

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-04055-6 - Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany, 1720-1980

Martine Segalen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

The Bigouden countryside today is liberally dotted with ‘traditional Breton homes’ – as hymned by architects and estate agents alike. With their white-washed walls and granite door and window surrounds, they positively flaunt themselves across open fields and hillsides. Yet for that very reason they can qualify as no more than distant cousins of the old farmhouses nestling in valley bottoms, shielded from prying eyes by a curtain of trees. The new homes are inhabited by the families of the builder, the plumber, the man who goes to work in Quimper. The old dwellings – often simply the latest in a series of houses erected on the same site by generation after generation – are farms. The new houses going up in such numbers in the towns and villages of the region are already eating away at all the agricultural land; the farms lie quietly enclosed amid their wooded fields or snuggle up against their neighbours when they lie at the centre of a *méjou*, the open fields that other parts of France call *campagnes* or *champagnes*. A fictitious architectural continuity masks a real social continuity.

This book deals with the passage from the one type of house to the other, the transition from a society based exclusively on agriculture to a society that is diversifying, playing on the new relationships between town and country, becoming ‘re-urbanised’, to use the hideous term sociologists have coined to account for the fact that the countryside, having emptied, is now filling up again. Descendants of former farmers or outsiders now living in the village fill the seats on the local council but for the most part work elsewhere. How has the change come about? What upheavals aided it – but what continuities, too? How has social reproduction occurred in a socio-economic environment that evolved only slowly up until the beginning of the twentieth century but that, since that time, has been developing swiftly and unceasingly?¹

The following study concerns the Bigouden region in the far west of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-04055-6 - Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany, 1720-1980

Martine Segalen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

France, a region bounded on three sides by the ocean and often represented as the archetype of the smallest unit that can be said to constitute a cultural area. Characterised – if not caricatured – by the tall *coiffes* worn by its womenfolk, described by Pierre Hélias, the self-appointed poet of a sublimated culture, dissected by sociologists in the 1960s, analysed by many of its own residents,² Bigouden is not in fact the homogenous unit that many people like to claim it is. The people of the southern part of the region, around the town of Pont-L'Abbé, regard themselves as the only 'true Bigoudens', and it is a fact that, because of their geographical situation, they have always been less subject to the influence of Quimper, the region's capital, and hung on to their distinctive identity longer than their cousins to the north. The division of the region into two parts – North Bigouden and South Bigouden – is no mere product of mental perceptions; it is firmly anchored in social usage. For an inhabitant of Penmarc'h (pronounced 'Pen-mar'), Loctudy, Plobannalec, Plomeur, Le Guilvinec, Saint-Jean-Trolimon, Tréguennec, or Plonéour-Lanvern there is a geographical space outside which one does not look for a tenancy or for a spouse. Its frontier happens to coincide with the northern boundary of the large commune* of Plonéour.

Contained within this precisely defined area, reconstructed family genealogies tell the story of social reproduction, chiefly through the medium of forms of matrimonial alliance. Analysing them in terms of how they relate to social structures and economic change involves drawing on a number of disciplines, notably history, demography, and ethnology. In this way past and present cast light upon each other and facilitate cross-objectification of one's various sources. Oral genealogies very quickly dry up beyond the subject's grandparents. After that the researcher has to fall back on vital records and census returns to trace the genealogical links back generation by generation; here most of them led as far as the early years of the eighteenth century. It then becomes necessary to adopt the opposite approach as we travel back towards the present by way of the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of the group under investigation. To put social flesh on the genealogical bones it is necessary to understand the hierarchies of the group, the organisation of production, modes of agricultural operation, the nature of production, and the organisation of local markets. In addition to the usual wide range of documentary sources, including post-mortem inventories, the accounts of folklorists and travellers, and archive

* In France, the smallest territorial division on the administrative map. Above it come the *canton*, the *arrondissement*, and the *département* [Translator].

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-04055-6 - Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany, 1720-1980

Martine Segalen

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 3

sources, there is verbal testimony gathered at first hand – usually referred to as ‘oral history’ – which sheds light on the changes the region has undergone during the most recent period. (The memories of today’s old people do not go back much before the 1900s, and let us not make the mistake of supposing that their evidence relates to an immemorial, frozen past.)

Historical detachment might be prescribed by the subject under investigation, but the ethnological approach took precedence. That approach is now in fashion – a welcome sign of the interest currently being taken in the socio-cultural systems of the recent past and the present day. As applied to the study of the behaviour of living inhabitants of the same country as the observer, it is not without its problems.

To begin with, one of the premisses of the ethnological approach is the negation of the principle of ‘participant observation’. Achieving an effective degree of integration within a village means establishing private ties with certain members of it, and ties of familiarity very quickly become pseudo-family ties. Catherine Daniel (not her real name), the wife of the former blacksmith (hence her Breton ‘surname’ *ar Marichal*), and her daughter were my hosts during the various visits I made over a ten-year period. I stayed in their house. The sincere friendship that grew up between us, the closeness we were able to share, and my having been associated with the family through periods of mourning as well as through marriages and births prohibit me from talking about them as if I had been observing them from outside. How do you give an academic account of people who take you into their home, feed you, surround you with their love, and become your dear friends? Your integration is so effective that it eventually destroys not only your faculty of detachment but all desire to exercise it.

In any case, working on the family and kinship and researching systems of inheritance and transmission of property, one is dealing with less neutral subjects than, say, studying a particular technique or a particular collective manifestation. On the contrary, ‘talking family’ is an exercise loaded with emotion and consequently with latent violence, even where the ethnologist claims to be keeping to the objective ground of the vocabulary of kinship, relations between affines and consanguines, and marriage rites. All things considered, it is not wholly unlike discussing witchcraft, which, as Jeanne Favret-Saada says in her study of the subject in Normandy, ‘is power rather than knowledge or information’.³ The reactions I received to my questions or simply to my presence and the comments made about me in my absence and painstakingly repeated to me later opened my eyes to the special status

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-04055-6 - Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany, 1720-1980

Martine Segalen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

of this subject. Occasionally I had the feeling of having suddenly entered a forbidden zone, invading an intimacy in which I had no share. It was as if the more knowledge I gained by my intrusion, the less I left my interlocutor with. Reactions ranged from a mildly demurring ‘don’t put that down’ (with a glance at my notebook) or, in another instance, ‘you’ll make my mother look ridiculous’ to violent letters of protest and unceremonious ejections from people’s houses. From ‘information’ I had slipped imperceptibly into the realm of ‘power’, understood as knowledge about others.

So it is fortunate that putting things into historical perspective gives the ethnologist back his faculty of detachment, as the study of documents enables him to objectify what people tell him, re-situate the individual in the general, and compare the way things are done with the way the rules say they should be done. Various historical approaches are available. First and foremost there is historical demography, which with its rigorous data provides a framework for the ways in which a population behaves. This may be considered either in terms of geographical mobility or demographic growth – phenomena that are traced at the level of the community – or in terms of marriage, birth, and death rates, which in a different fashion give a reading of the domestic group and its biological and social reproduction. What chance have we of understanding marriage strategies unless we know the ages at which men and women marry and the numbers of bachelors and spinsters? How shall we piece together the practices of the system of property transmission without knowing how many children survive in each generation? Brittany is noted for its egalitarian use of the partible inheritance system, unlike central or southern parts of France where the single-heir system operates. The region was able to retain the partible system for so long because, in contrast to other peasant societies, its farmers did not often own their own land. They had only movables to hand down from generation to generation, and movables are easier to share out than landed property. This is because a landowner will always seek by one means or another to keep up the size of his holding in order to protect its viability. Bigouden happens to have a complex system of land ownership known as the *domaine congéable*. Under this system, which is specific to Brittany, a farm will have two owners: the actual landowner (generally a member of the nobility, the bourgeoisie, or the clergy) and the holder of the ‘reparative rights’ (sometimes referred to as the *convenant*) covering the ‘edifices and surfaces’ – that is to say, the farm buildings and the arable stratum of the land, regarded as movables and hence as the property of the domanial tenant.

No peasant ownership of land, then – and very little permanence,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-04055-6 - Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany, 1720-1980

Martine Segalen

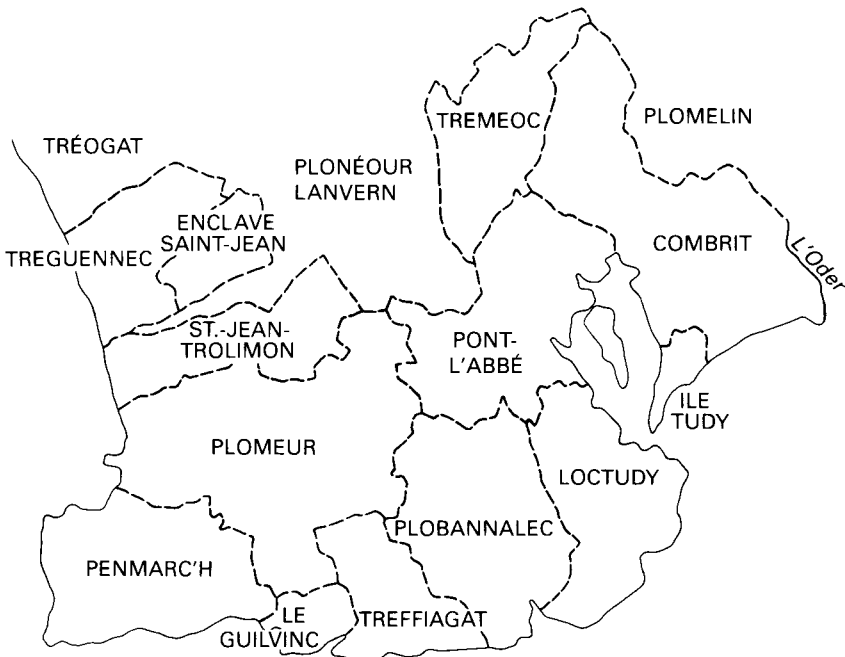
Excerpt

[More information](#)

either. There are parts of France where the transfer of tenancies down the same line of descendants means that a family will have occupied a particular farm virtually since time immemorial. In nineteenth-century Bigouden this was not often the case. In fact it was common for a small tenant farmer to quit his farm for another, either because his family had increased in size or because he could no longer afford the rent. There was considerable mobility up until the 1930s, but only within South Bigouden; people did not 'emigrate'. That mobility increased as a result of the upsurge in demographic growth. This was in stark contrast to the movements experienced in the rest of France. In general an exodus from rural areas slowly emptied villages of their inhabitants during the second half of the nineteenth century. Here it was the other way around. As pressure on the land mounted, the expanding population was enabled to stay within South Bigouden when the region rediscovered the sea and there was a revival of the fishing industry – and above all when, from the 1880s onward, ways were found of turning the products of that industry to commercial account on a large scale with the development of canning factories.

One of the minor paradoxes of the region is the fact that for two centuries the people of South Bigouden turned their backs on the sea.

Fig. 1. Commune boundaries in South Bigouden today.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-04055-6 - Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany, 1720-1980

Martine Segalen

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Introduction*

Between the high ground on which the *bourg** of Plonéour stands and the low-lying rocky and formerly marshy coast of Kérity-Penmarc'h the landscape consists of a series of alternate hills and valleys watered by little streams that flow into *étangs* opening into Audierne Bay. The bay is lined with a broad strip of sandy heath extending through the communes of Plomeur, Saint-Jean-Trolimon, and Tréguennec. In the case of Saint-Jean it takes up a third of the area of the commune. Despite low fertility and high winds, these areas (known as *palues*) had an important role in the agro-pastoral system, helping to contain the population explosion of the nineteenth century. This magnificent but (with its storms and fierce currents) hostile coast was largely unexploited by the local inhabitants. They gathered seaweed, which they mixed with dung and used to manure their land, and they picked up whatever was washed ashore from shipwrecks; but that was all. Yet in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the sea had been a source of wealth. Tréoultré-Penmarc'h was a prosperous port right up until the mid sixteenth century, based on the fishing and drying of conger eel, ling, and hake for Lenten fare. Seamen also maintained a coastal trade down to Nantes and carried the products of that city to Quimper and Saint-Malo. There were even coasters that called at Bordeaux.⁴ Competition from the Newfoundland fishing grounds and France's maritime war with Spain combined to ruin a flourishing business, bringing to an end a level of prosperity of which the nineteenth century still offered extensive archaeological evidence. Visitors to Bigouden in the nineteenth century were much struck by its chapels and manor houses, most of which have disappeared now, their stones recycled for the construction and repair of farm buildings. The coastal trade had died out completely by around 1660, and the number of fishermen continued to decline throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There was a drop in population as people abandoned these low-lying, unhealthy areas for more northerly parts; many genealogies of residents of Saint-Jean-Trolimon in the nineteenth century show them originating from Penmarc'h. All through the nineteenth century fishing was a purely marginal activity pursued on a small scale by an indigent population dividing its time between the plough and the dinghy.

Bigouden's wealth in the nineteenth century rested on agriculture. A visitor to the Pont-l'Abbé district shortly before the turn of the century saw 'a promised land':

In addition to the wheat that is harvested there in abundance, much barley,

* The *bourg* is the heart of a French village, generally comprising a crossroads, a church, a *mairie* or 'town hall', one or more cafés, and a number of houses [Translator].

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-04055-6 - Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany, 1720-1980

Martine Segalen

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 7

buck-wheat, and oats is also found. The butters of this region are celebrated; fruit of all kinds is very common: delicious cherries, peaches, apricots, figs . . . There are a great many gardens filled with cabbages, onions, beans, asparagus, melons, artichokes, and parsnips. To obtain this wealth of produce, only the lightest ploughing is necessary.⁵

It was cereals that brought prosperity to Bigouden. Surplus production in the late eighteenth century enabled the region to export its 'noble' cereals and keep the poorer grades for its own consumption. Potato-growing was introduced quite late and did not radically alter the productive equilibrium of the farms of the region, which continued to practise a blend of polyculture and animal husbandry until the 1960s. The latter was never developed as extensively as in neighbouring Normandy, for example; it was restricted to domestic needs, and numbers of animals were always small. It was thus the fertility of the soil that accounted for the relative affluence of Bigouden throughout most of the nineteenth century. The present diversity of economic activities has only a hundred-year history behind it. Fishing came back into its own with the advent of new conservation techniques and the arrival of the railway at Quimper. The more deprived section of the population, most of whom came from the sandy coastal strip lining Audierne Bay, flocked to the coast as factories began to spring up and a flurry of economic activity developed around the boat-building and fish-haulage industries. In other words, the supposedly typical image of Bigouden cuisine with its proud emphasis on *fruits de mer* (sea food) is no more traditional than the architecture of recent years. There are still people alive today who remember a time when the *langoustine** was spurned and left to rot on the dunghill.

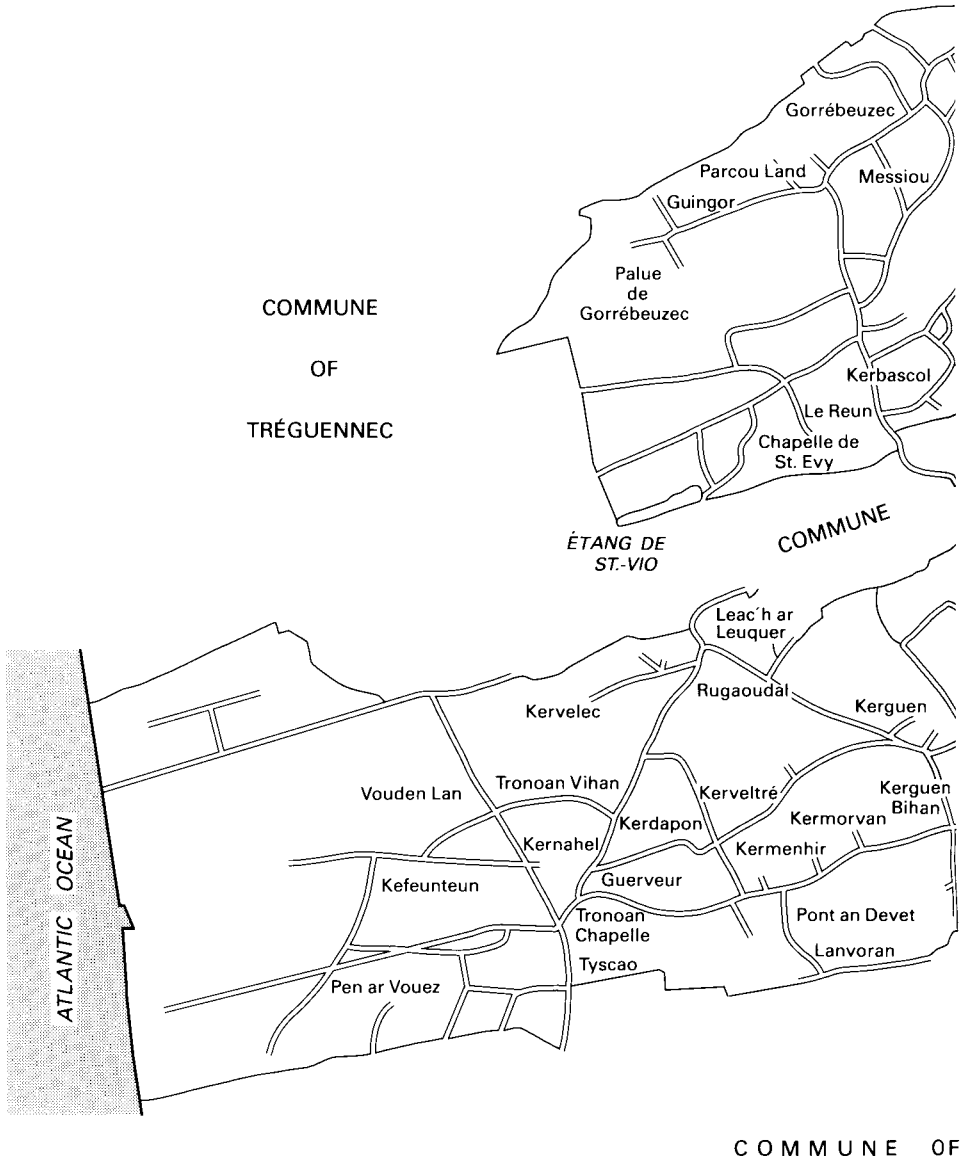
Now the situation is reversed. Maritime activities account for most of the region's wealth, while agriculture is in the middle of a process of reorganisation and the secondary and tertiary employment sectors are starting to expand. Yet despite these economic and social upheavals there has been no mixing of the population. Granted, there was emigration from the 1930s onwards, but the same names go on – Coïc, Le Berre, Daniel, Tanneau, Lelgoualch, Stephan – their history engraved in the Bigouden landscape as the names themselves are inscribed in the census records and notarised documents.

At the centre of both the Bigouden region and this study is the commune of Saint-Jean-Trolimon – the last part of the name comes from *Treff-Rumon* or 'sub-parish' (*treve*) of St. Rumon, a daughter church of the parish of Beuzec. Its territory is divided in two in a way

* A delicacy of French provincial cuisine resembling the Dublin Bay prawn [Translator].

8 Introduction

Fig. 2. The commune of Saint-Jean-Trolimon.



Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-04055-6 - Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower
 Brittany, 1720-1980
 Martine Segalen
 Excerpt
[More information](#)



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-04055-6 - Fifteen Generations of Bretons: Kinship and Society in Lower Brittany, 1720-1980

Martine Segalen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 *Introduction*

that bears witness to historical changes to the parish and communal boundaries (see map. pp. 8–9).⁶

Since most of my research concerns the people of Saint-Jean-Trolimon, it is to them that my first and most sincere thanks are due.⁷ The way in which I could best show my gratitude to my Bigouden friends, who took me into their homes and answered my questions, was to suppress their real names and details of where they live in response to their request that I conceal their identities and respect their privacy. Wherever necessary⁸ I have altered Christian names, patronymics, and names of hamlets.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Canon Jean-Louis Le Floc'h. Steeped in the traditional culture of the region, of which he has spoken to me many times with great enthusiasm, the *chanoine* is also an archivist with the knack of supplying researchers with the very records in which they are interested. He placed his genealogical files at my disposal, enabling me to reconstruct my fifteen generations of Bigoudens more quickly than would otherwise have been possible. He also read my thesis with close attention, drawing my attention to every inaccuracy. And he was kind enough to check the spelling of the Breton expressions that appear in the pages that follow. *Trugarez mad!*