

Vedanta Center of Atlanta

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Fall Festivals and the Goddess Kali

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GOOD MORNING... ANNOUNCEMENTS

- We will not celebrate Thanksgiving with a gathering of the congregation, this year. The virus is still too great a danger.

CHANT • WELCOME • TOPIC

November is a month for study of Karma Yoga, a spiritual path leading to the abandonment of selfishness. As a karma yogi, you practice offering your actions and their results, as well as your perceptions, thoughts, and feelings to the Divine Presence.

— This prayer is chanted by the congregation, in unison, at the end of a puja's homa fire ceremony:

“No matter what I may have done, said or thought, in waking, dreaming or dreamless sleep, with my mind, my tongue, my hands or my other members, may all that be an offering to the Divine Presence.”

Even before fully knowing this Presence, you hold firmly to the belief that the Presence *is within* each person or other living being that you interact with or serve. Working and abiding in this spirit, you are increasingly able to release attachment to your activities and their results. This yields the freedom and contentment promised by Karma Yoga.

“Even a little practice of this yoga will save you from the terrible wheel of rebirth and death ...” — Sri Krishna, Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 2.

Fall Festivals and the Goddess Kali

This past Sunday was Hallowe'en — a contraction of All Hallows Eve. In Old English, hallow meant saint, and indicates the Roman Catholic church had incorporated an ancient Northern European tradition — Samhain* — into its calendar of ritual observances.

In the early 8th Century, Pope Gregory III designated the 1st of November as All Saints Day, honoring saints and martyrs. He also decreed October 31 as All Hallows Eve, a night-time vigil of prayer and veneration. (*Samhain means summer's end — in Northern Europe, the end of the “light” half of the year and the beginning of the fearsome “dark” half, which brought with it a need for ritualistic protection.)

This morning, we'll take a journey through the ages, recalling fall festivals that celebrate the dead. This will include discussion of mythology and artistic expressions that can be traced back to the Goddess Kālī.

We'll talk about Samhain, All Souls Day, All Saints Day, Hallowe'en (All Hallows Eve), Dia de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead), Diwali, and the Festival of the Lanterns, and identify how some of these celebrations have ancient astronomical and ritualistic connections to Kālī Ma.

We'll begin with a Western tradition:

All Soul's Day is a primarily Roman Catholic feast day when people remember loved ones who have passed away. In Mexico, and now in many parts of the United States, this is widely and elaborately celebrated as the Day of the Dead.

In the United Kingdom and the U.S., we have Hallowe'en, with its roots in the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain.

On that night, people lit bonfires to symbolically ward off the lengthening darkness, and wore costumes to disguise themselves from roaming ghosts and goblins!

SAMHAIN, WHICH BECAME HALLOWEEN

Why is there a link between scary creatures and activities, and Halloween?

Most fall festivals have histories that are not that demonic, yet Halloween imagery includes themes of death, evil, the occult, and mythical monsters.

Black and orange are the holiday's traditional colors, because they are associated with night and with fire.

Can you already hear a whisper of Kali's terrible form, and the colors associated with Her?

Samhain — later to be called Halloween — seems to have originated at least 2000 years ago in the Celtic cultures of Northern Europe. Druids, the priests of these cultures, celebrated their new year on November 1 — Samhain, the end of summer and the harvest season and the beginning of a cold, dark winter, which they naturally associated with death.

According to legend, Druids believed that on the night before November 1 (October 31), wicked souls or spirits which had been condemned to live in the bodies of animals during the past year were free to roam about — that in the darkness human beings were surrounded by spirits, ghosts, witches, and wicked fairies and elves, who could harm them.

Cats especially were thought to be people who, as punishment for evil deeds, had been reincarnated in that form. That's why witches, ghosts, and cats are a part of Halloween imagery today.

On the night of October 31, Druid priests offered sacrifices to their gods. Their “summer’s end” festival included huge bonfires (from bone-fire: a fire in which burned bones are found).

Animals and the “harvest’s plenty” were burned to propitiate otherworldly spirits, asking for those demigods’ protection during the bitterly cold winter to come. (Little Ice Age starts 1300, ends after 1800)

And as the night of Samhain fell, people dressed in symbolic costumes — a form of magic meant to avoid being recognized by roaming spirits: the costumed person hoped they would be mistaken for a fellow spirit, and not be attacked.

Trick-or-treating — dressing up in costumes and begging door to door for treats — is now customary for children on Halloween. It dates back to the Middle Ages, and a tradition called “souling.” Poor folk would go door to door on Hallowmas (All Saints' Day, Nov. 1); families would give them pastries called "soul cakes" in return for their promise to pray for the family's dead relatives on All Souls' Day (Nov. 2).

This offering of soul cakes was encouraged by the church as a way to replace the Celtic practice of leaving food and wine on the doorstep for roaming spirits on Samhain.

Catholics and Anglicans celebrate All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day because they believe there is a prayerful spiritual communion between those who have died in the state of grace, and souls being purified in purgatory.

Souling may have originated in Ireland and Britain, although similar practices for the souls of the dead are found as far south as Italy.

The carving of jack-o'-lanterns springs from the souling custom of carving turnips into lanterns as a way of remembering the souls held in purgatory.

The turnip was traditionally used in Ireland and Scotland at Halloween, but immigrants to North America used the native pumpkin, which was both readily available and much larger and easier to carve than turnips.

OTHER FESTIVALS OF THE DEAD

Many cultures hold a Festival of the Dead, lasting up to 3 days, at the end of October and beginning of November, in honor or recognition of deceased members of the community.

In the Andes (Collasuyu)

In Inca religion the entire month of November is 'Ayamarca', which translates as Festival of the Dead. In the Southern Hemisphere, Nov. marks the beginning of Spring, and the return of the sun from the North. A very auspicious time!

The Inca's practiced mummification; during Ayamarca the mummies of dead kings were brought to the main square of their capital, Cuzco, and other cities. People sang and danced around those mummies as they were dressed in valuable clothes and offered foods. Other ceremonies, some very elaborate, using fire and going deep into the night, are led by local village shamans (yatiris).

Dia de los Muertos

Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is celebrated each year in Mexico, and wherever a community of Mexican descent is found. Spanish Conquistadors arrived in the New World to find indigenous peoples practicing a ritual, many thousands of years old by that time, that seemed to mock death.

However, the Maya, Aztecs, and other ethnic groups of that region saw death as the extension of life, as a passage to the next world, and thus it was in fact not a mockery but a celebration. Festivities were held to honor the departed, not to belittle them.

For some of us, it may be strange that "death" and "festivities" can go hand-in-hand — yet for most Mexicans, the two are intricately entwined. The ancient indigenous peoples of Mexico (Purepecha, Nahua, Totonac and Otomi) believed that the souls of the dead return each year to visit with their living relatives — to eat, drink and be merry. Just like they did when they were living.

The Spaniards were unable to stop these practices, so they tied the native rituals to the Catholic "festival of the dead" — All Hallows' Eve, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day.

Deceased children (*called little angels*) are remembered on November 1st, All Saints Day — toys and colorful balloons adorn their graves.

The next day — All Souls Day — adults who have died are honored with displays of the departed's picture, their favorite food and drinks, as well as ornamental and personal belongings.

Flowers, particularly a special type of marigold which is sacred to the Nahua goddess of the cosmos Tonantzin, and candles are placed on graves; these guide the spirits home to their loved ones.

At 6:00 pm, the bells begin to ring (every 30 seconds), summoning the dead. They ring throughout the night. At sunrise, the ringing stops and those relatives who have kept the night-long vigil, go home.

Japan's Festival of the Lanterns

(Note: This citation is apparently a mistake. During the discussion after this talk was given, a devotee born and raised in Japan said that this festival takes place in August, not at the end of October.)

Obon is a shortened form of Ullambana (Japanese: urabon'e). Ullambana is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word "hanging upside down" and implies great austerity or suffering. In this context it means "deliverance from suffering," and specifically refers to the salvation of anguished souls in Hell.

The Japanese hold an Obon festival, which lasts for three days, to honor the spirits of their ancestors. This Buddhist-Confucian custom is a family reunion holiday. People return to ancestral family places and visit and clean their ancestors' graves; spirits of their ancestors are supposed to revisit the household's altar. It has been celebrated in Japan for at least 500 years.

Astronomical Associations of Worldwide Fall Rituals and Festivals

The Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico is said to be a merging of Mother Mary with Tonantzin.

Her celebration can be traced to a pre-Conquest festival honoring Tonantzin at the winter solstice (December 12 in the Julian calendar).

So too, we see the origins of the Catholic church's "Day of the Dead" in the Nahuatl ritual known as "the binding of the years". That date in their calendar corresponds to November 1 in the Gregorian calendar.

Less than a quarter hour after the midnight of Oct 31-Nov 1, the star formation we call the Pleiades passes through the zenith above Tula and Tenochtitlán. And therein we find the link among all these worldwide observances that honor the dead — the Pleiades.

Some other Native American myths about the Pleiades:

Cherokee legends teach that Native Americans originated long ago in the Pleiades, and assert that indigenous people are on Earth as "star seeds," with a mission of bringing light and knowledge. The Navajo call the Pleiadian star cluster the "Sparkling Suns," and the Iroquois petition the constellation for happiness. The Lakota/Dakota people say their ancestors are from the Pleiades.

The Spanish conquerors of Mexico also found there a tradition that the world was once destroyed and reborn when the Pleiades were overhead at midnight — the identical tradition that we find in the far east, a myth so prevalent as to suggest a foundation of fact.

So, is it a coincidence that the Goddess we most associate with the destruction and dissolution of the world — Ma Kali, Shakti associated with Shiva — is also worshipped, during the night, at the time of year when the Pleiades are prominent in the night sky?

The Pleiades in India

Fall festivals in Mexico correspond with Janthar-puja, a celebration of the first-fruits of winter rice, held in November by the Bengal Santals.

The Santals call one of their sub-tribes by their name for the Pleiades, Sar-en.

Hindus in the western part of India, who trace their descent from the mother goddess Amba — which is the chief star of the sacred Pleiades — begin their year with the month Khartik (Oct-Nov).

The great Hindu star festival — Diwali or Dipavali, meaning a row of lamps — is held in the same month. Streets and houses are illuminated, to signify the triumph of good over evil. Lamps are kept on all night and firecrackers are set off to drive away evil spirits.

The Santal name for the Pleiades, Sar-en, is connected with the Vedic Saranyu, the mother of the twins, day and night, who still retains her place in Indian mythology as the god Hari.

She was also called Amba, the mother, the first star in the Pleiades, who led her sons, the farmers and mariners of Southern India, to Persia, Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece.

So the position of the Pleiades, and not the sun, seem to have governed some most significant rituals and celebrations of the primeval year.

Annual festivals for the dead were celebrated at the time when the Pleiades were first visible on the horizon at evening.

In the most ancient calendar of India, the month which began their year was Khartik (our Oct-Nov). Memorial services for the dead at this time of year, when the Pleiades occupy a conspicuous position in the heavens, seem to be a feature in the history of almost every culture on earth, from remote antiquity to the present day.

The universality of social and spiritual customs linked to this distant group of seven stars may well be considered one of the most remarkable facts that astronomical history records. (*434 and 446 light years from Earth*)

The Goddess Kali, who was at the center of Sri Ramakrishna's Divine Play, has ancient links to the Pleiades. Kali Puja was recently and elaborately celebrated at Belur Math, in the temple at our Hollywood Center, and at other Vedanta Centers in the West. Ma Kali's "daughter" festival, our Halloween — with its traditional ties to the Pleiades through its connection to Samhain — was observed last Sunday night.

Jai Kali Ma!

Qs & commentary • CLOSING CHANT