Freedom Towers

In Spain, some people build tall human pyramids to honor the past. But for others, the towers symbolize an independent future.

By Siobhán McGowan

As many as 600 people can work together to form a tower.

Building human *castells*, or towers, is a tradition in the Catalonia region of northeast Spain. The practice developed out of a folk dance and dates back more than 200 years. In town squares and bullfighting rings, tournaments take place where rival teams compete to build the best tower. Thousands of fans cheer them on.

A Symbol of Independence

Today, however, castells have come to symbolize more than tradition. Some Catalan people are unhappy with their country. They want to declare their independence from Spain and have Catalonia recognized as a separate country. To these people, the castells symbolize their quest for independence.

At the festivals, spectators wave Catalonia's yellow-and-red-striped flags. Politicians who support independence compare creating castells to creating a new nation. "We can build great things if we come together," one mayor said.

Building a Castell

Constructing a castell is no easy challenge. It can involve as many as 600 people. The biggest and strongest team members link and interlock their arms, legs, and bodies to make a solid, weight-bearing *pinya*, or base. Then more nimble team members clamber up and onto shoulders to form the levels of the tower—kind of like a layer cake. Some castells have up to 10 tiers! The taller the tower rises, the smaller and lighter the team members on top must be. Often, it's up to a child, called the *enxaneta*, to be the last one standing. This girl or boy claws and climbs to the tippy top.

Once there, the climber raises a triumphant hand to the sky as if to say, *Yes!*

However, this doesn't happen too often. Many towers come tumbling down during the construction stage. Deconstructing a finished tower is tricky, too. Sometimes people fall and get hurt. But teams are willing to take the risk to earn points. Teams are judged by their ability to complete a tower, as well as the complexity of their design.

Many people who live in Catalonia wish to be independent of Spain.

A Celebration for All

Although competition is fierce, rival teams celebrate each other's accomplishments. Each time an enxaneta makes it safely to the summit of a castell, many opponents will cheer for the sheer thrill of it. Others will shout for independence and wave the Catalan flag. Whatever side they take in the debate, everyone can agree: Castells are a towering achievement.

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