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Elizabeth McClure

California State University, Northridge

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Continuity of Culture: A Reenactor's Goal

Elizabeth McClure
Anthropology Graduate Student
California State University, Northridge

This paper examines the maintenance of cultural continuity through historical reenactment. It is the reenactor's goal, in this case, to portray and maintain the culture of Ireland and Scotland. They are holding on to this culture and presenting it to others by maintaining the dress, crafts, and lifestyles of sixteenth century Scotland and Ireland.

The methods of data collection for this study were ethnographic in nature. Interviews with key informants were conducted. In addition, there was a questionnaire distributed to members of the group. This method of data collection provided the insight to see how a member of this group achieved a sense of belonging to this particular cultural group.

The historical reenactors used in this study are from the Southern California area. Most of the individuals live in the greater Los Angeles area. There are about 30 members of this group. The ages range from mid 20's to late 60's. The group does have individuals under the age of 18 working with them, but this is due to their parents being active in the group. The group appears to be fairly even in the distribution of men and women. The occupations of the individuals are varied, with everything from teachers, retail sales, data processing, and librarians, to musicians and artists.

Historical reenactors are attempting to recreate the lifestyles of a specific time. This particular group of reenactors set up camp areas at different events such as Renaissance fairs, Highland games, and even schools. The reenactor is presenting a living area that is as close as possible

to the living areas of the historical period. The desire of the reenactor is to give the public an idea of what it was like to live then.

This group differs from the other permanent historical reenactments found at places like Williamsburg, and Plymouth Plantation. The Southern California area has no permanent locations that operate year round. This results in weekend events, usually fairs of some sort. Therefore, the reenactors are usually presenting a setting of a temporary camp. It requires that everything be portable as well as authentic as possible.

This desire to present living history comes from an interest in historical events and a sense of connection with the culture being portrayed. As John Bowen suggests, "To a large extent, the urge to preserve and recreate the best of the past derives from a feeling that new generations ought to be able to understand and appreciate their heritage." (Bowen, 1990:7).

It is this heritage that is a common link among the reenactors. It is more than just heritage it is a pride in a particular culture or ethnic group. For this group it is the Scots or Irish of the sixteenth century that are the given culture group. My informants would often group the two together under the label of Celtic culture. When asked why the sixteenth century, one informant stated it was the time when there had been very little outside interference. This is a time when the culture was not Anglicized. That the people were still being Irish or Scots without the influence of England trying to change them into something else.

Barth has stated that ethnicity should be viewed as a subjective process of group identification that the individuals use ethnic labels to define themselves (Barth, 1969). The individuals in this group see themselves as Scots, Irish, or Celtic people. It is this identification with the culture that is the basis for the existence of their reenactment.

It is this labeling by the individual that is the most important element for being part of the group. If there is a feeling of being connected to Scottish, Irish, or Celtic culture, then that is enough to let the individual be part of the reenactment group. Several of my informants say they are of Irish or Scottish descent and were attracted to doing the reenactment because of it.

The sense of connection to the Celtic culture expressed by my informants was done with a great sense of pride. Some said it gave a sense of pride in the past and sparked a desire for a legitimacy and respect for their culture. Others felt that they had been drawn to the culture and that it was one of the ways an individual felt a connection with other Celtic peoples and their own individual heritages. That there was a sense that this reenactment was touching a racial memory.

The reenactment of this Celtic culture becomes a means for the individual to carry on the culture as well as a practical way for the individual feel an ethnic and cultural connection. The recreation of the past according to my informants gives the individual a sense of really knowing what it was like to be alive then and what it is to be Scottish or Irish. Through recreating the past, you learn about the past. It gives the individual an insight into how or why they did something. If you put yourself in the same circumstances it gives you a more "hands on", particular experience of what life was like. The reenactment makes the history more real to the individual thereby, making the culture more alive to them.

One of the stated goals of this reenactment group is to educate the public about life during sixteenth century Ireland and Scotland. The use of living history makes the subject more interesting to the public in general. There is the feeling among the reenactors that while you are entertaining the public, without them realizing it, you are also educating them. The pride in

Scottish and Irish culture creates a desire to share this with others. The reenactors feel that they are able to explain in a more interesting manner what life was like for the people of Scotland and Ireland by doing daily activities. Individuals can ask questions and interact with people who are dressed in clothing of the period doing various tasks. As one informant suggests, it allows the people that she comes into contact with to hopefully think about how our past ties in with the present and the future. As well as another informant suggested how these type of activities show how much things have changed over time and how others have basically stayed the same.

Education is not for the public alone. It is also for the individual in the group. The reenactments help the individuals in the group learn about the culture as well. It provides an enjoyable way for them to know Scottish or Irish culture first hand. This is a more tangible way to learn history then just from reading the accounts of different events that happened in a specific time or place. According to one of my informants, demonstrating the crafts of this culture puts you in your ancestors place and in their hands, so to speak.

As Jane Schneider suggests, "not only is cloth catalytic in consolidating social relation; easily invested with meaning, it also communicates identities and values....Differentiated textiles can also indicate kinship, residence, and ethnic groups..."(Schneider, 1987:412-413). The clothing worn by the individuals in this reenactor's group also communicates various meanings to those that see it. Clothing is a visible marker to the world telling who you are and where you belong. It is a signaling device to let those individuals that share the same culture or ethnicity know that you are part of the group. The use of period ethnic clothing is one of the methods these reenactors used to tell you who they are. The type of cloth used, the color and cut of the garment are all accepted and known symbols within the group indicating a sense of

membership.

Margot Schevill states that "What we wear transforms our appearance. We speak silently, signaling layers of meaning through our clothing."(Schevill, 1991:3). The clothing worn by the reenactors tell whether they are Scottish or Irish. As one of the informants suggests the clothing ties one to the culture. We tend to stand out and draw questions from the public. Invariably that means talking about the culture in order to explain why we are different looking. It is the clothing that is the first thing people see of the reenactor. It is the way they are dressed that draws attention to them. In addition, when other individuals are wearing the same sort of clothing there is also a feeling of a shared culture. One reenactor feels that each group develops recognizable earmarks and they share a common dream of recreating visual and behavioral aspects of the past. Several of the reenactors say they feel a strong sense of kinship with the individuals from other groups in the same sort of clothing. It gives a sense of camaraderie to the reenactors, it marks them as belonging to a particular ethnic group and drawing the boundary of us (the reenactors) versus them (the general public). As one informant suggests, we are all cousins. Our clothing styles do not separate us instead they bind us closer together.

This common thread of ethnic clothing gives a sense of belonging to the culture. The clothing worn is based on the limited documentation of the period. The individuals in the group are interested in presenting as accurate as possible copies of the clothing found in sixteenth century Scotland and Ireland. As one informant stated, there are enough misconceptions existing about the Irish and the Scottish and they don't want to add to them by wearing clothing that is incorrect.

Even though there is a desire to be 100% accurate concerning the

clothing, my informants know there are limitations to what they can and cannot do. As one informant states, I know no period clothing can be 100% accurate short of growing one's own fiber (what kind of sheep did they have and are those breeds still around) hand spinning, dyeing, weaving, sewing by hand with period needles, etc. One almost certainly has to use store bought fabric, thread, and needles. But they should look authentic in texture, color, cut and accessories. As well as concerns about the materials, several reenactors expressed the concerns how the differences in the climates of Ireland or Scotland and Southern California would effect the clothing that they wore. Some of my informants suggested that the fibers used would be different. The heat of the Spring and Summer tend to dictate these differences. The clothes might be made out of more textured looking or heavy cottons as opposed to wool cloth. The other concern was of a financial nature. The cost of wool and linen cloth can be very high and this also creates problems for the reenactor. This group has no outside funding or costume department, as say Williamsburg does. Each individual provides their own clothing so cost becomes a very real concern.

In an effort to try to achieve as much accuracy as is possible for the correct look of the clothing, the individuals in the group carry out research in a variety of ways. One of the methods used is to find references from literature and historic documents with descriptions or drawings concerning the dress of the period. There is unfortunately a very limited amount of drawings and descriptions from the time. Some of the most commonly used sources include the works by John Derrick and Albrecht Durer. However, the problem of the authenticity of accounts and illustrations from the sixteenth century is a frequent point of discussion among the reenactors. Even with questions concerning the correctness of the sources, they do provide a picture of what

the clothing should look like.

Another method that some of the reenactors used to get first hand information was to visit Ireland. Several of my informants went to the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin. They had been in correspondence with Mairead Dunlevy who has been responsible for the glass, textiles and ceramics section of the museum since 1975. She had been able to answer some of their questions concerning clothing of the sixteenth century. Dunlevy also made it possible for them to see up close some of the garments the museum had from the sixteenth century. This allowed the reenactors to literally count panels of cloth, see how bodices were attached to skirts and if the garments were hemmed or not.

Clothing isn't the only way the reenactor preserves and continues the culture of the past. The various crafts or camp activities they demonstrate for the public, is another vehicle used to maintain the culture of sixteenth century Scotland or Ireland. This group places a great deal of their focus on the manufacture of cloth. According to one informant the textile arts are the most important thing that these reenactors do. It gives the individuals in the group and the public a point of reference that they they can identify with. As Margot Schevill states, " The creation of cloth for clothing and other purposes has always been a main concern and occupation of human beings." (Schevill, 1991:3).

This group presents what they call a "sheep to coat " approach to textiles. They will demonstrate to the public the various steps of cloth production. The raw material that is most often used in these demonstrations is sheep's wool. The process of carding and spinning is demonstrated to those interested. My informants also give the public a more hands on education by teaching them the basics of carding and spinning. It is through

this instruction that the reenactor explains how important cloth production was to individuals in sixteenth century Scotland and Ireland. One of my informants suggests that demonstrating and teaching the methods of textile production is a better way to explain the culture and lifestyle, than trying to use words.

The carding and spinning process are accompanied by weaving and if there is a chance for a fire, dying as well. The reenactors use a couple of different styles of looms at the events. These include inkle looms, lap looms, and in some cases, card weaving. These are the looms favored because of their ease of transportation. There are some individuals in the group who do have and weave on floor looms, however, the end products are usually what is brought out to events from these looms. The dye pot is often left out of demonstrations to the public. Since these events are often held in public parks, there are often rules against open fires. The reenactors get around this by bringing items that have been pre-dyed to events. They will explain the process of dying to the public from these items and explain that colors for clothing were often determined by natural materials found in Ireland or Scotland.

The process of textile production is important both to the physical appearance of the group as well as providing a thread that ties them to their culture. When asked why textile production was important to the group there were several different explanations given. Some suggested that it was one thing that would tie the different members of the group together. It was a common endeavor of the people in sixteenth century and required enough time that it would show up throughout the regular daily activities. Others feel that because it fills such a basic survival need, that it is an excellent way to demonstrate how this culture produced cloth. The culture being reenacted produced their own clothing and by demonstrating this process you are able to

get a basic understanding of their way of life. Demonstrating textile production is one of the ways the public is shown that nothing should be taken for granted in the past, and that everything had to be made, not bought off the rack at a store. The demonstrating of cloth production is a way to expose the public, as an informant suggests, to things that used to be common but that now are rare. Another informant feels that textile production is a way they can show the public the steps from raw plant or animal product to something that a person can wear, use or eat and that this helps to de-mystify how the people from earlier times could survive without Sears or McDonald's. This was a key part of the culture and by presenting textile production to the public, that culture is continued and awareness of it spread through out the Southern California region.

In conclusion, the reenactors have maintained a continuity of culture through portraying the past in the present. The reenactor maintains his or her ties to their culture by wearing the same sort of clothes their ancestors wore. The reenactors demonstrate their ties to their culture by learning and practicing the crafts, especially textile production, of sixteenth century Scotland and Ireland. It is the pride in their cultural history that provides the incentive to maintain this culture through reenactment, and share it with the general public at events.

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