Highland Games and Festival Community of New England: Investigating their Sense of Community

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I was planning to write about the Scottish Community in New Hampshire. Why? I know there is a huge annual festival at Loon Mountain in Lincoln, New Hampshire every fall, and I thought I’d check it out. Many ethnic groups have annual festivals but this one is especially grand in scope. They say around 25,000 people attend the event, traveling to a rural, mountain town to do so, so it sounded compelling. It’s a big thing. Therefore, I set out to learn about the Scottish Community of New Hampshire. This made sense to me.

I attended the New Hampshire Scottish Highland Games and Festival on September 21. I thought I’d learn about sense of community in the Scottish community. The festival has traditional Scottish foods, music (such as harp, fiddle, and bagpipes), Highland Dance, drum major parades, Scottish whiskey tasting and shortbread cookie eating, sheep dog trials and the 2013 Scottish World Heavy Athletic Championships with its many international competitors. The “heavy athletics” are a highlight and a lot of people say it’s their favorite part of the weekend. I would estimate that maybe 15% of those 25,000 people in attendance come dressed in traditional, historic Scottish attire from head to toe. Even the town’s police department for that day dons kilts and directs traffic wearing Scottish garb. I basically figured my paper would be about the community of people who are Scottish and live in New Hampshire. Clearly, or so I thought, there are a lot of them, and this looks like fun.

**Students: My paper is longer than yours will probably be. I wanted to give you a bunch of illustrations.** From talking to some people on the day I attended the Highland Games & Festival, I learned that many of them are not even a little bit Scottish. I didn’t exactly encounter the Scottish Community after all! Instead, I came to know the Scottish Highland Games and Festival
Community of New England, which is different. And that’s the community I’m investigating. The leadership is Scottish but many of the 25,000 people who are there, even if they’re participating in competitions, playing bagpipes, or wearing kilts, are not Scottish. And many of the participants travel to the Highland Games and Festivals throughout the six states of New England. I saw a band with a Korean drummer, in his kilt, leading the march.

As a note to students, it is unusual to find a community that is basically known for its events. “The Scottish Community in New Hampshire” should have made more sense to come to know and focus on in my paper. This is unusual, but this is the Highland Games & Festival Community, and the focus of my paper. As you will see, they are themselves a community.

I will refer often to the Clans. From how the people explained it to me, the word clan is from a Gaelic word for children, and refers to people of proven descent from the common ancestor related to the chief of a specific region in the Highlands of Scotland. Clans in their day included septs and protectorates who weren’t descendants of the chiefly house at all, but other families who pledged loyalty to that chieftain in return for protection in battles. They are like adopted children, if I understood that right. Families who are septs married into the clan.

The festival I attended had around 60 Scottish clans represented. Each clan has a tent, and a clan representative who’s there to greet visitors and give information about clan membership and history. So those people are actually Scottish – some part of their genetic history has to include a Scottish surname, and each has membership in that clan. Some reps are 100% Scottish or 50% Scottish. Others had only one person, four generations back, who was Scottish. Yet in this community, that is what matters. For more information, the website for the New Hampshire Highland Games and Festival is NHScot.org. I’m going to analyze sense of community using the
McMillan-Chavis model. It is defined by four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. Here we go!

**Membership**

The boundaries of membership in the Scottish Highland Games & Festival community are much less rigid than I had assumed before inquiring. I see many of the participants and attendees wearing kilts and other traditional garb, and I assumed these people were 100% Scottish. The Highland Games confer all of the *Highland Scottish Clans*, as they are called. They are known basically today by their last name. The interesting part to me was that if one has any ancestor with the last name of that clan, or the last name of any one *sept or protectorate* of that clan (the adopted children), then one has rights to join. Some clans require documentation – birth records, death records, something that indicates the lineage is legitimate. Others take one’s word for it.

Any small amount of Scottish blood is sufficient for membership and even leadership in the respective clan. I interviewed a man named Zimmerman, and the biggest part of his heritage is German.

One has to be Scottish to join a clan, true, but not to be a member of the Highland Games & Festival Community. There were thousands of people at the Games wearing kilts, participating in the traditional Scottish heavy athletics events, marching in pipe and drum bands, or just there to observe and take part, and many of them were not even Scottish at all. They were certainly community members. The boundary is that they were present there. Even I am a member because I showed up. If you’re not at the games, you’re not a member of this community.

A common symbol system defines membership as well, and this is huge in the Scottish Highland Games & Festival Community. Many participants as well as many in attendance, are
covered in their common symbols. If it is made of fabric, it probably reflects a clan’s tartan. That says which clan specifically someone is in. I used to think that color and pattern choice for kilts was by personal preference. However, the exact color and pattern is very important as a symbol of clan affiliation. And this clan-affiliation is a part of what it means to be Scottish. Also, if someone is Scottish or a part of the community (i.e. the non-Scottish members), the symbol of membership is the wearing of a kilt. Other symbols of membership include tartans, badges, bagpipe music, and even a war cry.

Kilts differ by function/purpose, similar to military uniforms for different occasions. Outside of the games (i.e. the rest of the year), a regular winter scarf, or the clan crest sewn on a jacket or hung on the wall, and other Celtic symbols and pins are generally worn by people who identify with the Highland Games & Festival Community. I saw many sales booths for these things at the festival I attended. Someone also gave me a gift of a winter scarf with the specific pattern of colors, which is cool.

Members of this community expressed to me that they experience emotional safety. This is a safe place to make friends. People really do seem relaxed and safe at the highland games. They appreciate the friendship, safety, and common ground. They look forward to talking to one another at upcoming festivals. Also in terms of emotional safety, American Clan Gregor Society explained how they are not, as a clan, a part of International Clan MacGregor due to the international clan’s stance that women cannot be chieftains. In fact, as of the time of this interview, American Clan Gregor’s chief is a woman.

Personal investment in the community seems important too. Those with whom I spoke are there because they want other people to have the same experience of connection, relationship, and pride in heritage that they do. Also, with a bunch of strong, burly men walking around in
kilts – surely they feel emotionally safe to do that. This is also a volunteer community in that no one is ever paid. Expenses might be subsidized by the clan (from dues people might pay) but mostly expenses are covered by the individuals. Even the ticket to get into the games costs around $35 per person for one day of the 3-day weekend. And 25,000 people pay it.

The sense of belonging seems apparent to me. I even felt it as a newcomer. Scottish comes over clan in terms of identity. I asked some Scottish people there about this and they didn’t hesitate to clarify. They come together as Scottish people. Yet, being Scottish is obviously only a part of one’s identity. These are normal people: one was a lawyer, for example, from Vermont. From an interview with MacLaughlan’s representative, “My people are the Scottish people. Even one step further, with the Irish we are all Celts. This is a different angle for having a sense of belonging in the community you see here...” They do feel like a family.

Influence

The clans seem to give influence and power to folks who want to take it. Any member can run for leadership offices, which are elected by vote. I feel that the clans are attractive to people by extending opportunities for influence. As I mentioned in addressing emotional safety, some clans are a part of national or North American clans, but not their corresponding International clans, because the international societies do not allow women to be Chieftan. Refusing to accept that, these clans refuse to join international clan things. Women who are members have full rights to leadership and influence in the American group.

The official sacrifice to become a part of this community is simple: show some papers to join a clan. There is a stronger expectation to conform to group norms though, as they pertain to clothing in particular. And the community of the Highland Games is a lot bigger than the subset of those who are actually Scottish and join the clans. Regular community members are expected
to be here every year without question, and the community exerts power in the sense of this expectation of commitment. I think by having such open doors to membership, the community extends an opportunity for influential membership quite readily. Perhaps it’s this reason, that people don’t really have to work too hard for their status, that there’s not as many younger people interested in the clan systems anymore. I’m just guessing about that.

Leadership (i.e. chieftains as well as council leadership) is elected by membership vote, after a hereditary right to membership is established by lineage. Because any amount of Scottish heritage is sufficient for clan membership and leadership, influence is up for grabs for anyone who wants to share it. I observed no sense of hierarchy in my conversations.

Scottish people whose ancestors (noted by last name) are descendants of a sept of a clan are welcomed as full members in the clan. I personally have never identified as Scottish. I identify as a hybrid of American Indian Mohawk and Swedish. Yet, I am aware that I’m not precisely “50-50” in my heritage. My mother’s father’s mother’s father (that is my great-great-grandfather) was a Gilchrist. Let me be clear: that’s one of my descendants, and we share a span of five generations. I learned that Gilchrist is a Sept of the Clan MacLauchlan! Upon sharing this information with the MacLauchlan clan representatives, I was invited to join the MacLauchlan clan, learn more, and even to begin doing so by joining them at their formal dinner to be held that very night. In other words, there would be an annual field day or dinner in any state once a year, six each year if I consider all of New England, and everyone who is a member of that clan is warmly invited, as a member. And I had just met these people.

It seems to me that the Highland Games & Festival community exerts power in terms of one’s personal identity. I heard from people of mixed heritage and only a small bit of Scottish genealogy, that they have chosen to most identify as Scottish “because it is fun,” or, “because we
don’t have German Highland Games,” or, “because I play the bagpipes in the pipe band.” or, “others don’t dress up in kilts and drink Scotch whiskey and have great parties like this.” That they would choose to formally join clan membership and be active in the Highland Games & Festivals community reflects influence of the group over its members. That’s not to say it’s negative, or a bad thing, just that it is compelling and draws people in. When a community exerts influence over its members, it clearly supports group cohesion.

Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

Because this element of sense of community is essentially about the rewards of membership, why do people do this? I think people have a deep desire to be a part of something cohesive, to belong and feel safe in sharing something familiar. I think some of us today lack a sense of belonging. We might have our immediate family members, but maybe not something bigger, and I believe it is a basic human desire to feel a part of a beloved community, to be able to care for one another.

In terms of shared values, what I observed included kinship, pride, hospitality, and keeping this going. “So many of us have interest in our shared history, and keeping it alive,” said one representative. “Other cultures do this in their ways, and this is ours. Highland Festivals and Games is how we do it. You’re in New Hampshire today, but there are over 300 annual Highland Festivals in North American each year, including Hawaii. Imagine people walking around in kilts in Hawaii! Those of us who are representing our clans here generally travel throughout New England…”

The clan representatives with whom I spoke each told me about the joy they felt when they first learned about their place in this community – specifically about their family’s heritage. They recalled with a smile when they first felt a part of something bigger and so cohesive, and
they give of their time and other resources to share that with others. Bringing people in through that same gate is a strong, shared value. “I get such joy out of the look in their faces,” said the MacChattan clan representative.

I see the shared value of “keeping this going” as sincere, and extending beyond their community to touch any ethnic community that seeks to learn about and pass on their shared narrative. I read the Clan Chattan Association’s mission statement: “To encourage and maintain interest in the history and the traditions of the Clan; to extend knowledge of the Clan and Association throughout the world, and to give support to similar movements which have as their object the preservation of old traditions and loyalties.” I also met a professional athlete in a wheelchair, who is not at all Scottish, yet there to compete kilt and all. He noted sharing the value of seeing a people keep their traditions alive, and respect for strength and athleticism.

In terms solely of the Games aspect of the community, there is a noteworthy shared value in the competition itself, with mutual respect and accountability among athletes. I interviewed the previously mentioned, physically disabled athlete, who is not Scottish, and he spoke to how he was as fully a member of the community as anyone else. “We wear the same clothes, compete in the same sports, attend the same athlete dinners…” So this man is not only not Scottish, but he competes in the heavy athletics of traditional Scottish Highland Games with a physical disability. This is one welcoming community, as far as the Games go, based on the shared value of sportsmanship.

They also have a community economy in terms of exchanging resources within the group. Community members participate in communities in part because their needs are met therein; these needs are met through connections with other members. They share stuff. There is a lot of camaraderie among the heavy athletes. For example, last year when one of the guys beat
the reigning world record holder who was throwing something heavy, the new record holder received an international phone call while still on the field, with congratulations from the one whose record was just beat. The other big aspect of community economy I saw is that the clan representatives possess years of historical and genealogical knowledge from their own research, which uses a considerable resource of time. New guests and members can receive details of their heritage that took a lot of discovery time for these representatives to have figured out. It would take you forever to learn all the information that these people will just hand you for free.

As another representative put it, “This is a lot of work to setup, but it is so worth it. Bob MacIntosh is our current council president. He lives nearby to this festival, so we all stay at his place every year for New Hampshire. We wouldn’t miss this.”

**Shared Emotional Connection**

So what is the soul of the people here? There is a shared emotional connection around the history of the Highland Clans. By definition, their shared history is the foundation of the community of the Scottish Highland Games & Festival. That they share this appreciation and respect for their history is itself a gathering sense. And the non-Scottish share in the emotional connection of being a part of something of history that people choose to sustain. More than that, as the community certainly includes non-Scottish people, they have the shared participation in the events themselves. This is whom they have become as a community that surrounds an event, which is not especially common in terms of how and why people become a part of a community.

There is a nonhierarchical nature to solidarity that I sense in this community. It’s really about relationships to one another and that all are connected to a clear, central identity of the Highland Games and Festival. I just keep going back to the mental image I got from talking to a non-Scottish woman that she and her non-Scottish husband look forward all year to this
weekend, to don their kilts and take in the Games & Festival which is all based on Scottish heritage and customs.

The important experiences they share are historical ones among their ancestors, wherever they’re from, as well as current, Games & Festival experiences. The community honors members with awards for musical performances, marching, drumming, dancing, cooking, and heavy athletics. The people who don’t win are not humiliated for losing. The dramatic moments they share are also both historical and current in terms of competition. That the clans historically were rivals is now a source of humor among present day clan members, who come together around the fact that they are all members of the Scottish Highland Games and Festival community. This fascinates me because those rivals from a few centuries ago were violent wards. They have literally “agreed to disagree” and seem in fact quite close to one another today.

Shared emotional connection comes about from shared community narratives, stories and rituals. This is probably the most obvious aspect of sense of community that I can put my finger on. That “story”… the story that every one of those 60 clan representatives can tell, is the real account of their people. “These are my people.” And at the same time, I learned from many that “we are Scottish first, and clan membership is a detail.” And they are the sort of Scottish subset of the greater community at the Highland Games & Festival.

From the many, many people who attend as spectators or competitors who are not Scottish, a few with whom I spoke shared with me that a primary motivator for attending these games is the shared emotional connection. I met a couple who were wearing kilts, and had told me they are not Scottish, who said, “We look forward to this every year. We bought kilts the first time we came to the games, and this is definitely a favorite event of the year now.” Not even Scottish, yet here they are and they find within this community a refreshing, restorative weekend.
Seriously, this is an interesting people! You can become a part of this community too if you want – just attend next year. You’ll probably surprise yourself and buy a kilt.

**Most Pressing Issues**

I asked about this, and I think I heard about two issues currently facing the community. I suspect there are more, but I’m not familiar enough to know them. First, because the shared history is one of wars and battles, some clans today really emphasize the warrior aspects of their identity. This is bothersome to some other clans. As the representative of Clan Chattan told me, “I’d want outsiders to know that we don’t all walk around swords, like Braveheart.” Yet other clan reps had a very war-like image to what they were presenting. I’d agree this is a valid issue because the Highland Games and Festival is such a tight community, based on shared history of battles, but presently quite peaceful. If some feel that others emphasize violence unnecessarily, that’s a source of conflict. They seem to discuss this amongst themselves and it seems to remain a relatively subtle yet persistent source of disagreement. It has to do with the future of their community, so it’s certainly an issue.

The other issue I heard about seems more clear-cut. I spoke with the youngest clan representative present, who was there for Clan MacFarlane. He expressed a real concern about the age of the clan representatives. The Highland Games & Festival is attended by people of all generations. There were a lot of children and young parents there. But the thread that winds through all of this really is the clan history. If there aren’t any young clan representatives, that social membership won’t be sustained. The MacFarlane representative told me how he felt when he was able to acquire his grandfather’s Scottish relics and symbols, and he expresses concern that there aren’t more like him who are ready to accept and carry on those elements of culture
that are going to be passed down. To address this issue, clans try to actively recruit younger membership and invite them to take leadership roles.

Overall, it looks like the future of the Scottish Highland Games & Festival Community is going to continue to be a proud, sure, caring and artful place to gather all who appreciate an event that can draw 25,000 people out to the boonies on New Hampshire to be a part of it.