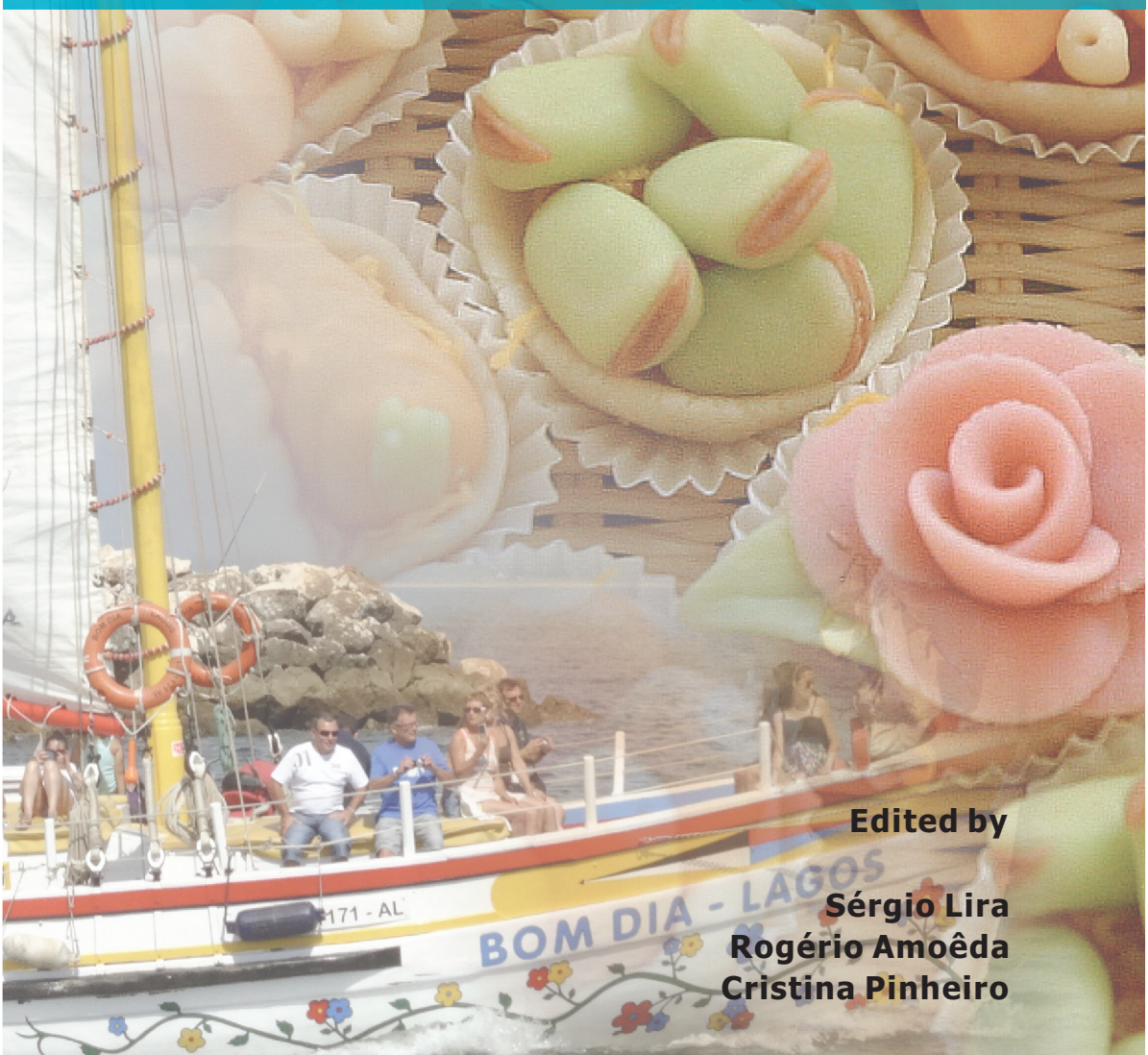


# Sharing Cultures 2015

4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on  
Intangible Heritage



Edited by

**Sérgio Lira**  
**Rogério Amoêda**  
**Cristina Pinheiro**

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4<sup>th</sup> International Conference  
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*Lagos, Portugal  
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## What is a traditional boat? The continuity of Catalan traditional boats

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**ABSTRACT:** In December 1990, on the beach of a small town on the northern coast of Barcelona (Catalonia), the town's last professional fishing boat was burned. It was the last testimony of the town's long history of fishing, a trade abandoned and replaced by tourism as the main source of employment and wealth along this coast. While the townspeople remained indifferent, only a local photographer, acting as a chronicler, photographed this bonfire. Thirty years later, on precisely the same beach, an association of volunteers to protect and promote the local fishing heritage was born. Some of their activities are focused on the restoration of what they call "traditional boats". But, what is a traditional boat? What ideas and representations are behind a traditional boat? In this paper I intend to reflect on the vision of the agents of the patrimonialization of traditional sailing about why some boats are ultimately considered to be traditional boats. I rely on a survey distributed to the members of all the voluntary associations in Catalonia created in the last years to promote and conserve the region's maritime heritage to learn their ideas about what is a traditional boat. Based on these data, I will propose some reflections around the concepts of tradition, repetition and continuity.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to consider what traditional boats are; what they mean to the people that use them. I will try to answer this question from the perspective of people who restore, preserve and maintain these kinds of boats in Catalonia through local cultural associations.

In the approach to the study of traditional boats, the first concept we should consider is that of "tradition" (both the noun "tradition" and the adjective "traditional"). Any discussion of this issue should necessarily refer to the debate on the "invention of tradition". As Eric Hobsbawm showed, many traditions in Europe were constructed between 1870 and 1914 and therefore can, or should, be de-constructed. Taken to its logical conclusion, this approach was the reason for the subtle, considerable loss of prestige of traditionalism in academia. As Alessandro Testa (2014a) rightly indicated, traditionalism was reviewed in a way that was often more inquisitorial than critical by a postmodern anthropology, which put facts on the same level as rhetoric. As a result, scholars of folklore –the science of tradition –had to seek refuge in the study of heritage, as stated by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995). However, as shown by various authors, including González Alcantud (2000) in Spain, Ginkel (2005) in the Faroe Isles, or Testa (2014b) in Italy, "tradition" is still an important concept for European populations. In my own fieldwork on traditional boats and small-scale fishing, I have seen the vigour and intensity of the concept of tradition associated with things of the sea in contrast to that of capitalist modernity. However, I will discuss this later in the paper. First, I will focus on Hobsbawm's and Ranger's theoretical reconsideration of traditions:

“‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 1).

Let us consider these two notions: repetition and continuity. In the paragraph following that quoted above, Hobsbawm states that we should distinguish between tradition and custom. This is an important point that perhaps has not been considered sufficiently. Hobsbawm argues that ‘custom’, “dominates so-called ‘traditional’ societies” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 2). Therefore, when ‘traditional’ is used as an adjective at popular level (for example, in the expression ‘traditional boat’), people are referring to a custom of traditional societies, rather than an invention of modern societies. As an example, Hobsbawm explains that when peasant movements demand a right on the basis of a “custom from time immemorial” they are not expressing a historical fact, but a balance of forces in the constant fight of a community against those that exploit them, or against other communities.

Basically, what is proposed here is a contradiction between repetitiveness and historical depth. Tradition refers to repetitiveness. As stated in the above quote, continuity with the past is sought through repetition. However, repetition is the opposite of innovation. Hobsbawm considers that the main characteristic of tradition is invariance. Tradition therefore involves repetition, time standing still, no progress. It is the opposite of the historical depth that custom draws on. A historical depth that is comprised as much of permanence as of change, as long as the change is consistent with precedent and thus ensures continuity: “social continuity and natural law as expressed in history” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 2). Therefore, “traditional”, as an adjective that describes heritage, does not refer to repetition (immobility and invariance), but to continuity (permanence and change). From this perspective, traditional is an adjective that is more closely associated with custom than tradition. Consequently, traditional, as an adjective, gains a dimension of experience and continuity. In addition, it is a social instrument. As has been widely discussed and theorized in recent years, the practice of heritage is a *cultural process* based on values and meanings that are not bound to artefacts, historical facts, buildings and cultural landscapes, or frozen in time, but are the result of repeated, continuous interactions in the life-world (García Canclini, 1993; Prats, 1997; Harvey, 2001; Smith, 2006; Byrne, 2008). Therefore, we can tackle the study of heritage – traditional boats in this case – by identifying permanent features and social innovations rather than inventions or fabrications: permanent features that reveal stable structures transmitted over time through living heritage.

## 2 DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF TRADITIONAL BOATS

We will now look at an example of the continuity of traditional boats in a town of the central Catalan coast, where in just a few decades there has been a shift from the almost complete disappearance of maritime culture to its revival in the form of maritime heritage.

Sant Pol de Mar is a town of five thousand inhabitants on the coast of Barcelona. In the past, its population lived mainly from fishing and agriculture. Some authors, such as Alegret and Nadal (1987) or Rodríguez (1977), describe it as the most important fishing town in the region in the first half of the twentieth century, despite being one of the smallest. It was also one of the least industrialized towns on this coast – hence fishing was relatively more important here than in neighbouring towns. Sant Pol de Mar’s fishing fleet was moored on the beach with the help of oxen and mares and later, from 1932, using a mechanical winch housed in a small building at the top of the beach. This building has been transformed into an Interpretation Centre on local small-scale fishing, after its restoration in 2007 by a local cultural association, comprised of volunteers and founded in 2001 under the name *A Tot Drap* (which means full speed ahead with sails unfurled).

The thriving “sun and beach” tourism from the 1960s onwards gradually moved the fishermen off the beaches. In Sant Pol de Mar, the construction of a fishing port a few kilometres away led to the final disappearance of local fishing in the 1980s. The last skipper from the beach retired in 1985, and the younger fishermen moved to the neighbouring port. The last professional fishing boat, the *Lorenzo*, was abandoned on the beach and burnt in December 1990 (Fig.

1), by order of the local authorities. The boat was seen simply as an old wreck and a hazard, due to its state of deterioration, on a beach that had to be “clean” for the start of the tourist season.



Figure 1. Burning of the last professional fishing boat on Sant Pol de Mar beach, December 1990. Photograph by P. Sauleda.

That bonfire, which removed the last trace of professional fishing from Sant Pol de Mar beach, contrasts with the intense activity in the area of maritime heritage that has taken place on the same beach since the *A Tot Drap* association was founded in 2001. Activities organized by this association annually on Sant Pol de Mar beach include a demonstration of traditional fishing using beach seine (*demonstració de pesca tradicional amb art de platja*), a demonstration of a traditional fish sale that is a kind of Dutch auction with bids called in the old way (*subhasta de peix a l'antiga*), a regional meeting of lateen sailboats (*trobada d'embarcacions tradicionals*), a demonstration of the traditional way of beaching boats (*demonstració de varada tradicional*), and sardine festivals (*sardinada popular*). All of these activities are directly related to the town's fishing past that has disappeared, but has been revived through tangible and intangible heritage.

Of all the activities carried out by *A Tot Drap*, those associated with the recovery of traditional boats are particularly important. Some members of the association are owners of small, auxiliary fishing boats called *gussi*, which are about five metres long and were used for coastal fishing (including squid, longline and seafood fishing). *Gussi* were propelled by oars, lateen sails and, from the 1930s onwards, small motors. They are the only kind of boat that has remained on these beaches since the professional fishermen moved to the ports. Since the 1980s, they have only been used by retired fishermen, former fishermen who have changed job (generally to work in construction or tourism) but still fish as a hobby, and some holidaymakers who owned a *gussi* to go out on the sea. On Sant Pol de Mar beach, a dozen of these boats have been restored and rigged once more with lateen sails. They belong to members of *A Tot Drap* (Fig. 2). However, *A Tot Drap's* main project has been the construction of a replica of a traditional, professional fishing boat that was highly characteristic of the Catalan coast until the nineteenth century: the *llaüt*. After the *Lorenzo* had been burnt in December 1990, there were no fishing boats of a certain size left in Sant Pol. Therefore, *A Tot Drap* decided to build a replica. They

chose a *llaüt de sardinal* that they named *Sant Pau*, in honour of the patron saint of the chapel that presides over the town, crowning a hill overlooking the coast (Fig. 3).



Figure 2. Boats (*gussis*) restored by *A Tot Drap* on Sant Pol de Mar beach. Photograph by E. Carbonell, September 2014.



Figure 3. The traditional boat “*llaüt de sardinal*” *Sant Pau* the day of its christening ceremony on Sant Pol de Mar beach (August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008), and the *Sant Pau*’s Chapel on the top of hill. Photograph by E. Carbonell.

The *Sant Pau* is a replica built in 2008 of the *Saint Pierre*<sup>1</sup>, a fishing boat that had been constructed a century earlier in Sète, in the south of France. The *Saint Pierre* followed the model of lateen sail boats that were called “Catalan boats” in this area of the French Mediterranean coast. They were used for centuries, mainly for fishing sardine, anchovy, mackerel and, depending on the time of year, tuna. During its hundred years of existence, the *Saint Pierre* changed owners various times but its name always stayed the same. In the 1930s a motor was added, and in the 1990s the boat was no longer used for professional fishing. In 2006 it was purchased by the town of Parlavàs, near Montpellier, and it was declared a French “historical monument” in 2010. In 2007, the lateen sail association *A Tot Drap* decided to purchase a fibreglass copy of the hull made from a mould of the *Saint Pierre*, in order to build a replica to sail and use in demonstrations of mooring traditional boats on Sant Pol de Mar beach. The part of the replica’s hull that is underwater is made of fibreglass, but the rest of the boat is made of wood, as was the original model. The replica is lateen rigged, as was the first version of the *Saint Pierre* until the 1930s and then again after the 1990s. In other words, it was lateen rigged from its construction in 1909 until a motor was added in the 1930s, when motors were widely introduced for professional fishing. The sail was left as an additional resource in many cases, although in others it was dismantled to leave more space for work. Subsequently, the *Saint Pierre*’s lateen sail was recovered for cultural use in 2006, to represent local fishing tradition and French maritime heritage in general.

So what past, what heritage, does the *Sant Pau* replica represent? In the area of maritime heritage in Spain, the construction of replica and even restored boats has been criticized, not without reason, for lacking historical and ethnological rigour too frequently (Apraiz et al, 2000; Apraiz, 2007). This lack of rigour is found in other aspects of maritime heritage such as fish gastronomy, architecture or coastal landscapes<sup>2</sup>. Similar criticisms have been made in relation to other areas of heritage.

If we accept Kirshenblat-Gimblett’s (1998) well-known definition of heritage as a form of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past, then we can state that the restoration or replication of an old vessel for heritage purposes brings the boat in the present into contact with its appearance at a specific time in the past, presumably its initial appearance. This can be applied to both boat restoration and the construction of replicas, as stated by Eric Laurier (1998:40), as both operations rely on practices that must involve sharing knowledge, vocabulary, skills, technology and materiality from the past (Jalas, 2006: 360).

The construction of the *Sant Pau* replica is related to the reconstruction of a town’s fishing past that was lost between the 1960s and 1980s, when the traditional fishing-based economy was replaced by a tourism-dependent economy, which is typical of the modern capitalism and was to occupy exactly the same physical space of the beach<sup>3</sup>. At the time of this operation of heritagization of the fishing past, there were no big professional fishing boats left in Sant Pol de Mar and they had to be sought elsewhere. The objective was to revitalize the landscape of the past (Tilley, 2006). In the imagination of those who took the initiative to build the replica is the coastal landscape of the past, its memory, and a desire to revitalize it. The construction of the replica involves a temporal component of continuity in the representation of a past and local identity.

Reconstructing a boat (constructing a replica or restoring an old vessel) would be equivalent to the term “revitalize” the past, as used by Jeremy Boissevain (1992). Boissevain states that “revitalization” (he refers to festivals and religious traditions in Malta, but I think his definition can be applied to other kinds of heritage elements) can mean three things: first, in the same sense as Hobsbawm, that is, in the sense of invention; second, to mean “resuscitate” or inject new energy into something that has been “asleep” for a while; and third in the sense of traditions that are kept more or less alive in rural areas and that have undergone heritagization (Boissevain uses the term “folklorized”), as a nostalgic reaction to modern life. Reconstructing a traditional boat is equivalent to revitalizing the past in all three senses. Tradition is not only repetition. It is repetition, but also revitalization. It is revitalization, but also continuity. This can be applied to restoration, to construction of boats and, finally, to sailing.



**Score from 1 to 5**  
 1 = Not important/Totally disagree  
 5 = Very important/Totally agree

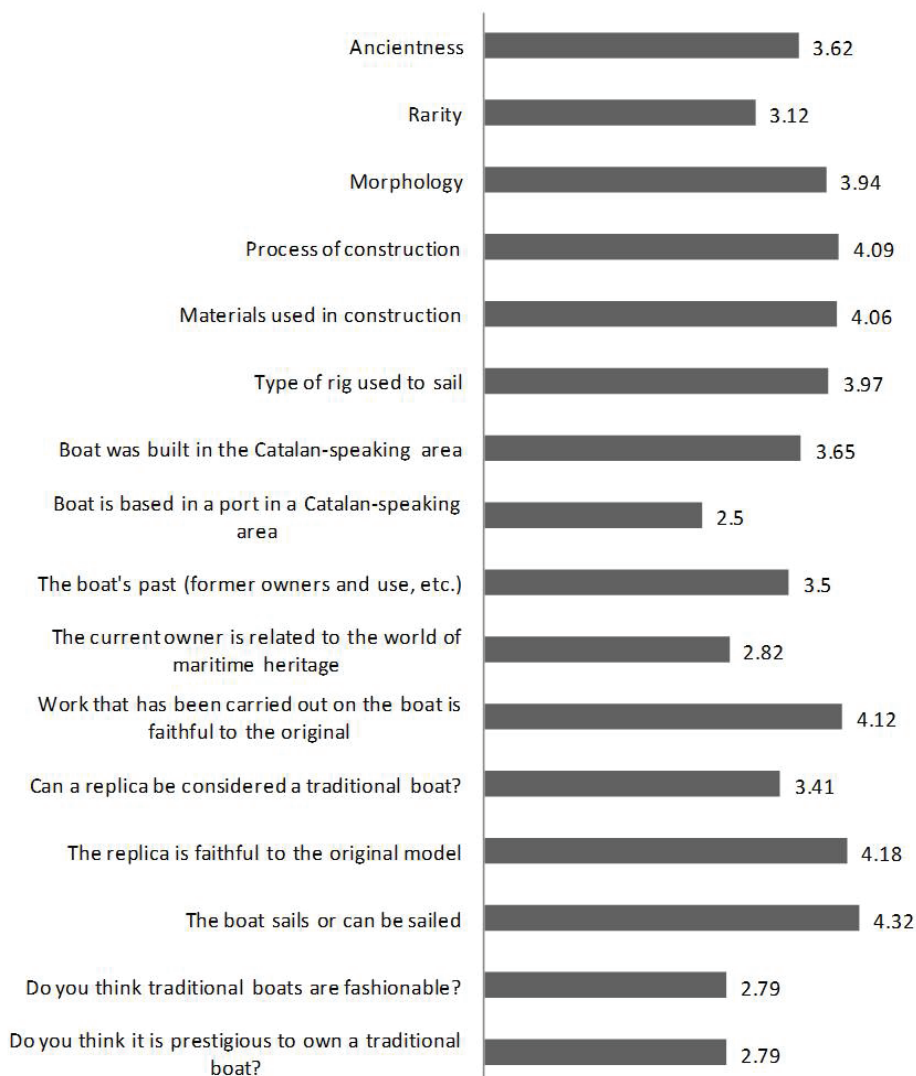


Figure 4. Results of the survey on criteria for defining a traditional Catalan boat. Compiled by author.

### 3 THE SURVEY ON TRADITIONAL CATALAN BOATS

In February 2015, I carried out a survey of people involved in the conservation and recovery of Catalan boats to find out what they consider to be a traditional boat. I will present and discuss the results of the survey below. The survey was administered to members of local maritime heritage associations in Catalonia, which are comprised of volunteers who love traditional sailing, history and maritime culture.

The survey was distributed via email through the Catalan Federation for Maritime and River Culture and Heritage (*Federació Catalana per a la Cultura i el Patrimoni Marítim i Fluvial*), which brings together seven local associations that conserve, recover and promote maritime heritage in their towns, situated along the entire Catalan coast, from north to south: Cadaqués (*Associació d'Amics de la Vela Llatina de Cadaqués*); L'Escala (*Associació d'Amics de la Vela Llatina de l'Escala*); Palafrugell (*Associació d'Amics de la Vela Llatina de Calella de Palafrugell*); Sant Pol de Mar (*A Tot Drap*); Vilassar de Mar (*Bricbarca*); Calafell (*Patí català de Calafell*); Cambrils (*Associació l'Arjau*).

I received 34 valid responses between 4 February and 13 March 2015. Only two of the 34 respondents were women; the rest were men. The average age was 55 years old. Almost all the respondents, apart from seven individuals, had a nautical certificate, and two-thirds of them stated that they were owners or joint owners of a traditional boat.

Respondents included architects, engineers, teachers, shopkeepers, retired people, and people from other professions, as well as three fishermen. In answer to the question about whether they were related to the world of fishing, eight people replied that they were not fishermen, but came from a fishing family. Therefore, over a third of respondents were associated with the world of fishing. We should bear in mind that in recent decades small-scale fishing has suffered a severe crisis in Catalonia, as in many places in the world, and there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of fishermen. According to Greenpeace (2013), there has been a 52% reduction in employment in the fishing sector in Spain in the last 15 years. The same report indicates that this drop has hit the small-scale fishing sector hardest.

I will now analyse the results of the survey on the criteria that enable us to define a traditional Catalan boat. These criteria were based on the five basic axioms that, according to Nathalie Heinich (2009), are used to identify and inventory heritage: ancientness, authenticity, rarity, signification and beauty. I have tried to transfer these axioms to the area of boats (see Fig. 4).

What are the main conclusions that we can draw from this survey? It is revealing to look at the aspects that were considered most and least important.

The criterion that respondents considered most important in the definition of a traditional boat is that it is sailed or can be sailed. Therefore, the definition excludes damaged boats that are inoperative, and those that are exhibited to the public in museums but are not in a suitable condition to be used. This is an important point, as it indicates that for people associated with traditional boats the key is sailing: the essence that defines a traditional boat is the sea, is cutting through the waves. A traditional boat is not conceived as an inert object (stripped of its main purpose, navigation, even if it has other qualities such as historical, ethnological or aesthetic values), but as a means of sailing. What defines the boat is its purpose. In other words, this is a kind of teleological conception of traditional boats.

At political and administrative level, Catalonia is currently an Autonomous Community of 7.5 million inhabitants within the Spanish state. However, the Catalan cultural area extends to territories in which the Catalan language has been spoken for centuries, both within the Spanish state (Catalunya, València, Illes Balears) and outside of it (Andorra, Catalunya Nord in France, and Alguer in Sardinia, Italy), with a total of 11 million Catalan speakers at the current time. The survey was sent only to associations in Catalonia, due to the fact that it was easy to access participants through the Federation. However, the questions refer to vessels in the entire Catalan cultural area, not just Catalonia.

The criterion that respondents considered least important was the port at which the boat is based. This is also interesting, as it reveals much about how a traditional boat is conceived. If being based in a port in the Catalan cultural area is not considered important to define a boat as traditional and Catalan, then there is a mental separation of boats from things of the land – that is, ports and towns – and the maritime aspect, sailing, is considered the main characteristic of traditional boats.

The other aspects that were considered most important in the definition of a traditional boat are related to its construction: the construction process; the materials used; and, with an even higher score, how faithful any work on a boat is to the original model, both in the case of old boats and replicas. Surprisingly, ancientness and rarity were not considered among the most important aspects in the definition of a traditional boat. Respondents considered the fashionable-ness or prestige of owning a traditional boat to be even less important.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Eric Laurier (1998) and Mikko Jalas (2006) have studied the practice of restoring and constructing replicas of traditional boats in England and Finland, respectively. Both have made some interesting points that I would like to discuss in this conclusion. First, the type of work involved in the construction or repair of these boats, and the practical activity of traditional sailing, reflects pre-Fordism ways of working, from start to finish, to produce a complete object (the boat) or action (handling the vessel).

As Laurier explains (1998: 31-32), there is also an interesting gender component at play. People who currently spend their leisure time building replicas of old vessels, or repairing and maintaining old boats, themselves become replicas of the former wooden boat builders. Thus, they create a kind of symbolic lineage of masculinity with past maritime workers: the “men of the sea” who have been evoked so many times in literature (in Conrad, Hemmingway, Coloane, etc.). This can be seen in current maritime heritage practices, and could explain why there is such disparity between men and women in this area of heritage, considering the numbers of men and women in traditional sailing associations in comparison to more equal numbers in other heritage revitalization activities, such as traditional music and dance. The same disparity was observed in the survey that I carried out.

Finally, as stated by Laurier and Jalas, wood has an aura of aesthetic superiority over modern boat construction materials, such as plastic or fibreglass. There is talk of the tactile properties of wood, its smell and warmth, in other words, its sensory qualities. In addition, the owners of traditional boats set themselves up as guardians of shared heritage; as activists. Therefore, the practice of conserving traditional boats entails a kind of resistance to the idea of time as a commodity (Jalas, 2006:360).

Based on Kopytoff’s (1986) ideas on singularization versus commodification, presented in his well-known article on the cultural biography of things, we can deduce that a traditional boat is a vessel that is outside of the commodification of the world of recreational and sports boating. In the world of traditional sailing, some boats such as the *Sant Pau* fly the “Slow sailing” movement’s flag from their masts. Slow sailing is a proposal inspired by the “slow food” movement that began in Italy in the 1980s as a protest against the proliferation of fast food restaurants in the historic centres of European cities. The journalist and sailor Joan Sol published the “Slow Sailing Manifesto” on his maritime heritage blog<sup>4</sup> in 2009. Since then it has been translated into several languages, and slow sailing groups have been formed in different countries, internet groups have been established, and presentations given at the Barcelona International Boat Show (*Saló Nàutic de Barcelona*). As with fast food, slow sailing is to a certain extent a reaction against the world of regattas and elite competition, which is a diametrically opposite way of understanding navigation to that of sailing traditional boats<sup>5</sup>.

Culture, as Kopytoff states, is responsible for singularizing, or decommodifying, what was previously commodified. This is exactly what heritagization does. For example, between its construction at the start of the twentieth century and its declaration as a historical French monument a century later, the *Saint Pierre* was bought and sold by various owners. The moment when it was no longer used for small-scale fishing is the moment when it was singularized again. Just as Raymond Williams (1973: 120) maintains that “a working country is hardly ever a landscape”, we can state that a working fishing boat cannot be considered heritage until its collective singularization, based on the passing of time. The passing of time is a fundamental element that means that an object is no longer what it was – a commodity – and is transformed into a singular object, a *Monument Historique*, as in the case of the *Saint Pierre*. These processes occur inside local cultural groups or associations, which work in a network with other associations, and which Kopytoff called “public institutions of singularization”.

Through the example presented here, and through the survey administered to associations that conserve and promote Catalan maritime heritage, we can reach the conclusion that a traditional boat is a boat constructed using traditional materials and methods, and that is sailed traditionally. A traditional boat sails literally in the sea, but also symbolically through time, connecting the past and the present. Continuity is the symbolic key to the meaning of traditional boats.

This was the view of the great Catalan writer, Josep Pla (1897-1981), who was himself very fond of sailing in a small *gussi* along his beloved Costa Brava. In the years after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the years when the dictatorship’s repression was most brutal, Josep Pla,

who was already a famous writer, chose to live away from everything in a small coastal town, side by side with the fishermen. In 1947, the ban on publishing books in Catalan was partially lifted, and Pla released one of his most acclaimed works, *Cadaqués*, which describes the landscapes and traditional ways of life on the north coast of Catalonia. In the preface, Pla wrote: "In the core of a culture, there is an obscure but indispensable mission: to continue"<sup>6</sup>.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup><http://lacatalanesaint-pierreabrest.blogs.midilibre.com/archive/2012/06/24/un-peu-d-histoire.html>. "La catalane Saint Pierre, un peu d'histoire" [Accessed on: 19/03/15].

<sup>2</sup> See the contributions in the volume edited by Alegret & Carbonell, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> I have examined this aspect in another paper. See: Carbonell, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> <http://elmareselcami.blogspot.com.es/2009/01/slow-sailing.html> [Accessed on: 19/03/15].

<sup>5</sup> The Slow Sailing Manifiesto is available in different languages at the following link: <https://es.scribd.com/collections/2638168/Slow-Sailing> [Accessed on: 19/03/15].

<sup>6</sup> "En el clos d'una cultura hi ha una missió obscura però indispensable: continuar". (Pla, 1974: 9).

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