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Gascon Rock? Micro-identities in the European Union

The idea for this paper came from a gift – a red t-shirt, decorated with two cows and the number 64, the number of the French department of the Pyrenees Atlantiques.

The department was created in 1790 from the provinces of Guyenne, Béarn and Gascony, as well as the three Basque-speaking provinces of Labourd, Soule and Basse-Navarre. It brought together groups of people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, who had been historically separate for centuries. The shirt was one of a range of clothing and accessories marketed under the ‘64’ brand, a concept replicated in the brand *Béarn Culture Wear*, featuring instead of the number 64, the horns of a bull as its central logo, referring to the cows that feature on the Béarn emblem.

These two brands are representative of peripheral identities, and as such fit into the context of what Philip Bohlman (2004) calls the New Regionalism, a European trend to integrate ethnic and cultural minorities into constructs of nation. Regionalism has been officially promoted in EU cultural policies as a counterpoint to the more negative implications of nationalism. As a result the focus has shifted a program by

which concepts of nations are represented by a combination of border regions and their cultures. The people represented in the symbolism of the '64' and 'Béarn' merchandise coincide with those who Bohlman calls the "New Europeans," groups of people whose cultures in the past have been excluded by, and from, nationalism (2004: 278). Bohlman draws attention to a "New European popular music" (2004: 310), the voice of these New Europeans: what musical voice might accompany this New Europeanness that seems to be expressed here in the Pyrénées Atlantiques?

I propose that an example of this identity can be found in the 'new folk' music of the Béarn group Nadau, who have become a local institution, and whose original songs, sung in the dialect of Gascon, have attracted a large, and demographically diverse, audience. Situated in the Béarn, at the borders of both France and of centralised French culture, Nadau epitomise a New European resistance to centralisation, representing what Bohlman calls "the musical landscape of New Europeanness" whose focus has shifted to cultural and geographical peripheries. (Bohlman, 2004: 281). Finally, I argue that while Nadau's national success is in part due to a movement within Europe that allows a voice for cultural minorities, the source of its music, and of its local success, lies in its connection to place, specifically, the Pyrenees mountains, clearly expressed through the music and the lyrical themes.

Nadau stand for, above all, the Béarn, now a region within the department of the Pyrénées Atlantiques, but formerly a small country formed in the 11th century. It stayed independent until the annexation forced upon France by Louis 13th in 1620 who, at the same time, imposed the usage of French as the official language in the

place of Occitan. Today, many of the people within the department still speak a language or dialect as well as French – generally speaking, Basque and Gascon. Gascon refers to a group of Occitan language variations, of which Béarnais is one, which is spoken in the south-west of France, in a region roughly corresponding to the ancient territories of Gascony and Béarn (Brock, 2008: 7). Yet, in the Gascon-speaking region, a so-called ‘militant’ movement instigated by Gasconists and Béarnists has set itself in opposition to the Occitan language movement (Moreux, 2004: 26), as evident in this extract from the home page of the *L'Enstitut Biarnes e Gascoun* (Béarnais and Gascon Institute; translated from French by the author):

While recognising the contribution and work of certain Occitan schools we would like to clarify our position regarding Occitanism. Occitanism, appearing at the end of the 19th century, is a doctrine that is completely alien to Béarn and Gascon heritage ... Béarnais and Gascon are not Occitan dialects. ... The usage of Occitan writing for a Gascon cuts off its people from their literary culture.¹

It is within this context of an identity flavoured by local linguistic and cultural variants, that the music of Nadau is best understood.

Formerly known as Los de Nadau, the group formed in 1973 in Tarbes, a small town in the department of Hautes Pyrenees, in the region historically known as Gascony. Originally a three-piece acoustic group, in the late 1980s new members joined and the group changed their name to Nadau, with a line-up including synthesiser, electric

guitars, bagpipes, accordion and drum kit. They have performed to crowds of up to 7000, both locally and in Paris, and have released 14 albums and 4 DVDs. Nadau's music could be loosely described as folk-rock in style, with some songs melding styles as diverse as Rap and Reggae, but many of their songs are much closer to a generic folk sound. In an interview with French journalist Jacme Gaudas, founding member Michel Maffrand explains that "Nadau do not resemble any other. I wouldn't know how to define it, that's for you to say; it's not folk, neither is it popular."

Nadau's official website, and the press releases contained within its pages, give an idea of the public reception of the group, focussing primarily on language, musicality, and emotion. For example one article states that "the fight for recognition of regional identity has been won Over thirty years, Nadau has never stopped evolving to keep up with the times, with one intangible constant: their love for the Béarn." ("Nadau Continue la Lutte en Chansons").³ Maffrand says that they are inspired by traditional music, describing Nadau as an "agent of culture" in one interview ("Nadau Veut Faire Battre le Coeur Occitan" n/d).⁴

The fact that Nadau sing in Gascon is of course the main indicator of this commitment, and as such they are part of a much larger musical movement of popular musicians, or musicians combining popular and traditional styles, who sing in an Occitan dialect. Other groups who sing in the Occitan language include Massilia Sound System, formed in Marseilles in the 1980s and whose music is a hybrid of reggae and ragamuffin, referred to locally as *trobamuffin*, from the troubadour tradition. The Fabulous Trobadors, a duo founded in Toulouse in 1987, have their own distinctive style which is based on Occitan folk music, but blended with north-

eastern Brazilian rhythms, rapped lyrics and human beat-boxing. Both groups are open supporters of Félix Castan (George, 2007: 105), an Occitanist whose anti-centralist philosophies are reflected in Gaudas' description of Nadau as a "decentralizing proponent", situating Occitan, and Nadau, in cultural opposition to what he refers to as "mono-cultural Paris."⁵ While George claims that the above groups "place themselves consciously in this tradition of Occitan thought" (2007: 106), Nadau do not appear to explicitly align themselves with any Occitanist philosophy; however, in the interview with Gaudas, Maffrand explains that "this traditional Occitan, Gascon, Béarn song, whatever you want to call it, we try to make it live today.... We need to do everything we can to evolve and move with the times"⁶ (translated from French by the author), clearly reflecting George's claim that the above two groups act primarily to "explore the reality of contemporary France and to construct new local and regional identities" (2007: 106).

Based on descriptions found in a number of newspaper articles and interviews, Nadau's songs are portrayed as being broadly divided thematically into love songs, songs about everyday life, and activist songs concerning an Occitan, if not a distinctly Béarn, identity. The lyrics of the songs from the Pau (1996) and Paris (2005) concert set lists were analysed to verify this, representing 24 songs from their repertoire. In fact, the lyrical analysis did indeed support this impression: 17% were love songs, 29% about everyday life, and 54% could be classified as activist, however it is in the nature of what might be termed activist songs that I would like to focus this discussion.

Given the emphasis placed on an Gascon and Béarn identity, it might be expected that this would be a common theme in these songs, however the words Béarn and Gascon never appear, and the word Occitan only once, in the song *Requiem for Little John*. In fact, the commonality of those songs that could be classified as activist is that they refer to the preservation or celebration of tradition, and that they all refer to place; it is to this 'place' described in the lyrics, and the identity it communicates, that I will now turn.

The thing that stands out in the lyrics is the number of references to mountains – this is hardly surprising, as the Pyrenees mountain chain forms a backdrop to the Béarn region, and is visible from all parts within it. The Pyrenees however are more than a picturesque backdrop; they are a “geographical symbol”, “a counterpoint to a more dominant, metropolitan world-view” (Entrikin & Berdoulay, 2005: 133). Further, the mountain culture informs an identity that is specific to the region – a collective socio-spatial, territorial construction which is specific to the region (Di Méo, Sauvaitre and Soufflet, 2004). Following are but a few of the many songs that exemplify the Béarnais connection with the Pyrénées mountain chain.

The Olympia concert opens with a song that epitomises this connection. *Se Canto*, a traditional song, has become somewhat of an anthem in the Occitan speaking region. It was sung at the opening of the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, and is often sung at official events such as Rugby matches. It is essentially a love song, which asks the mountains to lay down so that this lost love can be seen: “Those mountains that are so high keep me from seeing where my love has gone. Lay down, o mountains and rise up, o plains, so I may see where my love has gone.”⁷ These somewhat banal lyrics

believe the emotional intensity with which this song is embraced by the Occitan-speaking population; this is clearly visible in the video footage of the concert, but difficult to portray here in words.

For a local person, the metaphor is not of a mountain representing lost love, but of a love representing the mountains, and the culture of those mountains. This clip also offers a good opportunity to witness the level of engagement of the audience. Many of its members, young and old, are dressed in iconic clothing, especially the black Béarn beret, and the white shirt and bandana of the local fetes and bull fights. Both the Occitan and the Béarn emblems are evident in the banners being waved. The audience participate vocally with, it seems, everyone knowing the words to this song. This is mostly the case across the concert's entire set list.

To the Edelweiss is one of Nadau's songs that has become 'traditional' in its own time. The story told is simply one of looking for edelweiss in the mountains, but the iconography is rich: "Come little Peter, we will walk to the Edelweiss, and there we will find ourselves in the land" (pays). The song begins with a call and response between a solo singer and male chorus, reflecting the rich male choral tradition of the Béarn region, and finishes as an up tempo, traditional sounding song.

Le Saut de Banasse refers to a specific place – Bedous, a mountain village in the Béarn region - describing the *transhumance* when the shepherds take their sheep up to the higher mountain pastures each summer, a ritual rich in tradition. In keeping with this celebration of tradition, the song opens with a solo on the hurdy gurdy which gives an almost medieval feel. This is eventually accompanied by cello, then a capella

vocals; the song then takes off into an upbeat folk dance interspersed with the vocal sections.

Amongst this group of ‘place’ songs are others that refer to land and place in more general terms. *We are who we are* tells of someone loving the land so much his heart is breaking, believing in it so much it hurts. The song goes on to say “old world, that carries us from yesterday to today, you will never be old, everything begins again, the story never ends” – a clear reference to the importance of tradition.

In the song *The Door with my Foot* the narrator says that “when I have more than a thousand songs in my head I will push the door with my foot and I will say to him, I have never renounced anything, I am from the land, and from the world as well.”

Further on he sings of how “being stubborn, I have copped many blows wanting to make a future with these old stones.” Again, the ‘land’ figures strongly, as well as resistance he has faced for holding on to tradition. Interestingly, this song is both rapped and sung, making reference to a popular genre which has since its inception been associated with ethnic identity and the minority voice.

The themes of connection to the land and are very strong in all of the songs, the above being but a few examples. These are the so-called ‘activist’ songs – but it is not a militant activism; it is an activism that allows culture and place to speak for themselves. The only song with even vague ‘activist’ overtones is *Requiem for Little John*. It is the only song that includes reference to Occitan in the lyrics, and is the story of petit Jean, a peasant and folk hero, who in 1643 led a rebellion against King Louis XIV in protest against the proclamation of French as the official language; he was captured and tortured on the wheel. The more militant tone of the story, if not the

lyrics themselves, is reflected in the two traditional solo drummers, one of whose drums is draped with the Occitan flag.

The musical style of all of the songs is extremely varied: although the underlying feel is undeniably folk-ish, with some songs having a distinctively traditional feel, they are fused at times with genres as diverse as reggae, rock and rap. It is therefore not the music per se that creates a sense of connection with a local culture, but a more generalised connection of folk 'sounding' music, whose stylistic particularities often support the lyrical themes. It is however primarily the subtleties of place described, as well as the language used, that identify Nadau and their songs as Béarnais – although the language would be broadly understood as Occitan by the general public, and Gascon by local speakers, it is the localised, and poetic, sense of place in the songs that makes it so clear that Nadau are Béarnais before anything else. On the macro level the songs are linking language and place - Occitan and the south of France - but on the micro level they link Gascony, the Béarn, and the Pyrenees.

The obvious context within which to understand Nadau is that of language – the Occitan language movement is mirrored in, for example, the Basque country, Catalonia, Ireland and Cornwall. Language is primordial in terms of identity but is Nadau really only just about language? Let us turn back for a moment to the start of this paper, where I began with a local level identity expressed through the '64' range of merchandise, and from there moved to an even more localised identity – that of the Béarn. In other words, we are dealing with identities within identities. In examining identification with language, a similar setup is seen, where within the broad context of French language, we find identification with the Occitan language, and within that

group, identification with the Gascon dialect, within which we see a movement for the Béarn dialect to separate itself from the larger Occitan linguistic context. It seems to me we are dealing with micro-identities; in searching for a metaphor, the layers of the onion, or concentric circles came to mind, but neither of these really fit the phenomenon, as both imply a hierarchy, or an order one must follow to pinpoint a certain place within the circle or sphere. This is not the case with identification with the Béarn dialect, as it seems to exist concomitantly with other identities.

Nadau are held up as examples of the fight for the preservation and promotion of the group of Occitan dialects, even the Occitan language as a whole, yet Nadau represent a small grouping within this field, and more so one that is attempting to separate itself from the larger context of Occitan. As such, it mirrors what Bohlman refers to as the New European resistance to centralisation. On the macro level, Nadau stand for the 'principle' of language, and of cultural preservation, but on a local level they stand for more.

At the start of this paper I referred to the New Europe, and argued a place for Nadau in that context. What Bohlman refers to as the New Regionalism described a trend, arising from the amalgamation of nations into the European Union, to include cultural minorities within the larger constructs of nation. If this is the case, then the phenomenon of local branding I referred to at the start of the paper is hardly surprising, and contextualises the rise in popularity of musical groups singing in Occitan, and incorporating local musical influences into a broader popular style (or vice versa). Nadau exemplify this trend, through their lyrics sung in Béarnais, their

musical references to tradition, and the themes of local geography and cultural mores in the lyrics.

Nadau's music speaks with the heart, not with the head; an honest expression of a people, a land, it describes a feeling for place that is almost intangible. On that note, I will leave it to speak, or better sing, for what and who it is with a quote from Michel Maffrand, the man who *is* Nadau: "I believe that culture is the basis of everything . . . ideas have to come from your culture, that which you have inside of you even if it is invisible; if not you don't achieve anything, you are nothing"⁸ (translated from French by the author).

Endnotes

1. <http://www.biarn-e-gascougne.org>, accessed 14 November, 2008
2. n/d, translated from French by the author
3. Newspaper article from Nadau's official website, no source given.
<http://www.nadau.com/?page=7a51b166dfe235dfec2901a24ed2f671>, accessed October 24, 2008)
4. Newspaper article from Nadau's official website, no source given.
<http://www.nadau.com/?page=7a51b166dfe235dfec2901a24ed2f671>, accessed October 24, 2008)
5. <http://pagesperso-orange.fr/christian.esteve/nadau.htm#saga>, accessed November 6, 2008
6. <http://pagesperso-orange.fr/christian.esteve/nadau.htm#saga>, accessed November 6, 2008

7. All lyrics translated from the French by the author; French translations of the original Gascon lyrics available at
<http://www.nadau.com/?page=4cdf5a25d4673bfc4546ca7843071f65>, accessed September, 2008
8. <http://pagesperso-orange.fr/christian.esteve/nadau.htm#saga>, accessed November 6, 2008

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Nadau *A L'Olympia* (2005)

Nadau *En Companhia* (1996)