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Source: *The Crane Bag*, Vol. 2, No. 1/2, The Other Ireland (1978), pp. 57-71

Published by: [Richard Kearney](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30059463>

Accessed: 12-01-2016 10:44 UTC

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Notes on the Early Irish Concept of Unity

Proinsias MacCana

History has long given its verdict on the Celts: they are the glorious failures of the ancient world, the tradition-bloated barbarians who sacked Rome and Delphi and overran vast kingdoms and regions from Britain to Asia Minor, giving promise of a dominion which in the event they could not consummate, intrepid – if unruly – fighters who took on the might of empire and went down gallantly but inevitably, peoples of the periphery whose achievements lay more in the spiritual and ideological than in the material and political fields, quintessential conservatives who maintained a tradition that was more Indo than European and who, when they innovated through borrowing, so transformed their borrowings as to make them hardly distinguishable from native idiom.

The Celts were the noble savages of imperial Rome. Not that they were the first to be assigned that role in the ancient world, but it fitted them to perfection, so much so that they and their descendants have never quite relinquished it (though not infrequently, particularly in more modern times, have they been relegated in the eye of the beholder beyond the razor-thin line that separates noble savage from crude

aboriginal.) History abetted by pushing them back ever further towards the western perimeter of the European continent and by finally reducing them to political subjection while allowing them a measure of cultural survival (if only for the reason that in pre-modern times cultural genocide was normally more troublesome and time-consuming than political conquest). As colonial natives they experienced the periodic shifts of mood – indulgent and patronizing, distrustful and antagonistic – on the part of the colonizers, and they enjoyed the doubtful privilege that sometimes falls to colonized peoples with a culture and a creative capacity which are too distinctive to be ignored – that of representation without responsibility, in other words the freedom to participate in a major tradition without the responsibility to maintain it or the obligation fully to conform to it. All the familiar symptoms and reactions which characterize such situations of ambivalent relationship are here present, among them the expectations of the colonizers as to the nature of the colonized –primitive and unspoiled, crude and uncivilized, gifted but undisciplined, lyrical and romantic,

dissembling and cunning, childish and wayward – and the tendency of the colonized (or those of them who figure forth as individuals) to confirm such expectations by their own behaviour. Hence the familiar role of the Irishman or Welshman as eccentric entertainer or licensed buffoon on the greater metropolitan scene, hence the odd blending of curiosity and convention in the comments of historians, ethnographers and travellers on the manners and customs of the Celtic peoples, both continental and insular, and the perdurability of the bundle of assorted clichés and generalizations that have come to form the average man's compact biography of Celt or Irishman.

None of these clichés, whether they have their origin in disinterested observation or in ethnic and political prejudice, is wholly without substance. Where they appear to misrepresent reality, this is more often the result of misplaced emphasis or oversimplification than of straight falsification. This is true, for instance, of the commonplace notion that the Celts/Gauls/Welsh/Irish were chronically incapable of unity of purpose and action and, as corollary (or premise?), that they lacked the sense of nationality (not to mention nationalism). Whatever of the second assumption – and we shall return to that presently – the first seems to be amply substantiated by the chronicle of Irish history, which from the annalistic perspective is little more than a catalogue of battles, burnings and killings and of continual strife and dissension, even in the face of external aggression. The inability of the Irish to make common cause against a common enemy becomes the more obvious in the context of the modern

concept of nationalism, and it is significant that from the sixteenth or seventeenth century onwards the Irish themselves seem to betray a growing if still intermittent consciousness of this as a defect, a negative factor in native society – the disillusioned realism of the poet who deplores *an dream bocht silte nár chuir le chéile*. And here surely we come close to the nub of the matter. One salutary lesson we have learned from anthropologists (and from some good cultural historians) is not to import our own inherited system of motivation and classification into our description of alien societies – and naturally this holds as true for the diachronic as for the synchronic plane. In the primitive Irish view of things political cohesion and centralism was not in itself necessarily a social good, nor did this attitude change radically with the rise of expansionist dynasties within the historical period. The underlying principle was one of coordination rather than consolidation. Overkings there were, and provincial kings, but the king *tout court* was the king of the petty or tribal kingdom, the *tuath*, and he and his kingdom constituted the central nexus, both ritual and political, in Irish society. One's *tuath* was one's *patrie* and beyond its boundaries one became an outlander, a foreigner (Old Irish *déoraid*, Welsh *alltud*), and however this definition may have been blurred by political expansionism in the historical period the conceptual and indeed the practical autonomy of the *tuath* long remained a basic feature of Irish social organization.

But kingdoms were not islands, and relations were maintained, through the persons of king, overking and king of a

province, by a system of treaties, bonds of allegiance . . . and by fighting. The structure of early Irish society was such that one could no more do without one's enemies than one could without one's friends and in consequence the character and the effects of warfare were limited accordingly. Modern police and 'security' forces, struggling to cope with urban unrest, are busy devising what they refer to as 'harmless weapons'; by the same euphemism one might almost describe the endemic warfare of early Ireland as 'harmless', for, while it could be barbarous, its primary aim was like that of the modern riot weapon: to sting and to stun but not to kill. It was not designed to destroy peoples or to annex territories, but to assert status or to claim redress for real or assumed breaches of established relations. Like the later faction fights it had a strong element of ritual, but it was essentially less destructive because it was less rigidly patterned and because in the long run its purpose, at least in theory, was to uphold social order and to bond the tribal kingdom. As in India the newly elected monarch had to carry out a successful cattle-raid as an integral part of the protracted ceremonial of royal inauguration, so in Ireland, though the procedure is less formally defined in the extant texts, he had to perform the *crech rí* or 'royal prey', and the whole symbolism of this ritual expedition underlines the normative and conservative function of the cross-border cattle-raid.

Two factors contributed towards this convention of limitation, one practical, the other ideological. Cattle-reiving in a cattle-caring society can be a source of profit as well as of honour, but one thing it requires is that

there is frequently sufficient to neutralize the lust for territorial conquest. Secondly, where war was governed by the heroic ethic, as was largely the case in early Ireland, it constituted its own justification and, as with the Indian *dharmavijaya* or 'righteous conquest', it had for its reward honour and glory rather than annexation of territory. Where one or other of these factors operates — or both — there is almost always a tendency to limit the consequences of war notably in its extent, duration and range of target — by a body of restrictive convention or a more or less developed code of chivalry. One of the most demoralizing effects of the Norse invasions, as D.A. Binchy has pointed out, was that they brought the Irish face to face with an enemy who ignored the traditional conventions . . . 'Hence war as waged by the invaders was more 'total', to use a modern term; ancient taboos were ignored; no holds were barred. Before long the native kings themselves were using these ruthless and efficient fighters as allies in their own quarrels, and, inevitably, came to adopt the new tactics.'

Viewed then in purely Irish or even in Indo-European terms the obvious political disunity of the country did not entirely lack a social rationale. Moreover the Vikings themselves demonstrated most dramatically if unintentionally that it could act as an effective mechanism of defence against foreign aggression — at least until such time as aggressors could mobilize sufficient forces and sophisticated weaponry to wage a war of total conquest: given the peculiar cellular, un-centralist structure of Irish civil organization and the absence of complex

organs of administration it was possible to win victory after victory and slay king after king without achieving effective control over any considerable part of the country. In the event the Norse invaders faced up to the realities of the situation and, conscious of their own priorities, set about establishing a string of posts and trading settlements around the coast that were to stand for all time as the Achilles heel of the native order.

This is what happened on the level of historical fact; equally significant, however – if less tangible – was the spiritual reaction produced by these events in the popular consciousness, in so far as this can be gauged accurately from their reflex in the literature. The Scandinavians do not figure as such in Irish non-historical literature before the eleventh century, but there can be little doubt that they are already present, disguised under the name Fomoiré, in a number of earlier texts. These Fomoiré are the demonic beings who exist somewhere beyond the sea, they opposed Partholán in the first battle that was fought in Ireland and they strive continually to subvert cosmic order as represented by legitimate rule and sovereignty within the confines of Ireland. When the pagan marauding Norsemen appeared around the Irish coast, the shock-waves created by their violent irruptions must have affected deeply the whole populace in the vicinity of their landings and beyond, and while the clerics, nobles and secular men of learning would have been only too well aware of the mortal character of the terror that afflicted them, for the mass of the people, beset by report and rumour, it was all too easy to confuse these marauding gentiles with

the mythic forces of anarchy. And so, when the cycle of Fionn mac Cumhaill and his brotherhood of roving hunter-warriors develops a prolific written literature from the twelfth century onwards which obviously draws heavily on popular and semi-popular oral tradition, one of the motifs which keep recurring in it is that of the Fiana defending the Irish shore against the Lochlannaigh, as the Norsemen are generally known in the non-historical literature. Here we have the fusion of myth and history, the assimilation of the historical event to the mythic analogue that is a characteristic feature of a people *admodum dedita religionibus* – and, what is important from our immediate point of view is that the dominating theme is the security and integrity of the land of Ireland, not of one or other of its constituent parts.

As the divine Lugh, paragon of kingship and vindicator of the sovereignty of Tara, had routed the hordes of Fomoiré in the great mythic battle of Mag Tuired, similarly did Fionn mac Cumhaill and the Fiana repel the attacks of the marauding Lochlannaigh.

One could of course argue, if one wished, that in the latter case the notion of Fionn as the protector of Ireland is tied up with the elaboration of the propagandist fiction of the high-kingship as a political reality, particularly from the ninth century onwards, but while this was doubtless a contributory factor it was not a prime cause: the idea of Ireland as a single entity goes back much further in time, and indeed without its prior existence the political exploitation of the 'high-kingship' would not have been possible. Here, as in so many other instances in the Irish past, history

converges with mythic tradition and draws support from it. D.A. Binchy has stressed the enhanced reputation of the over-king of the Uí Néill dynasties as a result of their obstinate resistance to the Norsemen and the increased prestige of the Tara monarchy as the main focus of that resistance, and he sees here 'a striking parallel with the fortunes of the house of Wessex which alone among the English kingdoms, maintained an unbroken resistance to the Danes, and eventually became the nucleus of the national monarchy.'¹ He has also observed that the Norse invasions evoked among the native population 'that sense of "otherness" which lies at the basis of nationalism'. Yet if this was a notable step on the unending road towards political unity, it was also by the same token a step towards the secularization and politicization of a spiritual datum of long standing. In ideological terms the sense of national identity and the concept of unity were already old when the Vikings first drew up their ships on the Irish shore.

Eoin MacNéill once wrote that the *Pentarchy* — the division of Ireland into five provinces ruled by five kings of equal status — 'is the oldest certain fact in the political history of Ireland', a statement so well supported by tradition as to be almost axiomatic. The corollary of this — as has since been argued with convincing logic by D.A. Binchy — is that the 'high-kingship' as a political reality is late and largely spurious. However, if the pentarchy thus helps to discredit the notion of a supreme political monarchy, at the same time (by the kind of paradox that is not unfamiliar in the Irish context) it also has the effect of highlighting the

underlying conceptual unity of the country. The word for a 'province' in Irish is *cúigeadh*, Old Irish *cóiced*, literally 'a fifth', and *cúig cúigidh na hEireann* is still a familiar synonym for 'the whole of Ireland'; and as the fraction presupposes the whole, so the five provinces, though politically discrete, are conceived as mere fractions of a single all-embracing totality coterminous with the land of Ireland. The pattern of a central province enclosed by four others representing the cardinal points cannot be explained otherwise than as a historical reflex of an ancient cosmographic schema, and one which has striking analogues in several of the 'Great Traditions' of the world. This cosmography is implicit in many incidental details of the extant tradition, though only one fairly extended exposition of it survives, in a Middle Irish text on 'The Disposition of the Manor of Tara'. This defines the extent of the provinces and their attributes and it declares that a pillar-stone with five ridges on it, one for each of the five provinces, was erected at Uisnech. The central province was known as *Mide* (from an older *Medion* 'Middle') and within it stood the hill of Uisnech, supposedly the centre of Ireland, or as Giraldus Cambrensis puts it: *umbilicus Hiberniae dicitur, quasi in medio et meditullio terrae positus*.²

Here we have one of the most fundamental constituents of Irish, and indeed of Celtic ideology: the cult of the centre. The very notion of a centre naturally presupposes a circumference and an encompassed unity, and it is both remarkable and significant that the Celts should have re-created this cult wherever they established themselves as a distinct community or nation with

reasonably well-defined borders. We have it on Caesar's authority that the Gaulish druids held an assembly at a holy place in the lands of the Carnutes which was believed to be the centre of the whole of Gaul, and to it came people from all parts to submit their disputes to the judgement of the druids. It seems likely that the *drunemeton* 'oak-sanctuary' at which the council of the Galatians met had a similar role to the 'holy place' of the Gauls, as no doubt had the great assembly, *Mórdháil Uisnigh*, which is said to have been held at Uisnech on May-day. The social and ideological significance of such assemblies cannot be disregarded. Ferdinand Lot declared that the Gaulish gathering maintained a kind of ideal unity, both judiciary and political, among the Gauls, comparing its role to that of the temple of Delphi among the Greeks: 'The Gauls had thus a sense of *celticité* as the Greeks had of Hellenism, in spite of the rivalries and wars that took place within these two nations. This the Romans understood full well, and they made use of the abolition of human sacrifice as a pretext for the persecution they carried out against druidism until it was exterminated.'³

It should be said at once that Lot's comments conceal a fair amount of academic controversy: was the pursuit of the druids as ruthless and thoroughgoing as some of our sources suggest, what were the real motives which inspired it, and what was the real extent of the druidic participation and influence in politics? For example, as part of the critical re-evaluation of the classical commentaries on the Gauls, especially Caesar's, it has been argued that the social and political importance of the druids has been exaggerated (as also

indeed their religious and speculative sophistication). How one interprets the evidence in this regard depends very much, I fear, on one's scholarly background and presuppositions; for instance, many of those who have cast doubt on Caesar's account — and not without some justification be it said — have been fortified in their conclusions by an almost total ignorance of the culture and social organization of the insular Celts.

Essentially the druid was a religious not a political figure, but the distinction was easily blurred where the political structures were as simple as they were in primitive Ireland and no doubt had been in the other Celtic communities. In the small individual kingdom the few governmental functions required were at the disposal of the king and, given that the chief-druid of the *tuath* was the king's 'chaplain' and counsellor and the interpreter of the law, it is inevitable that he should have exerted some influences on political policy within the *tuath* and, perhaps especially, in relations with neighbouring kingdoms; just how great his influence was in any particular instance must have depended as much on his adroitness and strength of personality as on the political power conferred by his office. By and large those who would make light of the druids' political role are those who believe that the Romans in seeking to suppress the druids were motivated by the desire to eradicate barbarism rather than to quell political opposition. The problem is that barbarism may mean different things to different people. For some, mainly the classically oriented, it was marked by savage practices, such as human sacrifice, which were incompatible with Roman civilization, and this was sufficient

justification for seeking to suppress it. But historical situations can rarely be adequately interpreted in such simple terms. The civilizing (or proselytizing) impulse is a characteristic feature of empire-builders wherever they appear and no doubt it affected Roman policy regarding the druids, but it would be naive to suppose that a sodality like the druids, enjoying high social status and control over law, religion and sacred tradition, would not have been seen as a main source and organizer of opposition to the Roman conquest. Whatever of nationalism, cultural or political, professional solidarity and self-interest alone would have given them sufficient cause to defend the native ideology and institutions with which their own existence was wholly bound up, and the Romans, in common with other colonizing powers before and after, were only too well aware that conquest to be permanent required acculturation and that a native learned class of prestige and influence could seriously hinder both one and the other. 'Dès la conquête terminée,' observed Joseph Vendryes, 'le druidisme devait porter ombrage aux vainqueurs, parce qu'il représentait une force d'opposition. C'est en lui que s'incarnaient les traditions nationales. Il fallait le supprimer pour romaniser le pays.'⁴

A millennium and a half later the same suspicion and animosity coloured the attitude of the British government towards the Irish 'rhymer' who were the lineal descendants of the druids, and ultimately for the same reason: consciousness of cultural identity and commitment to its preservation is not overtly political, even among a professional elite, but they have profound political implications and a

political potential which, given the right circumstances – the threat of foreign domination for example – can easily be transformed into an active and even decisive force. This is why the Romans and English distrusted druids and *filidh* and acted more or less effectively to neutralize them. The fact is, of course, that the *filidh*, whatever of the Gaulish druids, lacked the capacity for effective political action on a national scale. The element of 'realism' introduced by the Vikings does not appear to have seriously disturbed the basic assumptions which shaped their view of society and their own role within it; if indeed these assumptions were temporarily cast into doubt by the Vikings' lamentable lack of respect for convention, then they were certainly re-affirmed in the period of retrenchment which followed the Norse invasion and the reform of the Church. For the *filidh* themselves personified the web of paradox and ambiguity that materializes so easily where the two planes of reality, the secular and the sacred, converge. According to the view of the world by which they were conditioned the spiritual concept of a national unity did not require a mirror image in the realm of secular politics: in other words religious concept and political structure did not necessarily coincide. The cosmographic schema of the four quarters and the centre occurs in several major traditions as well as in Irish, but, as Alwyn Rees has remarked⁵, in many respects they are not in accord with actual political and geographical structures.

In Ireland Tara was the ritual centre of sovereignty and consequently the king of Tara enjoyed a special prestige,

but he was not in any real and practical sense king of all Ireland. Ideally, no doubt, religious and political entities would have formed a complete correspondence, but in practice circumstance would as surely have hindered its full realization. If we assume that Tara was established as the seat of sacred kingship *par excellence* by the Gaelic colonizers who seized dominion over large areas of the Northern Half, those who came to be known as Uí Chuinn 'descendants of Conn Cétchathach', then obviously its spiritual precedence could only become a political precedence in so far as the Uí Chuinn or their later representatives succeeded in gaining effective control over the whole of Ireland. This they failed to do. In particular, the province of Munster came under the sway of a different set of Gaelic colonizers who, while they shared for the most part the same cultural heritage as the northern overlords, yielded nothing willingly to them in terms of political power.

Thus, while in principle one might expect the two orders to tally, they do not do so in practice, through the pressure of personal, tribal and dynastic interests (and also perhaps, as we shall see, because there is an inherent tension and conflict between the political and cultural-religious spheres in many pre-modern societies). It is true that some scholars have found difficulty in accepting this. Faced by the discrepancy between the religious concept of unity and the reality of political disunity, they have sought to resolve it by discounting the former. Joseph Vendryes laid great stress on the local character of Irish, and Celtic, religion. He pointed to the some four hundred deity names attested in Gaulish inscriptions, noting

that the great majority of them occur only once. He also pointed to the formulaic oath which occurs a number of times in the tales of the Ulster cycle: *tongu do dia toinges mo thuath* 'I swear to the god to whom my tribe swears', and relates it to the name of the Gaulish deity *Teutates* mentioned by Lucan. The conclusion he arrived at was that Celtic religion lacked universal deities and was characterized by local cults and tribal deities. In this he was echoed by his brilliant student Marie-Louise Sjoestedt.

It seems to me that both of them have misread the evidence and have as a result greatly exaggerated the inorganic character of Celtic religion. The features on which they base their conclusions come into clearer focus when we take account of the syncretism of Gaulish religion as represented in epigraphy and plastic art, the inadequacies of the Irish written tradition as a record of pagan belief and practice, the use of multiple names for a single deity, the confusion of divine epithets with deity names, and so on. That two such perceptive scholars should have so erred by taking the evidence at its face value requires some explanation. In fact it is not improbable that they were influenced by the teaching of their close neighbours in the Sorbonne school of sociology and most especially by the views of Émile Durkheim, father of modern comparative sociology, who maintained that religion was essentially a social phenomenon and that 'primitive gods are part and parcel of the community, their form expressing accurately the details of its structure, their powers punishing and rewarding on its behalf.' Durkheim's theories in this regard have been accepted widely, if not universally

— some would argue that he has too completely disregarded the role of individuals interacting in a common environment — and naturally they have been especially influential among French scholars. Vendryes and Sjoestedt can hardly have been unaffected by them, and if this has led as I suspect to their partially misrepresenting the character and structure of Irish religion it is not that Durkheim's views are incorrect or irrelevant to the Irish situation, but that they have operated as an unstated and unquestioned premise and been applied without sufficient regard to the deficiencies of the extant corpus of evidence.

Irish religion is not unstructured, as Mlle Sjoestedt would have it ('we seek for a cosmos and find chaos'), and in some respects it does correspond to the political structure of Irish society; as we have seen, even the concept of national unity and the cult of the centre are common to both religion and politics, as indeed we might expect in a society dominated by the notion of sacred kingship; the important difference is that in the realm of politics the impressive centralist theory so richly supported by myth and ritual was almost impossible to translate into practical reality.

This disparity between the political and cultural-religious orders is not in any way peculiar to Ireland. There are societies in which one is a function of the other even to the extent that the degree of political centralism stands more or less in inverse ratio to that of religious and cultural unity. M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard have discussed the several variations on this relationship which they found among a number of African peoples in modern times:

'We may, therefore, ask to what extent cultural heterogeneity in a society is correlated with an administrative system and central authority. The evidence at our disposal in this book suggests that cultural and economic heterogeneity is associated with a state-like political structure. Centralized authority and an administrative organization seem to be necessary to accommodate culturally diverse groups within a single political system, especially if they have different modes of livelihood But centralized forms of government are found also with peoples of homogeneous culture and little economic differentiation like the Zulu. . . . A centralized form of government is not necessary to enable different groups of closely related culture to amalgamate, nor does it necessarily arise out of the amalgamation.'

It is a matter that has universal relevance for the analysis and classification of social organization:

'Herein lies a problem of world importance: what is the relation of political structure to the whole social structure? Everywhere in Africa social ties of one kind or another tend to draw together peoples who are politically separated and *political ties appear to be dominant whenever there is conflict between them and other social ties* (my italics). The solution of this problem would seem to lie in a more detailed investigation of the nature of political values and

of the symbols in which they are expressed. Bonds of utilitarian interest between individuals and between groups are not as strong as the bonds implied in common attachment to mystical symbols.⁷

Its relevance for the Irish situation in particular is obvious, for when Fortes and Evans-Pritchard speak of 'culture' and 'other social ties' they include among these myths, rituals and all the other 'mystical symbols' to which they attach such importance for the effective ordering of society. Basically what they are saying is that where there is cultural diversity unity must be maintained through centralist state-like structures, but that where there is cultural homogeneity these may be dispensed with. The position in early Ireland was that each individual kingdom was small enough not to require such structures, while in the country as a whole cultural-religious homogeneity was such that centralized government was unnecessary.

As in so many other contexts, here again one of the most striking analogues to the Irish situation, despite the glaring discrepancy in scale, is that of India. In the period before independence apologists for the Indian nationalist movement were much concerned to demonstrate the cultural homogeneity of the country as a justification for their claim to self-government. For that very reason their arguments and conclusions are suspect, or at least would be so if they were not confirmed by a good deal of informed objective opinion. When Radhakrishnan declares that 'there is an inner cohesion among the Hindus from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin', he is saying in effect what virtually every serious student of Indian

has said: that despite its teeming variety the huge continent of India shares in the same flexible tolerant, comprehensive culture engendered of Hinduism. In the words of the *Oxford History of India* (1919), p.x, 'India beyond all doubt possesses a deep underlying fundamental unity, far more profound than that produced either by geographical isolation or by political superiority. That unity transcends the innumerable diversities of blood, colour, language, dress, manners, and sect.' A stable, enduring political unity was something never achieved, even under the powerful Mauryan Empire, but such was the integrating force of India's dominant culture that she was able to absorb an endless variety of peoples and traditions in a way that is hardly paralleled elsewhere in the world.

This almost axiomatic sense of unity colours the whole mainstream of the literary tradition, and what I have said of Irish literature in this regard might be said, and indeed has been said, of its Indian counterpart: 'The Indian epics and legends, in their manifold versions, teach that the stage for the gods was nothing less than the entire land and that the land remains one religious setting for those who dwell in it.'⁸ Another of the many scholars who have stressed this capacity for integration is Louis Dumont ('By putting ourselves in the school of Indology, we learn in the first place never to forget that India is one . . .'). He views it in terms of a conflict between *dharma* 'the moral law, moral and religious duty', and *artha* 'material gain, the pursuit of the useful'. *Artha* is the negation of *dharma*, but since society continues to be ruled by *dharma*, the art of politics is thus dissociated from

the realm of values (a dissociation which is not unknown much nearer home, though lacking perhaps the same philosophical justification as in India). *Dharma* and *artha* must coexist, but they need not, and in a sense they cannot, coincide:

'It is not in the political sphere that the society finds its unity, but in the social regime of castes . . . The system of government has no universal value, it is not the State in the modern sense of the term, and as we shall see, the state is identical with the king. Force and interest work only for strife and instability, but these conditions may thrive without anything essential being put in question; much to the contrary, *social unity implies and entertains political division* (my italics).'⁹

Early Indian society differed profoundly from the modern African societies discussed by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, but clearly the principle succinctly enunciated by Dumont has relevance for the question posed and answered tentatively by them. When they say that 'bonds of utilitarian interest between individuals and between groups are not as strong as the bonds implied in common attachment to mystical symbols', what they are saying in fact is that *artha* has less binding force than *dharma*, though naturally these precise terms are very much culture-bound and the social context to which they refer is infinitely more complex than the African one. The dissociation of *dharma* and *artha* has even more relevance for early Irish society — not surprisingly in view of the

cultural affinities between Ireland and India. It may lack the explicit documentation and elaborate rationale that it has in India, but it is implicit in the very fabric of history and tradition.

In both India and Ireland, then, culture — in the sense of belief, ritual and general tradition — was the transcendent force operating towards unity, but it was able to do so effectively only because there was in both countries a learned and priestly class which could assert the claims (broadly speaking) of orthodoxy. The druid or *file* had his local affiliations but at the same time, he, and he alone, had free and untrammelled passage across tribal boundaries throughout Ireland. He had therefore, like the brahman, the mobility as well as the professional status and cohesion to propagate an accepted culture to all parts of the land and all segments of the population irrespective of ethnic origins. It might indeed almost be said of him, as has been said of the brahman, that 'the destruction of tribal culture was a logical outcome, if not the conscious goal, of his ideology.' In his residual role as priest and adviser to his royal patron the *file* was above all distinguished as praise-poet. This was one of his primary functions during the historical period, since praise-poetry was the medium *par excellence* for validating a rightful king and for setting forth in exemplary fashion the ideals of conduct which he should strive to maintain, and it is perhaps not surprising, in the light of what has already been said, that the topos of unity should crop up fairly frequently in these formal poems, some of which may have been odes composed for the occasion of the

prince or chief's inauguration. In a poem addressed to Niall Óg Ó Néill, who was inaugurated chief of Tír Eoghain in 1397, the poet Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn begins with the declaration:

From the north comes succour;
from Eamhain all quarters are
joined in union;
let the men of the north take Tara,
they who came to her aid in the
past.

and ends with a stanza that echoes and confirms the cosmographic allusion in the phrase *gach aird* 'all points of the compass, all quarters':

Niall Ó Néill of the nine fetters
brings peace to the lands he unites;
having established the five equal
divisions,
he goes forth to inspect the borders
of Ireland's territory.

Most of the examples of the theme of unification as a panegyric motif occur in the post-Norman period which saw the establishment of the hereditary schools of poetry run by a number of distinguished learned families. The work of these learned poets is dominated by praise-poetry—though this preponderance of the genre in the later, as compared with the earlier, period may be somewhat exaggerated by the fact that it was more consistently recorded; during the Old and Middle Irish period, when the writing of secular literature seems to have been virtually confined to the monastic scriptoria, it was hardly to be expected that panegyric verse should enjoy priority, whereas the position was quite the opposite from the thirteenth century onwards when the

learned lay families themselves assumed responsibility for writing the poetry and began to compile 'poem-books' (*duanairí*) which brought together the formal verse of individual poets or groups of poets or verse composed for individual patron families. This would help to account not only for the higher concentration of praise poetry in the post-Norman period but also for the higher frequency of the unity theme as a praise motif. It is true that one might also explain the latter as a reflex of a growing unease and foreboding among the poets, who now saw the social order on which they depended being gradually eroded and threatened with total dissolution, but the rather formalized manner in which the motif is used in most instances also suggests something less topical and it seems reasonable to accept that it is in fact a very old ingredient of native praise-poetry which, for the reasons I have suggested, is better documented after the twelfth century.¹⁰

That it acquired a new and more urgent relevance during this period, and especially from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, is beyond question. For as long as Gaelic society remained relatively intact, so long could the combination of spiritual unity and political disunity continue without serious risk, since both were encompassed within a common, universally acknowledged ideology. So far as the poets were concerned, raiding and skirmishing among native chieftains was little more than a well-tried social lubricant that conferred certain benefits and carried few dangers for the system. This is why Elanor Knott can write in the following terms of the poetry of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn, who died in

'He shows in most of his poems a calm acceptance of the contemporary strife, as though it were the natural order. Poetry flourished on it, and for him, like most bardic poets, the profession was the thing. The apprehensions and sorrows which troubled Irish poets of a slightly later period did not affect Tadhg Dall. Shadows palpable enough to us in his own poems portended no disaster to him. We may take him as a typical figure, thoroughly adapted in mind and customs to the existing order; utterly unaware of the imminent dawn of a new world.'¹¹

Warfare and strife were indeed part of 'the natural order'. So also was the traditional independence and mobility of the *file*, who, notwithstanding that he often formed close bonds of friendship and loyalty to a single patron, still set great value upon his own freedom to choose the subjects of his encomium. It is this, combined with a liberal dash of professional self-interest, that accounts for the apparent opportunism and cynicism of the poets some of whom seem to opt for the highest bidder and to measure their praise more in terms of profit than of merit — a failing which is neatly ridiculed by one of their own number, Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh, who flourished in the fourteenth century.

But by the late sixteenth century the poets were faced with a very different kind of reality, one in which war was fraught with calamitous and possibly irrevocable consequences. The expansion of English power in Ireland meant

cultural suppression as well as military conquest, and the ultimate outcome could only be the extinction of the native order. The poets, who were after all better placed than most, including their patrons, to take a global view of contemporary events, saw the signs and read them clearly. Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn himself realized the inappropriateness of the traditional dissipation of energy and in his poem urging Brian Ó Ruairc to engage the English in all-out war he counsels a different mode of action; I quote from the convenient summary by Standish Hayes O'Grady: '... in the sword alone all hope lies now, and the state of affairs is such that never were the five provinces less inclined to peace; but all will not serve unless there be union: from north to south, from sea to ocean; the components of a great and (supposing concord to prevail) a feasible army are recited: the poet's immediate hero being (according to the consecrated figure of speech) held forth as chief commander of the host.'¹² The nobles of Ireland, says the poet, 'are being driven to the outskirts of Ireland, while troops of English are at its very centre (*Na glémheadhón*)', in other words the foreigner has established himself at the sacred spot which symbolizes the unity of the country. The phrasing is eloquent in its brevity.

A hundred years later Dáibhí Ó Bruadair is scandalized by the bickering and dissension of the Irish leaders, declaiming his message with all the passion and solemnity that only he can bring to bear on such a subject. There is no cause to wonder, he says, that the English are successful, for they hold firm by their compact, unlike his fellow-Irishmen whose alliance falls

apart at the pluck of a hair. The substance of his complaint is summarized in the title assigned to this poem in several of the manuscripts; it reads in translation: 'The Shipwreck of Ireland, composed by Dáibhí Ó Bruadair on the misfortunes of Ireland in the year of the Lord 1691 and how the sins of her own children brought ruin and dispersion upon her in the month of October of that year: *Regnum in se divisum desolabitur*.¹³ Again in his poem to Patrick Sarsfield (no. XXII) he shows himself preoccupied with the same anxiety:

‘O King of the world, Thou who
hast created it
and everything that stands upon it,
redeem the land of Fodla from the
peril of this conflict
and join her peoples together in
mutual love’ –

to which a scribal note in one of the manuscripts adds the disillusioned comment, *Agus fáríor ní dearna* 'But alas! He did not'.

By the time of Dáibhí Ó Bruadair the great dissolution of the native order had largely been accomplished, a circumstance which goes some way to explaining the sombre cast of much of his verse. He realized the full implications of the cultural changes brought about by military defeat and the imposition of British rule and he was close enough to the old dispensation to appreciate in a way that was impossible for those who came after how much had been lost and never could be regained. The symbols of unity are occasionally invoked by later poets, but they have become mere stereotypes emptied of real significance, either in the political or in

the cultural sphere. Throughout the visible history of Irish tradition the palpable mark of the cultural unity of the island was the learned, literary language fashioned and cared for by endless generations of druids and *filí*; now this linguistic cohesion was shattered, and with its shattering came the end not perhaps of a culture but certainly of an ideology. *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold* – the atrophy of the archetypal symbolism of the centre and of the cosmographic vision of totality of which it is a part signifies the collapse of a subtle equilibrium between cultural cohesion and political segmentation that was, it would seem, already old when the Celtic peoples were born. This perhaps more than any other single event or innovation marks the end of traditional Irish society and – from the ideological point of view – the reversion from order to chaos.

These notes on the traditional concept of unity are not intended to be exhaustive nor do they follow through to the end the possible implications of the topic. One might, for instance, trace out the extremely important role of the land, the actual soil of Ireland, as the material basis for the concept of national unity, and the tensions and complications which later arise within Irish republican nationalism when 'the people' – an entity which figures hardly at all in Irish tradition – becomes an integral part of the complex from the eighteenth century onwards. One might also reflect on the curious contradiction between the traditional view that cultural unity could dispense with political unity and the modern nationalist view which glorifies political unity irrespective of cultural disparities.

But these are for another day and
perhaps another hand.

1. *The Impact of the Scandinavian Invasions on the Celtic-speaking Peoples c. 800-1100 A.D.*, ed. Brian Ó Cuív (Dublin 1962), 129.
2. *Top. Hib.*, ed. Dimock, 144. For the idea of Uisnech as the 'naval' of Ireland, cf. *ós imlind Usnig* 'above Uisnech's navel', *Ériu* 4, 150. 22.
3. *La Gaule* (Paris 1947), p. 79f.
4. *La religion des Celtes*, p.294.
5. *Proceedings of the International Congress of Celtic Studies*, 1963, (Cardiff 1966), p.47f.
6. This is how Mary Douglas summarizes the central message of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* in her *Purity and Danger* (Pelican Books 1970), p.30.
7. *African Political Systems*, ed. M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (Oxford 1940), pp.9, 23.
8. David G. Mandlebaum, *Society in India* (Univ. of Calif. 1970), ii, 401.
9. Louis Dumont, *Religion, Politics and History in India* (The Hague 1970), p.78.
10. It has been noted of other pre-modern societies that praise-poetry can fulfil a unifying function. Among the Zulu, for instance, praise of the chief, who personified his tribe, served to build up tribal loyalty and solidarity, and, when the various tribes were joined to form a Zulu nation, it helped to bind them together in a common loyalty (cf. Trevor Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-poems* (Oxford 1968), 32f.).
11. *The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn* (London 1922), I, xiv.
12. *Catalogue of Irish Mss. in the British Museum* (London 1926), 413f.
13. *Poems*, ed. John C. Mac Erlean, S.J. (London 1917), III, 164.