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The Kate Kennedy Procession: A Revival of History and newfound Identity

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This ethnography examines the 99th Kate Kennedy Procession in St Andrews, exploring how remembrance, revival, and identity are produced through participation in this annual ritual. Drawing on participant observation, informal interviews, and the author's own positionality as a member of the Kate Kennedy Club, the study argues for the sensory and interpretative dimensions of fieldwork. Findings reveal that the procession operates as an act of historical commemoration, animating factual and mythical narratives central to a local, 'St Andrean' identity. Through embodied performance, participants and spectators experience a temporal suspension, reviving memories, values, and symbolic figures. The procession reshapes personal and collective identities, fostering a united community while allowing individuals to project their own meanings onto key characters such as Lady Katharine. Ultimately, this ethnography argues that the procession constitutes a flexible, contested cultural space in which history, legend, and personal memory intersect, highlighting the subjective nature of anthropological interpretation.

The Kate Kennedy Spring Procession is organized by the Kate Kennedy Club, and departs from St Salvador's Quad, on a Saturday in April each spring. The procession traces its roots to medieval, pagan, and Christian spring rites, with Fifers commemorating "Cath Cinneachaidh". Legend has it that in the fifteenth century, the beautiful niece of Bishop James Kennedy, Lady Katharine, came to stay in St Andrews in both the spring of her life and the spring of the year. Idolised by all, a festival emerged from two separate origins, and it became Kate Kennedy's Day. On the 5th of

March 1926, the procession was formally revived under the club thanks to two students, Donald Kennedy and James Doak, inspired by J. M Barrie's rectorial address on "Courage", with the assistance of Principle Sir James Irvine. The Club has since maintained the tradition of Kate's yearly Spring Procession, with the exception of the WWII and Covid periods. Today, the event celebrates the town's rich history, and will see over 150 students, locals, and university staff dress up as historical figures who have made an impact on St Andrews.

Explosion of colours, sounds, and smiles greet me

as I pass by the streets. My name is called, and I wonder where my purpose lies within this strange parade. My feet feel warm on the foreign pavement; my hands grip the familiar wooden cross I bear. I feel blessed to live a few moments back on this earth, in the country that calls me their patron. Different cloths drape the people around me, and crowds stare at us whilst holding strange objects that flash light. Centuries have transformed my surroundings...a

Cathedral lies in ruins and - what are those loud metal creatures? I am faced with contradictions, feeling strangely back home in a different time. Archbishops and royals parade behind me, and a horse drawn object covered in daffodils carries a beautiful woman...Katharine! She will wave and smile, sip whiskey from a quaich and lift people's spirits with the promise of Spring. A peculiar reality indeed!

INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

These are the words I envision St Andrew to say, if he were to lead the Kate Kennedy Procession today. I begin this ethnography with an attempt to place the reader within the deeply transformative experience that is participating in the procession. The following study will discuss themes of remembrance alongside revival and identity based upon conversations, participant observation, and personal involvement carried in the field between March and April 2025.

Throughout this process, I have come to realise that the diversity of human nature means anthropological research is interpretative, sensitive, flexible and contested. I aim towards an objective analysis, allowing anthropological knowledge to honour the voices and requests of participants; however, it should be noted that this work also reflects my active participation in organizing the procession as a current member

of the Kate Kennedy Club. My interpretations and conclusions are undeniably shaped by this relationship, distancing this from the original criteria of 'empirical fieldwork' outlined in Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). I hope this unique positionality will provide an alternative to rigid methodology, to create a transparent, sensory, and subjective interpretation, in line with some elements of autoethnography (Culhane & Denielle 2016). Whilst my fieldwork forms the basis for this analysis, I will consider historical contexts and draw on external ethnographies to inform the discussion. This stands in line with Kuper's argument on the limits of an exclusive Functionalist approach; in the prioritization of fieldwork, it often ignores history (Kuper 2015). I hope to give justice to student voices, friends, and local St Andreans, as they unlock the temporal and spatial journey surrounding this tradition. A powerful sense of historical revival permeates the procession, involving spectators and participants in a mystical experience of remembrance. With this comes an awakening of memories, emotions, and personal symbolism. This ethnography argues the surprising and immersive revelations give new meaning to the identities of people involved.

REMEMBRANCE

A recurring aspect which defined my fieldwork was the procession's significance as an act of remembrance. From the long costume inventories and logistical planning in the weeks prior to the Procession, to the scrupulous last-minute fittings, decorations, and polishing of armour, everything is planned with an intent to present the characters at their best. It is interesting to consider the passionate investment that goes into this relatively 'ephemeral' reality, lasting only a

couple of hours (Telle 2023:47). When speaking to other club members, almost all of them testified to a dedication to honour the stories of people that have contributed so much to the town and university. Students Paula and Sofia revealed how their participation connected them to Scottish culture and opened their eyes to histories of St Andrews which would otherwise go unobserved. The procession therefore assumes a devotional and educational power as an act of historical remembrance. It is interesting to consider how this commemoration acknowledges a history that is infused with myth and legend, reflecting a contradictory force between truth and mystery. This can be seen through the main character, the mystical Lady 'Katharina'. Whilst her uncle's status as Bishop Kennedy presents factual evidence, her own identity lies lost in the realms of legend. Only the bell in St Salvador's Quad bears witness to her name, forming a fascinating, mysterious character. This characteristic of the procession is no novelty to the context of Scotland, whose culture reflects a unique link to folkloric rituals. Anthropologist Guidicini alludes to the tradition of performing Scottish personhood through active engagement with civic space (Guidicini 2020). Similarly, Emily Donoho studies the history of 'insanity cures' in the Highlands, observing the relevance of magic to Scotland's identity (Donoho 2014). It is clear that this fusion between reality and legend fits within a specific culturally Scottish context. The historical remembrance of the procession is therefore also dedicated to the memory of these unique, mystical legends.

FROM REMEMBRANCE TO REVIVAL

My personal involvement on procession day, the 19th of April, revealed a fascinating quality of

this tradition: its ability to create a temporal, spatial reality which has the power of revival. By creating a temporal reality, I mean to convey how the physical experience of the procession, involving more than 150 characters in costumes, immersed viewers and participants in a unique realm of time and space which departed from 21st century St Andrews. Seremetakis alludes to how senses act as a 'polytemporal portal', crossing temporal boundaries (Seremetakis 1994). This crossing of boundaries resonates with the procession, as the sensory experience of re-enacting roles is able to immerse participants in a new dimension. This context then allows for the revival of memories through breaking the rational boundaries of time, creating a strange reality where characters, actions, and feelings lost in the past come back to life. Kari Telle's ethnography, focusing on the Cakranegara procession in Indonesia, argues a similar point. When analyzing the featured Hindu-Balinese imagination demons, Telle observes how this Cakranegara procession was the one occasion to let demons 'flourish in bursts of life' (Telle 2023: 49).

This brings me on to a second revelation in relation to this force of 'revival'. There is a sense of the procession becoming a system which goes beyond the aesthetic, physical presentation of a parade, and operates as a pilgrimage to resurrect values, people, and memories belonging to the past. This first came through my conversations with Mark. As an honorary life member, he has dedicated most of his life to the procession, and the club owes a great deal to his artistic wisdom and heraldic knowledge. For Mark, working to keep the procession holds deep significance:

'My strongest and enduring reaction to the whole Procession tradition - including the many

generations preceding its banning and then resurrection- is that it is, quite unconsciously, a deeply atavistic celebration of Spring (cf Easter, Nauroz, etc). In this iteration it is- again unconsciously- the festival of Spring personified as Persephone returning from the Underworld with her trail of the honoured dead. Kate is Persephone, whose by-name is Kore - the Maid.. I have used the adverb 'unconsciously' twice, intentionally, as every time I have urged this understanding on the participants, they have laughed it off dismissively. I suppose this is because they are far too 21st century and tech-savvy to acknowledge our dark, compelling natures! I hope this may be useful.'

Mark explains this, I note the Latin *Sursum Corda* engraved on fireplace behind him. He smiles, translating this as 'Lift up your Hearts'. Classical tradition and history are invaluable to Mark, and he often appears concerned on the impact of secularization and technology on our current society. The procession therefore presents the metaphorical revival of 'Spring', and with this, the restoration of the historical and cultural narratives surrounding the Procession. Katharine seems to assume the symbolic mission of resurrecting these fading traditions in the face of augmenting technology. Further, It is interesting to note how Mark stresses 'unconsciousness' within his reflection. It testifies to how personal interpretations of and interactions with this tradition cannot be easily framed within a rational, academic explanation. One of the greatest values of this fieldwork was precisely the interactive, everchanging subconscious meanings and relations to the procession.

If we return to analyse the Procession as a tradition of remembrance, then Telle's ethnography provides more insight to this. She

notes the relation between both 'invisible' and 'visible' forces in Hindu Balinese culture and defines the 'internal aesthetic' as a hidden meaning to the procession which is reserved for forces of the invisible, 'niskala realm' (Telle 2023:47). Diverting from Mark's desire to reanimate cultural values, Telle argues for a significance in attempting to entertain and communicate with the realm of spirits. In some ways, I think this strongly resonates with the Kate Kennedy Procession. Firstly, the physical act of interpreting a character does, in many ways, invoke a sensory feeling of connection with that person's spirit. This revelation became apparent through a discussion with another figure who is involved with the commentary of the procession, preferring to remain anonymous. They stated how they like to think of their role as a 'magic, narrative voice', with the objective of informing spectators as characters presented outside Holy Trinity Church. In a moving moment, they revealed to me how the procession helps them commemorate their late daughter Katie.

'You see, my daughter's name is Katie, and my wife is Elizabeth. These are the names engraved on the two bells in St Salvador's Chapel. When I saw the carriage with the Lady Katharine approaching, I saw Katie. To me, the Lady Kate is Katie.'

This touching description presents the procession as a powerful, devotional act of remembrance to Katie. Their sensory participation in the procession was able to transport personal memory through time (Seremetakis 1994). This acts as an opportunity to keep Katie's memory alive. Therefore, in some ways the procession gains symbolism as an act that is restoring contact with these 'invisible' spirits (Telle 2023).

NEWFOUND IDENTITY

We have considered how remembrance and revival are interpreted by the outside, but it is interesting to examine newfound identities within the revival of the past, considering how involvement with The Kate Kennedy Procession directly affects the identities of participants. These newfound identities became apparent through my ethnographic research, as I noticed how the procession introduces new meaning to the personhood of those involved. Interviewing university students Isa, Lis and Sofia revealed the intense sense of belonging this 'collective endeavour' instilled (Telle 2023: 51). In the multicultural, fast paced environment of St Andrews, Lis states;

'Even just for those three hours, the procession fosters a sense of belonging in this town that for many students isn't necessarily home. It let me feel like a part of something, part of the unique, special town that is St Andrews.'

Sofia also testifies to this shared space, explaining how it incorporated her within a celebration of Scottish culture for the first time, and acted as an opportunity to meet and connect with locals. We can observe then that personal identities are affected by a constructed 'imagined' community (Anderson 2005). In this case, the community is generated through participation and/or involvement to the procession. Frank, a charismatic honorary member and participant in the procession, recalls how his favourite aspect of the day is precisely the ability to create a unified group, merging students and locals in what he coins a 'People's Procession'.

In some cases, the procession causes personal identity to assume a quest-like, near missionary quality. For the many locals involved, their

selfhood is shaped by a belief and commitment towards the values of the procession. In response to the question 'what is the Kate Kennedy Procession to you?', David replied with Gustav Mahler's quote:

'Tradition is not the worship of ashes, it is the preservation of fire'

'To me, this is the essence of the procession...to maintain the spirit, freedom of thought, scholarship and humanity of St Andrews.'

This specific purpose of the procession, described so well by David, fosters a sense of devotion and purpose to the people involved in its organization. Throughout difficult past times, when the club struggled to improve itself, Frank, David, and Martin recall their intense conviction and battle for the procession to 'continue to do good'. The procession has transformed them into missionaries, with the role of preserving and representing the values of this tradition.

During my participant observation, I noted how students undertook the parade with a light-hearted attitude, laughing and enjoying the costumes. To many this tradition forms part of the unique experience that comes with being a St Andrews university student. The morals behind this centenary old tradition do not diminish its festive, joyful nature. Most students were visibly immersed in this ritual, affected by a subconscious sense of duty towards their role. This approach to cosplaying the characters, defined by celebratory devotion, testifies to the procession's ability to communicate and shape the identity of university students.

An aspect which shines through this discussion of 'identity', is how the procession provides scope for flexible, varied interpretations, and meanings. Participants are not forced to conform

to specific, historicised identity of 'The Lady Katharine', or a forced understanding of what the procession must signify to them. This fluidity enables interpretations which resonate with individual personhood and grant space for human difference. A club member, Robbie, captured this point when he revealed:

'I don't want to see a picture of the Lady Katharine. I like that she is a mystery, because everyone can interpret her as they want. I love that I have the freedom to picture her in my own mind'

The open-ended, ambiguous nature of the procession allows for participants to draw personal symbolism and meaning from this tradition. To Mark, 'Katharina' relates to his own principles for culture and history. Others attach significance to their own identities and can commemorate lost ones through this revival. University students, friends, and club members reveal various communal feelings, historical awareness, and celebration attributed to the procession. The possibility of a free dialogue between the procession and personhood, and a free formation of meaning within this is, in my view, what provided me with such an insightful, varied and open ethnography.

CHALLENGES

This wouldn't be a transparent ethnography if I were to overlook the challenges which defined the experience of this fieldwork. Fundamentally, this has been an immersive, totalizing journey as I have both participated as the organizer of this year's procession and simultaneously attempted to draw anthropological meaning from this. Due to these varying roles, I was at times challenged in the attempt to produce of an ethnography which honours research above the personal

views I hold towards this tradition.

The active nature of fieldwork was another surprising revelation. On procession day, I would have never expected to have to redirect a tractor and traffic jam trapped on South Street. As Telle alludes to, the physical impact of processions often make it difficult to resonate cultural, ritual purposes with authorities (Telle 2023: 51). In this case, the interruption traffic was a difficult reality for the Scottish police force to face. This quickly testified to how the reality of fieldwork manifests itself differently from any theoretical prediction an anthropologist can develop. The chaotic, overwhelming experience of the day allowed me to immerse myself completely within the field. This sensory involvement provided unique observations and details. The primal importance of executing a detailed, immersive fieldwork shines through here, as I do not think I would have been able to comprehend the varied meanings of this tradition without this.

CONCLUSION

The present work has aimed to produce an insightful, authentic ethnography on the 99th Kate Kennedy Procession, considering its significance and the relation it holds with the town and university today. Discussing this yearly ritual has revealed its primary role as a force of historical remembrance. Beyond this, my personal, sensorial experience in the procession has revealed the power of 'revival' the tradition possesses, suspending time and allowing for the resurrection of past memories and people. The testimony of various locals and students unveils the procession's decisive, transformative impact on personal identity. The varied responses, from community building to symbolic interpretations

of the Lady Katherine, have supported the argument for the subjective nature of anthropology. I am incredibly grateful for this immersive journey, and to everyone involved in this ethnography. From collaborating and helping shape meaning out of this weird, yet wonderful part of St Andrew's identity, thank you!

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