Language and essence: a comparative study of identity among Celtic language speakers in Wales and Brittany

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Language and Essence:
A Comparative Study of Identity Among Celtic Language Speakers in Wales and Brittany

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Abstract

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis maintains, “No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different cultures live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached” (Abley 47). Language offers insight into how people within specific cultures view themselves, but to what extent is identity shaped by or in response to the language and culture of the greater society? What does language tell us about the history of its speakers and the development and preservation of their identities throughout its evolution? What is the value of linguistic identity and preservation today? The purpose of this project has been to explore these questions by comparing two of the Celtic languages: Welsh and Breton. In the face of being nearly overcome by the effects of nationalism and colonization within their respective countries, these speakers have fought to maintain the individual cultures expressed through their languages in practice. This paper explores the place of Welsh and Breton in their respective countries. It looks at language’s status in state policy and the role that language and its recognition play in nationalism. It explores the different traditions associated with these two languages in music and orality, in history, in individual and national consciousness, and in the worlds of festival, myth, and modern society. Together, the findings here serve to show the interconnectedness of language, culture, and identity, and, thus, the importance of maintaining them today.
I. Introduction

Language grows out of and is influenced by culture, a culture that is transmitted through language. The two are intrinsically connected; one cannot exist without the other. But according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, “No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different cultures live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached” (Abley 47). This is not to say that people who speak different languages are unable to cross national or social boundaries; rather, it is to reaffirm that the language we speak influences how we approach the world around us. Our language, whether consciously or subconsciously, organizes our thoughts. It is a leading factor in the formation of identity, both individual and collective. Within language, one finds a culture that is shaped by the history and the social evolution of its speakers. The Celtic languages are a perfect example of this. Although minority languages within their respective countries, their speakers have had to fight to maintain the cultures and identities that go hand in hand with their languages. They have had to fight to make their voices heard.

Discussing the Manx language revival on the Isle of Mann in Scotland, Mark Abley explains that spoken languages, the connotations that come from syntax and how expressions are formed in different languages, changes how things are said, and thus changes their meaning. During language revival, when students begin to learn a
new—or in the case of the Celtic languages, an ancient—language, perhaps one that is coming back into use after near extinction, Abley writes, “It’s not just a new way of talking that students learn—it’s a new, or rather a very old, way of thinking” (Abley 112). In this instance learning Manx or another of the other Celtic languages connects the speakers to a long history, one that is more than just a collection of words. Looking at the other Celtic languages in Wales and Brittany causes us to question ourselves, for example, can one truly understand the Welsh culture if they are not speaking Welsh? Or, do people who speak Breton actually have a different perception of the world than someone who only speaks French? The two most closely related of the Celtic languages, Welsh and Breton, offer an insight into these questions and the interconnectedness of language, culture, and identity.

Although the majority of both Welsh and Breton speakers are, today, bilingual in these languages as well as their country’s national language, the Celtic languages they speak offer a new lens through which they see the world and their place within it. This project explores what exactly forms these identities while looking at how Welsh and Breton speakers see themselves and the value of their language in their respective countries and in the world today. Linguistically the two languages have much in common, but the situations of Welsh and Breton in context are almost perfect opposites. Comparing the experiences of these languages and the communities that rely on them to transmit a culture and a way of life shows the impact that language has on both group and individual consciousness. It also shows the importance of maintaining and promoting these minority languages because of the significance they
hold in cultural practice. Language, in essence, is the foundation on which culture and identity are built. One cannot exist without the others. The situations of the Welsh and Breton languages historically and today offer a lens through which to see this.

II. The Spiral Effect:
The interconnectedness of language, culture, and identity

As we know, identity is formed and influenced by society, by one’s environment, and by one’s community. It is human nature to form these groups. Collective identity, whether it is within an organization, a religious community, or a nation, offers members within these groups a sense of identity. To belong to a community gives a sense of one’s place in the world, but how are communities defined? Language plays a very important role in forming groups, in forming national, ethnic, and, obviously, linguistic identities. It acts as a common factor that is able to unite people under shared terms, which then offer shared meanings of traditions and values. Robert Wuthnow writes, “In a word, identity is like any other aspect of culture, indeed any other part of the reality of everyday life: it is a social product incomprehensible apart from the particular social context in which it was shaped and is maintained” (Wuthnow 43).

In Wales and Brittany, one finds many practices that are unique to their particular areas and populations. In music, religious practices, oral tradition, myth, history, the struggle for recognition and what that looks like today, in all these things one sees the interconnectedness of language and culture. In many ways, these rituals and practices do not make sense when taken out of linguistic or cultural context.
Because of this, collective identity and a sense of belonging among participants are made even stronger, and the importance of language protection becomes an objective that is all the more vital.

In fact, Stuart Hall goes on to claim that identity is “the product of the marking of difference and exclusion [rather] than...the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity” (Hall 4). Culture is generally understood as something that brings people within a society together under a shared system of values and beliefs, but Hall maintains that identity is also constructed through and because of difference. It acts not only as an adhering element, but also as a way of differentiating oneself or one’s community from greater, often imposing influences. In the case of Brittany and Wales, this means the overwhelming presence of French and English society in opposition to these cultures. Celtic language speakers share a linguistic heritage and a sense of shared identity that goes along with the language they speak and the culture that is formed and maintained as a result. This offers them a sense of distance, a place in which to foster and create their own separate and unique heritage distinct from those who would wish to change them.

What is more, Celtic language speakers fit into Hall’s definition in that they are looking to and influenced by the past, but are more so using this shared history to propel them forward and to strengthen a shared identity as it grows and changes with time. History, language, and culture all work together to form identity in an unending cycle of discovery of oneself and one’s place in the world, despite how one has been seen or portrayed from outside. These are the elements that come into play as identity
is constructed, whether consciously or subconsciously. They also fuel the language revitalization movements that seek to maintain these identities in order to pass them on to future generations. These movements are often directly tied to the political and greater social spheres within their countries, because it is there, more often than not, where they are most threatened.

III. Policy and Practice:
Nationalism and the fight for language recognition

Although France is often seen from the outside as a homogenous and uniform society—a view often encouraged and promoted by the French government—it is a country with an amazing diversity. This is not only because of immigration, although that plays its part, too. Geographically, the country contains a variety of different landscapes and ecosystems, and with these come a variety of regional cultures, each with their own distinctive customs, people, and language. Historically, the French regions were much more isolated from each other than they are today. In many cases, they were independent or semi-independent countries, something that stretched from the early feudal system until the introduction of the railroad in the 1830s. Because of this, most regional inhabitants felt a closer connection to the land and to their unique culture than to an abstract, unified France. The introduction of the railroad, and later the radio, into society sought to bridge the gaps between these smaller, separate cultures and languages, bringing them together as a single country under a single language.
Astoundingly, Brittany is one of the twenty-one different regions with Breton as one of 78 languages found within these regions and the French colonies scattered across the globe (“Questions”). It is a region strongly associated with myth and legend, due to its linguistic and cultural roots in Celtic practice. It is known for its rocky coastlines that are home to the fishing industry that made up so much of its economy into the twentieth century. The region is also scattered with woods and farmlands that house the druidic standing stones that predate recorded history. All of this offers a setting for the legends and oral tradition that have had such an important place in this region’s culture. Brittany is a region of festivals, some religious and some simply celebrations of the region’s music, dance, or language. Brittany does not fit the typical image one has of France, neither in custom nor in language.

The problem comes in the fact that the French government does not recognize the country’s regional diversity through either policy or support. This trend can be traced back to the founding of the Académie française in 1635, whose goal was to standardize the language by removing foreign influences (“L’histoire”). This organization is not, however, something confined to the ancien régime, the French monarchy in power through the French revolution. The Académie is still alive and active today, working to maintain the “purity” of the French language. The French constitution clearly states as the first sentence in Article 2 that French is the sole language of the country.¹ In 2008 a movement to recognize French minority languages sought to amend this section of the constitution, but the Académie publicly

¹ See http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/connaissance/constitution.asp
rejected this, saying that this action would be “an attack on French national identity” (Chrisafis, 2008).

Brittany, along with the other French regions pushing for the use of their local languages, has tried on multiple occasions, notably from World War I onwards, to receive constitutional recognition, but was decidedly turned back with the proposed amendment in 2008. In the years following the First World War, the French government made it even more difficult for Brittany to maintain a sense of local identity as reforms to language and education eliminated regional and minority languages from state consciousness almost entirely. The idea was to give France a greater sense of unity in order to stand strong against outside influences while the world was at war. Language is at the heart of this kind of nationalism, if only for the fact that a common language has the power to draw people together within a specific and shared system of values and means of expression. “To speak a foreign language is to change one’s pattern of thought, to enter a new world, to see things differently,” writes Anne Judge. “Where people have a language, a culture, a religion, and a territory in common, they are likely to see themselves as a nation and entitled to form a state that becomes their ‘home’” (Judge 49).

Furthering the idea that there is much at play in the formation of national identity today, sociolinguist Stephen Barbour, in an article on nationalism in modern Europe, denotes the concept that modern nations are formed only as a result of genetic ties (“Nationalism” 2). Where early nations organized themselves around kinship ties and lines of descendants, the idea of the modern Western nation is based
in a series of more complex identity questions. While the purpose of this paper shies away from questions of nationalism, the State, and the historical connotations of both, they are all important concepts when looking at minority identity within different nations. Anthony D. Smith defines the modern concept of the “nation” as, “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (Smith 14). This idea of the nation is flexible, however. It does not necessarily refer only to the nation as a political body, but also to “nations” that have been formed by people who share certain cultural practices. Ethnic groups, regional identities, and societies that share a linguistic heritage can all fall under this version of “nation.” Each one becomes a way to separate a distinct community from an imposing, greater identity.

For the Celtic language groups made up of speakers who share an ethnic identity with those who are seeking to impose a different way of life on them, linguistic identity becomes more important than the question of ethnicity. It is what allows them to retain a distinct individual culture within a greater nation. In a world with increasing mobility and a looser definition of what it means to “belong”, the idea of ethnicity is becoming more and more fluid. As groups move within and between countries and as the world becomes more accessible to people of all ethnicities, questions of belonging become more and more complex. Although race is often at the forefront of questions of modern Western identity, that is a different discussion. Identity looks to other factors to attempt to define who one is and where one or one’s
group belongs. Ethnicity continues without a doubt to be influential in forming individual identities, in influencing how one is viewed by and how one relates to one’s society and culture. However, language is also at the very core of these questions. It is the essence of society and one’s place within it, because it is the element around which modern society is built. One cannot truly understand a culture and all its nuances until one understands its language; language acts as a vehicle for its culture.

This view of the relationship between nation and culture is what makes it so difficult for smaller, non-recognized “nations”—those smaller communities of people who identify with something other than the national and unified “French” identity presented by the government—within France to receive recognition. In Strasbourg in 1992 at a meeting of the Council of Europe, France was one of three countries to refuse to sign the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (“Regional”, EBLUL, 4). This charter recognizes “the right to use a regional or minority language in private and public life” as a fundamental freedom and an “unalienable right” (“Charter”). The charter’s preamble also reads:

...The protection and promotion of regional or minority languages in the different countries and regions of Europe represent an important contribution to the building of a Europe based on the principles of democracy and cultural diversity within the framework of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. (“Charter”)

An IFOP (Institut français d’opinion publique) survey taken in 2000 shows that 85% of the Breton population was in support of the ratification of this charter, yet that has not pushed the French government to action (Gemie 155). Despite the
establishment of the Office de la Langue Bretonne (Ofis ar Brezhoneg) in 1999, the language continues to struggle and to receive little official support. This association was created to preserve and promote the Breton language. It began with a push to put up bilingual street signs and today continues to organize activities in a Breton medium. It also offers language classes in an attempt to push the Breton language beyond its context, one that seems confined to aging populations in rural areas. Although it has been successful in promoting Breton in the region of Brittany, this has not spread to the greater country. The French government is obstinate in maintaining that, in the country of France, French is the only language that will be bolstered and maintained in policy.

The case for Wales is far different, offering almost an exact contrast to the situation in Brittany. Beginning with a brief look at the country itself, Wales is marked by rolling green hills and coastlines rugged with cliffs. Like its Celtic neighbors, Wales has a strong tradition of story and legend. Scattered castles factor into tales of knights and dragons, weaving a history in which it is difficult to tell fact from fiction. It is a country once known for its coalmines; one that is now a country of small farms, but also metropolitan centers like Cardiff or Swansea. It offers a home to the royal family but also boasts welcome and hospitality in everyday life (“Welcome”). Wales has a strong rugby tradition, and a love of song and the spoken word. All of this is strongly tied to the Welsh language that forms the basis of Welsh culture and identity. “Here is a language spoken since the sixth century, still a native language for a significant minority, and to want to keep it, to insist on keeping it, is
then as natural as breathing,” writes Raymond Williams, “With the language goes a literature, and with the literature a history, and with the history a culture” (R. Williams 7).

Although certain periods of the country’s history show a decline in Welsh use, there has never been any official policy against language use, and today the language receives total support from the Welsh government, as well as recognition within the greater United Kingdom (“Welsh”). Some of this has to do with the industrial revolution. While industrialization in the nineteenth century hit Brittany hard, it was a period of growth for the Welsh language. As a region that relied on farming and fishing for so much of its income, many people left Brittany to seek jobs in urban areas. French was—and is—seen as an advantage in desperate times, and children were not being pushed to learn Breton so they would have access to more opportunity. The Industrial Revolution in Wales, however, caused non-Welsh speakers from England to migrate to Welsh cities (Barbour “Britain” 41). This meant people had to be bilingual, but it also meant that Welsh speakers didn’t leave because opportunities were coming to them.

Because of the strong presence of Welsh in society and industrialization, the language was—and is—able to be used in a variety of situations in daily life and is not simply reserved for home-use. It is a working language, a language that today continues to be used in business and politics as well. Today Welsh-English bilingualism is seen as an advantage, one that opens up more opportunities to workers than having only one language or the other. The United Kingdom has ratified the
Charter for regional and minority languages to officially recognize all the Celtic languages spoken in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In addition, the Welsh Language Act of 1993 sought not just to promote Welsh, but also to give it equality with English (Coupland 6). Margaret Sutherland goes so far as to say, “The situation in Wales offers the clearest illustration of government support for a minority language” (Sutherland 201).

The National Action Plan for the Welsh language came about in 2003 in a push towards a bilingual Wales. In it, the Welsh government directly states their vision for the future of the language. They also state the reasons why government support is necessary to truly bring about a nation-wide revival of Welsh and the actions that will be necessary to accomplish this. A bilingual state is not something that they want to force on the nation, but that they want the nation to have the power to choose. If the status of the language increases, then more people will want to speak it and language use will grow. A truly bilingual Wales, they write, is “a country where people can choose to live their lives through the medium of either or both Welsh or English and where the presence of the two languages is a source of pride and strength to us all” (National Action Plan i.). This position is reflected in the fact that the street signs across Wales are now all bilingual. This is a display of the presence the two languages have in daily life, giving them a sense of equality, but also showing that Welsh must be preserved and displayed.

2 See the full document here: http://gov.wales/topics/welshlanguage/publications/iaithpawb/%3bjsessionid=91D241368AD0B86E9A839E889CD448D5?lang=en
The view of the necessity of a bilingual nation has carried over into educational policy as well, in the creation and success of bilingual schools across the country. These schools are today, R. Brinley Jones writes, “viable units drawing not only upon those whose first language is Welsh but on those whose homes feel a lack of identity because they are without it” (Jones 160). Today 463,000 students in Wales are being taught Welsh, which is mandatory for students in ages from 5 to 16 (National Action Plan 37). There is a push for Welsh in all areas of life, not simply within education, because as the National Action Plan reads, “A language which is confined to the educational sector is not a living language” (National Action Plan 7). Showing that the language has a certain status will encourage younger generations to use it and will give them the drive to be involved in activities that require Welsh language use. It is young speakers that will help carry out the goals outlined by the Language Action plan for Wales’ youth meant to “develop a sense of ownership for the language” by offering everyday opportunities in which to use the language—to make it a normal part of life (National Action Plan 48). The family plays an important role in the act of language transmission as well, one that is just as necessary as the role of school. By teaching their children Welsh, families pass on not only a language, but also a sense of its importance.

According to census information gathered between 1971 and 1991, one can see that Welsh is increasing among younger speakers, but decreasing among older speakers (see chart below). This is due, in part, to increased media attention concerning Welsh, as well as these recent educational reforms. Beginning in the
1970s the Welsh Language Society advocated for a stronger presence of Welsh in daily life. With this came the development of television and radio broadcasting through a Welsh medium. Welsh language broadcasting helped to expose the language to a different audience by giving it a presence in the home. Today the BBC offers Welsh language programming on its television channel S4C, as well as on BBC Radio Wales. Together they offer over 220 hours of broadcasting a week in Welsh alone ("Welsh Language", BBC).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>1971 Per cent</th>
<th>1981 Per cent</th>
<th>1991 Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
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<td>15-24</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-44</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
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<td>45-64</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 and over</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Office for National Statistics and the National Assembly for Wales (National Action Plan, “Table 3” 6)

The growth of Welsh language use stands in stark contrast to Brittany, where the largest percentage of Breton speakers is found within the older generations and is confined mostly to rural areas (“Breton”). Today a similar push in Brittany is towards what Ronan Calvez refers to as normalisation, a movement that seeks to make Breton a language of daily life, one that people will want to use and protect. This is an important issue considering that Breton has taken a serious turn for the worse in the
last decade. The language has decreased from 246,000 *bretonnants*, or Breton speakers, in 1997 to 172,000 speakers in 2007 (Calvez 650). A 2007 report by the EBLUL, the French sector of the European Bureau for Lesser-used Languages, showed that on television there is generally less than an hour of broadcasting in the Breton language each week (“Regional”, EBLUL, 6). Because television in France is all centralized and national, regional stations must receive approval to be able to broadcast in their language. TV Breizh was created in 2000 as a Breton language network, but it was denied funding by the French Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel (CSA) and is now hardly more than a commercial station (“Regional”, EBLUL, 6).

There are no Breton-only radio stations, only certain programs on the greater Radio France network that, in general, do not receive more than one to two hours of air time each week (“Regional”, EBLUL, 6). This is what makes the emphasis on the family’s role in language transmission so important. If the language revival is to work, it has to extend outside of a school setting. Within an educational system that receives little support, it is even more necessary for families to become more involved. Inciting this action, however, has been more of a problem. In recent history, families in Brittany have moved farther and farther away from teaching their children Breton in a country where French seems a more obvious tool for success. The *Office de la langue bretonne* in a statement in 2007 made it clear that action is needed here:

> The family plays practically no further role in Breton language transmission. In order to slow down the diminishing number of speakers resulting from this, the public powers, local collectivities and Breton society, in general, need to mobilize rapidly: the 92% of Bretons who wish to see Breton conserved need to be alerted [of this] and incited to [bring about] an authentic recovery of their language. The conservation of
regional languages and the construction of their future rest on the involvement of each person in a re-launching of language transmission within the family. [Office de la langue bretonne, 2007:19] [my translation]3 (Calvez 652)

Ronan Calvez opens one of his articles with the disconcerting fact that, by the year 2011, someone could, in theory, spend an entire summer holiday in Brittany without actually hearing a word of Breton spoken (Calvez 647). Indeed, it seems that Breton is gradually disappearing from public use to be confined to personal interaction (Gemie 160). It is difficult, however, to even track the status of Breton today, because any research on the number of speakers must be done privately since the French state refuses to include language questions on the national census (Gemie 158). The idea of separate “spheres” is one that is very alive in French consciousness. There are certain things that should be confined to the private “sphere” that are personal and are matters to be dealt within the confines of the home or among one’s own community. This explains why, for example, the French are more likely to talk about politics than religion at a dinner party. Politics are a subject that concerns everyone and to which everyone can contribute. One’s political views are not seen as a private opinion because they are at the heart of the public “sphere” and, thus, concern everyone. All of this is to draw attention to the fact that one’s language, if it is not French, is something seen in terms of the private “sphere”. French is the

3 “La famille ne joue pratiquement plus son rôle dans la transmission de la langue bretonne. Pour enrayer la diminution du nombre de locuteurs qui en découle, les pouvoirs publics, les collectivités locales et la société bretonne, en général, doivent se mobiliser rapidement: les 92% de Bretons qui souhaitent voir conserver le breton doivent être sensibilisés et incités à une véritable réappropriation de leur langue. La conservation de la langue régionale et la construction de son avenir reposent sur l’implication de chacun dans la relance de la transmission familiale.”
language of the Republic, so if one is not speaking French, that is a personal matter and not something that concerns the state. Anne Judge makes this connection drawing attention to the fact that in terms of the national census, both language and religion are omitted because they are “private matters” and because questions like this could be seen as racist in that they could cause division based on the answers to them (Judge 46). This also shows, however, the denial of the French state to recognize any “linguistic problems” within the country (Judge 46).

Throughout its history, France has believed it has a duty to educate others. This is the idea of the mission civilisatrice that was so prominent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The “white man’s burden” existed in England as well, and in both countries these values made it into home educational policy. English and French became status symbols. Schools throughout the UK, particularly throughout Wales and Ireland, were standardized and made to teach in English only. Within France, the same approach that was used in the colonies was taken within regions where French was not the first language—la France obscure, these areas were called. Jules Ferry was one of the leaders in the push for the French language. He saw it as a tool for the “civilization” of those who were seen in the late 1800s as inferior because of their race, their language, and their lack of education, elements also perceived as a lack of culture. The fact that these same tactics were used in Brittany, a region of France, shows French views of this area. It is seen as something separate that required cultivation to bring it up to the same cultural standards as the rest of the country. Ferry’s educational reforms also separated religion from education under the title of
laïcité, the removal of religion from society to form a secular state. The Lois Ferry served to standardize French education under a single language at home as well as abroad. This was to insure that the French in France were also “cultured”, and that this was achieved through primary, public education and not just in private schools (Langues 2).

In Wales this period is marked by a similar intolerance for the Welsh language as it was overcome by the presence of English in the country. Across the UK, the Celtic languages were being quenched in an attempt to give people more opportunities by teaching only English in schools and by bringing Ireland, Scotland, and Wales up to the same standards as the English elite. In the 1840s one sees one of the largest sources of tension in the history of Welsh education known as the Treachery of the Blue Books. In 1846, William Williams, a Welshman who was serving as a member of the English parliament in Coventry, England, wanted to take a look into the status of education in Wales. To gather this information, he sent three of his English commissioners into the country to visit every region, collecting data and noting what was being taught in Welsh schools. The published results were offensive to the Welsh people and contributed to the sense of inferiority seen throughout the next century in connection with the Welsh language. The reports painted the Welsh people as ignorant and disadvantaged because of their language and made claims that their moral integrity was compromised because of the language they spoke. One report claimed:

Whether in the country, or among the furnaces [of the mines], the Welsh element is never found at the top of the social scale...[;] his language
keeps him under the hatches, being one in which he can neither acquire or communicate the necessary information. It is a language of old-fashioned agriculture, of theology, and of simple rustic life, while all the world about him is English. (Jones 160)

This led to English-medium schooling across the country, and the idea that English was necessary in order to achieve success. The Welsh intellectual classes that had thrived since the 16th century with the translation of the Bible into Welsh were nearly extinct and replaced with the image of Wales as a country of nothing more than farmers and miners. This act of translation had led to the preservation of Welsh outside of folklore and oral tradition, and the presence of Welsh in religious practice and instruction had helped to keep the language alive, but all of this was pushed aside with the seeming need for English imposed by the British government.

One of the biggest examples of the domination of English within Welsh education in the nineteenth century is that of the “Welsh not”, also called the “Welsh board”, referred to by the BBC as “that most hated symbol of English cultural oppression” ("Welsh and 19th century", BBC). When children were caught speaking Welsh within the English education system of the period, they were given boards to wear around their necks reading ‘W.N.’ for ‘Welsh Not’ to discourage them from speaking Welsh and to serve as a warning to other children not to use this language. This is similar to the Breton “sabot”, known as the symbole, where children speaking Breton in school were made to wear a wooden shoe around their neck to serve the same purpose. With both of these examples, children were made to wear and display this symbol and were only allowed to remove it when they caught another child speaking the forbidden language to whom to pass it off. This kind of policing in
schools was reflective of the actions of both the British and French governments in
their attempts to eliminate languages other than the established standard.

Although much evolution in language status and revitalization happened over
the following centuries, the real turning point did not come until the 1960s. The riots
of May 1968 in Paris in many ways made the movement towards different forms of
education possible. This student-led strike, the largest general strike in French history,
showed a transformation in French society and thought, one that spread across
Western Europe and indeed the world. May 1968 was a cultural revolution calling for
freedom of expression across society—in art, literature, and cultural life. These riots
acted out against the traditional French value system and the feelings of supremacy
found throughout French institutions, particularly in the schools. It was a rejection of
bourgeois values and the capitalist system and included a push for the recognition of
how these views had affected French colonies as well as the different regions of
France. The events of May 1968 had a particular impact on Brittany, causing the
region to rise up in what Maryon McDonald calls a “radical alternative” to the
“system”, the system being mainstream France (McDonald 82). This caused a spur in
language activism within Brittany. A decade after May 1968, the number of groups in
the Breton language movement had more than quadrupled, jumping from eighteen
groups in 1968 to ninety-four in 1977 (McDonald 83).

In the 1970s there was a push for monolingual Breton education in the form of
immersion schools as a response to ideas about education that had been held for so
long. Modeled after the Welsh *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin*, a Welsh immersion
program created in 1971 within nursery schools, the DIWAN schools were created to offer all courses and extracurricular activities conducted through a Breton medium (Kuter; “Background”). These schools, however, are not recognized by the French state even today. Because this language “barrier” renders the school unable to be accessed by everyone, the schools have to be classified as private rather than public and, thus, receive all their support from donors rather than from the state. The Fédération UNSA (l’Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes) Éducation refuses as well to support the DIWAN system because it does not offer an entrance into the public service sector and therefore cannot contribute to build the society (Langues, UNSA 11).\(^4\) Despite the DIWAN system and the increased presence of Breton in schools through the university level, studies show that only about 25,000 students out of 1 million in Brittany are actually learning Breton, with only about 4% (5,800) of these students enrolled in immersion schools (“Breton”). S. Gemie sums up results of a 1997 poll taken by Fañch Broudic that show that “there is widespread public support for the academic presence of the Breton language, but there is far less of a desire to participate in this linguistic culture” (Gemie 156). That is to say that out of Bretons surveyed, 72% think the language should be available to students, but only 16% think it should actually be compulsory (Gemie 156).

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\(^{4}\) See full text here: [http://www.felcocreo.org/mdoc/docs/t_doc_2_20121230164241.pdf?PHPSESSID=f48fe3812e8a081ff5bd943c078e46d8](http://www.felcocreo.org/mdoc/docs/t_doc_2_20121230164241.pdf?PHPSESSID=f48fe3812e8a081ff5bd943c078e46d8)
IV. Revolution, place, and the politics of song

The 1960s were a revolutionary decade across Europe, not just in France. Across the Channel in Wales, the events of these years led to the growth of the protest ballad in Welsh song. These ballads were a way to express political sentiments through the language of song, a medium that was already close to the hearts of the Welsh people. This tradition really took hold with the drowning of Capel Celyn, a village in the Tryweryn Valley in Wales. In 1957, the British government purchased the land to build a dam that would supply water to the English city of Liverpool. The reservoir Llyn Celyn, completed in 1965, destroyed 800 acres of land and the Welsh-speaking village that sat there (Crump, “Protests”). E. Wyn James notes that this area of Wales was a “stronghold of the Welsh language and its traditional rural culture,” one that was being “sacrificed” in a very physical way to serve the English (James 594).

During this time Welsh folk singer Dafydd Iwan entered the scene. As the grandson of one of the founders of Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist political party, he was involved in politics since childhood (James 596). Iwan’s music had a great influence on the nationalist movement in Wales as he showed open support for the actions taking place. In particular, the subject matter of many of his songs and much of his music was shaped by the development of the Welsh Language Society and the continued growth of Plaid Cymru. Because of his prominence in popular music, he helped to spread the ideas and goals of these action groups to a wider audience (James 597). He was later a member of both organizations, serving as chairman of the
Dafydd Iwan grew up near Capel Celyn during the time of protest against the construction of the dam. His family and community spoke Welsh and, apart from receiving an English education, he was constantly immersed in traditional Welsh life and culture, beginning to perform at Welsh language festivals, or *eisteddfodau*, at an early age (James 598). His songs, often referred to as protest ballads or even battle hymns, reflected the national politics of the times in which they were written. In a 1962 BBC broadcast, former Plaid Cymru president Saunders Lewis called the Welsh people to action saying, “It will be nothing less than a revolution to restore the Welsh language in Wales. Success is only possible through revolutionary methods” (James 595). Iwan held this same view and, thus, used his music to incite the nation to the revolutionary action needed to truly bring about a language revival.

Certain promoters of Welsh have taken this idea of a “revolution” to an extreme, but this group is not a majority. During the call for the devolution of the Welsh government in the 1960s, there were huge protests across Wales calling for the removal of English road signs. Protesters across the country went through towns and painted over these signs to physically, and, as Graham Day points out, symbolically, remove English from their society as well as from the landscape (Day 219). In his article “Painting the World Green”, E. Wynn James draws attention to the militaristic nature of Iwan’s song of the same name (Peintio’r Byd yn Wyrdd), using it as an example showing the influence of his music. The song, released in the 1970s, refers
to these displays encouraged by the Welsh Language Society and the Welsh nationalist party. The song, written and sung in Welsh, begins (translated):

Farewell to bending the knee  
And licking the arse of the English,  
Farewell to vile serfdom  
We shout with united voice

Chorus:  
We’ll take our song to the fields  
And we’ll shout in the streets,  
Let’s set all Wales alight  
And paint the world green.  
We’ll paint the world green, friends,  
Paint the world green;  
Let’s set Wales alight, friends,  
And paint the world green. (James 605)

This song is representative of the nature of the Welsh struggle against British imperialism and the firm grasp of the English language across Britain. Through his words, Iwan brings the Welsh people together as a community, as “friends” uniting with a single voice for a common cause. He also draws attention to the idea that movements like this require the participation of an entire nation. Whether in the “fields” of rural Wales, or the “streets” of urban centers, those fighting for Wales were and are a single people. For Iwan, this song served as a call to action meant to inspire.

The act of painting over and removing English street signs has more significance than being a mere symbolic act. Welsh place names offer a connection to the past that goes deeper than being simply sentimental feelings opposed to the presence of the English language in Wales. To remove these signs would be to remove a means of preserving heritage. Welsh place names often have significance
beyond just their words, coming from historical events that have happened in the place they are naming. They are, thus, stories carrying on history and giving a deeper meaning to the idea of “place”. This aspect makes them worth preserving, aside from being a display of nationalism. Twm Elias, who works at the study center at Snowdonia National Park in Wales, gives an example of one of these stories in the name of the southern town of Beddau saying, “But if we forget that the town’s name comes from...the Welsh for graves, then we'd be losing an understanding of its possible roots as an ancient, pre-Christian burial site” (Prior, BBC).

Circling back around to politics, revolutionary actions such as those called for by Dafydd Iwan in the 1960s and 70s still exist to a certain extent in Wales today but are far less common and are reserved to certain areas. In general, the Welsh are content with being a bilingual nation—as long as this means remaining truly bilingual. Nevertheless, the northwestern Welsh group Cymuned, meaning ‘community’, is very vocal against non-Welsh immigration into the country, protesting the government campaign to offer more widely spread housing, believing this privilege should remain among the Welsh-speaking community (Coupland 13). This group is made up mostly of nationalists who claim the importance of Welsh as the oldest European language and who actively fight against what many have termed the “linguistic genocide” of English and other majority languages over their regional counterparts (Coupland 15). It is important to note, however, that these sentiments are not reflected in the language plan of the Welsh government, which seeks to make Welsh accessible to all those who have the desire to learn it.
In Brittany the movement in music was also revolutionary, but in a different way. The changes in the music scene here were not so much political as they were a movement towards a different kind of music. Take Alan Stivell, for example. Stivell is a Breton singer whose music led to a revival in Celtic, not to mention Breton, music. He entered the music scene at a young age, performing with a custom Celtic harp made by his father. It was fashioned after the Irish harp, an instrument that had not been seen before in popular music and culture. Traditional Breton music has its own instruments, and by introducing this Irish influence to Breton popular culture, he helped bridge the gap between Brittany and other Celtic nations. This was important because much of Breton language activism up to this point had been confined to the militant sphere. These “militants” were those at the forefront of the fight for recognition and protection, politically and socially, of the Breton language and way of life, and had been particularly active since the 1960s. David Maynard reaffirms that this sector of the Breton movement was a minority in the region and not reflective of the feelings of the greater population. This group, he writes, were but “a set of unstable micro-parties, cultural associations, coalitions and factions whose total membership number somewhere between two to five thousand” (Maynard 196). Then and now they were mostly young, educated, urban males who, Maynard says, “generally share a leftist ideological position emphasizing resistance to what they perceive as the linguistic and cultural domination of the region by the French state” (Maynard 196). Alan Stivell, although he believed in the revolutionary aspect of
language revival, stretched the Breton movement from the militant sphere to include the whole of Breton society.

When he began recording music as an adult, he saw the importance of folk music to Celtic culture and decided to modernize it, which helped to bring it into public consciousness in France and to give Brittany a voice in the global music scene. Stivell’s albums contributed to the development of Celtic music as its own genre by taking traditional folk music melodies and instruments and adding different elements that gave them the feeling of more popular music (“Biographie”). The title of “Celtic music” serves to connect the music of Breton with the other Celtic nations and singers like Dafydd Iwan by bringing them together under a separate and unique heading.

Stephen D. Winick points out that the fact that Stivell, although he is French, purposely labels his music as “Celtic” in order to, in true Breton fashion, differentiate himself from France and to paint the image of Brittany as its own nation (Winick 336). Those who are familiar with the accordion or jazz guitar that is typical to traditional and stereotypical French music can see that, in his choice of instruments and musical style, Stivell is distancing himself from French culture and instead recognizing himself as a member of a separate and distinct Celtic culture. Stivell’s music is influenced by traditional folk melodies from each of the Celtic nations, but also heavily features Breton musical elements and language. This use of other influences, to him, does not make his music less “Breton”, but connects his nation’s heritage with the other Celtic traditions (Winick 337). His 1993 album *Again*,
although containing a considerable amount in Gaelic, has about half of its songs in Breton, and nowhere features the French language (Winick 337).

V. Music, festival, and the Celtic oral tradition

The Celtic culture that Wales and Brittany share, with its long history of bards, song, and storytelling, places great value on oral tradition. The spoken word here carries a heritage stretching back to the speakers’ Celtic ancestors. It keeps tradition alive and transmits a set of values to those who participate, conveying meaning within a greater history. For Wales and Brittany, song is at the center of this, connecting the past and the present and anchoring tradition in a modern setting. In the different styles of traditional and neo-traditional Celtic music, one can see the past uniting with the present, identities adjusting and reconstructing themselves with time and across history. One can trace the path these Celtic speakers have taken over the years manifesting itself in cultural practices that are at the core of both societies.

It is ideas like these that led to the eighteenth century revival of the Eisteddfod in Wales. There was already a long oral tradition here, where throughout the country’s history stories and legends had been shared through song. During the Romantic Movement, a group of poets gathered together for the first of this festival since 1567, the year that marked the disappearance of the professional bards from Welsh society (Morgan 26). Today, this festival’s purpose is not simply to have a week designated to the celebration of these practices, a week whose purposes will then be forgotten until the next year. It is a place for people who believe in the
importance of Welsh language and story and its importance in daily life to come
together with others from across the nation who feel the same way. It offers an
ideological connection today to those who revived it and who saw it as important at
its beginning. It also offers a sense of a heritage that stretches back to the bards and
legends of antiquity to which people can still connect.

The *eisteddfod* was re-launched in 1861 and has since grown into a national
festival celebrating Welsh language, arts, and music. It not only offers a place for
people to share and to participate in a linguistic heritage, but also helps to increase the
status of the Welsh language in the eyes of the public. The festival is held entirely in
Welsh with translators available, and activities include music and poetry, theatrical
performances, Welsh classes, and vendor stalls. After attending the 2010 festival,
over half of people surveyed showed positive feelings towards the language and
expressed interest in either beginning or to continue to learn Welsh after the festival’s
end (“Promoting”). The festival helps people to experience the language as something
living and active, not just a static concept. It shows that with the language comes a
whole way of life outside of revitalization efforts and political language activism, as
important as those things are. For a sizeable minority of people, the Welsh language
is a mother tongue. A life shaped by this language is something natural that is not
being forced or imposed, but is at liberty to be celebrated.

The Breton literary revival came after that of the *eisteddfod* in the mid-1800s
as authors inspired by the British Romantic movement sought to preserve certain oral
folklore traditions in writing. The most famous of this movement in Brittany, and the
one who was responsible for starting it, was Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué. In 1839 he published *Barzaz Breiz*, which translates to *Breton Bardic Poems: Popular Songs of Brittany*, and contained poems in the style of the *trouvères*, the *troubadours* of northern France. These were the traveling bards who were responsible for spreading and maintaining oral traditions throughout the Middle Ages. Although La Villemarqué’s poems were not so much folklore as they were of traditional or medieval influence, they sparked a popular interest in Breton folklore and its study and preservation (“Barzaz Breiz”). It was the Welsh *eisteddfod* that inspired Villemarqué to begin collecting these stories in the first place, and which inspired the creation of similar festivals in Brittany that are modeled after it (Bertho Lavenir “Pourquoi” 306; McDonald 138). He saw how literary and oral traditions in the other Celtic nations were celebrated and maintained, and he wanted the same to be true for Brittany.

The *Gouel ar Brezhoneg*, the annual Breton-language Festival, falls each year around the Catholic holiday of Pentecost. Like most Breton festivals, it involves dancing and music. It also celebrates the Breton language through plays, debates, and vendor stalls that sell, among other things, Breton literature—all within the medium of Breton (McDonald 138-139). The Breton word *gouel*\(^5\) (festival) is normally reserved for religious festivals or holy days (McDonald 347). The fact that it is used here to refer to a secular festival celebrating language and culture shows the festival’s importance in the minds of militants and those who participate. Although it falls on a

\(^5\) Shares origins with the Welsh *gwyll*, also meaning festival or feast
Catholic holy day, the festival is not religious. It is a space for Breton people to be Breton, to speak their language and to share a common heritage within their community.

In Brittany, the fest-noz holds a similar place within Breton consciousness. A more traditional manifestation of culture, the fest-noz emphasizes the importance of language in Breton daily and community life. UNESCO classifies the fest-noz as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,” “[celebrating] the importance of traditional dances and music performances for Breton communities, constituting communal gatherings passed down from generation to generation, recreated and reinvented according to changing times” (“Fest-noz”).

This tradition came back into public consciousness in the 1960s. Originally rural harvest celebrations, these weekly gatherings bring the community together while maintaining a centuries-old heritage. The fest-noz has always been a chance for a community to gather and spend time together, but with the folk revival in Brittany
these literal “night parties” became an ideal ground for the rebirth of interest in traditional Breton music and dance. At these gatherings, people dance to the kan-ha-diskhan, music sung in a traditional call and response style that offers a rhythm for dancing in the round. Traditional instruments, like the Breton bagpipe known as a biniou or a woodwind instrument called a bombard, can also accompany them. In his E Langonned “manifesto”, Stivell paints a portrait of what he sees as a “real” fest-noz:

What is a real fest-noz?
- only local dances.
...
- free admission (drinks bought)
- only unaccompanied singing and biniou-bom-barde (+ clarinette in the Plinn region)
- a minority of people from outside the district
- outside of the cities.

If you have known this, you know that something happens there, a communion that cannot be found anywhere else... But above all one finds direct contact with the tradition, a tradition that we have had the luck in Brittany, unlike the French, of having been capable of maintaining alive. [Italics added, Winick’s translation] (Winick 347-348)

Winick points out that, although this tradition was indeed at one point revived, for many people the fest-noz was and is simply a way of life. It is a normal community event centered on an important part of local culture that is natural to those who participate. It is not just a reconstruction of a bygone way of life or an idealistic attempt at revitalization. The fest-noz is still popular in community life across the region, especially in rural areas. In any given town, especially during the summer, one can find signs advertising a weekly fest-noz where there will be food, singing, and dancing in a “Celtic circle.” According to Maryon McDonald:
Through the fest-noz, the ‘Breton’ world makes a clear claim to peasant authenticity. There has long been a romantic association of the peasant, the soil, and Breton, and the peasantry and the rural world are commonly seen as strongholds of the Breton language. (McDonald 144)

The fest-noz takes these elements and gives them the authenticity that so many those seeking a revival of culture try to recreate.

Since the 1960s and the revival of the fest-noz as an act of cultural preservation, these dances have often been associated with Breton militant meetings. This resurgence of the fest-noz, particularly among these groups, appeared first as recreations of what they saw as a fading practice. In those first years, participants wore more traditional dress and preferred to have these dances in what they saw as more authentic settings and, of course, through the medium of the Breton language (McDonald 144). Today, since these militants are themselves urban, the fest-noz for them functions like the annual music festival Interceltique, urbanizing and giving status to traditions that are typically and more commonly rural.

The annual Festival Interceltique held in the Breton city of Lorient offers the celebratory nature of the language festivals with the atmosphere of a fest-noz. Unlike many Welsh national festivals held strictly through the medium of Welsh, or the fest-noz, the Festival Interceltique is not a celebration of the Breton language, although evident in certain elements, but rather a celebration of the language of music. As it is “inter” Celtic, this festival, like the music of Alan Stivell, also serves to connect Breton with a greater Celtic heritage, the idea of a united and imagined Celtic community in opposition to its oppressors. The music revival sparked by Alan Stivell
and other Celtic artists also marked the beginning of music festivals featuring a mixture of traditional folk music alongside their more modern adaptations. One could argue that Celtic music, although it is often sung in its original language, is not truly traditional. It has elements of the original, but it has been adapted to fit its time. These traditions, although they have been altered to coincide more with modern life, have not lost their meaning. They have changed and grown along with the generations that are responsible for passing them on.

In many ways the Festival Interceltique acts as an exhibition, a kind of spectacle. It takes “typical” Breton traditions and cultural practices, placing them inside a more modern context and giving them a place in a separate Celtic “nation”. France is a country known for its festival culture, for its many celebrations and opportunities to showcase the culture of one’s city, region, organization, or the like. The Festival Interceltique, however, creates its own traditions. It claims to be unique and international, stepping outside the confines of the French festival that typically are confined to dance, cinema, or more traditional forms of music (“Concept”). Instead of connecting Brittany to greater France, the festival serves to connect it with the other Celtic communities in the British Isles, Canada, the United States, and Spain. It also gives the Breton, a people whose customs are often lost or threatened in the face of a dominating French culture, a chance to display beauty, a created aesthetic unique to their community (Bertho Lavenir “Au-delà” 725).

The Festival Interceltique gives Breton people, especially a new, younger generation, a chance to participate in a heritage transformed from that of their local
community to a greater Breton community. Although they can be taken as such, James Porter maintains that exhibitions of culture such as these festivals should not be seen as simple romanticism:

...Latter day festivals of “Celtic” music such as that now held in Glasgow or Lorient must be taken seriously and not dismissed as ‘inauthentic.’ Their very authenticity resides in the motivations, goals, and identities of the participants, and in realization within specific contexts rather than in the surface elements of the performance pattern. (Porter 214-215)

These festivals are not only celebrations, but also transmissions of a way of life. This idea is symbolized in the common meal that opens the festival, bringing participants from all the represented nations together as a single Celtic community. This meal is known as *la cotriade*, a francophone translation of the Breton *kaoteriad* and the name for the large pot in which Breton fish soup is cooked (Morand 207). This traditional open-air dinner of fish soup and the days’ catch of the local fishermen eaten on the port helps to bring a sense of local tradition to a festival that does not focus on Brittany alone (Bertho Lavenir “Au-delà” 725).

Another important element of the festival is the Grand Parade, which showcases traditional music and dress of the Celtic countries participating in that year’s festival. Catherine Bertho Lavenir draws connections between this act and the greater folklore movement. She claims that the parade “is a moment very different in which the Festival of Lorient registers itself directly inside the heritage [my translation]” of this movement in that it brings rural culture into an urban setting (Bertho Lavenir “Au-delà” 725). In that urban political life, the Festival Interceltique acts more like a *manifestation* than a festival, placing it in both the political and
cultural spheres. A *manifestation*, or *grève*, is a public protest, often taking the form of a large march through the streets. This *grève* culture, the practice of bringing protesters out into the streets to assemble and to march, has been an important feature of French political life since before the revolution. It is interesting to note that the French word *manifestation* can also refer simply to a cultural event, or the display of an emotion. A *manifestation*, a display of solidarity for or against something, is a common occurrence in French political life. It is similar to the concept of a strike, but within French culture it holds more weight, and this right is central to the French concepts of freedom within society and freedom of expression. It brings people with a common purpose into the streets and public spaces, to show off those ideas and symbols that are important to them, reflecting not only the modern militant procession by armies or manifesting groups of people, but also the more ancient practice of the religious procession, the *pardon* (Bertho Lavenir “Au-delà” 725).

VI. The ritual of language

Although France does not have a national religion, the country has a long history of Catholicism. France, like much of modern Europe, is becoming a more secular society, but the presence of Catholicism has endured and is still especially strong in Brittany. Brittany was not always Catholic, however, and in many ways the religion of the region is a blend of Christianity and much earlier traditions that drift into the realm of myth. Brittany remained largely Celtic up until the seventeenth century when French Jesuits established missions there. Through this action, one can
see the beginnings of the region’s tensions with France. Brittany was treated as if it were a colony, a separate entity, and not a part of the greater country. Despite their attempts, these missions did not help to quench the Celtic beliefs and practices of the Breton people, but rather gave them a different setting. As Maura Coughlin points out, the missions “did not so much stamp out folk belief in ghosts, death omens and miracle cures as harness these beliefs for their own purposes” (Coughlin 134). Instead of wiping out the local popular religions found here, they instead reinterpreted them to fit a Catholic model. This had been seen before as early as the Romans, who built their churches to incorporate nature imagery into the architecture in order to attract the animist population. Alongside the Pagan architecture of many churches in Brittany appear images from Celtic death myths. Coughlin points out that, particularly throughout Lower Western Brittany, one sees Ankou, the Celtic personification of the grim reaper, in many churches (134). “Ankou takes the form of a skeleton or corpse bearing a scythe, an arrow, or a spear,” she writes. “In Breton folklore, a visit from Ankou means the coming of death” (Coughlin 134). The continued existence of imagery like that of Ankou today shows the lasting influence the Celtic tradition holds in Breton society.

Breton was the main language used in churches and in teaching up until World War II when it began to be replaced by French (McDonald 41). It has not completely disappeared from practice, though, and is still the medium for many religious ceremonies. The lasting connection between these practices and their early Celtic influences is apparent. Religious festivals called **pardons** are found across the
countryside in nearly every town as a summer tradition. *Pardons* pay homage to local saints and offer a reflection of the popular religion of the region. Although outside of the political realm, these *pardons* offer a sense of defiance against French dominion seen in the French Catholic Church. The Church established a set of rules and customs to follow that were imposed upon an already existing heritage in Brittany. Although a considerable amount of time has passed since then, it is in these acts of rebellion where the language movement and the push towards reclaiming a dying culture find root.

Breton *pardons* include a long procession where participants, often in their regional costume, carry representations or relics of their saint or a decorated banner, and they end with a mass and traditional hymns (*cantiques*) conducted in Breton (Doan 27). The element of show and the sense of tradition involved reflect the festival atmosphere of the *fest-noz*. *Pardons* sometimes last for days and can occur for anything from the celebration of saint days to the blessing of ships in order to ensure prosperity in fishing. In smaller, rural villages, these pardons are taken very seriously as a tradition reflecting the ancient Lughnasa celebration, a harvest festival of the ancient Celts (Doan 27). At larger *pardons* where there are more tourists, one can find *chansons sur feuilles volantes* being sold. These are small booklets containing printed traditional Breton folksongs. They date back to the 17th century when Catholic missions were being established in Brittany. They were originally used to print call and response *cantiques* that were sung to popular and well-known tunes everyone could recognize (Giraudon 23). Found mostly in Basse-Bretagne, the area of Brittany
that lies along the region’s western coast, the booklets evolved to become a way to
distribute folk culture as well. A revived interest in Breton heritage and the
reestablishment of the fest-noz brought an interest in collecting printed chansons.
People wanted to learn the old poems collected from oral tradition and used to
accompany pardons, as well as the traditional circle dances of the fest-noz (Giraudon 27). Many songs that came from this long oral tradition are available today only
because of these printings and are used by the singers of the kan-ha-diskhan.
Although today the chansons sur feuilles volantes are more nostalgic than they are
actually used or collected, they helped to keep alive these fêtes that are a normal part
of life across the region and act as a means of maintaining a tradition that is centuries
old.

The oldest surviving pardon in Brittany is that of Saint Anne la Palud, and the
practices surrounding it are deeply rooted in myth. James Doan sums up the legend as
follows:

St. Anne was a Breton princess whose husband was so cruel that an angel
transported her to the Holy Land. There she married St. Joachim and gave
birth to the Virgin Mary. When she grew old she returned to Brittany,
where Jesus visited her and brought forth the sacred fountain at Ste.-
Anne-la Palud before she died. (Doan 29)

He follows this by pointing out that although Saint Anne is a Catholic saint, this
change was most likely made by early Christian missionaries trying to find a religious
counterpart for the Celtic goddess Anu, something we also see happen in Wales
around this time with English missionaries (Doan 29). This is another example of
how these missions sought to adapt local traditions, translating them to Catholic
practices. The idea of a cult centered on a Catholic saint is not unique to Brittany, but is seen across France. What is unique is the context the manifestation that saint worship takes in Brittany, transforming from a Catholic ritual to a Celtic tradition.

Certain *cantiques* among those sung at this particular pardon have connections to the Celtic idea of the “mother goddess” (Anu), but more than that Saint Anne is seen as a mother figure for many. She is the patron saint of Brittany, and in Breton is referred to as *Mamm Goz ar Vretoned*, or Grandmother of the Bretons (Doan 31). Author James Doan recognizes that the weight of this is not immediately apparent until one is aware of how the Grandmother, and women in general, are seen in Breton culture. Breton, like French, has a formal and an informal tense for “you”—*c’hwi* (formal *vous*) and *te* (informal *tu*). In Brittany through the twentieth century, mothers and grandmothers were spoken to in the formal tense (*c’hwi*), while fathers and grandfathers are informal (*te*) (Doan 31). This carries over into the *cantiques*. While in French translations of these hymns Anne is addressed in the informal tense, in Breton she is always in the formal (Doan 32). This sign of respect towards women reflects the matriarchal culture seen in the early Celtic nations. The status of women in traditional Breton society draws attention to the role of women and the family in language transmission throughout history as well. This matriarchy, with the saints and the importance of grandmothers, is not so prominent in Wales where the typical sport or agricultural sectors of society are heavily male-dominated. It also stands in contrast to the Breton militant sector, where these groups are also predominantly male.

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6 And newborn baby girls, in the department of Finistère (Doan 31)
Pardons and their cantiques are also a way to reinforce an identity and a sense of collective culture. They are local in that they vary by town or village, and each area has a different saint and a different way of conducting their ceremony. The active participation of locals within the ceremony also helps to give a sense of a shared tradition that, again like the fest-noz, is not reserved to a certain societal class or a specific organization. It is simply an expression, in Breton, of belonging to a certain order that is connected by history and across generations. James Doan writes, “There is also a sense of a national Breton identity, since [one] cantique makes reference to Bro C’hall (France, literally ‘Land of the Gauls’) as a separate entity” (Doan 33). In fact, there is no French equivalent to the pardon (Lacombe 109). It is unique to its Breton culture. This is a reinforcement of Breton nationalism, a connection with a greater Celtic nation and a strong sense of regional identity in place of French nationalism. This is another element of the culture that establishes Brittany as its own nation apart from the country in which it sits.

Wales does not have this long practice of religious ritual. For one thing, Wales is Protestant rather than Catholic, which means far fewer religious festivals. In Wales, one could say the national religion is sport. Philippe Lacombe draws connections between the rituals seen in the religious and sports spheres, showing how they have the same outcome when it comes to collective identity and linguistic practice. He draws attention to the rituals involving preparation for a gathering and the celebration of the outcome as well as the feelings experienced during the event. The act of selling sports “tokens” in support of ones’ favorite team strongly resembles the sale of the
Breton *chansons sur feuilles volantes* at *pardons*, or, as Lacombe points out, the Catholic practice of collecting cards with pictures of saints (Lacombe 115). Sports songs echo the practice of singing hymns as well. Lacombe continues:

The ceremony of chants (in a match, by jeers and encouragements) has a place within a space that weaves a collective relationship, a cathedral or, for the sporty, a stadium. The strong moments are given rhythm and are proclaimed (the *magnificat*, the *cantiques*) by collective chants. Within the stadium, these chants echo provocations. ‘The procession organizes itself according to a mysterious hierarchy that *the whole world is familiar with*’ [my translation; my italics] (Lacombe 115).

The Welsh also turn to sport as an environment in which to showcase a collective identity. Although this “tradition” does not have Celtic roots or a great sense of history behind it, the emotions that appear here are indeed historical. For a country whose national identity is based most heavily on a sense of opposition to England and the English, sport gives them a place to express these feelings. It is something that offers the Welsh a place to express a constructed identity and anti-English sentiments in a tangible way, outside of the realm of story. This is a different kind of myth, a “nation” created by these participants, a physical manifestation of an imagined community. Martin Johnes dates this strong sense of anti-Englishness in sport to the 1960s, “when wider Welsh nationalism itself took on a more overt, confident and even confrontational character...[and] the emergence of a more aggressive and younger fan culture in soccer” (Johnes “We Hate the English!”). In

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7 “La cérémonie scandée d’invocations (un match l’est par les sifflets et les encouragements) a lieu dans un espace tissant un lien collectif, la cathédrale, le stade pour les sportifs. Les temps forts sont rythmés et clamés (magnificat, cantiques) par des chants collectifs. Dans le stade, les chants se font écho, les provocations aussi. ‘La procession s’ordonne selon une mystérieuse hiérarchie que tout le monde connaît.’ [Hélias, *op. cit.*: 182]”
fact, in Wales the stadium seems to be the most successful way to reach and to unite a nation. Martin Johnes claims that the surge in Welsh nationalism through rugby was more successful than the acts of the Language Society or Plaid Cymru because it was able to reach more people. He writes, “The new Welsh nationalism of this era was cultural rather than political; it celebrated Welsh traditions and achieved recognition for Welsh identity.... Sport offered a perfect vehicle for this recognition...without any of the uncertainties or extremities of a political movement” (Johnes “A Prince” 132).

There is a deep interconnectedness between rituals such as these—the Breton pardon or the Welsh stadium setting—and myth. In order for these traditions to have meaning, there must be a story behind them with which everyone is familiar and that makes them worth celebrating. These traditions offer a heritage that has been passed down through stories that have changed and evolved across generations. This means that these myths are stretched, gaining new meaning and different details, but that does not make them any less valuable. These stories bring people together under a common history. They act as the basis for the formation of imagined communities, groups of people who are connected by more than just where they live. For Wales and Brittany, this means constructing a nation based on a shared language and a shared Celtic heritage. The stories within the myths and legends of these areas give a sense of a shared origin and the shared history of those who preserve them. Today, it is no longer politics alone that make up a nation, but also a consciousness of tradition and identity. Catherine Bertho Lavenir writes, “What unites a nation is no longer
Shields 46

obedience to a prince, but a community of origin, of race, of language and of history, that forge the unity of a people” (Bertho Lavenir “Pourquoi” 305).

These practices help to offer people a sense of unity as a “nation”. As they are transmitted, myths and legends change slightly to reflect the events of the current time and the speakers who are experiencing them. In this way, they also act as a compelling reference to culture. This connection between past and present offers not only the enjoyment that comes from fiction and story, but also an insight into the community’s values and experiences. In this way, myth and legend also act as methods of preservation. The degree of truth of these stories is of little importance. Rather, it is the self-identity of the community that comes along with this tradition that is significant. Raymond Williams, a Welsh author who contributed greatly to the formation of Cultural Studies as a field, believed that modern interpretations of culture, like the gradual changes made to music or the formation of spaces in which to practice culture in a modern setting, are just as valuable in forming culture as traditional interpretations. He maintains that, in fact, all these elements work together to form a culture when he writes, “The feeling for the past is more than a fancy, but it’s how past and present relate that tells in a culture” (R. Williams 6).

VII. Language, Myth, and the Culture of Tourism

Culture is something meant to be shared. Myth and ritual are things that exist not for these Celtic communities alone; they are also traditions meant to be shown to those outside. This is where tourism comes enters the picture. Much of the Breton
sense of selfhood has strong ties to a sense of “place”, to the land from which one comes. The transformation of myth and rituals from simple stories to actual physical sites gives the Breton people a kind of source, a sense of origin that gives a new meaning to Breton practice and identity. The Breton countryside, like one sees in the UK as well, is dotted with standing stones dating back to the druids. These stones attract many tourists who want to see these remnants of ancient life, but who want a glimpse of Breton life as well. Although much of tourist culture is a kind of show, a spectacle made to draw people in from outside, one can see elements of real Breton life even within activities seemingly tailored to visitors.

In many ways, tourism takes traditional Breton life and glorifies it. Although the Breton region and language have struggled in policy, the strength of tourism in this region acts as a sign of accomplishment. It shows that even though at this moment it cannot receive government support, the Breton way of life is still living and active, and that there is still hope for the language in the future. At the very least, the presence of tourism in the region shows how its status has increased in recent years as people look past the stereotypes the region has been placed under for so long and have the desire to participate in cultural traditions.

To grasp the importance of this fact, it is necessary to understand exactly what the Breton people have had to overcome. The lack of recognition that the Breton language has received has not only helped to propel the decline of the Breton language, but also to increase the stigmas that have been historically assigned to it. For decades the Breton people have been labeled as “backwards” because of the rural
nature of the region. As an area that historically has been heavily reliant on fishing and agriculture, it has received stereotypes of its people that typically come alongside this lifestyle. As with most of the regions in France, there are negative expressions attached to the Bretons that add to these negative associations. Someone can be “têtu comme un Breton”, meaning they are stubborn and obstinate. Or there’s simply, “le Breton, tête de cochon”, meaning that is someone is Breton they must be pig-headed. There are also plays on words associating the region with the smell of farming, cleverly transforming “mer de Bretagne” (the sea) with “merde de Bretagne” (shit).

These negative stereotypes mean that even when people do speak Breton, they are sometimes afraid to use it in public because of how it is perceived by strangers. This explains why a region with such a strong tourist industry can still have so little language use. S. Gemie uses the example of a survey taken in 1946 that found that many people, even in areas where Breton was widely used, spoke to their priests in French “for fear that he would think they were ignorant if they used Breton” (Gemie 149). It is apparent that the Breton people are aware and sensitive to these stereotypes even within their homes. During research she carried out in Brittany in the 1980s, Maryon McDonald observed the different manners in which Breton farmers spoke to their animals. On the farms that she visited, she noticed that people spoke Breton to some animals, but not all. She notes that in one family she stayed with, “…the mother spoke French to her own two teenage daughters—and then Breton to cows, French to calves, and Breton to hens, but French to their chicks, and Breton to pigs and sows, but French to piglets” (McDonald 255). It appears that, almost unconsciously, this
woman had perceived notions of class associated with the two languages. The older working animals were spoken to in Breton, because they were already established into this society with no chance of breaking out of this cycle. For her daughter, and the younger animals, for whom their was hope of a greater “success” or mobility elsewhere, she spoke French as a language of higher status. McDonald notes that this same woman spoke Breton to her dog, but French to her cat. “When I pointed this out,” McDonald explains, “she laughed and explained that the cat was a pet, while the dog was a ‘farm dog’” (McDonald 276).

Although it took a long time for these stereotypes to disappear from people’s consciousness—they were still very present up into the 1980s and, in fact, have not disappeared entirely even today—the events of May 1968 helped to begin the shift in people’s perceptions. This decade brought Brittany into the political sphere, giving the region a place in social consciousness and spurred the fight for cultural recognition. The emergence of the fight for Breton into political life gradually began to change the region’s negative associations and stereotypes. Stemming from this change, a previous paper notes that “there arose a greater appreciation for a traditional culture, and an understood importance in the preservation of a fading and threatened way of life. Tourism became an important part of Breton life, seeking to change people’s perceptions and show them what exactly it was that made Brittany so unique” (Shields 4). The slogan of the Brittany regional tourism office today is Be Breizh, but what does this mean exactly? For one thing, it means that despite its negative

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8 Taken from an ENGL 3640 paper written by me
stereotypes, the Breton language has not given up its fight for recognition. It is a language that refuses to die.

Although it has significantly declined in use, there is still a sense that Breton is fundamental to identity, that the region would not be the same without its language. The label is not Be Breton, but Be Breizh, which also shows that the region continues to distance itself from French by inviting people to step into its “native” language. It is also a call to enter this region and to see how much it has actually contributed to French society. The blue and white striped marin fishing shirts, galettes and cider in a crêperie, the legend of Arthur, the cartoons featuring Astérix and Obelisk—all of these come from Brittany, and it is the presence of tourism that has helped to protect and to spread these images across the country and across the world.

When a tourist comes to take a guided tour of one of the many megalithic fields of Brittany, they are participating in an oral culture, even if it is not in the Breton language. They are listening to the stories of fairies and druidic rights that have been passed down since these stones first appeared as early as the first Celtic settlers. There is little historical evidence of how these stones got here or of their original use. Much of the reason why they are here is shrouded in mystery, something that makes them even more of a draw for visitors. Perhaps they marked the meeting spots of druidic counsels. Perhaps they housed fairies. Most likely they were used as sacrificial tables or burial sites for the early Gauls (Bertho Lavenir “Pourquoi” 308). The menhirs are distinctly Celtic in origin and possess a long history, one that is not recognized or celebrated to any notable degree by the French.
There is a certain antipathy towards what Maura Coughlin calls a “national legacy” that has existed throughout French history (Coughlin 132). She quotes Jacques Camby, founder of the Celtic Academy in Paris when he said in 1805, “if the monuments of Carnac had existed near London, how many times it would have been engraved and celebrated by the poets in England! How other nations would have been made to respect this temple of the Celtic nation!” (Coughlin 132). It is true that there is a great tradition in English poetry of celebrating ruins that goes back as far as the Anglo-Saxons and stretches at least as far forward as the British Romantics.\(^9\) Although this literary tradition is English rather than French, the French apathy towards the myths and legends associated with the standing stones is noteworthy. The stones offer a physical representation of the past that is being preserved through legend, yet the French are seemingly unable to recognize Brittany’s contribution to society through these and other tangible representations of a common heritage even today.

\(^9\) As far as the Anglo-Saxons go, see the Old English elegy “The Ruin” written by an unknown author in the eighth century. In the Romantic Movement, see Wordsworth’s “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” or Shelley’s “Ozymandias”.
In Wales, the movement towards language recognition has had its fair share of obstacles, despite being considered on the brink of total accomplishment today. The people of Wales, like the Bretons, have a history of negative stereotypes attached to the rural land in the country and the presence of agriculture and mining in the economy. Wales has been viewed throughout most of its history as backwards; a sentiment that today still exists to some extent among certain English and Anglo-Welsh. These are the people of non-Welsh speaking Wales, the area that is heavily concentrated around the towns on the border of England and Wales. Much of these stereotypes, however have ceased to be associated with the language they speak, but rather the agricultural nature of society.

In Wales, tourism offers a look into an “exoticized” version of the country, where farms and small towns are seen as charming and the country’s quirks are used as a way to draw people in. The town that receives the most attention with regard to this point of view is Llanfairpwllogwngyllgogerychwyrndrobwll-llantysiliogogogoch.
This name, claimed to be the longest on any railway stop in the world, puts the Welsh language on display to draw people in from outside. The name translates to “St Mary's Church in the hollow of the white hazel near a rapid whirlpool and the Church of St Tysilio of the red cave”, which reaffirms the importance of physical “place” in Welsh place names (“Llanfairpwllgwyngyll”). In the nineteenth century with the push for tourism in the country’s economy, this town was made an object of a pilgrimage of sorts. The town became well known during this time with the campaign to emphasize that the Welsh language was still a part of Welsh life. The campaign displayed the Welsh language as a way of life but also emphasized the fact that this should not limit the country’s enjoyment to Welsh speakers alone. In fact, the Wales tourism website today assures visitors, “We speak Welsh, but we speak English too. Most of all, you’ll experience a friendly ‘croeso.’ That’s Welsh for ‘welcome,’ and you’ll feel it everywhere you go in Wales” (“Welcome”). The point is to reaffirm that the culture and traditions that make Wales so unique are ones that should be shared.

VIII. Conclusions

The relevance of these findings lie in the effects that history and language status have on a nation’s culture, and thus on their identity as a group. It is difficult to come to a conclusive definition of what culture is, because it is constantly changing and being influenced by other things. It is something that is formed by its participants, something cultivated and collective and subject to change. At the same time, culture also maintains a sense of history, because it is something that is inherited, passed down from one generation to the next. Like language, culture offers a way to make
sense of the world, and it is through the vehicle of language that it is transmitted. Language is the way that we as humans pass on our culture, traditions, and heritage, and within this one finds a culture that is shaped by the history and the social evolution of its speakers. The two are inseparable.

Language offers a way to organize not only one’s thoughts, but also, on a larger level, how communities and societies function as groups. It is at the core here in that it is fundamental to most interactions. There is a Welsh proverb that says, translated, “A nation without a language is a nation without a heart” (James 595). Language is not only a means of communication, but also the life of a community of people. It is through language that we find and express meaning. A common language offers a sense of a shared identity among speakers and a way to maintain and display a certain history and culture. Stuart Hall writes:

Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actual identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we came from,” so much as what we might become, how we have been represented, and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. (Hall 4)

Despite having a very different status in Wales than in Brittany, the Celtic languages in these two places is what offers a sense of belonging to their respective speakers more than that of a physical place. The act of belonging is a cultural practice brought about by the language one speaks. Within Welsh and Breton we find a long history of traditions and a language in which this heritage and these people can live on. The survival of these languages, despite being at different steps in the process of
language revitalization, shows a sense of hope for the future. It shows that these communities, imagined or not, cannot be silenced.


<http://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/local-news/protests-over-drowning-


"Llanfairpwlldwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwll-llantysiliogogogoch.info."


Winick, Stephen D. "Breton Folk Music, Breton Identity, and Alan Stivell's Again."
