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## The *Fest-noz*: A Way to Live Breton Culture<sup>1</sup>

Brittany is a land situated “at the end of the world” – as is indicated by the name of one of its parts, Finisère (from Latin *Finis Terræ*). The Breton name of that region is *Penn ar Bed*, which may be translated as “Head/End of the World”. Today Brittany is known as one of France’s regions that is attractive to tourists, being virtually surrounded by water, yet capricious in terms of its weather – much like the other Celtic lands, all situated in the British Isles. The closer one comes to Brittany, the more one encounters characteristic symbols related to its political situation, such as its *Gwenn-ha-Du* (literally: Black and White) flag, its historical situation, such as the castle of the Breton dukes in Nantes (which was detached from Brittany in 1941, under the Vichy government, and was never returned despite public protests), and its linguistic situation, as symbolized by the only Celtic language surviving on the continent – Breton, its demise and current attempts at revitalization. Brittany is also known for its gastronomy, especially its salty butter and buckwheat crepes, called *galettes bretons* (Bret. *krapouezhenn gwinizh du*) and for its folklore, especially the distinctive tall women’s headdress made of lace, originating from the Bigouden region (*Bro-Vigoudenn*). But it is Breton music and dance that have gained the most renown. Both are now very widely renown: they do not relate exclusively to traditional culture, nor do they represent the kind of folklorization typical of minority cultures – although they are frequently practiced in organized form, geared towards recreating traditions, as seen with the “Celtic circle” associations (*Cerles celtiques/ Kelc’h keltiek*) and *bagad* bands inspired

<sup>1</sup> This project has been financed by a grant from the National Science Center. Decision number DEC-2011/01/D/HS2/02085).



by Scottish groups, they have nevertheless been subjected to a certain refashioning, to change, to external influences. This has given rise to a unique musical culture with thousands of Breton groups playing various styles of music and some of Europe's largest music festivals, such as the *Vieilles Charrues* in Carhaix and *Festival Interceltique* in Lorient, drawing together audiences of as many as several hundred thousand listeners.

One remarkable emanation of this Breton musical and festival culture can be found in the *fest-noz* (plural *festoù-noz*) "night festivals" and their daytime variant *fest-deiz*, held throughout Brittany at all times of year, in every possible location, drawing in representatives of all generations of Bretons, residing both in Brittany and outside it.

Before I commence my historical-anthropological analysis of this Breton phenomenon, I will permit myself a short retrospection. I went to Brittany for my first long stay in 2005, to spend a semester at University Rennes II as a member of the "Breton & Pays Celtique" research team, with the objective of becoming at least somewhat more knowledgeable about the culture I was then only familiar with from short vacation visits and from a few readings (my knowledge then went little further than the Breton symbols mentioned at the outset). Prof. Francis Favereau, then head of the department, a writer and linguist, first pointed me towards a Breton language course, then told me that the University also had a cost-free course in Breton dance that I should sign up for. Initially I thought that such a suggestion stemmed from the professor's personal concern for me, given that I did not yet have any acquaintances in Rennes. It was not until later that I realized how valuable a recommendation this was for my future research. I got to know the world of *fest-noz* slowly, and several weeks passed before I went to a first event organized outside the course. I understood why the dances are frequently called *petits doigts*: the basic Breton dances are performed by dancers holding just each other's little fingers. I certainly did not become a specialist in Breton dance and know only one or two routines, but that did not hamper me from participating in numerous *fest-noz* and engaging in participatory observations then and during my many subsequent stays in Brittany. From one event to the next, I gathered more and more information, observations, and acquaintances/sources. I felt increasingly connected to the culture.

The *fest-noz* is an event open to everyone, to which people come in their everyday clothes, in order to dance and to talk with friends and other people met there, to jointly engage in what may be called "Breton life". This is in fact the overarching objective, usually unspoken: to reaffirm that Breton culture is still alive. The *fest-noz* should not be confused with the folklorist performances of the Celtic circles, which are preceded by

numerous rehearsals, for which special (embellished) traditional outfits are sewn, and where everything takes place according to a script created by the choreographer and event director. The *fest-noz*, instead, is a participatory party. These gatherings very frequently take place in various indoor facilities (fire halls, schools, cultural centers, or other rooms available to the organizers), but they are also sometimes held outside, by the sea, in fields, or in courtyards, albeit rarely so due to the rainy weather. It seems that the *fest-noz* events are not very noticeable for tourists and outside observers, although on the other hand they take place often and everywhere. They are usually announced by small, simple signs posted up near traffic circles, on fences, in storefronts. In the towns, information about them can also be obtained from the offices of the Breton associations<sup>2</sup>, or more rarely from tourist information offices – since these are not by definition events meant for tourists, and “outsiders” are sometimes even only reluctantly welcomed. Information about all the *fest-noz* taking place in Brittany can also be found on special online portals, such as [tam.kreiz.com](http://tam.kreiz.com). Admission to the events is not expensive, and the money from ticket sales is allocated to covering the organizational costs and to supporting some kind of cultural or educational project related to Breton culture. The spatial layout of the event location is always similar: on one side is a stage, usually provisory, on which the musicians stand; in front of the stage, joined by their little fingers, there are dancing chains of rhythmically hopping people; while on the other side there is a bar most often offering locally produced cider, wine, and beer, plus something to eat, frequently galettes made on location by volunteers. Proceeds from sales also go to support the budget of Breton organizations or to maintain a specific immersion school, Diwan. Most of the individuals attending a *fest-noz* know one another and also know how to do the dances. If someone like me turns up, a beginner, someone will usually stop for a moment to demonstrate how the steps go. They do so not just out of pity for such an “outsider”, but also to make certain that an unskilled dancer does not ruin the general enjoyment. The music at a *fest-noz* is always performed live, although the range of possible accompaniments is broad. The most typical, “traditional” type, one might say, is the *kan an discan* (“call and response”) song style, meaning a *capella* singing by two or three individuals, whose voices overlap in a distinctive way. The bagpipe–bombard (*bignou-bombarde*) instrument pair also appears, playing a similar type of music.

<sup>2</sup> The larger towns of Brittany have offices of the federation of Breton associations operating within the given area. These include numerous associations dealing with various facets of Breton cultural life: music, art, education, sports, etc. Such federations include: *Skeudenn bro Roazhon* (around Rennes), *Emglev Bro An Orient* (around Lorient), *Sked* (around Brest), *Ti ar Vro Kemper* (around Quimper) and *Agence culturelle Morvan Lebesque* (around Nantes).

Yet very often there are whole bands on stage with “modern” instruments, sometimes with very impressive sound systems.

Why study Breton culture through the *fest-noz*? Like all Europe’s modern autochthonous minority cultures, Breton culture is not easy to pin down. Its ethnic boundaries, to use Fredrik Barth’s classical term (Barth 1969), are blurred, based exclusively on a subjective sense of belonging to a group, on a certain type of declared identity. If we consider the various objective attributes of such an identity, most often considered to include language, customs, religion, and family background, we will nevertheless still not be able to ascertain who “is Breton” nowadays. Moreover, a significant majority of Brittany’s inhabitants define themselves as Breton not so much in an ethnic sense, as in a regional sense. They see themselves as connected to their region and its culture, while at the same time considering themselves to be French, not just in the civic sense, but also emotionally. But be that as it may, this does not mean that the Breton minority has completely dissolved within the French element, that it has been absorbed by the latter. Studying the existence of the Breton minority in the modern world does, however, demand the application of different categories and a more subtle analysis. Work scrutinizing the phenomenon of the *fest-noz* may prove fruitful insofar as this is a kind of event that the Bretons themselves consider their own, something that particularly characterizes and distinguishes them.

Of course, the fundamental determinant of Breton culture should be considered the Breton language. Language is, after all, the most distinctive and “audible” manifestation of belonging to a given community. However, the linguistic situation in Brittany is very complex, and that complexity began much earlier than the onset of the wave of linguistic assimilation, imposed or chosen, to the French language. Historically Brittany was in fact a trilingual land. Alongside the Celtic language Breton, used primarily by the inhabitants of Lower Brittany, which means the western portion of the region, the portion stretching out to the “end of the world”, the population of Upper Brittany (the eastern portion, bordering on France “proper”) used Gallo, a Romance language belonging to the “*langues d’oïl*” family, although numerous Celtic borrowings can be found in it due to centuries of contact with Breton. In addition, the elite of Brittany used the French language, similar to the language of the ruling authorities in Paris. Many Breton activists, wanting to strengthen the position of the Celtic language as a symbol of Brittany, maintain that Breton is the only ethnic language of Brittany, displaced and doomed to demise as a result of the brutal language policies of Jacobin France. Moreover, despite the fact that the movement in support of preserving Gallo has gained strength in recent years, such activists do seem to have at least partially achieved their objective. The cultural division into Lower and Upper Brittany

started to become blurred in the 1970s, when the Bretons from both parts began to join in a common struggle to preserve their own culture. The Breton language was gradually unified, until it ceased to express the local identity related to its very diverse individual dialects, and became, as *néo-breton*, or the new Breton language, a tool for expressing a common, Breton identity (Hornsby 2005). The residents of Upper Brittany have begun to use Breton even more eagerly than Gallo, which being a Romance language was similar to French, and did not perform the function of a distinguishing symbol. The problem is that the Breton language now functions more as a symbol, an emblem of a group, than as a tool for communication (Edwards 1996). A great majority of Brittany's residents declare an affinity for the language and a desire for it to survive (Nicolas 2001: 144; Broudic 2009: 149), but looking at the statistics it is evident that such declarations rarely go hand-in-hand with action. At present, around 200,000 individuals speak the Breton language, but 70% of them are above 60 years old (Broudic 2009: 66). That means that Breton is known by around 5% of Brittany's inhabitants, and an even smaller percentage uses it in their daily lives. Moreover, within the coming 30 years the language's situation is inevitably headed for a drastic change: only a few tens of thousands of individuals capable of using the language will be left. Even though the Breton language can be seen as an important symbol of Breton culture, it does not bear upon the lives of a significant majority of residents of Brittany, who likewise do not strongly identify with the language.

The *fest-noz*, on the other hand, is a phenomenon that excellently enables us not only to present Brittany's history and culture, the changes taking place therein (including social, cultural, and linguistic changes), but also to ponder the modern condition of Breton culture, its means of existence and function, the identity dilemmas of its representatives. In light of this, it is quite astounding that the *fest-noz* has not yet been the subject of any thorough anthropological or even historical analysis, with the only resources available being general descriptions of Breton culture, music, ethnographic customs, and albums meant particularly for tourists (Kokel 2011; Jigourel 2009). It is high time for that gap to be filled, and so let us now start from the beginning, from a small scrap of central Brittany, the cradle of Breton folk-dance gatherings.

## Local community life

With a certain simplification, we can say that the way of life in Lower Brittany, the Celtic, Breton-speaking portion of the region, remained unchanged for centuries (between the 11th century, when Druidic religious

customs were displaced by Catholicism, all the way until the early 19th century). Collective life focused around the local communities delimited by the parish one belonged to, plus perhaps neighboring parishes one may or may not have contact with. Lower Brittany was inhabited mostly by simple people who did not speak a literary language and rarely even ended up attending parish Sunday-schools, where the teaching language was Breton (Broudic 1995: 380). The world of Breton fishermen and farmers (these being the two basic occupations of the Breton population) was therefore a world of oral culture, with a great wealth of stories, tales, and legends. Also the language that the Bretons used was inseparably linked to daily life, to one's occupation, to nature, customs, and religion. Apart from the four main dialects, with distinguishing traits that have been identified by linguists, there were also many subdialects, frequently differing slightly almost from every village to the next. Dialectical Breton therefore reflected the local identity of its users: using a given version of a Breton dialect distinguished one territorial community from another.

Like language, Breton customs were also based on strongly close-knit, local communities. That is why Breton dances, rituals, dress, food, etc. also differed from place to place. There was no doubt who belonged to a given community and who was an outsider – that was evident based on dialect, dress, behavior. Belonging to a local community yielded privileges and a sense of security. It also brought obligations: participation in collective work, thanks to which the local society could survive the difficult winter months. Such work was accompanied by various practices and customs meant to make them more efficient, as well as more pleasant.

The dancing customs that interest us here, out of which the *fest-noz* would develop in the future, first existed in a small area of Central Brittany, between Carhaix (*Karez*) and Poullaouen. Special celebrations involving food, drink, and dance were held in this area, occurring after collective community work was completed in the fields, most often involving the harvesting of potatoes and beets in September (McDonald 1989: 144). The long and physically arduous farm-work that the whole village took part in demanded subsequent relaxation and dance, which not only served social integration but also loosened up the muscles. Ethnographers maintain that the *kan ha diskan* song style and the corresponding dance style emerged from *ambleudadeg ed du*, a grain-threshing method involving trampling the spelt with bare feet. It seems that this was the most popular pretext for dancing, as the point was for the whole community, keeping close to one another (by just the little finger) to dance on the grain, separating out the unwanted perianths. After the work was done, everyone participated in a shared meal, drank cider, and danced again (Jigourel 2009). Other

opportunities to dance were supplied by religious holidays known as *pardons*, which were one of the most important celebrations in Brittany – after an act of forgiveness and an accompanying pilgrimage, they of course also involved a shared celebration and dancing.

These customs were closely linked to the traditions of fieldwork, and so could not have survived the changes that took place in Brittany during the interwar decades. These changes were of a twofold nature and completely turned upside-down what had previously been the completely stabilized rural life of the Bretons. On the one hand they brought new technologies, which gradually appeared in the Breton countryside and triggered the emigration of the Bretons from villages to towns (outside of Brittany), and from Brittany across the ocean (Broudic 1995: 291). On the other hand, the first half of the 20th century witnessed the most abrupt cultural and linguistic assimilation of Bretons, leading to the abandonment of many customs and the almost complete interruption of intergenerational transmission of the Breton language. This assimilation was also caused by factors of a varying nature. The most important role in the process was played by France’s conscious central policies targeted against minority cultures and languages, in line with the principle that “the only language of France is French” and the notion that French citizenship and the related privileges ruled out any other cultural affiliation.

The assimilation processes particularly intensified in connection with the establishment of obligatory school attendance in 1880. Children who knew only Breton before going to school were then forced, by the use of physical and symbolic punishments<sup>3</sup>, to speak only French. Not only the language, but also all of Breton culture was ridiculed and stigmatized in the collective awareness of children<sup>4</sup> and adults<sup>5</sup>. One telling illustration of the scorn widely shown for the Bretons can be found in the signs posted in public places: “No spitting on the ground or speaking in Breton” (Piriou

<sup>3</sup> The most perfidious was a punishment known as the *symbole*. A child caught speaking Breton even between classes had a “symbol” hung around his or her neck (usually a Breton clog or a stone), which the child had to wear until he or she caught another child speaking Breton, who would be then bear the mark of the “symbol” This punishment seems to ideally fit Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence. A dominant culture influences the representatives of an unprivileged culture to the extent that they themselves begin to perceive reality and their own status (as victim, subject, someone inferior) in terms that are imposed upon them by the dominant group (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990).

<sup>4</sup> For bad behavior in school, children would have their names written up on the blackboard under the heading “Breton” and the drawing of a pig (An Du 2000: 28).

<sup>5</sup> One example of such an attitude is the comic strip “*Bécassine*”, about the adventures of a simple Breton woman working as a servant in Paris. The character does not have a mouth, and her ears are covered by a comical Breton headdress. She is unable to speak and does not understand what people are saying to her. She is naïve, uncommunicative, and dumb. The first such comic strip was published in 1905.

1971: 30). A turning-point in the Bretons' attitudes to their culture and identity is thought to have come with WWI, during which the Bretons were treated as cannon-fodder. The number of Bretons who perished significantly exceeded the already high number of residents of other French provinces who died in the war (Broudic 1995: 301). Many researchers argue that these traumatic experiences, the conscious and systematic humiliation of the Breton culture and language, led to the mass abandonment of the characteristic Breton lifestyle and mass switching to French. However, that is just one side of the coin.

The first half of the 20th century was a time of increasingly strong contacts between Breton culture and French culture, previously unknown in Brittany. The Bretons came into such contact through the construction of railways, the influx of tourists, temporary migration in search of work, military service, and the new media. Belonging to French culture entailed not just liberation from the burdensome, negative Breton identity; French culture was also attractive, tempting in its modernity, and offered the chance to escape the small Breton villages. It was the sudden juxtaposition of two worlds, the modern French world and the rural Breton world, that came as a true "civilization shock" to the residents of Brittany. In contact with the French, Bretons experienced a strong devaluation of their culture, which they next abandoned *en masse* in favor of the "better", more prestigious French culture (Elegoët 2004: 61–64). Ethnographers observed that already in the late 1920s, French songs and dance *de société* had replaced the *kan ha diskan* and chain dances even at Breton wedding celebrations. As the way of life changed, certain conventions of enjoyment in the villages lost their *raison d'être* and, being nonfunctional, were discontinued by the communities. Even the traditional musicians, besides, did not try to defend the Breton culture. Many of them adopted the accordion and French instruments in place of the traditional Breton *bignou* and *bombarde*. They also did not try to hand down their skills, considering them to be *démodé* (Defrance 1996: 192). As Breton customs waned, so too did the use of the Breton language. Transmission of Breton was interrupted in the mid-20th century. Studies show that the generation born in 1915–1920 no longer spoke to their children in Breton (even though they themselves frequently had a hard time communicating in French) (Elegoët 1981; Quéré 2000; Broudic 2009). On the one hand they realized that without knowledge of French their children would not stand a chance of aspiring to higher social status; a change of social status also demanded a change of language. On the other hand, they wanted to spare their children from the unpleasant and humiliating experiences they themselves had been faced with in school or in any sort of contact with French state institutions. That attitude was further

exacerbated by the fear and stigmatization caused by the events of WWII, after which the Bretons were stigmatized by accusations of collaboration with the Germans.

### *Fest-noz*: an invented tradition

The Breton political scene was extremely complex, starting as early as during the interwar period. Many groups and associations seeking the best solution for Brittany emerged during that time. One of the most extreme was the Breton National Party (*Partii National Breton*, or PNB), whose members worked on developing the concept of an independent Brittany under Nazi-occupied France. The Breton National committee was formed in 1940; the Celtic Institute followed in 1941, and the Brittany Consultative Committee in 1942. It became possible to teach Breton in schools (an hour and a half per week), as well as the region's history and geography; the first radio broadcasts in Breton also started (Abalain 2000: 62). A certain radical faction of the PNB went even further, noting an opportunity for the region to gain autonomy or even become an independent Breton state by working with Germany. A collaborationist militia force known as *Bezen Perrot* was formed in 1943, with the officers openly wearing Nazi uniforms.

And yet the majority of Bretons were not interested in politics, and they simply tried to survive the difficult wartime days. Scores of people fled the cities and returned to the countryside, where their lives ran a more or less normal course. Cultural life was limited in cities, and public gatherings were expressly forbidden, but the authorities largely turned a blind eye to spontaneous dances held in rural regions. Paradoxically, then, one of the outcomes of the Second World War was a temporary revival of dance meetings in Central Brittany (Jigourel 2009: 29). However, after the defeat of the Nazi forces, the widespread condemnation of not only Breton collaborators but the entire Breton minority brought the revival to an abrupt end. As a result, Breton cultural life fell into decline for several years. Since the origins of the *Ar Brezhoneg Er Skol* came from the political right, in the wake of the war the desire to learn Breton was associated with collaboration, and people using the language in public were regarded as Nazis or Nazi sympathizers (An Du 2000: 71).

The origins of the *fest-noz* tradition can be attributed to a single man, Loeiz Roparz – musician, singer, popularizer of Breton culture and teacher, born in 1921 in Central Brittany. During the 1920s, his grandfather frequently organized dances to celebrate the harvest or the slaughter of farm animals. He taught the young Loeiz to sing and play musical instruments. Roparz studied in Rennes and became a teacher of French, Latin, and Greek. He

soon realized that without deliberate efforts, Breton cultural life would likely vanish into oblivion. As the former Breton political movement had become compromised, he chose instead to focus on culture in its “pure” form, untarnished by political ideas. Celtic Circles teaching various dances from across Brittany were by then already functioning.<sup>6</sup> During the second half of the 1940s, Roparz strived to raise awareness of the fact that as the Breton language was dying out, together with the related culture and customs; he stressed that Bretons should make an effort to revive traditions which were falling into oblivion with the older generations. He was mainly interested in preserving dance events from Central Brittany with the distinctive *kan ha diskan* singing style. Recalling the lively joint celebrations, he wanted to recreate “authentic” folk events, as distinct from the “folklore festivals” being organized by the Celtic Circles, depicting Breton culture as a culture of spectacles, frequently targeted at tourists. In 1954, Roparz organized the first *kan ha diskan* singing competition at Poullaouen, with a large degree of success. The following year, the *Ar Falz* association held a Breton language course in Poullaouen, providing an opportunity for young people from across Brittany to meet and exchange ideas. It was the starting point of “*fest-noz mod nevez*” (new style *fest-noz*), held in a hall with a stage for musicians and a dance floor. By the late 1950s, similar events were being held in many locations throughout Brittany. In 1959, Roparz organized the first “Breton ball”; in contrast to traditional events, featuring dances from the given region only, there were also dances from across Brittany, promoted by the increasingly popular Celtic Circles (Roparz 2011: 25).

The local events, closely tied with rural life in Central Brittany, became a standard for the recently created tradition of *fest-noz*. They were adopted throughout the region and regarded as an ancient custom, creating a continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983: 1), and – first and foremost – “establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities” (Hobsbawm 1983: 9). *Fest-noz* is therefore an invented tradition based around previously existing customs, which had changed and evolved with the arrival of new technologies and lifestyles to finally vanish altogether. It is notable that by recreating the custom and turning it into a “tradition”, it was given a symbolic significance. *Fest-noz* were no longer low-key dance meetings, reinforcing ties within small rural communities; they were mass events held in villages and cities throughout Upper and Lower Brittany, and they were increasingly symbolic of the struggle for a revival of Breton culture and language. The symbol became a banner of Brittany’s social movement during the 1970s.

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<sup>6</sup> The first was founded before the outbreak of the First World War in Paris.

### *Our years of Breizh*<sup>7</sup>

Although Breton culture embarked upon a slow process of recovery a few years after the Second World War, it was mainly under the guise of folklore. Celtic Circles and *bagad* ensembles blossomed, yet the language was in decline, the exodus from villages to cities reached its peak<sup>8</sup>, and members of the Breton minority seemed uninterested in fighting for their rights. It is impossible to suggest a single factor responsible for the young generation starting to re-evaluate its attitude towards its ancestors' language and culture, although to some extent it was surely due to the improving economy, the development of cities, and the effect of social mobility in the West towards the end of the 1960s. Young people's mutiny against the system and against centralization, their desire to escape the harsh realities of life, the class system and capitalism, intertwined with their desire to seek a Breton identity and roots. They increasingly rejected the system they saw as bourgeois and saw Brittany as a valid, radical alternative; French was seen as associated with oppression, in contrast to Breton seen as a language of emancipation. Speaking Breton or even singing in the language came to be regarded as a moral duty of young people whose parents had rejected it, broken by French policies (McDonald 1989: 82). The struggle for a Breton way of life became a part of the general fabric the late 1960s and early 1970s: a time when young people contested official culture and took to the streets in a revolutionary frame of mind, expressing it in a festive, musical way.

Existing since the 1950s, music and dance associations turned out to have been a good "school of being proud to be Breton" (Simon 1999: 144). Although the culture was originally steeped in folklore, after 1968 it evolved into a living culture. In reaching back to old traditions, Breton music adapted them to its latest needs. The first musicians of the Breton revival – Glenmor, Alan Stivell, Gilles Servat, and Tri Yann – combined protest song with folk music trends originating from across the Atlantic. As a result, traditional music was given a contemporary sound and an undertone of dissent. As well as contemporary Breton musicians playing in concert halls the world over, there were growing numbers of traditional musicians, such as the Goadec sisters and the Morvan brothers. Stivell's album *Réflète*s had the "effect of a bomb" (Pichard 2004: 197). There was no shortage of musical talent or eager listeners. Stivell, a singer fascinated by Celtic music, learned Breton and used the language as a form of political and cultural protest; he was also very successful outside Brittany, attracting many followers and imitators.

<sup>7</sup> The title is a reference to the album "*Nos années de Breizh*" (Nono et al. 1998).

<sup>8</sup> During the 1950s, over 50% of the Breton population worked in farming. By 1975, this number fell to just 21% (McDonald 1989: 4).

Breton musicians were saying loud and clear that their work wasn't intended as pure entertainment, and rather was a form of expressing defiance in the face of oppression. Hundreds of concerts were held across Brittany, albums sold in their thousands, and singers of Breton music (or music performed in Breton) became a major driving force behind the shifting attitude to the culture, since they attracted young people driven by change, rebellion, and trying to find a connection to the past. The growing tendency to preserve the culture, combined with changing perspectives, touched off a chain reaction, starting from a cultural awakening, through an improvement to people's economic standing, eventually turning into a cultural contestation (Favereau 1993: 134). The 1970s saw a genuine blossoming of ideas concerning Brittany's cultural identity – a kind of a cultural revolution led by musicians and singers and the ubiquitous *fest-noz*.

Stivell originated a musical trend that can be described as music to be danced to during *fest-noz*. Dance parties were held in all parts of Brittany, even in locations where they had previously been unheard of. The concept of *fest-noz* as a rural festival was widely accepted, and it fitted in perfectly with the social attitudes of young Breton activists, frequently brought up in cities and unable to speak the language. They were seeking a connection with original Breton culture, so they accepted the invented tradition, treating it as “authentic”. While they wished to be like the Breton peasants from before the war, they did not admit older Bretons into their circles, even if they were most genuine, unless they shared their views and ideas. As a result, *fest-noz*, intended as a link between the worlds of the “young” and the “old”, between “modernity” and “naturalness”, drove a permanent wedge between the two worlds. On one side were those who learned Breton and for whom unified *néo-breton* was an expression of a pan-Breton identity, with older native Brittophones, resigned to the belief that their Breton world was passing, on the other. Stivell popularized the phrase *Hep brezhoneg, Breizh ebet* (“Without Breton there is no Brittany”), which became the language's battle cry. Breton language courses were growing in popularity, since anyone who wished to be seen as a “true Breton” felt they had to learn the language at least to some extent (Le Coadic 2002: 131). Young activists regarded participation in *fest-noz* – renowned for their alcohol-fuelled atmospheres and left-wing political discussions carried out in broken, recently-learned Breton – as an act of engagement (McDonald 1989: 144). The actual dances became secondary to plotting about how to return Brittany to its former glory and ensure rights for the Breton minority.

Observers even mention a kind of “*fest-noz*-mania” sweeping across Brittany during the 1970s (Nono 1998: 41). *Fest-noz* events were no longer seen as pure entertainment or even a manifestation of pro-Breton

attitudes; they became a way of life. A *fest-noz sauvage* was held somewhere on most days, frequently without permission, in meadows, fields, barns, or on beaches. Their participants favored clothes of a particular style, kept long beards, wore “BZH” badges (from Breizh – Brittany), cared for the environment, and opposed the construction of nuclear reactors. Plogoff became a symbol of the struggle against nuclear policies of the time, as well as uniting Bretons in their belief in the importance of community living. For many years, thousands of Bretons held a protest in the coastal town that had been slated for a nuclear plant. When the nuclear power plant plans were finally abandoned, a spontaneous *fest-noz* broke out with over 200,000 people taking part in the dancing. *Fest-noz* also accompanied the protests of farmers and peasants, the environmental demonstrations in the wake of the Amoco Cadiz oil spill off the coast of Brittany in 1978, the marches in defense of Breton culture and language held by the *Galv* group, and demonstrations supporting the plans to decentralize French administration. People were brought together by more than a common goal; it transpired that those waving the white-and-black flags were shouting out slogans in Breton while dancing in a long chain with others. The events united people in their fight for the right to be Breton. A new kind of common solidarity was born, based on a sense of belonging to a single group and the need to defend its traditions and land.

The 1970s were successful in bringing forward the question of Breton language as an important element of Breton culture, as well as re-evaluating Breton identity (Kergoat 1992: 46). Breton music, literature, theater, and audiovisual arts bloomed. In 1977, the first Diwan federation school was formed, teaching Breton by immersion; it was not recognized by the French authorities for many years. Teachers at Diwan schools were involved activists, frequently with little or no teaching experience; the key point was that they were able to pass on the concept of what being Breton meant. Since the schools received no subsidies, money required to run them was collected during *fest-noz* and concerts of Breton music.<sup>9</sup> The powerful, roots-level social movement, involving growing numbers of people, combined with the extensive associations, notorious demonstrations and widespread strikes, meant that France could no longer ignore the voice of Brittany. In 1977, President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing signed the Breton Cultural Charter, intended to demonstrate the authorities’ clear policy of accepting minority cultures, even though its role was purely symbolic. However, it constituted proof that the collective euphoria that swept across Brittany during the 1970s had brought a measurable effect.

<sup>9</sup> The tradition remained in place for many years. As late as 1998, a million francs was raised for Diwan schools during the music festival “Vieille Charrues” in Carhaix (Nicolas 2001: 136).

## Stabilization and new media

Once the protests started to die down, the character of the *fest-noz* also started to change. The finest Breton musicians, previously the *porte-parole* of Breton activists, moved to concert halls and performed for audiences much less likely to be connected with revolts and struggles. Some researchers go as far as to claim that in terms of the *fest-noz*, the 1980s was a period of hibernation (Nono et al. 1998: 53). The general mood was becoming more calm, there were no more huge demonstrations, and all activities seemed less spontaneous and less involving. The period was marked with increasing organic work; the voice of the struggle was shifting from Breton *militants* to cultural and educational associations. The Breton Cultural Charter resulted in the foundation of institutions such as the *Kuzul Sevenadurel Breizh* (“*Conseil Culturel de Bretagne*”), *Skol Uhel ar Vro* (“*Institut Culturel de Bretagne*”), and “*Agence technique culturelle régionale de Bretagne*”. A few years later, one of the sections of the Breton Cultural Institute was converted into the Public Office for the Breton Language (*Ofis Publik ar Brezhoneg/ Office Public de la langue bretonne*), promoting bilingualism in Brittany. The institutions worked to develop Breton culture, support the rights of the Breton minority, and strive to meet its aims to preserve its own language. In spite of the scores of people involved in teaching and promoting Breton, the language was finding itself under increasing pressure, making such activities all the more necessary. Intergenerational transmission, believed by social linguists to be key for language preservation, seemed unlikely to return, and there were no communities (centered around family or location) using the language in everyday life (Fishman 1997: 92–95). *Néo-breton* was used by activists to stress their identity and was known only to Bretons involved with the revival movement, while Breton dialects were spoken exclusively by elderly people from relatively closed circles.

And yet the *fest-noz* experienced another revival in the early 1990s, with growing numbers of events held across the region. The majority were low-key, local parties gathering most of the local inhabitants. It is notable that as had been the case in the past, once again the participants came from all age and professional groups. There were also increasing numbers of *fest-noz* in cities, held in fairly large halls, attended by students and young people interested in Breton culture. However, it was rare for the events to be visited by people with no links to the region. This maintained the division into those engaged with the culture and its preservation, and those not interested in this aspect of regional life. While the militant *fest-noz* happened on a far smaller scale than during the 1970s, overall the events were steadily growing in popularity. The revolutionary ideal was being

replaced by the friendly atmosphere of the dances, allowing people to spend time with others with similar interests (some shared cultural bonds, others political or social views, and so on). The community of Breton activists was becoming increasingly pluralized; it was no longer essential to live an exclusively Breton life to regard oneself as a Breton or even *militant breton*. It was now enough to have an interest in an aspect of the culture and/or language, and the desire to preserve it. The enjoyment of the dances themselves was replacing the political engagement of early *fest-noz*.

The late 1990s saw the arrival of a new style of *fest-noz*, closely linked with the Bretons' fast-changing needs and lifestyles and matching the progressing urbanization and the advent of new, digital media. *Fest-noz* were also becoming increasingly urban, and started featuring more diverse music styles. At times, musicians were accused of breaking away from the public, since *fest-noz* music is supposed to match the dancing rather than vice versa. The expansion of music schools with a "traditional" profile meant that there were growing numbers of professional musicians available to play at the events, hoping to raise their profile and present their own work (Defrance 1996: 190). In 1999, Nicolas Gonidec held the first Cyber Fest Noz events. The massive hall, holding around 200,000 people, hosts an annual *fest-noz* lasting most day and night and transmitted online in full. Many other places around the world hold events simultaneously, with the music and "digital" participation of dancers in Brittany.<sup>10</sup> The format is attractive to young people, and makes participation in a minority culture attractive. It also means that *fest-noz* has become an element of global culture, created by a constellation of drifting components from many cultures detached from their base. According to Arjun Appadurai, contemporary culture comprises ethnoscapas created by all cultures we come into contact with, and it is frequently deterritorialized (Appadurai 1996: 48). *Fest-noz* events do far more than simply using new media to change the way people participate in the events; they also change the character of the music, adapting other styles favored by young people. Cyber-participation is transforming the *fest-noz* into an element of global culture, and the events themselves – beyond the Internet and the Breton diasporas – are held in different places round the globe; however, this does not signal that Breton culture is coming to an end or becoming excessively uniform. Appadurai's theory of deterritorialization of cultures does not predict their uniformity; globalization does not lead to the decline of ethnic cultures, but rather has the opposite effect. Minority cultures use elements of other cultures and internalize them as part of the globalization process. The complexity of these processes, and the ease with

<sup>10</sup> Fest-noz combined with Cyber Fest Noz are held as far afield as Poznań.

which it is possible for people to choose groups, cultures and subcultures they belong to, makes it easier for growing numbers of individuals to identify with minority cultures.

Since 1999, the “Yaouank” (*Young*) festival has been held in Rennes; the city is the capital of Brittany, both in terms of administration and as a centre of Breton culture. These days, hundreds of thousands of people attend festival events largely focusing on *fest-noz*, from low-key ones, held in pubs, to massive *fest-noz* lasting many hours and combined with music concerts featuring various genres originating from or inspired by Breton culture. It has always been the intention of the organizers to attract people who previously had no links with Breton culture. Urban *fest-noz* are increasingly becoming an impulse for young people to discover more about Breton culture, and – in some cases – even to learn the language.

This is partly linked to the shifting ideology behind Breton identity. Young people brought up in the French system, coming into contact with growing numbers of immigrants and increasingly learning about different cultures through travel and from the media, must discover their Breton roots by themselves, or through promotional channels. Despite living in the dominant culture, they are able to assimilate the minority culture as a conscious choice or by temporarily participating in some of its events. Breton language is exposed to similar processes. Although Diwan schools<sup>11</sup> continue to flourish as a hotbed of Breton activists, there is a parallel trend of Breton schools not linked with the *militants* ideals.<sup>12</sup> Increasing funds are being dedicated to the development of Breton culture and language; the latter was granted the status of one of the official languages of Brittany in 2004, alongside French and Gallo.<sup>13</sup> More programs improving the language’s status in the region are being put in place (Dołowy-Rybińska 2011: 200–211). This means there is a growing demand for people able to teach Breton and work in Breton-language institutions. The region provides funding for intensive, six-month Breton language courses for adults. For the first time, fluency in Breton and working as part of the region’s culture are becoming commercially desirable, and can bring measurable benefits, over and above ideology. In 2009 France, known across Europe for its

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<sup>11</sup> There are currently 41 Diwan pre-schools and primary schools, six middle schools, and one high school.

<sup>12</sup> Alongside Diwan schools, there are also bilingual Div Yezh schools, teaching all subjects in both French and Breton, and Catholic Dihun schools. In total, over 14,700 children were taught at all types of Breton schools in 2012 ([http://www.ofis-bzh.org/fr/langue\\_bretonne/chiffres\\_cles/index.php](http://www.ofis-bzh.org/fr/langue_bretonne/chiffres_cles/index.php)).

<sup>13</sup> Although this is a largely symbolic acknowledgement, it has driven an increase in funding and regulation of Breton institutions such as the Breton Cultural Council and the Public Office for the Breton Language, previously operating on an association basis.

hostile attitude towards minorities, finally gave in after years of disputes, public debates and demonstrations, appending Paragraph One of Article 75 of the Constitution to include the note “Regional languages are a part of France’s heritage”. And yet, for the younger generations, Breton does not exist outside specific places involved with administration and promotion of local culture. Conversely, older native Bretonophones, immersed in Breton culture in their everyday lives, frequently distance themselves from the concepts of revitalization of the language and culture.

### Being Breton in the 21st century

Using the *fest-noz* phenomenon to study the condition and functioning of the Breton minority helps warn researchers against the temptation to “museumify” the group by trying to fit it into an external vision of what a minority is or should be. However, analysis subjects researchers to other dangers. For one thing, observers risk attributing the identities of individuals to theories formulated on the basis of analyzing a single phenomenon. In turn, minorities have a tendency to take advantage of the stereotyping of their cultures by focusing on features perceived by outsiders as markers of their identity. Bearing these risks in mind, and having participated in *fest-noz* for a number of years, I will try to draw certain conclusions about the Breton minority, with the caveat that they represent a certain generalization, and the way in which individuals identify with the minority culture varies greatly.

The very formation of a movement striving to protect a minority language and culture signifies a lack of cultural continuity. Hobsbawm notes that such activities are unable to protect a living past (being equivalent to reservations where fragments of culture are isolated and conserved, rather than being alive), and instead become invented traditions (Hobsbawm 1983: 7–8). The Breton *fest-noz* is one of numerous examples of an invented tradition, which has evolved and adapted to shifting requirements. This type of symbolic, ritualized activity mainly serves to strengthen a sense of social identity and group solidarity when community boundaries and identities are blurred (Cohen 1985: 50, 70). Here, even the sense of group solidarity is based on different values than it would have been in the oral world: it is no longer geographical and cultural proximity, but shared ideology, driving individuals with different lifestyles, interests and needs towards a common goal. However, instead of the cultural shock experienced by Bretons at the turn of the millennium, we are no longer dealing with the destruction of an ancient way of life, but rather the creation of a new one; by recalling elements of traditional culture (laying powerful cultural and ethnic boundaries and a powerful sense of “us” and “them”) and borrowing elements from

other cultures (which we are constantly exposed to in today's climate), it was possible to develop an original way of life in which membership of a minority culture is not a barrier to participation in the global culture of the 21st century.

Currently, while participation in a minority culture is an attractive option, it does not have to be – or even cannot be – exclusive; it cannot prevent individuals from identifying with a dominant, national, or global culture. According to Marshall Sahlins, “in any local sector of the global system the transformation assumes the dual appearance of assimilation and differentiation. The local people articulate with the dominant cultural order even as they take their distance from it” (Sahlins 1993: 19). Paradoxically, globalization makes it possible for individuals to consciously identify with minority cultures, since it does not require them to unequivocally decide which cultural order they belong to. Bretons do not need to distance themselves from other Frenchmen or Europeans, even if they frequently refer to their cultural distinction. It is possible to participate in minority cultures in many different ways: speaking the minority language, belonging to a folk group, meeting others involved in the culture, sending children to minority schools, and attending language courses and concerts by particular musicians. Participation in a minority culture can be based on the individual belonging to a political party promoting the region's autonomy or even independence, or on far less extreme activities such as preparing regional dishes, buying locally-sourced produce, encouraging others to get involved with the minority, attending cultural events such as *fest-noz*, and simply declaring one's affiliation with the group without the backing of specific activities. There are as many ways of identifying with the minority culture as there are individuals who feel they belong to it. Today, in order to “be Breton”, it is essential to want to be Breton, since any objective markers deciding whether an individual belongs to a cultural group have been replaced by a subjective, individual sense of belonging.

This loose cultural belonging has one major disadvantage: it makes it difficult for people to identify with a dispersed, widely varied group of individuals. By losing its original local-community character, the minority culture becomes an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) whose members are only connected by the awareness of the bond between them. In turn, these bonds, formulated on the basis of community life, are created by minority activists, and through the work of associations and institutions whose specific, rational task is to preserve the culture. However, I believe that a rigid extrapolation of Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction of a community (*Gemeinschaft*) based on emotions and feelings, and association (*Gesellschaft*) operating on the basis of rational calculation (Tönnies 2001), is not fully

applicable to today's Breton minority or other minority cultures. After all, the Breton way of associated life transcends setting specific goals, and makes a fluid transition into emotional connections between individuals, particularly during activities based on effective participation. The nature of the bonds is also changing over time. The relationships between participants in protest marches during the 1970s, when the struggle for the rights of the minority and the participation in its culture was pivotal, are quite different than those in place today. It is worth noting here Michel Maffesoli's neo-tribalism theory. Young people today find it important to be able to move between different groups, while identifying with them fully at the time. As such, "in contrast to the stability induced by classical tribalism, neo-tribalism is characterized by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal" (Maffesoli 1996: 76). Individuals are able to leave groups at any point, even when they experience and express an connection to other members. The existence of these bonds is highly valuable as it gives a sense of a unique emotional connection while leaving individuals to make their own choices. Membership in such groups requires a certain setting, such as selecting particular clothes, hairstyles or attending specific events. For some Bretons, *fest-noz* provides a way of expressing their connection to others, and as such membership in their group. Celebrating events together also provides an excellent opportunity to renegotiate identities, and "a related realignment of boundaries. By eating, dancing, singing, clowning, and drinking together, a 'we' group defines itself vis-à-vis 'they' group" (Boissevain 1992: 11). And so events such as *fest-noz* provide the perfect conditions for creating a tribal community: they require engagement and proximity to others while recalling old traditions of Breton communities, giving individuals a sense of context, continuity, and belonging.

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## ***Fest-noz: sposób na życie kulturą bretońską***

*Fest-noz* („nocna zabawa”) to spotkanie, podczas którego ludzie tańczą wspólnie do muzyki bretońskiej. Tradycyjnie zabawy takie odbywały się na niewielkim obszarze Bretanii środkowej i związane były z ważnymi wydarzeniami wspólnot wiejskich (związanych z uprawą ziemi, ale i obchodami świąt religijnych czy prywatnych). Brała w nich udział cała społeczność okolicy, tańcząc w łańcuchach do improwizowanych pieśni typu *kan ha discan* („zawołanie i odpowiedź”). Tradycja ta powoli zamierała w latach 30. i 40. XX wieku, zaś po II wojnie światowej *fest-noz* nie odbywało się wcale. W latach 60. XX wieku *fest-noz* zostało w sposób celowy zrewitalizowane, by stać się symbolem bretońskiego odrodzenia etnicznego przełomu lat 60. i 70., buntu młodzieży, rewaloryzacji wypieranej kultury i języka, radosnego (a często i radykalnego) dążenia do uzyskania praw. Od lat 90. XX wieku *fest-noz* jest niekwestionowanym znakiem rozpoznawczym Bretanii, corocznie odbywają się setki a nawet tysiące imprez, od ma-

łych spotkań lokalnych, po wielkie, zorganizowane w największych salach w Rennes, wydarzenia muzyczne, a nawet internetowe CyberFestNoz.

Fenomen bretońskiego *fest-noz* będzie kanwą, na której opowiedziana zostanie historia kultury i języka bretońskiego w XX i XXI wieku, od ich ośmieszania i zanikania, przez przemilczanie związane z wydarzeniami II wojny światowej, po odrodzenie lat 70. i czasy współczesne. Samo święto jest więc jedynie punktem wyjścia do rozważenia wielu procesów dotyczących kultur i języków mniejszościowych: tworzenia się tożsamości negatywnej, ruchów społecznych prowadzących do rewaloryzacji mniejszości, działań na rzecz ich zorganizowanej ochrony. Ale będzie to też opowieść o tym, jak mniejszość językowa może funkcjonować w dzisiejszym świecie, o spontanicznym uczestnictwie i ujętej instytucjonalnie animacji, o tradycji wynalezionej oraz o wybranej i świadomie tworzonej tożsamości kulturowej.

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### ***The Fest-noz: A Way to Live Breton Culture***

The history of the Breton language and culture of the XX and XXI century is narrated through the *fest-noz* phenomenon story. *Fest-noz* ('night festival') is a meeting where people dance in groups to live folk music accompaniment. Traditionally these festivals were organized in the small region of Central Brittany and were connected to important community occasions. This tradition was slowly disappearing in the 20's and 30's of the XXth century to die out after WW II when the Breton culture was depreciated and connected with the negative identity of the Bretons. *Fest-noz* was recreated and in 50's and has become an invented tradition. In the 60's with the social and cultural movements leading to the revalorization of the minority *fest-noz* became the symbol of a Breton ethnic revival. Today it is one of the most significant marks of Breton identification. Every year there are hundreds *fest-noz* organized all around Brittany, from small local celebrations to huge musical events. Participation in *fest-noz* is one of the ways of conscious creation of the Breton cultural identity.

**Key words:** *fest-noz*, dance, *néo-bretonnants*/new Breton speakers, linguistic minority, cultural change, invented tradition