

## NEW NON-RELIGIOUS FESTIVITIES IN SPAIN

**Demetrio E. Brisset**

Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising, Faculty of Communication Sciences, University of Malaga, Spain

---

### ABSTRACT

Spanish society has undergone a profound transformation since the death of dictator Franco. One of its most relevant manifestations relates to popular festivities. The rigid Catholic morality that dominated the festive space, controlled by relentless censorship, gave way, with the democratization of political institutions, to profane festive behaviors, in which the playful aspect is central. This article aims to summarize the evolution of festive rituals in the last eighty years, highlighting the current trends and influences: secularization, coexistence of formal models, institutional interventionism, integration into the European framework, incorporation of women as protagonists, dynamism of associations and exaltation of military powers. In this last point, we highlight the conversion of the scheme of struggle between two factions – which monopolized the celebrations of Moors and Christians, from medieval roots and based on the triumph of *true religion* – into civic-historical recollections (especially Roman and Napoleonic invasions) of profane and even pagan content, as is the case with recent and numerous festivities in Galicia.

### KEYWORDS

Ethnohistory; festive rituals; Francoism, Spain; religiosity

---

## NOVAS FESTAS PROFANAS EM ESPANHA

### RESUMO

A sociedade espanhola atravessou uma profunda transformação desde a morte do ditador Franco. Uma das suas manifestações mais relevantes relaciona-se com as festas populares. A rígida moral católica que dominava o espaço festivo, controlado pela censura implacável, deu lugar, com a democratização das instituições políticas, a comportamentos festivos profanos, nos quais a vertente lúdica é central. Este artigo pretende resumir a evolução dos rituais festivos nos últimos oitenta anos, destacando as tendências e influências atuais: secularização, coexistência de modelos formais, intervencionismo institucional, integração no quadro europeu, incorporação das mulheres como protagonistas, dinamismo das associações e exaltação de proezas militares. Neste último ponto, destaca-se a conversão do esquema de luta entre duas fações – que monopolizava as celebrações de Mouros e Cristãos, de raízes medievais e baseadas no triunfo da *verdadeira religião* – em comemorações cívico-históricas (invasões romana e napoleónica, especialmente) de claro conteúdo profano, e mesmo pagão, como é o caso de recentes e numerosas festas na Galiza.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Etnohistória; rituais festivos; Franquismo, Espanha; religiosidade

---

Spanish society has undergone profound social and value changes since the death of former dictator, Franco, in 1975. Festive rituals reflect these multiple transformations.

Since the Council of Trent (1545-1563) religious and civil authorities have strictly controlled the *festive time*, and have restricted all celebrations linked to the liturgy. Few non-religious festivals escaped this process, and they were primarily reserved to the carnival period. In the late nineteenth century, a new kind of naturalistic festivities began to be celebrated. In 1904, the *Fiestas del Árbol* [Tree Festival], which encouraged the planting of new trees, became a national holiday. This was followed by the *Fiestas del Pez* [Fish Festival] which celebrate fried trout and salmon. Both sought to combine pedagogical and entertainment activities, in connection with nature. In the Eastern part of the Cantabrian Sea, a festivity has been held since 1922 in Getaria, the home town of the maritime hero Juan Sebastián Elcano, commemorating his naval landing in Sanlúcar de Barrameda in 1522 after a perilous 3-year circumnavigation of the globe<sup>1</sup>. In around 1925-28, the *Festivities of the Lamb roasted on a Spit*, began to be celebrated in Moraña, Galicia, as a community banquet, directed by a young Argentine who arrived there and told people that in Pampas the main food was lamb, sliced open in the middle and roasted on a barbecue<sup>2</sup>.

During Spain's short-lived Second Republic, many festivities were separated from their religious connection. But after the military junta's victory in 1936 and the repression imposed by National Catholicism, the more playful side of popular festivities was once again dominated by prevailing morals.

The first essentially non-religious festivity during Franco's dictatorship was founded in August 1945, in Bunyol, in the region of Valencia. Known as *La Tomatina*, it consists of mass throwing of tomatoes and has become one of Spain's most popular festivities ("The World's Biggest Food Fight" as it is advertised on the internet). Apparently, the festivity almost began by accident, when some young men threw some tomatoes at the bailiffs and were then banished from the town, on penalty of imprisonment<sup>3</sup>. In response, in 1957, they decided to stage the *burial of the tomato*, a great parodic demonstration, with fellowships and a band playing funeral marches. The municipal authorities gave in and in 1959 the festivity was allowed to be celebrated, while limiting the period allowed for throwing tomatoes. This festivity was later institutionalised and since 1975 has been organized by the *Clavarios* [festive organizers] of San Luis Beltrán (the city's patron saint), who were responsible for supplying the tomatoes, which until then had been brought by each participant. In 1980, the municipality took over organisation of the festivity, increased the raw material to several tons of tomatoes and began to publicise the festivity – which involves no physical damage, because the tomatoes are very ripe and soft. The festivity was declared International Tourist Interest, and its popularity has grown significantly. In 2005 it attracted more than 40,000 people, and the authorities decided to limit the audience

---

<sup>1</sup>The representation is staged once every four years. The promise to the Virgin of Sorrows of Seville to return safe and sound is also remembered. Only 17 sailors returned from a crew of 265 men.

<sup>2</sup> Province of Pontevedra, last Sunday of July. Lambs are purchased by a groups of diners. Since 1990, the *Festa do Porquiño á Brasa* [Feast of Barbecued Piglets] has been added at the end of August, which in 2005 featured 133 roasted piglets.

<sup>3</sup>Consulted in "Historia de la tomatina", available at [www.lahoya.net/tomatina/histoes.html](http://www.lahoya.net/tomatina/histoes.html). The model of this event seems to be the *Ambaixá de los Tomaques* [Tomato Ambush] of the Moors and Christians of Cocentaina, from the early 20th century.

to 20,000 and carry out the festivity in a paid enclosure. In 2018, 145 tons of tomatoes were thrown, and the event was covered by accredited journalists from 70 media outlets from around the world. An imitation event was even created in India. Similar exponential growth has occurred for the *Cascamorras* Festival, about a quirky character who leaves Guadix to hijack the statue of the Virgen de la Piedad that is venerated in the neighbouring town of Baza (both in Granada). Thousands of people run with him to the church and are covered in thick black oil. Failing in his quest, he returns to his hometown three days later, where he is greeted by another crowd, which transforms into a colourful and oil-coated mass. In Buñol, as in Baza, the celebrations are replicated for children, i.e. the future actors of the festivity.



Figure 1: *Cascamorras* (2018)  
Credits: Moisés Gallardo

The carnival festivities in Tenerife were also banned, as were all carnivals, in 1937. They were nevertheless celebrated again in 1950. In 1954 the revellers were disbanded by the police and many people were arrested. In 1961, the bishop of the diocese changed the festivity's name to the *Festas de Inverno* [Winter Festivities], and they were once again permitted<sup>4</sup>. The innocent *flower battles*, adored by the Bourbon court, were also authorised, for example the 1956 Torrelavega Floral Gala in Cantabria, which also included a parade of allegorical floats. Although perhaps difficult to believe, in the final years of the Franco dictatorship, during the magical night of St. John, an *aquejarre* (coven) was publicly celebrated, in the Zugarramurdi cave in the Pyrenees, that was infamous because of the trials conducted by the Holy Inquisition. In this splendid cave, the Skal Club of Navarre organised a light and sound show, together with a folk festival, which culminated with the *quema de la bruja* (burning of the witch) in the neighbouring city (Ministry of Information and Tourism, 1973).

In terms of Bacchic wine-related festivities, perhaps the first was held in 1947 – the *La Vendimia y el Vino* [Harvest and Wine festival], in the elegant town of Jerez de la

<sup>4</sup> This carnival entered the *Guinness Book of Records*, in 1988, when more than 200,000 people danced salsa in the Plaza de España.

Frontera, in honour of the *fine wine* made in the wineries of ancient English families, in which the first *obligation* of the year was blessed and offered to the town's patron saint – San Ginés de la Jara. Following this example, the *Albariño* Wine Festival in Cambados (Pontevedra) was launched in 1953; the *Vendimia del Rioja* [Rioja Harvest] festival in Logroño in 1955 (offering the first must to the Virgin of Valvanera); the *Vendimia del Jumilla* [Jumilla Harvest] festival (Murcia) in 1959 and the *Vinho do Condado* [County Wine] festival in Salvatierra de Minho, Pontevedra, in 1960. Thanks to communal alcoholic-fuelled enthusiasm, which transcended any ideological positions, public festivities became more informal. Of course, wine's best ally is food, and one of the activities developed to foster the incipient tourism industry was the multiplication of new festive events that highlighted local culinary products. Fraga Iribarne, the Minister of Information and Tourism between 1962 and 1969, who was from Galicia, played a key role in this context. After the creation of *Festa da Lampreia* [Lamprey Festival] of Arbo<sup>5</sup> and the *Sardiñada* [Sardine Festival] of Sada, in 1960, two new festivals – the *Festa do Polvo* [Octopus Festival] in O Carballiño and the *Frutos do Mar* [Seafood] festival in O Grove<sup>6</sup>, – were launched in 1963. This was followed in 1969 by the launch of the *Festa do Cozido* (stew fair) festival in Lalín<sup>7</sup>. A confirmed success, with the unanimous participation of local people and visitors, at the end of the Franco regime, Galician festivals celebrated the local stews, pies, meat, fish and seafood<sup>8</sup>. This trend subsequently spread throughout all Spain, leading to the creation of an endless variety of new festivities<sup>9</sup>.

A fundamental step in the transformation of festive rituals occurred in the early 1960s, when Spain was modernising in response to the arrival of more tourists and also the departure of emigrants, as a result of the Stabilisation Plan. At that time, several new festivities were developed in the Rias (estuaries) of Galicia, which had major repercussions.

In 1961, in Catoira, the members of the Ateneu Club, in Ullán, decided to create a festivity in memory of the attacks by the Normans between the 9th and 11th centuries, that devastated the Ulla river region, in particular an attack by about 100 ships in 968, which defeated the troops of the bishop Sisnando (who was killed by an arrow between his eyes) and then advanced to Santiago de Compostela. On the esplanade next to the West Towers, built to protect the mouth of the Ulla river, young men dressed up as Viking warriors, with large horns, and sexy *walkirias* arrived by boat, threw themselves into the river and conquered the towers, while shouting “Ursula, Ursula!”. Before disembarking,

<sup>5</sup> The mayor had the idea to create a party to promote the local Condado wine, but since this was already being done in Salvatierra, he decided to vary the object of the festivity.

<sup>6</sup> Dedicated to a different seafood every year.

<sup>7</sup> Pontevedra, on the Sunday before carnival.

<sup>8</sup> In 1974, the *fiesta de la empanada* (Meat Pie Festival) was created in Bandeira (Silleda). In 2004, there are literally hundreds of *festas gastronómicas galegas* (Galician food festivals) devoted to the tasting of seafood (*bonito*, sardines, *xouba*, salmon, trout, baby eels, eels, lamprey, goose barnacles, oysters, clams, mussels, cockles, lobster and cuttlefish), vegetables (sprouts, beans, potatoes, peppers), livestock (lamb, sausages, ear, bone broth, cheese, curd), elaborate dishes (tripe, tortilla), desserts (pancakes, donuts, iced buns, cakes) and various wines (Díaz, Blanco & Saldaña, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> For example in Málaga, in April 2005 alone, olive oil, asparagus, black pudding and *mondeña* soup festivals were organized, as well as a medieval market.

mass was celebrated in the Romanesque chapel attached to one of the towers, in memory of the soul of the Archbishop Gelmírez de Compostela, who was born in the city and was responsible for reinforcing the city's defences. After the conquest, there was a *mejillonada* [mussel feast] washed down by thousands of litres of red *ribeiro* wine. Due to use of the Galician language in these festivities there were problems with the national authorities and, in 1965, the *Romería vikinga* [Viking pilgrimage]<sup>10</sup> was organized by the workers of a local pottery factory.

In 1964, at the Pousada Nacional in Baiona, in the rehabilitated castle of the Counts of Gondomar, the tourist authorities decided to organise medieval banquets, in which the supposed counts and their court welcomed diners. They were based on the historical banquets organised in some Scottish castles. This was the germ of medieval markets that later spread to many places, offering an outlet for artisanal activities, and that currently enjoy notable success.



Figure 2: Medieval Fair in Cantabria  
Credits: Demetrio Brisset

The foundations for the modern-day festivals were thereby laid. The successful shift from festivities in honour of Catholic saints to a type of celebration related to non-religious carnivals simply required a change of attitude, that was encouraged by another social and political context, i.e. disintegration of the system of moral norms after the death of Franco. Community festive symbols were thereby revived.

### TRANSFORMATION OF THE RITUALS

The social effervescence of the fascinating period between 1976 and 1978 liberated the festivities from the tight control to which they had previously been subjected. In the

<sup>10</sup> Over the years, its spectacularity has grown, with a replica of a viking ship, a *drakkar*, and participation of Norwegian characters wearing strict wardrobe. The mass has been relegated and the confrontation with the archbishop's hosts and the captivity of the Galician girls has been theatrically represented. Today, thousands of people take part in the playful and winery pilgrimage of Catoira on the first Sunday of August, that has been declared of International Tourist Interest.

festivities in Madrid, celebrated on May 2 in memory of the popular revolt in the Maravillas neighborhood, which triggered the War of Independence, the festive transition that led to this change emerged spontaneously in 1976, in the emblematic Plaza de Malasaña<sup>11</sup>. This can be considered to be the beginning of a new era for festivities in Spain.

In the following month, on June 5, 1976, the *Festival de Cultura e Liberdade* (Festival of Culture and Freedom) was held in Fuentevaqueros, Granada. This was the first manifestly progressive festivity publicly celebrated in Spain since the Civil War (except for some recitals by choirs opposed to the regime, and semi-clandestine tributes to the poet Antonio Machado). The motive invoked was the celebration of the anniversary of the birth of Federico García Lorca in his home town. García Lorca was of course a world-renowned poet from the Latin American universe, and a victim of fascist repression. Anti-Franco forces were able to emerge from hiding under the pretext of the tribute to the poet. Subsequently institutionalised as “the festivity from 5 to 5”, its original form as a protest event evolved into a simple poetic-musical encounter. But other channels for collective meetings of a political nature emerged.

The municipal authorities that were democratically elected in 1979 were aligned with popular sentiment and tentatively attempted to respond to new demands, often in function of electoral criteria. In the urban market fairs, several escapades of leftist parties began to appear. Having begun in the cities, the new attitudes to festivities began to expand to rural areas, although in many localities, “due to emigration, there were no young officials who can organise festivities”<sup>12</sup>. In general, during the 1980s there was an explosion of festive occasions in social life. Municipalities organised competitions between citizens to see who could provide the finest decoration of crosses, altars, courtyards, horses and wagons (as a type of consumerist cult), as well as various professional competitions, to choose the best shepherd, tractor driver, bricklayer, etc. Finally, there was a significant increase in football matches organised between social groups, such as single men vs married men, incoming vs outgoing teams of festival organisers. In some villages there were matches between neighbours and emigrants.

On the other hand, “flower offerings” to the local patron saints were ritualised, inspired by the Festivity of Pilar, in Zaragoza and the offering to the *Virgen de los Desamparados* [Virgin of Helpless Persons] in Valencia. People competed to see who could deliver the highest number bunches of flowers. In terms of street entertainment, young people’s clubs or groups multiplied. Everyone wore the same coloured shirts and scarves, and actively participated in various events, often accompanied by a band. An association movement emerged from the festivities. Innovations that proved to be positive for the community were often quickly integrated into the ritual, and soon became traditional elements, as if they had existed “forever”.

---

<sup>11</sup> Celebration next to the sculptural monument to Daoiz and Velarde, which represents the soldiers who, together with the heroine Manuela Malasaña, led the citizen’s revolution. In the following year, in Zaragoza, the Cincomarzada was celebrated, a popular celebration of the victory over the Carlist attack on March 5, 1838, a festivity that had been suppressed by Franco.

<sup>12</sup> Report of the Gor Civil Guard Post Commander (Granada Civil Government, *Fiestas* section)

## CONTEMPORARY TRENDS

Modernisation of the rituals and interventions that have transformed them may be vertical (initiated by the organisations that run these festivities) or horizontal (emerging from spontaneous initiatives). This conflict may be generated between social groups with the same status (high or low); between a marginal group and the rest of the community; and more often between the authorities and agents responsible for the festivity. This seems to be due to the fact that control of the festivities is extremely important for social organisation, even if only at the symbolic level.

However, one should not ignore the broader cultural changes that have occurred over recent decades. In terms of the change in attitudes and values in modern times, characterised by computerisation and depopulation of rural areas, within the broader context of globalisation, there is no question that these phenomena have affected the way that these festivities are celebrated. According to Honorio M. Velasco (2000), new conflicts arose due to “zealous ecclesiastical actions concerning the order and purity of attitudes in religious spaces”, social rejection of certain political acts and “mass presence of tourists and visitors”<sup>13</sup>, complemented by habitual generational conflicts and loss of self-control for some people due to the “infectious euphoria”. The author also points to the process of “conversion of festive rituals into public spectacles”, together with “playful transgressions in processions and pilgrimages”, which derive from general secularisation of society. This however seems to contrast with the flourishing of certain “popular religious rituals”, that result from “processes of collective identity” which, in a framework of progressivism, revalorise popular culture. However, the massification of many festivities has resulted in them becoming less enjoyable.

Focusing on the period since the restoration of the Spanish monarchy in 1975, several strong trends in the evolution of rituals in the Iberian peninsula can be identified. On the one hand, evident secularisation, which manifests itself both in the calendar of public holidays – with the suppression of many former public holidays, or their transfer to the nearest Sunday – and a surge in the number of non-religious festivities, to the detriment of religious festivities. Significant examples of the new festivals that are classified as having Tourist Interest include craft festivals, such as the *Fiesta de los Arrieros* [horseshoe makers] (in Balsareny, Barcelona), the *Fiesta del Pastor* [shepherds] in Asturias (in Cangas de Onís) and the *Fiesta de los Vaqueros* [cowboys] (in Luarca). There are other festivals related to animals, such as the *Fiestas of the Matança* [slaughter] (in Burgo de Osma, Soria), the *Cordeiro* [lamb] (in Lena, Asturias) and the *Rapa das Bestas* or Galician rodeos of wild horses<sup>14</sup>. Finally, there are festivities held in honour of the natural elements – such as

<sup>13</sup> An example of the massification is the Galician *Festa do Viño do Condado* [Condado Wine Festival] which had 20,000 participants in its 46th edition in 2005, and as a result the wine was no longer distributed free of charge to avoid incidents.

<sup>14</sup> In Sabucedo (A Estrada, Pontevedra), instead of capturing them with a lasso, the animals are defeated with a mixture of strength and dexterity. For the inhabitants, the origin is due to a plague that attacked the region in the 16th century, when two sisters promised to offer two horses to St. Lourenço, the patron saint of the parish, if he defended them from the plague. Having been spared, they delivered them to the parish priest, who set them free in the hills. Today, the local horse population exceeds 2000, of which 250 belong to the church, which has the exclusive right to own stallions. Traditionally, horses would be brought to the village once a year to trim their manes, remove the male foals and mark the others. For this purpose, a stone corral was built next to the church in the 18th century.

the ancient festivity of *Rosa del Azafrán* [Saffron Rose] (celebrated since 1963, Consuegra) and the *Fiesta del Olivo* (of the Olive Tree) (Mora, Toledo), together with the *Exaltación del río Guadalquivir* [Celebration of the Guadalquivir River] (in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Cadiz). Markets have also proliferated, in which masked artisans offer their products, marking a return to the ancient tradition of ambulant tradesmen<sup>15</sup>. It is also worth noting the work of private cultural associations that organise festivals and which have played an important role since the 1980s in rescuing endangered folklore traditions, for which forgetting is equivalent to social death. In this context, rituals of a very different nature have been revitalized.

On the other hand, and in the opposite direction, civic-religious institutions have been strengthened, such as confraternities and brotherhoods. The resurgence of confraternities is visible in the return of the street festival, the *rosarios de la Aurora*; celebration of *romerías rocieras* in Catalonia and Madrid; and the increased number of penitents and processions<sup>16</sup> during Holy Week, the peak season for *pasiones vivientes* [staging of Christ's Passion] or staging of the Via Sacra. One example is in the Community of Madrid, where this popular theatre activity began in 1963 in Chinchón, and was celebrated in six locations in 2005, highlighting the fact that in Aranjuez there are more than 300 actors and seven stages. In Madrid, it has also become traditional to celebrate Easter Sunday with sonorous drumming, with drummers playing 100 percussion instruments as they run along the street and enter the Plaza Mayor (*Una tamborrada en la plaza Mayor despide la Semana Santa*, 2004).

This apparent contradiction between the two simultaneous processes (Moreno, 1989, p. 19) is a phenomenon where certain characteristics can be detected, such as a more active attitude by the faithful who, after losing institutional support, try to maintain their capacity for pressure, by adopting a new militant spirit and a mutual support system; the adoption of festive attitudes by social groups who were previously not involved in street entertainment; reflection of the current crisis of ideologies and political groups; and strengthening of group identification mechanisms.

Another type of contradiction concerns the coexistence of old and new types of festivities in the same territorial sphere<sup>17</sup>. For example, in the Community of Madrid, on the one hand, many festive rituals persist “that we did not even suspect would continue to exist at the gates of the megalopolis [which show that] the people's origins, half from La Mancha and half from the mountains, have not been forgotten” (González, 1993, p. 11). At the same time, new non-religious celebrations abound, such as the festival of the melon, the trip to the water, the founding of the city, the founding of the neighbourhoods, etc.

The second major trend is that of institutional interventionism, with democratic authorities applying their ideas about culture, which is reflected in subsidies from public

---

<sup>15</sup> An example of a combination of activities is found in the very recent medieval market in Cártama (Malaga), where donkey rides and archery are offered.

<sup>16</sup> There are a large number of children and adolescents who wear hoods as they cross the streets.

<sup>17</sup> In the Basque country, which is rapidly modernising, there is still widespread existence of the dance “of men”, or “rope dance” better known as the *aurreku*, the name of the first rope dancer, the most skilled dancer, who is responsible for conducting the dance.

agencies to foster certain kinds of traditions, such as the return of the old choirs and dances of the women's branch of the Falange political movement in Spain, or, in other cases, to foster the creativity of independent theatre groups.

Another relevant trend in the European framework, was that EU-funded projects from 1993 onwards favoured the rehabilitation of cattle route, and herds with thousands of merino sheep which travelled through the old royal livestock routes (including the Calle Alcalá in Madrid), over which they claimed rights. Transhumance festivities were also held early in the early summer, in the localities of the eastern Cañada Leonesa and the *Vía de la Plata*, where neighbours went into the streets to meet the herds and welcome the shepherds. Integration into the European Union has brought new residents to certain places, especially popular tourist spots, and has led to the organisation of festivities such as the *Oktoberfest* or Beer Festival (organised by the Germans; in Andratx, Calella, Calpe, Torremolinos, Vigo ...) and the *Dragonfest*, which celebrates the arrival of Spring in March next to the river, in Orjiva. Created in 1996 by a colony of English residents, the latter was disseminated abroad, attracting hundreds of *neohippies*. Without any formal organisers, the participants enjoyed a variety of concerts and drugs, although banned by the municipality it attracted around 3000 people in 2002<sup>18</sup>. Subsequently, other spontaneous spring festivities have sprung up in Granada and Seville<sup>19</sup>. Less troublesome are festivals organised by new immigrant communities, such as the Chinese New Year, which brings colourful parades with paper dragons to the streets of Madrid, and the gathering of Senegalese and Ecuadorians in various locations, in a cultural mix that brings new festive traditions.



Figure 3: Chinese New Year in front of the Royal Palace in Madrid (2012)  
Credits: Demetrio Brisset

<sup>18</sup> The death of two participants due to an overdose and the subsequent media campaign, in addition to strict access controls, resulted in a reduction of participants to 1,500 in 2003. A logistical infrastructure suitable for mass attendance was then created in 2005.

<sup>19</sup> In Granada, it began in the *Paseo de los Tristes* but due to strong neighbourhood protests due to the noise, in 2005 it was moved by the municipal authorities to a nearby enclosure. However, the inhabitants then succeeded in banning the event, which resulted in a huge open air drinking session. As for Seville, online advertising has brought about 70 000 people to Cartuja.

A major novelty is the massive and irreversible involvement of women in the festivities, both as organising members and active participants. Sometimes they have even managed to perform some ritual dances that had fallen into disuse, replacing men<sup>20</sup>. Use of a social space that used to be a male preserve, required a great effort in certain cases, as shown by the conflict for the inclusion of women in the *soldadescas* in the Basque region and the *costaleros* of Holy Week processions in Andalusia. Along with women's participation in bullfighting, one of the most striking examples of the equality achieved is on St. John's night<sup>21</sup>, when women walk barefoot over the embers and go out at night to court boys.

Outside the religious sphere, there are dynamic associations that export their organisational model from one location to another, contributing to the creation of similar festivities. Examples are the entities that promote dissemination of historical festivities. Finally, another trend is the exaltation of military themes, including military music, clothing and parades, both in representations of the Moors and Christians and in other festivities.

#### THE CIVIC-HISTORICAL CELEBRATIONS

During the Franco regime the main Hispanic ritual representations of the struggle between two factions, with a historical basis, were those between Moors and Christians, recalling the medieval conquest of the respective town by troops carrying the flag of the Cross. These revealed an intolerant patriotic-religious discourse, that was consonant with the dominant political mindset.

The earliest example is still celebrated today in a secluded corner of the isolated mountains of Cabrera Alta, in the area where the Romans exploited the gold mines of Las Médulas with slave labour. It is the dance of King Nebuchadnezzar, in reference to the king of Babylon who conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC, representing a Moorish leader, while the prophet Daniel represents his antagonist – the Christian ambassador<sup>22</sup>. Many depictions of the combat between Moors and Christians, involve a high level of anachronism, revealing a certain character as a sacramental fairy tale.

---

<sup>20</sup> The case of Finisterra (A Coruña) stands out, where women are responsible for the stick dance, replacing men, who used to perform a sword dance.

<sup>21</sup> In San Pedro Manrique, Sória. In relation to *correr en los encierros* [running of the bulls] in Navarra, it started in 1955; the mixed *alarde* [military procession] began in Irún in 1997; the two female *costaleras* left in Cordoba, first dated in 2001.

<sup>22</sup> It is held at Corporales in honour of the Virgin of August, although it was previously celebrated on the occasion of Corpus Christi.



Figure 4: Moors and Christians of Orce (1981)  
Credits: Demetrio Brisset



Figure 5: Moors and Christians of Orce (2017)  
Source: granadaaltiplano.org



Figure 6: Moors and Christians of Orce (2018)  
Source: <https://www.granadaaltiplano.org/>

Renewal of these rigid popular representations began in 1976 in Campo de Mirra (Alicante), when, on the basis of existing documents, an event was organised to represent the Treaty of Almirra (1244) – the agreement signed between Aragonese and Castilians that fixed the borders of the Kingdom of Valencia. From 1977 onwards, the festivity's events were rigorously adjusted to the historical facts (Francés & Francés, 1986, p. 286). In that year, the same author (Salvador Doménech) reproduced the texts of the Embassies of the neighbouring town of Crevillente, to reflect known historical facts.

An element of ideological disruption was introduced in Murcia in 1983, when a man from Alcoy and several university professors created the debates and initiatives for the Commemoration of the city's founding, recalling its building by Abderramán II, the entry of Afonso X, his negotiation with King Aben-Hud and his surrender, when he handed over the keys of the city. The old Moorish and Christian festivals of Murcia were thereby recovered, maintaining the system of two competing factions, but eliminating the spirit of religiosity and warmongering (Francés & Francés, 1986, p. 286; Capel, 2001, pp. 13-21).

For most of the members of UNDEF (the National Union of Festive Entities of Moors and Christians), created in 1976, responsible for ensuring the orthodoxy of the Moorish and Christian festivals, the Murcian model lost essential features of such festivities. But despite the official rejection, the new proposal drew supporters from young participants who favoured having fun over indoctrination. Different variants emerged with other groups that carried out the typical activities that occurred in such festivities, such as parades, fighting, and setting up festive camps for each of the various subgroups of the formations.

In 1979, a new step was unveiled in Galicia in the “fights between two factions to conquer a castle”, with the Assault on the Castle of Andrade, in Moeche, by the neighbours, representing the uprising by the *irmandiños* [brothers] in 1431, who demanded freedom against their despotic feudal lord<sup>23</sup>.

In Aranjuez, in 1980 (Sánchez, 1998, p. 442) there was creation of a burlesque *Descent by Pirates along the Tagus river*, in surrealistic boats, which in 1983 expanded to the civic-theatrical event known as the *Fiestas del Motín* [Festivities of the Mutiny], recalling the popular revolt against the Prime Minister Godoy between March 17 and 19, 1808, which led to the abdication of King Charles IV. The historical facts are represented by the local people with period costumes in the original settings where the events occurred: the assault on the Godoy Palace (wherein Godoy is symbolised by a straw doll) and the courtyard of the Royal Palace<sup>24</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> The revolt of the *irmandiños*, the popular brotherhood of the districts of Pontedeume and Betanzos, destroyed the castle that served as the residence of Nuño Freire de Andrade - *O Mao* (El Malo) [The Bad One], who fled to Santiago de Compostela seeking protection from the archbishop. After reorganizing his hosts, he defeated the revolted people in the battle of the Eume. The participants of the festive *March Irmandiña* in mid-August, walk the path between the monastery of Narón and the castle of Moeche (owned by Casa de Alba, in the province of A Coruña), which they conquer at night. In 2005, the festival commission only received financial support from the institutions.

<sup>24</sup> In the same Community of Madrid, another festivity with a historical reference was created in 1994: the uprising against the French, summoned by the leaders of Móstoles, with whom they declared war on the French. The participants recreate the outbreak of popular struggle on May 2, with about 350 people dressed as aldermen, soldiers and peasants. On May 2, 1985, the mayor signed a declaration of peace with the French ambassador, and the Community of Madrid embraced this festivity. With a less rebellious dimension, a festivity commemorating the wedding of Philip IV with Mariana of Austria has begun in Navalcarnero, on the last weekend of August.



Figure 7: Moors and Christians in Albondón (1979)  
Credits: Demetrio Brisset



Figure 8: Moors and Christians in Albondón (2018)  
Credits: Miguel Carvajal

More structured is the variant of these festivities which began in Cartagena in 1990 with the *Carthaginian and Roman Festivities*, which relive the events of the years 223-209 BC, when the city evolved from Qart-Hadast to Carthago Nova. Due to the success of the initiative, the initial 500 *narrators* increased to 5000, expanding the non-religious acts, which in 2001 consisted of an extensive sequence of events: lighting the sacred fire, the oath of enmity to Rome, foundation of Qart-Hadast, destruction of Sagunto, declaration of war by the Roman Senate, the marriage between Hannibal and the Iberian princess Himilce, the oracle of Tanit, the Roman circus, landing of the Carthaginian army, the parade of Hannibal's departure to Rome, the landing of the Romans, the great battle for the conquest of Qart-Hadast, the victorious parade of Scipio, the tribute to the Romans killed in battle, the proclamation of Roman law. This living history lesson about the Second Punic War, the archaeological ruins and a camp, is organised by the Federation of Troops and Legions, involving associations related to the Moorish and Christian ranks, the *fallero* groups or the *cuarteles* [confraternities] from Easter Week celebrations

in nearby locations<sup>25</sup>. This way of uniting culture, history, spectacle and popular entertainment was quickly imitated.

In La Coruña, to commemorate the battle of Elviña (which took place there in 1809, when English troops escaped from Marshal Soult's Napoleonic army), the Royal Green Jackets Historical-Cultural Association was founded in 1996, dedicated to organising historical recreations of events linked to the War of Independence. In 2003, the Royal Green Jackets collaborated in the *First Historical Re-enactment of the Battle of Medina de Rioseco* (Valladolid), which included parades, military band concerts, a military tent-museum and recreation of a battle.



Figure 9: Reenactment of the Elviña Battle of 1809, A Coruña (2009)  
Créditos: Demetrio Brisset

The precedent of these reconstituted battles may have their model at the celebrations of the battle of Bailén on July 19, 1808, when General Castaño's troops defeated the Napoleonic troops and thereby began their expulsion from the country. A parade of characters dressed in War of Independence costumes complements the procession with the patron saint of Bailén – the Virgin of Zocueca (who holds the rank of Captain General and was credited with giving decisive support in the fight). From 1890 the Army has participated in this festivity, that has clear military exaltation.

An interesting variant is that of Macharaviaya, in Malaga, where Bernaldo de Gálvez was born into a family of high-ranking soldiers. Appointed the Governor of Louisiana, between 1789 and 1791, he helped American settlers achieve independence by controlling the Mississippi and defeating British troops in various battles, in particular the battle of Pensacola. Since 2009, around July 4, the local people have recreated this battle with great historical rigour.

<sup>25</sup> As a thematic precedent, I am only familiar with one ball held on Corpus Christi in 1593, in Oviedo: Escipión's Triumph against African Hannibal, who had a triumphal car in which some nymphs accompanied the Roman general (Valdez, 1983, p. 55), although I believe that the historical subject must have been represented in the theatres of the Iberian Peninsula during the Roman era.



Figure 10: Pensacola Battle - surrender of British, Macharaviaya (2017)  
Credits: Demetrio Brisset

On the other hand, parades or military reviews have been organised in the Royal Palace<sup>26</sup> with troops dressed in period uniforms, such as the members of the King's Immemorial Regiment, which dates back to 1696 and is considered to be the oldest in the world, with halberdiers wielding their sharpened steel weapons.

#### INTEGRATION IN EUROPEAN FESTIVALS

For a society in the process of modernisation and secularism, the new festive orientation offered tremendous possibilities. Cartagena organised a meeting of historical festivals in 2000, with the participation of 12, resulting in the founding of the Spanish Association of Historical Recreations and Festivals, which later joined the *Fédération Européenne des Fêtes et Événements Historiques*<sup>27</sup>, created in 1991 on the basis of Italian and French festivals based on the ancient sport of crossbow archery. The Spanish association, whose objective is “to claim and promote the history of the different geographical points of Spain, through festivities, (...) combining efforts [and] improving the quality and enriching the festivities (...) based on the experiences of others” seeks to spread the “special pride (...) of being an active protagonist of a historic and unrepeatable event” and intends to link the festivities “which are organised in celebration of an event prior to the year 1900 [and may be] inspired by a historical fact or event, or also a legend, literary fiction or a specific moment in our history”. A festival is considered to be historical if “it has proved its periodic celebration and upholds rigour and fidelity to the original facts (...) respecting the aesthetics of the period in question”<sup>28</sup>.

This association includes the entities that organise festivities such as: the *Fiestas de Sodales Íbero - Romanos* (1st century), in Fortuna, Murcia; *Fiesta del Charco* or indigenous

<sup>26</sup> Like the military parade that is televised every October 12.

<sup>27</sup> One of the current Spanish representatives, is also the secretary of UNDEF, which shows the link between these organizations.

<sup>28</sup> Statutes of the Spanish Association of Festivals and Historical Recreations, articles 24º, 25º e 27º. Retrieved from [www.imaengine.com](http://www.imaengine.com).

rites, San Nicolás de Tolentino, Las Palmas; *La Morisma* (8th century), Aínsa, Huesca; *Siege of the castle* (1097), Consuegra, Toledo; the *Wedding of Isabel de Segura* (13th century), Teruel; *Medieval festivities*, with the arrival of Blanca of Sicily at the court of the King of Navarre, Olite<sup>29</sup>; the *legend of San Jordi* (1414), Montblanc, Tarragona; *Fiesta del Escudo* or the Moorish attack on Holy Saturday (1477), Cieza, Murcia; *Festa do Renascimento* or the Defence Militias (16th century), Tortosa, Tarragona; *Fiesta de los Conversos* (16th century), Hervás, Cáceres; *El alcalde de Zalamea* (17th century), Zalamea, Badajoz; the *Tres Blasones de España*, a comedy of saints (17th century), Calahorra, La Rioja; *Incursions by the Berbers* in the Mar Menor, Los Alcazares, Murcia; and, finally, the curious *La España de Rojas*, La Puebla de Montalbán, Toledo, which recreates an inquisitorial *auto-da-fé* in the 15th century in which condemned heretics were burned.

In relation to recreations of the battles of the War of Independence, on the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Elviña (in A Coruña, 2009), around 700 people took part, dressed in imitation period uniforms, including members of Napoleonic groups from France, Great Britain, Italy and Russia, focusing on the death of General Moore and the re-embarking of the British expedition.

The Asociación Napoleónica Española (Spanish Napoleonic Association) usually takes part in this type of recreation<sup>30</sup>. The association includes groups from Madrid, San Sebastián, Valencia and Zaragoza. When a battle has more than 400 participants it is considered to be class A. In 2005, the biggest recreated battles were held in Bailén (Jaén), Castalla (Alicante), La Albuera (Badajoz) and Brión (A Coruña) – and nine other battles occurred that year. Anti-Napoleonic sentiment became fashionable in the 21st century, like the sentiment against the Roman-empire, whose cruel triumphs over Galicia, Numancia and Cantabria are ritually avenged<sup>31</sup>.

## NEW HISTORICAL AND PAGAN FESTIVITIES IN GALICIA

Each year there are an increasing number of festivals of this new type that can be considered historical, and extend throughout Spain. Common elements include high popular participation in street theatre performances; absence of links with the Catholic liturgy; use of ancient costumes; promotion of pride in relation to events from the collective past.

It is worth recalling what Eric Hobsbawm said about the indispensable social contribution of historians:

---

<sup>29</sup> This historical representation began in 1994 with a grant from the European Leader II programme. The arrival of the Queen was incorporated in 2001.

<sup>30</sup> It is responsible for preparing the battle schedule, advising the municipal authorities on the organization of events and coordinating the various recreation groups at national and international levels (La Voz de Galicia, 2005). Recreations of battles have been organised in Europe since well before 1980, and they continue in full swing, as exemplified by the siege and conquest of Vyborg Castle in Russia, held since 1996, which involved the participation of over 50 military associations from places in Russia in 2005.

<sup>31</sup> In addition to the struggles against the Celts, the Numantine Wars (2nd century BC) in Garray (Soria) and the Cantabrian Wars (1st century BC) in Los Corrales de Buelna (Cantabria) are also celebrated.

firstly, to preserve memory. People easily forget things today. Secondly, to correct inaccuracies, because they know what happened in the past. We live in countries that have histories going back many years and each one intends to reconstruct a past that has nothing to do with its true history (...) Criticising the rhetoric of historical myths is the task of today's historians". (Intxausti, 2003, n. p.)

However, since it would be too ambitious to investigate the evolution of postmodern festivities in Spain as a whole, we will merely highlight some of the festivities in Galicia<sup>32</sup>:

Since 1989 the *Festa da Istoria* (History Festival) has celebrated the medieval splendour of Ribadavia, the former capital of the kingdom of Galicia. Products consumed are paid in *maravedis*, the ancient legal tender. The parade involves about 3,000 people dressed in period costumes. A *Xudea* (Jewish) wedding evokes the city's Jewish past; and since 2002, has culminated with a procession of souls<sup>33</sup>.

Since 1995, in the *Asalto al castillo de Vimianzo* [Assault of the castle of Vimianzo] a group of rebels carrying burning straw torches assaults the castle of the counts of Altamira, driven on by the screams of women: "Destroy the fortresses!". The popular assault of 1467 is remembered with a striking re-enactment, that includes battering rams, witches, priests and combats whose outcome is uncertain<sup>34</sup>.

Since 1997 in the *Reconquista de Vigo* [Reconquest of Vigo] hundreds of residents from Vigo have re-enacted the liberation of the city from the French occupiers in 1809, as a result of a conspiracy by the city authorities, with support from some Portuguese and English ships. The re-enactment includes the attack by Cachamuiña, who destroys one of the doors with axes, despite being wounded by 4 shots, as well as the French troops being taken prisoner in an English ship<sup>35</sup>.



Figure 11: Reconquest of Vigo (2015)  
Credits: Demetrio Brisset

<sup>32</sup> The personally collected data were complemented by data provided by Omayra Lista and Tania Saldaña (2004, pp. 8-109). Several of these festivities are part of the European Federation of Historical Celebrations.

<sup>33</sup> Tournaments, archery and falconry are also organised in the province of Ourense on the last weekend of August.

<sup>34</sup> It culminates in a Celtic folklore concert, in the province of A Coruña, in early July.

<sup>35</sup> On the weekend near to March 28, with artistic direction by the group Tanxarina.

In Xinzo de Limia, with the support of festivity organisers from Cartagena, the *Festa do Esquecemento* [Festival of Forgetfulness] began in 2001, in memory of a fact that occurred around the year 137, when the Romans conquered Galicia. When they reached the River Lethes (today the Lima river), the Romans were frightened by the Galician legend that those who crossed it would lose their memory. They stood paralysed on the bank until the General Decimus Junius Brutus raised a standard and crossed the river alone, and then called each of his men by their names. Since he had showed that he hadn't lost his memory, he was followed by his troops. This is followed by acts such as the "Ara Solaris offering" at sunrise, with challenges between the two factions, followed by re-enactment of the crossing of the river and the battle between the hilltop fort dwellers and the Romans, bidding for slaves, burning of the fraternity and extinguishing the sacred fire. In addition to a Roman circus and a temple of Bacchus, there are events in the camps where participants must disguise themselves: young people prefer going as barbarians, staying in makeshift huts (like the *Os fillos de Chingasvinte*), while the older participants go as Romans and stay in luxurious, well-stocked tents<sup>36</sup>.



Figure 12: *Festa do Esquecemento*, Xinzo de Limia, Ourense (2011)  
Créditos: Iñaki Osorio

*Arde Lucus* is held on the summer solstice in Lugo, commemorating the founding of the city in 14 BC by order of Emperor Augustus. It includes an offering to the Celtic god, Lugh (the light), gladiatorial combat, slave market, constitution of the Senate, brotherhood of legions from other roman festivals (Cartagena, Xinzo, ...).

The *Feira Franca Medieval* [Medieval Fair] in Betanzos celebrates the royal privilege of 1340 that created the town; the fire of 1569 is recreated, as is the arrest and expulsion of lepers from the city. A Medieval Fair is also held in Maceda, including a trial of witches<sup>37</sup>.

At the same time as the tendency to seek historical rigour in the festive re-enactment of local triumphs, dating back to the period of Roman rule, since the early 21st century new celebrations have emerged, linked to pagan beliefs, extending the temporal scope of celebrations to the far distant past (even prehistoric) so that they can hardly be

<sup>36</sup> Decimus is crowned as Gallaecus, consul of of Rome (province of Ourense), on the penultimate weekend of August.

<sup>37</sup> Province of Ourense, mid-August.

documented. In relation to these new pagan festivals, we can mention a few that refer to hilltop fort culture or the Celtic hilltop forts, which flourished from the 6th century BC onwards<sup>38</sup>:

The *Festa da Lua Cheia* [Festival of the Full Moon] which involves burning of 3500 litres of brandy carried by the wise witches and wizards, which was founded in 1979.

*Encontro Tribal* [Tribal Encounter] next to a *mamoa* (prehistoric stone monument) where hundreds of people dressed in furs, engage in troglodyte games and workshops to make stone and metal tools.

*Feira Celta Aureana* [Aurean Celtic Festival], held on the hill of the mythical Aurean fountain, reputed to have sacred properties, with links to Celtic legends.

In the *Festa Celta de Lugnasad* [Lugnasad Celtic Festival] or summer festival, weddings are celebrated next to the hilltop fort, in accordance with the Celtic rite, valid for one year and officiated by the *head druid* of Galicia, who then blesses a great bonfire.

*Festa castrexa* (pre-Roman festival) with an offering to the water nymph, Tanitaco, goddess of the waters, who is taken from the city to the river, following the Roman road. It also includes a Celtic wedding and a bonfire.

*Oenach Celta* [Celtic encounter] with reconquest of the pre-Roman settlement.

I am convinced that we can predict long offspring for these festivities, in opposition to the models that were imposed for centuries. They are, in fact, classic examples of libertarian festivities which have managed to survive despite the persecution against them.

Translation: Formigueiro, Conteúdos Digitais, Lda.

## REFERENCES

- Cabada, M. (1992). *A rapa das bestas de Sabucedo. Historia e antropoloxía dunha tradición*. Vigo: Ed. Ir Indo.
- Capel, J. J. (2001). Origen histórico y argumentos de las Fiestas de Moros y Cristianos de Murcia. In R. Montes (Ed.), *Moros y Cristianos* (pp. 13-21). Murcia.
- Casarrubios, C. G. (1993). *Fiestas Populares del ciclo de primavera en la Comunidad de Madrid*. Madrid: CEAC.
- Díaz, M. del M., Blanco J. & Saldaña T. (2004). *Fiestas gastronómicas (Galicia)*. Corunha: La Voz de Galicia.
- Enciclopedia de las Fiestas de España (1993), Diario 16, Fascículo 41, 651. Madrid.
- Francés, R. & Francés, J. M. (1986). Aportación de Campo de Mirra a los valores esenciales de la Fiesta de Moros y Cristianos. *Atas do II Congreso Nacional de la Fiesta de Moros y Cristianos* (pp. 285-286). Ontinyent: UNDEF.
- Intxausti, A. (2003, 12 de abril). El comunismo continúa vigente como motivación y como utopía. Interview with Eric Hobsbawm. *El País*. Retrieved from [https://elpais.com/diario/2003/04/12/cultura/1050098401\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2003/04/12/cultura/1050098401_850215.html)

<sup>38</sup> The old *queimada* or *halloween enxebre* in Cervo (Lugo), in mid August; the *encuentro* in Mos, near Vigo (Pontevedra), 2nd Sunday of August; the *aureana* in Neda (A Coruña), June; *Lugnasad* in Bretoña (A Pastoriza, Lugo), 1st Friday of August; the water nymph Tanitaco in Xunqueira de Ambia (Ourense), late July; the *oenach* in Sedes (Narón, A Coruña), last weekend of August. *Lugnasad*, created in 1995, was so successful that in order not to continue supporting outsiders, in 2005 it was almost secretly organised, with 21 contracting couples that exchanged laurel leaves next to the lovers' stone.

*La Voz de Galicia* (23 August 2005).

Lista, O. & Saldaña, T. (2004). *Fiestas Históricas (Galicia)*. Corunha: La Voz de Galicia,

Ministerio de Información y Turismo (1973). *Calendario Turístico 1974*. Madrid.

Moreno, I. (1989). El estudio de los grupos para el ritual: una aproximación. In M. Luna (Ed.), *Grupos para el ritual festivo* (pp. 15-21). Murcia: Editora Regional.

Sánchez, M. A. (1998). *Fiestas Populares*. Madrid: Maeva.

Una tamborrada en la plaza Mayor despide la Semana Santa (2004, 11 de abril). *El País*. Retrieved from [https://elpais.com/diario/2004/04/11/madrid/1081682658\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2004/04/11/madrid/1081682658_850215.html)

Valdez, C. C. G. (1983). *El teatro en Oviedo 1498-1700*. Oviedo: CSIC-Univ.

Velasco, H. M. (2000). Tiempos modernos para fiestas tradicionales. In F. J. García Castaño (Ed.), *Fiesta, tradición y cambio* (pp. 99-128). Granada: Proyecto Sur Ed.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Demetrio Brisset is Emeritus Full Professor at the Faculty of Communication of the University of Malaga (2017), where he has been Professor of Audiovisual Anthropology since 1993. Holds a PhD in Journalism at the Complutense University of Madrid (1988). He holds a specialization in audiovisual analysis and festivities history and symbolism. Conducted fieldwork throughout Spain and among indigenous communities in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Among his books stand out *Las puertas del poder: 'El Proceso' de Kafka y Welles como gestos de rebeldía* (2013); *Análisis filmico y audiovisual* (2011); *La rebeldía festiva. Historias de las fiestas ibéricas* (2009); *Fotos y Cultura* (2002); *Los mensajes audiovisuales* (1996); *Fiestas de Moros y Cristianos en Granada* (1988).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2546-769X>

Email: [brisset@uma.es](mailto:brisset@uma.es)

Address: Faculty of Communication Sciences, Campus de Teatinos, University of Malaga, Spain

**Submitted: 12.05.2019**

**Accepted: 07.09.2019**