

Popular traditions and festive imagery

The performance of the “Ball Parlat de Sant Joan”

A milestone for the recovery of popular traditions in Rodonyà

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In June 2013, after almost 100 years, the “Ball Parlat” play of the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist was once again performed in the main square of the village of Rodonyà. The new staging of this piece of popular theatre became an unprecedented milestone for this village of the Camp de Tarragona region. Year after year, for five years now, thanks to the collective involvement of the village’s residents, the project to recover this popular hagiographical performance has gained momentum. Today, it has once again become one of the main socio-cultural expressions of this village.

The interest that the resurgence of these theatrical street performances has aroused in most of the southern provinces for some decades now suggests that the restoration of this “Ball Parlat” will not be the last such case, by any means.

The project to recover the “Ball Parlat de Sant Joan” (the “spoken dance of Saint John”), a piece of folk theatre, has represented a real milestone in raising social awareness of the cultural value of the expressions of popular culture in this village in the Camp de Tarragona region. The project has galvanised the village’s inhabitants to organise a series of activities to ensure the recovery, preservation and consolidation of a number of their traditions, such as the “Ball Parlat” spoken dance, the singing of “goigs” poetic, “caramelles” Easter folk songs and the “pa beneït” blessed bread procession. These elements represent the major hallmarks of Rodonyà’s collective identity and popular traditions.

In the case of the *Ball Parlat de Sant Joan* of Rodonyà, as has probably occurred in other cases, it has become a reality as a result of the social fervour that has been unleashed by the restoration of a common heritage. It is in this sense

that an extensive participatory process has been generated with the collaboration of residents and local organisations which, under the protection of the village council, have led to the recovery of this piece of street theatre. The collective



Details of the cast of characters of the “Ball Parlat de Sant Joan” in the square of Rodonyà castle (2016). JAUME JOVÉ

El projecte de recuperació del ball parlat de Sant Joan, una obra de teatre popular, ha estat un veritable revulsiu per la conscienciació social dels valors patrimonials que tenen les manifestacions de la cultura popular en aquest poble del Camp de Tarragona. Aquest fet motivà que els veïns de la població endeguessin un conjunt d’activitats per tal de garantir el restabliment, la preservació i la consolidació de bona part de les seves tradicions, tals com el propi ball parlat, la cantada dels goigs, les caramelles o el pa beneït. Principals senyes de la identitat col·lectiva de les tradicions populars de Rodonyà.

El proyecto de recuperación del baile hablado de Sant Joan, una obra de teatro popular, ha sido un verdadero revulsivo para la concienciación social de los valores patrimoniales que tienen las manifestaciones de la cultura popular en este pueblo del Campo de Tarragona. Este hecho motivó que los vecinos de la población emprendieran un conjunto de actividades con el fin de garantizar el restablecimiento, la preservación y la consolidación de buena parte de sus tradiciones, tales como el propio baile hablado, el canto de los gozos, las coplas o el pan bobo. Principales señas de las identidades colectivas de las tradiciones populares de Rodonyà.

implication has, undoubtedly, made it possible for the people to once again connect with the very essence of the tradition of *Balls Parlats*.

The support and effort of a large part of the local inhabitants, when tackling the tasks that have been required to make this performance a reality, has been crucial in order to achieve it successfully. A wide variety of tasks have been carried out, involving both the arrangement of the text, the music and the dance routines, as well as the costumes of each and every one of the characters that appear in the play. Furthermore, the initiative has had a fundamental social impact, both at the local and regional level. The performance is a clear example of the theatrical tradition that lies behind these kinds of stage operations which, at the same time, represent a benchmark for the collective cultural heritage of this region.

Besides this project's importance for the restoration of the "Ball Parlat" tradition in question, the initiative has become a real trigger for reviving the popular traditions of Rodonyà. It is difficult to imagine that what had been originally conceived as a way to recover and showcase the "Ball Parlat de Sant Joan Baptista" would eventually become a real milestone that would lead to a new-found interest in the typical examples of the customs of Rodonyà. As such, this event has not been the culmination of a whole process, but rather has become the beginning of a programme focusing on the revival of popular folklore in the village. Of course, it has been the conjuncture of the moment, favoured by the series

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of synergies that have come together, which has led to the establishment of the necessary bases in order to undertake a heritage project of this nature, and thus to be able to set new goals for intangible heritage. Furthermore, both the results and the approaches that this project has involved have been essential for raising social awareness of the cultural value of the celebrations and customs of popular culture. They represent the hallmarks of the local collective identity. It is not at all surprising to also consider that one of the factors that has favoured this play's recovery has been the resurgence of the spirit



A scene from the "Ball Parlat de Sant Joan" of Rodonyà, with the stately castle in the background (2016). JAUME JOVÉ

of amateur theatre, which has long been rooted in the village. The project presented an opportunity for many residents to interpret the characters of the play, just as their ancestors had before them. On the other hand, it has been through the historical contextualisation of the "Ball Parlat" that the links that exist between this artistic performance and other examples of the repertoire of the village's traditional collection have been brought to light. These are cultural expressions which, until not so many decades ago, were still fully active and formed the expression of the festive repertoire.

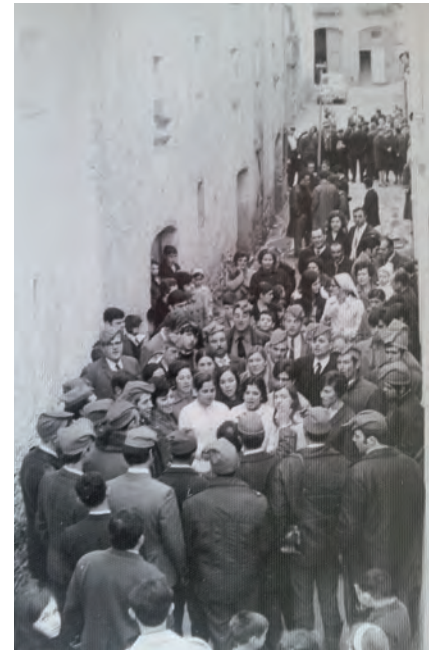
It is well known that a large part of these traditions have origins linked to the religious celebrations that took place based on the Catholic counter-reformist doctrine of the second half of the 16th century. This fact not only reveals their common origin, but also the fact that in most cases they share the same theme of praise and exaltation of a saint. Generally, the parish is named after this figure and they are also the town's patron saint, as is the case for Rodonyà where the church is dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. It is in praise of this saint that the main popular festive commemorations of the

religious calendar are held, which as of this period will be consolidated among the place's inhabitants. This dynamic would be reaffirmed starting in 1867, when the church of Rodonyà was canonically declared a parish church.

Despite the eminent nature and religious sense that lies in the origins of these celebrations, over the years they have become the essence of the village's fun and festive tradition. As a whole, most of these events include the peak of their collective expression in the programme of the village festival. It is based on this close relationship, estab-



Singing of “Goigs” poetic hymns in praise of Saint John the Baptist in the parish church of Rodonyà. (2016). ISIDRE PASTOR



Group of singers during a singing of “Caramelles” Easter folk songs in the street known as Carrer de les Barres in Rodonyà (1973). EMILI PASTOR

lished between the festive celebration and the confessional activities of exaltation of the patron figure, that the village’s traditional repertoire will be developed: the “Ball Parlat” play, the “goigs” poetic hymns, the “pa beneit” procession and, in a way, also the “caramelles” Easter folk songs. These represent a set of manifestations which, today, are considered just another part of the village festival, beyond their original religious sense.

The documentary research that was carried out for the historical contextualisation of the “Ball Parlat” made it possible to locate a copy of the “Goigs” poetic hymns in honour of Saint John the Baptist. Over time, the text of this composition had been lost, even falling into a deep collective obscurity. The original text of this ancient poetic composition was duly musically adapted and arranged for its interpretation as a piece of choral music. This meant that, during the same year of 2013, the “goigs” poetic hymns were once again sung during the celebration held in honour of the saint, as part of the events of the village’s summer festival. Since that date, the signing of the

“goigs” poetic hymns has become one of the main religious events that are held in the parish church. This event is attended by a group of singers who collectively get involved, as amateurs and for reasons beyond strict devotion, to make it possible for this musical piece to be heard again. These recitals of the “goigs” poetic hymns, which have been happening year after year in the celebrations of the village festivals, have led to a growing interest in choral singing among much of the population.

This interest in choral singing has been the trigger for setting a new challenge in relation to local folk traditions: the recovery of the “caramelles” Easter folk songs. At the beginning of the 1970s, “caramelles” Easter folk songs were sung for the last time in the streets and squares of the village, and to date the possibility of them resurfacing from their obscurity had never been seriously considered. In Rodonyà, as in so many other towns, “caramelles” Easter folk songs became one of the main exponents of popular choral tradition during the last century. As an expression of the cultural repertoire of the people, they had always been

very participatory and they were one of the most colourful acts of the Easter celebration. Unfortunately, certain logistical factors, rather than a lack of popular will, led them to no longer be organised.

The initiative to recover the “caramelles” Easter folk songs has become, in a short time, a firm proposal. This proposal is currently already supported by a large number of singers excited by the prospect of making this new milestone in the restoration of local popular traditions a reality. Although it is in its early stages, what is being worked on becomes an intrinsic recognition of their cultural value as a hallmark of the tradition that must be preserved. We must, therefore, wait for this initiative to soon become a reality and for Rodonyà to be able to once again be one of the towns that keep this ancient choral tradition alive. In the same vein as has been set out up to now, as a result of the recovery of the “Ball Parlat” and of the signing of the “goigs” poetic hymns, in the last few years the “pa beneit” blessed bread ceremony has



“Pa beneït” blessed bread procession with the traditional decorated bread on pieces of wood adorned with cloths. (2016). ISIDRE PASTOR

region. It is for this reason that the fact that people from a small community such as Rodonyà are immersed in this dynamic of keeping these traditions alive is particularly significant. In this way, the foundations are laid for preserving them and, at the same time, transmitting them to the new generations as the cultural legacy they are. It is in this sense, therefore, that the restoration of the “Ball Parlat de Sant Joan” must be considered a determining factor that has enabled this whole process of recovery and preservation of the customs and festivals of this town to take place. The performance of this “Ball Parlat” has been the turning point for raising collective awareness around the preservation of the local intangible cultural heritage, whatever its nature.

As a whole, each and every one of these popular expressions referred to represent the reflection of a cultural tradition that is becoming one of the main hallmarks of collective identity and, at the same time, a benchmark for the cultural heritage of Rodonyà. ■

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experienced a particular revival. This is a popular tradition associated with the events of the village festival. Its origins go back to the blessing that used to be given to the old flour before the harvest of the new wheat, around the month of June. This calendar coincided with the beginning of the summer and the celebration of the patron saint’s festival dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. The event itself centres on the route that young couples follow around the village to bring bread to the church to be blessed, and then to share them among all those present. This procession, which until not so many decades ago was one of the most significant events with which the festival began, had been gradually lost. In the last few years, however, the celebration of the “pa beneït” ceremony is regaining interest among the youth. Such participation is an essential factor in order

for this typical tradition of Rodonyà to be preserved.

Raising social awareness of the cultural value of these traditions beyond their original religious connotation has, in the space of just a few years, enabled everyone to once again feel identified with cultural hallmarks that are typical of the village. This participatory drive by the residents and friends of the village provides an essential factor to guarantee the restoration and preservation of these examples of local folkloric customs. Some of them had even been on the verge of disappearing with the passage of time. The “Balls Parlats”, the “goigs” poetic hymns, the “caramelles” Easter folk songs and the “pa beneït” ceremony are some clear examples of the ancient popular cultural manifestations typical of the majority of towns in this part of the Camp de Tarragona