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"Persistence of Difference": the National-Cultural Identity of the Cornish as a People on the Periphery of Britain

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Abstract

Cornish identity has been shaped by both Celtic and English influences. The county's proximity to other Celtic peoples and its position on the periphery of Britain has fostered a "persistence of difference,"[1] which, in turn, helped create a clear national-cultural identity, unique among other English counties. Cornish identity is also tied to forces of nature, industry, and tourism and, since the 19th century, the region and its people have experienced many changes, threats, and challenges. It has been during these times of upheaval and change that the Cornish have sought outlets to express and preserve their culture and infuse them with a distinct Cornish identity. The present paper discusses such cultural markers as language variety, politics, sport, and religion in this context and suggests that the Cornish, as a minority population group, have a national-cultural identity distinct from that of the majority English population, and that the position of the Cornish, as an ethnic group, is similar to that of minority groups in other countries (e.g. Basques, Catalans, or Rusyns).

Keywords

Cornish, periphery, identity, nationality, culture

As a boy, I remember my father telling me an anecdote. A British Admiralty ship and a Cornish fishing boat were radioing a Brittany port for a berth in its harbour during a storm. The story goes that cultural-national ties between the Cornish and the Bretons (the *Finistère* area of Brittany is locally known as *Cornouaille,* or Cornwall in English) were so strong that the Cornish ship was favoured, and the Admiralty vessel was turned away.

Of interest to the present paper are the complexities at the heart of identity which many living in the British Isles feel and how distinct or different identities are expressed culturally. The concept of identity is rooted in tradition yet, at the same time, is nebulous, constantly adapting, evolving, and contextualized by time, location, multiculturalism, and socio-economic boom and decline, whether a person be from the *Celtic periphery*,[2] a second- or third-generation immigrant, or a member of any other strong ethnic or cultural group. The present paper focuses on the ways in which the Cornish have tried to express their difference to the majority population of the United Kingdom – the English; namely, through language, sport, environment, religion, industry, and politics.

Culture and nation

The ways by which an ethnic or national minority express and preserve their identity, their sense of difference in the face of encroachment by outsiders, socio-economic change, and the pervasive influence of the state or the majority population are myriad and varied. These cultural markers can

1 Michael Tripp, *Persistence of Difference: A History of Cornish Wrestling* 1 (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2009), 2. For more information, see Payton, Phillip. *Cornwall: A History*. Fowey: Alexander Associates, 1992.

2 Patrick McGovern, "Globalization or Internationalization? Foreign Footballers in the English League, 1946–95," *Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2002): 28.

be seen among all stateless peoples or ethno-linguistic minorities. One of the most obvious ways of maintaining an identity or culture is through a shared language which is different from the state language, while other forms of cultural assertion include adherence to a particular religion, music and songs, folk dress, the passing down of a strong literary or oral history, traditional food and customs, and sport. Harold Perkin goes as far as to state that "sport is much more than a pastime or recreation and is an integral part of a society's culture."[3]

How does one identify a group of people as a distinct cultural minority? The Cornish historian Bernard Deacon singles out the following as being indicators of a clear, distinct cultural identity: "a common name, a myth of descent, a shared history, a common culture, a territorial homeland and a sense of solidarity."[4] Cornwall itself is on a geographical periphery, being the most south-westerly county in the UK surrounded by 422 miles of rugged coastline, which, combined with the harsh, imposing terrain of north Cornwall's moors, has engendered a self-reliance, this being somewhat of a constant in Cornish identity.

Cornwall is "not an English county […] crossing the Tamar [a river and a bridge marking the boundaries of Cornwall and Devon] is as much a crossing of a border as a journey into Wales or Scotland."[5] However, the Cornish have a clear and distinct national-cultural identity different from their Celtic brethren; they *are* English but, at the same time, they are *not*. Cornwall is considered by some observers to be a "Celtic country or nation, by others an English county"[6] and, furthermore, it is possible to consider Cornwall to be both at the same time. This, subsequently, lends Cornish identity a paradoxical nature, an "unresolved duality of place,"[7] a "very strong dual identity [which binds people to] village, parish or town – and to their County. [This] helps to preserve the Cornish identity and sense of community."[8]

Payton's "persistence of difference"[9] is a recurring theme when one explores Cornish identity; Cornish identity is tied to forces of geography, community, isolation, and industry.[10] Payton argues that Cornwall's difference has persisted because of its historical experience, which in each period has been distinct from other areas of Britain and has led directly to a clear, specific identity.[11]

In Payton's conceptualization, the persistence of difference is linked to another idea which is central to understanding Cornish identity – peripherality. In Payton's model, political and economic power is to be found largely at the 'centre' (in an English specific model, London) and the periphery represents not only geographic isolation from the centre but also dependence on it.

3 Harold Perkin, "Sport and Society: Empire and Commonwealth," in *Sport, Culture and Society: International, Historical, and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. J.A. Mangan (London: E. & F.N. Spon, 1986), 3.

4 Bernard Deacon, "And Shall Trelawny Die? The Cornish Identity," in *Cornwall Since the War*, ed. Philip Payton (Redruth: Dyllansow Truran, 1993), 200–223.

5 Meic Stephens, *Linguistic Minorities in Western Europe* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1976), 220.

6 Stephens, *Linguistic Minorities in Western Europe*, 220.

7 Stephens, *Linguistic Minorities in Western Europe*, 220.

8 Cornwall Council, *One and All* (St. Ives: Cornwall Council, 1994), 16.

9 Tripp, *Persistence of* Difference, 2.

10 A. Seward, "Cornish Rugby and Cultural Identity: A Socio-Historical Perspective," *The Sports Historian* 18, no. 2 (1998): 79.

11 Payton, in Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, abstract.

In order to appreciate and understand Cornwall and, by extension, Cornish identity, it is essential to explore and analyse the "complementary but also conflicting traditions"[12] which lie at its heart. Cornwall is different from the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom; its position and identity has been shaped by its historical and continuing peripheral relationship to England and the English state, but also by ethno-cultural ties to other Celtic peoples living in the British Isles and north-west France. The sense of difference that is often associated with Cornwall and the Cornish can even be found in the etymology of the word *Cornwall*, which is a compound of the Anglo-Saxon *wealas* (*foreigners*) and the Latinized *Cornubia*, "the land of the *Cornouii*."[13] However, while Cornwall is often portrayed as distant and isolated, peripherality has "in part been overcome by capitalizing on residents' creativity and utilizing natural assets such as the sea, coast, climate, and natural minerals."[14]

Small nations face great difficulties in "establishing their identities" when bordered by "powerful states and national groups" thus it is "crucial [to] preserve unity within established borders."[15] What factors have, therefore, conspired to preserve "the existence of the group and its culture"[16] in Cornwall?

The assertion and development of Cornish identity has two distinct characteristics. The first characteristic is one which can be termed *local* and refers to the language (or dialect) spoken, the customs practised, songs, literature and folk dress, and the religion observed by a group of people which, while different from the majority population of a country, has a close affiliation to other minority cultures in neighbouring regions. In Cornwall, the *local* characteristic has been shaped by two broad, mutual, cultural connections; with the Welsh and with the Bretons of north-west France. Like Welsh and Breton, Cornish is a Brythonic Celtic language and historically there was little distinction between *Kernow* (Cornwall) and *Kernev* (the *Cornouaille* region of Brittany). In Anglo-Saxon times, the Cornish were known, alongside other Britons of south-west England, as *West Welsh*[17].

The second characteristic can be termed *sovereign* or *imperial.* As mentioned above, the cultural exchange between the Cornish and the Welsh, as well as the Cornish and Bretons, has a more mutual nature, while the English influence only runs one way. While one can, therefore, point to Celtic iconography, linguistic heritage, and cultural motifs as attesting to Welsh/Breton influences in Cornwall, it remains an English county and a constituent part of England and as such remains open to English influences. Historically and today, Cornwall remains a border land, the "material and spiritual cultures"[18] of which are strongly marked by the interaction between

12 Bernard Deacon, *Cornwall – A Concise History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 2.

13 Stephens, *Linguistic Minorities in Western Europe*, 202.

14 Cornwall Council, *Demographic Evidence Base for Cornwall* (Truro: Cornwall Council, 2011), 7.

15 Paul R. Magocsi (as Pavel Maču), "The Rusyns of Czechoslovakia," *An Baner Kernewek – The Cornish Banner* 1, no. 2 (September 1975): 6.

16 Paul R. Magocsi, "National Cultures and University Chairs – Education and National Cultures," *An Baner Kernewek – The Cornish Banner* 28 (May 1982): 6.

17 Deacon, *Cornwall – A Concise History*, 4.

18 Magocsi, "The Rusyns of Czechoslovakia," 4.

English and local elements. Cornwall's location on the periphery of England, both geographically and politically, has enabled Cornwall to maintain a "degree of cultural separation."[19]

The view that the Cornish are somehow different has been supported and perpetuated in period writings; the Mappa Mundi (c. 1300) depicts an England made up of four constituent parts – England, Scotland, Wales and Cornwall and official papers of the time make mention of "Anglia et Cornubia" (England and Cornwall).[20]

Anglo-Cornish language variety

Compared to the Welsh, the Northern Irish (the inhabitants of *Ulster*), or the Scottish, the Cornish are unique in that they have "no constitutional status [distinguishing them] from the English,"[21] and unlike their Celtic brethren, cannot be described, as such, as a linguistic minority; the last native speakers of Cornish died out at the end of the 18th century and there are no native speakers or speakers of Cornish as a first language alive today. In fact, Cornish is one of the few European languages to have fallen into extinction in the past three centuries and the "decline of Cornish as a vernacular language [has] undermined the distinctiveness of its people."[22]

Unlike Wales and parts of Ireland and Scotland, where the Welsh and Gaelic languages continue to thrive, Cornish, as a living language, died out around 1780, following the death of Dolly Pentreath, the last true native speaker. At present, there are only an estimated 100 fluent speakers of Cornish with a further 3,500 possessing some working knowledge of the language. Subsequent revivals have floundered due to an inability to agree on which of the four forms of Cornish to use as standard. As a result, the Cornish have, arguably, placed even more importance on other cultural forms, such as rugby and the practice of the Methodist faith, as a means to express their national identity and their difference from the English.

Cornish English refers to the variety of English spoken in Cornwall, a peninsula located at the southwestern tip of England. Although Cornwall shares linguistic features with neighbouring regions, such as Devon and Somerset, its English has historically been shaped by the Cornish language (Kernewek), a Celtic language that, as stated above, declined as a community language by the late 18th century. This unique background has left an imprint on pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, giving Cornish English a distinct identity within the broader framework of British English.

Cornish English pronunciation exhibits several distinctive features. It is traditionally rhotic, meaning that speakers pronounce the [r] in words like *car* and *hard*, unlike in Received Pronunciation (RP). As Trudgill[23] observes, "In Cornwall, as elsewhere in the far Southwest, rhoticity remains a stubborn and emblematic feature, linking contemporary pronunciation with older, rural traditions." The TRAP–BATH split is also less pronounced than in RP, with words

19 Dilwyn Porter, "Rugby Union in a Paralysed Regional Economy: Cornwall in the 1920s and 1930s," *CESH*, Barcelona, 2013, 3.

20 Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, 57.

21 Stephens, *Linguistic Minorities in Western Europe*, 200.

22 Bernard Deacon, "The Cornish Paradox: Ethno Regionalism in a Hybrid Territory" (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2003), 3.

23 Peter Trudgill, *The Dialects of England*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 24.

such as *bath* and *grass* often using a short [a] rather than the long [ɑː]. The initial [h] is generally retained and pronounced, and yod-coalescence is common—resulting in pronunciations such as [ʃuːzdeɪ] for *Tuesday*.

Cornish English is often described as having a melodious or "sing-song" intonation pattern. Williams[24] notes that "[a]lthough Kernewek ceased to be a living vernacular by the late eighteenth century, its echoes continue to shape Cornish English through vocabulary, rhythm, and even aspects of intonation."

Several grammatical features distinguish Cornish English from more standard varieties. Traditional forms of auxiliary verbs are sometimes retained, as in *I be* or *you be*. There are also instances of non-standard past participle usage, such as *I've went* instead of *I've gone*. Multiple negation or double negatives are common—for example, *I didn't see nothing*. As Wakelin[25] explains, "[g]rammatical patterns considered non-standard elsewhere, such as invariant 'be' and multiple negation, persisted longer in Cornwall than in other English regions." Pronoun variation is also notable, with the use of *her* instead of *she* in some constructions.

The vocabulary of Cornish English includes both loanwords from the Cornish language and distinct regional usages. Cornish terms such as *croust* (meaning snack) and *huer* (meaning lookout) are still in use, alongside distinctive English vocabulary such as *dreckly* (meaning later), *emmet* (a term for tourist), and *proper* (used for emphasis). Kent[26] notes that "[w]ords such as 'dreckly' and 'croust' are active markers of Cornish identity." In addition, the dialect retains certain archaisms, such as the use of *thee* and *thou*, which have largely disappeared from contemporary English elsewhere.

Cornish English is experiencing dialect levelling due to media and mobility, although distinct features remain. "In Cornwall as elsewhere, mobility and media have wrought changes, but the sense of linguistic otherness — 'we are not like them up-country' — remains palpable"[27].

Cornish English presents a fascinating example of how geography, history, and language contact shape regional varieties of English. Although many traditional features are in decline, the dialect retains a distinctive flavour that continues to adapt to the modern world while maintaining its deep cultural roots.

Cornish Cultural Markers

Apart from the distinct Anglo-Cornish language variety, three further factors that have helped shape Cornish national-cultural identity as being different from English identity are the enduring popularity of rugby football over association football, the position of tin mining as Cornwall's prime historical industry, and the emergence of Methodism in the 18th century: the "hegemonic

24 Nicholas Williams, *Cornish Today: An Examination of the Revived Language* (Sutton Coldfield: Kernewek Lowender, 1995), 11.

25 M. F. Wakelin, *English Dialects: An Introduction* (London: Athlone Press, 1977), 97.

26 Alan M. Kent, *The Literature of Cornwall: Continuity, Identity and Difference, 1000–2000* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 134.

27 Daniel Sayers, "Standardisation and Language Change in Cornish English," *Language and History* 53, no. 2 (2010): 211.

religious institution in Cornwall."[28] Religious difference in Cornwall has a long history stretching back to the 1549 Prayer book rebellion and later Tudor suppression of Catholicism in the county, culminating in the 1577 execution of the Catholic priest St. Cuthbert Mayne in Launceston and the persecution of the prominent recusant Tregian family. Francis Tregian the elder was arrested along with Mayne in 1577 but was later pardoned.[29]

Methodism was initially spread in Cornwall by the arrival of John and Charles Wesley in 1743. Its message of justification through faith, salvation, hard work, and endeavour appealed to Cornish folk who "faced daily dangers […] and increasing uncertainty in a world being rapidly shaped by industrialization."[30] By the 1790s, Cornwall accounted for "5% of the country's Methodists"[31] and had two of the largest Methodist congregations in Great Britain (Redruth and St. Austell). Methodism became an integral part of Cornish identity due to a number of factors. First, the Wesleys took their message to the masses, rather than forcing people through church doors. John Wesley's sermons at places such as Gwennap pit (one of Cornwall's most important tin mines), which drew enthusiastic crowds, also aided Methodism in acquiring a level of *social inclusion*[32] which other faiths struggled to attain in the county. Second, Methodism allied itself easily with the "close knit groups found in Cornish metal mining,"[33] this being a quality which it shared with rugby. Finally, Methodism became such a convenient match for the Cornish because it acted as a "bridge between old and new, ancient and modern."[34] Methodism had such a considerable impact on Cornish society precisely because it spoke to themes – reconciling the past and the present – that were integral to Cornish identity.

When discussing Cornish national-cultural identity, the development of rugby football in the county and its ties to the cultural expression of identity for the Cornish are of key importance. While football, in the association code, is the pre-eminent sport throughout the majority of England and other parts of the United Kingdom, it is the Rugby football version which is the 'national' sport of Cornwall, enjoying a status comparable to that of the sport's standing in other provincial areas of the UK such as Wales, as well as former Empire countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Why is this the case? A possible answer lies in the above-mentioned cultural markers used by national minorities. Despite several renaissances over the years, the Cornish language is not a *langue vivante*; traditional, male dominated, industries (fishing and tin and copper mining) have disappeared, to be replaced by newer, less traditionally 'masculine' industries (tourism, the arts and the property market specializing in second, or holiday, homes). Furthermore, to adopt a *Kernowcentric* attitude, the indigenous population has been diluted by an influx of tourists and 'outsiders' attracted to the county by its 'high quality of life' on the one hand and by emigration and

28 Bernard Deacon, *The Reformulation of Territorial Identity: Cornwall in the Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (PhD diss., Open University, 2001), 281.

29 For more information on the period, cf., 'Tudor Cornwall' by John Chynoweth (2002).

30 "The Role of Religion – Methodism," *Cornish Mining World Heritage*, <https://www.cornishmining.org.uk/about/mining-in-cornwall-and-west-devon/mining-characters-and-society/religion>.

31 "The Role of Religion – Methodism."

32 "The Role of Religion – Methodism."

33 "The Role of Religion – Methodism."

34 D. Luker, "Revivalism in Theory and Practice: The Case of Cornish Methodism," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 37 (1986): 603–619.

exodus on the other as people leave home in search of better opportunities elsewhere. As a result, rugby in Cornwall is a potent symbol and source of Cornish pride and Cornish identity in times of great socio-economic upheaval. Yet, the relationship between sport and identity is varied and far from straightforward. At its most functional, sport "repeatedly flags the nation, reminding people who they are while providing reassurance that the national culture is alive and well."[35]

Sport in Cornwall, like the Methodist faith, has acted as a bridge between the past and the present in times of great social and economic change. By claiming the sport of rugby as their 'own', the Cornish are able to assert cultural authenticity over it, strengthening the perception that rugby is, indeed, Cornwall's 'national sport.' Returning to themes of masculinity, Rugby, for the Cornish male, was a "cultural glue, binding men together with shared identity."[36]

Cornwall is the only English county to have a dedicated political party; Mebyon Kernow (MK, Sons of Cornwall). Founded in 1952, MK had the original aim of maintaining "the character of Cornwall, to promote the interests of Cornwall and the Cornish [...] and the constitutional advance of Cornwall and its right to self-governance."[37] In the words of former MK leader Loveday Jenkin, Cornish identity is "about belonging to the place of Cornwall but also having a particular way of thinking about things, [doing] things differently. Our culture is different, we have our own language, [we] have more in common with Brittany and Wales than the south-east of England."[38]

While the existence of MK was, according to Payton and Lee, "in itself enough to mark [the] political experience of Cornwall off from that of English counties and to suggest [...] an autonomous political culture in which the articulation of separate identity [...] was of underlying significance,"[39] politically, Liberalism has been a much more vibrant force in setting Cornwall apart from other English counties.[40] Willet and Rowe state that "although Cornish nationalism has been a factor in Cornish politics for many decades, it is only relatively recently that Cornish political nationalism has been treated as a credible (as opposed to an oppositional) alternative"[41] while Payton points to an "intimate relationship between a distinctive Cornish political culture and the wider Cornish identity" in which the Liberal Party, in particular, was able "to project itself as both the plausible radical alternative to the Conservatives and as the *Cornish party.*"[42] The enduring success of Liberalism in Cornwall can be attributed to several important factors: the Liberals' ties to Methodism, the weak position of the Labour Party caused by a comparative absence of a strong tradition of Trade Unionism in the county, the positioning of Liberalism as a natural alternative to

35 Porter, "Rugby Union in a Paralysed Regional Economy," 4.

36 Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 8.

37 P. Berresford Ellis, *The Celtic Revolution: A Study in Anti-Imperialism* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 1985), 143.

38 "Cornish Party Mebyon Kernow Sees the Future in Black and White," *The Guardian*, January 26, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/jan/26/cornish-party-mebyon-kernow-future>.

39 Payton, *Cornwall: A History*, 203.

40 Adrian Lee, "Cornwall: Aspects of Regionalism and Nationalism," paper presented at the Workshop of Nationalist and Regionalist Movements in Western Europe, University of Strathclyde, unpublished, 1.

41 Joanie Willet and John Rowe, *Neo-Liberal Economic Development, Competitiveness, and the Growth of Mebyon Kernow in Cornish Politics* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2014), abstract.

42 Philip Payton, "Labour Failure and Liberal Tenacity: Radical Politics and Cornish Political Culture, 1880–1939," in *Cornish Studies: Two*, ed. Philip Payton (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1994), 83–95, cited in Garry Tregidga, *Party, Personality and Place: Researching the Politics of Modern Cornwall*, *Cornish Studies* 10 (2002): 191.

the Conservative Party and the popular view that the Liberal Party represented a continuance of Cornish Radicalism. As early as the 1920s, Cornwall was seen as the "last refuge of Liberalism."[43] Furthermore, the close links between Liberal ideology and Cornish identity can be seen in the decline of both the Liberal Party and Cornish industry following World War I; the "paralysis that had afflicted Cornish society and economy"[44] was reflected in the decline of the Liberal Party post-1918. Following this period, Liberalism in the Duchy enjoyed a resurgence in popularity due to allying itself with traditional, rural politics; a platform which allowed the Liberal Party to come second in Cornwall, in terms of the popular vote, in the 1945 general election. As popular support grew, the Liberal Party was able to post impressive returns in the 1950s and 1960s and this paved the way for the successful careers of the late David Penhaligon (MP for Truro from 1974 – 1986) and Matthew Taylor (MP for Truro, later Truro and St. Austell, 1987-2010) as well as the dominance of the Liberal Democrats in the 1997 and 2001 general elections.[45] In the 2024 general election, the Conservatives failed to return a single candidate to Parliament and, following the May 2025 local elections, the Lib-Dems became Cornwall's second largest party behind Labour.[46] A case could actually be made for Liberalism being at its strongest in Cornwall at precisely those times when the county was experiencing a period of resurgence in Cornish identity (the 1920s/1930s, 1950/1960s, and the 1990s/2000s).

Similarly to Cornish identity itself, Liberalism in the Duchy has been marked by periods of growth, decline, and revival. Up until their disastrous campaign in 1997, the Conservatives were the strongest party in Cornwall for over 50 years (and were again between 2015 and 2024), with the Labour Party emerging, in the years following the end of World War Two, as the popular alternative to the Conservatives in all but two Cornish constituencies. The Liberal revival of the 1950s and 1960s has as much to do with Liberal success in bordering Devonian constituencies as it does with Cornish successes. In an interesting footnote to the dynamics of Cornish Politics, Andrew George, Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for St. Ives from 1997 to 2015 (and, again, since July 2024), is a former MK member and the author of several works on devolution as well as campaigning for a Cornish Assembly. MK even gave him their backing during his first election campaign.[47] The politics of MK and the major English parties have converged to some extent in recent years. In a working paper, Willet and Rowe[48] point to "Mebyon Kernow policies [becoming] mainstreamed and frequently adopted by other parties."[49]

43 Tregidga, *Party, Personality and Place*, 194.

44 Tregidga, *Party, Personality and Place*, 194.

45 For more information on Matthew Taylor, cf., <http://www.parliament.uk/biographies/lords/lord-taylor-of-goss-moor/228>.

46 Lisa Young, "Conservatives Wiped Out in Cornwall," BBC News; see also "Overtaking the Conservatives," Liberal Democrats, <www.libdems.org.uk>.

47 For more on Mr. George, "Andrew George MP," <http://www.andrewgeorge.org.uk>; see also <http://www.parliament.uk/biographies/commons/andrew-george/227>.

48 Willet and Rowe, *Neo-Liberal Economic* Development, 7.

49 Willet and Rowe, *Neo-Liberal Economic Development,* 7.

The "Cornish Paradox"

The central theme underpinning Cornish identity is the "Cornish paradox" theorized by Bernard Deacon and can be explained simply by Cornwall's middle ground position as both Celtic nation and English county. On a deeper level, the Cornish Paradox refers to how Cornish identity has developed along a duality of, on the one hand, "social and governmental control" emanating from England and, on the other, "economic, geographic and ideological"[50] isolation. Deacon's paradox consists of three levels – *local*, *nationalist* and *Celtic*. The *local* level is driven by ties to communities and can arguably be traced as far back as *Kernow* and *Dunmonia* divisions between the far west of the peninsula and the inland, eastern part. The local level was later shaped by the industries which flourished – mining and fishing. The position of many Cornish towns and villages was such that they grew in an often-non-traditional way.

The growth of St. Ives, in west Cornwall, for example, resembles a spiral, curling upwards and outwards in a circular fashion from the heart of the old fishing community (in local vernacular 'downalong') to the newer areas of town furthest from the harbour front ('upalong'). The dynamics of Deacon's *local* level to the paradox can be keenly observed by using St. Ives as a case study. Although the demarcation was gradually eroded as the fishing industry fell into decline and was subsumed by tourism from the 1950s and 1960s and is much less pronounced at present, a divide can still be felt. Locals from St. Ives still refer to themselves as being from 'upalong' or 'downalong'.

The *national* tier of the paradox can be observed, nowadays, in Cornishmen and women's desire to identify themselves as "Cornish" in population censuses and surveys; 73,200 people, or 14% of the population, declared themselves, in write-in options, as "Cornish" in the 2011 national census, even though no "Cornish" box was allocated on the census form.[51] The figure itself, while pointing to a possible resurgence in Cornish national identity has not been universally accepted as proof of such. Referring to the same figure (14%), Sandford (2006) came to the conclusion that it pointed to a "sense of identification [with Cornwall] and a sense of difference"[52] without an equivalent in the rest of England.

The *Celtic* dimension can be seen in the adoption and proliferation of symbols of Cornwall's past and heritage, with engine houses, Celtic crosses, Arthurian legend, the Cornish language used on road signs and place names all pointing to a romanticizing of Cornwall's past and spiritual ties to Celtic mysticism: "[T]he Cornish are fortunate to be able to put their regional discontents in the attractive colours of Celtic tradition, which makes them so much more viable", adding a layer of authenticity to the "differentness" that attracts visitors, writers, and artists to the Duchy.[53]

50 Doug Krehbiel, *Heddwch! Heddwch! Sport and Cultural Identity in Early Modern Wales* (Richmond, Virginia: University of North Carolina at Wilmington, 2006), 81.

51 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/cornishidentityengland-andwales/census2021>.

52 Mark Sandford, "English Regionalism Through the Looking Glass: Perspectives on the English Question from the North-East and Cornwall," *National Identities* 8, no. 1 (2006): 77–93.

53 Sandford, "English Regionalism Through the Looking Glass", 77–93.

Conclusion

How then does one define Cornish identity in the 21st century? Returning to the beginning of the present paper, the Cornish can be described as a national minority, distinct from and different from the majority population of the UK. Although the tight knit communities of the past no longer exist outside of nostalgia, the concept of Cornish identity is still very much alive. A 2004 survey found that "44% of Cornish residents felt more Cornish than English or British or European;" the highest figure in Britain and a number which points to a clear, distinct ethnic identity.[54] Cornish identity has taken its place in the framework of a modern, culturally hybrid UK where one can be "Scottish or Cornish, Muslim or English and still celebrate a British identity bigger than the sum of its parts."[55] This was demonstrated by the granting, in April 2014, of national minority status within the UK, as set out in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The awarding of such a status to the Cornish recognizes "the distinctiveness of the Cornish," that "Cornwall has a distinct language and culture worthy of formal recognition."[56] Although the move, which gives national minorities the right and protection to "enjoy their own culture, to use their own language, to establish their own schools [...] and practise their own religion" has been widely praised. It has not gone without some criticism, however, namely that the convention does not "contain a definition of 'national minority'" and, therefore, is open to various interpretations. There has also been the objection that the decision glosses over the wider, socio-economic problems that the county faces.[57] Perhaps somewhat ironically, the Cornish voted to leave the European Union during the 'Brexit' referendum by 56.5% to 43.5%, based on the county's vote as a whole.[58]

If one is to consider Cornwall's most potent representation of their difference, their cultural identity, rugby football, what is the sport's position and importance in the present day? Returning to the above-mentioned national minority status, rugby, to some extent, has lost some of its symbolic power in that respect. Much in the same way that rugby in post-millennial Wales has lost ground to other leisure pursuits and the post-industrial reshaping of once-thriving communities, the sport's cultural cachet has also diminished in Cornwall. Rugby's reduced status has been compounded by greater post-millennial awareness of people politics: concepts of gender, faith, sexuality, race, creed, citizenship, and human rights coupled with environmental issues and consumer ethics dominate cultural and political discourse and have become embedded in the global consciousness. A combination of factors ranging from economic (Cornwall, like most provincial regions, suffers from a "brain drain", or out-migration, where each generation's best and brightest

54 "Cornish Has Been Granted a Comeback," 17 November, 2002, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1413412/Cornish-has-been-granted-a-comeback.html?msockid=2056c45505126fd93456d1da04e36e40>.

55 Bernard Deacon, "Peggy Combellack's Conundrum: Locating the Cornish Identity," 2006, <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/articles/preprint/Peggy_Combellack_s_conundrum_locating_the_Cornish_identity/29688929?file=56691209>.

56 "Cornish Recognised as National Minority Group for the First Time," *The Guardian*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/apr/24/cornish-recognised-national-minority-group-first-time> (accessed October 23, 2024); see also Cahal Milmo, "Cornish to Be Recognised as a National Minority," *The Independent*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cornish-people-formally-declared-a-national-minority-along-with-scots-welsh-and-irish-9278725.html>.

57 "What 'National Minority' Status Will Mean for Cornwall," *The Week*, <http://www.theweek.co.uk/uk-news/58250/what-national-minority-status-will-mean-cornwall>.

58 "EU Referendum Results – Cornwall," *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results/local/c>.

leave the county for improved job opportunities), to cultural (in the age of "lifestyle Cornwall" – a place of sandy beaches, second homes, surfing paradises, farmers' markets, art galleries and "destination" restaurants – rugby has found itself marginalized to some extent) has challenged rugby's position in the county.

As Cornwall moves into the third decade of the 21st century, however, the young generation is showing signs of a resurgent Cornish identity; in 2011, 41% (an 8% rise in two years) of school children considered themselves Cornish, in March 2014 £120,000 of funding was granted by the government for the development of Cornish language learning and Cornwall's three Liberal Democrat MPs took their Parliamentary Oath in 2010 in Cornish, the same year that the first Cornish language crèche opened in the Duchy.[59]

In summary, Cornish identity is a rich tapestry woven from linguistic revival, cultural expression, political activism, and historical continuity. As explored throughout this paper, the Cornish people have maintained a duality of belonging and separation, being both a part of England and distinct from it. This paradox has created a fertile ground for cultural resilience, evident in the preservation of linguistic features, the enduring popularity of Methodism, and the symbolic weight of rugby as a cultural cornerstone.

Politically, the development of movements such as Mebyon Kernow and the long-standing influence of Liberalism reflect a yearning for autonomy and recognition. These efforts are part of a broader trend across stateless nations and minority cultures that seek acknowledgment without complete separation. The case of Cornwall demonstrates how national identity can thrive without statehood, by means of representation, historical pride, and the continued assertion of cultural distinction.

In the modern era, Cornish identity faces new challenges, particularly from economic changes, demographic shifts, and the influence of mass media. The "lifestyle Cornwall" phenomenon threatens to commodify identity for tourism, diluting the authenticity of cultural traditions. Yet this very tension has sparked renewed interest in Cornish heritage among younger generations, demonstrated by the revival of the Cornish language, increased cultural funding, and strong regionalist sentiment.

Looking forward, the Cornish example provides a model for how small cultural groups can assert their identity in globalized contexts. By leveraging historical depth and community solidarity, Cornwall continues to project a coherent and evolving sense of self. The Cornish story is not only one of survival but of active cultural construction. It serves as a powerful testimony to the persistence of difference on the edge of a dominant culture.

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