



Basque Songs for My Grandmother

BEGOÑA ECHEVERRIA
University of California, Riverside



Echeverria Itcea Family, Ansona farmhouse, Orabidea (Amaiur), Nafarroa, Spain, ca. 1941.

Standing (l to r): Carlos, Manuela, Pablo, Maria Angeles, and Alejandro.

Sitting (l to r): Maria Carmen, Matiesa, Juanito, and Antonio.

The woman sitting in the above photograph is my grandmother, Matiesa, taken around 1941. Standing in the back row with the Elvis Presley haircut is my father, Alejandro, at about age twelve. My father would tell me about the hundreds of songs his mother had learned by heart, for she had never been taught to read. He would share memories of the songs she would lead her seven children in, as they went about their chores, like shucking corn. My father, too, loved to sing, and I like to believe that this love was passed from my grandmother to my father to me. For though Matiesa died years before I was born, she died on July 26—one day after my father’s birthday and one day before mine.

I share this anecdote not only because of its personal poignancy for me, but also because my grandmother’s experience as a bearer of Basque culture through song is illustrative of that of so many women throughout history, across cultures. Women were expected to teach their children their culture and language, and song was a good way to do that. Yet they were (and perhaps, still are) not given much credit for their efforts. In the Basque case, women were often the sources for male compilers of songs, such as the priests Resurreccion María Azkue and José Antonio Donostia. While the names of these priest-scholars are deservedly well-known in Basque circles, their many female sources are not; their names are either hidden in footnotes, repackaged as “Anonymous” or “traditional,” or omitted altogether. However, as I showed in *“Witches” and Wily Women: Saving Noka Through Basque Folklore and Song* (Echeverria, 2020), many women have opined about myriad topics through Basque song, despite the strictures placed upon them.

Building on this legacy, in this article I share songs I have written in Basque (*Euskera*). Due to my mother Pilarcho’s determination, Basque was my first language. My first song in Basque,

“Kafesnari Esker” (Basque-ing in Coffee-milk), was an homage to her (cf Echeverria 2020: 215-216). I begin with contemporary takes on topics typical of Basque music, such as daily life, history, and friendship. I conclude with grammatical subversion (this will make sense in time) of one topic—religion—traditionally relegated to women and another subject—philosophy—where female songwriters have been almost entirely absent.

Daily Life & Work

In *Historia de la Literatura Vasca*, Urkizu (2000) states that daily life and work are common themes across all genres of Basque song. In my experience as the daughter of immigrants to the United States, I have heard many tales about the challenges of life both in the Basque Country and in the diaspora. I have found them rich material for songs. Not surprisingly, and similar to other cultures, Basque lore highlights the success stories of immigrants. Looming especially large is the image of the lone shepherd who tended his thousands of sheep for months or years before realizing the American Dream; it has been glorified in family histories, celebrated in literature and song, and inscribed in arborglyphs (cf Mallea-Olatxe, 2000). But these tree carvings also heartbreakingly convey the loneliness and isolation felt by shepherds who rendered in erotic (even pornographic) detail the women for whom they pined. Among California immigrant communities, I know many men who eventually married and had families after months or years as a shepherd. But I’ve often wondered about the untold stories of shepherds and other male immigrants whose dreams of American fortune and romantic love did not come to pass. This was the basis for “Sos Bat Gehiago” (One More Dollar):

1. “Sos Bat Gehiago” (One More Dollar). [[Listen here](#)]

Baserritarra nauzu	I am a farm boy
Mendia dut laketu	I love the mountain
Bainan ez nintzen premu	But I was not the heir
Orduan gan nintzen	So I went
Diruen bila	In search of fortune
Segiduan lan aurkitu	And found a job right away
Sos bat gehiago	Just a little more money
Gero etxera	Then I’ll go home
Sos bat	A little more money
‘ta nahikoa	That will be enough
Sorlekutik, beharra	I left my homeland poor
Etixeratu, sosduna	And will go home rich
Neska bat ezagutu	I met a girl
Eni begi bota du	Who looked my way
Harekin nahi nuen ezkondu	I wanted to marry her
“Aski diru bildu arte, Nerea	“Until I earn enough money
Eginen dun esperatu?”	Will you wait for me?”
Zazpi urte pasatu	Seven years have passed
Etxea ez lortu	And I still have no house
Neska bestekin ezkondu	My girl married someone else
Esku baten, arrosarioa	I have rosary in one hand
Bestean eskopeta	And a shotgun in the other

Like other immigrants, Basques came to America in search of greater economic opportunity. But many Basques – women and men – began this quest even before they left their homeland. Their families were often large, and given the tradition of primogeniture, only one sibling (usually, the eldest, whether daughter or son) inherited the family farm or home. As Douglass (1976) demonstrated, Basque women would find work in service as maids, waitresses or shop clerks, while men would find work in factories or with timber companies. My father worked as a lumberjack in Oloron, in the Béarn region of France, adjacent to the Basque Country. Many decades later in Chino, CA, my father accompanied me as I ran errands. Amid a wandering story about nothing in particular, he off-handedly mentioned how a “gypsy” (ijittoa) he happened upon in the forest of Oloron offered—to my father’s surprise, in *Euskera*—to sell him his children. This tale, combined with other gems my father had shared over the years, inspired the following lyrics:

2. “Gizon Gazte Nintzala” (I Was a Young Man). [\[Listen here\]](#)

Gizon gazte nintzala	I was a young man
Bizarra kentzen	Shaving my beard
Alde bat zen egina	I finished one side
Lagun bat etortzen:	A friend came to me:
Falange heldu zela!	The Spanish Fascists are coming!
Leiotik ateratzen	I escaped through a window
Bestealderat pasatu 'ta	Passed to the other side of the border
Bestealdea finitzen	And finished shaving there

Mendian bide bada	On the mountain there is a road
Bestea gurutzatzen	That crosses with another
“Hemendik mezarat	“From here I went to mass
Handik kontrabanden	From there, to go smuggling”
Debekatua izan 'ta	Though it was illegal
Pekatua ez zen	It wasn’t a sin
Franko-ren pobrezian	In Franco’s poverty
Jan behar genuen	We had to eat

Oihanean, Frantzian	In the forests of France
Lanean nintzen	I was working
Ijittoa nerekin	A gypsy started talking to me
Euskaraz mintzatzen	In Basque
Gabezian bizi zela	He was living in misery
Ez nuen laguntzen?	Could I help him out?
Bere umeak neri	He was ready
Saltzeko prest zen	To sell me his children

Gizon gazte gaztea nintzen	I was a young, young man
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History of Basque Song

Song has also been a primary medium through which Basques have transmitted knowledge about important historical events. Among the oldest of these is “Bereterretxen Khantoria” (The Song of Bereterretxe) from 1449, which relates the killing of a horseman named Bereterretxe (Urkizu, 2003: 438-429). But there are verses which narrate events like the Carlist Wars, the Wars of Religion, and the exploits of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Other historical events that significantly affected Basques include the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the subsequent dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939-1975). Among Franco's most infamous acts was to allow Hitler, with Mussolini's help, to bomb the sacred Basque town Gernika on April 26, 1937. As it was market day, many people from neighboring towns were there that Monday; it was the first civilian target decimated by aerial bombing. While Picasso immortalized this event in his masterpiece *Guernica*, less well-known is that 20,000 children were evacuated from the Basque Country and other regions of Spain to keep them safe (cf Legarreta, 1984). When I lived in Donostia (San Sebastian) many years ago, I had a British neighbor whose father was sent to England along with his brother. While eventually their mother called for the brother back, she did not ask for my friend's father. He never learned why.

I wrote a play based on this incident, "Picasso Presents Gernika," in which a mother sends her daughter and son to England, but only calls for her son's return to her. I also wrote a song which concludes the play, "Bonbarazi Du Gernika" (He Had Gernika Bombed), through which the daughter – in her 80s—finally learns why her mother left her behind:

3. "Bonbarazi Du Gernika" (He Had Gernika Bombed). [[Listen here](#)]

Bonbarazi du Gernika	He had Gernika bombed
Bonbak hil du ene senarra	A bomb killed my husband
Bi hurrekin gelditu ni	Alone with two children
Alarguna eta pobrea	I was left a poor widow
Inglaterrak bidali du untzia	England sent a boat
Salbatzeko Gernikako haurrak	To save Gernika's children
Semea, alaba, nigarrez	My son and daughter cried
Sarrarazi ditut barkoan	As I put them on that boat
O Ama Birjina	O, Virgin Mary
Uzten ditut ene haurrak	I leave my children
Zure beso artean	In your arms
O Ama Birjina	O, Virgin Mary
Zaindu zaindu ene haurrak	Please protect my children
Etixeratu arte	Until they come home
Frankok hil du demokrazia	Franco killed our democracy
Munduko bigarren gerra hasi da	World War II began
Inglaterrak bere umeak	England wanted to help
Lagundu nahi 'ta itzuli gureak	Its own children and send ours home
Frankok kendu ditu eskubideak	Franco took away our rights
Bereziki emazte eta neskenak	Especially from girls and women
Semea 'karrazi, alaba han utzi	I asked for my boy back, not my girl
"Izanen dun bizi hobea?"	"Will you have a better life?"

Along with my co-writers Annika Speer and Jacqueline Postjadian, I further explore the daughter's trauma and the healing she receives from her work as an art therapist for refugee children, in our film-in-progress "Children of Guernica."

A more recent but quite different historical event about which I have written a song is "Coronavirus Biru" (Thread of Coronavirus). On March 31, 2020, my father's sister Maria Carmen

Echeverria Arburua died of COVID 19. It would be months before vaccines would be developed to counter the virus, so she had to be buried right away without a funeral. Only about a dozen people were in attendance, most with masks and standing far apart. Even one of her daughters could not attend; she was in quarantine after having visited her mother in the hospital during her last days:

4. “Coronavirusa Biru” (Thread of the Coronavirus). [\[Listen here\]](#)

Coronavirusa etorri zaiku	Coronavirus came upon us
Etsai ixila bezala	Like a silent devil
Gure etxeetan, txoko denetan	Into our homes and every corner
Gu ohartu gabe sartu da	It entered, without our noticing
Gure osasun eta harreman	Our health and our relationships
Lapurtzera heldu da?	Did it come to take them from us?
Elkartasuna indartu eta	If we stay strong with one another
Virus hau gaindituko da	This virus will be defeated
Egin behar duguna	What we must do
Nahiz eta aparte izan	Even though we are separated
Elkar lagundu ‘ta maitatu	Is help and love one another
Amodiok debrua hiltzen baitu	For love kills the devil
Coronavirusa etorri zaiku	Coronavirus came to us
Senideak ebastera	To steal our families
Adiskidea ehortzi dugu	We buried our friend
Adiorik ez erranak	Without saying goodbye
Azkenagurra egiazkoa	But the genuine farewell
Ez da hilobin egoten	Does not stay in the grave
Birua baita, elkar artekoa	For the thread between us
Zeru-lurrak dena lotzen	Is what ties heaven and earth
Egin behar duguna	What we must do
Nahiz eta aparte izan	Even as we are separated
Elkar lagundu ‘ta maitatu	Is help and love one another
Amodioak debrua hiltzen baitu	For love kills the devil

On Friendship

In *Euskera*, the word for “friend” (“laguna”) has the same root as the word for “help” (“lagundu”). So it is perhaps not surprising that many songs explore the extent to which people enact friendship by helping one another. Below I share lyrics I wrote that speak to this as well:

5. “Oroit Hadi” (Remember Me). [\[Listen here\]](#)

Ele eztiena laztani erraten da	The sweetest word is said to our beloved
Zakarrena, banatzen denean	The harshest, when we break up
Nahigabetsu senti haizenean	When you are suffering
Oroit hadi, naun hirekin beti	Remember, I’m with you always
Oroit hadi nitaz, une tristeetan	Remember me, in sad moments
Heldu dela soilik zori txarra	When it seems all your luck is bad

Oroit hadi nitaz, ordu beltzeetan
Nitan badun laguntasun beti

Remember me, in your darkest hours
You always have a friend in me

Bizi hoberena ametsetan da
Txarrena, bete ez direnean
Porrotaldi egiten badun ere
Oroit hadi, berdin zaidan neri

The best life is in our dreams
The worst, when they are not fulfilled
Even if you make mistakes
Remember, that doesn't matter to me

Lagun leialenak hitz betetzen du
Faltsuenak, isilpeak saldu
Konfiantza galdu badun ezaguneein
Oroit hadi, adiskide naun ni

The loyal friend keeps their promises
False ones spill your secrets
When you lose faith in your friends
Remember, you have a friend in me

One way that Basques in the homeland and the diaspora demonstrate friendship is by attending funerals for loved ones, sometimes traveling over a hundred miles. Until the 1452 *de Bizkaia* (legal charters) that forbade the practice, women had served as hired singers of funeral dirges (Aulestia, 1995). In my own community, several other women and I have unwittingly revived this role by leading the congregation during Catholic funeral masses. But I have also written a song of farewell that could be used in other contexts:

6. “Adio Maitia” (Farewell, Dear One). [\[Listen here\]](#)

Adio maitia adio	Farewell, dear one, farewell
Ez zaitugu ahantziko egundaino	We will never forget you
Adio maitia adio	Farewell, dear one, farewell
Ez zaitugu ahantziko egundaino	We will never forget you

Adiskide ospatzera	To celebrate our friend
Hemen bilduak gira	We are gathered here
Lagunaren arima	Our friend's soul
Airutzen kantuz	We lift up through song

Lagunaren ondarea	Our friend's legacy
Gure artean baita	Is within us
Elkar zinez maitatuz	By truly loving one another
Dezagun kanta	Let us sing

Women and Religion in Basque Life

Religion is one realm in which women have been allowed to participate in Basque life, though to a lesser degree than their brethren. Roman Catholicism has been the dominant religion in the Basque Country since the 10th century (Trask, 1997: 13) and most Basques are at least nominally Catholic today. Though women continue to be excluded from the priesthood, Basque women have played important roles as female sacristans, called “seroras” (Frank, 2001).

The connection between Basque women and religion is also illustrated by the goodly number of women who have served as the sources to and about a figure important to Roman Catholicism: the Virgin Mary. In my review of songs for which provenance can be traced to female sources, I have found twenty so far that are about the Virgin Mary. These songs hail from all provinces in the Basque Country and include all dialects of *Euskera*, including the now defunct

variety from Roncal (Nafarroa), Spain—whose last speaker, Fidela Bernat, died in 1991.¹ Most of the songs in this corpus resemble those one would find in any language in a typical Catholic missal: songs proclaiming the virgin birth; the nativity; and the Virgin Mary’s compassionate intercession on sinners’ behalf. As a figure of respect, the Virgin Mary is addressed in these songs with the pronoun of respect, *zu*, roughly equivalent to *usted* in Spanish.

However, I found one song that takes pronominal liberties in parodying the quintessential tribute to her, the Hail Mary (Noka forms are in bold):

7. “Agur Marie” (Hail Mary).² [Text only]

Agur Marie	Hail Mary
Ederra den arie	The thread is beautiful
Grazia z betie	Full of grace
Dena Orapilo z betie	Full of knots
Jauna dago zurekin	The Lord is with you
Atorra ederra din berekin	The fine shirt is with Him

The radical nature of this linguistic move is not evident without some background, especially as the English version of this prayer uses the familiar pronoun “thee/thou” instead of “you.” But, as I have shown in Echeverria (2020), the second person familiar pronoun for a single female addressee—*noka*—is restricted in use as well as meaning. *Noka* has practically disappeared from contemporary speech, in large part due to the negative connotations ascribed it, as the pronoun is associated with “untraditional” women such as “witches,” and its use in sexualized and violent imagery in Catholic texts. Historically, however, *noka* (and its male counterpart, *toka*) used to be the only singular, second-person pronoun in *Euskera*. By definition, then, *noka* was used by all speakers in every context whenever addressing one girl or woman. Further, in Protestant texts, *noka* was used in all dialogue directed to a female addressee, regardless of the status of the speaker(s) or address, as a way to create a solidary relationship between believers and between believers and their God. Drawing on these traditions, I wrote the following song using *noka* to the Virgin Mary which highlights her personhood and her own accomplishments:

8. “Maria Badakin” (Mary, You Know). [Listen here]

Maria badakin	Mary, you know
Emaztea dohatsu haizela	You are a blessed woman
Maria badakin	Mary, you know
Saindua haiz hire seme bezela	You are holy like your son
Badakin O Maria	Did you know, Mary
Kuraje dunala ?	You have courage?
Zoria onartzeko	To accept your destiny
Neska hain gaztea?	As such a young girl?
Maria badakin	Mary, you know
Emaztea fededun haizela	You are a faithful woman
Maria badakin	Mary, you know
Haizela graziaz betea	That you are full of grace

¹ See <https://ahotsak.eus/uztarroze/hizlariak/fidela-bernat-aracues>.

² Lyrics by Francisca Iribarren from Baraibar, Nafarroa, Spain. See Azkue, 1968: 809.

Badakin O Maria
Indarra **dunala**?
Hire seme bakarra
Sakrifikatzera?

Did you know, Mary
That you are also strong?
To be able to sacrifice
Your only son?

Maria **badakin**
Gure ama bihozdu haizela
Maria **badakin**
Haizela eredu onena
Badakin O Maria
Podere **dunala**?
Sufritzen direneri
Ematen bakea?

Mary, you know
You are our compassionate mother
Mary, you know
You are our role model
Did you know, Mary
That you also have power?
To give those who suffer
Peace?

Towards a Philosophy

As indicated in the introduction, if there are philosophical songs penned by Basque women, I have yet to find them. Below I share lyrics I wrote that build on comments made by the Rev. Ed Bacon, retired rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, CA. In one of his sermons, he encouraged congregants to “Let go with grace the life not meant for you.” This seemed to me an excellent piece of advice, and it aligns closely with my point of view:

9. “Utzi Zan” (Let Go). [\[Listen here\]](#)

Utzi zan airoski
Bizia ez zaijanana komeni
Ospatu hire zori
Hire baitana, la la la, eman zan argi
Haien ideiak ez ditzen hireak
Bertzeen iritziak ez izan behar hireak
Ospatu hire zori
Hirea ez badun erraiten, nork erranen din?
Hirea ez badun egiten, nork eginen din?
Hirea ez badun bizitzen, nork biziko din?

Let go
Of the life not meant for you
Celebrate your destiny
Give light to what’s within you
Their ideas need not be yours
Others’ opinions need not be yours
Celebrate your destiny
If you don’t speak up, who will?
If you don’t do it, who will?
If you don’t live your life, who will?

Conclusion

I began this article with an anecdote about my paternal grandmother, Matiesa, whom I never met but whose legacy of Basque song I have endeavored to honor. I wonder sometimes what she thought of the songs she sang to her children, or if she ever composed lyrics just for herself. Did singing give her respite from the burdens of working a farm with her husband and raising seven children? Did she have opinions about world events swirling around her that she expressed through song, as she never learned to write? After all, Matiesa lived through two world wars, the Spanish Civil War, and died in the thick of Franco’s dictatorship. Closer to home, she endured the loss of three children as well as the departure of four siblings and all four of her sons to the Americas. My grandmother’s last name, “Itcea,” which means “nail,” seems fitting. She likely had to become tough as nails to persevere in a life filled with hard physical labor, emotional pain and political turbulence. Or, perhaps, she learned to take her struggles in stride.

In this sense, Matiesa’s story—or what I imagine it might have been—resembles our own. For our current historical moment, too, is one of political tumult in which many of us are

experiencing violence, separation from loved ones, abrogation of rights, fear and despair. In my version of “We Shall Overcome,” I express my hope that “This, too, shall pass:”

10. “Gaindituko Dinagu” (We Shall Overcome). [\[Listen here\]](#)

Gaindituko dinagu	We shall overcome
Gaindituko dinagu	We shall overcome
Gaindituko behar dinagu	We must overcome
Bihotzetan dakinagu	In our hearts we know
Gainditu behar dinagu	We must overcome
Egia nahi dinagu	We want the truth
Egia nahi dinagu	We want the truth
Egian bizi nahi dinagu	We want to live in truth
Bihotzetan dakinagu	In our hearts we know
Egia behar dinagu	We need the truth
Juztizia nahi dinagu	We want justice
Juztizia nahi dinagu	We want justice
Juztizian bizi nahi dinagu	We want to live in justice
Bihotzetan dakinagu	In our hearts we know
Juztizia behar dinagu	We need justice
Bakea nahi dinagu	We want peace
Bakea nahi dinagu	We want peace
Bakean bizi nahi dinagu	We want to live in peace
Bihotzetan dakinagu	In our hearts we know
Bakea behar dinagu	We need peace

Erran bezala—May it be as I have said.

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