

More mother-in-law trouble

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A FEW weeks ago I described basic “mother-in-law avoidance” as anthropologists have found it practised in primitive societies all over the world. This time I’ll add a little more detail, then bring the subject back home through another story from J F Campbell’s “Popular Tales of the West Highlands” (1860–62).

Among many Australian tribes, and also the Herero of South Africa, avoidance began when a girl was betrothed in infancy. From then on, her husband-to-be had to avoid the sight of his future mother-in-law.

This raises the question of how to avoid a person if you weren’t sure what they looked like. The answer is that the community took the problem on itself. In Australia, if your mother-in-law were seen coming along the path your friend warned you and you hid behind a bush or a tree. One report from the south-west of the country tells of a bull-roarer being swung to warn the mother-in-law to keep away from her son-in-law.

Among the Navaho in North America it was the custom for the husband to live with his wife’s people, and the commonest sounds in a Navaho camp were the friendly shouts warning men and their mothers-in-law to keep apart.

With regard to communication the general rule, especially in Australia, was that mother-in-law and son-in-law must not speak to each other and that was that. Among the Kamilaroi, for example, any message between them had to go through a third party.

Sometimes this was modified however. In south-west Victoria when they spoke in each other’s presence they had to use a special form of language called “turn tongue”, though not for the sake of concealing their meaning, because everybody understood it. On the Pennefather in Queensland they could converse with face averted, while in north-western Australia they had to turn their backs to each other.

Outside Australia, in Vanua Lava for example, they might be allowed to talk at a distance. Generally in Africa they could use a third party, shout at each other from a distance, or talk a little more normally with a barrier (such as the kraal fence or room partition) between them. So in Africa it was common to see people talking to walls, while in America it was often acceptable for women to talk to their sons-in-law provided they kept a blanket over their heads.

Now let me turn to Campbell’s thirty-ninth story, which he gives in four different versions, sent to him from Barra, Ardnamurchan, Berneray Harris and “somewhere in Argyleshire”. In all of them the plot is pretty much the same.

Put simply, it’s about bullying. Two men in a township turn on a third and kill his cow. This third man is the hero and in each case he has a different name – *Dòmhnall*, *Levi Odhar*, *Brian Briagach* or *Eoghan Iurrach*. Should that be *Iùhrach*, I wonder, meaning “from Newry”, which for centuries was the nearest Irish port town to Argyll and the Western Isles? Anyway, let’s call him Eoghan, because with regard to mothers-in-law the main interest lies in the fourth version.

Eoghan is smarter than his persecutors, and outwits them in a series of incidents which ends in their throwing themselves off a cliff. These are all violent but are not to be taken any more seriously than a modern computer game. What’s more, Eoghan never lays a hand on his tormentors.

In the first incident, he brings the hide of his dead cow to town to sell it, and comes back with a lot of money. He tells the bullies that hides are fetching a splendid price these days (yes, it sounds like Newry).

In fact, it’s only half true. In the Barra version he has captured a little bird, put it in the hide, and convinced a man in a tavern that this is an oracle which will foretell his future and make him rich. There’s no bird in the Ardnamurchan and Argyll versions; instead, every time he kicks the hide in the tavern enough money drops out to pay for a round of drinks. Needless to say, after it’s sold the hide stops producing the goods, by which time Eoghan has made a sharp exit.

It’s enough to persuade the two bullies to kill their own cows and attempt to sell the hides for the same price, which of course they fail to do.

Eoghan’s con-tricks work every time. By the time we get to the last one the bullies are so mad at him that they shut him up in a barrel in order to roll him off a cliff. It’s a hot day and on the way to the cliff they stop off for a dram, leaving Eoghan in the barrel, cheerfully playing his trump. A shepherd comes by with a flock of sheep and asks him what he’s doing in there. Enjoying the pots of money which I’ve found here, says Eoghan. So the shepherd lets him out

and gets in instead. *Chan eil airgead no òr an-seo*, complains the shepherd. “There’s no silver or gold here.”

Chan fhaic thu dad gus an téid an ceann sa bhairilt, says Eoghan. “You won’t see anything till the lid’s put on the barrel.”

So he puts the lid on and goes away with the sheep. The bullies come out of the tavern, resume their journey and push the barrel over the cliff. When they get home, Eoghan is there with his new-found wealth of sheep. How did this happen, they want to know?

Oh, says Eoghan, when I got to the Other Place (*an saoghal thall*, the otherworld) they said I had plenty of time, and just sent me back with these sheep to make some money.

“Would they give us the same if we went there?” they ask.

“Oh yes.”

“How do we get there?”

“Oh, just the same way you sent me there.”

One of the bullies puts the other in a barrel and Eoghan goes along with them to the cliff. The first bully gives the barrel a good push and as it sails over the edge they can hear the man inside yelling. “What’s he saying?” asks the first bully.

“He’s shouting, *Crodh is caoraich, maoin is mathas!* Cattle and sheep, wealth and prosperity!” says Eoghan.

Sìos mi! Sìos mi! says the first bully. “Down I go! Down I go!” And without waiting to be put in a barrel, he runs down the slope and dashes his brains out beside his friend on the rocks below. Then Eoghan goes home and takes their land.

So much for the first and last episodes. In the middle of the story we have something like this. The bullies are so angry at being conned that they kill Eoghan’s mother. He finds the corpse and takes it off to the market town, where he props it up against the well with a couple of sticks. Then he goes to the king’s door. (Important men are nearly always called kings, *righrean*, in these old stories. In Gaelic Highland chiefs were seen as kings.)

He knocks, and tells the servant to tell the king there’s a woman at the well who has business with him. The servant comes back, and goes over to the corpse to address it. *Mura freagair i thu*, says Eoghan helpfully, *putaidh tu i – tha i bodhar*. “If she doesn’t answer you, give her a push – she’s deaf.”

You can guess what happens. The corpse falls into the well, Eoghan accuses the servant of murdering his mother, the king gives him generous compensation, and he goes back to tell the two bullies, not untruthfully, that old women’s corpses are fetching a lot of money these days. So each of them murders his own mother and goes off to try and sell the corpse, with unfortunate results.

That describes the incident in the Barra and Ardnamurchan versions, but there’s a little twist in the latter. Instead of murdering their mothers, we’re told of the bullies: “He who had no mother had a mother-in-law; so they killed an old woman each.”

The Berneray version is pretty different from the other three – Brian Briagach isn’t up against village bullies but a rich merchant. This particular incident is missing, but there’s another in which Brian pretends to murder his wife and bring her alive again, and in trying to copy him the merchant murders his own wife, sister and mother.

The “Argyleshire” version, however, is all mothers-in-law. As a result of the first incident the bullies decide to murder Eoghan, but he hears them plotting and offers his bed to his mother-in-law, who says: “Oh, my little hero, you were always kind to me.”

The bullies pull the house down around her ears while Eoghan hides in the barn, and he makes money – *ciad marg*, a hundred merks – out of her corpse in the way described in the other versions. He goes home and tells his “friends” that there’s *miadh mòr air cailleachan marbh*, “great value on dead old women”. So they kill their mothers-in-law, and “just miss being put in prison for trying to sell them”.

Reading these stories in the order in which Campbell prints them, you get the impression that “mother” gradually changes into “mother-in-law”, as if that makes the murder and mayhem more acceptable. Of course you could equally claim that the process was the other way round, or that the difference is between the Western Isles and the mainland!

But it reminds me of how Wilhelm Grimm tinkered with the stories he and his brother had collected, turning “mother” into “stepmother” in cases of child abandonment such as Hansel and Gretel. Somehow it makes the crime seem less heinous. I’m sure the Kamilaroi, the Herero and the Navaho would agree.

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