

Basque Mythology

Translation of a talk given by Xabier Goni; translated from spanish by Claire Handscombe

Things, and their representations (that is, the symbols which represent them) are connected to each other by a force known as "adur" (literally, luck, destiny), so that, providing certain circumstances are in place, what we do to the representations will affect the things which they represent in the same way.

- Light as a symbol

Wax candles represent the body, while light represents the spirit. Traditionally, a candle is twisted and burned in order to harm someone who has committed a wrong. When someone has been ill for a long time, it is said that "horri batek bat argizatie piatu dio" (the Legend of the "barkillo" - the silver saucer- and the apple tree).

- Coins

Coins generally carry the likeness of any given person. Twisting coins and throwing them into the alms box in a church (or into the fire at home) caused harm to anyone to whom one wanted to cause harm.

- Grains of salt, wheat and juniper

To cure any verruca or skin growth, rub it with grains of salt (or make the sign a cross with them over it) and afterwards throw them into the fire. The same goes for grains of wheat or juniper but they must then be placed under a stone. When they rot away, the growth disappears.

- Herbs, bushes/shrubs and trees

Reeds are used for verrucas (in the same way as wheat grains and juniper; the same procedure applies).

In order to cure the skin disease known as "Arrosa" (a type of herpes) one must circle a roses bush several times.

In order to cure hernias, an oak tree must be chopped in half on the eve of St John's Day.

- Animals

The male goat represents the healthy animal. His presence in the stable guarantees good health for all the animals sheltered there.

- Skulls and teeth

Headaches can be prevented by drinking water from certain skulls. Children's teeth can be encouraged to grow by putting the teeth of hedgehogs, wild cats or horses around their necks.

- Sprinklings

In order to bring on the rain in a time of drought, one sprinkles a picture with water (?), or puts it in a well.

- Axes

In order to prevent lightning striking a house, an axe with its blade pointing downwards is placed next to the door.

- Stitches

A cloth is placed over the injured limb, and the magician (fortune-teller - "azti") goes through the fabric several times, as though sewing it.

- Solstice based rites

Baths and showers on the morning of a solstice prevents illness during the rest of the year.

Branches of white hawthorn, ash tree, bracken in flower, etc picked on that day and hung in doorways and windows protect the house against lightning.

Small fires are lit at crossroads and in front of houses. Jumping over them helps to avoid skin diseases. Throwing a bunch of coins into such fires helps to avoid plagues and diseases in crops. If someone has a hernia, they should walk through an oak which has been split.

At the winter solstice, fires are also lit. Pets are purified by making them walk over the log that is burning in the home.

- The names of things

Cursing the names of things allows one to influence the thing itself.

- Myths

The Earth is something immensely large whose limitless surface forms a horizontal plane, with relief such as dry land, mountains

and sea water. The surface of the Earth is not immobile, some regions are rising while others are descending, and many mountains are growing in the same way as live human beings do.

The inside of the Earth is divided into very large regions, and it is from these regions that certain atmospheric phenomena proceed, mainly storm clouds and hurricane winds. In the sky, the stars move around, and when they disappear in the West they enter the reddish sea and continue their journey through the underground world.

The sun and the moon are goddesses, daughters of the Earth to whose bosom they return every day after their journey through the skies.

The day is for men who live on the earthly surface, but during the night it belongs to the spirits and the souls of the dead, for whom the moon gives its light.

- The worship of the home

The home is one's land and refuge, church and cemetery, maternal support, common symbol and centre for all family members, alive or dead.

- The house as a church

It is a sacred place, protected by the fire of the home (symbolising Mari), by laurel, by the branches of the white hawthorn and of the ash tree, by wild thistles (symbols of the sun) and by the axe. The house is inhabited by the spirits of ancestors, and visited by them ; hence the tradition of continually

lighting the home (for the dead) and of leaving offerings. Houses face the sun. They are the family cemetery. The existence of the "jarleku" (lately in the parish church, originally in houses themselves), a sort of altar, demonstrates the sacred nature of houses. A new spouse arriving in the house offers lights and bread to the ancestors on the jarleku.

- The house as a grave

Each house has a tomb next to the parish church (or inside it), and the stone which covers the jarleku. Before Christianity was brought in, the house served as a grave. Until recently children who died without having been christened were buried in the basement of the house ("itasuria"/"itxusuria" - gotera) (or in the "baratz"). There is a belief that one cannot walk around the house three times in a row (as with a church or a cemetery). The outline of a house is like a cemetery. Equally, the path which links the house with the church and the cemetery is sacred. Along this path, in some crossroads, the mattresses of those who die are burned.

- Objects of domestic worship

These are the souls of ancestors, seen as lights or as gusts or blasts of wind. Upon death, "Erio" separates souls from bodies. These souls live in the underground regions but they frequently return to the surface during the night, especially to their own houses. Certain mountain tops and caves are considered to be channels through which souls travel. These channels lead to homes and to kitchens in older houses.

- Ministers of domestic worship

The "etxekoandre" is the main minister of this worship. She is in charge of the offering of lights and food, and of blessing family members once per year. They represent the household in the "jarleku". This has been instrumental in the appreciation of and high regard in which women are held in the Basque country. She was the primary heiress before her brothers (it was the first born who inherited the house (?), whether they were male or female, in contrast with the feudal system which was the governing norm in Europe where only the men could inherit.

- The world of the gods

Beside the souls of ancestors there are many mythological figures, almost all of them linked to natural phenomena. Some are indigenous to the Basque country, others originate from foreign mythologies which, as time went on, became incorporated into popular tradition during different periods of history.

- Gaveko

He was the spirit of the night (or night personified). He does not allow men to take part in certain activities after the Angelus bell has tolled¹ (he punishes betting that takes place at night). It is a reckless act to challenge Gameko.

- Iratxo

¹ Translator's note: In Medieval times, the Angelus bell marked the time at which one must say the Angelus prayer ; it was said at morning, noon and night, and the inference here is that it is the night time bell.

He is a night spirit. He is not evil; he lets himself be known by humans, but if someone makes the sign of the cross over him, he takes them away along cliffs and other dangerous places, afterwards returning them to the place from which they came. He lives inside walls (?), chasms and wells.

- Inguma

Evil spirit who appears in houses at night, when people are asleep, and strangles them. Similar to (?) Aideko and Gaizkine. Aideko is responsible for all illness with unknown causes. Gaizkine makes roosters' heads out of the feathers in pillows, causing serious illness to those who sleep on them.

- Mamarro

Tiny spirits which help their human owners with their tasks. They live in needle cases - entering them on St John's night if they are left open next to a blackberry bush². Also called Galtzagorr (?).

- Maide

Night-time, male spirit (the corresponding female spirit is called Lamia). Said to be responsible for the building of ? and dolmens.

- Lamia

Spirit with a woman's body and duck's feet. She is a mermaid in landlocked seas. If a farmer leaves anything edible on the edge of his farm, they eat them, and in return they plough their fields. It is said that the arrival of the ox-driven plough was

² Or brambles

instrumental in their extinction (as was the building of rural hermitages).

- Sorgin

Witches (but in the original meaning of the word, not that of the word applied by extension to men and women whose behaviour seemed strange and extravagant to their neighbours in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). They are night-time spirits whose power reigns between midnight and the first crowing of the cock. They work hard at maintaining humans' belief in them, punishing those who deny them: "Direnik ez da sinistu behar, ez direla ez de etran behar".

- Basajuan

He is a spirit who lives in the deepest forest, of which he is the lord. He is tall, has a human form, has long hair on his head and is covered with bodily hair; according to some, one of his feet is rounded. He is the protecting spirit of flocks. The sheep proclaim his presence by simultaneously shaking their bells. The shepherd can then sleep easy, as the wolf will not be attacking them that night.

- Tártalo

Evil spirit with only one eye in the centre of his forehead. He lives in caves. Also known as Anxo. He is the cruellest and most terrifying of them all. He tears apart his prisoners, then roasts and eats them.

- Erensugie

Appears as a snake or a dragon. Attracts his bait with his breath and devours it. Sometimes he lives on humans. (Teodosio de Goni y Aralar)

- Sugaar

Male snake or rattlesnake. He often crosses the skies in the shape of a sickle, which is an omen predicting a storm. Also known as Maju, a spirit which is said to be Mari's husband. More ancient than Erensuge.

- Beigorri, Zezengorri, Zaldigorri

Spirits who adopt the form of animals (cows, bulls, horses, ?) the same characters which appear in the late Palaeolithic era. Roman coins have been found in caves and chasms, which points to the practice of throwing them there to obtain the protection of the cave spirits.

- Lur

Considered mother of the sun and of the moon. The usual dwelling place of souls and of most of the mythical characters. Contains treasure - legends tell us where, but do not specify exact co-ordinates.

- Mari

The main spirit of Basque mythology, she is female, as are most of the Basque spirits. She is the head of the other spirits. She takes many different forms, mostly as an elegantly dressed woman or as a woman who throws fire. Lives inside the earth. The inside of the earth communicates with its surface via certain

caves and chasms, which is why Mari often appears in them. Her husband is Maju (or Sugaar). Her children are Atarrabi and Mikelats. The best present to take to her cave is a ram. Earlier on, people used to offer her coins, which they threw into caves and chasms. One must speak to her informally³. One must enter and leave her cave in the same way, that is without taking one's eyes off her, and one must not sit down in her presence. She condemns lies, stealing, pride, not keeping one's word, not giving people the respect due to them, and refusing to help others. Those who enter her dwelling place without being invited there, or who steal any of her possessions, are punished. She is said to be responsible for hail and lightning⁴.

- Akerbelitz

A spirit who appears in the shape of a male black goat. Basque sorcery of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made this ancient representation notorious. Protector of livestock and head of the sorcerers (azti). The custom is to keep one male black goat in the stable, to ensure the good health of all the animals to which he protects.

- Equzki, Ekhi

The sun, daughter of the Earth (Lur). Chases away the evil spirits which exercise their power over the world during the night. That is why the eguzkilorre is placed by the front door to the house, and why houses face East, as do tombs and dolmens.

- Ilargi, Ilazki

³ With the use of informal "tu" for "you" rather than the more formal "usted"

⁴ Translator's note: two different words for lightning are used here. "Rayo" can also be a beam, such as a sunbeam.

The moon, daughter of the Earth (Lur). The light of the dead. Fridays are dedicated to her (Ostziral). In order to free someone from a spell, the belongings of a person who has been bewitched must be burned on a Friday, by moonlight, at a crossroads.

- Ortzi

The skies, deified. Thursdays are dedicated to him (Ortzeguna). "Ortzi" is the root of many words: Ortzadarra, Oskarbi, Ortzfomi, Ortzhots (trumoi), oinztagi (tximistagi), oinaztarri (tzimista, txiamstarn). The latter refers to the belief that lightning was a flint stone (txiamstarn) thrown from the skies. It is because axes used to be made of flint that they were placed, blade down, to prevent lightning bolts. (An axe from the bronze age was found in the cave of Zabalitz, on the ground, with its blade pointing towards the skies).

- Kixmi

This was the nickname that the Gentiles gave Christ. In their language, it meant "lovely".

Basque Pre-History

Prehistory:

Stone age: Palaeolithic
Mesolithic
Neolithic

Metal ages: Eneolithic
Bronze age
Iron age

Early Palaeolithic (to 80,000 BC)

- First information (?) about settlers in the Basque Country (150,000 BC)
- Pre-Neanderthal man
- Flint ? and chips

Mid Palaeolithic (to 30,000 BC)

- Neanderthal man inhabits the Basque Country
- Man as hunter-gather
- Belief in the afterlife (people buried with weapons and food)

Late Palaeolithic (to 8,000 BC)

- Homo sapiens sapiens - current type of man
- Art (decoration of caves, bones and stones)
- Evolution towards the Basque Type begins
 - Homo sapiens sapiens soon divides into the racial groups which now inhabit the earth (white, yellow, black). Each group becomes the origin of the races which we now distinguish. One of them, Cro-Magnon man, evolved indigenously into the Basque group.
 - Cave of Urtiaga (Deba) - final magdalen (?) level (end of the late Palaeolithic age) → Cro-Magnon type cranium beginning to evolve into the Basque cranium. Azilian level (beginning of Mesolithic age) → intermediary crania, between Cro-Magnon and Basque. The crania of the Eneolithic age are clearly Basque.

Mesolithic age (to 3,000 BC)

- Climactic temperance
- Men are still hunter-gatherers
- Late Palaeolithic art disappears

Neolithic age (to 1800 BC)

- The hunter begins to tame animals
- The gatherer begins to cultivate the land
- Polished stone, ceramics

Eneolithic age and bronze age (until 700 BC)

- Caves as tombs; dolmens (grazing areas)
- Main lifestyle: grazing → migration → cultural interchange → changes in the culture of the Land
 - Rich (aberatsa) ↔ abere
- Differentiation on both sides of the dividing line (Mediterranean influence)

Iron age (until 200 BC → Romanization)

- Cromlechs (Shepherds from the eastern region, up to the ?)
- Monoliths
- Beginning of Indo-European languages, death of the previous ones (except for Euskerra) → Basque goes back to the Eneolithic age at least.

Popular Basque worldview

The diversity of natural regions, tendencies and mental traditions (that is, the outside world, and the inside world of individual) have led to the shaping of differing human groups. One of these groups is the Basque people and some features of its "inside world" are the following:

- The real world is made up not only what the senses and intelligence perceive, but of everything which has a name.
 - "Izena duen guztia omen da"
 - "Izen gabarik ez da ezer"
- Constant noting of the value of each type of reasons

- If knowledge has been acquired through senses and experience:

"hori ala da"
- If knowledge has been acquired based on the experiences and feelings of other people:

"hori ala omen da"
- Binary classification of the world's phenomena:
 - Natural (berezko, eskuko)
 - Mystical (adurrezko, aideako)
- Animist view of the world; one spirit is responsible for each phenomenon and is at the bottom of each mystery.
- Formalism: use of ever-adequate formulae, to obtain predictable and expected results (magia).