

Between Two Worlds: An Ethnography of the Basque People

For millennia, anthropologists and historians have pored over the myriad cultures of Earth, adding to their stores of knowledge and understanding the histories and beliefs of a wide variety of peoples. From the plains of Africa and the Australian outback, to the deepest jungles of still relatively unexplored regions of South America and New Guinea, many peoples have been studied, and their cultures extensively documented. Rarely though, does a culture come to light that is in such close proximity to our own western cultures, yet be so fundamentally different as the Euskaldunak people of the Pyrenees mountains between France and Spain.

A Brief Introduction

The Euskaldunak people are more commonly known in western populations as the Basque. The name "*Basque*" comes from the Latin "*Vasco*" which was adopted by the Spanish and French as "*Basko*" and "*Basque*" respectively. Their name is thought to have been taken from the Vascones, who inhabited an area in northern Spain that currently lies within the boundary of Basque Country.¹ Due to the Latin linguistic trait of using the same basic pronunciation for both the B and the V (also pronounced as an English B), this "*Vascones*" could be gradually changed to a "*Basque*."

The "*eusk*" used by the Euskaldun people themselves is derived from the Basque word "*eusk-i*", which would be translated as 'sun'. Their name for their language, Euskara, would then be said to be 'of the sun', or 'of the east.'² Suffice it to say that while the outside world refers to them as the "Basque" they refer to themselves as the Euskaldunak, which is the plural of Euskaldun, which means "One who speaks euskara,"

¹ Douglass, William A., and Jon Bilbao. *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World*. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2005. Print.

² Bautista de Erro, Juan. *The Alphabet of the Primitive Languages of Spain*. Boston, MA: Issac R. Butts, 1829. Print.

their name for their language. For clarity, ease of reading, and familiarity's sake, I shall refer to them as Basque throughout this ethnography.

Geographic Region

As previously mentioned, the Basque inhabit a region on the border between France and Spain in the Pyrenees mountains. This region is unofficially recognized as "Basque Country". Basque Country rests primarily in the territorial claims of Spain, but a small northern area comprised of the French counties of Labourd, Lower Navarre, and Soule are also included in Basque Country. The total Basque population of the region is in the neighborhood of 3,000,000, though this represents a fraction of the total population as many have moved to other areas of the globe and live in Ethnic Basque enclaves. The total Basque population globally is estimated to be about 18,000,000, though for the purposes of this ethnography I will be focusing mainly on the Basque homeland. The largest city in the region is Bilbao, with a population of 355,000.

History and Origins

To say that the origins of the Basque are steeped in mystery would be a severe understatement. They are a fascinating and enigmatic people, and much about their history will leave scholars scratching their head.

The first written account of the Basque people was in the 1st century AD, in Pliny's accounts of what is now Navarre. Before this written account, there is little written information available to the researcher about the prehistory of the Basque people, though there are many archaeological sites and oral tradition that pass on much information. There are many archeological sites within Basque territory that provide

evidence for continued inhabitation from the Aurignacian period up until shortly before Roman occupation, so it is conceivable that the same group of people could have inhabited the same area for thirty millennia or more.³ During this time, a natural cultural progression toward greater complexity can be observed, but it is amazingly untainted by outside influences. Various local cultures rise and fall, but it stays mostly contained to the region without a large amount of outside influence. At the beginning of the Iron age, a group of indo-European settlers arrived, fundamentally changing the way life was lived in Basque country. The Urnfield people from the British Isles are thought to be the most likely candidates for this incursion into Basque territory due to the archeological record. It is thought that there was some amount of warfare between these two groups, as Basque settlements only appear primarily in defensive positions during this time period.

The might of Rome reached the Iberian Peninsula and the Basque people in the first century BC, but being an area of little economic value they were mostly left alone. It is known that the Basque people worked with the Romans in the area, possibly to maintain their autonomy. When the Romans were in force, they stuck mostly to the more fertile Ebro valley and avoided the mountains. The Basque, being a primarily mountain people were able to exist for long periods of time relatively unmolested by the rest of civilization. As Rome imploded, the Basque for the most part went back to their isolated and insular existence, with the exception of several roman legions that had been levied from the Basque and those from the surrounding hill tribes.

During the early middle ages the Basque made up what was known as the Duchy of Vasconia, which encompassed all of the modern day Basque homelands. The Duchy

³ Diaz-Andreu, Margarita, and Simon Keay, eds. *The Archaeology of Iberia: The Dynamics of Change*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

of Vasconia repulsed multiple attempts by surrounding tribes and nations to establish footholds in the Basque homeland in the Ebro valley and surrounding mountains. They in turn repulsed the Visigoths, the Suevi, the Franks, and in the beginnings of the Muslims from Africa. In the end, the Duchy was stuck between multiple warring states in the form of the Duchy of Aquitaine in what is now modern day France, the Duchy of Cantabria in what is now northern Spain, and the Islamic domains in the south. In the end, the Duchy of Vasconia joined forces and was absorbed by the Franks in the Duchy of Aquitaine during the reign of Charlemagne. After Charlemagne's death, this union disintegrated and the region was fractured along what have always been fairly stable territorial lines.

For a short time, the Basque were able to mostly consolidate their forces and form their own kingdom, known as the Kingdom of Pamplona. This included all of the Basque homelands, with an exception of a small region in the south known as *Banu Qasi*, which was made up of Basque Muladi (likely where the modern Spanish term *mulatto* is descended from, as the Muladi were mixed race descendants of Count Cassius, a Basque nobleman who converted to Islam during the middle ages to maintain control of his territories and avoid being ousted by the Muslims during their initial conquest of the region.⁴)

As the middle ages drew to a close, the Basque lands were all annexed by the Spanish and French empires, which is the same essential situation in which the Basque currently find themselves in, a Nation without a State.

⁴ O'Callaghan, Joseph F. *A History of Medieval Spain*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975. Print.

Language

One of the most enigmatic features of the Basque culture is their language, which is impossible to trace back to any of the greater families of languages. Basque country is surrounded by indo-European languages, Euskara is clearly a language isolate.⁵ There is much debate among linguists attempting to link the Euskara language to other geographically distant cultures. Given the existence of the proto-Basque people in the area prior to the ascent of the Indo-European languages, and given the differences between the Euskara language and the other Indo-European languages, the hypothesis that I feel is the most likely is that the Basque language is the remainder of a language that once covered much more of Europe, but was displaced by the arrival of the Indo-European language families.

Land & Inheritance

As their cultural history would suggest, the Basque have a very close link to their homes and the land they live on, which is often a mostly self-sufficient family operated farm. In keeping with the pre-historic settlement patterns of the Basque regions, families in many cases will live in the same location for more generations that can be remembered. Basque surnames are often derived from the place in which their family lives, as opposed to the name of their father as is common in the rest of Europe. Basque families often live on the same farm for their entire lives, and multiple generations of the same family will cohabitate together with the eldest male in the household being seen as the leader of the family.

⁵ Ostergren, Robert C., and John G. Rice. *The Europeans: A Geography of People, Culture, and Environment*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2004. Print.

Modern Basque society is mostly patriarchal, with the entire estate generally passing to the eldest child, male or female, upon the father's death, in a somewhat modified example of single-heir inheritance.⁶ The other children are expected to set off and find their own way in other areas, or remain and work the family land. This feature of the Basque culture led to a gradual trickle of Basque leaving their traditional homeland to find their fortunes elsewhere. There are many reports of the younger brothers of the family setting off together as sailors⁷ or soldiers, and later returning to the family to live communally on the same farm that their family has owned for generations. This created a steady stream of sons and daughters of the Basque homeland streaming into the new world to herd cattle, run restaurants, and work in other industries.

Gender Roles

Accounts by early historians observing the Basque, mentioned observing women acting as landowners and church officials, which ran contrary to the standard practices in Europe at the time. In the rural areas, there was generally a village matriarch who would act as a judge and arbitrator for disputes. This tended to keep the power balanced fairly evenly between men and women.⁸ In Strabo's accounts of the region, he mentions seeing women leaders among the people, which struck him as odd. It is the power possessed by women in the Basque territory that brought the Spanish Inquisition down upon their heads in the early 17th century, leading to the torturing death of many people, primarily women but also men and children, at the hands of the inquisitors. This episode in the inquisition is seen as one of its darker persecutions.

⁶ Gimbutas, Marija. *The Living Goddesses*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999. Print.

⁷ Markham, Clements R. "On the Whale Fisheries of the Basque Province of Spain." *Nature* 25 (1881): 365-68. Print.

⁸ Zirakzadeh, Cyrus E. *Hills of Conflict: Basque Nationalism in France*. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1991. Print.

Within the Basque culture, women are generally afforded a higher status than in surrounding regions. This is reflected by the folk religions of the Basque countryside, in which women would play a prominent role and were capable of wielding considerable power. The folk legends include stories of large groups of women who would participate in collective magical ceremonies. In the region surrounding Zugarramurdi there is a field that to this day is revered as a place of witchcraft and magic, and was the local target of the Inquisition in the 17th century.

Tales, such the story of Izar and the Aquellare, serve as perfect examples of the way women were perceived in society. The Aquellare was an undisputedly evil creature that carried between his knees the skeleton of a mammoth while riding a giant owl, and was always seen in the presence of large groups of female witches who would arrive to do his bidding in open fields that existed for that purpose.⁹

The primary deity of the pre-Christian Basque people still recorded today is the goddess of the storms, Mari, who lived underground and upon leaving her cave would cause wind and rain to come.¹⁰ The fact that of the very few deity figures that has survived the arrival of Christianity is a woman says a great deal about the strength and pervasiveness of the belief. There is also a remarkable similarity in the name of “*Mari*” when compared with the Christian “*Virgin Mary*”. The *Virgin Mary* was quick to take hold in the Basque culture, and was elevated to the point where the worship of the holy virgin surpassed that of her more commonly worshiped son. In many circumstances, cults sprang up performing much the same duties as the cults of Mari, but dedicated to the *Virgin Mary*.

⁹ Montiero, Mariana. *Legends and Popular Tales of the Basque People*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1890. Print.

¹⁰ Trask, Robert L. *The History of the Basque*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Basque Families

The typical Basque family is a very tight knit unit, as one would expect from families with a history of long periods of cohabitation and with a rich cultural heritage. Women tend to bear most of the burden of raising the children and performing the basic domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning. Men also participate in these tasks, ranging in participation from very little to very high, though women generally shoulder the majority of the burden.¹¹

A Basque child's early life is generally lived in close proximity to its mother. From day one the child is brought up in the ways of the folk religion. This is for obvious reasons more prevalent in the rural areas, but the children being raised in the city still receive a heavy dose of the rich cultural heritage of their family.

Superstition abounds in the early life of a Basque child. While an amount of superstition is common in the raising of almost all children globally, for the Basque young the world is a colored and somewhat dangerous place.¹² Children are taught of the spirits of the animals, trees, the dead, and just about everything else. A strong belief to be wary of the "*bezigkoa*" or the "*evil eye*" is instilled in children at a young age. According the Basque folklore, the evil eye affected children much more easily than anything else, and it was necessary to keep the children alert and aware of it.¹³

As children are raised, a high emphasis is placed on physical fitness and sportsmanship. Children are pressured to excel in games with an emphasis on agility and cooperation. The attitude of parents is much like the attitude of Spartans in history, with the family being seen as supportive but harsh. According to some modern, western

¹¹ Bullen, Margaret. *Basque Gender Studies*. Reno, Nevada: The Center for Basque Studies, 2003. Print.

¹² Clarke, Robert P. *The Basques: The Franco Years and Beyond*. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1979. Print.

¹³ deBlecourt, William, and Owen Davies. *Witchcraft Continued*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004. Print.

views of child rearing, the way the Basque raise their children may appear neglectful,¹⁴ but to the Basque within the context of their own culture, it allows the children to grow up strong and able to look after themselves.

Basque families often live together in traditional stone two story, distinctly Basque houses.¹⁵ Within their communities, the houses are painted mostly white, with a red or a green door, as a symbol of their national pride. The houses are often on landed estates, so there is usually various outbuildings for livestock.

Sports and Competition

Sports are something highly praised in Basque culture, with children pushed at young ages to engage in sport activities. Basque sports are often very physically strenuous and carry a higher risk of injury than comparable sports in other European countries. This is likely due to the rural nature of the population.

Basque sports could be said to fall into two categories; sports related to work, and pilota. There are often contests of strength related to the construction and forestry trades, such as treefelling, log chopping, stone pulling, rowing, grass cutting, or stone drilling. The majority of these sports were devised while performing various tasks around the farm. Games such as *txinga erute* (weight carrying with one weight in each hand) is meant to represent the transport of milk containers, while sports like *segalaritza* (cutting grass with a scythe) has an obvious relation to the harvest. Other sports such as bullfighting or the famous running of the bulls in Pamplona have obvious ties to the herding and husbandry trades.

¹⁴ Weyts, Arabelle. *Meeting the Needs of Children in Substitute Care: A European Comparative*. Gents, Germany: Academia Press, 2005. Print.

¹⁵ Trask, Robert L. *The History of the Basque*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

The official sport for while the Basque are best known as the originators is the sport of Pilota.¹⁶ It was once recognized as an Olympic sport but has lost favor in the last century. There are pilota clubs scattered over the globe, with ethnic Basque players taking part wherever they should happen to be.

Pilota is a sport played on a three walled court by two teams of two players each and seems somewhat related to the game of squash. It is played with a ball with a hard core, wrapped in wool yarn, and covered in a leather skin.¹⁷ It is known as the “fastest ball game in the world” and players can only compete in the best of physical condition.

While not an ‘official’ sport, the event that is best known around the world is the “Running of the Bulls.” This event was originally designed to transport bulls from their holding pens to the markets for sale, but over the centuries it has become a social and sporting event, bringing the bulls from the holding pens outside the city of Pamplona to the bull ring in the city center where they will be used in bullfights. This sport has a very high incidence of injury, though most of the injuries caused are due to falling, though some herds such as the bulls of the Salvador Guardiola ranch have an incredibly bloodstained record.¹⁸ Sports such as the running of the bulls typify Basque sporting events, high energy, high danger, with a premium placed on bravado and courage.

Basque Politics

Being in the unenviable position of a nation without a state, the political power has been mostly dissolved since their days as the Kingdom of Pamplona. Sandwiched between France and Spain, the Basque as an ethnic minority are able to exert almost no power upon their future or the management of their land or resources. Within the

¹⁶ Bell, Aubrey F. *The Magic of Spain*. London: John Lane Company, 1968. Print.

¹⁷ Facaros, Dana, and Michael Pauls. *Bilbao and the Basque Lands*. London: Cadogan Guides, 2009. Print.

¹⁸ Facaros, Dana, and Michael Pauls. *Bilbao and the Basque Lands*. London: Cadogan Guides, 2009. Print.

confines of Spain, the Basque mostly control an autonomous community in the northern reaches of Spain. The Spanish constitution is established in such a way that the local region has a certain amount of autonomy and self-government, provided they follow the rules governing the rest of the country.¹⁹ These autonomous communities exist within Spain, and all are purported to support an “indissoluble Spanish Nation,²⁰” though in practice, independence is universally preferred amongst most Basque. This Spanish system might be compared loosely to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the reservation system in the United States, with slightly more freedom and autonomy.

In France, the plight of the Basque is much worse than it is in Spain. The French government has long had a policy of absorption rather than acceptance of ethnic minorities living within its borders. A great amount of pressure is put on the Basque community to conform by the mono-linguistic education practices instituted by the French government, as well as a general inhospitably toward other cultures.

For many years, the French government was very open towards the Basque, and even offered sanctuary to the Euzko (a Basque militant separatist organization²¹) for fear that the Spanish government, with their history of repression would harm them. However, beginning under Jacques Chirac, the French began a policy of open armed repression of the Euzko, going to far as to raid Basque enclaves and bring in known members of the Euzko and their families for detention.²²

While the vast majority of the Basque population does not desire to use violent means to attain their goals of total autonomy, it is something that is in the minds of a majority of the Basque populations. As a nation without a state, they feel the pressure

¹⁹ Douglass, William. *The Basque Diaspora*. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1999. Print.

²⁰ *Constitution of the Spanish Nation*. Madrid: Kingdom of Spain, 1978. Print.

²¹ Zirakzadeh, Cyrus E. *Hills of Conflict: Basque Nationalism in France*. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1991. Print.

²² Gal-Or, Naomi. *Tolerating Terrorism in the West: An International Survey*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.

from all sides to become something else, but that pressure serves only to make them more Basque, as it is this cohesion under adversity that has served for so long to inspire the Basque people to cling so strongly to their own identity.

The Holy World of the Basque

Of all aspects of the Basque people, one of the most fascinating is their religious system. As stated before, the only pre-Christian deity that has stood the test of time in any sort of powerful fashion is the goddess Mari, quite possibly due to the similarity of name with the Virgin Mary. Though she is the only to still have a hold on the Basque people, there are others who are mostly lost to time, but who we know a small amount about. There was the god Leherren, who was purported to have the body of a serpent and who could be roughly compared in function to the Roman god Mars. There was the motherly goddess Erditse. Larraxon, god of the pastures.²³ Aherbelste, god of the black goats and protector of flocks.

Aherbelste in particular seemed to play a rather important role in Basque mythology. The inscription of his name is found on many of the pre-Christian funerary stones found in Basque inhabited areas. Aherbelste was thought to protect flocks, and a black sheep in your flock was seen as a sign of good luck to ward off evil spirits and disease as it was felt that Aherbelste was embodied in black sheep and goats.²⁴

Early Basque religion can be easily seen as a polytheistic system, in which superstition and communal nature-based ritual was prevalent, with an animistic perspective having always been present amongst the Basque people. These deep-seated beliefs in another spiritual level to all of existence have carried over into modern

²³ Fedden, Katharine. *The Basque Country*. London: A&C Black, 1921. Print.

²⁴ Dirven, Rene, Roslyn Frank, and Cornelia Ilie, eds. *Language and Ideology*. Vol. 2. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000. Print.

times to produce a profoundly superstitious people with a rich system of tradition surrounding most things that they do.

Christianity came to the Basque lands relatively early, given their proximity to the rest of Europe, which was being rapidly converted, but the religion didn't take hold until some time later. Evidence exists of attempts at conversion appear in the 4th century, but very little if any Christian architecture or grave markings appear until much later. Even up into the 1600s, when the rest of Europe was firmly in the hands of one church or another, the Basque were still being persecuted as witches. The gradual modification of the traditional Basque religion can be seen pulling the Basque people towards a measured conformity, but pieces of their old religion can be seen to this day within Basque society.

A good example of this measured conversion is the melding of the Virgin Mary with the Basque goddess Mari. Mari, being traditionally seen as close to the top of the Basque pantheon, was adopted as the Virgin Mary within sects of the Basque populace, being elevated in status to the point where she surpassed her traditionally more worshipped son.

Conclusion

As it can be seen, the Basque people are a complex and enigmatic people, and while I have done my best to cobble together a humble ethnography with the very barest bones of their histories, beliefs, traditions, and systems. However, as with all people, would require much more than could ever be written into a paper. I always feel lacking in writing something of this nature, because I feel it would take many years of living with the people, learning their language, studying their history in depth,

interviewing their elders and exploring their cities before I would feel worthy to pen a worthwhile ethnography of their people.