

Conclusion: showcasing Cornish folk tradition

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This study provides a major contribution to New Cornish Studies and demonstrates that folk tradition is an important issue in understanding modern Cornwall. It shows that there is a strong link between folk tradition and identity in Cornwall and that this is a positive and creative relationship. Understanding folk tradition and identity as processes rather than static artefacts or states of being is the key to this study. This challenges popular stereotypes and portrays folk tradition as a contemporary process that draws upon the past but takes place in the present and embraces the changes that will arise in the future. Using the formula of “process” rather than reducing folk traditions to disparate groups of phenomena has enabled a more holistic approach to the subject. A significant outcome of this work has been to demonstrate the full extent of folk tradition in Cornwall, past and present, and to recognise the variety of ways in which it has been recorded.

The study of folk tradition also serves to increase our wider knowledge of Cornwall by providing an alternative vantage point on key issues of the present as well as the past. It provides another view of the mindsets of the early nineteenth century industrialists, the romanticism of the antiquarians and the world of the Celto-Cornish revivalists. All of which provide a legacy that impacts upon how Cornwall is perceived today. Observing folk traditions today provides insight into the impact of contemporary social trends on the identity of modern Cornwall from the debate about the black faces of the Padstow mummers to the Celtic Festival scene. This study also introduces the intriguing prospect that the interconnectivity resulting from new information technologies will strengthen both folk tradition and Cornish identity.

The significance of this study and the approach taken to folk tradition goes beyond Cornwall into a broader Celtic, European and global context. It recognises that all traditions and identities are in a sense constructed but argues that this does not make them artificial or inauthentic. Indeed, the case made by this study is that folk tradition is, by its very nature, a process of construction but rooted in elements that represent continuity and community ownership. The ways in which these elements are drawn together create a profile that defines the cultural distinctiveness of a community. This study examines these elements and with particular reference to Cornwall but in doing so provides new insights into the development of folk tradition in the other Celtic communities.

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This chapter summarises how the understanding of folk tradition has been developed and extended in this study. It evaluates the inter-relationship with identity and particularly the impact of an evolving sense of a Celtic Cornwall on folk tradition. The use of action research as an enquiry tool is reviewed here together with the impact of the researcher upon the researched. The conclusion to this study is that folk tradition is a natural, ongoing and powerful social process.

Folk tradition in a Cornish context

The concepts of “folk song”, “folklore” and “folk tradition” evolved within the Romantic Movement alongside notions of nationality, regionality and authenticity of origin. A sense of purity developed from this that saw folk tradition as distanced from commerciality, popular culture and arbitrary aestheticism by merit of continuity with the past and a Darwinian process of selection within community ownership. In the mid twentieth century, this was articulated by the International Folk Music Council’s definition of folk music in oppositional terms to popular music; and Dorson’s use of the terms faketore and folklorismus to describe folk traditions contrived for the purposes of commerciality and tourism.¹

The emergence of “folk” as a genre of popular music alongside of “Jazz” and “Rock” provided a twist, which challenged this. In Britain, this was represented by the development of MacColl and Lloyd’s folk club scene in the fifties and sixties. Although MacColl and Lloyd sought authenticity by making use of the Child Ballads,² they were nevertheless also influenced by Gramscian notions of voicing a challenge to hegemonic power through folk song. This was realised through compositions such as MacColl’s “Dirty Old Town” and embracing the American protest song culture of singers like Bob Dylan.

To an extent, the old school accommodated this by recognising a distinction between traditional and contemporary folk. However, the whole issue of tradition and the authenticity of collectors and revivalists were subject to substantial deconstruction from critics such as Hobsbawn, Harker and Boyse in the latter half of the twentieth century.³ Tradition was seen as either an invention to legitimise the ruling elite, or a folk phenomenon that was mediated in order to support its ideology. Critics argued that mediation was a significant agent of change in folk music together with the influences of commercial and aesthetic interests. This challenged the sense of

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legitimacy in folk tradition and opened the door to a postmodern free for all where nothing was authentic. What it did do was free the study of folk music from the constraints of earlier orthodoxy and encourage the move towards a more pragmatic view. Writers such as Ó Giolláin ⁴ and Russell ⁵ subsequently brought the study of traditional music into an era that recognised the complexity of folk tradition as a social phenomenon.

Folk dance definitions followed a slightly different trajectory with Hoerburger's proposal that traditional dance could be seen as having first and second existences. The first existence equated with an original setting and the second with a revived one. Nahachewsky developed this idea further to show a cyclical relationship between first and second existences. Reflexivity featured as an agent of change in the first existence and reflectivity in the second. In this model, reflexive change is a response to external social and cultural influences and reflective change the result of a considered and evaluative approach on the part of the participants. Selection is a factor in both reflexivity and reflectivity in that the new element is attractive to or felt appropriate by the performer. Nahachewsky makes the point that a tradition can also move from a second existence to an original one. She illustrates this by showing that Ukrainian dances imported to Canada by migrants as a second existence tradition would be seen as existing in an original setting as the new communities became established.

This study argues that Nahachewsky's template can be combined with the principles of continuity and selectivity in community ownership to provide a model that describes and explains the folk process in relation to music and songs as well as dance. It helps to situate guizing traditions in Cornwall, for example, and anticipates that there will be cycles of popularity, decline and revival. In Helston, the Hal An Tow, can now reasonably be described as a first existence tradition in an original social and geographic location that takes place on an historically established date. In the last few years, there have been changes such as the inclusion of Cornish language on banners and the introduction of the character St Piran, which are a response to the prevailing social trend of increased awareness of Cornish identity.

The Hal An Tow had ceased to be performed by the end of the nineteenth century and it was due to the efforts of the Celto-Cornish movement that it was revived in 1930. The reconstruction was a reflective process informed by the recollections of people who had observed or participated in it historically and a comparison with other

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Guizing traditions, particularly Padstow's Obby Oss. From the vantage point of the 21st century, the absence of performance during the first decades of the 20th century seems but a small blip against an overall continuity recorded back as far as 1790. The Old Cornwall Society, who were the original instigators of the revival now have little involvement and the tradition lies entirely in the ownership of the local community.

This approach also helps to understand songs or tunes as products of this process in their own right, as well as being part of a broader community singing tradition. Indeed the concept of cyclical relationship between first and second existences can be extended to accommodate the way in which material of commercial or art music origins can be absorbed into folk tradition. The value of this insight is that it focuses on the extent to which structure, meaning and context has changed rather than whether an art music or commercial origin is identified. It explains why songs like Maggie May and Little Lize can be understood as traditional to Cornwall although they originate as composed popular music in the United States. These songs were popular in Cornwall because they lent themselves well to informal harmony and extended choruses not because of massive exposure or marketing. Both were the subject of structural change in words and music through the process of oral folk tradition and have a first existence / original setting within community singing sessions. It is arguable that they also have a second, reflective, existence represented by translation into the Cornish language and their incorporation into musical arrangements intended to portray Cornish identity.⁶

An important point argued in this study is that the development of performance through critical reflection in a second existence is as much part of the folk process as accidental or intuitive change in the first existence. This makes sense of contemporary phenomena such as folk festivals and dance displays as part of the folk process. In Cornwall this is particularly so for activities arising out of the Celto-Cornish movement where reflectivity will involve judgments about Cornishness and identity. The Lowender Peran festival is an example of a stakeholder that will make judgements about the Celtic and Cornish nature of performance before providing a platform for that performance. Another clear example of reflectivity is the Cornish dance competitions, set up in the first instance by the Cornish Gorsedh. Entries are invited for performance of traditional dances and newly composed dances in a traditional style and adjudicated using criteria based on quality of performance and the observation of traditional steps and choreography. An outcome of this has been the development of a much greater

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consistency of style and a sharper performance.⁷ These events serve to build on the repertoire of Cornish dances but selectivity is quite fierce and only those compositions that catch the imagination of the dancers are regularly seen in performance.

This study does move beyond Nahachewsky's essentially material and structural template by emphasising the importance of meaning and the role of folk tradition as site of memory. Here, the folk phenomenon acts as a vehicle carrying meanings and memories between people and across generations with each adding their own significance and attaching greater or lesser importance to that inherited from predecessors. The song Trelawny is an example of this. It was originally composed by Hawker circa 1825 drawing on the folk motif of "here's twenty Thousand Cornishmen will know the reason why" and the story of Bishop Trelawny. By the end of that century, it had become a rallying point for Cornish identity in the growing Diaspora and by the next a symbol of defiance against the establishment whether in the context of County Rugby Championships or the celebration of the 500th anniversary 1497 rebellion.⁸ There has been little change in words or tune but the meaning and significance for contemporary singers is arguably different to that attached by Hawker or Sandys.⁹

Trelawny is very tangible as a site of memory for the Celto-Cornish speech community but the same principle applies to more personal and poignant circumstances. In Magliocco's documentary of Padstow May,¹⁰ interviewees describe how the faces of people long since deceased seem to remain present amongst the Mayers on May Day. Likewise, some songs are strongly associated with, and continue to be attributed to, certain singers who have since passed away. Maggie May is an example which has been encouraged by the nostalgic nature of the lyrics. The interesting point is that within the Celto-Cornish movement, the song is attributed to John Bolitho, late Grand Bard and within the folk club scene to Charlie Bate who was an associate of Peter Kennedy and a driving force of the folk revival in Cornwall.

The database supporting this study contains approximately 1100 references relating to 639 folk phenomena collected in Cornwall over an approximate 200-year period to the present. Drawing on the paradigms of discursivity, oral history and memory it is clear that the records in this database are not comparing like to like. What they provide instead are snapshots of oral folk tradition as filtered by the mindset, knowledge and skills of the individual collectors together with the technology and locations available to them. For example, Gilbert had neither the musical skills of

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Dunstan, nor the mobility of Kennedy. Baring Gould and Sharp were both class conscious and collected material for publication and performance within an entirely different social setting to that of their sources. In contrast, Miners and the Thomas family recorded oral folk tradition from the communities of which they were a part. Likewise, Dunstan for all that he had an academic career in music outside of Cornwall, recorded musical traditions that he had himself participated in as a young man as well as drawing on the memories of his contemporaries as an older person in late 1920s Cornwall.

Rising tides of Celtic Identity

In the 21st Century, the term “Celtic” is associated with a much wider range of meanings than at its genesis in the early eighteenth century. For Llyud and his contemporaries it was a linguistic term but became synonymous with the communities who spoke the Celtic languages of the Western European seaboard. When Herder introduced the romance of folklore as an expression of nationality, especially subjugated minority nationalities, Celtic identity was well placed to be part of this movement and although it was in a sense a “construct” so were other the identities of this time. This did not make it artificial or inauthentic.¹¹

Understanding Cornwall and its language was a key factor in the development of the term Celtic and the recorders and collectors of folk tradition from Gilbert through to Baring Gould all made reference to Cornish Celticity. Unlike their contemporaries elsewhere in the Celtic world, their interest was not to quarry the folkloric past in order to actualise and justify a modern identity but rather to celebrate its passing. Gilbert's stake was that there was little room for archaic languages and peasant traditions in the modern, technocratic Cornish identity. Bottrell, Hunt and Courtney mediated in favour of romance and nostalgia. Baring Gould also held romantic notions about folk tradition but was one of the forerunners of a more revivalist approach.

The early years of the twentieth century saw the increasing development of speech communities across the British Isles and Ireland, each with a stake in what folk traditions represented and how they could be interpreted. In Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the Isle of Man this was part of a continuing movement seeking to represent the cultural integrity of the nations concerned. In England Sharp made clear that he saw folk dance and song as a way of celebrating Englishness. Critics such as Harker and

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Boyse later suggested that Sharp he also saw it as a way of maintaining the hegemonic status quo.

This study shows that in Cornwall, the Celto-Cornish movement also saw folk tradition as part of the armoury available to promote Cornish distinctiveness. It faltered slightly with Jenner's lead as he had very little understanding of folk tradition and a class-consciousness that distanced him from any experiential contact. Indeed, Jenner expresses the views and motives for which Sharp was criticised by Harker and Boyse.¹² With the advent of the Old Cornwall Societies in 1920, the Celto-Cornish movement connected in an organisation very much owned by the people and not the academic or political establishment. Activists such as William D Watson, the Thomas family and Tom Miners were regular contributors to the Old Cornwall Society Magazines as well as the Folk Song Journal and were amongst the performers to be recorded by Carpenter in 1931. The important point about these people is that they were participants and performers themselves and not "visiting folklorists". They were recording what they and their immediate peers sang and performed.

Although the Cornish language remained its primary concern, the Celto-Cornish movement steadily developed its engagement with Cornish folk traditions during the first half of the nineteenth century. It identified Cornishness with folk tradition located in an original "first existence" setting and was a positive force in promoting revival and continuity. A large amount of material was recorded in the Old Cornwall Society Magazines. People like A K Hamilton Jenkin revisited the work of the nineteenth century antiquarians and used it to revive and support traditions such as Guize dancing and the midsummer festival of Golowan. Dunstan's two songbooks, published in 1929 and 1932, were seminal in establishing a body of folk songs identified as Cornish. His were the first of a string of publications of songs, music and dances linked to Cornish identity that continue to the present. These served to provide the material for performance in new locations seen as second, reflective existence folk tradition in Nahachewsky's model.

A key point argued in this study is that folk tradition in Cornwall became contested territory in the sixties and seventies. It is here that the concepts of speech communities and power relationships are particular useful in analysing the debate. By this time, the folk song and dance culture of Sharp had merged with the folk club scene of MacColl and Lloyd to provide for a folk revival and a speech community with a

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discursivity that had very little room for a Cornish folk tradition outside of an English one. Sharp had effectively collected just one dance in Cornwall and a small number of folk songs so when the folk revival arrived in Cornwall it brought its own songs and dances with it. The homegrown Celto-Cornish movement at the same time was developing a relationship with pan-Celtic festival culture and the ability to provide a quite different representation of Cornish folk tradition to that of the folk revival. The most significant difference being that it shared with the other Celtic regions an oppositional identity in relation to England.

A feature of the debate at the time was the perceived “common sense” of the more powerful English / British folk revivalist speech community. Claims to Cornishness in folk tradition were seen to be spurious and inauthentic, especially the mediation of some songs by translation into Cornish or tunes by the adoption of Cornish titles.¹³ Particularly interesting here is that contemporary critiques were showing English, Scottish and Welsh folk traditions to have been subject to an equivalent level of mediation.¹⁴

One of the intriguing revelations of this study is the contrast between the approach taken by the Old Cornwall Societies in collecting and reviving traditions to that of the English collectors from Sharp through to Kennedy. In the case of the former, ownership of the tradition and its revival remained with the individuals and communities from whence it came. For the latter there was a tendency for it to become their personal domain. It was as if the Old Cornwall Societies had anticipated and addressed the criticism and deconstruction of folk tradition by Harker and Boyse by some fifty years.

Outcomes of action research

Participatory action research was the principle means of obtaining information on contemporary folk activity for this study. In practice, this comprised of a mixture of project work, interviews, correspondence and dialogue together with participant and passive observation. Such a method does not cover every traditional event or record the frequency of performance of a dance or a song, to do so would clearly not be possible. The methodology of action research nevertheless provides a level of critical reflection and triangulation with other evidence that justifies it as a reasonable contemporary record of folk tradition in Cornwall.¹⁵

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The impact of the researcher upon the researched is a recurring theme in this study and a particular issue when participation is used to gain information and insights. This study argues that, by observing the ethics of ownership and empowerment embedded in participatory action research, this impact can be a positive one. Two projects serve to illustrate this, the “Padstow Mummers” and the “Clay Country Customs” (Rescorla Festival).¹⁶ For the Padstow Mummers project, a detailed analysis of the historical and legal contexts was published as a paper. This was then lodged with the local information centre and shared through dialogue with various stakeholders. The information provided by this research will serve to inform future debate and support the Padstow Mummers against criticism. The Clay Country Customs project involved local people in remembering and researching customs associated with the area. The practical outcome of this was the sharing of information about these customs through workshops and publications and the revival of the *Snail Creep*. Another important outcome was to provide contributors with a sense of value in these customs and their recollections of them.

Continuity

Just as the work of the folk song collector and folklorist bears witness to the continuity of oral folk tradition over a 200-year period in Cornwall so this present study shows that the process continues today. The feast days, Guize Dancing and street processions identified in this study provide evidence of both continuity and revival of folk traditions in Cornwall. This study also shows that increasing recognition and expression of Cornish distinctivity is a prevailing social trend that is reflected in the dress, dances and music used in these customs along with “badges” of Cornishness such as the St Piran’s flag.

It is also clear from this study that not all events within oral folk tradition are immediately visible and that there is considerable activity within relatively private spaces as well as well-advertised public locations. Obvious amongst these are the informal singing sessions but weddings and private parties also provide a significant location for traditional activity especially around social dance. What is particularly interesting here is that few of the performers involved in traditional aspects of Cornish music and dance promote themselves on a strongly commercial basis so that event organisers will have been actively seeking out something of this nature rather than simply booking suitable entertainment.

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This study shows that the relationship between Cornish identity and oral folk tradition is a symbiotic one. Cornish identity and its connection with the “Celtic Imaginary” has resulted in opportunities for performers to present traditional material to a wider audience on the festival scene and in turn have this material recognised and reinforced. This has both reflexive and reflective impact upon Cornish folk traditions by introducing new ideas and encouraging critical examination of performance. As well as being a stakeholder in the Cornishness of established folk customs, the Celto-Cornish movement is a key player in the social trend of increasing interest in Cornish identity, which creates new locations for traditional music and dance activity. St Piran’s tide provides a number of examples of this with organisations and towns throughout Cornwall staging events that are likely to incorporate some form of music or dance from Cornish tradition.

It is apparent from participatory action research that, far from being a destructive force, the information revolution and global interconnectivity has integrated with and accelerated the process of oral folk tradition. A key issue here is the disempowerment of hegemony within this particular medium, whether that hegemony is understood in terms of a ruling elite, cultural imperialism or a global conglomerate. Folk activity on the internet is much more akin to Old Cornwall Society members sharing information about songs dances and customs amongst themselves. As opposed to Cecil Sharp who made judgements about what it was appropriate to publish as traditional or record companies making decisions about what forms of folk tradition to promote.

The flywheel of folk tradition

This study has taken the reader on a journey through the folk traditions of the people of Cornwall. It has engaged with these traditions from the perspectives of critic, observer and participant. It has also explored the processes that lay behind folk tradition and the meanings attributed to it. For the researcher, one of the strangest revelations is that the study of folk tradition is about the present and not the past and one of the delights, its chaotic nature.

By developing the concept of folk tradition as a process this thesis shows that it acts as a kind of flywheel which increases momentum as new ideas and meanings are added. This thesis argues that the very mechanisms that were feared would cause the demise of folk tradition, from the printing press to global communications and mass interconnectivity, have in fact added to its momentum. This makes the present time

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particularly exciting time for the study of folk tradition. Although the internet may not have achieved the freedoms and emancipation dreamed of by its early enthusiasts, the culture of connectivity has become matter of fact rather than novel. Paired with new audiovisual technologies it facilitates the instant sharing of music and images without the intervention of commercial or artistic interests.

Writing in the mid 1920s at a pivotal point in the development of the Celto-Cornish movement, Nance voiced a clear view on the interaction between folk traditions of the past and the Cornwall of the future.¹⁷ He saw the folk culture of Cornwall as the material from which a “New Cornwall” and strong Cornish identity could be forged. By the twenty first century, significant elements of Nance’s ambitions for Cornish cultural integrity and recognition have been realised particularly in terms of pan Celticism, linguistic heritage and folk tradition. His “New Cornwall”, however, remains a future to which the Celto-Cornish movement aspires and folk tradition will provide a medium well placed to express the Cornish identities of the future.

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Notes

¹ The International Folk Music Council definition agreed at the 1954 conference and Richard M. Dorson, "Is Folklore a Discipline?" *Folklore* 84(3): (1973) p.199 and p.204. See also discussion Chapter 1. pp. 24 -25.

² Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. (Boston and New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Co, 1857 – 1882). This collection provided a corpus of folk ballads for the folk revivals.

³ Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983). See Chapter 1. pp. 24 - 25 for discussion.

⁴ Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore : Tradition, Modernity, Identity*, (Sterling, VA: Cork University Press, 2000).

⁵ Ian Russell and David Atkinson, *Folk Song : Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation*, (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2004).

⁶ See appendices 2.10 and 2.11, also *The Ghosts of May*, Pete Berryman, CD, Zafredot, 2010. Track 11, "Cambornia", includes a jazz arrangement of "Little Lise".

⁷ Ted Chapman, *Lowender Peran Video Archive 1987- 2011*, Lowender Peran Celtic Festival, Perranporth, The development of performance style can be observed from video footage of Cornish dance groups main stage performances.

⁸ The events involving Bishop Trelawny, and romanticised by Hawker, actually took place in 1687 but what has happened here is that this song has become detached from its original meaning and connected generally with expressions of Cornish dissent from 1497 onwards.

⁹ See Appendix 2.3

¹⁰ Sabrina Magliocco and John Bishop, *Oss Tales*. Media-Generation, 2007, [DVD / CD-Rom format].

¹¹ Amy Hale and Philip Payton, *New Directions in Celtic Studies*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), p. 9.

¹² Henry Jenner. "The Renaissance of Merry England: Presidential Address, September 1920", in *Journal of the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society Journal* (Falmouth), 1922, pp. 51 - 61.

¹³ See discussion of "I Love my love / Ryb and Avon", chapter 4. p. 114.

¹⁴ David Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British "Folksong" 1700 to the Present Day*, (Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1985).

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Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village : Culture, Ideology, and the English Folk Revival*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993).

Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

See also discussion in chapter 1. p. 17.

¹⁵ Chapter 2 describes the methodology of participatory action research and appendices 3 and 4 record the practical application of this together with case examples.

¹⁶ See appendices 4.1 and 4.2 and discussion in chapter 7.

¹⁷ Robert Morton Nance, "What we stand for", *Old Cornwall*, (St Ives, Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, 1925), vol. 1, p. 1.

