

# MAINTAINING AND CREATING HERITAGE

## Music and Language on Jersey<sup>[1]</sup>

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### Introduction

This research explores the use of the Jersey language (Jèrriais, or Jersey Norman-French) in folk song on the island of Jersey in the Channel Islands. The study is concerned primarily with two groups of songs: (1) those that are perceived as traditional Jersey folk songs in that they use a distinct local language; and (2) a wider repertoire of appropriated songs and their subsequent transformation through the adoption of lyrics in Jèrriais. Of particular significance for this study is the use of Jèrriais in contemporary society as a vehicle for maintaining and creating heritage. As a relatively small island of approximately 15 km by 8 km, but with a population of around 87,000, Jèrriais is today spoken by relatively few people on Jersey (estimated at about 3.2% of the population). While folk songs using Jèrriais might be understood by just a small percentage of islanders, their significance in contemporary island life is that they not only represent a traditional part of the island's culture, but songs using Jèrriais are also used as a way of maintaining and creating culture through the celebration of a minority language. This research provides an overview of Jersey folk songs, while examining the performance contexts and wider social meaning of songs in contemporary island life. The study focuses on the use of language as the main way in which some songs are maintained as traditional, as well as providing a commentary on the ongoing contribution of such folk songs to the contemporary heritage industry.

### General background

The Bailiwick of Jersey is located within the Bay of Mont Saint Michel to the north of France and is the largest and most southerly of the Channel Islands, the other main islands being Guernsey, Alderney, Sark and Herm (Appendix 1). Located about 135 km south of England and 22 km from France, the island measures around 15 km by 8 km. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Jersey was an annex of the Duchy of Normandy and became part of the Anglo-Norman kingdom when William the Conqueror became the English ruler in 1066. Even when Normandy was lost to the King of France, Philip Auguste (1180-1223) in 1204, Jersey and the other Channel Islands remained loyal to the English crown. From

that time, Jersey gained special status as a Crown Dependency, not being subject to the British Parliament, only to the monarch in council. The island has its own government of 53 elected members and complete autonomy over domestic affairs. It is divided into twelve parishes and, as of 2001, had a population of 87,186. The island is well known for its agriculture, tourism and finance industry, each of which has attracted permanent and temporary residents.

Jersey has a complex cultural makeup. Life in Jersey changed considerably in the 20th century, especially after World War II with the influx of tourism and more recently with the development of its offshore finance industry. A perceived traditional lifestyle was soon superseded by a changing ethnoscapes of permanent residents, seasonal workers, especially from the UK, France and Portugal (including Madeira), and temporary visitors. In the 2001 census, for example, 51% of islanders identified as being Jersey, 34.7% British, 6.63% as Irish or French, and 6.36% as Portuguese or Madeiran.

Multicultural Jersey also has its own language, Jèrriais (sometimes referred to as Jersey Norman-French),<sup>[2]</sup> even though most islanders do not speak it.<sup>[3]</sup> While the precise number of Jèrriais speakers is difficult to ascertain due to varying degrees of proficiency or confidence in speaking the language, in the mid 1980s it was estimated that between 7,000 to 10,000 residents spoke the language (Birt, 1985:1), and by 1989, when the local census requested linguistic information, the figure was 5,720 people (cf. Sallabank, 2003). The last census of 2001 reported that 2,874 people, or just 3.2% of the population, spoke Jèrriais (Statistics Unit, 2002). Of those who do speak Jèrriais today, they use it not as their everyday language, but usually as a second language, in educational contexts, or in settings that are constructed to celebrate the language and its culture. Part of the survival of the Jersey language, as this paper explores, is through song and its celebration during public display (cf. Kuehl, 1997),<sup>[4]</sup> and through its connection to maintaining and creating heritage. As an ethnography of this process, this paper looks specifically at how some islanders and non-islanders encourage, sustain and facilitate local culture. The study gives emphasis to a contemporary festival, or fête, that celebrates Norman heritage, and the transformation of one poem into three contrasting pieces of music is used as an example that helps in understanding some of the complexities associated to identity construction on the island.

## Maintaining and Creating Heritage

There are various contexts in which Jèrriais is promoted through song (eg, language classes, carol singing, hymns, nursery rhymes,<sup>[5]</sup> competitions,<sup>[6]</sup> fêtes, etc.). One that stands out is a recently established fête that celebrates the Norman language in its various forms across the Norman region (ie, the Channel Islands and Normandy). What is apparent with songs in Jèrriais and the performance practice of those who sing the songs, whatever the genre, is a desire to maintain and create cultural heritage.<sup>[7]</sup> That is, in this context it is the performers themselves who are the main facilitators of their cultural traditions.

Many songs currently performed in contexts that promote Jèrriais are translations of English songs or ones of Norman-French or French origin, although some – very few – have a recognised local origin. Kennedy (1975b:246-92), for example, provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of Jersey folk songs.<sup>[8]</sup> Covering Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark, he spent just a few weeks collecting songs in the islands in 1957 and 1960. The songs from Jersey in his book are sung in French, Norman-French (or Norman) and Jèrriais, with some mixing words from several of these languages.<sup>[9]</sup> Even though Kennedy was an outsider researcher, his work has been endorsed locally with the reproduction in Jersey of the section on the Channel Islands in booklet form (see Kennedy, 1980). However, while Kennedy's work might be seen to occupy a contested space in local music making with its emphasis on a variety of languages and limited number of performers, it does offer a glimpse into some aspects of music making on the island in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It has also become a resource for the contemporary discovery and celebration of aspects of Jersey heritage.

In connection with Jersey folk songs, tradition is being maintained, transformed and created in several ways. While the local societies and organisations in which Jersey songs often find a performance context are particularly conspicuous in terms of their role in promoting local culture, there are also events that take place that include local and non-local performers, each of whom has a place in helping construct a contemporary idea of Jersey heritage, whether it is based on traditional songs or transformations of those songs and others.<sup>[10]</sup> One of the most visible performance events to be staged in recent years that promotes Jersey's Norman heritage is La Fête Nouormande, which is shared between different Norman centres, usually on an annual basis.<sup>[11]</sup> The Fête is a site of display of Norman heritage. It is a context that helps produce locality, one that is now enmeshed in cultural flows of complex forms of identity construction. That is, while aspects of island identity are constructed from the local, the local itself is constructed through multiple locations and identities.

In 2002, for example, when La Fête Nouormande was last held in Jersey, the main music events were Jèrriais singers in costume, the Holmchase Choir singing in Jèrriais, bachîn ringing (pan ringing), La Sagesse Nouormande (a UK-based group consisting of such instruments as voice, hurdy-gurdy and bagpipes), and Magène (a French folk/jazz group playing modern songs from Jersey, Guernsey and Normandy).<sup>[12]</sup> There were also some performances from Guernsey musicians.

The first event was the Jèrriais Singers, who performed in costume for the BBC Music Live programme. The choir included several Beatles' numbers such as *All you need is love* and *Yesterday*, which were sung in Jèrriais, as part of a massed performance of the song around Britain. This borrowing of well-known songs and translating the lyrics into Jèrriais has become a popular way of promoting the local language, which helps illustrate the foregrounding of language in some local music making contexts. The Fête even witnessed the revival of an old tradition of pan ringing. Bachîn ringing consists of using

an old preserving pan and making it sound to announce mid-summer in order to scare evil demons away. A piece of cord is tied across the pan and to make a sound wet fingers are drawn across it.<sup>[13]</sup> This reinvention or rediscovering of tradition (cf. Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983) helps add a sense of local uniqueness or identity to the celebrations. While challenging notions of music and non-music, the ringing is also a highly audible and visible attraction that indexes the context of farming, one of the island's traditional industries.

In connection with the two folk groups that performed, Magène and La Sagesse Nouormande, what is especially interesting about them is that they are not Jersey based, but were present in order to represent Norman culture through their renditions of Norman songs, some from the Channel Islands.

Magène are a Norman-French group and play various pieces that have a Norman origin, but they place the music in a contemporary musical context. The group note that they “use old and contemporary Norman lyrics written by local authors from Normandy and the Channel Islands. We write original music for them.” (Magène, 2004) As well as adapting several verses of Jersey writers Augustus Asplet Le Gros (1840-77) and Frank Le Maistre (1910-2002), one of the songs they play has been composed from an anonymous 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jersey text, *Ma Chifournie* (or *La Chifournie: My Hurdy-Gurdy or The Hurdy-Gurdy*). There are three known musical settings, each of which is not based on a traditional local melody, but on a poem published in 1871 (fig. 2).<sup>[14]</sup>

The first musical setting of *Ma Chifournie* is published as part of the ten classical songs scored for voice and piano by Alfred Amy (1867-1936) (see Amy, 1988), where it is given the title *La Chifournie*.<sup>[15]</sup> The left-hand piano drone provides a characteristic hurdy-gurdy sound, with a folk song-like melody given to the vocal line. It is the right-hand piano part that gives the piece its classical sound, especially with its sometimes quite chromatic harmonic movement. The setting by Magène (2001), the original music of which was written by Daniel Bourdelès, is played on acoustic guitar with voice. The arpeggio guitar playing provides a typical contemporary folk style accompaniment. Magène's version retains the Jersey text, although it has been modified to accommodate Norman-French and has an alternating verse-chorus structure. La Sagesse Nouormande's musical setting is by Dominic Allan (he is not a member of the group), who wrote a tune in 2002 as a hurdy-gurdy piece with voice (Appendices 2-3). From the UK, La Sagesse Nouormande, whose name translates into English as “Norman Wisdom,” perform contemporary renditions of traditional music from France and the Channel Islands played on such instruments as hurdy-gurdy, mandola, recorders, saxophone and rauschpfeife. Their melody of *Ma Chifournie* is a punchy hurdy-gurdy tune, quite different to the melody of Amy or Magène. The vocal line has been adapted to repeat the first two phrases of each verse, with the first verse also being repeated at the very end of the piece.

The transformation of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jersey text into classical and contemporary folk settings helps illustrate the ways that locals (ie, Amy) and non-locals (ie, Magène and La

Sagesse Nouormande) help facilitate local culture. Amy placed the text in a classical context as a way of promoting the Jersey language in London at the Annual Dinners of The Jersey Society, which was founded in 1896; Magène have used the text as a source for promoting a broader notion of a somewhat fragmented Norman culture; and La Sagesse Nouormande have recontextualised the text for a modern and original setting. But what each has in common is that they have encouraged local culture. While Amy's work was published in 1988 as part of a rediscovery of Jèrriais, Magène and La Sagesse Nouormande have been important in giving local culture back to the locals through the medium of performance and public display. Each has helped facilitate local heritage in local and non-local contexts.

## Closing Thoughts

Even though Jersey is a small island, it has a complex cultural make-up. Jèrriais is only spoken by a small percentage of islanders, yet it is recognised as an important part of Jersey heritage. Performance using Jèrriais through song is one way that some islanders, as well as the local heritage industry, self-identify in order to celebrate the island's Norman history. The performance of a minority language through a range of song styles puts into the public sphere a small yet highly significant part of Jersey heritage.

The performance of Jèrriais through song is made more complex by the borrowing of Jersey songs by non-islanders who have then been invited to perform as representatives of a broader Norman culture to which the island identifies. While some of the performers are from Normandy, others have come from the United Kingdom, and have been given key parts to play in the celebration of Jersey's Norman heritage. In this sense, islands can also be found outside islands; through cultural flows island music can become a marker of identity in the lives of diaspora and other communities (cf. Allen and Wilcken, 1998). What is evident with these flows is that present-day Jersey is paying particular attention to its Norman past; it is celebrating its Norman heritage through public performance; and it is using song as a vehicle to perform identity through a range of music genres and performers.

The emphasis of language in the celebration of island identity is especially evident in the wide range of music styles that have been orally transmitted, learned from music notation or appropriated. But what is significant here is that many of them have a recognised origin from outside the island. There are pieces borrowed from other Channel Islands, pieces from France and Normandy, and, more recently, there are the well-known popular songs that have perhaps been appropriated because they serve as a useful way of promoting Jèrriais through music and song.

Jersey, therefore, is not an insular culture, and even though it has a long Norman heritage, that aspect of its identity is still evolving through increased local, regional and other cultural flows. Jersey has a minority language, but it is given prominence in public displays as a way of representing tradition, maintaining culture and building an island

identity. While tradition is being (re)discovered and (re)invented, cultural difference is constructed through the performance of songs in Jèrriais. In such contexts, local identity is negotiated and contested by locals and non-locals alike, and appropriated songs adapted to Jèrriais texts help create culture, which is even endorsed and promoted by the local heritage industry. Moreover, songs are particularly made meaningful when they are performed in Jèrriais, even though most islanders do not understand the language.

## Endnotes

[1] I am grateful to the Asian Studies Research Centre, Otago University, for helping to fund attendance at the SICRI (Small Island Cultures Research Initiative) conference in Kagoshima, Japan, where this research was first presented. I am indebted to several key informants and organisations who made much of this research possible, Joyce and Brian Gilbert, Amelia and Garnet Perchard, Joan Tapley, L'Assemblée D'Jèrriais and La Société Jersiaise. Also, Geraint Jennings and Roland Scales have been very helpful in providing valuable information and sources that have helped this research, for which I am extremely grateful. Data for this research has been collected over many years, although interviews with key informants took place in 1988-89.

[2] Sometimes referred to as Jèrriaise.

[3] For official purposes (ie, laws, contracts, documents, oaths etc.), Jersey also uses official French, which is referred to as Jersey Legal French.

[4] For a survey of musics of islands see especially Dawe (2004).

[5] See, for example, Tapley (nd).

[6] The Eisteddfod is the main competition that includes Jersey evenings, which were introduced for Jèrriais speakers in 1912 (the first Eisteddfod in Jersey was held in 1908).

[7] The idea of preserving traditional culture in this context might be compared to the folk song collectors (eg, Sharp, 1954 [1907]) who aimed to preserve what they saw as dying traditions.

[8] Kennedy has also released several recordings from his field collections (Kennedy, nda, b, c, 1975a, c). Kennedy's research was made in conjunction with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (Kennedy and the BBC, 1957a, b, c, 1960a, b).

[9] See also, for example, the collections of Le Maitre (1979).

[10] A committee of Société Jersiaise (founded in 1873), La Section dé la Lange Jèrriaise, is particularly active in promoting Jèrriais.

[11] Since being established, the Fête has been held each year since 1998 except in 2003. It is rotated among the Norman centres, including the Channel Islands and mainland France. It will be held in Jersey again in 2005.

[12] In France there are also such groups as Marée de Paradis, who from 1991 have been including Norman songs in their repertoire. Their blend of modern folk music, which includes singing, accordion, concertina, violin, guitar, flute and percussion, has even included some Jersey pieces. The group has used some of Michel Colleu's collected songs of the Channel Islands, including the ballad *La Chanson de Peirson* (it has

not been recorded by them) which Scales forwarded to him (Scales, 2004). It was collected by Geraint Jennings – see [www.societe-jersiaise.org/geraint/jerriais.html](http://www.societe-jersiaise.org/geraint/jerriais.html).

[13] The tradition was revived by Geraint Jennings. See further [www.societe-jersiaise.org/langsec/fete2002/english.html](http://www.societe-jersiaise.org/langsec/fete2002/english.html).

[14] As noted by Geraint Jennings (2005), the first known published version is in the local annual literary magazine *La Nouvelle Année* of 1871 (fig. 2). The annual was edited by A. A. Le Gros and islanders strongly suspect that the poem was one of his, although some dialectal features suggest that the writer was from the east of the island. The poem is written according to French syllabic convention by someone well-trained in composing verse in French.

[15] On British classical music being inspired by the Channel Islands (including Jersey) see, for example, Richards (2004).

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Refereed papers from  
The 1<sup>st</sup> international Small Island Cultures conference  
Kagoshima University Centre for the Pacific Islands, February 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> 2005  
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Appendix 1. Jersey, Showing Location in Northwest Europe. Source: University of Texas, www.lib.utexas.edu/maps.



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Appendix 2. Comparison of Texts to “La Chifournie” / ”Ma Chifournie.”

“La Chifournie” Words Anon. Source: Le Gros (1981:21-22)	“La Chifournie” Words Anon. Music by Alfred Amy Source: Amy (1988:42-45)	“Ma Chifournie” Words Anon. Music by Magène (2001)	“Ma Chifournie” Words Anon. Music by Sagesse Nouormandie Source: Scales (2004, 2005)	
Jèrriais	Jèrriais	Norman-French (Norman)	Jèrriais	English Translation
1. Deux p'tits sous, si vouos pplait; Ch'est pour gagnir ma vie Que touos les jours je vais Auve ma chifournie. Ma chifournie, Ma vie. Ma chifournie!	1. Deux p'tits sous, si vuuos pplait Ch'est pour gagni' ma vie Que touos les jours je vais Auve ma chifournie Ma chifournie Ma vie Ma chifournie Ma vie	<i>(Refrain)</i> 2, 4. Deux p'tits sous s'il vous pplait Ch'est pouor gangner ma vie Que touos les jours je vas D'aveu ma chifournie Ma chifournie ma vie	1, 5. Deux p'tits sous si vouos pplait Ch'est pour gagnir ma vie (repeat) Que touos les jours je vais Auve ma chifournie (repeat) Ma chifournie Ma vie Ma chifournie!	Two little pence, please To earn my living For every day I go [out] With my hurdy-gurdy My hurdy- gurdy My life [My hurdy- gurdy (My life)]
2. J'sis v'nu pars monts par vaux, Pilvaudant dans la baue, Ma chifournie sus l'dos; Si vouos pllait, un d'gout d'iaue. Ma chifournie, Ma vie. Ma chifournie!	2. J'sis v'nu pars monts par vaux Pilvaudant dans la baue Ma chifournie sus l'dos Si vouos pllait, un d'gout d'iaue Ma chifournie Ma vie Ma chifournie Ma vie	1. J'sis venun par mounts par vâos Pilvôdaunt dauns la boe Ma chifournie sus l'dos S'il vous pllait eune goutte d'iaô	J'sis v'nu pars monts par vaux Pilvaudant dans la baue (repeat) Ma chifournie sus l'dos Si vouos pllait, un d'gout d'iaue (repeat) Ma chifournie Ma vie Ma chifournie!	I have come over hill and dale Stumbling through the mud With my hurdy-gurdy on my back If you please, a glass of water [My hurdy- gurdy My life

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				My hurdy-gurdy (My life)]
3. Je vous vignonnerai De petites sornettes, Et je vous chanterai De belles chansonnettes. Ma chifournie, Ma vie. Ma chifournie!	3. Je vous vignonnerai De p'tites sornettes Et je vous chanterai De belles chansonnettes Ma chifournie Ma vie Ma chifournie Ma vie	3. Je vous vignonnerai De petites sornettes Et je vous chanterai De belles cauchounettes	Je vous vignonnerai De petites sornettes (repeat) Et je vous chanterai De belles chansonnettes (repeat) Ma chifournie Ma vie Ma chifournie!	I shall fiddle Little trifles for you I shall sing Beautiful little songs for you [My hurdy-gurdy My life My hurdy-gurdy (My life)]
4. Et quand je s'rai sièz-nous Auv' men père et ma mère, Souvenanche de vous J'érai dans ma prière. Ma chifournie, Ma vie. Ma chifournie! Ma vie	4. Et quand je s'rai sièz-nous Auv' men péthe et ma méthe Souvenanche de vous J'éthai dans ma priéthe Ma chifournie Ma vie Ma chifournie Ma vie	5. Et quaud je s'rai cheu nous D'aveu men père et ma mère Souvenaunche de vous J'érai dauns ma pryire  <i>Ending:</i> Souvenaunche de vous J'érai dauns ma pryire Ma chifournie ma vie Souvenaunche de vous Ma chifournie ma vie	Et quand je s'rai sièz-nous Auv' men père et ma mère (repeat) Souvenanche de vous J'érai dans ma prière (repeat) Ma chifournie Ma vie Ma chifournie!	When I get home To my mother and father I shall remember you In my prayers [My hurdy-gurdy My life My hurdy-gurdy (My life)]  <i>Ending (Magène):</i> I shall remember you In my prayers My hurdy-gurdy My life I shall remember you My hurdy-

				gurdy
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Appendix 3. *La Chifournie*. Music by Dominic Allan. Source: Scales (2004).

