

Rother Baron:
L'estaca by Lluís Llach –
a Catalan Freedom Hymn
and its Variants in Other Languages



Lluís Llach's Catalan freedom song *L'estaca* (The Stake) has become a worldwide anthem for a more peaceful world. It takes on a different face in each cultural area – and yet is based everywhere on the same unifying melody. In this way, the song exemplifies the ideal of unity in diversity.

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Cover picture: Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875 – 1911): *Zinia* (New / Virgin territory, 1905); Wikimedia commons

Preface:

The Arduous Path to a More Peaceful World



What is Peace?

Peace can be described as an ideal state – a utopia of a world in which there are no wars and no social injustice;
a world in which people share everything because they experience material community as a reinforcement of spiritual community;
a world where all people consider the well-being of others in all their actions;
a world in which no one strives for power over others, because every restriction of the freedom of others is experienced as just as painful as the restriction of one's own freedom;

a world in which people are curious to learn about the particularities of their fellow human beings instead of trying to mould others in their own image;

a world characterised by respect for nature rather than by the pursuit of exploitation, because the connection with nature is far too intimate for anyone to perceive it as mere matter.

A Spiritual Source of Power for the Journey to the Land of Peace

We all know: A world like this does not exist. If we want to reach it, it is clear that the way there is long and stony. The danger of tiring on the arduous journey and resigning ourselves to the seemingly unchangeable is great.

That is why we need not only material provisions for the journey to the land of peace, but also immaterial support: spiritual nourishment that keeps our inner fire alive.

Lluís Llach's song *L'estaca* can be regarded as such a spiritual source of power. Written in 1968 to support the fight for freedom against the Franco regime, it has since been taken up by freedom movements in many countries. Thus, today the song is a global source of strength for the journey to a more peaceful world.

The different versions of the song also reflect the cultural characteristics of those who have adapted the song for their countries. Similarly, the political framework differs from country to country.

As a result, the song unites a multitude of messages within itself. This will be illustrated in this essay by means of selected examples.



Pictures:

1. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875 – 1911): *Fairytale castle* (1909); *Wikimedia Commons*
2. Alexas_Fotos: *Melody* (Pixabay)

1. The Catalan Original: Against Franco, for the Freedom of Catalonia



Genesis of *L'estaca*

The family in which the Catalan cantautor Lluís Llach, born in 1948, grew up was not exactly critical of the regime. His mother worked as a teacher, his father was a doctor and served the Franco regime as mayor of the small Catalan town of Verges. Thus, a successful career in the Francoist state seemed to be preordained for the son.

At the age of 15, however, the singer came into contact with Narcís Llansa, the grandfather of a friend. Narcís Llansa was a committed opponent of Franco and had actively supported the Republic during the civil war. The young Lluís regularly ac-

accompanied the then 76-year-old on fishing trips. The conversations they held opened the young man's eyes to the oppressive character of Franco's regime.

In 1968, Lluís Llach created a musical monument to his mentor in the form of "Avi Siset" ("Grandpa Siset" – derived from "Narcís"). This is the person his spiritual role model appears as in the song *L'estaca*, a freedom hymn that was to make Llach famous far beyond the borders of his homeland.

Anthem of the Freedom Movement in the Late Franco Era

In the song, "Avi Siset" asks his apparently younger companion to help him knock over a wooden stake. Although the stake would already be rotten, it would still be stuck firmly enough in the ground to fix the shackles with which they are all tied to the stake.

The stake ("l'estaca") refers to a state (in Catalan "l'estat") that denies people their right to freedom. At the same time, the song makes clear that the chains imposed on its citizens by the repressive regime can only be broken by the united resistance of the oppressed. Acting in solidarity thus appears as a prerequisite for a freer, more just society.

Despite the more general imagery, which was not directly related to conditions in Spain, the song was banned during the Franco era. Llach reacted to this by playing only the first chords of the song at each performance and humming the melody. This humming was then taken up by the audience,

while at the same time candles were lit and waved in rhythm with the music.

Through this special form of presentation, the song became even more of an anthem of resistance. In this way, it also paved the way for Llach's career as one of the most successful Catalan cantautores.



Significance of the Song for the Catalan Autonomy Ambitions

Although *L'estaca* was generally related to the repression by the Franco regime, it was also associated with the repression of the Catalan language and culture from the beginning. Implicitly, the song thus also highlights the misleading character of national state designations.

A term like "Spain" inevitably evokes the idea of a unified entity. The latter, however, does not exist in this form in reality. Instead, the multitude of vibrant regional cultures raises the question of what right the Castilian-dominated Spanish central government has to criminalise people who demand the same right to free development for their ethnic group as the Castilians claim for their culture. Why do people like the Basques, who speak a language (the "Euskara") that does not relate to any other European language family, have to belong against their will to a state whose claim to hegemony they have rejected since the 17th century?

The same question arises with regard to Catalonia: Why are Catalan independence supporters imprisoned, while no one would think of questioning Portuguese independence?

After all, in 1640, when the Portuguese were able to end Spain's 60-year rule over their country, the Catalans also tried to break away from Spain. If they had succeeded, no one would dispute their right to an independent state today.

The Catalans simply had the misfortune of being on the losing side after the War of the Spanish Succession (1701 – 1713). Because they had supported the opponents of the Spanish King Philip V, their autonomy rights were increasingly curtailed – culminating in the violent suppression of the Catalan language and culture under dictator Franco.

Franco fought the Catalans for two reasons: on the one hand, because of their insistence on cultural autonomy and, on the other, because of their republican attitude. Thus, it was simply the law of the strongest that triumphed here.



Song and Lyrics

The Stake

Once I stood with the old Siset
outside the front door. Waiting for the sunrise,
we watched the carts go by.
Just then, Uncle Siset said to me:

"Don't you see the stake
to which we are all tied?
If we don't manage to break free of it,
we will never move freely again.

If we pull hard enough, we will knock it down.
Believe me, it won't take too long.
I know it will topple, topple, topple,
because it must have rotted long ago.

If I pull hard here
and you pull hard there,
then it will surely topple, topple, topple,
and we will be able to free ourselves."

"But it's been there for so long!
My hands are sore from all the pulling.
And every time I let up for a moment
the stake gets thicker and bigger!

I know it is rotten,
but its weight is so great
that sometimes I lose my strength.
So please sing your song for me once more!"

"If we pull hard enough, we will knock it down.
Believe me, it won't take too long.
I know it will topple, topple, topple,
because it must have rotted long ago.

If I pull hard here
and you pull hard there,
then it will surely topple, topple, topple,
and we will be able to free ourselves."

The old Siset has long since fallen silent,
a wicked wind has carried him away –
only he himself knows where.
But I am still standing in front of the same door.

And when the young fellows pass me by,
I raise my voice and sing
the last song that he taught me:

"If we pull hard enough, we will knock it down.
Believe me, it won't take too long.
I know it will topple, topple, topple,
because it must have rotted long ago.

If I pull hard here
and you pull hard there,
then it will surely topple, topple, topple,
and we will be able to free ourselves."

Lluís Llach: [L'estaca](#)
from: Ara i aquí (1970)

[Legendary live performance](#) by Lluís Llach after the end of the Franco dictatorship in Barcelona (1976)

[Song with anti-falangist slideshow](#)

[Lyrics with variants of the song in numerous other languages](#)
and background information on the song (English/Italian/French) on *antiwarsongs.org*

[On the figure of "Avi Siset" in the song:](#) Oliveres, Jordi:
"Tomba, tomba, avi Siset"; *El Mundo*, January 26, 2004.

Links to the Catalan Independence Movement

Piñol, Albert Sánchez: [The Deplorable History of the Catalans.](#)
In: *Elnacional.cat*, September 12, 2016.

Articles in German:

Geo-Epoche: [Wie vor fast 400 Jahren der Grundstein für den Katalonien-Konflikt gelegt wurde](#) (How the Foundations for

the Catalonia Conflict were Laid Almost 400 Years Ago). *Geo-Epoche*, No. 31 (2008).

Urban, Thomas: [Der Streit zwischen Spaniern und Katalanen ist ein Konflikt der Kulturen](#) (The Conflict between Spaniards and Catalans is a Conflict of Cultures). *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 29, 2017.

Pictures:

1. *Mister Pittilger: Musical bridge ("Piano"); Pixabay*
2. *Innoxius: Lluís Llach during a performance at the Olympia Music Hall in Paris, 2006 (Wikimedia Commons)*
3. *Enrique (ELG21): The Catalan municipality of Castellfollit de la Roca in the province of Girona (Pixabay)*

2. Poland: A Sceptical Variant of *L'estaca*



Jacek Kaczmarski's Polish Resistance Hymn

The equally simple and powerful symbolism of *L'estaca* and the catchy melody of the song have helped to make it popular in other countries as well. Today, numerous variants exist in other languages.

In some cases, the Catalan lyrics have simply been translated into the local language. Sometimes, however, they have only been adopted in spirit. In these cases, often new verses were created that better suited the respective oppressive situation.

The Polish version of the song (*Mury/Walls*), written by Jacek Kaczmarski in 1978, is particularly interesting. It became the resistance anthem of the *Solidarność* trade union in its struggle against the Polish real-socialist regime.

The song was not only sung during the 1980 workers' strike at the Gdansk Lenin Shipyard, but was also used as a theme song by the underground radio station *Radio Solidarność*. For this, another Polish version of *L'estaca*, based on a more straightforward translation of Lluís Llach's text, also circulated.

Although Kaczmarek only took the melody from *L'estaca*, his lyrics remain closely connected to the history of the song. The songwriter unmistakably alludes to the form of presentation of *L'estaca* during the Franco dictatorship.

Thus, the song refers to a singer who gives the oppressed masses "strength" with a song whose melody carries "without words (...) the call for freedom into their hearts". Moreover, Kaczmarek mentions the candles that were lit during Llach's hummed song performances:

*"Thousands of candles they lit for him,
whose smoke floated above their heads."*

Restrained Revolutionary Euphoria

What is most remarkable, however, is the pessimistic ending of the lyrics: Spurred on by the energy of the song, the masses realise their power and try to bring about the very overthrow that the song suggests in the call to tear down the walls. In the process, however, the liberal spirit suddenly turns into a totalitarian movement that mercilessly fights everything that is different:

*"This one is on our side,
that one is against us.
Whoever is alone is our worst enemy!"*

As a consequence, the "uniform marching of the crowd" only makes the walls grow further instead of contributing to their collapse.

The sceptical outlook can be generally related to the often problematic momentum of revolutions. After all, their initially liberal impulse frequently turns into excesses of violence and new forms of authoritarian rule.



In concrete terms, Kaczmarewski might also have been thinking of the wildcat strike and protests with which the workers of the Gdansk Lenin shipyard reacted to the sharp increase in food prices by the state in late 1970. This had led

to riots, as a result of which several demonstrators (according to official figures 49, in fact probably around a hundred) were shot dead by security forces.

Kaczmarewski's song can thus be understood as a warning to resistance groups not to overestimate their own forces and not to endanger human lives through precipitate actions.

Prophetic Power of Kaczmarek's Text

Against the background of today's political situation in Poland, Kaczmarek's song has an almost prophetic quality. After all, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Polish ruling party PIS, once used to fight for the ideals of Solidarność himself.

Nowadays, however, his political ideal can be characterised quite well by the "uniform marching of the crowd", the deterrent image Kaczmarek chooses in his song for a misguided revolutionary dynamic.

So today the song could be understood as an appeal to tear down the walls again and break the chains with which the state paralyses the people's desire for freedom – combined with the hope for a better outcome of the freedom movement.

Jacek Kaczmarek: Mury (Walls)

Walls

He was young and full of visions,
and together they were inestimably many.
He gave them strength with a song
in which he sang of a rising dawn.
Thousands of candles they lit for him,
whose smoke floated above their heads.
He sang that it was time for the wall to collapse,
and they sang with him:

Tear down the bars and break down the walls!
Break the chains, smash the whip in two,
then the walls will crumble, they will crumble,
and bury the old world beneath them.

Soon they knew the song by heart,
and the melody alone, without any words,
carried the call for freedom into their hearts
and inflamed their spirits.
So they sang and clapped the rhythm with their hands,
and their handclaps echoed like cannon thunder
even though the chains still clung to them
and the dawn was nowhere to be seen.
He, however, continued to sing and to play:

Tear down the bars and break down the walls! ...

So they understood how many they were,
they felt their strength and the propitious moment
and marched through the streets of the town
with the song of the dawn on their lips.
They toppled the statues,
tore up the pavement and shouted:
"This one is on our side, that one is against us.
Whoever is alone is our worst enemy!"
But the singer was also alone ...

He looked at the uniform marching of the crowd,
silently he listened to the thunder of their footsteps.
And the walls kept growing, growing, growing,
the chains still clung tightly to their feet.

He looks at the uniform marching of the crowd,
silently listening to the thunder of their footsteps.
And the walls keep growing, growing, growing,
the chains still clinging tightly to their feet.

Jacek Kaczmarski: [Mury](#) (1978)
(album of the same name with the song released in 1981)

[Song with slideshow](#) on dissident protests in Poland

[Live performance](#)

[Information about Jacek Kaczmarski](#) on culture.pl



Pictures:

- 1. Ri Butov: Cellist in the desert (Pixabay);*
- 2. Zenon Mirota: Strike at the Gdansk Lenin Shipyard, August 1980 (Wikimedia Commons);*
- 3. Pawel Plenzner: Jacek Kaczmarski at a concert in Gdańsk, 1992, 1992 (Wikimedia Commons);*

3. Russia:

Singing Against the Walls of the Putin Regime



In the Polish lyrics to the melody of *L'estaca*, the stake symbol had been replaced by the metaphor of walls that must be brought down – an image that was apparently more obvious to the people behind the "Iron Curtain".

This image was later taken up by the Russian band *Arkady Kots*. Their name is a reminiscence of the Russian socialist of the same name, who translated the *Internationale* into Russian in 1902.

The Russian version of *L'estaca* (*Styeny ruchnut* – "The walls collapse"), which otherwise closely follows the Catalan original, is of course a musical expression of resistance against the repressive Putin regime. Fittingly, a video is circulating on the net in which the band sings the song in a police car.

Arkady Kots: Styeny ruchnut (The Walls Collapse)

The Walls Collapse

Once I stood at the front door
with my grandfather.
In the distance, day was dawning,
and the wooden carts rumbled past us.
Just then my grandfather said to me:
"Do you see those walls over there?
We all have to live behind them,
and if we don't tear them down,
we will rot alive behind them.

Come on, let's break open this prison!
These walls do not belong here.
So let them collapse, yes, collapse –
they've been crumbling for a long time anyway!
And if you push against them
with your shoulder a bit
and if we push against them together,
then the walls will collapse, yes, collapse,
and we will be able to breathe freely."

My hands have long since become wrinkled,
many years have passed since then,
my strength is getting less and less,
and the walls still haven't been taken down.
I know they are fragile,

but it's still hard to overcome them.
Therefore, if I'm running out of strength,
I ask you to sing:

Come on, let's break open this prison! ...

My grandfather has long since fallen silent,
a wicked wind has carried him away,
but I still see myself standing with him
in front of the door,
next to the clatter of the wooden carts.
And when someone passes by,
I strive to raise my voice
and sing the song he sang
before he died:

Come on, let's break open this prison! ...

Arkady Kots: [Styeny ruchnut](#) (2012)



[Song](#) with impressions of protest
actions and performances of the
band

[Video of a "performance" in a
police car](#)

Pictures: 1. *Rakoon: The Moscow Kremlin Wall, February 2019* (Wiki-
media Commons; modified); 2. Arkadij Kots: Photo from [the band's
website](#)

4. Tunisia: An Anthem for the Jasmine Revolution



An Imagery Open to Different Interpretations

When Lluís Llach wrote his song *L'estaca*, he undoubtedly had his Catalan homeland and the Franco regime's repression of freedom in mind. However, the openness of the imagery he had to choose to circumvent censorship made the song transferable to other constellations of oppression.

On the one hand, this concerns the oppression of an entire population by authoritarian rulers. On the other hand, the song can also be related to the oppression of the culture and language of individual peoples or ethnic groups who are confronted with the hegemony of other peoples.

Love of the Homeland as a Source of Resistance



In the first sense, the song has been taken up in Tunisia, where Yasser Jradi has written his own variant of *L'estaca*. The title of the song (*Dima dima* – "Always, always") is also the name of Jradi's first band, founded in 2005. It was already written in 2003, eight years before the beginning of the Arab Spring.

The willingness to resist is given here a different accentuation than in the original version or in the Polish and Russian variants of the song. Jradi puts the emphasis on the love of the homeland and the close ties with the people living there. For him, this love is stronger than all attempts by dictatorial rulers to subjugate a country to their own ends.

The popularity the song gained in Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution is also thanks to Emel Mathlouthi. The singer-songwriter, born in 1982, performed the song in public, thus making it a revolutionary anthem. Mathlouthi also critically accompanied the later, partly sobering course of Tunisia's revolutionary transformation.



Yasser Jradi: Dima dima (Always, Always)

Always, Always

I swear by the sweat of the masons,
which drips and evaporates on the stone,
by the barefooted and by those
who are stricken with the whims of fate.

I swear by the right hand of the sailors,
by the sun and by the clouds,
by the wind and the treacherous wave:
Never, never, never
will I regret loving you.

Never, never, never
will I resign myself to your pain.
With blood I write your name on my hands.
Always, always, always
will I return to you,
however thorny the path may be.

Even if time should carry me away from you –
always, always, always
will I return to you,
and I will water your fields with my tears.
Even if you should betray me,
you are still dear to me.



I swear by the hands of the peasants,
who were born among earth and thorns,
from whose wounds the bread has sprouted
and who have conquered the capricious fate.

I swear by the nights of the street sweepers,
by all those who have to work hard,
the woodcutters, the miners and the farm labourers:
Never, never, never
will I regret loving you.

Never, never, never ...

Even if time ...

Yasser Jradi: [Dima dima](#) (2003)

[Orchestral version](#)

[Duet with Emel Mathlouthi](#) (live, unplugged)

[Lyrics and translation into Italian](#) on antiwarsongs.org

[Information about Yasser Jradi](#) on radioopensource.org

Pictures:

- 1. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875 – 1911): Hymn (Part 3 of the cycle, 1906)***
- 2. Housseem Abida: Yasser Jradi, 2018 (detail)***
- 3. Michael Coghlan: Emel Mathlouthi, 2014 ("Curls")***
- 4. Leomaros: Sit-in at the central Kasbah Square in Tunis during the Jasmine Revolution, January 2011, January 2011***
(Wikimedia Commons)

5. Corsica und Basque Country: The Vibrancy of European Regional Cultures



The Expression of Cultural Particularities in the Different Versions of *L'estaca*

As in Catalonia, *L'estaca* has also been interpreted and taken up in other European regions as a symbolic expression of the striving for cultural autonomy. Thus, besides a Basque version, there is also a Corsican variant of the song. Especially often, it has been translated into Italian regional languages. In addition to a Sardinian and a Sicilian version, variants of the song also exist in Ligurian, Tuscan-Livorno, Venetian and Neapolitan.

The different versions of *L'estaca* hence illustrate the diversity of regional cultures in Europe. This does not only apply to the field of language. Musically, too, the richness of cultural variants is reflected in the various versions of the song.



Thus, the Corsican version recorded by the band *Chjami Aghjalesi* is characterised by the tradition of the rather solemn choral and alternating singing. For the Basque text, on the other hand, the band *Betagarri* has also recorded a version in ska sound. This corresponds to the widespread use of ska and punk rhythms in the Basque music scene to express resistance to state power.

In this way, the different versions of the song also convey an inkling of what we are losing through the increasing displacement of regional languages and cultures by the hegemonic cultures. Each language stands for a different view of the world, each culture is a world of its own.



The Ideal of Unity in Diversity

However, the numerous versions of Lluís Llach's *L'estaca* do not only show the differences between the individual cultures. The common melody to which the texts are performed also illustrates the overarching commonality that results from the various expressions of the will for freedom.

The story of the song thus stands for the idea of "unity in diversity", as it is also repeatedly invoked in the European Union. However, it is disregarded here – as shown by the persistent refusal to mediate in conflicts such as the one concerning Catalan autonomy aspirations – precisely when it could serve as a pacifying regulative.

In contrast, the chorus of the many voices, each singing the one song in their own way, indicates how easy it would be to achieve lasting peace between peoples. It would only take each one to respect and appreciate the cultural uniqueness and the will for freedom of the other, instead of striving for hegemony over others.



Corsica: Chjami Aghjalesi: A Catena (The Chain)

The Chain

Look at your brother:
A chain is tightly wrapped around him!
The same one is wrapped around you
and around all of us.

If we all pull hard enough
and tear at the long chain,
maybe one day it will break
with a bang, a thunderclap
echoing to the other side of the sea.

If we all pull hard enough
and tear at the long chain,
maybe one day it will break
with a bang, a thunderclap
as of a song of freedom.

Talk to your brother!
Let's build the future together!
A common idea flowing in our blood
will be the force that holds us together!

One single embrace will encompass
our Corsica instead of the chain,

as a force that will continue to grow
with every awakening youth.

If only we really want it,
we will break the chain!
May this song be the bridge
to a future without chains!

If we all pull hard enough ...

Chjami Aghjalesi: [A Catena](#) (1990)

[Live performance](#)

[Lyrics with French translation](#) on laoccinelle.net

On the history of Corsica, see the [article on Corsica](#) on britannica.com.

On the most recent autonomy efforts: Chrisafis, Angélique: [France may offer Corsica 'autonomy' as it struggles to quell protests](#). The Guardian, March 16, 2022.

Basque Country: Betagarri: Agure zaharra (The Old Man)

The Old Man

One morning, as I was going to work,
an old man called out to me from his front door:
"Young man, don't you see what our obstacle is?
If we don't knock it down, we will be lost forever!

Let's knock down the obstacle together!
Rotten as it is, it will not withstand us for long.
If we shake it from both sides,
it will surely crumble quickly."

But time goes by, and I am already exhausted,
my hands are chapped, my strength used up.
The obstacle still persists, however rotten it may be.
Come on, let us join forces in singing:

Let's knock down the obstacle together! ...

The old man has long since disappeared,
a wicked wind has carried him away.
But to the children playing over there
I'll pass on his little song:

Let's knock down the obstacle together! ...

Gorka Knörr / Betagarri: [Agure zaharra](#)



[Song](#)

[Lyrics with French translation](#) on
kantuz.esponda.net

[Original version by Gorka Knörr](#) (1976)

For detailed information on Basque culture and history, see the website of the [Basque Cultural Institute](http://eke.eus/en) (eke.eus/en).

Furthermore, an article on this topic can be found in *The National Geographic*: Blakemore, Erin: [How the Basques became an autonomous community within Spain](#); October 24, 2019.

The [variants of the song in Italian regional languages](#) can be found on antiwarsongs.org. Furthermore, many versions in other languages are listed there.

Pictures:

1. *Alexas_Fotos: Melody of Freedom (Pixabay)*
2. *The band Chjami Aghjalesi; excerpt from a [French TV documentary](#) celebrating the band's 40th anniversary (2017)*
3. *The band Betagarri, 2007 (basqueed.org/Wikipedia)*
4. *Christian Klein (XtianDuGard): The citadel of Bonifacio at the southern tip of Corsica (Pixabay)*
5. *Basotxerri: Calle San Francisco and the Iglesia de San Vicente in the old town of Vitoria-Gasteiz, the capital of the Basque Country (Wiki-media Commons; modified)*