

Gaelic Incantation – Mark Sheridan

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I am going to set the scene, the context, for the piece of music that I want to share with you ... A Gaelic chant or incantation ... And it's importance historically, and indeed today, for our concepts of ceremony around death and dying.

Firstly let's consider the historical context

Ritual and ceremony have surrounded death and dying since our earliest ancestors walked the earth. The sense of mystery, the loss, the meaning making and the imaginative response are fundamental parts of our nature and are exercised in different manifestations – largely dependent on local culture and practice.

As long ago as 154,000 BC there is evidence of Homo Sapiens Idaltu in Ethiopia engaging in mortuary practices of cutting and polishing skulls and by 110,000 – 100,000 BC there is evidence of burial and social systems, of flute playing and story telling. Remains discovered in the Qafzeh caves in Israel date from before 90,000BC. Erella Hovers (2003) of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem writes

‘Human remains from Qafzeh cave include seven adults and at least nine juveniles. All of the human remains appear to have been purposefully buried, if so, these are very early examples of modern behavior indeed, direct-dated to 92,000 years BP. The remains are from [anatomically modern humans](#), with some archaic features...

Modern behaviors indicated at the cave include the purposeful burials, the use of [ochre](#) for body painting and the presence of marine shells, used as ornamentation.’

In the millennia that follow we have evidence of some of the most remarkable artefacts and objects including cave paintings, materials such as ornaments decorative objects, monument’s, flutes, harps and horns and so on found in images of the Pyramids, in reference in Greeks Odes and Chinese rituals.

So for a great deal of our existence we have engaged in rituals and ceremonies.

I would like to consider the Scottish Context.

In more recent times - here in Scotland we have recorded manifestations and evidence of ritual practices from as far back as the 6th and 7th centuries.

The early peregrinations of the monastics into the western coasts of Scotland brought early Christian rites to a largely pagan, druidic communities. The journeys of St Brendan, St Columba, St Marnock and Kessog are fairly well documented – and what is now clear is that these Christian rites merged with more ancient rites – the coming together of cultures. (Sheridan et al 2011).

In his great work 'Scotland's Music' John Purser discusses this ...

The coming of St Columba and Christianity to Scotland in 563 (Purser, 1992) brought a great richness of new music, sung mysteries and chants and there is strong evidence that the early Celtic Church embraced both the older secular music of the inhabitants of the islands as well as the mother church of Rome.

...'when Christianity came to Scotland it encountered and embraced a culture rich in music which it has permitted to survive if not helped to preserve.' (Purser, 1992)

I mention this because the music I want to play you resonates with secular metaphor as much as sacred rite and beliefs.

The music comes from the The Hebridean Islands of the Western Isles- islands which have been the home of Gaelic language for over 1,000 years –

and there is both a rich extant oral tradition as well as documented literature of poetry and prose. (Sheridan et al, 2011)

In recent centuries folklorists, collectors, musicologists have visited the western isles and we now have many rich sources of material – some of the most notable include 'Carmina Gadelica' (1992) by Alexander Carmichael in the late 19th Century. His collection include many chants, prayers and incantations,

stories around birth, life, seasons, the sheiling, the home and hearth, travel and death.

‘An Tuiream Bais’ collected by Carmichael – is a death dirge which invokes the following:

‘You go home this night to the summer home

To the home of autumn, spring and summer

You go home this night to your eternal home...’

And some of these phrases resonate with the recording I will play you.

The song itself

Dol dhan taigh was recorded in 1965 – the singing of Alasdair Boyd from Ardnamonie and recorded in Lochdar in South Uist – by a field researcher from School of Scottish Studies, James Ross. He discusses the background of the melody – a pibroch or ceol mor, big music of the highland bagpipes – and that it was played at funerals in Uist.

The pibroch has generally a majestic, elegant and timeless melodic line with stylised variations. This tune was learned in times past, he says, from a piper from the 93rd regiment ...

(This Sutherland Regiment was formed in 1815 for the colonial wars and reformed in 1854 where they fought the Crimean war – described in battle on October 14 as ‘the thin red line with tips of steel’ a reference to their impressive kilt and red jackets and bayonets. A phrase still used today.)

The tune here has words added – and the metaphor for death is a journey to home. And to the winter and the summer home, the eternal home ‘with you’.

The home is an important image here in Gaelic culture – it resonates with the care and comfort of family – of warmth, hospitality and conviviality. Colleagues in Hospice care will recognise the language here ...

These dwellings, croft houses and blackhouses scattered up the west coast of the machair lands of the Uists were shelters in winter against the formidable

storms and gales of the wild Atlantic and the wolf-wind ice locked peaks of Bein Mhor and Ben Hecla. A haven, a place for ceilidh and story telling, memories and dreams. (Sheridan & Byrne, 2008)

In summer the homes were cool shelters, a space for respite, for relaxation and refuge from the heat and hard-work during long long days from dawn to dusk in summer months of arduous work on the croft and at sea.

As you listen you will hear how Alasdair projects the emotion and expression of the incantation ... And how he imitates the sound of the pipes towards the end - a very ancient performance practice.

<http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/play/44665;jsessionid=9653C10BB07023567352B76D41D6A112>

Dol dhan taigh, dol dhan taigh

Dol dhan taigh bhuan leat

Dol dhan taigh Geamhraidh

Dol dhan taigh Samhraidh

Going home, Going home

Going to the eternal home with you

Going to the winter home

Going to the summer home.

Alsdair Boyd, born 1885, died 1970.

Thank you.

References

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