CONSTRUCTING ISLANDNESS ON JERSEY

A Study of Language and La Fête Nouormande

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Abstract

The Jersey language, Jèrriais (Jersey Norman-French), is used by some islanders in an attempt to maintain and (re-)construct local tradition. While Jèrriais experienced considerable decline in the latter half of the twentieth century, it currently holds the position of being a minority language on the one hand, yet a language that has immense significance for many islanders on the other, particularly in its use in contexts that continue, invent and re-invent island tradition. Moreover, in contexts that celebrate tradition, which also express a notion of islandness, Jèrriais is often found in song, whether old, borrowed or new. While Jèrriais is a minority language, perhaps an endangered language, it is through such activities as music making through hymns, children’s songs, art music and folk song that it is being rediscovered, promoted and maintained within some parts of island life. While there are very few songs that have an origin (real or perceived) in Jersey, an increasing number of songs are sung in Jèrriais with the aim of preserving and promoting the Jersey language.

The paper investigates some of the ways that song is used in contemporary local settings to construct a sense of islandness on Jersey. While Jèrriais is visibly promoted through song in order to encourage, sustain and facilitate local culture, the context of a fête that exists solely to celebrate tradition is explored with the aim of understanding its place in representing island tradition. The research provides insight into the social meaning of Jèrriais in contemporary performance contexts. It shows that while the island context is a complex zone of sub-cultures and identities, Jèrriais and song are foregrounded through institutional intervention with the aim of helping to construct a modern-day view of island heritage and identity.

Introduction

The island of Jersey is about 22 km from the north of France and 135 km south of England. It is a British Crown possession, yet a self-governing Dependency and Bailiwick. Along with the other Channel Islands (including Guernsey, Alderney, Sark and Herm), it is not part of the United Kingdom or the European Union. Jersey, which is approximately 15 km by 8 km, became part of the Duchy of Normandy in the tenth century. It was incorporated into the Anglo-Norman kingdom when William the Conqueror (1028–87) became the English ruler in 1066. Thereafter, Jersey, along with the other Channel Islands, maintained its loyalty to the English crown, being subject to the monarch and not to the British Parliament.

The population of Jersey is about 87,186 (States of Jersey Statistics Unit, 2006: v). The island has its own language, Jèrriais (or Jèrriaise), which is sometimes referred to in English as Jersey Norman-French or patois. Jèrriais is not a dialect of French, and some speakers refer to it as Jersey-Norman in order to avoid the connection with French (there are several different versions of the language on the island itself). While in the mid 1980s there were around 7,000 to 10,000 Jèrriais speakers (Birt,
1985: 1), by the end of that decade the number had fallen to 5,720 (cf. Sallabank, 2003). According to the latest census figures of 2001, just 2,874 people, or 3.2% of the population, sometimes spoke Jèrriais (Statistics Unit, 2002). With such a minority status, as has been pointed out in a recent academic thesis on Jersey’s cultural policy, “to most Jersey residents, Jèrriais has become a quaint symbol of Jersey’s past” (Riddell, 2005: 22; cf 2007). However, the twenty-first century has seen a renewed interest in Jèrriais, especially in the form of intervention from the island’s government in promoting the language as part of the island’s living heritage:

_In the 21st century strenuous efforts are being made to re-establish it. Le Don Balleine, funded by the States, is leading a programme in schools teaching Jèrriais. L’Assemblée d’Jèrriais promotes the language generally. Language brings distinctiveness, a sense of localness and a whole new set of skills all of which are important qualities in attracting the creative economy. It is fundamental to the Island’s identity. This objective is to work with these organisations to help in the revival and status of the language_ (States of Jersey: Education, Sport and Culture Committee 2005).

Building on my earlier (and ongoing) research on this theme (Johnson, 2005), this paper looks at how song in Jèrriais is used by islanders to maintain heritage, and to create culture and community. In terms of the ethnicity of its population base and external influences, Jersey has undergone rapid change over the last century. In this context, one aspect of island culture that is visible as a symbol of heritage is the foregrounding of songs (old, borrowed and new) using Jèrriais in contexts that exhibit the past or celebrate heritage. It is here that recent traditions have emerged, ones that draw on the past for emblems of identity yet simultaneously point to the future through cultural display (cf. Russell & Atkinson, 2004).

New Traditions

Songs in Jèrriais are performed in a number of island settings that celebrate tradition and the local language, but one of the most publicly visible contexts is _La Fête Nouormande–La Fête des Rouaisouns_ (Norman Fête), hereafter the Fête. The Fête is a celebration of Norman heritage held annually at a different Norman centre. It is a relatively recent addition to the island’s festival calendar in that it has only been held since 1998. The Fête showcases a wider Norman heritage, and songs are a main feature (see also Johnson, 2005). The different locations where it has been held are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location (Basse-Normandie)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Montebourg</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Bayeux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Jersey</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Guernsey</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Guernsey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Coutanaches</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Bricquebec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Jersey</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Guernsey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study of music and festivals has received increased interest from an ethnomusicological perspective in recent years (e.g. cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Lau, 2004; Lindsey, 2004; Cooley, 2005; Hosokawa, 2005; Harnish, 2006). Such contexts provide a focal point in which particular cultural traits are showcased or foregrounded as a means of representing culture. In the case of Jèrriais, the Fête allows this minority language, alongside other Norman languages, to take centre stage and receive wider public attention for a few days each year.
Front Covers of the festive anthologies of La Fête Nouormande-La Fête des Rouaisouns

2000 – Guernsey

2001 – Coutanches
The Fête was literally invented in 1998 (cf Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983):

La Fête des Rouaisouns a été conçue par le journaliste Jean Margueritte et l’association Montebourg-Guernesey en 1998. (The Festival of Rouaisouns (rogations) was conceived by the journalist Jean Margueritte and the Montebourg-Guernesey Association in 1998; my translation.)

As might be expected, the times when it has been located in Jersey have seen considerable Jèrriais input. A significant part of the Fête is the printing of an anthology that includes all (or at least most) of the texts of the Norman songs, poetry and verses performed (not all are always performed as some are kept in reserve). The anthology is intended for the audience to follow and is considered an important document of each Fête:

One of the traditions of the Fête des Rouaisouns is to have a “festive anthology” that people can buy so as to be able to follow the performances - and to have a fine souvenir of the Fête. Even if you are not familiar with Jèrriais, Dgèrnésiais or Norman, having the words of the songs, poems and stories in front of you will make the experience that much more accessible and enjoyable.

As well as providing representative examples of several literary traditions in terms of, for example, stories, poems and songs, the booklets also help give an idea of the meaning of the event by the way
the Fête is presented (see further http://www.societe-jersiaise.org/langsec/fete2008/). In terms of the iconography of the anthologies, two themes are particularly visible on the front cover over the ten years of the event. The first relates to the idea of a real or imagined community of Norman speakers that gathers with the aim of celebrating a common linguistic heritage. This is represented visually in the form of a handshake over a map of the Channel Islands and Norman region of northern France, which was seen in 2000 and 2003 (fig 1), the map showing the geographic place, and the handshake the link between the community of speakers.

The second theme in the anthologies regards the photographs or drawings of people and how they present themselves. That is, there is a custom of dressing in a type of period costume for the event, something that seems to represent an idealised past that spreads over many centuries. The dress of participants (performers and audience), as shown on the covers of the anthology in 2001-2 and 2005-6, is given special visual attention in that it draws from the past, it wants to celebrate a past epoch, and it gives value to that which is viewed as historical even though is it being celebrated and sometimes (re-)invented in the present day (figs 2–6).

In 1999, the second year of the event, which was advertised as La Fête Normande (The Norman Fete – note the French spelling), the Fête was held in Jersey at Hamptonne Farm on Saturday 17 April. At this Fête, song texts in Jèrriais ranged from well-known older pieces including ‘J’ai perdu ma femme’ (‘I Did Lose My Wife’), ‘Jean, gros Jean’ (‘John, Big John’; 1997 version) and ‘Not’ île de Jèrri’ (‘Our Island of Jersey’), to modern and borrowed pieces from folk or popular traditions, including ‘Les mais du coucou’ (‘Cuckoo Months’; by Joan Tapley from a Welsh song), ‘Ô grâce immense’ (‘Amazing Grace’), ‘Freunme la porte’ (‘Close the Door’; by Amelia Perchard from ‘World of Our Own’ by The Seekers), and ‘Tréjous nord’ (‘Always North’; by Amelia Perchard). The influence of pieces by Amelia Perchard is explained because she has been particularly active in adapting well-known and popular pieces into Jèrriais.

As a case study of an older piece of Jersey song, ‘J’ai perdu ma femme’, for example, is particularly well-known among Jèrriais speakers. Featured in the folk song collections of Kennedy (1975) and Le Maistre (1979), it is a representative example of a traditional Jersey piece of folk music. The first verse indexes the growing of greens (i.e. cabbages, possibly in a farming context), and as Kennedy (1975: 284) comments, “the allusion to kale or cabbage-growing is characteristic of the agricultural tradition of the Channel Islands”:

J’ai perdu ma femme en pliantant des chours
[I did lose my wife as I was planting greens]
J’ai perdu ma femme, vèrse dans man vèrre
[I did lose my wife, come fill up my glass]
J’ai perdu ma femme en pliantant des chours
[I did lose my wife as I was planting greens]
É-en pliantant des chours
[As I was planting greens]
(http://www.societe-jersiaise.org/geraint/jerriais/perdu.html)

In 2005 the event was again held in Jersey (the third time to date), this time from 3-9 June around a number of prominent local locations. The songs in Jèrriais that were included in the anthology were very similar to the 2002 Fête that was also held in Jersey. Some of the songs were repeated from previous years while others were additions (the song categories are my own):
Old/Well-Known Songs:
‘J’ai pêrdú ma femme’ (‘I Did Lose My Wife’)
‘Jean, gros Jean’ (‘John, Big John’)
‘Tchi pêtít homme’ (‘What a Little Man’)
‘Vive La Compagnie’ (‘Long Live the Gang’)

Recent Songs:
‘Man beau p’tit Jèrrî’ (‘My Beautiful Little Jersey’) 
‘Lé r’ou dé Ph’lip dé Térreneuve’ (‘Ph’lip of Newfoundland’) 

Songs Borrowed and/or Adapted from France:
‘Alouette’ (‘The Skylark’)
‘Ma Normandie’ (‘My Normandy’)
‘Bônsouair maî’t dé chutte maîson’ (‘Good Evening Host’)
‘Les garçons dé Grouville’ (‘The Boys of Grouville’)
‘Un p’tit bouonhomme’ (‘A Little Gentleman’)

Songs Borrowed and/or Adapted from the UK and Ireland:
‘Dgieu sauve la Reine’ (‘God Save the Queen’)
‘Not’ bouon veir temps’ (‘Auld Lang Syne’)
‘Jé chantons dans la pylie’ (‘Singing in the Rain’)
‘Sus man pônîn’ (‘Donkey Riding’)

Hymn Translations:
‘Ta main, Seigneur, a dgidé’ (‘Thy Hand, O God, Has Guided’)
‘Dgide-mé, tu’es man grand rédempteux’ (‘Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer’)

In terms of islandness, the Fête is linked to heritage, identity and tourism. Tourism is an important industry for the island, although in decline since the 1980s, and the Fête provides a focal point of tourist interest (for visitors and locals alike) for the celebration of an island heritage that connects Jersey to its wider Norman history. Music is linked to tourism in the Fête in that traditional styles of music (or at least music perceived as traditional) are put on display with the purpose of celebrating and showcasing the island’s Norman heritage, for locals and non-locals alike. While such musical displays have been observed at other island sites (e.g. Hayward, 2001; 2002; 2006; Dawe, 2004), the Jersey example has specific meaning connected with language.

In the case of the localisation of Jersey and Jèrriais, when popular texts are translated into Jèrriais they carry with them not only the associations with the well-known original version(s), but they also convey deeply evocative meanings that are specific to the local context. They usually embody elements of what it means to be from Jersey, a demarcation of “difference and social boundary” (Stokes, 1994: 3), and more specifically what it means to understand Jèrriais in the twenty-first century.

The transformation of song and the foregrounding of Jèrriais in the contemporary performance context are particularly noticeable in many songs that are currently sung as adaptations of songs that are well-known in the singers’ first language (i.e. English in the case of Jèrriais speakers). In addition to the borrowed songs noted thus far, there are many other songs that have been appropriated with the aim of promoting Jèrriais in the contemporary context, one interesting example being ‘Les douze jours dé noué!’ (‘Twelve Days of Christmas’). One member of La Section dé la Langue Jèrraisé, Geraint Jennings, sings, composes and arranges pieces in Jèrriais. At a December 1997 meeting of...
La Section dé la Langue Jèrriaise, for example, which was dedicated to practising for the annual Christmas service, he sang a piece to the tune of ‘Twelve Days of Christmas’, but using words about the presents that might be given from each of the Island’s twelve parishes (a summary of the twelve themes is shown below, after Jennings, 1997):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jersey Phrase</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lé douzième jour dé Noué</td>
<td>On the twelfth day of Christmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man galant m’a donné</td>
<td>My true love gave to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douze messieurs d’Saint Pièrre</td>
<td>12 lords of St Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onze darnes d’la Trin’té</td>
<td>11 ladies of Trinity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dgièx patates d’Saint Louothains</td>
<td>10 potatoes of St Lawrence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neu tonmates d’Saint Sauveux</td>
<td>9 tomatoes of St Saviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huipt vaques d’Sainte Mathie</td>
<td>8 cows of St Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept cygnés d’Saint Clément</td>
<td>7 swans of St Clement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sièx pithots d’Saint Brélade</td>
<td>6 geese of St Brelade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chîns bagues d’la Ville</td>
<td>5 rings of St Helier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quat’ pies d’Saint Martin</td>
<td>4 magpies of St Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trais poules d’Saint Jean</td>
<td>3 hens of St John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deux colombes d’Grouville</td>
<td>2 doves of Grouville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Et un perdrix Saint-Ouënnais!</td>
<td>And a partridge of St Ouen!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

For Jersey, language plays a pivotal role in several song-making activities for some islanders. Language and song help construct islandness with the aim of celebrating and maintaining local and wider Norman heritage. This is reinforced through the activities of language activists, local organisations dedicated to promoting Jersey heritage, and more recently through government cultural policy and intervention.

This paper, therefore, has shown that language and song using Jèrriais has a particularly important and highly valued place in some spheres of island culture. The research has shown that the contemporary heritage industry and individuals alike are currently doing much on Jersey to promote a minority language, and song is an extremely important vehicle for the promotion of the language. It is this foregrounding of language that helps illustrate local aspects of music making, culture construction and, above all, identity building. Music and language intertwine to maintain, establish and develop local heritage, even though local identity is often constructed and influenced by non-local imports in a somewhat paradoxical space of cultural construction. Songs using Jèrriais provide a focal point for the celebration of cultural identity; and they help create culture, community and islandness.
Endnotes

1 This paper has been extrapolated from a longer piece of work in progress due to appear in Shima v2n2 October 2008 on the songs of La Fête Nouormande. The paper has, however, been re-worked with new ideas for the conference theme. I am particularly grateful to Tony Scott Warren, Geraint Jennings and Colin Ireson of Office de Jèrriais (Jersey Office) for their help with archive materials and for commenting on the research.

2 The name La Fête des Rouaisouns derives from the Christian term rogation, a litany of the saints.

3 Hamptonne was restored by the Société Jersiaise (Jersey Society) and is run as a Country Life Museum by the Jersey Heritage Trust.

4 Grouville is one of Jersey's twelve parishes. The song is an adaptation of the Norman song 'Gars de Senneville' ('The Lads of Senneville').
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- 64 -


