Breton clerics and folklore: The nationalistic experience of the Barzaz Bro-Leon

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The question I would like to address concerns the links between clerics and folklore in Breton-speaking Brittany (Western France) by analyzing a very original, well documented though almost unknown experience of collecting songs at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1906, a young priest from the North of Brittany, Jean-Marie Perrot, organized a competition of traditional songs entitled Barzaz Bro-Leon. The public were invited to send any Breton songs they knew or to collect songs from their families and neighbors. As a result, more than 500 songs were gathered in two months. The same competition was organized again during several years, so that around 1000 songs were collected all together before the First World War¹. This experience is really interesting for many reasons.

First, the way chosen to gather songs – a competition – is very unusual. Our understanding of oral traditions is usually shaped by what folklorists choose to collect, according to their culture and to the ideas they have about what oral tradition is. By contrast, the Barzaz Bro-Leon, which contains songs chosen by the singers themselves without the mediation of folklorists, gives us a completely different view of oral tradition.

What is more interesting for the purpose of this workshop is to analyse the very detailed and enthusiastic announcements of these competitions, advertised in a Breton Catholic newspaper entitled Le Courrier du Finistère between 1906 and 1909. These announcements give us all the keys to understand what reasons motivate a Breton cleric to collect folklore at the beginning of the twentieth century and what correlation he does between faith, vernacular culture and nationalism.

In this paper, I will briefly present the national and regional context of this experience, Jean-Marie Perrot’s motivations and nationalistic project, his religious network, the results of the competition and the ambiguous attitude of both his

ecclesiastical hierarchy and Perrot himself.

Clerics and folklore in France: a few remarks

In order to better understand this experience, we must replace the Barzaz Bro-Leon in the context of collecting folklore in France and in Brittany.

First of all, contrary to a lot of European countries where many of the most active collectors of vernacular culture in the nineteenth century were priests or ministers (like Britain, Scotland, Scandinavia, the Faroe Islands or the Baltic States), no priest appears as a pioneer among the French folklorists or, to be more precise, among scholars considering folklore – I mean here songs, tales, legends and other forms of oral literature – in a positive way. We can notice the role played by the priest and theologian Jean-Baptiste Thiers and his Traité des Superstitions (1697) to our knowledge of folklore in the diocese of Chartres in the south of Paris, but he documented these so-called superstitions in a purpose of condemnation in a post-tridentine context. We can also remark that the first major national fieldwork including – among a lot of other points – questions concerning folklore in vernacular languages, is the one led by the Abbot Grégoire during the French Revolution (1790): however his purpose was not to valorize this oral material but to enrich his report on the way of destroying provincial dialects and languages for the benefit of French.

Concerning folksongs, if we consider the most important French folklorists in the nineteenth century, we find noblemen, schoolteachers, lawyers but none of the first folklorists was a priest. We must take into account that, very early, the government played a considerable role to promote folksongs collections throughout the country in the middle of the nineteenth century: the Ministry of Public Instruction asked to dozens of corresponding members to collect songs as part of the Enquête sur les Poésies Populaires de la France. These folklorists published many regional anthologies of folksongs, like Damase Arbaud in Provence, Théodore de Puymaigre in Lorraine, Edmond de

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Coussemaker in Flandre, Jérôme Bujeaud in Poitou, Eugène Robillard de Beaurepaire in Normandy, Victor Smith in Velay and Forez, François-Marie Luzel in Brittany. We find no priest among them. We can observe the same situation for the main folklorists who gathered folktales in the nineteenth century, like Paul Sébillot or Achille Millien.

It is not the purpose of my paper, but it would be interesting to analyze if we can define a French model characterized by a strong correlation between the fact that the government took charge of collecting folklore early in the nineteenth century and the fact that the first folklorists who gathered folksongs and folktales came from a secular environment. It is may be not a model specific to France and, for what I know, in a lot of European countries – especially Catholic countries from the south of Europe – we find no clerics among the first major folklorists. I don’t know if we can explain this phenomenon easily, if catholicity can be a cause of this or if the proximity between folklorists and secular institutions (like Costantino Nigra in Italy for example) has played a role.

We must also say that, if we consider a long term view of folklore collections in France, it is true that some priests have played an important role, for example Jean Garneret in Jura in the second half of the twentieth century. Several clerics have also made large research concerning not oral literature but vernacular languages and linguistics, historical legends, rural everyday life and religious beliefs, for example Césaire Daugé in Gascogne in the first half of the twentieth century. The other region where priests were relatively numerous among folklorists is Brittany. Before detailing this last case, let me notice that the three parts of France I have mentioned just before correspond to three regions where religious practice is really high (more than 50% in the years 1960s) and where the influence of the Church is ancient and deep\(^5\). Another interesting work would be to analyse the connections between the work of the French clerics concerning folklore and the geographical roots of faith in this high-contrast country from the nineteenth century on.

**Clerics and folklore in Brittany at the beginning of the twentieth century**

Brittany is the part of France where the biggest collections of oral literature have been made and are still made nowadays. It is also the region where the first collections were

gathered. It is especially true in the Breton speaking area, whose Celtic heritage had convinced scholars very early of the quality and quantity of its oral traditions. The first collectors, especially interested in folk ballads, were not clerics. We can mention a printer, several lawyers, a schoolteacher and, above all, noblemen – the most famous one being Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué and his best-seller *Barzaz-Breiz* published in 1839. It is true that, very early, a cleric and medievalist, the abbot Gervais de La Rue, published an essay dedicated to the bardic traditions of Brittany (1815), in which he underlines the role played by Bretons in the elaboration of the French medieval poetry and wants to incitate people to work on the Breton literature; but he didn't collect anything.

We must also mention another priest pioneer in collecting traditional tunes and oral traditions in the Vannetais area (South of Brittany): the canon Mahé in the middle of the nineteenth century.

But the role of the Breton priests is particularly remarkable from the last years of the nineteenth century to the inter-war years. We can give the names of Abel Soreau in the region of Nantes, François Duine in the north of French speaking Brittany and in the Breton-speaking Tregor, or the canon Pérennès from Cornouaille. But the most important concentration of clerics collecting folklore was, by far, in the Vannetais area (South-east of Breton-speaking Brittany) with Jean-Mathurin and François Cadic, Jean-Louis Larboulette, Augustin Guillevic, Jérôme Buléon and so forth. The second region where some priests were active is the Leon area (North-West of Breton-speaking Brittany). It is surely not by chance if these two areas correspond to the parts of Brittany where the religious practice and the influence of the Church are the strongest.

But Leon is very different from Vannetais concerning the status of oral traditions at that time. Contrary to Vannetais where the quality and quantity of folktales, folksongs and tunes was proved, Leon has always been considered as a very poor country concerning oral traditions. Some of the most influent collectors from the nineteenth century (François-Marie Luzel, Anatole Le Braz) proclaimed and wrote that the Leon area was irrelevant to collecting folklore. In order to explain this difference with the bordering zones of Haute-Cornouaille and Tregor, considered as particularly rich, these

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folklorists pointed out the negative role of priests and missionaries, who forbade to dance and sing. In fact, the situation is more complicated to explain. It is an evidence that the influence of the Church played a major role: the Leon is the part of Brittany with the highest ratio of priests per capita, the seminars have turned out the most important number of priests then exported everywhere in Brittany or in missions overseas. The Leon dialect of Breton has often been considered as the best Breton, because it was the dialect spoken by the majority of the priests. But we must also consider other reasons, like a high rate of education anciently perceptible in Leon – which is largely a consequence of the presence of the Church – and also the ancient economic development opened to the outside (which has nothing to do with the Church). So we face this paradox: some clerics from Leon were interested in folklore but the influence of the Church explains largely that traditional folktales and songs were rarely heard in this region when Jean-Marie Perrot organized his song competition.

In fact, besides Perrot, the main clerics from Leon interested in oral traditions either collected historical legends, like the priest Lan Inisan who gathered memories concerning the Counter-Revolution in Leon⁹, or concentrated on a linguistic approach or went to collect in other and richer parts of Breton-speaking Brittany: it is the case of François Falc'hun, an eminent linguist who participated to a big folklore fieldwork organized in the south of Brittany by the Museum of the Arts et Traditions Populaires in 1939¹⁰.

Jean-Marie Perrot had a very personal and isolated conception of folklore in Leon. In the announcements of the Barzaz Bro-Leon competition, he affirms that scholars have a false opinion of the quality of the Leon repertoire: he writes that the idea according to which there is no interesting folklore to collect in this region is a prejudice. The results of the competition show that he was partly right partly wrong.

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Perrot’s conceptions of folklore: faith, vernacular language, oral traditions and nationalism

One last – and very important point – to understand Jean-Marie Perrot’s actions and discourses in favour of the Breton folklore is, of course, the French political context at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is not by chance if this priest organized the competition in 1906, at a time where tensions between the Church and the anticlerical radical government were explosive. Since 1901, the government of the Third Republic had successively adopted many repressive measures, the most famous of them being the Separation between the State and the Church in 1905\textsuperscript{11}.

At the time, Jean-Marie Perrot was only 28, he had been ordained a few years before and appointed to the parish of Saint-Vougay in Leon. He had already founded a catholic association in favour of the Breton culture, the Bleun-Brug, whose purpose was the exact opposite of the governmental policy: the defense of the Breton faith, language and traditions. All his life long, he continued to fight for these ideas by developing a lot of cultural activities: theatre, catholic feasts, youth clubs, writing and distribution of religious books, direction of a catholic newspaper in Breton and so forth\textsuperscript{12}.

His collection of folklore is only one of the projects of this dynamic cleric: it is not the most famous but one of the best documented thanks to the very long published announcements of the competition and the quality of the archives conserved. Indeed, these announcements can be read as a real manifesto in favour of the preservation of vernacular culture and folklore. Collecting folksongs is not a goal in itself: it is only a way, among others, to save and regenerate the Breton nation. In his writings, Jean-Marie Perrot considers folksongs as a way of preserving faith against atheism, traditions against modernity, Brittany against France. He develops a relatively simple nationalistic theory, based on the correlation between faith, vernacular language, culture – including folklore – and the Breton identity\textsuperscript{13}. His independentist ideas led his actions until the end of his life. During the inter-war years and the Second World War, he had regular relations with

some of the most famous Breton militants and collaborationists and he was killed by a communist member of the Resistance in 1943. The death of this priest is very polemic, still today, and it is not the subject of this workshop, so I won’t go deeper into this question. But it is clear that Perrot’s nationalistic ideas started early and are connected with his role as a folklorist.

Another thing I would like to point out is that almost all the other Breton scholars and collectors in the long nineteenth century considered folklore as a survival of times past doomed to disappear – it is not specific to Brittany. They had the conviction to witness the last representatives of a dying culture but they didn't try to act or even expressed the wish to revitalize actively oral tradition among the people (François Cadic, in the Vannetais area, is an exception). Jean-Marie Perrot’s view of folklore is the exact opposite. He considers folksongs as a living weapon against cultural – including religious – transformations in the Breton society. He expresses the wish that the songs gathered during the competition should be published in a book in order to help the young generations relearn the traditions of their grandparents and revitalize the Breton folklore. He even proposes to reoralize this oral tradition by the way of written documents. His ultimate goal is nothing less than the entire regeneration, through folklore, of a Breton culture connected to its faith and language.

This conception helps us to better understand why Jean-Marie Perrot chose the way of a competition to collect songs, even if he had personally already collected oral traditions. It is sure that this solution was the most efficient to gather rapidly folksongs from everywhere in Leon. But it also gave an active role to the Breton people in order to defend by themselves their cultural, religious and linguistic identity.

The competition: participation, network, results

The Barzaz Bro-Leon competition can be seen as a half-success. 1000 songs were gathered, implicating more than 180 people (singers, collectors, composers). It is, by far, the most important collection of songs ever gathered in Leon. It proves the scholars’ negative assertions concerning Leon to be false, even if it is true that a lot of the pieces

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sent to the competition were recent compositions really impregnated by a clerical style. The fact that a priest organized the competition and that it was advertised in a Catholic newspaper has obviously influenced the type of participating members and the type of repertoire. Nevertheless, a consistent part of the collection comes from oral tradition and gives us a completely new view on the Leon repertoire which allows us to completely redefine our knowledge of the Breton folksong tradition and its geography.\(^\text{15}\)

Who says competition says prizewinners. The laureates of the *Barzaz Bro-Leon* were publicly presented during a big cultural feast organised each year by Jean-Marie Perrot. For the preparation of this feast, for the payment of the prizes and more generally for the organization of the competition, Jean-Marie Perrot activated a vast network in which clerics were essential. A lot of them – priests, nuns – sent folksongs or gave money to support the competition, even if the competition remained the project of one man. Many letters from this ecclesiastical network are conserved in Perrot’s archives. The first competition received the benediction of the bishop, who offered the first prize. But rapidly, Perrot’s hierarchy tried to moderate the young priest’s energy. In 1911, the bishop wanted to abolish his very successful annual feast, asserting that the activities proposed – competitions, theatre and so forth – were morally dangerous. In fact, Perrot’s enthusiasm, his popularity among the people and his ideas were regarded less and less positively by his hierarchy. His conceptions concerning folklore are not really in cause, but his independance of mind, his freedom of speech and his nationalistic involvement were considered as going too far for a priest. The decision of his transfer to a parish known for the lack of faith of his inhabitants in 1930, outside of Leon, is clearly a sanction for his behaviour.

I would like to evoke a last point concerning Jean-Marie Perrot’s folklore collection. Even if he had gathered 1000 songs thanks to the *Barzaz Bro-Leon*, he was obviously not satisfied by what he had collected. His first idea was to publish a book with the best songs after the first competition in 1906, but he finally decided to organize new competitions the years after before publishing, justifying this by the fact that he was sure that people could find and send other – and implied better – songs. In fact, there is a contradiction between the type of songs Jean-Marie Perrot was looking for and the type of songs he received. The title he chose for his collection, *Barzaz Bro-Leon*, and the

explanations he gave in the announcements are very significative. His idea was to publish a new Barzaz-Breiz dedicated to Leon, that is a book massively composed with old historical folkballads – the type of songs called gwerzioù in Breton – similar to the anthology published 70 years before by Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué. But the participating members sent few oral ballads and a lot of newly composed songs, the kind of songs written and distributed by clerics since the nineteenth century, deeply influenced by a religious spirit and massively rejected by folklorists.

Finally, Jean-Marie Perrot has never published his book. Several reasons can be given to explain this: the break of the First World War, the fact that Perrot was implicated in too many cultural projects and had no more time for this book, but also a personal disappointment concerning the types of songs gathered and a contradiction between what Perrot was interested in – ancient folksongs – and what he was expected to do as a priest – to distribute a catholic literature –. It is very significant to notice that Perrot was in charge of the main catholic journal in Breton, the very popular Feiz ha Breiz during several decades\(^\text{16}\). It could have been a good opportunity to publish songs from the Barzaz Bro-Leon. But Jean-Marie Perrot has never advertised the competition in his journal and has almost never published songs from his collection in it. In the same time, the journal has regularly published poems and new songs and the editors encouraged the readership to compose writings in Breton inspired by Christian virtues.

So the situation is paradoxal. Jean-Marie Perrot’s position as a priest clearly helped him to organize the competition: he was a respected and well-known person of distinction, with a developed network and a vast influence on his parishioners, which explains how he managed to mobilize so many people and to gather so many songs in a short time. But rapidly, his choice of folklore as a weapon to save faith entered in contradiction with his ecclesiastic hierarchy and the choices of the Church, which were to substitute the ancient folksongs for a newly composed religious repertoire. Perrot continued to have a personal taste for collecting folklore and he gathered a repertoire of folktales during the inter-war years. But he let the Barzaz Bro-Leon unfinished and didn’t start again a similar project. After him, nobody tried to complete the publication of the anthology of folksongs often promised by Perrot and the Barzaz Bro-Leon was almost completely forgotten during one century. In fact, the popular success of this competition

was connected to the charismatic personality and to the energy and enthusiasm of one priest, whose youth dream was to push the Breton people themselves to become aware of the richness of their culture and identity through faith, language and folklore and, from that point, to entirely regenerate the Breton nation.