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## Brittany's borders

Ronan Le Coadic

► **To cite this version:**

Ronan Le Coadic. Brittany's borders. Crossing borders - History, theories and identities, Dec 2004, Glamorgan, United Kingdom. hal-00872449

**HAL Id: hal-00872449**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00872449>**

Submitted on 14 Oct 2013

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# Brittany's borders

As Brittany is not a State, it doesn't have a political border. But, on the other hand, it is surrounded by sea, bordered by a historical land border which used to be border between States, cut into two by a linguistic frontier and covered by internal micro-borders which seem to be swarming in all directions. We will study them all, asking what they mean. We will start with the external borders.

## I. External borders

### A. *Is the sea a border ?*



**Figure 1 :** The sea routes of the Bretons.  
Source : Léon FLEURIOT, *Les Origines de la Bretagne*, Paris, Payot, 1980, p. 335.

### 1. At the origins

The sea is often seen as a border which cuts people off from the rest of the world. But it is not what it represents for the Bretons: it is the matrix of their origins. Leon Fleuriot explains us that "in Antiquity, the two banks of the Channel took part in the same civilization. This sea was no more a gap than the Aegean sea, and one needed a singular ignorance of the things of the sea to see in such a narrow channel an obstacle, whereas it was a link<sup>1</sup>." It is by the sea that the Bretons came from the island of Britain to settle in Armorica from the IV<sup>th</sup> to the VII<sup>th</sup> century.

### 2. A crossroads

Thereafter, "the Breton peninsula was not a 'cul-de-sac', as it was too often written", adds Leon Fleuriot. "During almost all the phases of its history, this area was the crossroad of very busy sea routes<sup>2</sup>." Let us recall, with Pierre Flatrès, that "the Trégor<sup>3</sup> coasts are not further away from the British littoral than of the town of Rennes. [...] The Spanish and the English are, by sea, close neighbours to the Bretons [...] The sea is a road, which leads to the ports of all the countries. And the

<sup>1</sup> Léon FLEURIOT, *Les Origines de la Bretagne*, Paris, Payot, 1980, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> FLEURIOT 1980, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Trégor is an area in the north part of Brittany.

sea makes Brittany close to to any country equipped with a maritime shoreline and ports<sup>4</sup>."

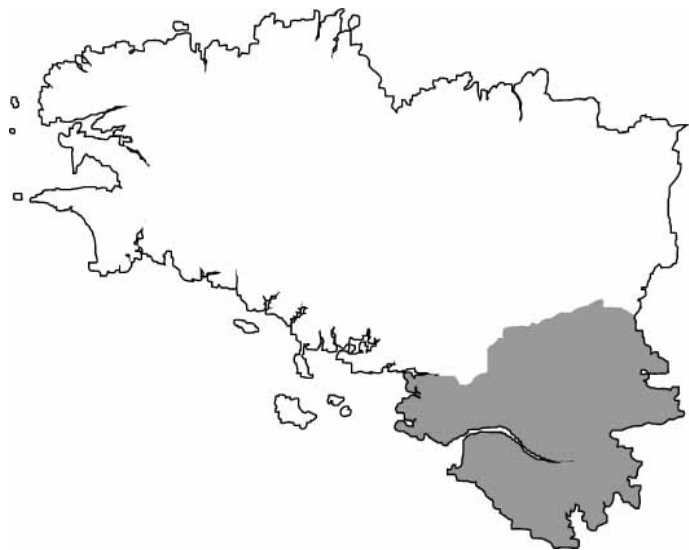
### 3. An opening

This universal maritime neighbourhood makes Anatole Le Braz write that "the sea is the same everywhere, and for whoever was born on its edges it is even the fatherland..." The sea is an inspiration for an imaginary world without borders<sup>5</sup>. More prosaically, the maritime neighbourhood makes the universe of the Bretons of the littoral, far from being closed on itself, accessible to the most remote influences. Is it the same with the terrestrial border, in the east of the Breton peninsula?

#### B. Which land border?

##### 1. History

The eastern border of Brittany was fixed in 851 by the treaty of Angers after the Frank emperor Charles the Bald was defeated twice by the Bretons (in 845 and 851). It remained unchanged with the passing centuries. During the French Revolution, Brittany was one of the only provinces to see its border completely maintained when the borders of the departments were drawn<sup>6</sup>. It is only in 1941 that the eastern border of Brittany was modified by a decision of Marshal Pétain to remove Nantes and the department of Loire-Inférieure<sup>7</sup> from Brittany. Thereafter, no government called the decision of Vichy into question and the departement of Loire-Atlantique is now administratively attached to the region of the Pays-de-Loire.



**Figure 2** : Loire-Atlantique separated from Brittany.  
Source : Ronan LE COADIC.

##### 2. A sharp debate

This splitting of Loire-Atlantique from Brittany has always been disputed by "Breton militants"<sup>8</sup>, who criticize it for having been decided by a nondemocratic government and maintained without asking the populations' opinion; they stress that Loire-Atlantique is culturally, historically and geographically united to Brittany and insist on

<sup>4</sup> FLATRES 1995, pp. 11 and 16-19. I translate from Breton language.

<sup>5</sup> One generally considers that the Breton Edouard Corbière (father of the poet Tristan Corbière) is, with his novel in four volumes *Le Négrier*, published in 1832, the precursor of the maritime novel.

<sup>6</sup> Except for eight villages, which were incorporated against their will to the department of the Vendée. The memory of the Breton character of these villages is always preserved by the Breton cultural 'militants'. Thus, the diary in Breton language of the association Skol an Emsav ("School of the Breton movement") still mentions them today in the list of the towns and villages of Brittany...

<sup>7</sup> Old name of the department which is called today Loire-Atlantique.

<sup>8</sup> It is the use, in French, to call "militants" the people who fight actively to defend an idea or a cause, would they be the members of an association, a trade union or a political party.

the economic dynamism which the reunification would allow. On the other hand, its adversaries consider that the reunification would open a quarrel of capitals between Rennes and Nantes, that it would be fatal to the Region of the Pays-de-Loire and that Brittany, even with five departments, would not be strong enough to face international economic competition, so it would be better to create a bigger zone, the "Great West".

### **3. The population**

Any change disturbs and, in Loire-Atlantique, the idea of being part of Brittany again disturbs the interior order of people who built their life on an institutional context established for decades. In this respect, the last sixty years seem to weigh heavily in comparison with the thousand years which preceded them: the memory of the Breton character of the department seems, indeed, to fade with the younger generations. Nevertheless, the successive surveys which ask the inhabitants of Loire-Atlantique if they would like to be united to Brittany generally reveal a vast majority of answers in favour of the reunification (about the three-quarter of the people questioned).

#### **C. Topical issues**

##### **1. Which maritime ambition?**

Brittany has been providing to the world, since the Antiquity, sailors whose reputation of excellence is firmly established. Unfortunately, the world-wide crisis which struck the merchant navy in the 1970's destroyed a whole area of the Breton economy, which was also stricken, since the 1990's, by the crisis of fishing. Today, the question of the maritime destiny of Brittany – surrounded by 1 700 km of coasts – is too rarely considered but essential. The sea shouldn't be perceived like a border-fence but like a border to be conquered, as the mythical frontier of the American West.

##### **2. The production of locality**

The question of the eastern border and of the reunification of Brittany must not be put in terms of perpetuation of the past but of subjective building of identity. Everywhere in the world, today, men and women want to become the subjects of their life, rejecting more firmly the prescribed identities. Moreover, globalization leads to a new production of identity: the groups reinvent their projects. According to Arjun Appadurai, "the task to produce locality (as a structure of feeling, property of the social life and ideology of an identified community) is more and more a struggle<sup>9</sup>" because it is often opposed to the projects of the Nation-State, which "most typical modes of localization [...] have a disciplinary aspect"<sup>10</sup>.

##### **3. Democracy**

What can the State do, vis-a-vis the production by citizens of a "structure of feeling" which does not correspond to its decisions? And what can the citizens do to concretize their aspirations? It is known that 83 % of the inhabitants of Loire-Atlantique want a referendum to be held on this topic<sup>11</sup>; however, the initiative of the

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<sup>9</sup> Appadurai, Arjun, *Après le colonialisme, les conséquences culturelles de la globalisation*, Paris, Payot, 2001, p. 260.

<sup>10</sup> Appadurai 2001, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

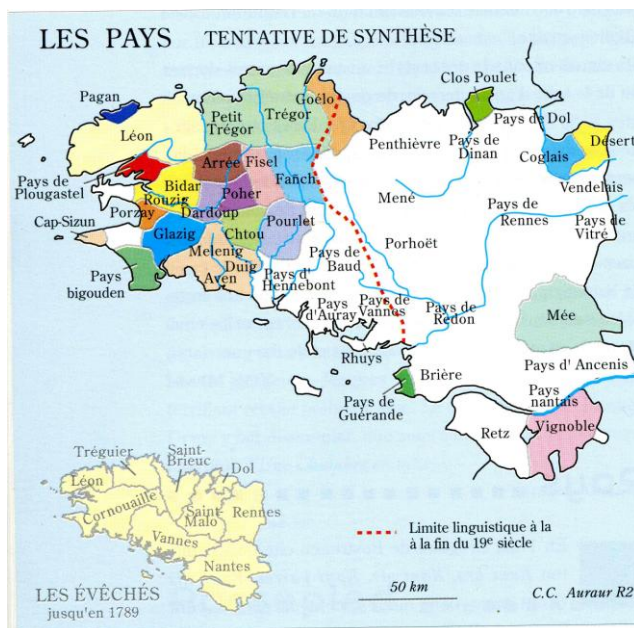
<sup>11</sup> According to a survey of 2001.

referenda exclusively belongs to the State. Isn't it a central issue of the reflexion about democracy ? According to David Held, the "decisive contribution to making the polity more democratic" today is to know "how can the requirements of both a 'sovereign state' and a 'sovereign people' be met?"<sup>12</sup>. This question doesn't arise with regard to the internal borders of Brittany...

## II. Internal borders

### A. A plethora of micro-borders

#### 1. Nonofficial borders



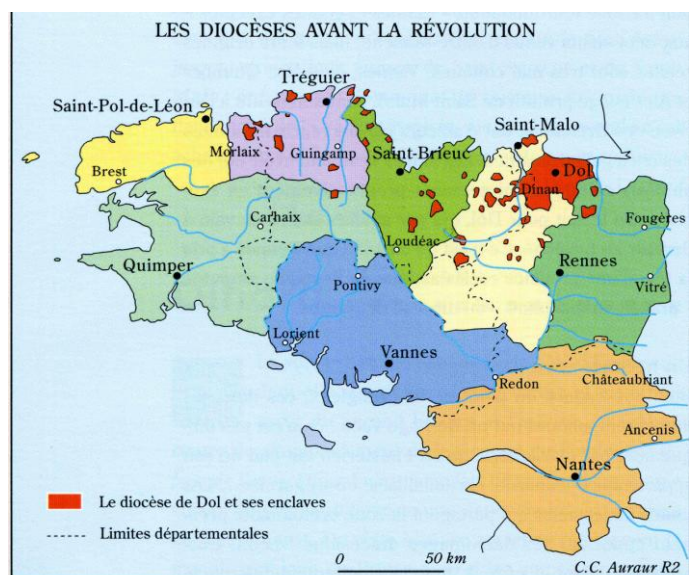
Brittany is strewn with a multitude of "small countries" without legal existence to which the feeling of membership is sometimes intense and whose borders are not always clear. The nine old dioceses of Brittany are wider "countries" of old origin<sup>13</sup>. They still remain, today, a lived human reality, at least in the west part of the peninsula. Contrasts between these countries are real and exacerbated in the border areas: formerly, one endeavoured to choose his spouse within the limit of his diocese, rivalries broke out on all the occasions of meeting (religious festivals, wedding banquets, sporting tournaments...) and people talked of their neighbours' faults

**Figure 3** The small "countries". Source : Alain CROIX and Jean-Yves VEILLARD (ed.), *Dictionnaire du patrimoine breton*, Rennes, Éditions Apogée, 2001, p. 738.

and weaknesses, which sometimes are still evoked today.

#### 2. Do the borders produce the identities?

The Breton "countries" certainly partly reproduce old differences<sup>14</sup> but they also give place to the production of new differences in



**Figure 4** The ancient dioceses. Source : Alain CROIX and Jean-Yves VEILLARD (ed.), *Dictionnaire du patrimoine breton*, Rennes, Éditions Apogée, 2001, p. 324.

<sup>12</sup> Held, David, *Models of Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press, Paperback, December, 1996, p. 317.

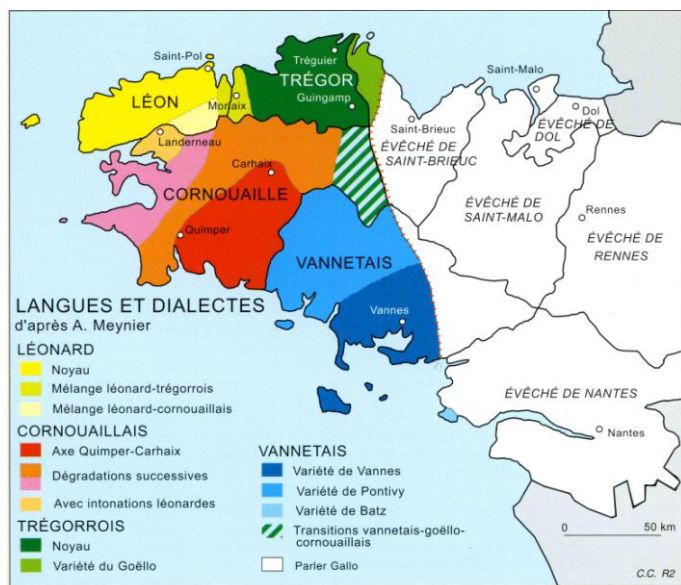
<sup>13</sup> The limits of some of them are even approximately the same as the limits of the Gallo-Roman cities.

<sup>14</sup> For example the religious practice is very contrasted between *Léon* and *Trégor*.

any kind. Thus, as from the 1950's, people from *Léon* and from *Cornouaille* adopted contrasted economic and social strategies<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, the differences are readily posted or cultivated: the names of the "countries" are used to baptize companies<sup>16</sup>, one invents jokes to disparage certain countries and the ethnic stereotypes finish sometimes by being published in the form of books<sup>17</sup> or Internet sites<sup>18</sup>... In short, the borders seem to produce identities. Does it go in the same way in the linguistic field?

## B. The "Wall of China"

### 1. The limit of "true Brittany"?



**Figure 5** The linguistic border. Source : Association BUHEZ, *Parlons du breton !*, Rennes, Éditions Ouest-France, 2001, p. 169.

In 1845, Pitre-Chevalier said that the linguistic border between the Breton and the French was the "Chinese wall of the Breton idiom" and in 1913 Andre Siegfried wrote that "to find true Brittany, the only one which is really worthy of this name, it is necessary to get to the Breton-speaking Brittany or Lower Brittany"<sup>19</sup>. This last opinion is still largely widespread today, including by expert or perceptive observers of Brittany such as Yves Le Gallo, for whom Lower Brittany and Upper Brittany lived "more juxtaposed than associated"<sup>20</sup>, or Pierre Flatrès, according to whom "true Bretons are in Lower Brittany"<sup>21</sup>.

### 2. A limit felt as a border

The local population often knows with precision the limit between the Breton-speaking area and the Gallo-speaking area<sup>22</sup> and cultural dualism is sometimes hard

<sup>15</sup> A lot of *Léonards* choose to stay in their farms and to modernize them (which stimulated the economy of Brittany) while a lot of *Cornouaillais* and *Trégorrois* choose to make studies, to leave the countryside and to become civil servants. Cf. "Humanisme et Bretagne" in Ronan Le Coadic, *Bretagne : le Fruit défendu ?*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2002, pp. 165-186.

<sup>16</sup> For example, among hundreds of others, *Bâti-Léon* ("Building company of Léon"), *Cornouaille Chaises* ("Chairs of Cornouaille"), *Goëlo Peintures* ("Goëlo Paintings"), *Le Bouquet Vannetais* ("The Vannetais Bouquet") or *Pressing Trégor* ("Trégor dry cleaner's")...

<sup>17</sup> In particular Arnaud Maisonneuve and Sylvain Kernea, *La Bretagne se marre – Biskoazh kement-all*, drawings of Gégé, Bannalec, Éditions des Dessins et des Mots, 2002. One finds in this book many jokes about *Léonards* and *Bigoudens*.

<sup>18</sup> For example, one can read on the [frey-roger.ifrance.com/frey-roger/pays\\_religieux.htm](http://frey-roger.ifrance.com/frey-roger/pays_religieux.htm) page that "*Trégorrois* are merry. They like the joke, the theatre and are readily rebellious. *Léonards* are austere, not very expansive, folded up, proud and pious [...] *Cornouaillais* [...] are sometimes slovenly and vulgar [...]. In the pleasure and under the effect of certain dopings they become 'poetic and spiritual'. The *Vannetais* are placid, delicate, sometimes mystical"...

<sup>19</sup> André Siegfried, *Tableau politique de la France de l'Ouest sous la Troisième République*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1913. Réédition Imprimerie Nationale 1995, p. 141.

<sup>20</sup> Yves Le Gallo, "Basse-Bretagne et Bas-Bretons (1800-1870)", in Jean Balcou and Yves Le Gallo (ed.), *Histoire littéraire et culturelle de la Bretagne*, Paris-Genève, Champion-Slatkine, 1987, volume II, p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Pierre FLATRÈS in Ronan LE COADIC, *L'Identité bretonne*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes and Terre de Brume, 1998, p. 312.

<sup>22</sup> The area where people do not speak Breton but a Romance dialect.

to come to terms with: formerly, the populations on the two sides of the linguistic border had as little relationship as possible; at school, the French-speaking and Breton-speaking children did not have any relation, except "punches or insults"<sup>23</sup>. From now on, with the collapse of the practice of Breton, the language is not any more an obstacle to communication and yet the suspicion has not disappeared completely. Especially, each one agrees to saying that, on the other side of the linguistic border, mentalities "are completely different". Thus the difference persists, in spite of the homogenisation of the populations. It is conform to what Fredrik Barth said: "borders can persist in spite of what one can call by metaphor 'the osmose' of the people who cross them"<sup>24</sup>.

### 3. Which significance today?

The Breton linguistic border, underlines the sociolinguist Fañch Broudic, "is no more than a disaggregated border nowadays. But it remains felt like a border"<sup>25</sup>. It is all the more paradoxical as the practice of the Breton language tends from now to turn away from all the traditional constraints. The new Breton-speakers<sup>26</sup> live, indeed, in deterritorialized networks: they can as well live in the regional metropolises of Upper Brittany as in the Lower Breton campaigns or anywhere else in the world. They, moreover, are desocialized: they are not necessarily related to the traditional Breton-speaking milieu, members of Breton-speaking families, nor even Bretons. On the one hand, therefore, the linguistic border is maintained in the spirits; but on the other, the linguistic practice is deterritorialized. Is it the only paradox?

#### C. Invisible borders

##### 1. The "pure Breton zone" and the "Mixed Zone"

If, as we said, the linguistic border is well-known to local people, this is certainly not the case for two borders traced in the nineteenth century by the historian Joseph Loth and based on toponymy. The first, known as "Loth's Line 1", delimits an area where the place-names are mainly influenced by the Breton language; it would be the zone of maximum extension of the Breton language, reached in IX<sup>th</sup> century<sup>27</sup>. The second, known as "Loth's Line 2", delimits a Breton

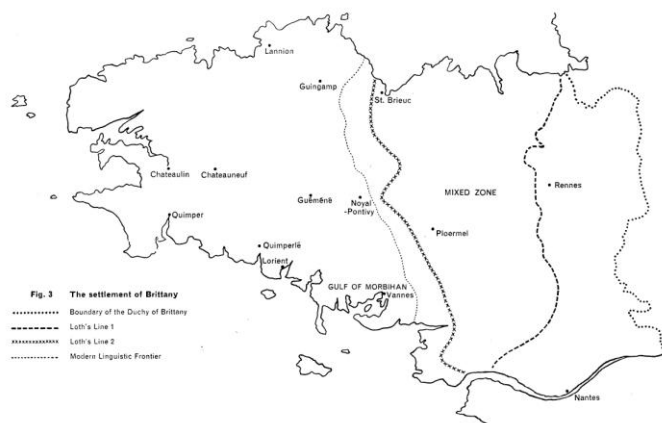


Figure 6 The two zones. Source : Kenneth JACKSON, *A Historical Phonology of Breton*, Dublin, The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> TALDIR-JAFFRENOU, *Eñvorennoù. Ur wech e oa... ur c'hrennard, un deskard, ur soudard*, Lesneven, Mouladurioù Hor Yezh, 1985, p. 51. I translate from Breton.

<sup>24</sup> Fredrik Barth, "Les groupes ethniques et leurs frontières", French translation of the introduction to *Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of culture difference*, Bergen, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1969, in Philippe Poutignat and Jocelyne Streiff-Fenart, *Théories de l'ethnicité*, Paris, Puf, 1995, pp. 222-223. I translate from French.

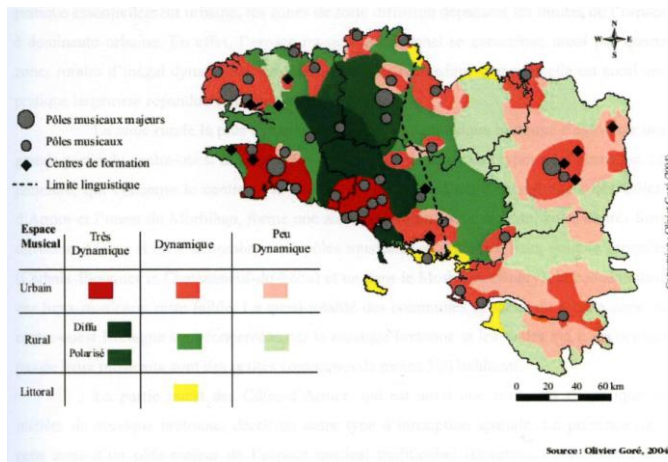
<sup>25</sup> Fañch BROUDIC, *À la recherche de la frontière : la limite linguistique entre Haute et Basse-Bretagne aux XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Brest, Ar Skol vrezonég – Emgleo Breiz, 1995, p. 85.

<sup>26</sup> Those who make the choice of Breton today, by contrast with those of whom it is the mother tongue.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph LOTH, *L'Émigration bretonne en Armorique du V<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle de notre ère*, Paris, Picard, 1883. This limit remains a reference; however, since the work of François Falc'hun and Bernard Tanguy, its exact

zone known as "pure", i.e. where the place-names of Gallo-Romance origin are very rare<sup>28</sup>. Between the two lines is a "Mixed Zone" Romance and Breton from where the Breton language ebbed. These two limits do not correspond to any administrative level, are not known as such by the populations and are not the subject of any claim from the militants of the Breton culture. However, it could be that they still correspond nowadays to an observable sociological reality.

## 2. Not asserted but curiously long-lived borders



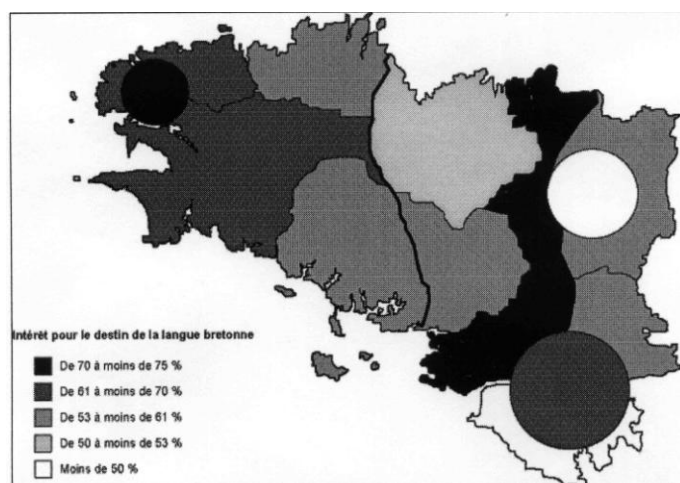
**Figure 7** Synthesis sketch of the dynamism of traditional music. Source : Olivier GORÉ, *L'inscription territoriale de la musique traditionnelle en Bretagne*, PHD, University of Rennes-2, December 2004, volume II, p. 284.

current attraction of Breton people for the Breton language would not be limited to Lower Brittany but would stretch out, east, to an area which corresponds to the "Mixed Zone"<sup>31</sup>. However, a survey of which I took the initiative in 2003, based on a representative sample of 1 300 people, confirms this fact and goes even further: apart from the *Léon*, indeed, it is in the Mixed Zone that the interest for the future of Breton language seems to be

the greatest today. Thus, if these works were confirmed, it could be

The author of a recent thesis devoted to the inscription of the Breton music in the territory<sup>29</sup> reveals that the zone where the Breton traditional music is the most dynamic today is bigger than Lower Brittany. It coincides precisely with the Breton zone known as "pure" which, according to Leon Fleuriot, would correspond to the territory which has been populated by Bretons for longest<sup>30</sup>.

In addition, according to the Office of the Breton language's works, the



**Figure 8** Interest for the future of the Breton language. Source : Ronan LE COADIC

significance is discussed. In any case, for Leon Fleuriot, "it is practically impossible to fix the Eastern limit" of the Mixed Zone. (Cf. FLEURIOT, Léon, « Langue et société dans la Bretagne ancienne » in BALCOU Jean and LE GALLO Yves, *Histoire littéraire et culturelle de la Bretagne*, volume I, *Héritage celtique et captation française : des origines à la fin des États*, Paris-Genève, Champion-Slatkine, p. 11).

<sup>28</sup> And the abundance of the toponyms starting with Plou -, which would be revealing a very old Breton presence.

<sup>29</sup> Olivier GORE, *L'inscription territoriale de la musique traditionnelle en Bretagne*, PhD of geography under the direction of Jean PIHAN, presented and supported publicly at the university of Rennes 2 in December 2004.

<sup>30</sup> The "extraordinary coincidence between the eastern limit of Ossismes and of Vénètes and that of the 'pure' Breton zone reveals without any doubt the extent of the zone the most formerly entrusted to the Bretons, at one time when the Gaulish remained quite alive there." Leon FLEURIOT 1980, p. 161.

<sup>31</sup> *Da Ienn*, summer 2004, p. 2.



that cultural borders going up at the origins of the settlement of Brittany still have an impact on contemporary attitudes and behaviours.

## **Conclusion**

We mentioned seven types of borders in Brittany: two external borders – the sea which surrounds the peninsula and the eastern terrestrial border – and five internal borders – the borders of the old dioceses, those of the small "countries", the linguistic border, the limit of the "pure Breton zone" and the limit of the "Mixed Zone".

It would be necessary to carry out thorough local investigations about the last two, to know to what point they are, or are not, present in the conscience of the populations. In the absence of such work they make us think of curious fossils of a remote history.

On the other hand, if the first five borders carry the mark of history, they are also completely invested by the subjectivity, and even by the imagination of the social actors, who give them all their sense.