

Ritual and Elements – a Ternary Approach

By Potia. July 2005

This article will first give a brief idea of the philosophy of a ternary approach and why it might be needed in a modern lifestyle. It will give a few examples of ternary thought and approaches drawn from ancient Irish and Welsh cultures and manuscripts. The article will go on to give examples of how such an approach could be included in a modern Pagan lifestyle from the perspective of one walking a Druid path.

The western society we live in tends to view things in a binary system, you are right or wrong, there is good or evil, there are truths and lies, black and white, light and dark and even in modern Paganism or Neo-paganism there can be a tendency towards seeing deity in terms of a binary system of God and Goddess. There is nothing inherently wrong with this system of thinking but at the same time it can be limiting. In reality there are very few things that can be classified into opposing camps in this way. For example truth is something that can very rarely be a simple thing. Even when two people witness the same event they will remember different aspects of that event and may sometimes contradict each other without lying about what they experienced and witnessed.

From the Three Druid Elements by John Michael Greer:

“Back in the nineteenth century, schools of esoteric philosophy closely allied with French Druidry worked out ways to overcome this habit of twofold thinking. In these systems any division into two is called a binary, or more fully an unresolved binary. Binaries make useful tools for thinking when you need to focus on differences, but they produce a distorted picture unless they're balanced by something else. The opposite distortion comes from a unary, a view of the situation that sees only one factor, and focuses attention exclusively on equalities.

The first number that guides thinking into balanced patterns is the number three. Divisions into three are called ternaries. Every ternary, according to this teaching, consists of two things opposed to each other, and a third that connects them together. Thinking in ternaries pays attention to differences that divide and equalities that unite. While it's not foolproof, ternary thinking thus sidesteps some common pitfalls in the way of clear understanding.”

(Greer, 2003)

The logic of the ternary can help to balance the binary ideas and influences. Where the binary approach gives us things in black and white, the ternary approach includes all the shades of grey. Where binary thought says that something is a truth or a lie

ternary thought allows for more flexibility and allows for an individual's perspective on something to affect their views so allowing for shades of meaning. A ternary approach encourages us to look at things from several different perspectives before coming to decisions or making judgements. It is not a foolproof approach but it helps us to see a wider picture.

In both ancient Welsh and Irish writings we have lore recorded in Triads such as:

“The Three great melodies of creation:
The wind in the Trees.
The stream at snowmelt.
The cry of a new-born babe.”
(Mor, 1998: 26)

Triads like these are a common feature in Celtic writings. The number three was one of the sacred numbers to the Celts. Lore and legends often refer to things in multiples of three: the three Bridgets, “beyond the ninth wave”, the realms of Earth, Sky and Sea, the three strains of Celtic harp music; joy, grief and sleep, Scottish needfires kindled by 9 men, with the fire made up with 9 sticks gathered by nine men from nine trees, companies in myth often are of 27 men with 1 leader. Stories often have three phases or three tasks and then there's the concept of the threefold death. Ternary ideas appear again and again in Celtic lore and mythology and they have an important place within modern Druidry as well. If we use ternary ideas we can work towards balancing the way we approach the world. To use only ternary concepts would be to go too far in that direction but as so little in our western lives lends itself to ternary ideas it can be helpful to use these concepts in our spiritual life in order to help us to balance our approach to life a little better.

One example of the ternary approach in Irish and Welsh lore are the elements of Earth, Sea and Sky. It is likely that fire was not considered an element in the ancient classical sense but it was considered to be an aspect of divine energy. Before I talk about these elements in detail I would first like to mention the concept of the “dúil”. The Celtic elemental system links the world in which we live to our own bodies, the macrocosm of the world linked to the microcosm of the self. It is about the identity of self within the World and this is what is also referred to as the “dúil”. The translation of this word according to MacBain's online Gaelic dictionary (at:

<http://www.ceantar.org/Dicts/MB2/index.html>) is either expectation, hope, an element or creature. The concept of the “dúil” is most easily explained by giving examples from sources such as Amergin’s Rune. In this poem Amergin uses words to attune himself to his new environment. The following is a translation of the ancient Irish by Caitin Matthews.

I am a wind on the sea,
I am a wave of the ocean,
I am the roar of the sea,
I am an ox of seven exiles,
I am a hawk on a cliff,
I am a tear of the sun,
I am a turning in a maze,
I am a boar in valour
I am a salmon in a pool,
I am a lake on a plain,
I am a dispensing power,
I am a spirit of skilful gift,
I am a grass-blade giving decay to the earth,
I am a creative god giving inspiration.

Who else clears the stones of the mountain?
Who is it who declaims the sun’s arising
Who is it who tells where the sun sets?
Who brings cattle from the house of Tethra?
On whom do the cattle of Tethra smile?
Who is this ox?
Who is the weaving god who mends the thatch of wounds?
The incantation of a spear,
The incantation of the wind.
(Mathews C & J, 1994: 11)

Note: Tethra is a poetic reference to the surface of the Sea, the cattle of Tethra being the waves themselves.

Another example of this concept is the well known poem called Hanes Taliesin in which Taliesin not only links himself with the world around him but with the divine and to the past, present and future. In this work he links himself to all existence. When considering this concept of the “dúil” you can see that it would not be unusual for the elements of Earth, Sea and Sky to be linked to the individual in a very personal way.

The most common links for the three elements of Earth, Sea and Sky seems to be either to our to Flesh, Blood and Soul respectively or to our Body, Spirit and Soul.

The elements of Earth, Sky and Sea can each be broken down further into three parts making nine elements in total. Earth breaks down into soil, rocks and plants. Sea breaks down into seas, clouds and winds (all things that flow) and Sky into the Sun, Moon and the heavens.

When broken into these nine components the links to a human body can be seen as follows:

Earth – flesh

Stone – bones

Plants – skin or hair

Sea – blood

Clouds – thoughts

Wind – breath

Sun – face

Moon – brain

Sky or heavens – soul.

This information is drawn from articles by various sources including Caitlin Mathews, John Michael Greer, Searles O’Dubhain and Elisaid Ní h'Eibhin. All of the articles have in turn drawn upon references in a number of Irish manuscripts and references to these sources are included at the end of this article.

Each of the Celtic elements of Earth, Sea and Sky can also be linked to what is called a Cauldron within each person. The three cauldrons are known as the Cauldron of Warming, the Cauldron of Motion or Vocation (depending on the translation) and the Cauldron on Wisdom or Knowledge. There is a particular manuscript which deals with this concept which in translation is referred to as the “Cauldron of Poesy”. It gives information about what each one can effect and is effected by, what position they are in at birth and how they can be turned.

“What then is the source of poetic art and every other knowledge? Not hard. Three cauldrons are engendered with each person, the Cauldron of Warming, the Cauldron of Vocation and the Cauldron of Knowledge.

The Cauldron of Warming is born face up in a person first of all; from it learning is distributed to all people in early youth. The Cauldron of Vocation, then, increases after it has been activated; it is originally present on its side in each person. The Cauldron of Knowledge is originally positioned upside down, and it distributes many artistic gifts, besides poetry.

The Cauldron of Vocation, in every second person, is upside down in unenlightened people; it is on its side in those who practise bardic and poetic skills; it is upright in the masters of knowledge and learned art. The reason why every person does not attain the same level of proficiency is because the Cauldron of Vocation is upside down for them until it is converted by sorrow or joy.”
(Mathews C & J, 1994: 225)

And it goes on from there to list the types of sorrow or joy that can turn the cauldrons. In her article “The Three Cauldrons of Inspiration” Caitlin Matthews gives a translation of the original Irish manuscript and also goes onto suggest the positioning of the cauldrons within the body as the Cauldron of Warming placed in the lower abdominal region, the Cauldron of Motion or Vocation at the heart and the Cauldron of Knowledge or Wisdom in the head.

The three cauldrons can be linked to the three Celtic elements as follows:

- Earth is linked to the Cauldron of Warming
- Sea to the Cauldron of Motion or Vocation
- Sky to the Cauldron of Wisdom or Knowledge.

In other words the Cauldron of Warming is concerned with our bodies, the Cauldron of Motion with our blood, thoughts and breath or our Spirit and the Cauldron of Wisdom links to our soul. This means that if you have a problem with physical health then working with your Cauldron of Warming would probably help. If you have a problem with something you are learning or an emotional issue then working with the Cauldron of Motion is more appropriate and if you are troubled in the practice of your faith in some way then working with the Cauldron of Wisdom should help. As with any concept of this nature it is possible to visualise these cauldrons and their contents in meditation and in this way you can work to clean either the vessel itself or the contents and in doing so improve the situation causing you problems.

While the information above mainly refers to Irish sources Druidry that is inspired by Welsh traditions and writings is usually influenced to some extent or another by Iolo Morganwg's Barddas. One of the sets of three that is found in Iolo Morganwg's writings that seems to agree with Irish sources is his description of the three elements of nwyfre, gwyar, and calas. John Michael Greer in his article on Three Druid Elements discusses the meanings and symbolisms of these concepts. He writes:

"Nwyfre (pronounced "NOOiv-ruh") is an old Welsh term meaning "sky" or "heaven." As an element, nwyfre is the source of life and consciousness, and modern Druids often refer to it simply as the life force. Its image in nature is blue sky. Gwyar (pronounced "GOO-yar") literally means "blood" in old Welsh, but its more general meaning is "flow" or "fluidity." As an element, gwyar is the source of change, motion, growth, and decay. Its image in nature is running water. Calas (pronounced "CAH-lass") comes from the same root as *caled*, Welsh for "hard," and means "solidity." As an element, calas is the source of form, differentiation, manifestation, and stability. Its image in nature is stone."
(Greer, 2003)

Given the similarities between these Welsh elements and the Irish sources it seems likely to me that this aspect of the Barddas draws on genuine Welsh traditions. I am well aware that many scholars feel that aspects of the Barddas were probably created by Iolo himself and not drawn from older manuscripts or traditions.

From the above we now have a set of three elements linking into three centres of the self. Use of use of these sets of three in meditation, chants and ritual can help to attune yourself to the World around you. As you become more aware of the relationships between different parts of yourself and different parts of the World you become more aware of the connections and relationships between all things. As this awareness deepens so to the hold on your mind of the typical western binary approach weakens.

Examples of simple chants or mantras that can be used on a regular or even daily basis that I have found to help in this process include:

Three Cauldrons prayer/meditation

Cauldrons three,
I know to be,

Deep within me.

All unseen
Let me clean
My Cauldron of Warming.
Let me feel,
Let me heal
My Cauldron of Warming.
Let me see
Deep within me
My Cauldron of Warming.

All unseen
Let me clean
My Cauldron of Motion.
Let me feel,
Let me heal
My Cauldron of Motion.
Let me see
Deep within me
My Cauldron of Motion.

All unseen
Let me clean
My Cauldron of Wisdom.
Let me feel,
Let me heal
My Cauldron of Wisdom.
Let me see
Deep within me
My Cauldron of Wisdom.

Cauldrons three,
I know to be,
Deep within me.

Elemental prayer/meditation

Earth, Sky and Sea.
These are the three.
All within me.

Earth beneath me,
Earth within me,
Earth about me.
Sea around me,
Sea within me,
Sea about me.
Sky above me,
Sky within me,

Sky about me.

Earth, Sky and Sea.
These are the three.
All within me.

Nine Elements Prayer

The World in me
For all to see
So may it be

As Earth my flesh
As Stone my bones
As Plants my hair
As Sea my blood
As Wind my breath
As Clouds my thoughts
As the Sun my face
As the Moon my brain
As the Heavens my soul

The World in me
For all to see
So may it be

All of these can also be used with prayer beads but as they are in sets of threes and nines you will need a set of beads that can fit that pattern. The only ones I know of are made by Siusaidh at Clutha's Cave (<http://stores.ebay.co.uk/Cluthas-Cave>)

This ternary approach can also be used in ritual. Instead of calling to the four quarters you can call to Earth, Sea and Sky. In many Druid rituals three types of ancestors are already called, ancestors of blood, ancestors of the place you are working in and ancestors of your spiritual path. Having three calls to deity is another way of encouraging people to think beyond the binary approach. In many rites calls to deities are done in pairs God and Goddess. Why should there be calls only to a God and Goddess of that festival? Some deities do come as couples within the myths of their cultures but not all of them do. Some deities are not definable as either male or female but are hermaphrodite in nature and calling to a male God or a female Goddess excludes these deities. Why not include a deity of the local area or of your tribe? Of course you can also have rituals which are focussed upon one deity to give honour to that deity alone and that too moves us away from the binary approach. There is

nothing wrong with using a binary approach in ritual or in life in general. This article is simply intended to explain how using a ternary approach brings in a different energy and how it can be used for those that wish to try it.

References:

Greer J.M. (2003) Three Druid Elements from chapter 2 of *Druidry: A Green Way of Wisdom* available at: <http://www.aoda.org/articles/elements.htm> last accessed 27 Jul. 2005

MacBain, A. (1982) *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* available at: <http://www.ceantar.org/Dicts/MB2/index.html> last accessed 27 Jul. 2005

Mackenzie, D. A. (1935) *Scottish folk-lore and folk life: studies in race, culture and tradition* London: Blackie & Son Limited

Matthews, C & J. (1994) *Encyclopaedia of Celtic Wisdom: A Celtic Shaman's Sourcebook* Dorset: Element Books Limited

Morien Institute *The 'Hanes Taliesin' riddle-poem* available at: <http://www.morien-institute.org/hanesguest.html> last accessed 27 Jul. 2005

Mor, C (1998) *The Moon on the Lake* Sydney: Random House

Ní h'Eibhin, E. (2003) *The Dúil* (not published)

O'Dubhain, S. (1997) *The Elements of the Dúile* available at: <http://home.flash.net/~bellbook/faolcu/elmntsduile.html> last accessed 27 Jul. 2005

Rees, A. and Rees, B. (1961) *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* London: Thames and Hudson Limited