

Etniker Euskalerrria



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Cincuenta años de investigación etnográfica en Vasconia

CAPÍTULO 12

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Reflections on the *Atlas etnográfico de Vasconia*

William A. Christian Jr.

First, I must protest, after a month of dipping into the *Atlas Etnográfico de Vasconia* under coronavirus-19 confinement, that someone much better qualified should be writing this review, someone with an intimate knowledge of Vasconia from the ground up. It is only due to my affection for and sense of obligation to the Co-Director Ander Manterola, the Coordinator, the late Gurutzi Arregi, and the longtime staff at the Instituto Labayru, that I agreed. But because of this affection, and 35 years of friendship and collaboration, I cannot pretend to be entirely objective.

Nevertheless, rest assured that these eight volumes and over 7,000 pages, with over 2500 photographs, are an authentic treasure for Basque, Spanish, French and European history and anthropology, though they be, as yet, little known outside of Vasconia. They are the result of four decades of selfless, almost anonymous, labor of several scores of dedicated women and men, tenderly and soberly recording the recent history of almost everything in their home communities. Trained by José Miguel de Barandiaran or by his direct disciples, they worked organically, addressing sets of the same agreed-upon open questions systematically over a period of 50 years. After posing the questions in their respective places, the separate Etniker groups in Alava, Navarra and Bizkaia, at least, would each consider together the issues that they found, ensuring a certain uniformity of approach and the sharing of variation and surprise.

This periodic consultation has been critical. For the atlas was conceived by Barandiaran, he writes in the first volume published (pp. 25-26), to «study of the traditional culture of the Basque Country... to record the

material culture, the customs and the world of values... pointing out as well its contemporary transition... before it is disfigured or eliminated». To this end he set out in detail in 1974, about 850 matters that all participating ethnographers should address, and it is this set of open questions which, now 46 years later and counting, are still being used. The advantages are that, in terms of what Barandiaran considered traditional life, the matters are comprehensive, and all participants have been reporting whether and how they occur in their home town. The disadvantage is that they have made this study in the period of the great acceleration, the swiftest social, cultural, economic, linguistic, geopolitical, and, above all, climate change that the Basque Country, Spain, France, Europe, and the planet has ever known.

So that what is the core subject for the atlas, long-lasting rural customs, material culture, and procedures, are disappearing or being transformed or replaced. Barandiaran throughout much of his life had an urgent sense of an ancient world that was fast disappearing.¹ In 1974 when he drew up the checklist he could not imagine (and could not hope to include) what some of the replacements would be: whether internet commerce, the European Union, EEU subsidies of agriculture and animals, industrial farming, agro-tourism, organic food movements, new universities, malls, limited-access highways, high-speed trains, new airports, social networks, and quick access to Europe and the wider world. And a Basque population in accelerated motion, leaving, returning, migrating, spending time in Benidorm, studying in Salamanca, Madrid, Barcelona, London, and Toulouse, and being supplemented by new residents of Castilian, Galician, Moroccan, Romanian, or Latin American origin.

Thus, the brave ethnographers doggedly working through his questionnaire, now over half a century, have been faced with a moving target and

¹ Of course he was not alone in seeking to record a vanishing world. His project was in synch with that of other ethnographers, as in the International European Conference of 1965. And in the United States the idea of systematically documenting cultures throughout the world in comparable categories was mobilized in 1940s in the United States by George Murdock in the form of the Human Relations Area Files. But the product here is anything but dry facts on file cards, but rather has the freshness and fullness of an armful of greens straight from the garden.

an almost quixotic task. For the idea of traditional society and the past will no doubt have to be enlarged to include many things that just yesterday were taken for granted, like the fixed telephone, cursive handwriting, personal mail, analog photography, and abundant religious vocations. Now «today» changes with such rapidity that aspects new in 1990, when the first volume was issued, are already out of date thirty years later. Modern farm machinery depicted in the agricultural volume had been junked by the time it was published.

To some extent, dynamic change has long been baked into the notion of «traditional,» for historically the relative homeostasis of the basic *baserri* farm unit could only be achieved by the diaspora of Basque siblings, including large numbers of priests and religious, to elsewhere in Spain and France, and to the Americas and Australia. In the wider perspective, the farm was part of an articulated system that included a nun in Toledo, a merchant in Valparaiso, and a sheepherder in Idaho. This aspect of the economy (activity elsewhere, calm at home) has informed, subsidized and capitalized the home place and the emigrants, as it has enriched rural life throughout much of the world for centuries.

In this, as in many other matters, the atlas is resolutely bi-cultural, specifying differences between areas governed by impartible inheritance, and areas under French and Spanish common law. It gives balanced treatment to customs in Spanish-speaking zones, and those in Basque-speaking zones.

The perusal of these volumes and their built-in emphasis on place-by-place differences, reminds the reader of just how different places, even neighboring places, could be, and can still be, and how much *usos y costumbres* have been effective and even legal concepts. Iberian Vasconia, of course, with its *fueros*, has its own versions of legal codes, and point to the extent to which every village council, municipality, and parish had its own customary usages. In the towns of the same valley in Cantabria where I lived in the 1960s, not only did each village have its own accent, but also, as seen for Vasconia in this atlas, they had particular lexicons and customary regulations. As we read for each item in Barandiaran's survey that this town calls it this, and these towns call it that, that these towns do it this way, on this day, and this other set of towns do it that way, on that day, we have a sense of wonder and admiration that these citizen ethnographers have spent a

good part of their lives to record carefully these differences in a time when they are being diluted and the local has taken on a different valence, with outsiders living in, local people working out, and tourists passing through. What they have compiled is distinguished by its uncompromising, and monumental, granularity. For this reason, the cogent volume introductory essays take on a special importance as sensitive overviews. These essays, nested among other preliminary items, are certainly the starting point to approach each volume.

It must be admitted that some of these fairly raw listings of particularities are a little numbing to read. And the compilers largely leave it to the reader to imagine patterns for why in this set of places it should be done in one way, and why in that set, another. For example, different customs relating to first communions [*Ritos del Nacimiento al Matrimonio*, pp. 263-288] could variously be the result of decisions made at the Vatican, by different bishops, by the archpriest, by cohorts of like-minded priests, or a particular parish priest, or by the villagers for whom that a certain ceremony (like the public procession of communicants in Viana) «took» a one place and held on after its time had passed elsewhere. Beneath these place-centered accounts the reader senses the push and pull between universal, legal, state or church norms and the resistance, inertia or creativity of local practice.

At one point there was a volume planned of ethnographic biographies, but in the meantime these volumes, while researched and presented with infinite care, are restrained and clinical, in keeping with the no-nonsense objectivity of Barandiaran himself. We do not read, for instance, what the rite of first communion felt like, the experience of first receiving the body of Christ, having one's first formal photograph, of receiving presents, of being important for a special day. The poses, the eyes and the expressions of children in the photographs supplement the words on the page.

Mention of the Vatican reminds us that many items, of course, may be the result of currents, fashions, and fads that transcend Vasconia, and whose etiology lie on a broader level, one that includes the rest of Spain, the rest of France, Europe, Catholicism, Hollywood, or the wider world in general. There is a fundamental arbitrariness in the political borders of this (or any) atlas and its maps, as human communities naturally spill over boundaries. As the volume on animals and herding states in its introduction, animals

do not know frontiers. The map of transhumancy on page 507 has arrows going off into terra incognita for the animal routes that lead into Cantabria, Rioja, Aragón, Oloron and the Landes, whereas we learn that in Aragon, at least, Basque herdsmen settled and married, and initiated sheep routes in the opposite direction. And we read that villagers in Alava organized joint wolf hunts with their neighbors in Burgos. We also read that the system of round *seles* for cattle continues along the mountains in Cantabria and Asturias, and intuit that an ancient herding culture was shared at the very least from the Pyrenees in what is now Catalonia to Galicia. Many of the historical origins and conditions for the patterns found in this atlas no doubt have to do with economic systems that greatly transcend the territory under study. Not only do sheep and wolves ignore boundaries, but so do people.

Readers should know what they will not find. This survey of traditional custom has been simplified by marginalizing the cities in which the great majority of Basques now live. While in some volumes Bilbao (in the form of the Begoña district) is included, in practice it is given no more weight of attention than the smallest hamlet, and the matters under study make little reference to aspects of culture and institutions that are specifically urban, or to urban working classes or cosmopolitan capitalists and professionals. Donostia-San Sebastian, Irun, Pamplona and Vitoria are not included. Another absence is political history. As the emphasis is on pattern, permanence and transformation, there is little room for event, and readers looking for the impact of Carlism, the rise of Nationalism, the visions of the 1930s, the Civil War, or ETA on these towns should look elsewhere.

What these volumes are, then, are a detailed survey of rural and small-town Basque material culture and customs, based largely on oral sources, that reaches back to the end of the nineteenth century, when the oldest informants were born. It is supplemented by the lifetime research of Barandiarán himself and his disciples, many of them parish priests, since the early twentieth century. The answers to the Barandiaran open questions turn out to be highly dynamic, starting perhaps from a hypothetical «traditional» stasis, but quickly incorporating the rapid changes over the last century.

Many of these changes are captured in photographs, a medium that itself became central in organizing memory and a sense of self, family, domestic unit, and community in the period under study. So these atlases are also

photo albums, with stunning historical images from private collections and the Instituto Labayru, carefully selected and exquisitely reproduced, as well as skilled contemporary photographs taken by the authors. The photographs alone justify the enterprise. They could be deployed even more effectively if integrated into the text of the narrative. As it is, they seem to be illustrative afterthoughts, always apt, but perhaps selected after the text was completed. The text generally does not refer to them, whereas they are in fact historical testimonies, each with its approximate date, which demonstrate, document and supplement the text, enriching it with new information.

Somewhere in the remaining volumes, perhaps that on professions, I would love to learn when still photography began in each community, who were the professionals, fixed or itinerant, by name, what were the occasions for photographs, particularly the role of fairs, and rites of passage, when families began to have their own cameras, what new occasions for pictures arose with snapshots, where photographs were stored and displayed, and to whom they were they sent. Here the moving target of «today» becomes especially dizzying with the advent of digital pictures, cell phones, and instant internet transmission, videos, and video streaming, and an evolution of applications so rapid that any account will inevitably be out of date. But photos, films and videos have affected who we were and who we are; the media themselves are essential to what they show.

The volume on popular medicine is a remarkable vademecum of Basque home remedies for hundreds of ailments (I could add a complicated remedy involving garlic and the full moon a woman in Legazpi gave me in 1983 for my vitiligo). It includes a very apropos account of the influenza of 1918. This volume, the one on funeral rites, and the delightful one on children's games, particularly stand out as separate books. I wondered about the arbitrary classification of remedies as «empirical,» «magical,» «belief-based» (*creenciales*), or «pharmaceutical.» (For those applying the remedies, all would be empirical.) And the ethnographers' effort to find oral sources «not contaminated by books or media,» will surely have been in vain, as there has been a to-and-fro between written compilations, healers and consumers since the dawn of writing. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there was a plethora of published compilations of home remedies in Spanish, French, and no doubt Basque, sold to farm households.

But in the context of the massive achievement of this publication these are minor issues. Readers will be repeatedly surprised and fascinated. A few examples: how animals are named, how they are addressed, with what emotions they are treated; the detailed process of domestic linen production; the great variety of the ways to knead bread; the lay distribution of bread at mass, in a kind of community para-communion; the former custom of offering live animals at funerals; the announcement of the death of the head of household to animals and bees; the way hunters of wolves or foxes quested for alms; the local versions of *saludadores*, or specialists for rabies, and the inherited vocation of healers in general; the careful documentation of weights and measures that varied even between neighboring towns; the custom of women saying the rosary together as they carried their produce to market. Every volume has surprising aspects of daily life rescued, depicted, diagrammed and explained.

It is hard to convey the dimensions of this enterprise. The eight handsome and durable volumes together weigh over 60 pounds. Each volume is in turn a compilation of the sixty or so monographs compiled from interviews in the communities under study, with around seven hundred informants for each volume. So there is much, much more unpublished material than is published in the Atlas. It is hard to imagine that so much information on rural life for one zone has been gathered anywhere else in the world.

A table compiled from figures in the volumes give a sense of this magnitude.

Year	Volume	Towns / monographs	Infor- mants	Pages	illus.
1990	Domestic Food (<i>Alimentación doméstica</i>)	74	c. 800	755	257
1993	Games of Children (<i>Juegos infantiles</i>)	79	857	935	299
1995	Funeral Rites (<i>Ritos funerarios</i>)	85	700+	847	262
1998	Birth and Marriage Rites (<i>Ritos de nacimiento y matrimonio</i>)	69	700+	823	260
2000	Animals and Herding (<i>Ganadería y pastoreo</i>)	61 26 pasture zones	500+	1021	409

2004	Popular Medicine (<i>Medicina popular</i>)	58	500+	751	196
2011	House and Family (<i>Casa y familia</i>)	87	c. 800	1053	518
2017	Agriculture (<i>Agricultura</i>)	56	c. 600	1151	424

Seven additional volumes are contemplated (on clothing; popular veterinary medicine; professions and crafts; neighborhood, town, customary law and institutions; popular religion and the festive calendar; legends, stories, and myths; and a final volume of maps, glossaries and indexes). The ethnographic surveys for them have already been completed. Readers, scholars, and all residents of Vasconia will be grateful to these diligent and sensitive researchers and editors for this astonishing and durable gift from the past to the future, and for the governments and other institutions that have made it possible.

What they have constructed together, in the midst of a tsunami of modernity and virtuality, is a Noah's Ark of the life of their parents and grandparents, and in a certain manner that of the parents and grandparents of all agricultural peoples worldwide. The new world swirling around them, I daresay, has not, and at the moment cannot, appreciate what they have rescued, does not have eyes to see it. But it is there in profusion and safe for when it is needed: food, clothes, buildings, words, animals, fields, pastures, implements, kinship, prayers, stories, games, music, photos, remedies.

In the volume on funeral rites there is a moving homage to José Miguel de Barandiaran, a sequence of five funeral photographs by the Etniker member Antxon Aguirre Sorondo and the journalist Andoni Canella, labeled «Hileta, Ataun (G), 1991» (pp. 378-379). It was the year after the first volume of the atlas was published. In the first photograph a number of persons including Gurutzi Arregi are seen standing around Aita Barandiaran's open coffin in his home. Other photos show the guest book on a table, and the coffin being carried away from the house, across the bridge over the river, and into the parish church. It is entirely in keeping with the austere ethos of their founder and the anonymity of all this ethnographic

information, that the deceased is not named in this mute but transparent farewell to the diminutive, indomitable figure, preternaturally lucid until the very end, who at age 100 published the first volume of an encyclopedic work that in a very real sense he continues to guide thirty years later.

Las Palmas de Gran Canaria