Culture, self-perception and historical experience

In October 2008 Doug Ford addressed the International Conference of Island and Coastal Museums in Haugesund, Norway. This is the paper he delivered.
In June 2008 the States of Jersey Education, Sports and Culture Department convened the Island’s first Council for Culture Conference – ‘Valuing our Culture’. At that conference I presented a paper on the subject of ‘Small Nations and Culture’. This paper was a follow-up to my paper, Island Identity – National, Local or Global?, that I presented in September 2006 to an international gathering of museum professionals at the European Museums Forum workshop on the Greek island of Milos.\(^1\) The following two days of discussion provided the basis for a submission to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe’s Sub-Committee on Cultural Heritage. This current work has also been influenced by the National Museums and Small Nations Conference held in the National Museum Wales in Cardiff, which I attended in December 2007.

The interesting thing about culture is that many people talk about it in broad and expansive terms without actually saying what they mean by the term as a starting point. On the UK Government’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport’s website, part of their mission statement reads;

‘We aim to improve the quality of life for all through cultural and sporting activities, to support the pursuit of excellence and to champion the tourism, creative and leisure industries.’

‘We work to support and promote the widest access to excellence in culture - in the arts, in museums and galleries, in architecture and in the built and the historic environment, and libraries.’

But there is no actual definition as to what they regard as being culture at this entry level. Bournemouth council, however, does give it on their website under the heading – CULTURE - NEW DEFINITION

The word ‘Culture’, as defined by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, has a much wider meaning than the traditional perception and includes:

- Performing and Visual Arts;
- Landscape, Architecture and Buildings;
- Museums / Archives, Local Identity / Sense of Place;
- Fashion / Design Media / Film Writing and Publishing;
- Sports and Recreation, Food, Parks, and Open Spaces;
- Cultural Diversity, Countryside, Recreation;
- Tourism, Traditions and History, Libraries;
- Children’s Play and Playgrounds.

Looking at the list it becomes clear why so many organisations avoid trying to give a succinct definition. I have to agree with the sentiment that culture is really a very difficult thing to define and if you pose the question ‘What is culture?’ to any audience, then the probability is that all of them will come up with a slightly different type of description, influenced by their own areas of interest. That is probably why the ‘art’ definition of culture is rather easier to address than the ‘ethnographic’ definition.

One of the reasons for this difficulty is because the culture we grow up in seems so normal that we don’t even notice it’s there. We are born into an already existing culture and so the rules of that culture are invisible to us - we can’t see the norms, we can’t see the assumptions, we can’t see the behaviour patterns. The reality is that our behaviour is controlled by our culture; we act in a way that is patterned, and we acquire all the rules of the culture almost without knowing it.

A simplistic ‘art’ definition is given by David Throsby when he describes cultural activities as involving ‘... some form of creativity in their production ... they are concerned with the generation and communication of symbolic meaning, and ... their output embodies, at least potentially, some form of intellectual property.”\(^2\)

The ‘ethnographic’ definition is really about cultural identity – it is about who we are and why.

Professor Sir Ken Robinson gave a very broad definition when he suggested that culture consists of ideals, values and assumptions about life that are widely shared among people and that guide specific behaviours.\(^3\)

If we regard culture in this light then we are looking at shared assumptions or patterns of behaviour within specific societies. How these have been influenced by history and landscape and how they are threatened by globalisation or centralisation – the one-size fits all mentality.

Happily this appears to be the line followed by our Education, Sport & Culture ministry who recognise that ‘culture’ is at the heart of most things that we do as individuals or within communities. Recognising that definitions of the term ‘culture’ can be very wide-ranging and that the term can mean very different things to different people, the ministry believes that ‘culture’ comprises the core beliefs and values which establish individual and community identity. It is in our people, our landscape and our buildings, it is about ‘the way we do things’, and it is also the means by which those core values and beliefs are transmitted and developed.

Obviously a strong cultural identity bring benefits to a community and in the past decades we have seen the resurgence of small nations and regions reclaiming or proclaiming their individuality. Where does Jersey fit into this cultural movement?

\(^1\) The organising bodies for this meeting were the European Museums Forum, established under the auspices of the Council of Europe, and INSULA, an organisation specifically concerned with the sustainable development of island communities operating under the auspices of UNESCO.


\(^3\) Professor Sir Ken Robinson: All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education, DfEE/DCMS, London 1999
Initially, the idea of cultural identity needs exploring and here I believe that the issue has, at its core, three aspects:

1: **we identify with something.**
This involves a sense of belonging nicely summed up by question ‘Are you Jersey?’
While this identification can be very strong, it can also be quite weak and, of course, we can at the same time identify ourselves simultaneously with a number of different groups and/or places.

In preparing this paper I was conscious of the fact that I already have a strong cultural identity in that I am undoubtedly a Northumbrian and yet I have spent nearly the last forty years of my life living and working on an island just off the coast of France. So I am approaching the subject from a personal standpoint – that of an Islander.

2: **we identify against something.**
Identity requires that we can differentiate ourselves from other places and that requires a border to distinguish what makes us and our place special and distinctive. In Jersey we are lucky – Nature has created that border. It makes it very easy for us to label ‘the other’: those people who belong to an identity different from our own. National identities are particularly prone to this ‘othering’ - defining who we are by who we are not – and it explains why the French have been so important to the English or the English to the Scots - for centuries they have been a convenient ‘other’. Being English was defined in opposition to being French, and the positive attitudes of the English were contrasted favourably with the negative attributes of the French. For the Scots, the English provided a convenient ‘other’ against which to unite the varying groups within that country. At the same time ‘French’ writers were beginning to define France in the same way, ‘othering’ the English.

Traditionally, in the local context, Guernsey, Normandy and Britain have provided this ‘other’.

3: **we attribute certain ways of behaving to other people.**
This involves giving meanings to both our identity and to the ‘others’; certain symbols - flags, for example, or items of diet, historical events, or places - take on a special meaning and are invested with a special importance. Although these meanings are also constructed by the society which produces them, they have a certain free-floating quality that can result in the representations of the identity and of a place appearing to be at odds with the reality. Identities are neither fixed nor unchanging, but tend to be fluid and they change over time.

In recent years a new historiography has seen a breaking down of national history which has facilitated a more vigorous approach to regional history. It has enabled historians to set regional distinctiveness within the experience of the British Archipelago as a whole, and to enhance cultural identity.

The received wisdom of political scientists in the 1960s was that ‘Britain is probably the most homogeneous of all industrialised countries’\(^4\). However, this was simply a veneer created by London-centric historians who were the ones tending to get published. Regionalism was still active, as can be seen by the numbers of Local History groups and societies set up in the 19th and 20th Centuries to record and preserve the histories of their particular locales.

Even by the end of the 20th Century, despite three centuries of government support, notions of ‘Britishness’ still remained contested and unresolved. Ian MacBride\(^5\), in his studies of Ulster, describes ethnic allegiances co-existing in concentric circles, with different patterns emerging in different contexts, and this is true of most small nations.

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In looking at the situation in Jersey the over-riding element in the shaping of the Island’s cultural identity has been the fact that Jersey is indeed an island.

Whether one has a romantic or a more prosaic view of life on islands, the role of the sea is paramount in shaping any island identity – the sea defines the island, and cannot be ignored even by those who feel they have nothing to do with it. It dictates communication and supply, it moderates climate, and determines the availability of land. The sea can be seen as both a barrier and a link and, unlike our mainland cousins, islanders look out onto a landscape of horizons as opposed to an horizon of landscapes. Even the weather on islands is different – it is more obvious and elemental than in mainland towns and cities.

Islanders are territorially possessive: we can appear shy and suspicious of outsiders but at the same time very ‘snobbish’ or proud of our Island. Islanders resent criticism of our Island, seeing any flaws as being ‘our business, not yours’. Islands elicit emotions in a way the mainland can’t – certainly in the Channel Islands it is natural to describe oneself in the sense of place, for identity and place are the same thing. ‘Are you Jersey?’ on one level means, ‘were you born here in the Island?’ while on another it means ‘do you live here?’ The two levels are interesting as far as island identity is concerned because we must ask ourselves whether being an Islander is an active choice reflected in an attitude of mind and perception, or is it an accident of birth in which a person has no choice?

This differentiation does impinge on our ethnographic definition of culture, because the demographic changes that have taken place since the 1950s means that only about 50% of the population are able to claim Jersey family roots. This, of course, has an impact on the old-style nationalist interpretation of culture, because that was first and foremost based upon ethnicity – the promotion of a distinct people, more likely to be expressed in ‘art’ cultural ways, such as Eisteddfods and national costume and the creation of a Romantic vision of the past. This means that in common with places such as Cornwall and Brittany, the ethnographic definition has given way to a more civic form of nationalism, which is more inclusive and bases it’s claims on the right to citizenship of the people living in a territory rather than the needs of one particular ethnic group within that territory – the Jersey/Islander paradox.

Or, as the Cornish academic, Philip Payton put it: ‘Ethnic identity has little to do with biology, and everything to do with culture, self-perception and historical experience – including contemporary socio-economic conditions.’ In this he was echoing what the 19th Century French theorist, Ernst Renan (1823-99), advocated in his 1882 speech to the Sorbonne “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” in which he pointed out that ‘A native of Jersey or Guernsey differs in no way, as far as his origins are concerned, from the Norman population of the opposite coast. In the 11th Century, even the sharpest eye would have seen not the slightest difference in those living on either side of the Channel. Trifling circumstances meant that Philip Augustus did not seize these islands together with the rest of Normandy. Separated from each other for the best part of 700 years, the two populations have become not only strangers to each other but wholly dissimilar. Race, as we historians understand it, is therefore something which is made and unmade. The study of race is of crucial importance for the scholar concerned with the history of humanity. It has no applications, however, in politics.’

This movement of people is obviously a factor in shaping island cultural identity for while island economies can benefit from immigration, if it is on too large a scale then the identity of island culture can be endangered. The outward movement of people is often accompanied by a feeling of diaspora amongst islanders who often feel different because of the circumstances of their upbringing at odds with their host communities.

Amongst mainlanders there is often a perception that island life is second best and islanders are often seen as leading a more simple life. Yet, in my experience of islands here on the north-east Atlantic seaboard, the maritime nature of islands, certainly from an historical perspective, means that islanders are more appreciative of global opportunities. After all, from St Helier harbour it is only ‘20 steps (on dry land) to Canada’. In the second half of the 18th Century, over 10% of the entire Island population sailed over 3,000 miles every spring to spend the summer months catching and curing cod before returning to Jersey in the autumn.

In the past, islanders have had a special relationship with the sea, which can be seen in the development of island kingdoms such as that of Somerled and the Gaels in the Hebrides, or the Viking kings of Man, and the positions held by islands in global trade networks. In common with other maritime communities the pervading nature of the sea can be seen in its role in personal relationships, and also the way in which, compared to the situation on the mainland, it empowered the position of women within island societies.

Despite the independence imposed by geographical necessity on islanders’ characters (and in Jersey’s case we celebrated 800 years of political independence from France in 2004), islands, because of their size and strategic positions, have been subject to takeovers which brings with it the danger of assimilation into the new political structures. In turn, this can lead to loss of identity, language and customs, and this is often because of the willingness of islanders to identify with the new order, especially if it brings with it economic benefits.

It is also worth reminding ourselves that in 1204 the Jersey Islanders sought an association with the English Crown, rather than with the French, precisely because they wanted to be left alone! Nowadays, the threat to Island identity is less obvious and is caused by the ease and speed of travel - it no longer takes a great effort to move from Island to mainland. There is also a threat to all regional/local cultural identities as a result of the development of national television and the global music and film industries. When these combine then island cultures and small nations are all too easily lost.

The States Chamber – the Island parliament.
Where did identity go

In his 1941 book on Tudor Cornwall, the historian A L Rowse observed that the central theme of his study was ‘the process of tension, struggle, adjustment by which the Cornish were eventually absorbed into mainstream English life’. It was the Anglicizing, Protestantizing, ‘forward-looking’ Cornish gentry who were the heroes . . . rather than the traditionalists, whom Rowse described as ‘the stupid and the backward-looking peasantry’.

A similar cultural assassination was carried out by the Highland Landlords in the century following Culloden. In his 1963 book on the Highland Clearances, John Prebbles set out to rescue the ordinary Gaels of the Scottish highlands, whom he saw as overborne by Lowland and English values before, during and after Prince Charlie’s rebellion, ultimately betrayed by their own chiefs, and evicted from the lands of their ancestors; the Highlands themselves were transformed from a working landscape into mere scenery.

In the quest for wealth, cultural identity comes a poor second - we can see it happening today in neighbouring Sark. Are the recent constitutional changes there the result of a popular upwelling, or is it the attempt of a few wealthy English in-comers to change the situation to their benefit? Attempts were made here in Jersey in the 1840s and 1850s by the Residents Party (essentially wealthy English immigrants), led by Abraham Le Cras, to change Island institutions to something more amenable and understandable to themselves. When the culture under attack has its own separate institutions to something more amenable and understandable to themselves, it is an even greater target.

The language used by the establishment is also indicative of the way we look at ourselves. The Manx government recently published an official document in which they stated: ‘As a nation, we can give ourselves a modest pat on the back’ and state on their website ‘We value our independence as a country and aim to enhance it’. Stressing the idea of nationhood in public proclamations should be used as a tool in the Island’s strategy to consolidate and strengthen its position within the global economy.

‘A nation is an historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture’

Joseph Stalin

The Role of Museums

Today economic development is often linked to global opportunities, the two most obvious being finance or tourism. With all these changes going on, which can be seen as threats to Jersey’s Island identity, we must avoid preserving an identity in aspic, and becoming stereotypical Islanders playing a part for onlookers. It is here that museums, archives and heritage organisations have a role to play. I see our contributions as being:

- to strengthen identity and engender pride in our Island heritage;
- to express Island culture (rather than multi-culturalism) while at the same time avoiding the excesses of jingoism;
- to serve our Island community - almost as three dimensional reference libraries with associated stories;
- to tell incomers of place and to provide “instant roots”, and to illustrate Island life to visitors (and for us it is easy to identify visitors as opposed to residents as they have to cross a physical barrier).

When it comes to trying to determine cultural identities, Islanders in Jersey have their own distinct insular features, but are part of a wider political or economic world. As Islanders, I believe we have multiple identities and that our Islands are our place in the world.

And there is nothing to fear from being different.

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