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ARTICLE

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"Remember, remember the fifth of November" – A time now to be forgot? The psychology and politics of remembering and forgetting, celebrating and commemorating

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Abstract

The lighting of fires and fireworks on 5th November is a tradition that has continued to varying degrees within Great Britain and the former British Colonies since the *Observation of the 5th November Act 1605* became law, only months after the plot to kill James I was foiled on the evening of 5th November 1605. Since then, like many traditions, the original reasons and methods for remembering and celebrating have been deliberately usurped for differing religious and political intent, as well as having become diluted simply through the passage of time and location. More recently, some places still celebrating Bonfire Night have tried to ban fireworks, and/or change the celebration to fit other cultural events. This article explores the reason for the original Act, and the way in which this intent has been usurped to serve different ends; it also considers the more general implications of maintaining such traditions within a multicultural society, as they can influence the reality and development of shared or separatist multicultural identities. The parallel between maintaining traditions to reinforce collective identities is considered, as well as the role and risks of integrating multicultural traditions to develop a stable personal identity within psychotherapy. It then concludes with the assertion that continuing to celebrate the 5th November has a role to play in maintaining a shared identity, irrespective of what is actually being remembered.

Remember, remember!
The fifth of November,
The Gunpowder treason and plot;
I know of no reason
Why the Gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot!
(English folk verse, c. 1870, Habing, 2006)

1 | FIRE AND FIREWORKS IN GREAT BRITAIN BEFORE GUY FAWKES

The history of lighting fires or bonfires in Great Britain began long before it became associated with 5th November, and Guy Fawkes. In Celtic tradition, for example, fire festivals were known to have been observed four times per year to mark each quarter point, since the 13th century Common Era (CE). These were Imbolc (2nd February), Beltane (1st May), Lughnasadh (1st August) and Samhain (31st October). People would gather around a bonfire, and often drink, dance and sing to ward off evil spirits (Battel Bonfire Boyes, 2016). In his *Statistical Account of Scotland*, published in 1793, Sir John Sinclair mentioned that, in the Highlands, bonfires were lit and consecrated cakes baked on 1st November (the first day of winter) and on 1st May (the first day of spring). In North Wales the autumnal fire was called Coel Coeth; it was accompanied by such ceremonies as leaping through the fire (as on St. John's Eve in Germany and other countries), throwing nuts in the fire, and biting at apples suspended from a string.

The derivation of the word "bonfire" itself has been variously referenced to mean "bone-fire" relating to the burning of martyrs or bones to drive out bad spirits, "boon-fire" (from the French *bon*) relating to welcoming in good occasions, or "beacon-fire" (from the Danish *bavn*), and has been referenced in these various forms, again since the 13th century CE (Battel Bonfire Boyes, 2016).

Similarly, fireworks have had an extensive cultural and social history, long before being associated with the Gunpowder Plot. It is thought that fireworks were first made in China sometime between 600 and 900 CE, were brought to Europe during the Middle Ages and became involved in general celebrations, being used, for example, in England, for the coronation of Anne Boleyn as Queen in 1533 (Waxman, 2017).

Thus, it could be argued that both fire and firework celebrations have very little to do with specifically remembering 5th November and so there is little need to keep this date as a reason to have such a celebration. So, what exactly is supposedly being remembered on Bonfire Night?

2 | 5TH NOVEMBER: GUNPOWDER, TREASON AND PLOT

Under the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603), English Catholics experienced persecution for over 45 years, being banned from celebrating mass, forced to attend Protestant services, and fined heavily if they did not comply (Lester, 2017). When James I ascended the throne, it was anticipated by some Catholics that he would be more moderate in his views, and they would once again be free to practise their religion, especially as his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had been a devout Catholic. When this did not happen, a group of Catholic conspirators resolved to destroy the Anglo-Scottish king, along with the Protestant episcopacy, peerage and parliamentary gentry who were due to assemble at the opening of the houses of parliament in Westminster on 5th November 1605. The mastermind behind the plot was Robert Catesby, a wealthy Catholic man of noble stock. He involved the other conspirators: Thomas Bates, Robert and Thomas Wintour, Thomas Percy, Christopher and John Wright, Francis Tresham, Everard Digby, Ambrose Rookwood, Robert Keyes, Hugh Owen, John Grant, and Guy Fawkes, who was employed as the explosives expert (Cannadine, 2005).

Their method was to place 36 barrels of gunpowder under the main hall of the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, with the intent of blowing up the king and almost everyone else attending on that day. Indeed, a television programme "The Gunpowder Plot: Exploding the Legend" (Darlow Smithson Productions & Slee, 2005) first shown on the ITV network in the UK concluded that the amount of gunpowder used would have obliterated not only all those attending, but anything and anyone within a blast radius of over 500 yards. As the conspirators were concerned not to include any Catholic peers in the blast, they decided to send out an anonymous letter warning them not to attend. One of these was sent to the Baron of Monteagle, who alerted the authorities, and as a result Guy Fawkes was discovered guarding the explosives. Under torture he then gave up the names of his conspirators. Due to be hung, drawn and quartered, he jumped from the hanging scaffold and broke his neck, thus avoiding the more painful and gruesome fate (Mayall, 2017).

3 | TRADITION AND POLITICS: THE CHANGING FACES OF 5TH NOVEMBER

On the day of the conspirators' arrests, impromptu bonfires were lit across London to celebrate King James I's survival. However, the "miraculous" (Sharpe, 2006) nature of the plot's discovery also proved to be an important propaganda tool to further solidify Protestant rule. Even before the execution of the plotters, Parliament passed the observance of 5 November Act 1605, also known as the *Thanksgiving Act (*only repealed in 1859), which required every parish church in England to deliver a sermon on 5th November thanking God for James I's deliverance from a Catholic plot (Sharpe, 2006).

The new holy day was adopted fairly slowly at first, as the day itself was not made a national holiday, only mandated for a sermon of thanksgiving. Despite this, celebration was also actively encouraged by the establishment to promote anti-Catholic sentiment and it was known as Gunpowder Treason Day (Sharpe, 2006). Thus, by the 1620s it had become the most observed day of commemoration in the British calendar, involving not only the lighting of large fires, but use of gunpowder-infused fireworks, assumed to represent the explosives that were never used (Sharpe, 2006). Within London especially, although Gunpowder Treason Day was seen as an enjoyable and social celebration, anti-Catholic sentiment remained a core focus, and was whipped up repeatedly when politically expedient to do so. For example, when the young Charles I ascended the throne, observation of the day was seen by influential Protestants as an indictment of his dedication to his Catholic wife (Sharpe, 2006). On 5th November 1646 celebrations were also used to whip up anti-Catholic fervour during the English Interregnum, as a method to reinforce the power of the Parliamentarians. This occurred again between 1677 and 1682, when effigies of the Pope were burnt on fires throughout the country by angry Protestants after the Duke of York converted to Catholicism. Much later, this was captured in the poem of 1870 (quoted as the epigram to this article), which include the lines: "A rope, a rope, to hang the Pope|A penn'orth of cheese to choke him|A pint of beer to wash it down|And a jolly good fire to burn him!" (Habing, 2006). Such was the violence accompanying these events that the following year bonfires and fireworks were banned throughout England. However, despite also being banned under James II, Gunpowder Treason Days continued to be celebrated, and where it was not possible to make bonfires, the day was noted by placing candles in windows (Hutton, 2001). In other parts of Britain the religious link was already being lost, and it was in the period 1625–1640 that in some places the evening started to be referred to as Bonfire Night: tar barrels, paid for by parishioners, were burned and fires were lit (Sharpe, 2006).

Interestingly, in 1688, when James II was deposed by William of Orange, the whole function of 5th November changed for the ruling classes. William landed in England on that day. This, combined with his birthday being 4th November, resulted in 5th November becoming a celebration of freedom, as well as of William's double "arrival." The official prayers were re-written and the specific commemoration of James I's survival was lost. However, on this occasion, and merely for safety reasons, the ban on fireworks remained, but fires were allowed to be lit.

When British colonists landed in America, only some 15 years after the plot itself, it was the focus on the burning of effigies of the Pope and other figures which appeared to be taken with them. Hence in America, where it was celebrated, it became rather ironically called Pope Day (Stewart, 2015). However, the day lost its importance during the American Revolution, as colonists had new symbols of hatred on which to focus their attentions. In some communities 5th November was renamed Benedict Arnold Day after a then infamous war-hero-turned-traitor (Pollack, 2015). In Canada, following the passing of the *Quebec Act 1774*, which guaranteed French Canadians free practice of Catholicism, Pope Day was no longer observed. As a result, in the United States, in order to maintain positive relations with Catholics in Canada, George Washington made a public statement of his disapproval of Pope Day, as he saw it as insulting to their religion. Subsequently, in many parts of America, Pope Day also ceased to be observed. Although in some parts of New England and New Hampshire bonfires continued to be lit on 5th November until the late 1800s, these no longer commemorated the failure of the Gunpowder Plot; rather, the date became an opportunity to have a social event with food, fire and fireworks. It is also considered that the growing popularity of Halloween in the 19th century may have contributed to the decline in Pope Day celebrations, which, in most parts of America, have now faded away completely (Stewart, 2015).

In England, in the meantime, the effigy burnt moved more consistently towards being that of Guy Fawkes, and the day began to be more commonly known as Guy Fawkes' Day. It is of note that, in the late 18th century, there appeared to be a split in the manner of celebrating it, as, for the lower classes in some areas such as Guildford and Lewes, Guy Fawkes' Day was seen as a pretext for violence and uncontrolled revelry by a group of men who called themselves "Guys", the focus being more on settling personal scores than inciting any religious fervour (Sharpe, 2006). Also, by this time, children began to be observed begging for money using effigies of Guy Fawkes, and the phrase "A penny for the Guy" became a popular request (to fund fireworks) before the Guy was set alight atop the bonfire. Thus, the event had moved from anti-Catholic rhetoric to a simple time of celebration using fire and fireworks, with Guy Fawkes as the central focus.

Later colonists appear to have taken the non-partisan meaning of the lighting of fireworks and burning of fires to remember the events of 5th November 1605 to other emerging colonies, and so left out most of the religious undertones. In Australia, South Africa, various countries in the Caribbean, and New Zealand, the day was exported as Bonfire Night or Guy Fawkes Night.

By the 20th century, the links to violence had subsided, and the day was internationally seen by many who still celebrated it as a peaceful and enjoyable, non-religious social event.

It is clear, therefore, that, while the celebration of Bonfire Night has continued, what has been remembered since 1605 through observation of 5th November has been many and varied. It also appears that, while the commemoration was initially strongly politically motivated, once that specific driver had subsided, certain factions temporarily hijacked this time for violence. Now, for those that continue to celebrate the day, it has simply become an excuse for fire, fireworks and fun, an occasion that likely taps into much deeper-seated needs, as evidenced by the use of fireworks and fire as features of celebration throughout history and across continents. However, when debating the current utility of continuing to observe Bonfire Night on 5th November, those in power appear to still draw on the history behind Bonfire Night either to support or decry its continuance.

4 | CURRENT DEBATES: THE ONGOING SIGNIFICANCE OF 5TH NOVEMBER AS A TRADITION TO UPHOLD

Recently, the celebrating of Bonfire Night has again come under threat, with questions raised not simply about the physical safety of personal fires and fireworks, but also as to the relevance of continuing to commemorate a historical event from 400 years ago, apparently celebrating a murderous anti-establishment act, and a Protestant agenda.

An article in *The Daily Telegraph* (Quinn, 2006), for example, highlighted how in Tower Hamlets in the UK Bonfire Night was no longer being supported by the Council. Liz Pugh, producer of the Emperor and the Tiger Festivities,

condemned the anti-Catholic heritage of Bonfire Night, stating "We no longer want to be involved in that" (paragraph 5), and that fireworks were better incorporated into a professionally managed display within the Emperor and Tiger Festivities instead. However, councillor Tim Archer argued that "Bonfire night is a celebration of our rich and proud history and it would appear it's being air-brushed out with some sort of attempt to be politically correct" (*London Evening Standard*, 2006, paragraph 13).

In a similar fashion, an article in the *Dominion Post* by Collette Devlin (2017) highlighted how in Wellington, New Zealand, the City Council decided to cancel Guy Fawkes and move the use of fireworks to the Māori Matariki (New Year) celebration in June/July. In this article, Mayor Justin Lester simply noted that "Matariki ought to be the cornerstone celebration, rather than the long running November tradition, which marked the anniversary of an attempt to blow up British parliament more than 400 years ago"(Paragraph 3). However, in the same article, councillor Iona Pannett was quoted as saying that "it's been a long part of our history, and despite what it represents, we live in a multicultural environment, and it is about celebrating traditions" (Paragraph 15).

However, this raises an interesting point about the difference between commemorating and celebrating. As noted above, what 5th November has commemorated has changed over time, and now appears far less important than the collective act of celebration, enjoyed by many, through fireworks, food and fun. This point seems to be missed by many, as exemplified in an article in *Stuff* by Rob Rattenbury (2017), where he notes with apparent frustration that in New Zealand, whilst Bonfire Night is celebrated, no tradition has been developed to commemorate the memory of those who fell on both sides in the New Zealand land wars between 1860 and 1872. This seems to assume that the commemoration aspect of Bonfire Night is the central reason for continuation of the tradition.

More recently, in some parts of the world the tradition of bonfires has been deliberately usurped as a means simply to boost tourism, as in the Burning Man festivals, which are now becoming a yearly tradition, but which have no commemorative basis or historical significance (Richards & Palmer, 2010).

Certain factions have also again hijacked specific aspects of the history of Bonfire Night for their own political symbolism. For example, in the 1980s, graphic novelists Alan Moore and David Lloyd created the comic strip "V for Vendetta," in which the main protagonist wore a grinning, moustached Guy Fawkes mask. Following the release of the film of the same name, this mask was used by several extremist groups, such as the project Chanology, which attacked the Scientology church, and Anonymous, an online activist hacking group (*The Economist*, 2014). In these publications, the film and on websites, the caricatured face of Guy Fawkes became the face of post-modernist protest, but again it had no specific links to the events of 5th November 1605. Similarly, and more recently, Harvey Weinstein was the effigy chosen to be burnt on 5th November 2017 at Edenbridge in Kent in the UK (Wright, 2017).

It would seem, then, that the arguments over 5th November may centre on a broader debate than simply the single action of banning an outdated commemorative celebration, namely the value of upholding, in whatever form, or letting go of historical traditions, festivals or other celebrations, to which it may be uncomfortable for some to remain attached, or which represent an identity or history to which some parties do not wish to relate. Thus, the nature of acts of commemoration and/versus social celebration becomes unclear.

The debates about the continuation of Bonfire Night appear to be no longer about Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot, or even religion in general, but more about a deeper issue of how different group histories, recognised through different traditions and festivals, are integrated within multicultural societies, and the inherent threats to personal safety and identity that can arise with (in) this process.

5 | THE IMPORTANCE AND RISKS OF MAINTAINING TRADITIONS: WHEN CULTURES AND TRADITIONS COLLIDE

The roles of traditions and historical celebrations such as Bonfire Night are multifaceted. Collective historical traditions are often dramatic symbolic representations of the past, which can remind participants in both a formal and informal way of who they are and where they come from, and, as such, can create a "collective memory," not of

simple commemoration *per se*, but rather of the historically repeated act of collective celebration (West & Ndlovu, 2010). When recognised by all, traditions can be unifying: an expression of a collective identity and shared history, where the historical event itself takes second place to the ephemeral action of social play which, in turn, can provide a commentary on the structures of the present and immediate social world (Lang & Frost, 2015). In this instance, the sheer repetition of such traditions can create a collective sense of "us," a shared culture, thereby enhancing group stability and cohesion. Even when used for political expedience, such as the Christianising of pagan celebrations of the spring (Easter) and the winter solstice (Christmas) by the Romans, the blending of different traditions can still act as a unifying force between different cultures (MacMullen, 1986).

However, either deliberately or merely through the presence of different cultural experiences coming together over time, traditions can also create divisions, and promote more separatist, and even elitist, "us" and "them" thinking. For example, whilst the festival of Christmas was at least partially founded on the birth of Christ, the traditions used to celebrate this event have changed over time, and now owe more to Charles Dickens, the Victorians and even Coca Cola, than any form of long-standing practice. Many ancient, blended aspects have faded (holly, ivy, carol singing, church attendance) and more modern forms have come to the fore (wrapping paper, crackers, paper hats, turkey, Santa dressed in red, and so on). Traditions associated with celebrations are clearly flexible. Consequently, it seems reasonable to suggest there should be no undue concern at varieties of festive expression. However, this often does not appear to occur in practice, as certain groups can be seen to take ownership of the traditions, which, it can be argued, risks leading to in-group and out-group thinking. One such example is Christians decrying the secularisation of Christmas and attacking those who celebrate this festival using non-Christian traditions (Altman, 2008). This would appear to suggest that such opponents consider those traditions that have been introduced more recently as "wrong," as they do not observe the original spirit of the tradition or the event—despite the fact that the blending of traditions of celebrations already occurred some time ago (as noted above). Again, this appears due, at least in part, to a lack of clarity regarding the distinction between commemorating and celebrating through the use of tradition.

Disagreements and disputes about the ownership of traditions can become very heated, as can be seen in the recent outcry over a comment posted by Chinese supermodel Wen Liu celebrating the Lunar New Year rather than Chinese New Year (Zhou, 2018). Based on the Chinese lunisolar calendar, the Lunar New Year is celebrated not just in China, but also in Korea, Vietnam, and Mongolia; the Chinese New Year (which is slightly different) is now celebrated widely too. The comments on Wen Liu's Instagram post reveal nationalistic reaction:

> *"Do you still know that you are Chinese?" … "Are you trying to appease the Koreans and the Vietnamese now?" … "If you want to become Vietnamese so badly, get out and don't come back to China" … "Are you kneeling down to the South Koreans? It should be Chinese New Year!"*

The people who wrote these comments appear to be attempting to plant a Chinese flag firmly on the festival, and to be willing to vilify anyone not seeing the tradition in the same way as themselves.

This also raises an interesting point of view in which traditions are seen in a highly competitive light, rather than being integrated in an additive and complementary way, where all traditions and histories are respected—all of which further suggests that festivals, like so much else in life, are becoming part of the playing field in the contestation of identity politics, which undermines the very idea of a celebration bringing people together. When such traditions are used to define both who you are and what you do and who others are not, traditional festivals that are unintegrated and unadapted risk causing more divisiveness.

6 | INTEGRATING INTERCULTURAL IDENTITY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Just as is being played out in society with 5th November and other traditional celebrations, for an individual born into a multicultural society, the tension involved in attending to different traditions and rituals can risk resulting in difficulties in developing an integrated and stable sense of personal identity. For example, if a person's lineage is Chinese,

but they are born in a Western country, how do they decide which to integrate from the different traditions to which they are being exposed, how to integrate them and indeed whether they should be integrated at all? This is a tension noted to be playing out within many people who culturally identify as Chinese and were brought up within the Western world, with, for some, understandable impacts on their mental health (Ling-chi Wang, 1991).

The working through of these tensions can be even more problematic when one set of traditions is imposed through colonisation, where indigenous traditions are often actively suppressed by the ruling and/or dominant class (es). For instance, Durie (1997) has highlighted how those who identify as Māori in New Zealand have experienced differing levels of mental wellbeing based on the extent to which they were able to experience an integrated and stable cultural sense of self, which, he noted, was influenced not only by the competing cultural traditions and rituals of differing iwi (tribes) but also by those traditions that were imposed through colonisation. He identified three typologies of cultural integration in Māori: the "culturally Māori," who have a strong and stable, mainly Māori identity; those with a bicultural identity, who identify with being Māori, but could also operate effectively as culturally "white" (Pākehā); and those who have been marginalised and are unable to relate effectively to either Māori or Pākehā culture. He concluded that, while there are "many differing ways of being Māori" (page 35), a lack of ease and clarity with respect to these tensions was—and still is—a strong predictor of mental ill-health.

This internal cultural tension has also been cited as a causal agent of mental ill-health for many other minority groups, for instance, as young people try to make sense of the various traditions and rituals they are exposed to within a multicultural society, which can come with a complicated social agenda. These include Indian (Jacob, 2017), Afro-Caribbean (Jackson & Green, 2000), and Aboriginal (Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003) people.

It is thus easy to see why the complicated process of developing a stable personal cultural identity, arising from competing external traditions and expectations could be at risk of being oversimplified by therapists, where assumptions can be made that "my cultural identity" is the same as "your cultural identity," and that this can interfere with the development of therapeutic rapport and a shared direction. This is supported by some research (see, for example, Maramba & Hall, 2002; Wintersteen, Mensinger, & Diamond, 2005), which suggested that a simple cultural matching of client and therapist does not consistently assist in a helpful outcome, perhaps because assumptions are being made as to how a client "should" define themselves.

Instead, Hong and Domokos-Cheng (2001) highlighted the importance within psychotherapy of supporting the development of a stable cultural identity by acknowledging the role of all traditions and rituals an individual has been exposed to, with the focus on identifying the balance that works best for them. In other words, it is for the client, not the therapist, to create meaning out of the competing traditions and rituals associated with different cultures to which the client has been exposed. For therapists, this can create significant complexities when considering how to undertake any identity work with clients, where the risk of personal overidentification or assumption needs to be reflected upon, and stepped back from whenever it is observed.

7 | CONCLUSION

Recognising 5th November through fire and fireworks is a tradition that has changed its political and social focus many times since it was first commemorated and celebrated in 1605. The focus thus seems to have changed based on the politics of the day, but the social value of the tradition of celebration through fireworks, food and fun in and of itself would appear to remain an important force in developing a shared social and personal identity. Tensions appear to develop both in society and within individuals when the value of differing traditions is questioned, with one deemed more important or "right" than another, especially when there is a political power imbalance behind which traditions are being supported or usurped for a specific agenda. Again, for both society and the individual, it may be the recognition and integration of traditions from different cultures which can allow growth, where all tradition is respected, not merely for its politics or history, but simply for the tradition itself. Thus, it seems wholly appropriate that, for many, the only association with 5th November is a fun night of fire, food and fireworks to share with others.

It is now for many simply an opportunity to recognise the importance of tradition in our lives. It would appear now no longer a colonial imposition, or commemoration of an out of touch history, but rather a method of developing and enhancing a shared social and personal identity. As such, it has an equal, but not greater, place in the social calendar as traditions from other cultures.

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