

# DANCES, REMAINS OF THE GREAT FEASTS

TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS OF A LOCAL NATURE ARE FIRMLY ROOTED IN CATALONIA. EVERY TOWN AND VILLAGE HAS ALWAYS CELEBRATED ITS LOCAL FEAST DAY. BEHIND EACH OF THESE LOCAL FESTIVALS THERE IS A PROFANE LITURGY WHOSE ORIGINS ARE LOST IN THE MISTS OF TIME.



LA PATUM DE BERGA

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**T**raditional festivals of a local nature are firmly rooted in Catalonia. Every town and village, however small, has always celebrated its local feast day. Sometimes, their splendour has been lessened as a result of financial hardships or political restrictions and there have been dark periods filled with difficulties. But once the hard times are over, the feast once more bursts over the town in all its might.

Behind each of these local festivals is a whole profane liturgy whose origins are lost in the mists of time, and which changes and evolves according to circumstances, reflecting a wide range of fashions and influences, evolving and even, in a great many cases, disappearing over the years and hiding the secret of its function or of its existence.

Perhaps the most characteristic Catalan celebration has always been that of Corpus Christi. Started in the Liège diocese, the festival quickly spread throughout the Catholic world when it was established by Urban IV in 1264, set out at the Council of Vienna under the Dauphinate (1311, Clement V) and universalised by the Papal Bull of John XXII in 1316. There are accounts of its celebration in Vic in 1318 and in Barcelona, with great pomp, in 1320, as well as in Girona, and soon afterwards there are accounts from Lleida, Tortosa, Valencia and Perpignan, and by 1370 it seems to have been widespread. Corpus quickly became a celebration in which the public took part on a large scale, particularly in the procession, in which a large number of both religious and profane elements went before the Eucharist. The most outstanding of this wide assortment of elements were the "entertainments", complete theatrical representations of themes from the Bible or the Scriptures, either on foot or on mobile platforms, produced specially for the procession and incorporating earlier elements. This presence is extremely significant, as it allowed the preservation or even revival of a great number of older elements of differing age and origin, which in this way were legitimated –although the prohibitions weren't long in coming– on being included in the official liturgy.

The procession was structured according to a rigorous order. It started with the Creation, the struggle between angels and devils, the Garden of Eden,



and went on with representations of scenes from Genesis and characteristic scenes from the lives of the Patriarchs; the Prophets and the announcements of the Redemption; scenes from the New Testament and the life of the Church, with the evangelists, the apostles, the hermits, the founding saints, local saints, doctors, preachers, martyrs, and so on, down to the Monstrance and the symbolic elements, the church and –later– civil authorities, etc. The complexity of the retinue, the great crowd taking part –either directly or as spectators–, the difficulties of maintaining order or of establishing the limits of respect, led to abuses which gave rise to a large number of prohibitions which gradually eliminated certain elements of the procession and left others isolated from their original context. Thus we find giants, wild beasts, monsters and dragons taking part in the procession, alongside dancing devils and horses, stick dancers, drum dancers and others. If I've dwelt –too long perhaps– on the Corpus Christi celebration, it's because in some ways it's a looking glass for almost all the other festivals. Because of its great popularity and the sense of participation it inspires in people, whenever there's to be a visit from an important figure, a king or a bishop, or when the town celebrates the festivity of its patron saint, it uses the same elements, the things it's found most striking, the things with which it identifies most strongly or which, for whatever reason, have met with most popular acclaim. The Corpus Christi celebration brings together a mixture of religious and pro-

fane elements, some of which go back to the most remote past, and, because of the popularity it reached, it became first the meeting point for popular cultural activity and then later the model in which the other celebrations were reflected. Now, in the festivals of Catalonia –from the biggest to the most local–, whatever the occasion, we find dancing. Apart from the more elaborate events, either the result of a more or less cultured development of tradition or of its reworking by the dance groups known as *esbarts*, there are other, isolated elements which have come down to us from ancient celebrations and which the common people have wanted to preserve, even though their initial significance has been lost or their origins forgotten. Right now, in the last decade of the 20th century, there is still a great deal of material of this sort to be found in Catalonia, which we could try to classify as follows:

#### *Giants and Dwarfs*

Although the giants, large figures of cardboard, generally with a wooden frame, appear to derive from the Corpus Christi entertainments, they could be much older elements. They can be found in a number of European countries. Nowadays, in Catalonia, they're used in processions and outdoor celebrations, where we might equally well find them leading other elements as following behind. Since the Matadepera gathering in 1982, there have been more and more meetings at which, after a "walkabout" and dances in pairs –usually without a particularly clearly defined choreography–, all the participants come together in one large dance. The dwarfs appeared more recently and seem to have arisen as a contrast to the giants. They're small and have large heads, also of cardboard, way out of proportion in relation to the height of the figure. Nowadays, they accompany the giants, complementing them not only in size, but also in mobility. At present, and except in very particular cases, they don't follow any kind of choreography.

Giants and dwarfs are to be found all over Catalonia.

#### *Beasts*

Of all the entertainment figures representing wild beasts, the most frequent

are the hobby horses and the dragons. The hobby horses –the dancer wears a cardboard costume in the form of a horse, without legs– form dance groups that follow steps and movements representing a battle or more simply a procession. The dragons, or *cuca-feres*, and any other kind of animal that can incorporate fireworks, have become very popular recently, and are as widespread as the Dance of the Devils, probably because they are so spectacular. At Catalan festivals today, they take part alongside the Devils in the *correfocs*, an event that takes place in the evening or at night. There are other fantastic animals and beasts that are used in these processions or on more specific occasions: the Eagle, the “Víbria” (another kind of dragon), the Mule, the Lion, the Ox, the “Guites” (anything that kicks), and so on.



sticks, one in each hand, which they beat against the other dancers' sticks in time to the music while following fixed steps and movements. There are accounts from the middle of the last century according to which some of these dances might have included speeches, but no trace of these has survived. At present there are numerous groups, most of them concentrated in “New Catalonia”, especially in the Penedès region and in neighbouring areas.

#### *Human Towers*

The *castells* are formed by groups of men standing on one another's shoulders in very precise arrangements which can be anything up to nine “storeys” high. This tradition, although it has Mediterranean precedents, is concentrated in the regions of Camp de Tarragona and Penedès. There are reports of games, ceremonies and popular dances which involve the raising of human towers, but it seems that since the beginning of the nineteenth century it has become a separate festive element carried out by specialized groups. Amongst the most important of these are the Old and the Young groups of the “Xiquets de Valls”, the “Castellers de Vilafranca del Penedès”, the “Xiquets de Tarragona”, the “Nens del Vendrell”, the “Castellers de Barcelona”, the “Minyons de Terrassa” and the “Bordegassos de Vilanova”.

#### *Spoken Dances*

A group of researchers based at the University of Tarragona has produced an extremely interesting study of the popu-

lar theatrical performances commonly known as spoken dances. Almost lost as a result of their minimal literary quality, the spoken dances are normally itinerant events containing music, dance, words and acting. Divorced from the series of entertainments in the Corpus procession, they became most widely established in the towns and villages of Camp de Tarragona and the surrounding area. Their subject matter can be religious, normally hagiographic, or else profane, of a patriotic nature or a criticism of society or customs. The music is very simple, usually with a single melodic theme, and the choreography is reduced to the positioning of the actor/dancers in two rows, with the main character in the middle, and a few simple steps. The most outstanding of these dances today are the “Ball del Sant Crist”, “Ball de Salomó” –with an essentially theatrical slant–, and the newly-recovered “Ball de Serrallonga” and “Ball de Dames i Vells”, in Tarragona. So far we've looked at the dances and festive groups, elements which, from their inclusion in the Corpus Christi procession, have become firmly established in small rural communities, especially in “New Catalonia” (south of the River Llobregat), and which, with this protection, have been handed down to us today. The history of these elements is often unclear, and some of them, for the simple reason of survival and adaptation, have been grafted onto other elements –local, foreign, authentic, passing fashions, etc.– which have changed them to a greater or lesser degree, but which nevertheless have a special charm and are of unquestionable interest. But there are also events that include a range of elements and that are real feasts, with a much more complex structure, such as *La Patum* in Berga, the processions of the “Festa Major” of Vilafranca; of Sant Bartomeu, in Sitges; of Santa Tecla, in Tarragona, and so on. An account of these festivities, with their extraordinary popular vitality, would take up much more space than that used so far.

However, these events have to bear the weight of cultural contamination, have to have a sense of identity that will justify them, and have to find a way of projecting themselves in the future. Luckily, they are kept alive by a nation that holds them close to its heart. ●

#### *The Devils' Ball*

Its main purpose was to open the way for the processions, though they often included clearly satirical speeches and social criticisms, with characters such as Lucifer, the She-devil or the Archangel, and it could well have derived from earlier performances. The Devils are normally dressed in sackcloth decorated with elements of popular symbolism and carry a long club, at the end of which is a firework which spins round when lit, scattering sparks all around. Today there are troupes of devils all over Catalonia, though the so-called “historic” groups, with a long and unbroken tradition, are to be found in the regions of Penedès, Garraf, Camp de Tarragona and neighbouring areas. In the last ten or twelve years, they have become very widespread and, perhaps because of this, some troupes are simply groups of performers who use the trappings but are a long way from the traditional spirit that characterizes them. Every 24th June, Saint John's Day, when the summer solstice is celebrated, the troupes of devils gather in one place and perform together.

#### *Stick Dances*

These are identical to the stick dances and sword dances which can be found in many parts of Europe. They may be vestiges of ancient warrior dances. As their name suggests, the dancers, arranged in two teams, carry two thick short