Feria, an invented, recognized, and protected tradition

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For more than 8 decades, many towns in the southwest of France have been preparing to host the biggest festivals in the Basque Country and Gascony: the ferias. This event is organized around the tradition of bullfighting, an ancestral activity that continues to exist and be transmitted. The ferias have diversified and offer folkloric animations and typical sports for all ages, within a convivial and festive atmosphere. In this context, this paper seeks to understand the origin of the Feria, along with its associated activities, in order to determine how it has become the symbol of the region reflecting its identity.

Feria, an event with Basque / Spanish origins

Feria is a traditional event that has its origins in the Pamplona feria in Spain. In this country, the festivities primarily honor San Firmin who, according to the tradition, was the first bishop of the city of Pamplona. These festivities are nowadays present in many cities in the South of France during summertime. Bodega, fiesta, sangria: so many words that recall the Spanish origins of this festive and convivial event that honors local activities during 5 to 6 days, such as cow races, float parades, bullfights, or bandas\(^1\). More importantly, the feria honors a territory shared between Spain and France: The Basque Country. Therefore, in the South-West of France, activities anchored in the territory are highlighted, such as the Basque pelota and Basque songs. It is the same in the South-East where the abrivado\(^2\) simulates the transfer of bulls from the pastures to the streets, led by guardians on horseback. Every year the event attracts thousands of aficionados and fans in every city and has gradually built up a national and international reputation. In this context, Bayonne was the first French city to organize these festivities in 1932; today it welcomes 1.5 million festayres\(^3\). Under this impulse, other cities have followed the movement: Béziers with over 1 million participants, Nîmes with more than 900,000 spectators, Dax with approximately 800,000 visitors, and Arles with half a million participants\(^4\), to mention only the main ones.

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1 Bandas: traditional music groups playing in the streets of the city.
2 Abrivado: a tradition that refers to the release of bulls in marked out streets. Guardians on their horses circle the bulls to lead them in the right direction.
3 Festayres: in the local jargon, participants in the popular festivals of the region.
The word “feria” in Spanish means feast. In every language, cities make it a point of honor to name their festivity with one of these two words (“Fêtes de Bayonne”, “Feria de Dax”). But why is the word “fête⁵ / feast” used instead of “festival”? This can be explained with the intention of highlighting the more traditional and cordial connotation of the word “feast” compared to the word “festival”. Indeed, the feast is associated with a “very localized culture that is the responsibility only of the communes” (Garat, 2005: 272). The ferias are in fact organized by the cities themselves, basically, in the public space, in the city center: the streets are then flooded with festayres and all kinds of events. Therefore, unlike festivals which are often “confined to closed, gated, controlled spaces” (ibid.), feasts do not seem to have any precise boundaries: everyone can participate and move freely from one event to another as if they were in a single giant public square.

The feast phenomenon is also characterized by the predominance of voluntary action. Indeed, the voluntary associations of the ferias, called peñas⁶, are very numerous. According to the Internet website of Bayonne's feasts⁷, there are more than 80 friend associations in Bayonne that gather around common passions: bullfighting, sports, or music. Etymologically, the word peña means “rock”, a metaphor for “a compact and solidly united group” (Fribourg, 1976: 265-284). In this way, each peña becomes an active actor in the organization of the ferias which gives their singularity. In Pamplona, each peña has a specific section in charge of organizing the ferias: these are the peñas sanfermineras, named after the feasts. Thus, the resources of these non-profit organizations are limited to membership fees and the sale of all kinds of snacks. The funds are then kept for the same purpose: to save as much as possible for spending at the ferias.

**Bayonne feasts, the first ones organized in France**

Initially, there are written traces of the presence of bullfighting games in the streets of Bayonne dating back to the Middle Ages. Indeed, running the animals through the narrow streets of the city was in the past a sign of rebellion against the “civil and religious authorities who severely condemned these practices considered anarchic and pagan”⁸.

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⁵ Fête: means “feast” in French.
⁶ Peñas: groups of friends who come together to share a common passion for the feast. They assume part of the organization of traditional Basque festivities.
It was officially on July 13, 1932, that the first Bayonne feasts were announced in the city, then called “Grandes fêtes d’été”\(^9\). They were also the first feasts organized in Gascony and have been the most important ones in France since then. This event was born thanks to a group of friends from the rugby section of the Bayonne Rowing Club who used to go to the San Fermin feasts in Pamplona. They wished to reproduce the same atmosphere in their hometown. The Bayonne feast Committee took up this challenge with the aim of offering the people of Bayonne a feast that reflected Basque traditions. Several events, already well established in the area, were organized in an institutional way: cow races, bullfights, Basque pelota games, concerts, Basque songs, etc. Some of them appeared later: running, yoga, basketball, cooking competitions, Petanque tournaments, salsa, jazz, tastings, karaoke, funfairs, etc. Here we find an adaptation of feasts to its contemporary era and to current trends. From this mixture of ancient and modern was also born King Léon who entered the feast with force. This giant puppet of the Bayonne feasts, often adored by the youngest festayres, has become the mascot of the Bayonne Feasts. We will have the opportunity to talk about it in more detail in the further parts of this article.

The commune makes it a point of honor to highlight the people of Bayonne during the festivities. In 1947, the keys of the town were entrusted to its inhabitants by the town hall for the first time. Celebrities were invited to pass the keys to the crowd on the opening day of the feasts. The three keys represent the three districts of the city: Grand-Bayonne, Petit-Bayonne, and Saint-Esprit. The inhabitants are all the more present in the organization of the feasts with the emergence of 86 peñas in Bayonne since the 90s. Thus, in addition to the extra-municipal commission of Bayonne, these associations (or groups of friends) participate actively in the cultural life of Bayonne. They currently bring together nearly 3,000 people from Bayonne. Formerly scheduled between July 13 and 17, the Bayonne feasts have replaced the patron saint's day of Saint Léon in March. They are now held every year in the last week of July.

According to the Bayonne Feasts website\(^{10}\), “Bayonne has been twinned with Pamplona, the capital of Navarre, since 1960”. Thus, originally, the public used to come in blue and white (the color of the city and the rugby team). It was not until the 1970s that white and red became more popular, as in the case of the festayres of Pamplona. In addition, for its part and because of its seniority, the festival of San Fermin remains the largest feria in the world with nearly 3 million participants. It also attracts a much more international public (Japanese, Americans, etc.). Since 2004 and inspired by its twin town, the city of Bayonne has

\(^9\) “Grandes fêtes d’été”, means “great summer feasts” in French.

also set up a poster competition to choose the official poster for the Bayonne festivities each year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bayonne Feast Ritual</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1st day</strong></td>
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<td><strong>2nd day</strong></td>
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<td><strong>3rd day</strong></td>
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<td><strong>4th day</strong></td>
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<td><strong>5th day</strong></td>
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**Ferias of Dax, festivals inspired by bullfighting culture**

Bullfighting has always been present in the department of Landes, particularly in Dax, since the 17th century, a period in when it is possible to find archives mentioning bullfighting in the streets, particularly in the “rue des Fusillés”, which was previously known as “rue Large”. Symbolic of courage and sensations, the youth of the Landes used to defy the animal's horns. In 1784, the first arenas surrounded by wooden bleachers were built at the Place Saint-Pierre. Called “la place de la Course”, these arenas continued to host Landes races until the first corrida was organized in 1891. Having become a bullfighting town, Dax took on the nickname of “Séville landaise” (Seville of the Landes). The fatal blow of a devastating fire in 1908 forced the city to opt for reinforced concrete arenas that could now accommodate up to 5,800 spectators. It “was inaugurated with a corrida on May 11, 1913” (Bordes, 2012) before being enlarged in 1932 to provide an additional 2,500 seats. After the Second World War, the

\(^{11}\) Luminous *corso*: parade of floats in the streets of the city. They are decorated by different local associations that compete for making the best float.
bullfighting tradition was gradually revived: first with bulls from Camargue farms and later when the borders reopened with Spanish breeds.

“Ironically, the public authorities, desirous of prohibiting and then controlling the races, by imposing the first regulations and the construction of the first arenas, allowed the Landes race to develop, take root and become an inescapable popular tradition”\(^\text{12}\). It is through the construction of the arenas and the institutionalization of regulated and controlled bullfighting games that the tradition has developed and taken root in Gascon culture.

Similarly to the inhabitants of Bayonne who were inspired by Pamplona, the festayres of Dacquois also dress in red and white, wearing a scarf and a belt. The inhabitants of Dax also highlight their Roman origins and their antecedents as a spa town in the staging of the Roman landing and parade. The Landes race remains one of the most popular traditions in Gascony, the principle being to confront fighting cows called “couriers” by provoking them, then avoiding them at the last moment by moving away (role of the “retractor”) or jumping over them (role of the “jumper”). The testimony of a retractor from Aire-sur-l'Adour\(^\text{13}\) serves as a proof of this deep-rooted tradition: “To face a cow, in our region, it's cultural, it's like a blood test if one wants to be a Gascon, one should go and fight a cow at least once in his life”\(^\text{14}\). In the beginning, it was a tradition, but then this sport has become the symbol of the ferias of Dax. Thus, the bullfighting tradition was able to take root in the area thanks to the determination of the Gascony people and their passion for the bull and the cow, which are still considered the kings of the feast today. The city is also home to other traditional Gascon events: the cow races, the Landes competition (with jumpers and retractors), arena games, bandas, novilladas\(^\text{15}\), bullfight, bull run for children, and rugby. Following this, and as a sign of modernization, other activities were added, such as the foot race called “feriascapade”. Until the 1980s, the feria was organized in a context of cattle fairs at the end of every summer. Little by little, the feasts were brought forward to finally take place around the middle of August.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dax Feast Ritual</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Landes day; Various activities; Landing of the Romans on the banks</td>
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\(^{13}\)Aire-sur-l'Adour: a town in the Southwest of France, located in the department of Landes.


\(^{15}\)Novillada: corrida intended for young initiates opposing young bulls with young bullfighters.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Events</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>of the Adour; Reception of the Romans on the town hall square; Opening ceremony and handing over of the keys.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Children's Day; Various activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Folklore day; Various activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>The day of shows; Mass of the bandas; Big parade; Various activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Music Day; Arena at the end of the day: Paquito Chocolatero (popular song), Vino griego (popular song), Agur Jaunak (song of farewell); Closing ceremony on the banks of the River Adour; Restitution of the keys of the city; Fireworks display.</td>
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**Feria as an intangible cultural heritage**

Based on their strong and identified values, the ferias of Bayonne and Dax are, since 2010, have been listed in the UNESCO inventory of intangible cultural heritage as “festive practices”: Bayonne's feasts under the name of “Hèstas de Baiona, Fêtes de Bayonne” and those of Dax under the name of “Hèstas de Dacs, Fêtes de Dax”. According to the book entitled *Le don du patrimoine* written by Jean Davallon, the institutional and patrimonial status of ferias could be established since this heritage is “identified by its values” and holds an “authenticated origin” which confirms the “original context of the object” (Davallon, 2006: 134). In fact, as we have already explained it in the first part of this article, the origins of the feria can be found not only in the city of Pamplona, but also in ancient cultural practices, such as in bullfighting games, which date back to the Middle Ages. On the other hand, since the event is maintained, perpetuated, publicized and safeguarded, its status is therefore recognized as having “a character of common good” (ibid.) in the eyes of the community that makes it exist, and also in those of the Institution.

Based on the book entitled *Le patrimoine culturel immatériel, enjeux d’une nouvelle catégorie* written by Chiara Bartolotto, we find that ferias meet the criteria of intangible cultural heritage set out in the UNESCO convention of 2003.

- The Basque and Gascon communities are doing their utmost to keep their traditions alive through the festive event of the ferias. This is then recognized “as part of the cultural heritage of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals”¹⁶ (Bartolotto, 2011: 26).

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¹⁶ Translated from French by Saber Qechai
- Moreover, this event is “passed on from generation to generation” (ibid.) and the new generation continues to draw inspiration from the old to perpetuate the tradition.

- Although the feria is a common event for Gascon and Basque people, it is also an event that presents the specificities of each smaller territory: the waders in the Landes for example. Thus, the event is “permanently recreated by communities and groups according to their environment, their interaction with nature, their history” (ibid.).

- In addition, these communities have the will to defend their culture and show it to everyone, which shows a strong personal involvement on the part of the inhabitants. Thus, the feria “provides them with a sense of identity and continuity” (ibid.). Finally, the feria represents a convivial moment organized around shared traditions. It allows local people to get together, and foreigners to discover a different culture. It is thus “consistent with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirement of mutual respect between communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development”17 (ibid.).

Unlike a tangible heritage that is based on objects, intangible heritage, such as that of the ferias, is based on the recognition of “a pre-existing heritage status that we accept, declare and continue”18 (Davallon, 2015: 13). This recognition should come from the community concerned, but also from foreigners and institutions. The whole challenge concerns “the validity of the manifestations and traces of what constitutes heritage, their conformity and their respect for the ideal object” (ibid.).

The ferias are characterized by know-how that uses a multitude of objects keeping the intangible heritage alive. These skills represent the festive, popular and institutional expression of a local community that wishes to express itself. Therefore, they simultaneously become “a testimony of popular arts and a cultural manifestation”, according to the words used by Juliette El-Abiad in her book entitled Le patrimoine culturel immatériel published in 2014.

Briefly, here are some examples of the typical musical instruments of the Basque country that bring traditional music and songs to life. Several posters highlight them to represent Basque culture (see below). The first poster shows the txistu, a straight flute with three holes. This instrument is often accompanied by a small tambourine called the danbolin which hangs from the musician's arm. These instruments are found in the second poster.

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17 Translated from French by Saber Qechai
18 Translated from French by Saber Qechai
presented below. These examples reveal the strong desire to show the know-how and traditions of the Basque communities through the posters of the Bayonne festivities.

![Figure 1: 2015 and 2017 posters of the feast of Bayonne](image)

*Figure 1: 2015 and 2017 posters of the feast of Bayonne (authors: Biarrot Aski and Jean Duverdier).*

This logic leads us to think that objects in the effigy of ferias (poster, cup, scarf, etc...) also tend to symbolize a heritage that is apparently without bodily consistency. In this way, “the object becomes a visible trace and a testimony of know-how”\(^{19}\) (El-Abiad, 2014: 106). It is a kind of physical celebration and a tangible proof of an intangible event that escapes us. The following example shows the use of the visual of the poster of the Bayonne festivities in 2012 to decorate reusable cups.

\(^{19}\) Translated from French by Saber Qechai
It is easy to recognize the visual of the poster on the cups, as if it had been glued directly onto the glass. The idea seems to be to standardize all the derivative objects in order to create a visual reminder that can be quickly identified by festivalgoers. In this way, the cups become the physical trace of an untouchable heritage. Therefore, it is already possible to advance the fact that the poster seems to be a determining support in the contribution of the heritagization of the event since it serves as a model in the making of the derived objects which are the image of the event.

Transmission of feria through orality

Year after year, transmission is essential in what Jean Davallon calls the heritagization process. For this process to get under way, two conditions are necessary: “the existence of a social interest for the object” and “the possibility of a knowledge of this object and its origin” (Davallon, 2015: 4). Indeed, the continuity that takes place between the past of the event, from the creation of the ferias and its appearance in France, to the present is achieved above all through a predominantly oral testimony between people of the same community, from one generation to another. This is what is called “collective memory”, (Davallon, 2015: 3), a term coined by Maurice Halbwachs. It is based on the individual memory of each member of the group who donates orally his or her knowledge concerning the practices of the ferias within his or her social group. In this way, collective memory is constructed “around the figure of
historical return where a restoration project is built”\textsuperscript{20} (Chaudoir, 2009: 60), a restoration that does not revive the past but rebuilds it by distorting it. Collective memory “mitigates conflicts, erases roughness, produces consensus. It balances the dissimilarities of individual remembrance in the perspective of a shared social relationship”\textsuperscript{21} (Chaudoir, 2009: 61). In this sense, the feria is a fantasized staging of social cohesion where friendly and family encounters and reunions are predominant and where street art performances create social bonds and a relational experience through a festive and anti-individualistic logic.

It is important to note that collective memory is based on oral testimony and direct transmission between individuals, unlike heritage, which is based on knowledge produced and transmitted through writing (Davallon, 2015: 4). In other words, it is important to have written traces of a heritage in order to consider it as such. In this way, the process of heritagization uses tangible and intangible elements as well as the knowledge related to these objects in order to function. The community, attached to the memory of this intangible heritage, protects and continues to keep the ferias alive, thus developing a real sense of belonging. Indeed, according to the inhabitants, heritage is “the means to regain confidence in the development and community life prospects of the place where they live, an incentive to develop new projects and a brake on the exodus of their young people”\textsuperscript{22} (Greffe, 1999: 23).

The occupation of territorial spaces by an annual federating event then allows “the transmission of locally referenced values and meanings, ensuring the durability of the collective representation of the self and identification with place”\textsuperscript{23} (Jolivet, 2000: 9). In other words, the feria as heritage allows the territory to be brought to life through a common and federating project. It also makes it possible to perpetuate and preserve an identity through the years.

In this logic of sharing, the community opens up and easily welcomes tourists who come to participate in and discover a heritage activity that they are not used to seeing. In this sense, mobile populations are invited to enter these sacred places to be received and to receive an initiation into local identity (Gravari-Barbas, 2005: 365). Foreigners are welcomed with the idea of introducing them to a new culture. However, it is also through the tourist activity that the event lives, whether it is through the financial contribution of the foreigners who consume the products offered to them (drinks, food, accessories, visiting places in the arenas),

\textsuperscript{20} Translated from French by Saber Qechai
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\textsuperscript{23} Translated from French by Saber Qechai
or through their oral testimony which allows the event to grow in fame and obtain a good “image” if it has been appreciated by the participants.

The feria, an invented tradition inspired by ancestral customs

A tradition refers to “a practice or knowledge inherited from the past and followed from generation to generation”\(^{24}\). It is customary to think that it is reproduced identically from one year to the next, despite the passage of time. However, the historian Eric Hobsbawm has a completely different opinion on the definition of this term. According to him, regional and national traditions are rarely very old (of a few decades) and are often subject to regular changes as they are repeated. The stability associated with tradition seems to be a purely symbolic illusion that leads to the belief that we reproduce “as before” when there have been inevitable transformations engendered by the evolution and history of the community.

The feria is then an event based on customs that have become (re)invented traditions by various means. In other words, traditions that are expressed in different ways embody older customs. Let's take the example of the waders of the ferias of Dax. It is possible to come across them at parades, dancing, dressed in their costume, which always consists of black shoes, a *pelisse* (short-sleeved vest made of sheepskin and hair) and a black Landes beret, as in the time of the shepherd waders who watched over the herds to which refer to. However, as this practice no longer exists today, waders are now associated with a Gascon tradition, and a sport recognized by the French Ministry of Youth and Sports. Previously used as a practical and necessary means of transport, waders are now part of a folklore that aims to entertain spectators.

In the book entitled *The Invention of Tradition* written in 1983, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger speak about “invented traditions” which are characterized by “stable practices, formalized in a normative way, lending themselves to repetition”. Far from being associated with a routine, traditions represent “knowledge or acts carrying value and meaning for a human group”. To illustrate all this, let's take the example of King Léon, the mascot of the Bayonne feasts. The creation of this giant puppet refers to Léon Dacharry (his real name: Raphaël Dacharry), a humorous and simple man from Bayonne who worked as a salesclerk in a store in the town making raincoats and berets. This man, a performer of lyrical repertoire, was a figure in Bayonne in the 50s because of his participation in the foundation of the Bayonne feasts. In a humorous tone, he was proclaimed King of Bayonne in 1949 and a song

was written for him in 2000 entitled “Debout Léon”. Since then, people have been representing him and inventing a life and character traits for him. It was the draftsman and caricaturist Jean Duverdier who, with his pencil strokes, gave King Léon his present appearance and personality. He also created several comic strips that tell the story of the latter's escapades. The story does not end here; a few years later, the members of the association Or Konpon invented 6 characters who come to compose the court of the king: the favorite, the madman, the governess, the marshal, the chocolate maker and the doctor.

![Figure 3: The Court of King Léon.](image)

*Author: Jean Duverdier*

Being the symbol of the past, the tradition of King Léon is a practice of the present inspired by the story of a person from Bayonne to exist around a recently imagined narrative. In this way, the tradition is “a piece of the past adapted to the present,” as Gérard Lenclud explains. This invented tradition is accompanied by an institutionalized ritual discussed in the first part of this article: the parade of the Giants to the balcony of the town hall during the children’s day, and the Awakening of King Léon at noon.

The tradition of King Léon is then given impetus in the form of rituals that make it live and cross the years, and this, in a will of identification on behalf of the people of Bayonne and of social cohesion. “The rituals are actions in which the staging and representation of the human body occupy a central role” (Wulf, 2005). During the ceremony of the Revival of King Léon, the festayres are all physically present, in the same place (namely in front of the town

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25 Gérard Lenclud: director of research at the CNRS (French National Center for Scientific Research) at the Social Anthropology Laboratory.
hall) to take part in the ritual process. By their presence, the spectators are invited to participate in the ritual. Emotions such as joy, impatience and excitement are experienced simultaneously by all the spectators during this staged event. The countdown is shouted in unison and the King Léon song is sung in chorus. Although irrational, this ritual is nevertheless a mark of stability in an ever-changing world since it is repeated year after year. It creates a unifying social link between all the participants. King Léon becomes “sacred” in the eyes of the spectators who then make it a symbol of the Bayonne festivals.

In short, ferias are a large-scale intangible cultural heritage and reflect a local identity that is constantly defending its traditions and creating a reputation among the general public. The feria is built around socially and historically shared traditions, takes shape through a large artistic program that takes place downtown, and is an opportunity for many participants to discover the local culture and traditions. It is also an occasion for many participants to leave their daily lives behind for a few days to enjoy an idealized popular and convivial atmosphere, which leaves space for the construction of a collective imagination. Moreover, the posters of the ferias, carried by the traditional, imaginary, popular and festive impulse, are endowed with a unique power of communication which makes them an effective tool of heritagization.

**Bibliography**


**Webography**


