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**Formation and Dissolution of Cultural Borders in the Cornish Dance Revival**

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If you drive down the Southwest of England and pass the River Tamar, you are crossing a border, whose exact identity has been debated for almost a hundred years now.

For the majority of British people, the river just marks the boundary from county Devon to county Cornwall. However, for many people in Cornwall, this boundary constitutes much more than that: it is seen as a **national** border in the eyes of Cornish nationalists and as a **cultural** border amongst Cornish cultural activists. It is the border that distinguishes between the English and the Celtic imaginary, the border that separates ‘down ‘ere’ from up-country, the border which some wish would grant Cornwall the same right to self-determination than Wales and Scotland have.

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Whether this border was considered a border at all in past times can be questioned and has been severely denied by German scholar Malte Tschirschky in his book: *The Invention of the Celtic Nation of Cornwall*, in 2006. However, since the Cornish Language Revival, which started at the beginning of last century, the Cornish border to Devon has become highly symbolic for many people in Cornwall, a fact which gained even more importance when in April 2014 Cornwall was officially declared a ‘national Celtic minority’ by the UK Government under the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

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The desire of the Cornish people to be seen as different from the English can be explained by various facts. The main one seems to be based on processes of othering.

Similar to other Celtic people, and the Irish in particular, the Cornish were considered less civilised than the Londoners during the 18th and 19th centuries as can be seen on this highly pseudo-scientific map on “Nigrescence” on the left here.

***click***

At the same time, the Cornish were highly over-romanticised as some kind of noble savages and spiritual people, attributions that served for marketing strategies in tourism. For instance this Great Western Railway advert of 1922, which promises to take tourists to the Legend Land Cornwall.

***click***

Even nowadays many Cornish people express their concern that they are not taken serious by people from up-country. Cornwall remains the poorest area within the UK, while at the same time being one of the most loved holiday destinations within the Isles.

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This process of othering was taken as a basis by the Cornish themselves when they started their Celto-Cornish Language and Cultural Revival around 1900. Not surprising, therefore, that the Cornish Dance Revival, which started in the early 1980s was especially eager to revive the Cornish folk dances as Celtic instead of English dances.

This idea of shaping one’s past according to one’s own preference in order to achieve a certain cultural outcome fits in nicely with the theory on music and dance revivals and can be encountered in numerous cases worldwide. Owe Ronström, for instance, generalizes this process thus:

***click***

*“Revival is only partly about ‘what once was’. More importantly, it is about ‘what is’ and ‘what is to come’… In essence revival is a process of traditionalisation that goes on in the present, to create symbolic ties to the past, for reasons of the future.”*

In this paper, I would like to demonstrate how the revivalists of the 1st Cornish dance revival created a corpus of Cornish dances that would clearly be distinguishable from English dances in Devon and other places in England.

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I call this process ‘Celtification’ and I understand it as the conscious adoption and imitation of perceived ‘Celtic’ dance features, which aims at demonstrating Cornwall’s cultural distinctiveness from the rest of England and which stands in opposition to ‘Celticisation’, the natural process of acculturation. The latter, I argue, is long lost in Cornwall.

In a second step, I will then focus on a second dance movement in Cornwall, which started around the year 2000 and offered a different interpretation of the Cornish dance style and which developed a different understandings of being ‘Celtic’.

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The Cornish Dance Revival began soon after Cornwall had decided to participate at the inter-Celtic festivals in Brittany and Ireland. One of the revivalists told me how it all started:

*“We were going to an Irish festival and one of the guys we’d met the previous year rang us up and said: “Bring a dance team this year”, and we said: “there isn’t one in Cornwall, we’ve only got about two or three furry dances”.*

(These are processional dances.)

*And he said: “Well, make a dance team!” and we said: “Well, it’s not that easy.” And he said: “Of course it is, do it!”*

***Click***

*So we did, and we ended up with eight people and two musicians to start with, and we had three dances. Dave and I were the organisers and another couple were doing the research, and we ended up with I think about forty-three dances in the end, all traditional”.*

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Before examining some of these dances, I would like to give you a visual example of what Cornish dancing looked like in 1982. This is an excerpt from the Irish television RTE. You will discover a number of similarities with Scottish ceilidh dancing, such as the set dance formation, the double-step and the costumes, featuring the Cornish kilt, which was invented in 1963 by Ernest Morton-Nance.

***Film***

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All of the 45 revived Cornish dances appeared in 2009, collected in the book “Scoot Dances, Troyls, Furries and Tea Treats. The Cornish Dance Tradition” by Merv, Alison and Jowdy Davey. A close examination of the resources shows the following:

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Despite the fact that the early dance revivalists boasted of having filmed numerous old people doing Cornish dances, only 2 recordings were made in total. One showing a single step of the *Boscastle Breakdown*, and one showing parts of the *Broomstick dance*, a dance also known in other parts of the UK and in Ireland.

***click + Film***

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10 dances seem to have been reliably constructed due to multiple sources. Examples are the *Helston Furry*, the *Grampound Furry* and the *Hands Across Dance*, all of which had been also described by the English folk song and dance collector Cecil Sharp in 1913.

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12 dances were reconstructed based on historic information, some of which stem from the 17th century resource “The English Dancing Master” by John Playford. An example is Joan Sanderson, or The Cushion Dance.

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9 dances seem somehow questionable, mostly because the informants of these dances were in their 80s and 90s at the time of collection and could often neither show the dance steps nor remember the tunes. One of the dance revivalists remembers:

“We’d find bits, people that could remember a few steps and then we managed to tie them together and say: ‘ooh yeah, that one and that one goes together’, so we managed to piece together dances”.

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And another revivalist admitted:

“Most of them would’ve been too old to do a lot of dance”. “Granny Rowse had to be held up, she danced on an arm. She literally held an arm”.

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One dance, commonly know as “The Flying Scotsman” was given to the Cornish as a gift from the Scottish Hariott Watt University at an Interceltic Festival, where it was renamed “The Cornish Express”. ***Slide 16*** And the remaining 10 dances in this dance collection are new choreographies, following the ceilidh-dance style.

I would like to give now one example of a ***click*** historically reconstructed dance as well as a ***click***dance I consider of doubtful origin.

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*Liskeard Fair* was reconstructed as a set dance using a polka step. It first appeared in the dance collection *Troyl* in 1981. The source description links the dance to the Liskeard Fair Days, introduced in 1266 by Richard, Earl of Cornwall. It states that the dance has been reconstructed, and I quote: ***click*** “using figures and steps from manuscripts and known to have been danced in Cornwall”, unquote.

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In *Scoot Dances* (the dance collection), the source-description alters considerably: It admits that no single dance description of this dance had ever been found in Cornwall. “Liskeard Fair” is the name of a tune which was collected by folk song collector Sabine Baring Gould in 1891. The whole dance is a choreography put together by the revivalists, and in order to make the dance appear especially Celtic, it’s name was translated to one of the revived forms of the extinct Celto-Cornish language Kernewek, so that it’s now called *Fer Lyskerrys*.

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As an example for a dance of doubtful origin, I would like to trace the sources of *Newlyn Reel*, now translated to neo-Cornish *Plethen Lulynn.* This is as a very long and rather complex couple dance, as you can see on the slide. It takes considerable amount of time to learn this dance, let alone to remember it. Here is a recording of the dance, performed by the now extinct group *Asteveryn.*

***Slide 20: Film***

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The source of *Newlyn Reel* in *Scoot Dances* quotes a description by Esme Frances, the harper of the Cornish Gorseth:

*A neighbour of mine, farmer John Williams, who lived at Boscreggan Farm, Nanquido, described the Newlyn Reel dance to me in 1971. He remembered travelling to Newlyn on a horse and cart when he was a child and seeing it danced by the fishermen there. This would have been early 1900s. He would bring forth the tune in his gruff voice, and demonstrate the steps as he remembered them.*

I leave it to you to decide whether this source sounds reliable, given the fact that the little boy, who’s cited as the original source here, would have had to remember this dance for about 70 years, having never learnt it himself but having only seen it once from far.

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I am not the only one who questions the narrative of this dance and others. A couple of younger folkies in Cornwall started to question the authority and orthodoxy of the Cornish dance revivalists and the origins of their revived dances, as can be seen in this quote. ***(time to read)***

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The English Folk Dance and Song Society likewise questioned the Cornish material, a fact that was interpreted by the Cornish as a typical example of English hegemonic power relations. ***(time to read)***

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In the year 2000, the critical younger Cornish generation decided to invent a new form of Cornish dancing, one that according to them would be more inclusive and less conducted by the revivalists’ authority. They based it on the Breton Fest Noz dances, long chain-dances that would not have the need for a caller and would not need a certain amount of couples. They called these dance nights *Nos Lowen*, a neo-Cornish term that translates “happy night”.

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The *Nos Lowen*-revivalists’ method was to take simple dances or single dance steps from the dance revival corpus and to create chain dances from them. Theypresented themselves as being community centred but open to everyone, no matter whether Cornish born-and-bred, a Cornish in-migrant or a foreign visitor. They took elements from Breton dancing and Balkan and Klezmer dances and also included ‘world music’ elements in their music. So in a way, despite the fact of representing Cornish dancing as Celtic, *Nos Lowen* dissolved the cultural borders the early revivalists had constructed.

***Slide 26***

This is an example of a newly created Nos Lowen dance.

***Film***

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At present, the different visions of what Cornish traditional dance should be and how it ought to be interpreted, have led to a huge and highly emotional, if not adversarial, controversy between the early revivalists and the initiators of *Nos Lowen*. While the early revivalists blame *Nos Lowen* to have “ruined the Cornish culture”, *Nos Lowen* argues that at least what they do is creating a “living tradition rather than a fossil collection”.

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This phenomenon exists in many music and dance revivals. Tamara Livingston formulates it thus:

“After a tradition has been ‘revived’ the question always arises as to the balance between ‘preservation’ of the tradition (i.e. strict adherence to revivalist stylistic parameters) and innovation, even innovation that is intended to win over a greater audience for the tradition. Frequently this tension is responsible for the break down of the revival”.

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I offer yet another interpretation here, which connects the situation of the Cornish dance revival to a theory developed by anthropologist Michael Dietler. When analysing the phenomenon ‘Celt’ in his article “The Consumption of the Past in the Age of Globalization”, he distinguishes between different aspects of Celticness. ***Click*** He uses the term “Celticism” for national concerns and characterizes it as “self-conscious attempts to construct ethnicized forms of collective memory and communal identity that are territorially bounded and embedded in overt political projects and ideologies”. This vision of being Celtic, I believe, is very similar to the way Cornish dancing was constructed by the early revivalists. Cornish dancing initially served for promoting Cornwall’s Celticness and established clear boundaries between Cornish dances and those that were considered English, for instance morris dancing.

The method the revivalists applied in order to achieve such a geographic as well as cultural distinction was taking dance styles of other Celtic places, Ireland and Scotland in particular, as a basis for reviving the Cornish material. Additionally Celtic symbolism was being used in costumes and the Cornish dances as well as dance steps were renamed with revived words in the Cornish language, a process I chose to call ‘Celticifaction’.

***Click***

As a second way of defining what ‘Celtic’ means, Dietler introduces the term “Celticity”, which he describes as “a phenomenon centred around a global spiritual connection to the idea of Celtic identity”, which is “largely decoupled from essentializing notions of race, “blood”, genealogy, or even language”. In my opinion this strongly relates to the vision the *Nos Lowen* revivalists had when they created the Cornish chain-dances. Community building as well as inclusiveness of everyone was the most essential aspect here. The cultural background of the dancers did not matter as long as people decided to take part in the dancing and to use it as a source of inspiration and creativity.

So while the early Cornish dance revivalists rather focussed on creating cultural borders between Celtic Cornwall and Anglo-Saxon England, the *Nos Lowen* revivalists relativize these considerably and shifted the idea of Cornish dancing from the notion of “Celtic blood” to the “Cardiac Celts”, to use a term by Marion Bowman. This means that the cultural boundaries the early revivalists had created dissolved again with *Nos Lowen*, so that Cornish culture currently presents itself as all-inclusive and open to global influences.