

Basque matriarchy: science and existence.

English Abstract by Mariado Hinojosa.

Attending to historic development, the aim of my work is to analyze feminine figure in Basque culture, mainly why Basque women, from ancient times, have had a superior status than other women in different social and cultural groups. This valued status includes the possession of ritual or medical traditional knowledge and its transmission in generations, because this wisdom appears closely related with feminine gender.

If we also attend to the fact that in general, the challenge of contemporary feminism is to beat the deep androcentric overload of science, one interesting thing and which I would like to analyze, is why this fact appears inverted in Basque culture, because historic and culturally, women have been depositaries of traditional knowledge, being also included here medicinal wisdom.

My analysis will begin from philological study, because Basque language or *euskera*, gives a lot of preeminence to feminine gender, so we can see that even in the familiar treatment form (called *hika*), the verb changes its desinence according to the sex of the person referred. In this way, we can confirm that *euskera* is a rich language in its structural morphology of verbal and nominal syntagma, as well as it has an interesting feature too: its agglutinative character, whatever allows to separate terms to a possible subsequent analysis.

In this way, first, I will try to do a philological analysis of some words that I think to have capital importance in ancient social Basque organization. Therefore, mainly, it will be analyzed the following words: *eme* (female), *ume* (baby, child) and *emakume* (woman) and then, the analysis will be focused on other words that take form from these, like *umetoki*, *umontzi*, *umedun*, etc. If we focus the analysis in these three words, we can observe that the literal meaning of the two first terms, *umetoki* and *umontzi* is *uterus*. If both Basque words are analyzed according to morphologic characteristics, we can notice as follows: *umetoki* can be separated in *ume* (baby) and *toki*, whose meaning is place, so *umetoki* literally would be “*the place of the baby*”. On the other hand, *umontzi*, though less common used, it is made by two other words: *um-e* (woman) and *ontzi*, whose meaning is recipient or bowl so literally, *umontzi* is “*the bowl of the baby*”.

If we continue with this philological analysis, another word, *umedun*, whose literal translation is *pregnant*, in its syntactic or morphologic division it would mean “*the one who owns the baby*”, which delivers to high status or high level conception about feminine gender than in other languages with Indo-European roots. As the same way, other two Basque words that define pregnant women are *haurdun* and *seindun*, in which both *haur* and *sein* mean child and the final form *-dun*, indicative of possession, would give the meaning of “*the one who owns the baby*”.

This analysis seems fundamental, because if we compare with other languages, for example ancient Latin, we can verify that *uteru(m)*, that is the root of the Spanish word *útero* and English *uterus*, come from the concept *uentre(m)*, which simply means *abdomen or belly* and could be applied to women as much as to men. In fact, this word *uentre(m)* was also used to define another type of organic cavities, so we can see that in Latin there was no existence of syntactic special specifies to refer an exclusively feminine organ. As we can see, from a philological point of view, the difference between Euskera and Latin is enormous, whatever is not only interesting, moreover enlightens the higher status of feminine gender in Basque culture comparing to Latin conception and of course, showing the obvious difference between the feminine status value in both cultures.

After this whole philological analysis, the study will be focused on myths, legends and cultural Basque traditions, cause these supposes an important information source to anthropologic study. In this section, the analysis will be about the central figure, considered leading lady or goddess of Basque mythology: *Dama Mari*, *Anbotoko Damea* or *Txindokiko Damea*, because she is known with such different names, depending on the different geographic areas. To many authors, *Mari* would be a reminiscence of an ancient prehistoric goddess because her very strong earthy character, which is remarked by its relationship with the internal deep regions of the earth that only communicate with outward regions through caves and chasms. According to different affirmations, she lives in depths, but she can shape herself as an animal, as well as a beautiful woman. She also leads on harvest growing and has a role paper in managing storms, rain and general weather. As the same way, in many narrations she also appears flying through the sky or transfiguring herself into a thunderbolt.

Around this deity or talent of feminine gender, and independently, appear related other characters like the *lamiak* and *sorginak*. *Lamin* or *lamiak* are spirits or genius with feminine shape who always have a characteristic zoomorphic attribute, generally hen, duck, or goat hoofs, although sometimes of another animal, depending on the different versions. Though these deities have importance in the whole group of myths and legends, they don't reach the power status and centralization that Mari owns, so we can confirm that as the same way that the *etxekoandre* or *woman of the house* is the central figure of typical Basque family relatives, Mari is the centre of the whole mythological group, into which all the others turn around.

On the other hand, and according to the second concept, the appellative *sorginak* (witches), in ancient times referred to the old common belief about essences or beings with dark and evil powers, but due to some circumstances that occurred in a concrete context and period, they were extended as private accusations and charges to a group of people, mainly women.

Finally, and related with the previous point, I will analyze several facts that occurred in modern times and which supposed a great change in social Basque organization: these events were the formal accusations and severe persecutions about witchcraft that took part in many areas of Basque country, mainly in Zugarramurdi (Navarre) and Lapurdi (northern areas of Basque country in French state). If we analyze this question deeply, we can verify that the majority of damned people were women, being many of them just midwives and women with herbal and traditional medical

knowledge, whom developed their work parallel to the “androcentric and typical objective science” that began to rise in Western Europe.