–145).

Although the actual process of historical and cultural transmission is real, it is not given that the cultural representations transmitted can be labeled shamanic. As Sjöblom points out, what in fact is passed on and repeated in cultural performance – a narrative text being only one example – are the surface-features, not the unconscious models underlying them (Ibid, 146). To put it another way, the meaning of narrative motifs used in early Irish tales such as *Buile Suibhne*, whatever their origin, has been reformulated many times. In interpretations where shamanism is used as a heuristic concept, further elaboration on this aspect of literary reception is missing. Also, the relation between the ‘shamanistic worldview’ (Trevarthen 2003, 11) and the actual historical change in religious belief and practice often remains ambiguous.

By universalizing shamanism, ascribing it to the most distant, mythical past while insisting on its historical continuity, many Celtic scholars are facing the danger of stripping the concept of all heuristic value. In the words of Neo-Pagan writer Cynthia Danielson (2001):

No matter what spiritual path, religious doctrine, dogma, tradition, myth, faerie tale, belief or faith you find – if you dig deep into the roots of that tradition until your fingers are covered with rich black soil, you will find shamanism there. It is the foundation of all everyone believes in. Proven fact.

Since truth claims of this sort are beyond scientific scrutiny, scholars would do well to steer clear of essentializing their heuristic categories, as it rarely adds precision to their analysis (Geertz 1993, 369–372).

## Conclusion

The Celtic scholars' stance towards the modern phenomenon of Celtic shamanism is for the main part indifferent. Apart from a few exceptions (cf. Jones 1998), scholars have left the popular market to rely upon semi-scholarly and Neo-Pagan writers and reprints of outdated, early 20<sup>th</sup> century research (Harrington 2002, 10–12). However, the fact remains that Celtic spirituality constitutes a vital part of the ever-growing Neo-Pagan movement writ large, and the interest in early Irish literature as one source for self-actualization is equally strong. Christina Harrington notes that in Neo-Paganism, scholarship is extremely influential in peoples' religious life (Ibid, 11), and the same can be attested by browsing reading lists on various Neo-Pagan websites, where academic and spiritual material are presented side by side (Jones 1998, 191; d'Emerys 2001).

While scholars may be frustrated by the popular audience misunderstanding or freely appropriating results of their research, this should force them to exercise some self-reflexivity as well (Atkinson 1992, 323; Sjöblom 2002, 149). The meaning of a text is recreated in every interpretation and can never be seen as objective or unambiguous. Eventually, acknowledging our own presuppositions and interpretative strategies as producers of knowledge may also help to understand the contemporary dynamics of moulding and adopting the original sources as well as their “official” interpretations to fit the Neo-Pagan worldview, which is both temporally and mentally distant from the world represented in early Irish texts.

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