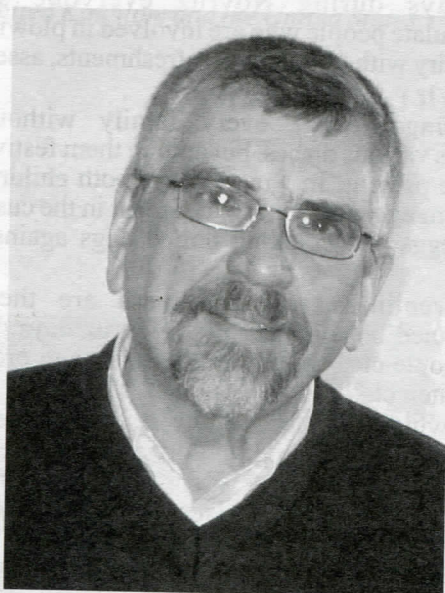


AN AMERICAN REFLECTS ON SPRING FERTILITY TRADITIONS IN ENGLAND AND U.S.A.

By Joel Robbins
Peace Corp Response Volunteer
Khazar University



With spring just around the corner, thoughts and preparations for seasonal holidays are beginning to occupy our time. All ethnic groups have celebrations focusing on birth and rebirth, and they often share common threads.

Without scientific understanding, ancient cultures fell back on superstitions as explanations of the cause and effect of natural phenomena, such as certain weather occurrences, geological disasters, crop failure and illness. The fertility rites of Azerbaijan and England and America, although from different religious, cultural, linguistic and geographic backgrounds, still have many elements in common. Dancing, natural tokens, archetypes, bright colors, foods and fire are the most obvious similarities. Teacher Xuraman Mammadova has enumerated the Azerbaijan traditions in the companion article above, so I will mention a few from America and England.

The origin and meaning of current seemingly Christian holidays and traditions are often unknown to practitioners. For example, American and English children and many adults are unable to explain why Christmas is on December 25 and features evergreen trees, holly, a yule log and mistletoe, or why Easter is celebrated in early

spring with eggs, rabbits and chicks, none of which has any documentable relationship to the Christian historic events being observed.

As a child growing up in Midwest USA, I enjoyed the rituals of Easter. Mom collected the best proportioned white eggs from our henhouse, washed them carefully, hard-boiled them and gave them an added etching rinse with vinegar. Then she put dye tablets in five or six separate cups of water. My brothers and I used wire spoon-shaped tools to dip the eggs. Mom and Dad's job was then to hide the eggs in the yard for us to find. Supposedly the Easter Bunny had magically laid the eggs among the bushes and in the grass. The Easter egg hunt is so popular that even President Obama will have an Easter egg hunt on the White House lawn on Easter Sunday, which is traditionally the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox.

Just before Easter one year, I also remember Mom sewing matching robin's egg blue suits for my brother and me, seven and five years of age, respectively. We wore them Easter Sunday and mother donned a new hat. Easter bonnets were a tradition for many years in America. America's favorite Easter song, "Easter Parade," by Irving Berlin begins this way: "In your Easter bonnet with all the frills upon it, You'll be the grandest lady in the Easter Parade." Yes, New York City used to have and still has an Easter parade down Fifth Avenue. I remember mother bustling off to an Eastern sunrise service at our church, coming home and getting my brothers and me dressed properly, serving us brunch and then shuffling us off to our church's regular Easter service at 11.

Then in the afternoon on Easter Sunday, Mom and Dad watched us search for colored eggs in our yard. Back in the house, the boiled eggs, large jellybeans in the shape of eggs, chocolate in the shape of a rabbit (Easter Bunny) and yellow chick-shaped marshmallow candies were eaten. Did I understand why we celebrated with these foods, sunrise services and assorted activities other than the church service? Not at all!

Most pagan religions in temperate zones centered their beliefs on the sun. This was mainly

because--unlike regions of the globe that are always warm and have a continuous growing season--as the sun waned each winter it appeared that it might die. With pagans believing the sun was a living and life-giving being, it became a god to them, or actually, a sun god. The apparent death of the sun--observable as the calendar approached the shortest day of the year, December 21--potentially meant no light, heat or growing season for the earth, so communities felt their welfare was closely interrelated with the health of the sun god. This living-sun idea extrapolated into communities believing that their actions (worship and/sacrifice) could bring the sun back to health or, at least, placate it enough so that it didn't abandon them. By December 25, it was obvious to astronomers that the sun was reviving and the pagans rejoiced. Christmas and Easter celebrations eventually adopted the dates of centuries-old sun-worship rituals, but the pagan aspects of the festivals were so enjoyable and ingrained that they linger even unto today—not that devoted Christians over the centuries haven't tried to eliminate them or, at least, reduce their influence.

The word *Easter* reportedly comes from “Eostre”, “Astarte”, “Atargatis”, “Ostara”, “Ishtar”, “Austron” and/or “Ashtaroth”. Some of the names associated with these deities were goddess of spring, the heavens, the sun, the wind or fertility and also herald of the sun. Although scholars disagree on the origin (Babylonian, Phoenician, Philistine, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon, German or Greek) of the word *Easter*, most agree that Christianity inherited the name when it attempted to keep the date but refocus the popular spring fertility festivals in countries being proselytized. The word origin of *Easter*, of course, also corresponds with the fact that the sun rises in the east. For obvious reasons, some researchers even have tried, with little success, to link the term *Easter* with the word *estrogen*.

Ancient scholars and astronomers observed the sun and reported its health to the people. This led the pagans to schedule their sun-worshipping rituals around the equinoxes and solstices. That is why the major fertility festivals from ancient times and still held today in England and Azerbaijan are usually found to occur on or near the vernal equinox, which marks the end of winter and beginning of spring. Others are celebrated on May Day. I was visiting England's Stonehenge

one summer and found access to the ancient stone solar observatory was restricted because it was near the summer solstice, when the sun rises over the ring's heel stone. Those who still practice sun worshipping (neo-druids and neo-pagans) flock to Stonehenge--or one of the thousand or so stone circles in England--for autumnal and vernal equinoxes and the summer and winter solstices.

Fertility dances, for example, are still performed in the Cotswold, but these now are practiced not to insure good crops but mostly to retain a community's traditions and to draw tourists' money. As a tourist in England, I have also observed some of these modern renditions of ancient dances. In the Cotswold ritual a character, known as the Fool, dances among other dancers for the tourists and locals in what seems to be an aimless way. But the dance is traditional and symbolizes the naivety of man.

The dancing and singing is known in some parts of England as wassailing, with participants wearing brightly color clothing with bells attached and drinking wassail, a mulled cider often fortified with alcohol. Sometimes the dancers carry the bells. The noise from the bells is supposed to scare away evil spirits. In parts of England, wassailing may be done around an apple tree with cider-soaked morsels of bread hanging from its branches on strings. These obviously represent the hope that a fresh crop of real fruit, and the resulting cider, will be available in the fall. A shotgun is fired to wake the tree from its winter nap. A “Judas” fire is lit and stamped out, which brings a Christian element to the rituals and provides another reference to the exorcism of evil spirits.

Having children dance and circle a maypole is also a tradition to bring luck to the spring planting. The children hold one end of a long ribbon while the other end is attached to the top of the pole. As they dance in a circle, they produce a brightly colored design on the pole.

Tokens of nature's reproductive powers and renewal are also common in vernal equinox and May Day celebrations. English and American traditions include wreaths, colored eggs and bunny rabbits. Eggs are obvious fertility tokens and so are the highly procreative rabbit family. Although eggs and rabbits have nothing to do with the belief in Easter as the time of Christ's rebirth, their pagan origins still are prevalent in England's spring, rebirth festivities. Some tokens in America

have been transformed into plastic eggs filled with money or candy, and, surprisingly, giant inflatable, plastic colored eggs, pink bunnies and Easter baskets as lawn ornaments. Also, the tradition of buying one new piece of clothing as a token of starting anew has continued to be practiced in many households.

On May Day some communities in England used to celebrate by placing a green bush with tallow flowers in front of their cottage in order to receive the blessings of the wood spirits. Wreaths were decorated with flowers and a white doll was placed in the center and two spheres were suspended from the hoops. The orbs represented the sun and the moon. Young people carried the garlands to houses to bring good luck for the growing season to their inhabitants. Young people were also known to wake shortly after midnight before May Day, when they paraded through their village blowing horns. This was followed by a frolic in the woods until dawn, when they returned with the garlands. *Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare captures the mood of this rebirth lark.

With the inclusion of Mother Earth and the Fool, we see Archetypes utilized in ancient fertility rituals. As mentioned, in England and America, children may be challenged to find Easter eggs hidden in the grass, bushes, trees or other natural settings. This activity honors the Earth Mother, and reminds young people subliminally that all of our nourishment is available solely through her bounty. The Fool mentioned above represents man's recognition that he does not possess the power to produce a harvest without nature, so he must admit his shortcomings and humble himself to the Earth Mother.

Bright colors in ritual attire, boiled eggs, hats, ribbons and scarves mimic the rebirth of color to the earth after a colorless and dormant winter. Red, yellow, white and blue flowers begin appearing during spring along with bright yellow and green leaves. The displays and wearing of strong hues are intended to help to awaken mankind from a cold and snowy winter.

All festivals, not just fertility ones, feature food. The English, for example, make hot cross buns, a pastry with a prevalent Christian cross featured on the top. Drinking cider and eating boiled eggs, which are mentioned above, also are traditions of English fertility festivals. Fasting

was also present. Some sacrifice was meant to "pay" back the sun goddess for her bounty. Lent, which in the Christian religion encompasses the forty days before Easter, sometimes features giving up something, like a favorite food, as a spiritual and physical cleansing ritual.

Fire is an ambiguous symbol during fertility rites in England. It has the distinction of meaning both death, or purging, and life or rebirth, depending on how it is used. With the Judas Fire, the stomping out of the flames is intended to put to death Evil, which might cause a failure of crops. On the other hand, building fires at night for rebirth ceremonies, rekindles life as it produces its bright light. In other words, revelers possess a piece of the sun, or sun goddess, that has been stored in wood and released in flames. The Beltane Fires in Northern England and Scotland are lit for the nighttime May Day fertility celebrations.

In both English and American cultures, the garden cleaning and house cleaning superstitions also abound. Therefore you may find both men and women bringing in the "new day" by clearing away old weeds with fire or dust with brooms.

At 68, I'm not a fan of robin's egg blue suits, and I hope my wife isn't going to buy and parade around in an Easter bonnet with silk flowers adorning it. I will eat, though, English Cadbury cream-filled Chocolate Easter eggs and maybe chomp off an ear or two from an American Hershey's milk chocolate bunny. Plus, you'll most likely find me in my home church's Easter Sunday worship service.

The Golden Bough by Sir James George Frazer

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