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The Lost Tribes of Europe

As national borders blur, the Continent's original minorities are fighting to reclaim their ancient cultures and identities

BY JAMES GEARY

When John Angarrack accompanied his two young sons on a school trip to a local-history exhibit in their hometown of Bodmin, Cornwall, in southwestern England, he was shocked to see 10th century King Athelstan portrayed as a benevolent monarch who gently persuaded the indigenous Cornish people to pledge their lives and land to the English crown. Angarrack had been taught that Athelstan was an expansionist tyrant, and that Cornwall became part of England only after centuries of strife. So he led a protest at the next town council meeting with 40 demonstrators waving banners demanding: we want our history back!

That was eight years ago, and Angarrack is still fighting to reclaim Cornish history. His group, Cornwall 2000, is waging a campaign to get the Cornish recognized as an ethnic minority within Britain, a designation he says would revive Cornish culture and language with the help of state funding. "The English national curriculum does not include Celtic history [of which the Cornish are a part] because it doesn't want to suggest that the concept of the 'English people' is fairly new," he says.

Angarrack isn't out for independence, but he does want some form of Cornish government — like the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly — in the hope that increased local control will spur growth in an economy driven primarily by tourism. And if the Cornish aren't granted status as an ethnic minority, he plans to ask the courts to review the decision. "If Cornish people want to be English, that's up to them," Angarrack says. "But many of us don't and I'm going to do my best to get the state to accept that."

Angarrack's campaign may seem like a lone, eccentric quest — his Celtic rallying cry is heeded by only a few — but it is emblematic of an identity crisis that's playing itself out all across Europe. The recent London terrorist bombings, some of which were carried out by young men who were born and raised in Europe, have opened a fierce argument about multiculturalism, which pivots on whether Europe has been too tolerant of extremism masquerading as cultural diversity. As those questions are debated across the Continent, another, less obvious clash is taking place. This time, the conflict is not between national identities and the cultures of relatively new immigrants to Europe — like those who have arrived from Asia or North Africa — but between the idea of a nation and the cultural survival of Europe's oldest minority groups.

In Eastern and Central Europe, the fall of communism and the enlargement of the European Union have unleashed a new pride and interest in cultural roots, especially those minority identities that were suppressed under communist rule. There has been a similar resurgence in Western Europe, albeit for different reasons. For many in the west, a bigger E.U. is a blander E.U. — and a potentially threatening one. When the French and Dutch rejected the proposed European

constitution earlier this year, many of those who voted no saw the poll as a way of preventing "non-European" Turkey from joining the club. The fear is that as old borders erode — due to globalization, mass tourism and possible further E.U. expansion — long-cherished ethnic and regional differences will be gradually sanded out of existence.

Increasingly, Europe's national minority groups — those "tribes" who are ethnically and culturally distinct, and who for decades have been lost to the mainstream — want to accentuate, celebrate and commercialize their differences. The Sami, a reindeer-herding people who live across the Nordic region, have their own parliaments in Finland, Norway and Sweden to make decisions on linguistic and cultural matters. About three years ago, a clutch of determined editors formed the European Association of Daily Newspapers in Minority and Regional Languages (midas); the organization brings together some 30 dailies to coordinate strategies and share experiences and resources. Some minority languages are making a comeback, too. In the state of Schleswig-Holstein in Germany, 20% of the 50,000 or so people who consider themselves North Frisians — descendants of tribal migrants who settled in this coastal region around 2,000 years ago — still speak dialects of their West Germanic language. "It's only been during the last couple of years that people here — especially young people — have begun to realize that belonging to our ethnic minority is something to be treasured," says Fiete Pingel of the North Frisian Institute in Bredstedt.

Have Europe's lost tribes found their groove? There may be economic as well as cultural benefits to doing so. Stefan Wolff, a professor of political science at Bath University and co-editor of *The Ethnopolitical Encyclopaedia of Europe*, says a distinct cultural identity is a competitive advantage. Tourists want precisely those experiences — folk dances, handmade crafts, unusual culinary delights — that they can't get at home. And local delicacies have a way of catching on further afield. Maryon McDonald, a Cambridge University anthropologist and author of *We Are Not French! Language, Culture and Identity in Brittany*, points out that the humble crepe — once the daily fare of poor Breton peasants — is now available in the region's finest restaurants.

Of course, Europe has always been a mosaic of competing and collaborating cultures. It was only with the rise of the nation-state in the 18th and 19th centuries that many people — often by force rather than choice — began primarily identifying themselves by nationality rather than local ethnic group. Now that national borders are crumbling, the tribal mind is once again coming to the fore.

And the time may be right for revival. Far from stamping out diversity, the E.U. in many ways encourages it. In Cornwall, for example, part of the Union's current €1.2 billion, seven-year aid package is devoted to harnessing "the benefits from the arts, cultural and heritage industries to develop new, sustainable opportunities for growth." "A local identity has become a powerful resource for politicians," says Wolff. "If you want E.U. funds, you need a relatively strong regional identity."

Not all minorities have been successful in making their identities marketable or politically viable. Of Slovakia's 350,000 Roma, 150,000 live in segregated rural settlements or urban ghettos. A 2003 U.N. report described the living conditions of Central and Eastern Europe's Roma as "closer to those in sub-Saharan Africa than to Europe." Things are only slowly beginning to change. Last year, Hungary's Livia Jaroka, 30, became the first Roma to be elected to the European Parliament.

The Basques, by contrast, have managed to maintain a vibrant, thriving culture. The Spanish Basques have their own regional government, and some 45% of the books published in the area in 2003 were in Basque.

Why should we care about the Basques, Roma, Sami and North Frisians? For starters, because cultural diversity, like biodiversity, is a good in itself. "Minorities are part of the cultural heritage of Europe," says Wolff. "We would all lose out if cultural diversity didn't survive." There are more practical benefits as well, especially at a time when disaffected young people too often find radicalization when they go looking for their roots. From the Caucasus to the Balkans to the Basque country, regions with multiple minorities often have histories of violence and instability. A recognition of cultural diversity — rather than an attempt to crush it — can stop a sense of identity spinning out of control into violent separatist campaigns.

To find out how some of Europe's oldest minorities are faring, Time visited four groups: the Veps in Russia, the Rusyns in Slovakia, the Sorbs in Germany and the Bretons in France. Some of these ancient peoples seem doomed; others are thriving, in part by transforming their traditional crafts and customs into cultural commodities. However disparate their fortunes, though, they are all, like Angarrack and his group of Cornish, fighting to get their history back.

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