In Search of Cornish Identity
Revival and Creation of Folk Music and Folk Dance in Cornwall from 1970-2010

Lea Hagmann, University of Bern

**Summary**

A similar approach was taken by musician and storyteller Mike O’Connor, who started to write his PhD thesis on the history of Cornish music about six years ago but later abandoned the project and produced a smaller book on a similar topic, *Illess Kernow*, instead.

Musician and post-graduate Frances Bennett, who was herself actively involved in the foundation of the *Nos Levan* movement in 2000, also started to write her PhD thesis on Cornish folk music, focusing on the contemporary developments rather than the historical aspects of the movement. But due to a change in her family circumstances, she too gave up her studies.

Recently, two academic works have been written on topics concerning Cornish folk music, namely Jamie Toms’ Master thesis, *Cornishness: A study into the ways in which a regional identity is reflected within the Cornish folk community* (2010), and Richard Trethewey’s Bachelor thesis, *The Significance of Absence. A comparative study of mining’s musical culture in Cornwall and the North-east of England* (2011).

In contrast to the works by O’Connor (2007) and Davey (2011), which have focused more on the history of Cornish music and traditions in line with their intention to justify the Revival, my dissertation project will focus on the Revival itself and its more recent developments from the 1970s to 2010s, looking at it from an etic perspective. I am interested in the contemporary identity of Cornish folk music and folk dance, and the ways Cornish people create, promote and expand their folklore.

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Contrary to the well-known folk music and folk dance of major Celtic nations like Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany, the folklore of Cornwall, a partly autonomous region located in the far southwest of England, has to date not received much international academic attention. Even in the major scientific works on Celtic music (Sawyers 2000; Stokes and Bohlman 2003), Cornwall is usually not mentioned at all, even though it was the site of the assembly of the many downland and coastland nations as early as 1904 (Jenner 1905). Until now, only one PhD thesis (Davey 2011), an MA thesis (Toms 2010) and a BA thesis (Trethewey 2011) have been written on Cornish folk music, while Cornish folk dance has only been investigated in a single chapter of Davey’s thesis.

This lack of scientific interest in the region’s folklore seems somewhat surprising, however, given that there is indeed a rather lively folk music and folk dance scene observable in the Duchy at present. This movement has its roots in the late 1970s, when local musicians initiated the Cornish Music and Dance Revival – not least because they wanted to give emphasis to their Celtic heritage and celebrate their otherness to English people. In the year 2000, some young musicians and dancers started a new folk movement called Nos Levan, in search of more modern ways of expressing Cornish identity. However, the different visions of what Cornish folk music and folk dance should be and how it ought to be interpreted have led to a huge and highly emotional, if not adversarial, controversy between the early revivalists and the initiators of Nos Levan.

By exploring and examining the Cornish Folk Music and Dance Revival as well as the Nos Levan movement, the present PhD thesis aims at filling a significant gap in the scientific field of Celtic Folklore Studies as well as the Anglo-American folk music research in general, and at raising international awareness of it. It also aims at addressing important questions concerning the identity/identities of Cornish folk music and folk dance, how the terms “authenticity” and “tradition” may be interpreted and expanded in the Cornish context, and how new and especially young people are attracted to the Revival scene. This also relates back to general issues regarding questions on identity in a modern and global context, which is not only an important aspect in Cornwall but also in many other parts of the world.

**Method**

As a basis I will follow guidelines of the Grounded Theory Methods (Glaser & Strauss 2005), which are based on:

1. Collection of qualitative data (interviews, ethnographics, participant-observation etc.)
2. Sampling (transcription of data, generating of categories)
3. Coding (analysis of the data)
4. Generation of a new theory

The participant-observations, which I will carry out in Cornwall (at concerts, gigs, festivals, school-projects, workshops, etc.), as well as at inter-Celtic festivals, (the Manx Music Festival, the Breizh-Kernow Festival, the Aberfest, the Festival Interoceltique Loirent, the Lavender Penan Festival, etc.), will be based on the guidelines of Emerson, Fretz and Shaw’s *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (1995), which contains excellent working tools for ethnomusicalographic fieldwork.

The interviews (approximately 20 main interviews with Cornish music or dance experts and 6-8 shorter interviews with other Celtic musicians) will be semi-structured and, once transcribed, analysed using the Grounded Theory Method (Glaser and Strauss 2005; Charmaz 2006). For a further interpretation of the transcriptions, the text-based Critical Discourse Analysis (“Kritische Diskursanalyse”) will be applied (Jäger 1993). Such an approach seems to be very well suited for the present dissertation, especially since questions on identity and artistic expressions of such “personal matter” that their essence is extremely difficult to capture using quantitative methods.

**Bibliography (selected)**


Toms, Jamie. 2010. *Cornishness: A Study into the Ways in which a Regional Identity is reflected within the Cornish Folk Community.* MA Thesis, University of Sheffield.


St Piran’s Day
Troyel at the City Inn

**State of Scientific Research and Personal Focus on the Topic**

Merry Davey, musician, collector and co-founder of the Cornish Music and Dance Revival, was the first and only person so far to complete a PhD thesis (2011) on Cornish folklore. In his dissertation, he traces Cornwall’s traditions in the past, such as the Gaising Traditions and Furry Dances, whereby he seems mainly concerned with the authenticity of Cornish customs, not least because he wants to justify the Cornish Music and Dance Revival. However, the Nos Levan movement, which was co-founded by Davey’s youngest brother Neil Davey and which is looking for more modern ways in which to interpret Cornish music and dance, is hardly mentioned as a term and not further discussed.