

THE OLD “GLOSADORS” OF MALLORCA: POETS OF THE PEOPLE



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HEIRS, PERHAPS, OF THE REMOTE POETS OF THE PEOPLE, THERE HAVE BEEN MEN AND WOMEN WHO HAVE CARRIED THE TRADITION IN THEIR BLOOD. THE PHENOMENON IS COMMON TO OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD. AMONGST OTHERS, THERE ARE THE “BERSOLARIS” OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY, THE “FISTORES” OF GALICIA, THE “PAYADORES” OF RÍO DE LA PLATA AND THE “REPENTISTAS” OF BRAZIL.

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One of the most remarkable characteristics of the *glosadors* is their capacity for poetic improvisation, although, of course, not all their poetry is improvised. There are a series of pre-established rules and cultural norms which are translated in the *glosador's* head into metric structures and time-tested rhymes, skillfully put to-

gether. All this knowledge, acquired through continuous practice, eventually makes itself felt in the improvisation. But, of course, there's no such thing as pure spontaneity, because there's no such thing as pure automatism. But what in fact defines improvisation is the simultaneous production and transmission of a text. The text, then, is pro-

duced and integrated in the performance, the complex action by which a poetic message is transmitted and captured at the same time. (Poetry, voice, melody—text, energy, sound—, actively joined in the performance, lead to unity of meaning.) This text, created at the very instant it is received, is different from one previously created for the performance.



POPULAR CHARACTERS IN MALLORCA



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Another important feature of the *glosadors* is their fighting spirit, the argument between two men or between a man and a woman publicly fighting to show off the sharpness of their wit and their ability to improvise *gloses* on the spot. This rivalry makes the performances real rituals which are manifested in the struggles or the public disputes between the *glosadors* themselves. I once heard a woman from Algaida, a *glosadora*, who was afraid of the fight the *glosadors* from Sineu would put up. She said, "These will come and tie us up like sheaths, if we don't look sharp". One ancient song says,

Your singing doesn't frighten me,
at least your meaning's clear.
You look more worried
than a grasshopper
stuck in a tarantula's web.

Poetic images –parallels, metaphors, metonymy, etc.– are part of the fight. But everyone knows that the *glosador* is quite capable of contradicting himself, of turning words around as often as he chooses so to emerge victorious from the struggle:

Save us, Saint Anthony,
from the *glosador's* tongue.
We use it like a painter
who with the same colour
paints both saints and demons.

There are towns where these songs have a special following and which boast of the quality of their *glosadors*: Sòller, Artà, Campanet, Algaida, Pòrtol, Lluçmajor, etc. Father Rafel Ginard, a famous chronicler of popular poetry, wrote of Artà, more than forty years ago: "In Artà, great prestige is attached to the conservation of the *glosador* breed, latter-day rhapsodists, godlike figures, for whom the founts of inspiration never run dry" (*Croquis Artanencs*, Artà, 1929, p.39). Another old song warns:

Algaida takes after Sòller,
because they are all *glosadors*.

But there have been *glosadors* all over the island, men and women who carried the tradition in their blood, perhaps heirs of the remote poets of the people. The phenomenon is common to other parts of the world. According to Paul

Zumthor (*Introduction à la poésie orale*, Paris, 1983, p.205), it probably started in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, and later spread to Latin America. There are the *bersolaris* of the Basque Country, with their several variations going back to remote times; the *fistores* of Galicia, with their "challenges"; the *payadores*, wandering minstrels of the Río de la Plata region who improvised poems full of aphorisms and maxims, accompanied on the guitar like the *glosadors* of Menorca; the Brazilian *repentistas*, etc.

With the spread of literacy and printing methods, the *glosadors* have published their songs on home-made sheets or booklets, providing a record of their wide range of subject matter: deaths from broken hearts, thefts, events worth remembering, advice to lovers, political songs and gibes.

Finally there is the playful element in the improvisation of *gloses*, in the fight and the rivalry. They play with the words, with the stops, the rhythms, etc. Once more they play with the skill of men in exploring the expressive possibilities of language, to reach the limits of imagination along the paths that emerge from words. ■