

Mini Episode - 4R - Samhain - The Celtic Roots of Halloween ...

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SPEAKERS

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Hey friends, welcome back. I'm Rayah. And today for my mini episode I wanted to go over some history. So over the last couple years, my eyes have been opened to the innumerable ways that white people have stolen and appropriated every other culture pretty much. So I've been working hard to discontinue my participation in that. And along the way, I've also been trying to figure out like what my roots are so that I can connect with those, rather than someone else's, or some like whitewashed or watered down version of things. I've done some research on my family tree and come to find out that we came over from Ireland in the 1700s. And of course in the US, we usually think of like St. Patrick's Day when we think of the Irish, that or potatoes. There's actually a different connection that I want to look at today. And that is the origins of Halloween or Samhain, which is the Gaelic word for the celebration that eventually birthed the bastard baby called Halloween. So first, we have to talk about the Celts. The Celts were a collection of tribes with origins in Central Europe that shared similar language, religious beliefs, traditions and culture. The Celts were spread throughout Western Europe, including Britain, Ireland, France, and Spain. The Romans starting with Julius Caesar launched a bunch of military campaigns which ended up killing them by the 1000s and destroying their culture in much of mainland Europe. This also pushed them north and the main areas they ended up are Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Neither Romans nor the Anglo Saxons, who took what is now England from the Romans, were able to successfully invade Ireland. This enabled the Celtic tribes that had settled there, namely the Gaels and the Irish to survive and allow their culture to flourish. Christianity arrived in Ireland via St. Patrick, who we will cover in a different episode. And it's thought that Catholicism was able to take over as the dominant religion on the island following the mass killing of Druids, which were the religious leaders of the Gaels. And it just gets me thinking if Christianity is so right, or natural, then why does it have to be so violent to become the dominant religion? Because it sure seems like every place where it's dominated it has that history. We'll leave that question and answer for another time. But I also feel like that's relevant because there are a lot of things that kind of merge with Celtic traditions and Catholicism. So Samhain is a religious festival. Originating from an ancient Celtic spiritual tradition. They considered Samhain to be the most significant of the four quarterly fire festivals, and it took place midway between the fall Equinox and the winter solstice. Early texts present Samhain as a mandatory celebration that lasting three days and three nights where the community was required to show themselves to the local kings or chieftains. After the harvest work was complete celebrants joined with Druid priests to light a community fire using a wheel that would cause friction and spark flames. The wheel was a symbol for the sun, they would pray during this cattle were sacrificed. During this time of the year, hearth fires and family homes were left to burn out while the harvest was gathered and then during the ceremony, they took a flame from the communal bonfire back to their

home to relate their hearse. If you didn't participate, it was believed that the gods were going to be upset with you and you'd likely get sick or die. In Ireland, there was also a military aspect and they would prepare holiday thrones for this soldiers commanders. Anyone who used weapons or crimed it up during the celebration also got a death sentence. Some texts also talked about six days of getting drunk typically with mead or beer along with these really ginormous feasts. The celebration itself was centered around welcoming the harvest and bringing in the dark half of the year. They believe that during this time, the barriers between the spirit world and the physical worlds were broken down, allowing more interaction between humans and those on the other side. Celts believed in things like faeries, or Sidh. This is a broader term that includes several different types of creatures or beings, which is already something that was new to me. I don't know about you, but I always thought of like fairies is the tiny little people with wings who lived in flowers and shit. But faeries actually include things like Banshee, leprechaun, pooka, Dullahan and changelings. I really want to dive into those categories and like those stories soon, and as I was researching I saw mentioned that in some of the ancient writings, the word faery was swapped out with devil to erase or christianized things so that again, goes back To like the Celtic and Christian stuff merging and when Christianity took over devil or demon kind of overwrote the term faery in certain texts. It wasn't just limited to faeries or monster type beings though it was also ancestors that could come through. During Samhain they would leave offerings in the fields for fairies and Celts would dress as animals and monsters of the fairies weren't tempted to kidnap them, cause trouble or damaged crops. Celts thought that the presence of the otherworldly spirits made it easier for the druids to make predictions about the future. Being able to know what's coming has always been something that has been important to humans, which is why so many different traditions have some sort of person that helps predict the future. The first outside influences to Samhain came from the Romans as they conquer the land and push this Celts towards north and west. To have their traditions were incorporated in first one was Feralia when the Romans traditionally commemorated the passing of the dead. The second was a day to honor Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees. The symbol of Pomona was the apple and incorporation of this celebration into sound is probably what led to the whole bobbing for apples thing. But in Celtic mythology, apples were also strongly associated with the other world and mortality, while hazelnuts were associated with Divine Wisdom. So apples really come into this from two places. Other Samhain Apple rituals included hanging a small wooden rod from the ceiling at head height, with a lit candle on one end and an apple hanging from the other. The rod was spun around and everybody took turns trying to catch the apple with their teeth. apples were peeled in one long strip, the peel was tossed over their shoulder and the shape of the peel was said to form the first letter of the future spouses name. There were also rituals that went along with hazelnuts of course. Two hazelnuts were roasted near a fire, one named for the person roasting them and the other for the person they desired. If the nuts jumped away from the heat, it was a bad sign. But if the nuts roasted quietly it foretold a good match. Items were also hidden in food usually a cake, like barmbrack, cranachan, champ or sowans and portions of it were served out at random. A person's future was foretold by the item that they happen to find. So like if you found a ring that meant marriage if you found a coin that meant wealth. Another thing was a salty oatmeal bannock was baked. The person ate it in three bites and then went to bed in silence without anything to drink. This was said to result in a dream in which their future spouse offers them a drink to quench their thirst. Egg whites were dropped in water and the shapes foretold the number of future children. Children would also chase cows and divine some of these things from the number of birds or the direction they flew. As the Middle Ages progressed, these moved to be more like big bonfires which were closer to the farms and also protected the families from faeries. This is also the point where jack o' lanterns started turning up, which were originally carved from turnips attached by strings to sticks and embedded with coal. Later Irish traditions switch to pumpkins and jack o' lanterns have a whole history behind them and legends and things like that that we don't have time to get into today. In Wales men tossed burning wood at each other and set off fireworks. In Northern England men paraded around with noisemakers. The dead were also honored at Samhain. The beginning of winter may have seen as the most fitting time to honor them because it was also the time of dying in nature. The souls of the dead were thought to revisit their homes seeking hospitality. Places were set at the dinner table and by the fire to welcome them giving the families a chance to interact with the spirits until they left after dinner. Kids would play games to entertain the dead and adults would update the dead on the past year's news. That night doors and windows might be left open for the dead to come in and eat cakes that had been left for them. The belief that the souls of the dead return home on one night of the year and must be appeased seems to have ancient origins and is found in many cultures throughout the world. James Frasier a Scottish anthropologist suggests that it was perhaps a natural thought that the approach of

winter should drive the poor, shivering hungry ghosts from the bare fields and from the leafless woodlands to the shelter of the cottage. However, the souls of thankful kin could return to still blessings just as easily as that of a wronged person could return to wreak revenge. Pranks have also had a long history with Samhain though in the ancient celebration, the tricks were typically blamed on the faeries. As Christianity gained a foothold in pagan communities. Church leaders attempted to refrain Samhain as a Christian celebration. Pope Boniface tried to move the celebration to may 13, and he also dedicated the Pantheon in Rome, which was originally a temple to the Roman gods, which he then rebranded to honor all of Christian martyrs and the Catholic feast of all martyrs day was established in the western church. But bonfires and festivals stuck around in October and November. In the ninth century, Pope Gregory moved to the church's celebration of the dead back to fall, declaring All Saints Day on November 1, and All Souls Day on November 2. Neither of those new days got rid of the pagan aspects of the celebration of Samhain. October 31, became known as All Hallows Eve or Halloween and contained much of the traditional pagan practices before being adopted in 19th century America through Irish immigrants bringing their traditions across the ocean. In Ireland mumming was the practice of putting on costumes going door to door and singing songs to the dead. cakes were given as payment. Over time though, pranks became more and more of the focus, so towns started having actual Halloween parties and festivals to help deter some of that mischief. The Staunton Spectator in Staunton, Virginia described the happenings in 1852 as a multitude of wild mischievous games which were tolerated at no other season. pranks included breaking into gardens and stealing cabbage and early form of ding dong ditch that involved knocking rather than ringing and even violently harassing women. It was, as the paper put it, a day in which men are set free from the laws they are just learning to respect. Partly it would seem as a reward for the deference which they have paid them, partly to serve them as a kind of breathing space in which to recover from the unwanted fatigue of being obedient. By the 1860s mentions of Halloween and newspaper records increased exponentially, that in 1894 comes the first mention of a Halloween parade in the papers collected by the Library of Congress in 1894. The Scranton Tribune of Scranton, Pennsylvania notes the Chester Halloween parade will have 5000 men and boys in line, Chester only had around 20,000 people in 1890, meaning that about a fourth of the city's population participated in this early Halloween celebration. From there it continued to evolve into the holiday as we know it today. There are tons of Halloween and Samhain details that I could go into beyond that, but we only have a limited amount of time, so you can find more info in the show notes to check out. There's also going to be a link to both the text and a video performance of a long but really delightful poem titled Halloween by the Scottish poet Robert Burns. So thanks for hanging out and learning about Samhain with me today and I hope that you learned something new. Next week me and Amira will be back with a full length regular episode.