***SLIDE 1***

**Text In Search of Cornish Identity Through Dancing and Performing Bodies**

***SLIDE 2***

When the Music and Dance Revival in Cornwall started in the early 1980s, it was designed as a Celtic rather than an English revival. This is due to the fact that the Cornish people see their peninsula not as part of England but as a separate Celtic nation within the UK with a political status that they think should resemble the one of Wales and Scotland.

Historically, this claim can be debated and has been severely rejected by German scholar Malte Tschirschky in his book *Die Erfindung der keltischen Nation Cornwall,* (‘*The Invention of the Celtic Nation of Cornwall*)*’*, which appeared 2006. This book, however, has never been translated to English and it is therefore unknown in Cornwall.

***SLIDE 3***

There are multiple reasons for Cornwall’s perceived otherness, and I’m afraid I cannot go into details here for time reasons. However, two main aspects seem to be Cornwall’s cut-off geographic location on the one hand and its very bad economic situation on the other. Both these circumstances make the Cornish people feel forgotten by the English urban areas and London in particular.

Therefore, rather than being considered England’s rural backwaters, it was a much more attractive option for the Cornish to join the glossy Celtic music and dance world as invented during the 1970s and 80s, for instance by Breton musician Alan Stivell or Irish singer Enya.

***SLIDE 4***

Hardly surprising, the Cornish got the first inspiration for reviving their dances at the Pan-Celtic Festival in Killarney, Ireland. I’m going to show you now an excerpt from an interview broadcasted by the Irish Television RTE in 1982. The two dance revivalists, Pat and Dave, tell the journalist about their relationship to Ireland and they reflect on the beginnings of the Cornish dance revival.

***Film Interview***

***SLIDE 5***

The main problem the Cornish dance revivalists faced was the fact that at the time there were only about 3 traditional dances known in Cornwall. One of them is the Helston Furry, also know as Helston Flora Dance, which was already described by the English folklorist Cecil Sharp in 1913 and which was first recorded in 1790 in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Although having of course changed over time, this dance has been part of Cornwall’s festive culture to the present day.

***Film Helston Furry***

Generally, the research Pat mentioned before in her interview proved very difficult. Most of the few informants the revivalists found were in their late 80s and were often not able to remember the dances, let alone to show them. Even the contextual information was very limited, and the elderly people most often could not remember the tunes either. The revivalists had therefore to be quite creative when reconstructing the dances, a fact that has never been openly communicated.

***SLIDE 6* + *Film Charlie Jose***

An example of this reconstructional process is the dance *Boscastle Breakdown*. When the revivalists filmed the elderly Charlie Jose of Boscastle in 1981, he was only able to provide them with a single step of this dance, as can be seen here.

***SLIDE 7***

Now I will show you a performance of the same dance in its reconstructed form, here danced by the two boys Alan and Andrew at a Pan-Celtic Festival in Isley, in 1984. Please also pay attention to the way Pat introduces the dance to the audience.

***Film Alan and Andrew***

The revival group *Cam Kernewek*, which you saw perform in this video, revived about 40 dances within a relatively short amount of time, a process that came as a surprise to members of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, as this quote illustrates.

***SLIDE 8***

From the English ‘folk’ point of view, the Cornish revival was bogus! [The] researchers did not have the normal disciplines of academic researchers and failed to quote references. The ‘folkies’, who spent ages trying to find anything in English records, were simply dismissive of the ‘sudden explosion’ of Cornish material.

As I analysed elsewhere, the corpus of revived Cornish dances can be subdivided in the following categories:

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- 2 dances only were ever recorded on videotape. One of them is the *Boscastle Breakdown* you’ve just seen.

- 10 dances seem to have been reliably constructed due to multiple sources. An example is the *Helston Furry*, which you also saw before.

- 12 dances were reconstructed based on historic information, some of which stem from the 17th century resource “The English Dancing Master” by John Playford. You will see an example of such a dance in a minute.

- 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. The dance revivalist Dave remembers, and I quote:

“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”.

- 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”. And the remaining 10 dances in this dance corpus are new choreographies, following the ceilidh-dance style.

During the 1980s and 90s, the main aim of the dance revivalists was to have enough material at hand to represent Cornwall at the pan-Celtic dance competitions, which means that the dances were first and foremost created for performances.

***SLIDE 10***

You will now see an excerpt from a TV advert for the Interceltic Festival Lowender Peran in Perranporth in 1983. The performing group is *Cam Kernewek* and the dance, *Phoebe*, is one that is based on a historical description of 1750 by John Johnsons.

***Film Phoebe***

The whole dance material was collected and written down in a self-published booklet, called *Corollyn*, which appeared in 1992. And from then on, the revived Cornish dances were set in stone. People were not allowed anymore to change them.

***SLIDE 11***

This is a process which is also described by Tamara Livingston in her revival theory.

“Revivalist stylistic parameters and aesthetics are based on what is believed to be the stylistic common denominator of individual informants and/ or source recordings; this is transformed into the "essence" of the style which is then used to judge subsequent revivalist performances”.

Now, not everybody in Cornwall was happy with this development. People of the younger generation eventually became rebellious against the strict orthodoxy the Cornish revivalists had over the Cornish dance corpus. The dance we just witnessed, *Phoebe*, for instance was criticised thus:

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Take a dance like the *Phoebe*. It’s written down in a manuscript but it doesn’t tell you what step to use. Everybody will do *Phoebe* to a step hop, because when it’s published in *Corollyn*, it was suggested it was step hop. And people tell you you’re wrong if you don’t do that. In actual fact, there’s nothing in the manuscript.

The older of the two boys you saw doing the *Boscastle Breakdwon* before, Alan, does not have very fond memories of Cornish dances. About thirty years later, he told me:

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“Cornish dancing is really really not cool, so it’s difficult to actually get anybody young. You know, especially blokes. […] I think if you’re under ten, it’s fun, if you’re over sort twenty-five or thirty, it’s more of a hobby, but it’s actually trying to get that sort of in between generation which can actually add the big dynamics. Not think: “oh my God, I’m doing street dancing in Truro and my friends are gonna see me.” Which is exactly what I used to think when I did it.”

The musicians also expressed their boredom to accompany the Cornish display dances. Here’s another quote:

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“[The early revivalists] carried on playing those sets and haven’t changed them, done nothing to them. You know, if you’re doing that dance you do those tunes, you do them twice, then you do the next one and do that and then you go back again. Where are you getting stimulation from in that? Why don’t you do something different? It was getting landlocked, that’s my feeling, it was getting stuck.”

The growing discomfort with the Cornish display dances eventually led to the creation of a new way of interpreting Cornish dances. The idea was to develop something that should be fun for people, and the social aspect gained the highest priority. So, inspired by what the Cornish dancers, especially the younger ones, had seen at the Inter-Celtic festivals in Brittany, namely the dance nights Fest Noz, where people would dance chain-dances for hours, the Cornish people created a similar kind of dance nights, and they called them *Nos Lowen*, which is Cornish and translates as ‘happy night’. They describe their creation thus:

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*Noze Looan* is a recent concept in Cornish Dancing based on a sound tradition and a sense of fun. *Noze Looan* is about enjoyment for everyone – not just dance teams. Its dances are […] either historically recorded in Cornwall, constructed from existing steps and formations, or are directly inspired by particular Cornish tunes. Elements from familiar dances have been simplified and applied to line or circle dancing, or dances for couples.

**(*SLIDE 16***

I will now give you an example of how the *Nos Lowen* revivalists transformed the dances of the former revival corpus to fit their new concept.

Here, Karen explains how a dance the early researches had termed *Mr Martin’s Reel* eventually developed into the *Hedley Serpent.*

***Film Karen*)**

***SLIDE 17 Film Nos Lowen***

Here you can see an example of what a *Nos Lowen* event looks like. I find it interesting to observe how the visitors of this event immediately join in the chain-dancing as soon as the music starts. Nobody seems to need to persuade them. They just want to be part of the dance.

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Not everybody was happy with this new interpretation of Cornish dancing. Some former revivalists claimed that the Cornish dance style has become diluted. Some saw *Nos Lowen*-dancing as a bad copy of Breton dancing. Some compared *Nos Lowen* to *New Age cicrle dancing.* And some claimed that *Nos Lowen* was not attractive enough to be performed at the Interceltic events.

So there seems to be quite a discrepancy between the dances the Cornish people enjoyed dancing for themselves, and the dances that were thought more attractive for representing Cornwall to the outside.

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Of course, the difference between dancing bodies (or maybe I should term them ‘socialising bodies’) and performing bodies does exist in many cultures. But the interesting thing to me is that unlike the stage dance versions, of say Bulgaria or former Yugoslavia, the performed versions were not the stylized versions of some village dances but rather vice versa: The social dance forms had evolved from the choreographies. So what the revival theory calls “decontextualization” or “shifts”, from the barn to the stage, happened in Cornwall the other way round.

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I would like to end my paper with a quote by Nos Lowen revivalist Karen, who formulates this transition of Owe Ronström’s “Shifts” in her own words:

In a funny sort of way, in my heart, I feel that what we’ve done is we’ve invented something for the modern times. But I think if you went right back to the dawn of time, probably what we’re doing is how it would’ve been done. Rather than very organised and regimented. I think that came with history. When you take away all the rights and rules, you just have people, music and dance, and the fact that you celebrate through music and dance.