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The indirect consequences of linguistic silencing: the example of gwerziou in Brittany

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Summary

The text refers to the ways in which a popular tradition is censored by new principles, religions, beliefs over time, as a result of which it is lost or transformed. At the heart of the article as a basic example is the description of the evolution of the mournful gwerziou songs of Brittany.

Keywords: censorship, linguistic silencing, suppression of cultural practices, folk songs, Brittany, gwerziou, Mell, Soul

Οι έμμεσες συνέπειες της γλωσσικής αποσιώπησης: Το παράδειγμα του gwerziou στη Βρετάνη

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Περίληψη

Το κείμενο αναφέρεται στους τρόπους που μια λαϊκή παράδοση λογοκρίνεται από νέες αρχές, θρησκείες, πίστες στην πάροδο του χρόνου, με αποτέλεσμα να χάνεται ή να μετατρέπεται. Στο επίκεντρο του άρθρου ως βασικό παράδειγμα βρίσκεται η περιγραφή της εξέλιξης των θρηνητικών τραγουδιών gwerziou της Βρετάνης.

Λέξεις-Κλειδιά: λογοκρισία, γλωσσική αποσιώπηση, καταπίεση λαϊκών πρακτικών, λαϊκά τραγούδια, Βρετάνη, gwerziou, Mell, Soul

Introduction

Silencing cultural objects or practices by an authority leads to replace the culture of the weaker by the culture of the stronger, and this for different purposes such as establish an authority, adhere to new standards, or create a common story. Through examples related to Brittany, this peninsula at the west of France which was independent until the 16th century, we will see the different reasons for cultural suppression before focusing more specifically on linguistic suppression and its consequences on singing practice in Brittany.

It is a common way for a new authority, religious or political, to suppress cultural artefacts so that the population, unable to follow the rites or the customs they ancestors used to follow, lost with no more markers, will then follow the new markers given by the authority. As Bernard Merdrignac explains, this is the case, for example, of the suppressions led by the Christian religious authorities who thus eradicated Celtic mythology from Brittany to replace it with Christian legend. *“It is not a question of substitution of worship, but of an effort to deconstruct pre-Christian beliefs which goes hand in hand with the integration of elements from paganism essential to ensure the success of Christian worship in popular mentalities”* (Merdrignac 2015: 63). The gods and goddesses gradually disappeared, so their pagan sacred places and the saints settled in.

Here, for example, is the legend of Saint Enori, also known as Azenor, a young virgin mistreated



1. Statue of Saint Azenor in the Valley of the Saints in Carnoet (Côtes d'Armor), MG.

by her father. The latter, sick, can only be cured by the milk of a virgin and it is towards Enori that he turns. As he approaches his lips to his daughter's breast, a snake cuts her breast. An angel then descends to replace it with a golden breast. This Christian legend of a Breton saint (who does not exist in the calendar of Roman saints) is to be compared to the Celtic myths of the women with a golden breast. But the Breton goddess can only be found in its Christianized version (Le Menn 1985).



2 The menhir of Saint Uzec (Côtes d'Armor), MG.

of

There are many examples of suppressions of pagan rites and sites by the Christian authorities in Brittany, and whenever this suppression was not possible, because of the people's resistance, the Christian authorities appropriated these pagan sites and rites. The menhir of Saint-Uzec in the Côtes d' Armor is one of them, which was marked with Christian signs during the 17th century, when the catholic authorities, unable to prevent the local population from using it for pagan rites, decided to make it a sacred Christian place (Giraudon 2009).

Another example, at last, concerns the beginning of the 20th century when one can observe a broad choreophobia of the priests especially for the new dances which put the girl in the arms of the boy, these dances which one calls in Brittany Kof ha kof (literally belly to belly). *“My desire is to warn you against the improper dances, the fashionable town dances which are now being tried to bring into our country instead of the old dances which are yet so beautiful”* wrote the rector of Pluvigner in February 1911¹. The Catholic religion beginning to lose its influence on the populations, these attempts of suppression remained in vain.

¹ Messenger de pitié, parish bulletin of Pluvigner, February 1911, Archives Départementales du Morbihan, IB619.

Suppression of cultural practices can also aim to force a population to adhere to new cultural or social norms under pressure either from a state or from another part of the population.

This is the case of the game of "Mell" or "Soule" which was banned in Brittany by the prefectural authorities (local authorities where the prefect represents the State in each French department) for



3. Engraving from Alexandre Bouët and Olivier Perrin, « Breiz-Izel ou Vie des Bretons de l'Armorique », Paris, 1844, t.III, p.21,

security reasons. This game, which was quite like rugby, took place between two parishes. The winning team was the one that brought the ball back to their parish. There were no rules, and it happened that players were killed (by accident or by violence) during the game, which motivated its prohibition on September 21, 1857, in all the department of Morbihan, the last Breton department where the game was still authorized². Society no longer tolerated young people dying during a ball game, which had

previously been accepted as one of the risks of the game.

Another example concerns Breton wrestling, the *gouren*, where traditionally the winner wins a ram called *ar maout*. Due to European standards on animal welfare and because of the lobbying of certain associations campaigning for animal well-being, this tradition was almost suppressed. It only lasts by way of derogation from these rules since 2010, thanks to the article L-214-4 of the Agricultural Code³.

Suppression can also be a way of creating a common story and at the same time create unity around this story.

This is the case for example of French history taught at school which is the same for the whole country. Yet Brittany has only been French since the 16th century. This implies that all the Middle-Ages taught in Brittany do not concern the territory where it is taught. On the other hand, the history of

² Arrêté préfectoral interdisant le jeu de la soule, 21 septembre 1857, Archives départementales du Morbihan, 2 Z 9.

³ Code de l'Agriculture, article L214-4 Modifié par LOI n°2010-874 du 27 juillet 2010 - art. 60 : L'attribution en lot ou prime de tout animal vivant, à l'exception des animaux d'élevage dans le cadre de fêtes, foires, manifestations sportives, folkloriques et locales traditionnelles, concours et manifestations à caractère agricole, est interdite. Le représentant de l'Etat dans le département concerné établit la liste des manifestations sportives, folkloriques et locales traditionnelles pour lesquelles cette interdiction ne s'applique pas. (The awarding of prizes or premiums to any live animal, with the exception of farm animals in the context of festivals, fairs, sporting, folkloric and local traditional events, competitions and events of an agricultural nature, is prohibited. The representative of the State in the department concerned draws up the list of sporting, folkloric and local traditional events for which this prohibition does not apply).

Brittany before it joined the kingdom of France is never taught at school, creating in fact an acculturation of young Bretons on the history of the territory where they live. *“In a teaching instituted to forge republican consciousness, the teaching of regional history indeed inspires a lingering distrust”* explains Evelyne Hery in her study about the teaching of history in France (2000)⁴.

But the most important case of this French policy of unity was around language. After the French Revolution in 1789, the new authorities, no longer able to unite the country around the king since they had cut off his head, sought to unite the country around the French language. But the majority of the Kingdom of France did not speak French and looking at a linguistic map of France will show that many different languages and dialects were and are spoken in France⁵. This desire for unity around the language crystallized, especially during the 19th and the 20th century. We will first review the important times of this unification by language, and then we will see the indirect consequences of this language policy on traditional practices, focusing more particularly in a third time on the practice of singing in Brittany.

French language policy

The school was compulsory at the end of the 19th century with the laws Jules Ferry in 1881 and 1882⁶ with a series of measures including obligatory and free education and instruction exclusively in French.

“There is a primary interest in ensuring that the Bretons understand and speak the national language: they will only be truly French on this condition. French people are needed to Frenchify the Bretons, they will not Frenchify themselves”, wrote Irénée Carre, Inspector General of Education in 1922⁷ to justify the fact that the pupils had to learn French. Without the language, they could not feel French. Nationality and language are strongly linked in the French ideology.

The teaching was done by immersion, prohibition being made to use the local language to teach French. This prohibition was, in fact, already in place in several schools before the laws Ferry as evidenced by these words of the Prefect of Finistère in 1837: *“But by this alone that we now form but one nation, that we have the same constitution, the same laws, the same government, good minds can believe that all these common things will lead us to have also the same language and that consequently, it is necessary to avoid what would tend to delay the moment*

⁴ “Dans un enseignement institué pour forger la conscience républicaine, l'enseignement de l'histoire régionale inspire en effet une défiance rémanente”.

⁵ https://www.lexilogos.com/france_carte_dialectes.htm.

⁶ Laws of the 16 of June 1881 and the 22nd of March 1882.

⁷ Carre, I., *Méthode pratique de langage et de lecture*, A. Colin, 1922, « Il y a un intérêt de premier ordre à ce que les Bretons comprennent et parlent la langue nationale: ils ne seront vraiment français qu'à cette condition. Ce sont des Français qu'il faut pour franciser les Bretons, ils ne se franciseront pas tous seuls. »

of it”⁸ (Postic 2003: 382). Following this reasoning leads to the fact that using Breton language to teach French being one of those things that would delay the coming of a single language.

In many schools, children were also prohibited from speaking Breton among themselves: “*Pupils are forbidden to speak Breton, even during break, and to utter any rude words. No Breton book should be admitted or tolerated*”, mentions, for example, the article 21 of the Regulations for elementary primary schools in the district of Lorient, adopted in 1836 [Broudic 1995: 362]. Sometimes, but not systematically, institute what was called “*ar simbol*” (the symbol), a symbol of humiliation for the one who was caught to speak Breton. It was a stick of wood, a clog or whatever out of the teacher's imagination (Milin 2022).

As soon as the beginning of the 19th century, the governments' intentions were clear: it is a question of annihilating Breton. Here are some quotes illustrating this desire: “*Above all, remember, gentlemen, that you are established only to kill the Breton language!*”⁹ said the sub-prefect of Morlaix in a speech to the teachers of Finistère (the most western department of Brittany) in 1845; “*We must eradicate the Breton dialect, barbaric relic of another age*”¹⁰ declared Jean-Baptiste Bienvenu-Martin, Minister of Public Instruction, in 1905, in a Circular to the Prefects of Brittany; “*For the linguistic unity of France, the Breton language must disappear*”¹¹ confirmed Anatole de Monzie, Minister of Public Instruction in a speech of July 29, 1925 (Rees 1939: 206).

This linguistic unity dreamed of by the various French governments has produced an ideology that cannot tolerate the existence of minority languages on the territory, seen as a danger for the unity of the country, a country whose article 1 of the Constitution says: “*France is an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic*”. The languages of France, apart from the French language, are perceived as a threat to this indivisibility.

Here are some more recent quotes that show the persistence of this ideology. It can be noted that this ideology is trans partisan. It is shared by right-wingers like the president of the Republic Georges Pompidou who explained during a speech at Sarre-Union in 1972 that “*There is no place for the Breton language in a Europe that France is called upon to mark with its seal*” (Leclerc 2015) or left-wingers like Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Minister of National Education, who said in 1985: “*We will not be doing young people a favor by teaching them languages that do not open up any prospects for them*”¹² after the government decided, against the advice of its Minister of Education, to open the C.A.P.E.S (teacher recruitment competition for secondary schools) to Breton (Abalain 2000: 71).

⁸ “Mais par cela seul que nous ne formons aujourd’hui qu’une nation, que nous avons la même constitution, les mêmes lois, le même gouvernement, de bons esprits peuvent croire que toutes ces choses communes nous amèneront à n’avoir aussi qu’une même langue et que dès lors, il faut éviter ce qui tendrait à en retarder le moment”.

⁹ “Surtout rappelez-vous, messieurs, que vous n’êtes établis que pour tuer la langue bretonne!”.

¹⁰ “Il faut extirper le dialecte breton, barbare relique d’un autre âge”, quoted in La Croix du Morbihan, 19/03/1905

¹¹ “Pour l’unité linguistique de la France, la langue bretonne doit disparaître”.

¹² “On ne rendra pas service aux jeunes en leur apprenant des langues qui ne leur ouvrent aucune perspective”.

If the eradication of regional languages is no longer pronounced so directly today, it is, on the other hand, regularly made an obstacle to their teaching in some of the political parties represented in the National Assembly: For Marine Le Pen, at the head of the “Rassemblement National”, a far-right party, it is important that the teaching of regional languages do not take place “*at school, which must focus on the teaching of fundamental knowledge*¹³”, which implies that regional languages are not and cannot be a fundamental knowledge of the inhabitants of the regions where they are spoken. Others will fight against the co-officiality of the languages of France like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, head of La France Insoumise, a far-left party, who explains that “*this would undermine the constitutional principles of the indivisibility of the Republic, of equality before the law and of the uniqueness of the French people*¹⁴”. Those quotes, which are just a few examples among many others, show that on both sides of the political spectrum, this ideology of unity around the language is still very much alive.

However, the situation of minority language teaching improved with the Deixonne law in 1951 and with successive laws which now authorize the teaching of regional languages on a parity schedule. However, a 2021 Constitutional Council decision declared unconstitutional the teaching of regional languages by immersion, as practiced by schools such as those in the Diwan network. Following large demonstrations, the government of Mr. Castex, Prime Minister, allowed by circular of the 14 of December 2021 this teaching by immersion and is, as a result, not applying the decision of the Constitutional Council. The situation is therefore stable for the moment, but at the mercy of a political reversal.

The indirect consequences of the suppression of minority languages

Of course, this language policy has achieved brilliant results and the number of speakers of regional languages in France is constantly decreasing despite the efforts of activists to promote their teaching. To make a language disappear is not only to make words disappear, but also to make a culture and traditional practices linked to this language disappear. A number of these practices have already gone, others are in great danger.

In these traditional practices, we can find traditional practices related to singing. As in other countries, Breton songs fall into several categories:

- dance songs
- marching songs,

¹³ “Pas à l’école, qui doit se concentrer sur l’enseignement des savoirs fondamentaux”. Interview in the newspaper Ouest-France, 21st of April 2022.

¹⁴ “Cela porterait atteinte aux principes constitutionnels d’indivisibilité de la République, d’égalité devant la loi et d’unicité du peuple français”, answer to the association “Pour que vivent nos langues” 2022, <https://melenchon2022.fr>.

- hymns,
- gwerziou¹⁵ which are long laments.

If the dance songs are endangered, given the decline in the number of speakers, their primary function, which is to make people dance, is maintained even if the public who dances does not understand the words of the song. If they can dance, they dance whether they understand what is being said during that time. This leaves a certain reprieve to these songs, especially since the “fest-noz”, a traditional space where those songs are sung, is on the list of the intangible heritage of humanity of the UNESCO since December 5, 2012. As long as there is Breton speaking singers, of course.

The marching songs are in great danger of disappearing, but many cultural groups maintain them by organizing sung hikes, which allows the transmission of the repertoire and its use. The hymns are maintained by religious practice, even if this decreases greatly with regard to the Breton language, most of the offices now taking place in French.

The gwerziou, for their part, are in a perilous situation. But first of all, what is a gwerz? A gwerz is a lament, usually long, sung a cappella on a tune with little amplitude to favour the story being told, a story which most often tells a tragic event: war, murder, accident, natural disaster.

If the flamenco is the song of anger, the blues the song of sadness, the fado the song of melancholia, the gwerz is the song of drama. A gwerz, in addition to a story, is a literary style that favours strong images. As Walter J. Ong writes in his book *Orality and literacy: “Enthusiastic description of physical violence often marks oral narrative”* (Ong 2002: 44) and that’s true for the gwerziou: the blood spurts on the assassin's shoes, the light from the lantern illuminates the body of the raped and killed young girl. The oldest gwerziou seem to come from the Middle-Ages and have a complex versification system. One of the most famous ones is the gwerz of Skolvan, dated by the ethnologist Donatien Laurent from the 12th century (Laurent 1973). Skolvan is a man who comes to see his mother to ask forgiveness, forgiveness she won’t give to him, not because he raped his sisters and killed their babies, not because he burnt churches and priests, but because he lost her little book written with the blood of the Christ.

This tradition was maintained throughout the centuries, and we still sing the gwerz of Skolvan but also the murder of the young Morised, killed by her cousin in 1747 (Guillevic 1998), the sinking of the Titanic in 1912¹⁶ or the story of a young man sent to Algeria in the 60’s during during the French decolonisation war¹⁷. Nowadays, people are still writing gwerziou like those:

- That of Gilles Servat tells the death of Victor Jara, killed by the dictator Pinochet in Chile in 1973¹⁸.

¹⁵ “Gwerziou” is the breton plural of the word “gwerz”.

¹⁶ <https://follenn.kan.bzh/titanic.html> (accessed on April 2, 2023).

¹⁷ <https://vimeo.com/243666268> (accessed on April 2, 2023).

¹⁸ Servat, Gilles, Gwerz Vikor Jara in L’Hirondelle, Kalondour, 1974.

- That of Denez Abernot tells the story of the fight against the nuclear power plant which was planned in Plogoff in the Finistère in 1978¹⁹.

- Denez Prigent wrote in 2003 Gwerz Kiev about the Holodomor, the famine in Ukraine in 1932²⁰.

The topics are very diverse, ranging from disasters to political protests. So how can I say that the gwerzioù are in danger to disappear if we still have people creating new songs on a traditional pattern?

Gwerzioù endangered

This weakening is due to the auditors. The translation of these gwerzioù, if it is technically possible to promote understanding for non-Breton speakers, never uses the versification, sometimes very complex for the oldest gwerzioù. If the story can be preserved, the strong images, the rhythm, the power of these gwerzioù are lost with the translation. The disappearance of the Breton language would therefore lead to the disappearance of a cultural practice already endangered by changes in society. Today, listeners are more often trained in song formats no longer than three minutes. However, it is not uncommon for a gwerz to last about ten minutes and can even reach half an hour or more of singing. If it was adapted to an attentive audience, interested in what was told, it finds with difficulty its place for an audience used to zapping information in the language which it masters. Imagine this 30-minute lament in front of an audience that doesn't understand what is being told. This is why changes occur in the structure of those songs:

1) I explained previously that the gwerz is traditionally sung a cappella and mostly solo. If it is sung by several singers, it is sung in unison. Today's artists who sing these gwerzioù often add musical instruments to them, that's the first point. Let's take one of the most famous gwerzioù in Brittany: the gwerz of "Kêr-Is", written in 1850 by Olivier Souvestre and published on loose-leaf²¹. This gwerz tells of the engulfment of the town of Is, located off Douarnenez, by the wrath of God after Princess Ahes gave the keys to the locks that protected the city to her diabolical lover. Let's now take a look at some recent interpretations that can easily be found on the internet or on albums:

- Yann-Fañch Kemener (1957-2019), a famous Breton singer, sung a version of Gwerz Kêr-Is with Didier Squiban playing the piano²²;

¹⁹Abernot, Denez, STORLOK, Keleier Plogoff in Stok ha Stok, Névénoué, 1979 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vozxKW19O3k> (accessed on April 2, 2023).

²⁰ Prigent, Denez, Gwerz Kiev in Sarac'h, Barclay / Universal, 2003, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RHYjV99Nlo> (accessed on April 2, 2023).

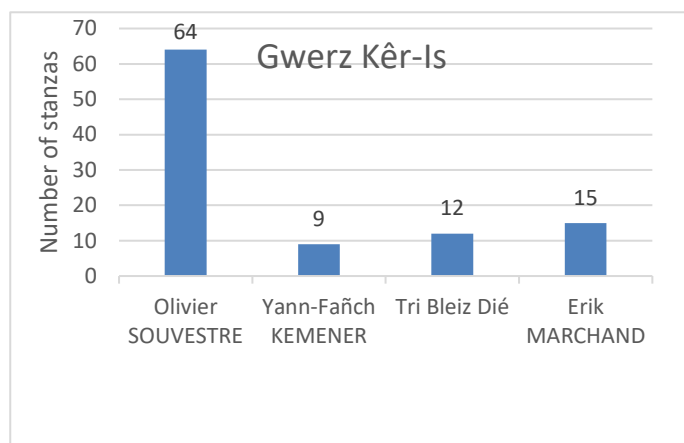
²¹ <https://fv.kan.bzh/feuille-00542.html>, (accessed on April 8, 2023).

²² <https://youtu.be/YZBWqB85RgU> or on the album, KEMENER Y.F, SQUIBAN D. Gwerz Kêr-Is, Ile-Exil, Coop-Breizh Muzik, 1996.

- The rock-punk band Tri Bleiz Die, uses the usual instruments of a rock band: electric guitar and bass, drums... with the singing²³;
- Erik Marchand, another very famous Breton singer (1955-) sings the gwerz with the pianist Bojan Zulfikarpašić, known as Bojan Z²⁴.

These three examples show that the addition of musical instruments becomes almost a necessity for gwerz singers. In doing so, they modify the musical object that is the gwerz and thereby create a new musical object, which, if very interesting, is nevertheless no longer a gwerz in the strict sense of the word.

2) The second big change that occurs in the singing of gwerzioù is that the singers are led to truncate the songs so that non-Bretons speakers who are now the very large majority of Bretons can, ever so slightly, enter into the musical domain of the singer even if they do not understand what is being sung. Let's continue to observe the current versions of the gwerz of Kêr-Is. The original text by Olivier Souvestre had 61 stanzas of 4 8-foot verses. But, if this song is still sung very often, on the 61 stanzas,



only a few of them are sung:

- The version by Yann-Fañch Kemener and Didier Squiban, mentioned earlier, has 9 stanzas;
- The version by Tri Bleiz Die is a bit longer with its 12 stanzas;
- The version by Erik Marchand is the longest, with 15 stanzas.

We quickly realize that of the three examples, the gwerz loses at best three quarters of its content. The same phenomena can be observed for almost every gwerz. If I go back to Gwerz Skolvan, the one dated from the 12th century, the versions collected from the 19th century to the 60s are about 30 stanzas of 2 or 3 8-foot verses. The best-known version is a recording by Madame Bertrand (1886-1970), captured by Claudine Mazéas in 1959²⁵. It has 29 stanzas.

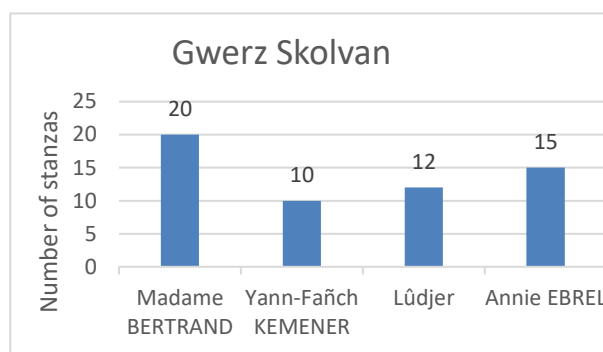
If we compare with the actual versions of this gwerz, we find:

²³ <https://youtu.be/O1CJh0vR2o0> or on the album TRI BLEIZ DIE, Argêra Is, Dalc'homp mat, Coop Breizh, 2001.

²⁴ <https://vimeo.com/181189262>, (accessed on April 10, 2023).

²⁵ <https://youtu.be/1OXc0AwJy5U> (accessed on April 10, 2023).

- A version of 10 stanzas sung by Yann-Fanch Kemener with the group Skolvan²⁶;
- A version of 12 stanzas by the group Lûdjer²⁷;
- A version sung by Annie Ebrel with Riccardo Del Fra playing the double bass showing 11 stanzas²⁸



We can also notice that each of these versions use musical instruments playing, as shown previously. The modern gwerziou have on average between 11 and 15 stanzas, which confirms this tendency to shorten these laments. These changes, whether they concern the musical accompaniment of the song or the length of the texts, lead to a modification of the very nature of the gwerz. This long lament, which tells a complete, structured and versified story, becomes a relatively short song, in which several elements of the story have disappeared. The gwerz, as a precisely defined cultural artefact, disappears as it is transformed into another cultural object.

In March 2012, a working group entitled "intangible cultural heritage of Brittany" submitted to the Ministry of Culture the UNESCO application file requesting the integration of gwerz in the intangible heritage of humanity. This group rightly took the argument that the survival of the gwerz necessarily depends on the survival of the language. This file was rejected by the ministry and could therefore never be presented.

Of course, other traditional practices linked to the language are also in danger, like the fairy tales and the legends. But if these tales were collected from the 19th century in Breton, the vast majority of them were immediately translated or transcribed into French. If the language disappears, the content of the tale or the legend remains beyond the language.

On the other hand, the same is not true of other traditional practices such as nursery rhymes or riddles. The nursery rhymes are intimately linked to the emotional and they cease to exist as soon as mothers or grandmothers change language. The riddles, which are one of the cultural peculiarities of the Bretons who had a great appetite for these puns untranslatable, are disappearing since they are based on wordplays. The impossibility of maintaining the object without the language associated with it leads to the disappearance of an entire heritage. Admittedly, it is preserved in writing but is no longer transmitted and as a result is reduced to being a cultural object of the past.

²⁶ <https://youtu.be/GPdHmGEG0dM> (accessed on April 10, 2023).

²⁷ <https://youtu.be/72DhirCGwH8> (accessed on April 10, 2023).

²⁸ https://www.brezhoweb.bzh/Annie-ebrel-riccardo-del-fra-skolvan_fiche_1349.html (accessed on April 10, 2023).

We therefore see that it is not necessary for the political or religious authorities to manifest a clearly expressed desire to suppress a traditional practice for it to be de facto suppressed. It is enough to touch one of the constituent elements of this practice for it to be immediately endangered.

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