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Recognising and Reconstituting *Gàidheil* Ethnicity

Iain MacKinnon

Abstract

This article analyses some claims made about the *Gàidheil* identity in Scotland, with particular reflection on a distinct ‘sociolinguistic turn’ within *Gàidhlig* studies and related research over the last two decades. Through critical analysis of a major sociological survey on the structuring of various markers in framing *Gàidheil* identity, a normative basis is provided to then assess other identity classifications made by some academics whose work is focussed on the single identity-marker of the *Gàidhlig* language. It is argued that identity claims predicated on the specific nature of the *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn fail to capture the complex reality and living histories of actual *Gàidheil* identities (and claims on those identities), in particular, the socio-cultural importance of place-based practices and understandings. Recent proposals for a *Gàidheil* ethnolinguistic assembly may enable modes of articulation and recognition to develop which better capture those realities, as well as supporting societal and linguistic regeneration among the indigenous group.

Keywords: ethnicity; ethnolinguistic; Gaelic; identity; recognition; sociolinguistic turn

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Introduction

This special issue on Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd* Futures facilitates wider discussion on the future place and situation of Scotland's *Gàidheil*.¹ In this article, I investigate some ways in which the collective, nominal identity 'Gàidheil' is being defined, articulated and recognised in ideologically oriented academic discussions about the future of *Gàidheil*, *Gàidhlig* and the *Gàidhealtachd*.

In particular, I examine a reductive trend in some recent identity claims associated with a sociolinguistic turn in *Gàidhlig* studies over the last twenty years. Section **I** of the article outlines the nature of the *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn with particular reference to what has been described as the robust critique (Chalmers, this volume) of *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic scholarship made in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (GCVC), a major report examining the condition of *Gàidhlig* in its remaining vernacular, or 'heartland', communities (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020).

Section **II** then critically assesses a major sociological survey of 'markers' of *Gàidheil* identity (Bechhofer and McCrone, 2014) and asserts that contemporary perspectives on identity elide the importance of place – and the practice(s) and politics of place – to being *Gàidheil*. Moreover, I argue that this elision may be a corollary of the lack of attention *Gàidhlig* language scholarship and policy has given to vernacular concerns, a major conclusion of the GCVC report. The following sections **III** and **IV** then use the sociological survey findings as a normative basis for assessing identity claims made by academics associated with the sociolinguistic turn. Finally, section **V** considers the GCVC's proposal for an ethnolinguistic assembly. In particular, I assess whether a self-governing assembly of this sort could help expedite a necessary transformation in the way that *Gàidheil* are recognised in Scotland today, even to the extent of a national consciousness re-emerging.

This topic of recognition is central to my analysis. It was brought to prominence by the Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor (1994) in his essay *The Politics of Recognition*. Taylor argued that the idea that our identity is formed by a process of recognition has become important in contemporary societies and that struggles for recognition are at the root of many political contests over gender, ethnicity and race:

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (1994: 25)

This article, then, assesses some recent claims made by academics about how Scottish *Gàidheil* are, or should be, recognised, and considers to what kinds of future these various forms of recognition might lead us.

I.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, and particularly from the late 1940s onwards, there was an emphasis in *Gàidhlig* studies on field recordings of *Gàidhlig* speakers to 'rescue' for

posterity aspects of vernacular traditions and practice which were in the process of being lost (MacDonald, 2011). During this same period little sociolinguistic work was conducted (McLeod, 2001: 23). In the twenty-first century scholarly focus has increasingly turned towards research to rescue or revitalise the language itself. The specific character of this *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn has been identified and detailed in *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community* (GCVC) (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020: 10, 385, 392) which argues that academia's growing interest in language revitalisation has created a 'university led discourse ... increasingly articulating a self-sustaining ideology based on individualised interest in the minority language,' and is primarily concerned with the 'aspirations and assertions of individuals in relation to a peripheral practice of a marginal culture'. GCVC contends that this 'individualised cosmopolitanism' is interlinked with the development of a political agenda focussed on civic promotion of *Gàidhlig* nationally, with a specific goal of creating 'new speakers' of the language throughout Scotland. The report further states that in new speaker discourse, 'Gaelic is presented as an additional or occasional competence or identity to be acquired in the near or more distant future' and supports a view of *Gàidhlig* as 'a non-primary, minority and complementary cultural practice to the dominant and normative English language culture in Scotland'.

According to the GCVC authors, this linked academic and political project 'actually normalise[s] vernacular decline' in the existing minority ethnolinguistic speaker group, mainly situated in the Western Isles. The report notes 'the marginal position of vernacular concerns in language planning and policy in Scotland' with 'almost non-existent support for the autochthonous group and the absence of independent agency of the Gaelic speaker group'. It argues that current policy has 'failed to address the critical contraction of the speaker group' and, such is the rapidity of decline indicated in the survey findings, the GCVC authors conclude that on current trends *Gàidhlig* will cease to be a living language of community anywhere in Scotland within a decade (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020: 9, 10, 361, 374, 392). In their contribution to this special edition (Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul, this volume) two GCVC authors conclude that *Gàidhlig* language policy should be refocused 'on the societal reality of minority-language speakers and learners rather than on superficial aspirations for an imagined future'.

II.

In trying to understand how this desocietalised *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn may have influenced the kinds of identity claims found in contemporary scholarship, it is useful to establish a normative position from which to assess those claims. The most likely candidate for a normative assessment is the most comprehensive analysis of Scottish *Gàidheal* identity in the twenty-first century carried out by sociologists Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone (2014: 119). They surveyed four markers of *Gàidheal* identity in order to answer the question: what makes a *Gàidheal*?

The markers were:

- *Gàidheal* ancestry
- ability to speak *Gàidhlig*
- living in the *Gàidhealtachd*
- being born in Scotland

Their survey, incorporated into and adapted over several rounds of the Scottish Social Attitudes surveys, was sent out to addresses in postal areas reporting the greatest concentration of *Gàidhlig* speakers, and contained a range of questions to draw out how the various combinations of these markers make a difference to people being identified as a *Gàidheal*. A total of 537 responses were received. On the basis of these returns the authors stated:

We could then relate how willing the respondent was to accept persons with such markers of being a Gael to their own sense of being a Gael. Were, for example, those who had a strong sense of themselves as Gaels more likely (or not) to accept a claim from someone with various combinations of these markers? ... [H]ow do these markers ... stack up against each other? Does having the language trump residence and/or ancestry? Would you be taken for a Gael if you have ancestry, but neither residence nor language? (2014: 119)

The respondents' evaluation of the different categories of markers put forward in the survey then enabled Bechhofer and McCrone to develop an understanding of what they called the 'rules' that underpin them:

By identity rules, we mean probabilistic rules of thumb whereby identity markers are interpreted, combined or given precedence over others. They are guidelines, though not necessarily definitive or unambiguous ones, to the identity markers which people mobilise in their identity claims, as well as those they use to attribute national identity or judge the claims and attributions of others. (2014: 130 n. 7)

They found that of those people who defined themselves predominantly as *Gàidheil* (2014: 126):

- 80 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people with ancestry and language ability, but who were not living in the *Gàidhealtachd*;
- 64 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people with ancestry living in the *Gàidhealtachd*, but who could not speak the language;
- 58 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people able to speak the language and born in Scotland, but without ancestry;
- 29 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people with ancestry, but not able to speak the language and not living in the *Gàidhealtachd*;
- 28 per cent were willing to accept as *Gàidheil* people able to speak *Gàidhlig* but not born in Scotland and without ancestry.

Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 122) also asked respondents whether 'being a Gael is mainly about the Gaelic language and history, music and literature in Gaelic ... [or] mainly about Gaels gaining control over things like fishing, crofting and land use.' The authors envisaged the former attributes as indicative of 'cultural' ideas about identity, and the latter as related to the 'political'. They asked respondents to place themselves on a scale between the two positions. In putting this question, the authors wanted to test whether they could differentiate between the nature of their respondents' *Gàidheal* and Scottish identities. Bechhofer and McCrone had hypothesized that being 'a Gael could be largely a "cultural" matter (after all, language is important), whereas being a Scot might be a "political" issue, a matter of governance'. However, they found that 'strong Gaels [were] more likely to see Gaelic identity in political/economic terms, rather than cultural ones'. Arguably, the survey's

exemplification of what counts as ‘political’ and what counts as ‘cultural’ may reflect a sociological understanding of these terms: crofting, fishing and land use are routinely described as part of a form or ‘way of life’ and many *Gàidheil* may consider them to be as cultural as language; and on the other hand, language and history are equally sites of political struggle.

However, the survey responses indicate that *Gàidheil* generally believe that political commitment to material practices such as crofting, fishing and land use are at least as central to being a *Gàidheal* as are language and culture. This finding suggests that, although Bechhofer and McCrone did not include it among their identity markers, what we can call *the practice(s) and politics of place* – above and beyond simply being resident in the *Gàidhealtachd* – appear in fact to be salient characteristics in articulating *Gàidheal* identity. (For the importance of place in the context of the *Gàidhealtachd*, see also Oliver (2002; 2005) and McIntosh (2008)). Although in their discussion Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 128, 129) emphasised the importance of ‘participating in the social and cultural life of the community’, the research finding is clear evidence that further consideration of *practice(s) and politics of place* as a marker of identity can facilitate a more satisfactory discussion of ‘what makes a *Gàidheal*’. For the purpose of this article, what is certain is that the finding further complexifies the subject of *Gàidheal* identity and poses considerable challenges for reductive linguistic perspectives.

On the basis of their finding that, ‘Someone who has Gaelic and was born in Scotland is just as likely to be accepted as a Gael as someone who has the blood and lives in the *Gàidhealtachd* but without the language,’ Bechhofer and McCrone conclude that, ‘Gaelic identity should be considered as open and fluid, rather than fixed and given’ (2014: 127). This finding effectively contests the notion of *Gàidheal* identity as fixed or rigidly determined, nevertheless, the assertion that it is therefore ‘open and fluid’ is less convincing when the survey’s findings are taken in the round. Arguably, using the concepts ‘fluid’ and ‘fixed’ metaphorically in this way cannot capture the range of assessments about identity that Bechhofer and McCrone found among *Gàidheil*. In their discussion the authors state that it ‘seems a priori likely that ancestry plus language plus residence in the *Gàidhealtachd* would raise the 83% [for language and ancestry markers alone] to close to 100%’ (2014: 125). That set of markers would appear, then, to be archetypal for being recognised as a *Gàidheal*. Beyond that idealized, yet widely existing, set of markers there are also a number of less archetypal variants featuring fewer of the markers. Bechhofer and McCrone’s work shows that these variants exist in gradients of recognition: from the 83 per cent of *Gàidheil* who believe that ancestry and language without residence still makes you a *Gàidheal*, to the fewer than 30 per cent who would recognise as a *Gàidheal* someone who speaks *Gàidhlig* but was not born in Scotland.

Therefore, these putative ‘identity rules’ employed by *Gàidheil* to recognise other *Gàidheil* do not simply operate in an ‘open’ or ‘fluid’ way (beyond any claims on identity for oneself). The survey has disclosed ‘guidelines, though not necessarily definitive or unambiguous ones’ by which some ‘identity markers are ... given precedence over others’ in the processes by which *Gàidheil* recognise *Gàidheil*. What Bechhofer and McCrone’s survey has outlined is an apparent hierarchy of belonging based on the respondents’ evaluation of the relative importance of the different sets of markers given to them in the survey.

Their analysis may therefore be considered to have outlined a *Gàidheal* equivalent of the non-arbitrary and respect demanding ‘observable realities’ of the social world, which the

sociologist Richard Jenkins (2014: 130) exemplified using Norwegian identity and which Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 114) adopted:

... you cannot turn up at the Norwegian border (or any other), claiming to be 'Norwegian' if you do not have the relevant passport, or language, or ancestral or historical connection to Norway. Your claim has to have some basis in commonly accepted, even legalistic, rules. 'I am one of you because I want to be,' is rarely sufficient to let you join the national club.

Crucially, however, the 'identity rules' of this *Gàidheal* 'national club' exist in an ontologically different state to those of Norwegians; being a *Gàidheal* is not mandated authoritatively by a state or state-like structure and there is no *Gàidheal* passport. Indeed, Scotland's decennial census form does not officially recognise *Gàidheil* as an ethnic group, requiring *Gàidheil* who wish to identify as a *Gàidheal* to be placed among the country's 'Other white ethnic groups' (Registrar General for Scotland 2011: 9). For historical reasons, and unlike Scotland as a whole (or Norway), there are no legally defined boundaries or borders for the *Gàidhealtachd*. Unlike these other examples, there is no official, 'legalistic' status for these rules and the identity they mark out. Instead, they are more or less 'commonly accepted' or normative rules self-generated by *Gàidheal* society and largely implicit in its self-understanding. Through Bechhofer and McCrone's survey they have found a general articulation.

III.

Although necessarily reductive, Bechhofer and McCrone's empirically-based analysis of markers of *Gàidheal* identity can nevertheless be used as a normative foundation to critically assess some claims about contemporary *Gàidheal* identity coming from academics associated with the *Gàidhlig* sociolinguistic turn. One such set of claims is being promoted by Dr. Tim Armstrong, a language activist and a senior lecturer in *Gàidhlig* at the University of the Highlands and Islands. He asserts that he is engaged in: 'an ideological campaign to reimagine the *Gàidheal* as an exclusively cultural and linguistic identity ... completely unrelated to ancestry or race' (Armstrong, 2019). Comparable revising propositions about *Gàidheal* identity can also be found in writing of Wilson McLeod, a professor of *Gàidhlig* at the University of Edinburgh, who asserts that a linguistic based identifier becomes a necessity as language becomes 'the only real and relevant marker of distinctiveness' among *Gàidheil* (2014: 151).

For Armstrong, in his series of research-related writing and dissemination (2019, 2020a, 2020b) about the campaign to reimagine *Gàidheal* as a linguistic identity, his conclusion is that many modern *Gàidhlig* speakers are shut out of the *Gàidheal* identity on the basis of, in his terms, 'race' because, 'the fact is, currently, the "Gael" identity is typically based on a complex conflation of ancestry and language' (Armstrong, 2019). In Armstrong's opinion, 'the identity of a "Gael" in Scotland is still predominantly defined by ancestry, and therefore, by race' (ibid). Disposing of *Gàidheil*'s sense of belonging to a lineage would therefore remove what he describes as 'the potentially racist foundation of ancestry' (ibid.). As a language activist, Armstrong believes that reimagining *Gàidheal* as an exclusively 'cultural' and 'linguistic' identity will have multiple benefits. Depriving *Gàidheil* of a sense of ancestry will, in his view: make the identity *Gàidheal* more accessible for language learners who do not have *Gàidheal* ancestors; strengthen the *Gàidhlig* language; remove 'uncertainty about

who is a "real" Gael' (ibid.); and remove the identity's association with low-status, shame and poverty. Although he does state that *Gàidheal* identity should be cultural as well as linguistic, he elsewhere argues that *Gàidheal* should be 'predominantly defined linguistically' and advocates 'redefining the Gael as a strongly linguistic identity' (ibid.). 'Culture' is of course a vast concept, in some accounts comprising ideational, material and practical aspects, and incorporating the realm of meaning and values (Goldberg 1993: 8). Nevertheless, aside from language Armstrong does not offer significant aspects of culture which he would recognize as forming part of *Gàidheal* identity. Therefore, the language appears to be the sole cultural object of his concern.

Armstrong's writing effectively imposes a binary choice, and false dichotomy, between considering *Gàidheal* as a racial (and potentially racist) identity or as a linguistic identity. Framing the debate in this way subtly and casually dismisses the idea and histories of *Gàidheil* as an ethnic group. While ethnicity in academic discourse is also a complex and contested term, a generally agreed starting point is 'that ethnicity is about "descent and culture"' and that ethnic groups can be thought of as 'descent and culture communities' (Fenton, 2003: 3). This more capacious way of understanding *Gàidheil* as a collective identity may act to repair the reductionist cleavage of Armstrong's assertions. That Armstrong has overlooked this ethnic perspective on a language considered indigenous within Scotland is curious for at least three reasons. Firstly, Armstrong considers the Basques as an example to follow in terms of shifting from an ancestral to linguistic focus for identity; yet the article that he cites to support this (Urla, 1988) is framed in terms of Basque ethnicity. Secondly, and more importantly, Bechhofer and McCrone's (2014: 129) research survey of *Gàidheil*'s own views on identity, cited by Armstrong, concluded that *Gàidheil* constitute an ethnicity within Scotland. Thirdly, and although not mentioned by Armstrong, at least as significant, a Scottish Government commissioned review of hate crime in Scotland last year carried out by former Scottish High Court judge Lord Bracadale concluded that 'that there is a fairly strong argument that Gaelic speaking Gaels belong to an "ethnic group" within the meaning of the current aggravation' on race as a protected characteristic (Scottish Government, 2018: 52).

Armstrong's argument that a sense of ancestry should be dissociated from the *Gàidheil* sense of self-understanding in the future has radical implications. Ancestor literally means those who go [*cedere*] before [*ante*] us. This includes our parents and grandparents (see, for example, UK Government, 2020). At face value, then, Armstrong appears to be asserting that the influence of our parents and grandparents on identity and ontological 'being' is, in his own words, 'dangerous' and 'potentially racist'. Proposing to eliminate the sense of ancestry from an already minoritised *Gàidheal* identity in favour of language alone raises questions for the future of *Gàidheil*'s cultural memory and creativity. For instance, ethnologist Mairi McFadyen (2019) writes about Grimsay musician Pàdrùig Morrison's participation in the 'Kin and the Community' project, where he responded creatively to ethnographic recordings made by his grandfather, a crofter and bard who passed away many years before Pàdrùig was born:

The audience witnessed past and present fuse together as Pàdrùig and friends accompanied his forebears in real time, unlocking layers of memory and meaning and inviting us to reflect on who we are and where we come from...[T]his work of creative ethnology is a moving reminder of *what it is to be human*. We live in a society that has forgotten to value what it is to be human, in a world where far too

many people get left behind. Our economy cares not for localities, cultures, ways of life or the cohesion of kin and community. (McFadyen, 2019)

What would the future be for projects exploring identity in this way if *Gàidheil* were to adopt an ideological position that kin and ancestral influence are ‘dangerous’ and ‘potentially racist’? Would this require us to surveil and regulate, even extirpate vital online archival resources such as *Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches*—a collection of field recordings made by ethnographers from the School of Scottish Studies and elsewhere—in case users were exposed to ideas or evidence of ancestry through the cultural connections of people and place? How does this stand in relation to international understandings of minoritized indigenous cultures and peoples and their recognition and place in society?

Eliminating a sense of ancestry would also require fundamental re-evaluation of past works of creativity. The rock band *Runrig* have probably done more than any other individuals or groups to encourage contemporary *Gàidheil* to take pride in who we are, as well as bringing more non-*Gàidheil* towards the *Gàidhlig* language and aspects of our culture. Yet an appeal to ancestry has always been at the heart of their muse. The incendiary song *Fichead Bliadhna* [Twenty Years] from their second album invokes the ancestral term, ‘*Clànn nan Gaidheal*’ [children of the Gaels], to describe people awakening to oppression. *Runrig*’s sixth album includes the song *Sìol Ghoraidh* [the progeny of Godfrey], an anthem of praise to the ancestors from whom they are descended. According to the poet Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul, this song:

... takes a powerful stand against the shame of the local simply by naming it. Here is a bold declaration that we can survive, that you, you are important. For in that song there is that wonderful naming of people in Gaelic by their *sloighneadh* [family ancestry]: a hammer chant that declares what it is to be Donald, to be Ranald, to be Mary, to be Jean, to be human, to be a Gael. (A. P. Caimbeul in Morton, 1991: 8)

In Armstrong’s *Gàidhlig* future such statements, and creative work, would be ideologically suspect. Yet this sense of belonging to a minoritized indigenous cultural tradition of which family and ancestry are essential parts is integral to the grounded and inspirational *Gàidhlig* and English language cultural productions of *Runrig*, Aonghas Pàdraig and many other creative *Gàidheil*. Moreover, these artists are not simply operating on the basis of familial relations. An examination of their cumulative cultural productions discloses a rich and complex understanding of themselves and the people to whom they belong. Eliminating, by ideological force if such a thing could be achieved, any element of the complex inter-related weave of these artists’ self-understanding would diminish them, as Mairi McFadyen observed, not only as artists but fundamentally as human beings.

It appears that one underlying challenge for Armstrong’s ideological campaign is the lack of a method for detaching his desired ‘linguistic’ identity from his undesired ‘ancestral’ identity (or, for that matter, from identity based on ‘residence’ or ‘place’). At present, his planned reduction of identity to language would leave *Gàidheil* with a hugely impoverished – and surely unrealistic – conception of what it means to have an identity in the first place. Now of course, this argument is not to diminish the real importance of language to identity; as Charles Taylor and other hermeneutic philosophers emphasise, we are ‘language beings’ (Taylor, 1995: 14. See also Taylor, 2017). Instead, it is to place language as an important, even galvanising (and I would consider in the longer term likely a necessary), but not sufficient component within a greater, and more complex sense of *Gàidheil* identity and

collective self-understanding. As Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 127) concluded: ‘There is no simple metric for being a Gael.’

Armstrong’s elision of ethnicity may be related to his views on what he described as ‘the old core Gael identity’ which, in his opinion, should be abandoned because it is considered ‘shameful’ and is characterised by inferiority: ‘low status ... poverty and social exclusion’ (Armstrong 2019). It is certainly true that these and other related discursive terms have been deployed over several centuries by a range of ideological campaigners (including some genuine racists) to describe and diminish *Gàidheil*. However, shadowing this longstanding discourse of inferiorisation there has also been a responding discourse of resistance. In order to characterise ‘the old core Gael identity’ exclusively by the kinds of deficit terms used by ideologists of inferiority, Armstrong has correspondingly had to exclude the activists, bards and scholars of this resistant stream. By excluding those voices from his analysis, and by emphasising the view that poverty, shame and low status are the essential features of *Gàidheil*’s core ethnic identity today, Armstrong leaves himself open to criticism that he is contributing to an ideology of *Gàidheil* ‘inferiorisation’ (for the concept of ‘inferiorisation’, see Fanon (1994)) while at the same time advancing a new form of cultural *misrecognition*.

IV

As a resolution, Armstrong considers the idea that, ‘One possible answer to this problem ... of the low status and shame associated with being a Gael’ would be ‘to distance Gaelic from the old core identity, [and] to create a new idea of a “Gaelic speaker” which is independent from the term *Gàidheil*. However, he rejects this idea as he believes the term *Gàidheil* can still be useful for his campaign because it remains ‘powerfully affective’ and can be ‘repurposed as a linguistic identity’ to emphasise continuity with ‘Scotland’s people, Scotland’s geography and Scotland’s past’ (Armstrong, 2019). In this way his writing may be seen as responding to the writing of Wilson McLeod, who, like Armstrong, is a fluent adult learner of *Gàidhlig* originally from North America. McLeod has repeatedly emphasised language-based identity terms while questioning the contemporary status and significance of the term *Gàidheil*, arguing that it ‘has become increasingly opaque’ or even “‘a hollow category” to some extent’ (McLeod and O’Rourke, 2015: 155; McLeod, 2018: 88). He has advised that ‘One means of overcoming this difficulty is to use language-based identifiers such as *luchd na Gàidhlig* (literally “the people of the Gaelic language”) in place of “Gael”’. (McLeod, 2020a: 314). Indeed, he has asserted that ‘the ethnic identifying label *Gàidheil* has come to be replaced in many contexts’ by language-based terms of identity, a process that is necessary because, in his view, language is becoming ‘the only real and relevant marker of distinctiveness’ among *Gàidheil* (McLeod, 2014: 149, 151). McLeod’s views on ethnicity may have shifted somewhat recently. In a book published in 2020 he argued, on the basis of Lord Bracadale’s argument on *Gàidheil* ethnicity, that ‘there may be some theoretical potential’ in conceiving of *Gàidheil* as an ethnic group. (2020a: 41) However, he concluded the book by emphasising a position on *Gàidheil* identity that seems similar to Armstrong’s reduction to language use. (2020a: 335, 336) The replacement of ethnicity with language appears to be a trend in more recent work. In a blog for the *Centre for Education for Racial Equality in Scotland* on ‘anti-Gaelic rejectionism’, McLeod used Krystyna Fenyö’s (2000) historical work to argue that ‘attitudes to Gaelic in the wider Scottish population have been described as a complex mixture of “contempt, sympathy and romance”’ (McLeod 2020b). However, the book *Contempt, Sympathy and Romance*, as Fenyö (2000: 11) notes in its introduction, is concerned primarily with ‘[t]he extent of hostility, contempt and at times sheer hatred towards the Highland Gaels’ in the mid-nineteenth century. It analyses racialised

thinking towards *Gàidheil* during the period, and it even considers whether the Highland Clearances can be thought of as a form of ‘ethnic cleansing’. (2000: 90-92, 179-184). Language is not the book’s primary concern, and on the occasions when it is mentioned it is considered an attribute of a wider ethnic identity.

In order to justify the assertion that the meaning of the term *Gàidheal* is becoming unclear, McLeod invariably makes use of a partial quotation from qualitative research analysis from James Oliver: ‘when Gaels are spoken of, no one is quite sure what one is and few claim to be one’ (2005: 22). However, as also highlighted by Oliver (this volume), McLeod’s reuse of the quote to generalise from a site-specific research context, in effect, misrepresents what Oliver was discussing. Moreover, it is clear from Bechhofer and McCrone’s research – published following Oliver’s article but before McLeod’s assertions – that promoting a generalising claim based on the idea that ‘no one is quite sure what a Gael is and that few claim to be one’ is misleading. Although in many parts of Scotland few would claim to be a *Gàidheal*, Bechhofer and McCrone found that in their more strongly *Gàidhlig* speaking survey areas more than 80 per cent of their respondents considered themselves to be *Gàidheil*, at least to some degree (2014: 120). Their findings led them to posit near universal acceptance among *Gàidheil* for a set of markers which constitute an archetypal *Gàidheal* identity along with less archetypal, and less generally accepted, variants on the archetype. If clarity is lacking, it is in the lack of agreement among *Gàidheil* about where the boundaries of the identity lie, a disagreement which appears to be routine in judgements about ethnic or national identities; it can, for example, also be found among Scots in relation to Scottish identity (Kiely et al, 2001).

The complex understanding of *Gàidheal* identity disclosed above contrasts with McLeod’s view that language is becoming the only real and relevant marker of distinctiveness among *Gàidheil*. In his recent assertions (McLeod, 2020a: 314; 2018: 88) that language-based terms are not only becoming more popular but are also being used in place of the ethnic term *Gàidheal*, McLeod cited as evidence another of his own articles (McLeod 2014). This earlier article also made the claim about replacement but gave no evidence in support. However, it did refer to a then forthcoming paper, of which McLeod was also lead author, which was said to provide evidence that ‘the term *luchd na Gàidhlig* is perceived by some “new speakers” as being more “inclusive” than *Gàidheal*’ (2014: 149, 150). However, the co-authored article on ‘new speakers’ of *Gàidhlig* in Glasgow and Edinburgh did not discuss the term *luchd na Gàidhlig* at all. Indeed, while one of the people interviewed used the term *luchd na Beurla* [translated by the authors as ‘English speakers’], in the same sentence the same interviewee eschewed the *Gàidhlig* equivalent in favour of *luchd-ionnsachaidh na Gàidhlig* [translated as ‘Gaelic learners’] (McLeod, O’Rourke & Dunmore, 2014: 31). Although the term *luchd na Gàidhlig* may be being used in some instances, the sources cited by McLeod gave no evidence for this, let alone that the term is replacing the ethnic descriptor *Gàidheal* ‘in many contexts’. These evaporating reference chains, as well as the limited quality of evidence provided for the critical argument on the disintegration of *Gàidheil* as a recognisable ethnic group, opens up the question of whether, when describing the replacement of the ethnonym *Gàidheal* as a term of recognition, in favour of the linguistic ‘the people of the Gaelic language’, McLeod may in fact be advancing more an aspirational ideological position than an evidence-based reality.

The discussion in the rest of this section of the article relates the lingua-centric propositions for changing *Gàidheal* identity assessed in sections III and IV to the individualised, cosmopolitan sociolinguistic turn in *Gàidhlig* scholarship outlined in section I, and it draws

on analysis from Ireland by Conchúr Ó Giollagáin (Ó Giollagáin, 2016). Prominent members of the new-speaker group, strongly rooted in the dominant English language culture and forging an additional or secondary identity by way of language acquisition, use their institutional influence to begin to assert claims for recognition of their own language-based identity on the basis of, but simultaneously at the expense of, the pre-existing ethnolinguistic group whose language they have acquired. Furthermore, bound by their narrow ideological focus, some proponents of efforts to reduce to language the complexity of *Gàidheal* identity may see this transformation as a way of eliminating what they understand as a wider societal context and legacy of ethnic ‘shame, low status and poverty’, impeding establishment of a newer and forward-looking, language-based identity. Nevertheless, such a campaign would do nothing to alter the socio-cultural troubles and complex societal issues that are integral to the everyday and lived reality of many *Gàidhlig* speakers in the vernacular community today. (For some contemporary societal issues in the islands related to ‘shame, low status and poverty’, see Ross (2015), Ross (2012), Ross (2018), Adamson and Partners (2013)).

Wilson McLeod (2020a: 333, 334) has acknowledged there are ‘deep-rooted structural problems’ in heartland areas. However, he believes *Gàidhlig* policy for those areas has been ‘too little too late’ and that ‘broad-based community level interventions’ have become ‘impracticable’. Ó Giollagáin (2016) has asserted that academic institutional leaders rooted in the dominant group have used their ‘cultural capital’ to become predominant in Irish Celtic Studies departments – it has been observed that learners of the language also predominate in *Gàidhlig* related academic posts in Scotland (McLeod 2001: 19, 20). Ó Giollagáin’s position can be extended to argue that the adoption of a language-focussed ideology may serve to entrench the status and position of members of that group institutionally. At the same time, if we choose not to deal with the reality of societal crisis in the weakening and declining minority culture group which contains the greatest concentration of *Gàidhlig* speakers, then approaching revitalisation as a linguistic project may serve to further marginalize this group and hamper the potential for communal leadership to emerge commensurate to the linguistic and societal tasks.

V.

In this article I have analysed two radical and related propositions for changing the way that *Gàidheil* are recognized in Scotland today. Were either of these propositions to be realised they would arguably be moves towards the end of *Gàidheil*’s recognition as a distinct ethnic group. In contemporary Scottish public discourse aspects of *Gàidheal* identity are already routinely misrecognised (MacKinnon 2012). In other cases, such as the census, *Gàidheil* are not explicitly recognised at all. Charles Taylor (1994: 25) argued for such processes of misrecognition to be considered a form of oppression, projecting a ‘confining’ or ‘contemptible’ picture on the subject group, ‘imprisoning them in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being’.

An alternative proposition, which appears to be a more realistic prospect for maintaining a societal presence for *Gàidhlig* in Scotland, is the recent suggestion for an ethnolinguistic assembly for *Gàidheil* (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020: 419-443; Ó Giollagáin and Caimbeul, this volume). In addition to holding a community cultural and development function beyond language revitalisation, the proposed assembly might fundamentally change the ways in which *Gàidheil* are recognized in Scotland today. It would have the potential to bring the informal identity rules identified by Bechhofer and McCrone to conscious deliberation, even

to some level of adaptation and formalisation. A *Gàidheal* assembly would provide an authoritative focus for deliberation on and then enactment of policies that, in addition to their material effects, would also have the effect of formalizing a space of recognition of *Gàidheil* as a rights-bearing group indigenous to Scotland. This form of recognition could act as a step on a cultural path of recovery and regeneration, a journey to which contributions to this volume also act as markers. Moreover, as Bechhofer and McCrone observed, strongly self-identifying *Gàidheil* hold firm political and economic views and aspirations related to their identity and ethnicity, including to culturally distinct, place-based knowledge and practices (and creative adaptations) that are seen as integral to community wellbeing and identity.

If an assembly comes into being, it is likely to emerge in relation to pressing issues relating to the ethnic group, and out of such issues it would develop both a focus and locus of concern. Given recent academic and political discussion, the initial focus of concern is likely to be linguistic, and the locus of concern the vernacular language community, living in an area that would be considered part of the traditional *Gàidhealtachd*. However, as the fuller range of supra-linguistic societal concerns relating to community cultural development among the wider community of *Gàidheil* are elaborated in assembly the focus and locus of concerns may develop and complexify, leading to an emergent but porous *Gàidhealtachd* territorialisation around the politics and practice(s) of place, including the language in which those places of the *Gàidheil* maintain their human presence and life.

Despite their observation that there is a strong political marker of *Gàidheal* identity, Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 127-129) conclude that *Gàidheil* constitute an ethnicity in Scotland rather than a nation. They reach this view on the basis of Erikson's (1993: 6) argument 'that many ethnic groups do not demand command over a state ... when the political leaders of an ethnic movement place demands to this effect, the ethnic movement therefore by definition becomes a nationalist movement'. Bechhofer and McCrone (2014: 128) believe that *Gàidheil* would need to advance a 'claim to statehood' to be considered a nation. However, self-governing nations exist within larger sovereign orders – including states – both in practice and as aspiration (Lätsch, 2012: 77; Graham and Petrie, 2018; Sinclair, 2017. Christie, 2007. See also Carleton (2021)). Assertions of indigenous nationhood can and have been made without demands for separate statehood.

A more perspicuous distinction between ethnic and national groups has been drawn by Will Kymlicka (1995: 10) who defines 'national minorities' as 'cultural diversity [that] arises from the incorporation of previously self-governing, territorially concentrated cultures into a larger state.' The cultural diversity of 'ethnic minorities', by contrast, arises from individual and familial immigration' where immigrants 'coalesce into loose associations.' What I would add to this is that ethnicity is not optional; national minorities are also ethnic minorities. Under this categorisation, *Gàidheil* appear as a 'national ethnic minority' (See also the important discussion in Newton (2011: 215-216, 231-233)).

In the light of Bechhofer and McCrone's findings, generating *Gàidheal* identity over time can be understood as a complex and developing but rule-bound and enduring process of collective self-making and self-maintenance, largely achieved implicitly in the face of a dominant and typically hostile social and cultural environment (MacInnes 2006: 92, 266). The proposed *Gàidheal* assembly has the potential to create a protected space for the regeneration and recovery of an indigenous national group.

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¹ In this article I write the ethnonym *Gàidheal* [plural form *Gàidheil*], the linguistic term *Gàidhlig* and the territorial term *Gàidhealtachd* in their *Gàidhlig* forms, except when quoting other authors using the Anglicised versions of these *Gàidhlig* terms.