

Moving forward whilst looking back; the revival of tradition
Conversations at the May Day celebrations in South-East Cornwall



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Some people assume that villages' May day traditions have an unbroken history centuries old, however many have been revived within the last handful of decades. Factors such as the wars, urbanisation and an increasingly mobile population changed the make-up of communities and impacted such traditions. While the Padstowians can claim ancient roots and a continuous history for their *Obby Oss* day – that was until the recent pandemic- the Black Prince day was revived in the 1980s after a long hiatus.

My MA thesis explored the revival of traditional May festivals in Cornwall. One of reasons I chose this area was the divisive attitudes I had previously encountered; 'true' traditions are perceived as valuable social assets worthy of protection whilst their revived cultural cousins can be treated with suspicion. I asked; what separates them and to what extent do these difference matter in decisions about support and protection given?

I explored the contemporary form of revived traditions across the county. I took a sociological approach, investigating the demographics of participation, discourses of identity, patterns of social interaction and the articulation of meaning. I found that the dichotomy of true tradition and revived tradition was an unhelpful framework for assessing these kinds of community festivals. I questioned the validity of the criticisms against revived traditions.

Given scope of this piece, I will not be able to discuss all these aspects but will look at an example of the renegotiation of meaning using the *Black Prince day* as an example.

What is a tradition?

A tradition a repeated and ritualised activity with a relationship with past and a relationship with community, this enables collective understandings and gives it social, religious, or spiritual function rather than a (foremostly)

practical one¹. Participating in the activities affirms membership of a collective identity, further to this, the cultural symbols used in a tradition can highlight the importance of specific types of knowledge for survival of the group.

Traditions are aurally transmitted in an informal, social manner between members of a specific social-cultural group². This enables the consolidation and negotiating of group identity. The absence of single authority means a tradition can carry multiple voices which symbolise the distinct nature of a community. Another result of the transmission process is that it enables reflexive renegotiation of meaning in response to the changing needs and preferences of a community, therefore remaining relevant to its bearers³.

How does a revived tradition differ?

Historical discontinuity is necessary for something to be revived but a continuity with the past is required for a tradition to be aurally transmitted; this presents a simple paradox and says that any aspect of cultural heritage that is revived cannot be traditional. In a revival, the discontinuity breaks the aural transmission process. A historic occasion is reconstructed using cultural symbols and artefacts from written sources, other cultures, and collected recollections (outside of the original context).

Critics say that the reviving an aspect of traditional culture takes a perceived heritage and intentionally constructs an identity from the associative values of the borrowed cultural symbols; this is often based on nostalgic ideals and not representative of the original culture⁴. The displacement and exchange of cultural materials in this way bypasses the mechanism by which traditions gather meaning, therefore, it is said they lack authenticity and the ability to fulfil the same social and spiritual functions⁵.

The word on the street

The binds of the modern world, such as the necessity of committees and the saturation of social media, results in alternative forms of transmission for our local traditions. This enables meaning to be articulated between people in forms of fixed, recorded media and to be passed to a wider audience with greater speed than would be achieved through aural transmission. There is also the potential to create a perceived authoritative view.

I found differences in the articulation of meaning of traditions between the word on the street, arranged interviews and online material. For example, at Black Prince Day a number of young people saw the event as a marker of the start of the summer, it served as an anchor in the year and a chance to reaffirm social connections⁷;

'It's the start of it now'

'Back the sea, cider in the sun'

'It's the day you see everyone, like yeah I'm still part of it – I'm one of villagers'

The flower boat signified a broader sea-based identity and heritage beyond or instead of boat-building; people talked the importance of the fishing industry. Where some saw this as a dilution of cultural heritage others saw it as a way of keeping the traditions relevant and alive;

'People forget what it was really about, we have to remind them'

'what we do today will be tomorrow's traditions'

This difference in understanding of how traditions relate to the past is also seen the wider literature. The early revivalist assumed that there was an inherent value imbued in age of origin and this propagated the notion that authenticity required an identifiable history. However, through an ethnomusicology perspective, traditional culture's connection to the past is slightly more nuanced; *it is not looking back but carrying forward*⁹. This is a subtle but significant difference and enables revived culture to move closer to the values of tradition, events can gain an autonomy as they are repeated year upon year. There is a collective renegotiation of the meanings of cultural symbols by those who take part.

Is there a correct meaning? Can there be multiple, equally valid meanings? These questions require us to consider the notions ownership of the tradition- something complicated by the process of revival, and the difficulties of defining a community in contemporary societies.

I'll leave for you ponder further, perhaps over a pint next May Day.

Author of 'The revival of folk tradition; St Germans May Tree Fair' (2019)

References:

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2. Bohlman, P. (1988) *The study of folk music in the modern world*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
3. Cohen, A.P (1982) *'Belonging, Identity and Social Organisation in British Rural Culture'* Manchester, Manchester University Press.
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5. Hobsbawn and Ranger (1983) *The invention of tradition*, London, canto. Boyes G. (1993) *The imagined village*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
6. Livingstone, T (1999) *Music revivals: towards a general theory*, Ethnomusicology, vol. 45, no. 1 , Hobsbawn and Ranger (1983) Harker (1985)

7. Macabe, A (2006) discusses the function and advantaged of community festivals/traditions as focal points in a constantly changing society; their routine nature gives a sense of consistency – enabling the make-up of a community change whilst maintaining a cohesive identity. In Macabe, A. (2006) *The making of community identity through historic festive practice*, in *Festivals, Tourism and Social Change*, e.d Picard, D and Robinson, M, Clevedon, Channel View publications

9. The bibliography for the introduction of Rosenberg, N., V (1993) *Transforming Tradition; folk revivals examined*, University of Illinois is a good starting point for a re-examination of the difference between revival and traditional culture and the many essays in the book revisit this idea.

For further discussion of these ideas in the form of a case study:

The revival of folk Tradition: St Germans May Tree fair (2019) available via The Little Egret Press and Amazon. ISBN 9781096421955