

## **Gaelic culture for sale: language dynamics in the marketing of Gaelic music**

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Scottish Gaelic culture is strongly identified with its musical tradition, and Gaelic song — both recorded and performed live — has become an increasingly popular element of Scotland's vibrant traditional music scene. At the same time, Gaelic organisations have identified Gaelic music, and Gaelic culture more generally, as a key resource for language development in Scotland. The audience (or, to put it more directly, the market) for Gaelic song thus consists not only of the Gaelic community but many English monoglots as well—a linguistic dynamic that presents significant challenges in terms of how this material is packaged and transmitted.

In this paper we look at how Gaelic and English are used in presenting Gaelic music, and Gaelic culture more generally, to this audience (or these audiences). In doing so, we consider what role this cultural dynamic is playing within the conceptualisation and implementation of Gaelic development strategies. The focus here is on recorded rather than live musical performance (although interesting research could be conducted into performers' practices with regard to language use in the context of live performance), considering the ways in which commercial recordings of Gaelic music are 'packaged' in linguistic terms.

We began with the observation that there appears to be too much English around Gaelic music — too much English spoken where Gaelic songs are sung and too much English written where Gaelic songs are presented and explained — and that this is problematic from the standpoint of Gaelic language maintenance and development. It weakens Gaelic music as a domain for Gaelic language use (and therefore for language revitalisation efforts) if English is used as the sole medium of communication at concerts and ceilidhs, and in the packaging and presentation of recorded music, in order to accommodate non-Gaelic speakers. Gaelic music is thought of as a stronghold of the language, and it certainly represents a reservoir of great cultural wealth and distinctiveness; indeed, traditional songs, especially those of the 17th and 18th centuries, constitute an important element in the canon of Gaelic literature. Our fear, however, is that Gaelic language use may in fact be weakest where people think it is strongest, and that a thriving Gaelic music scene could be masking the most serious

problems facing Gaelic — falling speaker numbers, low levels of literacy and linguistic confidence and lack of intergenerational transmission of the language.

A few words of background are necessary to situate the context, in particular with regard to ways in which the Gaelic situation may be somewhat different from that of other European minority languages. First, there is a very large linguistic distance between Gaelic and English, the dominant language in Scotland, and the overwhelming majority (90% plus) of Scots have no knowledge of Gaelic whatsoever, as a result of shortcomings in the education system. The ‘home’ market for Gaelic music is thus extremely small relative to the potential wider market, and products ‘packaged’ for the home market, i.e. containing little or no English, would be utterly impenetrable to that wider public.

Secondly, the Gaelic song repertoire is unusually conservative, and there is a very limited role for new composition. Most songs recorded and performed in Gaelic are many decades old, and many date from the 19th and 18th centuries, even the 17th and 16th centuries. While this older repertoire is a storehouse of great cultural wealth, the flipside is that very few new songs are composed. In recent decades, there has been very little role for Gaelic song as a medium of expression for contemporary topics or concerns; it arguably has a fossilised quality. There was formerly a very strong tradition of ‘local’ song composition, especially songs of a humorous nature; the change is certainly due at least in part to performers’ expectations of their audience and to the limits of performers’ own abilities in Gaelic. Of course, some new songs have been written during the past thirty years or so, most notably by Calum and Rory MacDonald of Runrig and more recently by Mean Time, Brian Ó hEadhra and the MacKenzie sisters, but the great majority of singers draw on well-established songs for their repertoire.

Third, and most important, the dominant role of English language use in the public performance of Gaelic music is not a new development, but has been the norm since the beginning of the 20th century, if not earlier. The Mòd, Scotland’s equivalent of the Welsh Eisteddfod or the Irish Oireachtas, has always been a primarily English-medium event, and many performers, both choir members and individual singers, have little knowledge of Gaelic. Because it is so long-established, this approach has become ‘normalised’ in Gaelic circles; in Joshua Fishman’s terminology, public performance of

Gaelic music, even often in the Gaelic ‘heartland’, has long been primarily a Yish rather than Xish domain (Fishman 1991).

Fourth, and conversely to the last point, there are relatively few ‘hard-liners’ in the Gaelic community, individuals who are strongly committed to using Gaelic as consistently and in as many situations as possible, without regard to traditional diglossic patterns or possible offence either to ‘traditional’ users of Gaelic or to non-Gaelic speakers. In particular, very few musicians take this tack, in contrast to the situation in other minority language communities such as Wales and the Basque Country, where militant musicians who are firmly committed to the language have played a crucial role in galvanising the language community (Llewellyn 1999).

### **Recordings of Gaelic music**

As the basis for this study, we examined the language use patterns and translation practices in CD notes for recordings of Gaelic music, looking at the information given about songs and singers, at how lyrics were presented and translated, and at the overall balance between Gaelic and English. Although we set out initially to look at language use on singers’ websites as well, this proved a less fruitful line of inquiry, as websites tend not to be kept up to date — indeed one or two vanished from the Internet during the period of our study — and were found to contain very little Gaelic in any case.

The qualifying characteristic for CDs in our sample was that they should include at least one Gaelic song — even a single Gaelic song on an otherwise English or instrumental album — and we included both commercially produced CDs and smaller-scale or self-published CDs, of which more are starting to appear as the necessary technology becomes cheaper and more accessible. We listened to 108 CDs and looked in detail at their sleeve notes to see what information was provided in which language, and particularly at whether lyrics were provided and how they were translated. The earliest recording in the sample dated from 1987 and the most recent from 2005, and 74 of them were devoted exclusively or predominantly to Gaelic song, i.e. more than half the tracks were Gaelic songs. It is interesting that most albums by the most popular and commercially successful ‘Gaelic’ bands, Runrig and Capercaillie, devoted fewer than half their tracks to Gaelic songs.

A number of points are particularly worth emphasising. The predominant language of the sleeve notes for all CDs in the sample was English. Only one CD was ‘Gaelic only’, and this was not a CD of traditional Gaelic music but a punk album: *Ceàrr* (2004) by Mill a h-Uile Rud, who take a deliberately hard-line approach to language use. Incidentally, *Ceàrr* was the only album in the sample, and the only Gaelic CD of which we are aware, to consist entirely of original compositions in Gaelic. Only one traditional album — the Seonag NicCoinnich album (1999) in the School of Scottish Studies/Greentrax *Scottish Tradition* series — came close to being all-Gaelic, and even this had acknowledgements and copyright/commercial information in English and a brief paragraph in English explaining the nature of the recording and the singer’s career. A handful of other CDs used various mixtures of Gaelic and English, but the vast majority of CD notes appeared to be aimed at an English audience, or perhaps at a Gaelic-speaking audience that prefers to read English, many fluent Gaelic speakers not being literate in the language.

The most common format for sleeve notes (36 CDs) was to provide biographical information about the singer, technical information about the recording/production and information about the songs in English only, with the lyrics provided in Gaelic and then translated into English. Next most common (35 CDs) was to provide biographical, technical and song information in English only, with no printed lyrics at all. Other combinations of Gaelic and English were found, but the predominance of English, and the paucity of Gaelic-dominant formats, was remarkable. On the whole, more recently published CDs contained more information and more Gaelic, and were more likely to include the Gaelic lyrics, but this is a very broad generalisation, as there is little consistency in language use, even by the same artist or the same record label. Further, this trend appears to be true only of commercially produced CDs, with the self-published recordings less likely to have detailed notes, for the obvious reason that they are more expensive to produce.

Where a ‘varying bilingual’ approach was taken (and this accounts for only a handful of the CDs in our sample) this involved some interesting examples of different information being provided to Gaelic readers and to English readers. For example, the notes for *Sguab is Dlòth* (2000) by Donnie Murdo MacLeod give different biographical information in each language, to explain basic geography and language dynamics to the

non-Gaelic audience and to provide the Gaelic-speaking audience with more detailed local information.

The English biography begins:

Stornoway is the main town of the Western Isles, and its inhabitants, for many years, thought it more genteel to be monoglot English than to be bilingual in English and Gaelic. It was there that Donnie Murdo MacLeod was raised in a Gaelic speaking home. Donnie Murdo appreciates his Gaelic upbringing despite a school education which did much to undermine it ...

The Gaelic biography begins:

Chaidh Donaidh Murdo MacLeòid a bhreith is àrach ann an Steòrnabhagh. Thàinig athair à Rànais anns na Lochan agus a mhàthair à Aignis an sgìr an Rubha. Seach an àbhaist anns a' bhaile mhòr sin, 's e Gàidhlig a bha air a bruidhinn an tac an teine.

English translation of the Gaelic:

Donnie Murdo MacLeod was born and brought up in Stornoway. His father came from Ranish in Lochs and his mother from Aignis in the Point district, Unusually for that town, it was Gaelic that was spoken in the household [*lit.* by the fireside].

Clearly, Gaelic speakers do not need to be told that Stornoway is the main town of the Western Isles, so the difference is understandable in this case. In other instances, the approach to language use and translation seems more haphazard, as with the following example from Margaret Stewart and Allan MacDonald's album *Colla Mo Rùn* (2001). Here, the non-Gaelic audience gets information about the pipe tunes not provided in Gaelic, while the Gaelic-speaking audience is treated to a little anecdote relating to the first of the tunes.

The tunes in the first track are called *Road to Loch nam Bearnas*, *Cutty's Wedding*, *Rothiemurchus Rant*, *Lochiel's Away to France* and *The Flagon*. The following information is given about them:

'S dòcha gur h-e 'slighe' is còir a bhith ann an-seo oir chan e rathad ceart (mar a th'aca anns a' Bheurla) a th'ann, ach bha e math gu leòr dhuinne 'nar n-òige

agus sinn a' dol a dh'iasgach ann ge b'oil le mo sheanamhair, a chanadh  
'seachainn an t-àite sin, tha Each-Uisge ann a dh'itheas thu'.

\*

The road to Loch nam Bearnas (Bairness on the Ordinance map) is actually a small track leading off the main road to Smirisary, Glenuig. Another name for the Rothiemurchus Rant is, 'The Lassie with the Lint-White Locks', which appears in the Macinnes Collection (1939), and may be a translation from Gaelic. The flagon is well known in Ireland as The Flogging Reel.

English translation of the Gaelic:

Perhaps 'track' ought to be used here because it's not a proper road (as it's called in English), but it was good enough for us in our youth when we went fishing there despite my grandmother, who would say, "avoid that place, there's a Kelpie[\*] there that'll eat you".

[\*A kelpie is a spirit in the form of a horse, said to inhabit bodies of water]

The notes for *Colla Mo Rùn* contain all the Gaelic lyrics with a full translation in English, but information about the songs and instrumental tracks is sometimes bilingual, sometimes in English only and sometimes in Gaelic only. Notes and translations are by Margaret Stewart and Allan MacDonald themselves. Stewart and MacDonald's previous album, *Fhuair Mi Pòg* (1998), took a far more consistent approach, with the Gaelic explanatory text containing virtually the same information as the following English translations, although the song lyrics for this earlier album were in Gaelic only. Song texts and sleeve notes for the earlier album were by Morag MacLeod.

More interestingly, Mill a h-Uile Rud (the punk band mentioned above) and traditional bands Mean Time and Sgorrabreac take an approach to language use that has obviously been deliberately adopted with insider and outsider audiences in mind — often, one might suspect, with a certain tongue-in-cheek disdain for the English monoglot — but it should be noted that these examples are atypical. These albums are fairly recent and all self-produced, and their approach to language use makes them stand out from the albums produced by market-driven labels such as Macmeanmna and Foot Stompin'.

The following example is from *The Natives are Friendly* (2002) by Mean Time. Only very basic information is provided in English, with far more detail and humour in the counterpart Gaelic text. This album is most unusual in taking a Gaelic-dominant approach, although unfortunately the lyrics of the songs are not provided.

The notes for the song *Zulu Dhòmhnail Ruaidh* are as follows:

Briathran (C. MacCoinnich) bho Chomann Eachdraidh Chàrlabhaigh  
Ceòl (T. MacArtair)

Òran a chaidh a dhèanamh aig deireadh na 19mh linn, nuair a bha an t-seòrsa bàta-iasgaich ris an cante ‘Zulu’ cumanta. Tha Dòmhnall Ruadh a’ tighinn le tè ùr agus tha am bàrd a’ dèanamh beagan de tharraing-às. Air a sgrìobhadh le Coinneach MacCoinnich nach maireann à Breascleit. Chuir Tormod fonn ùr ri na briathran agus tha e fhèin gan seinn, a’ dèanamh a dhìcheall ainmean a’ chriutha gu lèir fhaighinn a-steach dhan dara rann!

\*

Zulu was the name given to a certain style of fishing boat common around the turn of the 19th century.

English translation of the Gaelic:

Words (K. MacKenzie) from the Carloway Historical Society  
Music (N. MacArthur)

A song composed at the end of the 19th century, when the sort of fishing boat known as a ‘Zulu’ was common. Dòmhnall Ruadh [Red-haired Donald] comes along with a new one and the composer is making fun of him. Written by the late Kenneth MacKenzie from Breascleite. Norman put the words to a new tune and he himself sings them, trying his best to fit the names of the whole crew into the second verse!

The Gaelic-English balance (or imbalance) evident in the language use patterns in the CDs in the sample must seem odd, even shocking, to speakers of minority languages who take a more determined approach to making their language visible. We have to ask what assumptions are being made by those producing CDs that lead to such an overwhelmingly English-medium presentation of Gaelic music.

As far as we can determine, the approach is not based on any market research suggesting that more Gaelic would scare off English consumers, although perhaps this is what production companies fear. Perhaps music producers lack the language skills and feel more confident in English, but they could always ask for help. Indeed, several albums list translators/advisers in their credits — even, bizarrely, *Coming Home* (2004) by Fiona Kennedy, which credits one Neil Fraser with the Gaelic translations even though no lyrics or translations are provided. If printing space or cost is a factor, as

might well be the case with self-published CDs, lyrics or translations could always be put on a website, but few artists do this. Indeed, a number of albums devote pages of their accompanying booklets to colour photographs of band members or of landscapes but do not include lyrics or translations.

It could even be assumed that Gaelic speakers do not need information about Gaelic songs but that they have, by virtue of their understanding of the language and their cultural background, some instinctive understanding of the song tradition and need no more printed information. However, what is most likely to be behind the English-dominant approach evident in the sample is tradition and the long-established diglossia in the Gaelic music domain, which dates back at least to the late 19th century, if not earlier.

### **Implications and issues for language planning**

These findings raise a range of difficult issues. Clearly there is a major issue of cultural ownership here. To whom does the Gaelic cultural tradition belong, and to whom is it being presented? Surely the fact that the a large section of the target audience is clearly an ‘outside’ one — and that there is no ‘home turf’ for Gaelic music, following Fishman’s analysis (1991: 58) — will have significant consequences in terms of how the tradition is understood, maintained and, crucially, developed in the future. The risk of ‘museumisation’ is serious, as shown by the near-total disappearance of new compositions dealing with contemporary issues of concern to the Gaelic community.

However, we should emphasise the language planning issues as well as the aesthetic and cultural aspects. Here too the issues are clearly serious. First, Gaelic music is perceived and promoted as an integral part of overall Gaelic development strategy. The recently enacted Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 expressly seeks to promote Gaelic culture along with the Gaelic language, and significant amounts of public money are spent with this aim. Bòrd na Gàidhlig has given relatively generous funding to tours by Gaelic musicians (although, to be fair, most CDs are private undertakings and do not draw a public subsidy). It is therefore appropriate in the circumstances, if somewhat reductionist, to look at the Gaelic arts from an instrumental language planning standpoint.



It is clearly problematic, from this purely instrumental language planning point of view, that such an important and prestigious sector, one that is potentially so strategically useful, should actually be so unhelpful in terms of creating a secure ‘Gaelic’ domain and in promoting the reversal of language shift more generally. Quite the contrary: Gaelic music through English expressly legitimates and promotes the ‘Xian via Yish’ approach, and fuels arguments that promoting ‘Gaelic’ does not really have to be about language at all (Rogerson & Gloyer 1995).

Second, there is the thorny problem of exclusion. Excluding those who cannot speak or read Gaelic can be controversial. It is more accepted in some fields; for example, Gaelic radio can only be appreciated by those who understand spoken Gaelic and Gaelic publishing necessarily excludes those who cannot read the language, but this is considered normal and reasonable. Within limits: the high level of translation in some domains (especially poetry) means there are problems comparable to those seen with regard to music (Krause 2005). It should also be noted that Gaelic publishing is generally frail, particularly with regard to periodicals; at the moment, there is but a single Gaelic magazine, the semiannual *Gath*, while Breton — hardly the best supported of minority languages in Europe! — has some 10-12 magazines/journals (monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly) for a comparable or slightly smaller number of readers of the language (c. 40,000).

An additional aspect of this problem of exclusion is that one-third of Gaelic speakers cannot read Gaelic. Would a Gaelic-only approach to the packaging of CDs exclude them in an unconstructive way? These will almost all be native speakers; native Gaelic speakers can understand the lyrics given the way Gaelic is sung (admittedly, this may not be true of Mill a h-Uile Rud) and probably know many of the songs in any event given how fixed the repertoire is, so perhaps the liner notes are not so necessary for them.

## **Conclusion**

Gaelic music provides, at the very least, an opportunity for more visibility for Gaelic and for a thoroughly bilingual approach, if not a more-Gaelic-than-English approach. However, the opportunity is not being taken up at present, and English still dominates. In many respects, the current situation of Gaelic music represents a dynamic typical of declining minority languages, with much symbolic rather than instrumental language

use and little challenge to the legitimacy of the 'Xian via Yish' approach. More determined revitalisation strategies might include a stronger commitment to establish (or restore) Gaelic music as an 'Xish' domain and to connect the culture of musical composition more directly to contemporary life and the contemporary situation of the Gaelic community. Problematically, however, the current 'outward-looking' approach to the Gaelic arts, focused principally on serving the non-Gaelic-speaking 'mass market', has been identified as a key strand in 'cutting edge' contemporary development strategies that work towards the consolidation of the so-called 'Gaelic economy' (Sproull & Chalmers 1998; Pedersen 2000; McLeod 2002). In this sense, then, key players in Gaelic development circles perceive the current dynamic not as a lagging indicator that is symptomatic of an ailing language community but as an indication of the healthy evolution of that community. As such, the ideological challenges involved in any reorientation of cultural strategy are not inconsiderable.

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