Druidism is probably one of the oldest religions on earth. Because of the fact that information on Druidism has been orally transmitted from generation to generation and there are no reliable sources, it is difficult to determine the origin with certainty.

Some sources claim that Druidism originated from the Shamanistic religions practised by the Celt’s Indo-European ancestors in Asia. Others believe that it was the religion of the first inhabitants of the British Isles, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and North West Spain, before the coming of the Celts.

Differences between sources

During the expansion of Christianity in Europe ancient Druidism for all practical purposes disappeared completely by the seventh century. Although some modern Druids claim that their groups are the uninterrupted continuation of ancient Druidism, it is very improbable.

Sources on ancient Druidism differ very much, and it is therefore difficult to say with certainty what the original Druid’s view was on, inter alia, gods and goddesses, significance of festive days, rituals and other practices.

Ancient Druidism

Golden age

In the seventh century BC, the Celts emigrated westward from East Asia through Europe. By about the fifth century BC the various Celtic tribes had occupied the greater part of Europe and Druidism was the general religion.

Differences between tribes

Just as in Modern Druidism, there were also various groups and schools in ancient Druidism. In various geographical regions like England, Wales, Ireland and France gods and goddesses were worshiped under different names. Local tribes sometimes also worshiped a few local gods and goddesses not known at other places.

Druidism in all its forms, however, always boiled down to the veneration or worshiping of nature and its powers (see Druidism), and about this nobody had more knowledge than the Druids themselves.
Leader of the tribe

The Druids were trained for up to twenty years before he or she could qualify (see Three Orders in Druidism). Hence, the rest of the tribe's religious life was mainly centred around the knowledge, magic power and authority of the Druids.

Druids were not only the spiritual leaders of tribes, but they were also the doctors, philosophers, peacemakers during disputes, advisers (even of kings), judges and the ambassadors when different tribes needed to negotiate with each other. Some Druids were even the leader of the tribe or the king.

The life of the Druids

The number of Druids within a specific tribe depended on the size of the tribe. Druids differed in seniority and esteem, and, although everyone had a sound knowledge of all the disciplines, senior Druids specialised in specific disciplines (for instance, medicine, divination and magic). The Druids of different tribes gathered from time to time to share information or to perform special rituals together.

Some Druids lived in a house among the other members of the tribe. Others lived in isolation in caves and a few were wanderers without fixed abode. Druids were not obliged to serve as soldiers like the other male members of the tribe, and the tribe also made provision for their material needs like food, drink and clothes.

It seems that the most Druids usually wore a plain loose-fitting robe. Sometimes the robe had to be of a specific colour for rituals at special occasions.

First set-back

After a golden age of several centuries Druidism experienced its first set-back during the Roman Empire's occupation of Celtic regions. Although the Romans also practiced polytheism and were not opposed to the Druids in principle, Julius Caesar felt that the Druids threatened his authority after they opposed his occupation of Britain in 55 BC.

Caesar, who wrote a good deal about Druidism and whose writings are presently regarded as of the most important sources on this religion, started to stamp out Druidism systematically.

Conversion to Christianity

Like many pagan religions across the world, however, it was the coming of Christianity that gave Druidism its death-blow. Interestingly enough it was particularly the leaders and thinkers among the Celtic peoples - among which kings, tribal chiefs and Druids - who first accepted the Christian doctrine as truth and converted to Christ.
Long after Christianity became the official religion of the Celtic peoples, Druidism was still practised particularly in the remote rural regions.

Brigid becomes Catholic

Another interesting phenomenon in this time was that the Roman Catholic Church ostensibly also absorbed parts of the Celtic religions. In this way, for instance, pagan gods and goddesses were declared Christian saints.

The names of places like fountains which were previously regarded as ancient Celtic holy places, were changed and declared holy places of the Roman Catholic Church.

A good example is the legendary Celtic heroine Brigid (also "Brighid" and "Brigit"). Brigid was a Celtic goddess similar to the Gallic goddess Minerva, who was the patron of poetry, education, healing and craftsmanship.

After the region converted to Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church declared Brigid a saint and even today she is known as Saint Bridgid. Her festival day is 1 February which coincides with Imbolc, on which Neo-Paganists celebrate the coming of spring and which is celebrated in the USA today as Groundhog Day.

Fire festivals "adopted"

The fire-festival Samhain was also adopted by the Roman Catholic Church and became All Saints Day or All Hallows Eve (in remembrance of the deceased saints). Today All Hallows Eve (Halloween) is mostly a secular festive day.

The fire-festival Beltane - 1 May - is celebrated worldwide today as May Day, and in South Africa and Namibia as Workers Day (see Fire-festivals and changes of season).

Modern Druidism

Present-day or modern Druidism’s official origin could be broadly traced back to the eighteenth century. The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) claim that they were founded in England in 1717. According to other sources OBOD emanated from the Ancient Order of Druids (AOD) which was founded in 1781 by a certain Henry Hurle.

On 23 September 1792 one Edward Williams preformed a Druidistic ritual in London, England, and, together with a few followers, started doing research on this religion and practiced it.
Twentieth century

By 1918 there were five smallish groups of Druids who performed solstice rituals at Stonehenge in England. By 1955 only the British Circle of Universal Bond were still active, and these later split up in 1963 to continue their existence as the OBOD.

The British Druid Order (BDO) was started in 1979 by Phillip Shallcrass and Emma Restall Orr. This group had about 3,000 members by the end of the twentieth century, mostly in the United Kingdom.

The Reformed Druids of North America was founded in 1963 by students of Carleton College in Minnesota (USA) in protest to a rule that all students had to attend church services. That which started as a joke, soon became a independent movement out of which other American groups like the Am Draiocht Fein (ADF) and the Henge of Keltria came into being.

Worldwide

Precisely how many Druids there are worldwide today is impossible to say. What is indeed certain is that their numbers, like Neo Paganistic religions, are still increasing. Groups like the OBOD make use of modern technology like the Internet to promote their religion and claim that between 1998 and 2000 more than 7,000 new members joined them and who were trained in Druidism by distance education.

Controversy over human sacrifice

As in other Neo Paganistic religions, human sacrifice is surely the most controversial subject in Druidism. Ancient Druids did not have much respect for life and human sacrifice of humans was therefore a fairly common practice which was even performed in public.

The purpose of human sacrifice differed - sometimes a god or goddess needed to be appeased by it to ensure a good harvest or to prevent a cold winter. Sometimes the sacrifice needed to convey a special message or request, on behalf of the team, to the “gods” in the “other world”.

Gods had preferences

Different gods were believed to have given instructions to Druids on the way in which a person should be sacrificed to them. Thus, sacrifices to Teutates had to be drowned in “holy water”, while sacrifices to Esus and Taranis had to be stabbed to death and burnt, respectively.
Messenger’s attitude

Some Modern Druids claim that human sacrifices in the past only took place with the permission of the victims, and that it was ensured that he or she did not suffer pain. Whether this was always so is doubtful, but maybe the victim was treated well to ensure that he or she would have the correct attitude to put in a good word for the tribe with the forces of nature or the gods after his or her death.

Gruesome practices

The Roman historians Ammianus (330-395 BC) and Diodorus Siculus described, respectively, how the British and Irish even ate the victims flesh, while the Gallic Celts, according to another description, ate the flesh of children during rituals and drank their blood.

According to still another description, some of the tribes had the custom to eat the flesh of their deceased family members as part of a ritual to bid them farewell.

Sacrifices stopped

After the conquering of the Celtic tribes by the Roman Empire, the Roman Senate, after an initial time of tolerance, decided in 97 BC to prohibit human sacrifice through legislation.

Later, allegations of, inter alia, human sacrifice was one of the causes that thousands of people in the Middle Ages were killed on charges of witchcraft and diabolism (see The witch hunt). Modern Druids contend that human sacrifice has no place in Druid rituals today.

Fae - “bright people”

Druids believe that fairies, or fae (which means “bright people”) are beings that consist of ‘unfocused energy’. They believe fairies actually live at an astral level, but can for brief periods and with extreme effort assume a physical shape in this world or in the other-world. They do this by changing their energy into any external shape imaginable through their willpower.

Some fae are linked to specific (one or more) elements, and fae also have different strengths. Stronger fae can maintain their shape in this world for longer periods at a time.
The ancient Druids believed that a special bond existed between them and fae. A Druid could even through specific rituals become part of a fae family, after which the two could mutually assist and support one another. Some of the well-known fae from Celtic mythology include the following.

Gnomes/Fessilnik: They look like an old person, but are seldom more than 80 cm high. They can work very hard and like to carve statues from rock. They live underground and are sometimes also found in thick forests. Gnomes are associated with the earth.

Barghest: They usually appear as big dogs and are pitch black with glowing eyes. They hate people and dogs, and can kill someone with their poisonous breath. Barghests are associated with the element fire.

Beansidhe: They look like a frail human-like being with red eyes and claw-like hands. They can kill people with their penetrating wailing, and can only be driven off with saltwater or silver. Beansidhes are associated with the moon and air.

Goblins/Gooblinae: These are revolting beings of about one metre tall with pointed ears, an egg-shaped head, sharp teeth and long claws. Some have smooth bodies, while others are covered with thick hair and warts. Some of them have severely deformed bodies, and others have bat-like wings. Most of them live in the mountains, and others live under water. They are cowardly, but will kill people or other fae if they can. Most of them are associated with darkness and the earth, others with air and water.

Dryads/Druimad: They look like a human woman with a rough brown skin and green, knee-length hair. They usually select one tree in which they live all their lives. They are friendly and good-natured, but can defend themselves by causing lightning and storms. Druimads are associated with air, water, and the tree in which they live.

Coosie: They are also called the elf-dog and appear as a large, silver wolf. They are very quick, and although they are dangerous, they will sometimes help a sick or injured traveller. They are associated with air and water.

Dwarfs/Grounam: They look like small people with broad shoulders, and spend most of their time underground, mining gemstones or copper. They have short tempers, but are loyal towards those they like. Grounams are associated with earth, stone and fire.
Elves/Meadhil: They are of slender build, but between six and seven feet tall. They mainly have blond or red hair and blue or green eyes with cat pupils. They are much stronger than humans and are also very quick, and often in control of other fae. They can be divided into good, evil and neutral groups. Elves are associated with air, water, fire, the moon and trees.

Pixies and sprites: They look like young human beings of about 45 cm tall. They are slender with blond hair and green eyes. It is difficult to distinguish between male and female pixies and sprites. Sprites have wings and pixies do not. They can cause objects to move through the air and like playing tricks on people. They are not associated with any elements.

Nymphs: Druids believe they look like exceptionally beautiful women. They usually travel in pairs and acquire their strength from sexual energy. They can sexually drain humans to the point of death, although most of them don’t realise the harm they cause. Nymphs are associated with air, water and the moon.

Trolls/Ruginae: They are very tall: up to three metres, with shoulders that can be up to two metres wide, and particularly long arms. They have a scaly brown, black or green skin, with stringy hair and sharp teeth. They are very strong and quicker than a human, and eat meat, which they hunt at night in groups. They are afraid of fire and are associated with earth, air, stone and darkness.

Fire festivals and change of season

Like their ancient forebears, many modern Druids have several fire festivals on the first day of four months in the year. Others point out that the ancient Celts followed a moon calendar, and they therefore celebrate the fire festivals with full moon, which does not necessarily fall on the first day of certain months.

The festivals usually start at sunset and last for three to seven days. Large bonfires were usually made on hilltops. In ancient times cattle were chased between two bonfires to ensure their fertility, and today couples run between the fires for the same reason.

Samhain: The end of the warm season Samhain (or Samhuinn) is celebrated on 1 November or with the first full moon after Lughnasad, and literally means ‘end of the warm season’ (in the northern hemisphere). At this festival deceased ancestors are honoured, among other things by sacrificing food and drink. It is believed that the ‘veil’ between this world and the other-world is at its thinnest at this time, and that communication between the two worlds is easier. Samhein is one of the few occasions when Druids use a circle for protection during rituals.
Midwinter: Winter monotony is broken by Midwinter, also known as Yule, which is celebrated on the second full moon after Samhain to break the monotony of the long European winter.

Spring not far off: Imbolc (or Brighid), which means ‘day of hope’, is celebrated on 1 February or on the second full moon after midwinter to remind the people that spring (in the northern hemisphere) is coming, and together with it life. During Imbolc candles are lit as symbol of the coming warmth.

Blossom season: Beltaine (or Bealteinne) is celebrated on 1 May or on the second full moon after Imbolc and indicates the climax of spring or the blossom season, when cattle and sheep usually also give birth. Some of the most popular rituals during this festival are hand fasting or weddings, and a ritual to celebrate the transition of young girls to adult women. With this fire festival the ancient Druids usually burnt a human sacrifice in advance to appease the gods against poor harvests and a cold winter.

Midsummer: Also called Fae Day, Midsummer is usually celebrated on the second full moon after Beltaine. At this festival the participants work on improving relationships between people and sympathetic fairies (see Fae - "bright people").

Happiness about harvest: Lughnasad (or Lammas) was called after Lugh, the god of light, and is celebrated on 1 August or on the second full moon after midsummer as a thanksgiving feast for the harvest. The main ritual during Lughnasad has a bearing on the initial gathering of the harvest. Modern Druids who do not have harvests, sometimes bake bread and share this with one another as a symbol of the harvest.

Celtic New Year: The Celtic New Year is celebrated five days after Samhain. New Year’s festivities last up to seven days and are accompanied by big celebrations. Quizzes, wrestling competitions and sex games are popular pastimes in this period. A popular ritual with New Year is name-giving ceremonies for children born during the past year.

Changing of the seasons: Like other Neo-Paganists, Druids also celebrate the changing of the seasons. Different rituals for predicting the future and spells that have a bearing on the coming season are used at these festivals.
Stonehenge and other “holy” places

Ancient and modern Druids regard certain places, including fountains, wells, hills and old graves, as holy places. Druids visit these places to carry out special rituals, for isolation and meditation or to use the energy (force) associated with the place concerned for healing illnesses, for example.

Stonehenge

The ancient stone formations of Stonehenge are probably the best known and most popular holy place of Druidism. Exactly who erected these gigantic stones in their astronomy-related pattern cannot be established with certainty. However, ancient as well as modern Druids view this as a particularly powerful temple of the sun and moon, where rituals are carried out that have a bearing on the annual solstices (when the sun is the furthest away from the equator - 21 December and 21 June).

ABOVE: Stonehenge in England.

Until 1915 Stonehenge was privately owned, after which it was given to the British government by the owner. In 1988 the government decided to no longer allow Druids to have their solstice rituals there, as the area was severely damaged by vandals on these occasions. However, this did not stop Druids from all over the world from arriving in large numbers, and recently the British government again decided to officially allow Druids there during solstices.

Islands

The Druids also regard various islands as holy places. The Orkney Islands in the North Sea, where numerous ancient tombs and strangely arranged rock patterns occur, are regarded as a kind of

...
access route to the other-world. In ancient times Druids liked to bury their dead here because they were then close to the other-world, and today Druids still visit the islands to meditate or to make contact with the gods and deceased forefathers.

Other islands that are regarded as holy are the tiny island Iona, the Isle Mona (Anglesey) and the Isle of Man.

Fountains, pools and wells

There are literally thousands of fountains, pools and wells in the British Isles that Druids regard as holy, because they form ‘access routes’ to the other-world. Some of them are very dilapidated and overgrown today, but others are still popular places for druids to visit.

Most of these places apparently have special powers of healing or soothsaying. Sometimes the water is drunk and in other cases they bathe in the pools. Specific pools and fountains are often associated with specific supernatural beings (gods and goddesses or fairies), and therefore good places to make contact with these beings. Sometimes a piece of clothing or coin is thrown in the water as an offering to the being from whom healing or assistance is requested. Sometimes the future is predicted by sleeping next to holy wells and then explaining the dreams.

Three Orders of Druidism

Three clear orders or levels can be distinguished in ancient as well as most modern Druid groups, namely bards, ovates and Druids or Druidesses. Together these groups form the backbone of Druidism.

Bards: Keepers of tradition

In ancient times the bards were the keepers of the tribe’s tradition and history. A bard was trained for twelve years, and had to memorise hundreds of stories, poems, philosophies and other information. On special occasions, such as feast days, the bard shared this information with the other members of the tribe and thus ensured that the information remained alive and was retained.

In some modern Druid groups, newcomers start out as bards. During this phase the person is instructed in the basic principles of the religion, while considerable emphasis is placed on the development of skills in music, singing and other forms of art as well.

Ovates: Healers and mediums

The ovates were in the first place the healers of the ancient tribes, and among other things they had a thorough knowledge of natural medicines. However, the ovates were also the soothsayers and acted as mediums for communication between members of the tribe and their ancestors.
In modern Druidism, the ovates are the second level and in this phase knowledge and skills related to making contact between this world and the “other-world” are emphasised. The ovates should understand the Druid-teachings on of death and reincarnation very well so that they can also be trained as “natural healers”. Among other things this involves a study of plants and herbs that can be used as medicine, but also instruction in certain schools of psychology, because the ovate has to look after body and soul.

Druids: Highest order

The highest order in Druidism was and is the Druids and Druidesses themselves. The Druids are a combination of priest, teacher, astronomer, philosopher, theologian, scientist, poet, and in ancient times also ambassador, political adviser and judge. According to some sources, ancient Druids underwent training from their fifth year for twenty years.

ABOVE: Most rituals, such as these at Stonehenge in the 1960s, are led by the Druids.

As in ancient Druidism, most of the rituals today are also led by the qualified Druids - not so much as intermediaries between the people and the gods, but rather as reliable leaders who are followed by the rest. Although they all possess the knowledge of bards and ovates about the spiritual world and healing, among other things, the Druids are regarded as wise philosophers rather than priests.

-----------------------------------------------

Article by Manie Bosman (E-Mail maniebosman@mweb.co.za)