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## FROM THE BASQUE FAMILY TO BASQUE FAMILIES. SELECTED ASPECTS OF RESEARCH INTO BASQUE FAMILY LIFE<sup>1</sup>

Until recently, the family was considered a natural and universal category, characteristic of all cultures and performing similar functions everywhere. The assumption about the strength of “blood ties” was also widespread. Today, the construct encompassing the family and its definition is viewed from a much more critical and broad perspective, and its cultural or historical changeability is noticed (Bestard-Camps 1991, pp.80–81, Fishburne Collier, Rosaldo, Junko, Yanagisako 2007, pp.60–75). Sometimes, attempts at defining it are even abandoned (Stanisz 2013, pp.9–13, Ostrouch-Kamińska 2011, pp.18–21). Researchers also note that the crisis or the end of the family has been repeatedly announced and its “evolution” (for example from the large and multi-parent household to alternative models) is not so unambiguous and obvious as previously assumed (Schmidt 2015, pp.23–50, 184–189). Ignacio Irazuzta indicated that:

[...] to the present day there has been a tendency to consider the family as the social location closest to nature, as the first instance of contact between an individual and society [...] Today, in light of the contemporary tendency toward framing new family models, the family continues to occupy a central place in Basque intellectual debate (Irazuzta 2005, p. 88).

The aim of this text is to outline the images of the family in the Basque Country<sup>2</sup> and the diversity of modern Basque families. In order to do that, I look at the ideology and practices related with the Basque family, using the example of the “traditional Basque family” personified by the inhabitants of rural farms (*baserritarrak*), or family symbolism in Basque nationalism (metaphors and myths like “Basque matriarchy” etc.). I also describe the specificities and historical changes in family models

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<sup>2</sup> In the text, I focus on the Basque Autonomous Community (made up of three provinces: Bizkaia, Araba, Gipuzkoa), which is located in Spain. It is worth adding that three provinces located in France (Zuberoa, Lapurdi, Nafarroa Beherea) and the Spanish Navarra (Nafarroa) are also considered to be Basque. The situation of each of these parts of the “great Basque Country” is specific (for example due to the status of the Basque language).

in the region. An important element will be the analysis of women's position in the contemporary Basque family and society. The purpose of the article is therefore to analyse the transformations related to family models and to the image of the Basque family, taking into account the specificity of the region (minority status, language, separatist aspirations).

#### THE BASERRIA AND ITS INHABITANTS: THE MYTH OF THE BASQUE FAMILY

*Herrik bere lege, etxek bere aztura*<sup>3</sup>  
Basque proverb

Gentle mountains, grazing sheep, a characteristic house (*baserría*) in the background – this is the stereotypical landscape of the Basque Country, and at the same time the Basque ideological landscape (Camus Bergaretxe 2012, pp. 144–161)<sup>4</sup>. Ideally, its inhabitants were a multi-generational family, living in harmony and almost outside of time, as in the paintings of local artists such as Valentin Zubiaurre or Aurelio Arteta. Many Basque painters have portrayed the inhabitants of a rural farm in idyllic scenery during meals or holidays (Martínez Gorriarán, Agirre Arriaga 1995, pp. 204–205). During the period of industrialization and influx of immigrants to the Basque region from other Spanish provinces, the countryside was considered by national ideologists the place where the essence of Basque culture survived. Although they came from cities, nationalist ideologists considered rural life to be typically Basque and those living in the countryside to be “real Basques”. At that time, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the myth of the “traditional Basque family” was born (Zulaika 1988, pp. 103–104).

In the national ideology, the Basque family, identified with its rustic idealized version, has been a fundamental part of Basqueness. The Basque home has also become a symbol of Basque tradition and values (including religiousness), “a sanctuary” and “a mother country” (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, pp. 304–305, 437–440). It has been embodied by the *baserría*, the traditional rural farm and “symbolic representation of the nation” (Aretxaga 1988, p. 60). In the national vision, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *baserría* has been an “eternal” element of Basque tradition, and as such its essence. In fact, this type of socio-economic construction is said to have been created around the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. The number of *baserría* farms was on the increase until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Berriochoa Azcárate 2015, p. 146). Nowadays, on the one hand, there is a perceived crisis of the *baserría*, on the other, there is a specific “fashion” for living in the *baserría*. It is also worth pointing out that many present day *baserriás* are changing their character as a result of rural tourism,

<sup>3</sup> “Every country has its own law, every house has its own custom” (K.M. – own translation).

<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the Basque Country, despite being identified only with the rural landscape, is characterized by various landscapes, including those related to modern urban architecture (the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is a flagship example).

proliferation of eco-lifestyles, or EU subsidies. Hence, the *baserría* is not ceasing to exist as much as it is undergoing a transformation (Caro Baroja 1998, p. 287; Homobono 1991, pp. 83–114; Zulaika 1988, pp. 117–165).

The rural landscape and the family of a *baserritarrak* as “typically Basque” are part of the stereotypical image of the Basque Country and of Basque life. However, these images remain common and are used as model examples, thus becoming symbols of “Basqueness” in the national ideology and political discourse. They also serve as an element of tourist promotion of the region. It is popular to dress up as *baserritarrak* (farmers) as part of holidays or family commemorative photographs. The *baserría* also tends to be considered as a place where the “true Basque language” has survived (language courses are organized on such farms) (Aretxaga 1988, pp. 60–64). However, other views are beginning to emerge, and indicate that “the real Basque is not only a rural host and that Basques can also live in the city” (Altuna 2012, pp. 178–179).

The traditional family living in the *baserría* was multigenerational. It usually consisted of grandparents – an old married couple, who were at the head of the family, parents – a young married couple, their children (also adopted – adoption was a frequent phenomenon), as well as the parents’ siblings (an unmarried aunt or uncle). Until the head of the family died, their successors and successors’ spouses played a secondary role (Arbaiza Vilallonga 1996, p. 52), though without doubt they were playing an important role in many spheres of life, such as work or family continuation (Caro Baroja 2000, p. 213). Some farms also employed a farmhand or two – an older and a younger one (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, p. 337).

Household members also included dead ancestors, who were present in numerous rituals and, according to beliefs, visited the house from time to time (Aretxaga 1988, pp. 26–27; Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, p. 367), and animals<sup>5</sup>. The house was more than a building. It extended to the farm land and even to the symbolic tombstone in the church (*yarleku*), which was a place of some key rituals (Aretxaga 1988, pp. 24–25; Ortiz-Osés 2007, pp. 52–53). At the same time, the harmonious relations between household members, just like the romantic image of country life, were usually perceived as such only by external observers. Those who glorified the existence of the *baserritarrak*, as well as their religiousness, honour or morality, often came from cities and admired the countryside from afar. Also national ideologues, who saw the “national spirit” in the Basque countryside, often had little in common with its inhabitants (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, pp. 319–325). Iñaki Vázquez Larrea notes that the Basque farmer (*baserritar*) appears as a rural Noble Savage (Vázquez Larrea 2009, p. 202). However, other authors indicate that this comparison is not justified, because the *baserritar* embodies a simple, traditionalist and conservative man (Altuna 2012, pp. 175–178). The nationalistic image of the “ideal Basque woman” from the countryside is also interesting. Her physical strength, propensity for hard work, as well as modesty and innocence, which were the components of her “beautiful soul”, were glorified (Martínez Gorriarán, Agirre Arriaga 1995, pp. 193–195, 211).

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<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.hiru.eus/cultura-vasca/izaki-doneak>, access date 10.01.2018.

The *baserría* was an independent economic unit (also defined as “an institution that simultaneously includes the mode of production, the process of socialization, the network of kinship and the cultural system”, Aretxaga 1988, p. 60) and its welfare was a priority. Some authors indicated that for the inhabitants of the *baserría* the good of the community was paramount, and not the ambitions or desires of an individual, whose conduct could bring disgrace to the whole family. When talking about one’s home or mother, the term “mine” was almost never used; instead, one would say “our” as Pedro Berriochoa Azcárate observed (2013, pp. 305–307). The statements of many of my interlocutors, especially from the older generation, confirmed this rule. The house, protected by amulets such as the *eguzkilorre* plant – “the flower of the sun” (Ortiz-Osés 2007, pp. 51–52), sheltered one against evil, but also against the outside<sup>6</sup>. A new household member (also a new animal) was ritually walked around the building, thus being introduced to the circle of “ours”. The word *etxe* (Basque: house), after all, is derived from *itxi/etsi* (Basque: closed), which reflects the attachment to the independence and autonomy of the farm and its inhabitants, as well as fears and anxiety towards what comes from the outside. A Basque proverb: *Etxeko sua etxeko hautsez estali behar da* sheds light on this. It states: “Home fire must be extinguished with domestic ash”, which is usually interpreted as indicating that home problems should not be revealed outside of home, but should be resolved in one’s own circle. At the same time, the priority of the well-being of household members is indicated, just as in the proverb: *Egik ongia lehenik eurei; gero, al baduk, atzei* – “First look after your family and then after others, if you can” (Martínez Gorriaran 1993, pp. 123–124)<sup>7</sup>.

According to custom, after giving birth (and before the traditional blessing in the church), a woman would take with her an element symbolizing the house (for example a tile or a handkerchief), which protected her every time she left the house (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, pp. 307–308)<sup>8</sup>. The house possesses a “sacral” character, like that of a church or cemetery, which is reflected in similar rituals and beliefs. One of these is connected with burying unbaptised children under the floor of the house or in the garden next to the house (Manterola 1994, p. 43). These children were household members and after death were believed to become its “guardian angels”.

Houses were given names, and these became names of a sort for their residents, sometimes to a greater extent than the family names appearing in documents<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> I also wrote about the meaning of the house concept in Basque culture in another article: 2011, pp. 165–174.

<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, relationships with neighbours were often very important and close (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, pp. 394–406).

<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it should be noted that children were the essence of the family, their lack was the greatest disaster (no successor, and therefore no future for the family), for which the woman was often blamed – there were numerous rituals to bring the desirable descendant into the world (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, p. 339; Aretxaga 1988, p. 32).

<sup>9</sup> In a small Basque village, I saw that church benches were labeled with house names, and not family names.

A change of address meant that the individual was identified with another house and therefore with another “name”. It indicates that, in this case, living together was key, and not blood ties (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, pp. 299–337). At this point, it is necessary to distinguish between the family (*familia*<sup>10</sup>), that is people from a given family, and household members (*etxeokak*), that is those who lived in a particular house.

Traditionally, a farm was inherited by only one child, often regardless of their gender. This fact was referred to as one of the arguments to confirm the high position of women in Basque society, and even the existence of a matriarchy among Basques (Ortigosa 2013, p. 427) – I will return to this issue later. Parents would choose the successor, taking into account their character, and knowing that their attitude was crucial for the future of the house (as well as for their living conditions when they grew old). It was equally important to choose the successor’s partner, a decision which was also influenced by the parents (love was not considered an important factor) (Arbaiza Vilallonga 1996, pp. 40, 52; Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, pp. 352–355). The rest of the offspring had to look for other places to live and means of subsistence – in the city, through emigration, priesthood, or in another household (through a relationship with its successor). Those who wanted to stay did not start families of their own and helped with everyday tasks, yet sometimes they were considered abnormal or “incomplete” because they did not have a spouse or their own family (Caro Baroja 2000, p. 214). Children would often work, either on their family farm (one of my interlocutors told me about her mother who, as a girl, would herd cows, and remembered her fear of these animals) or somewhere else (sometimes as early as at the age of 7 or little more; those children would move out to undertake employment and only visit their family home once in a while). Berriochoa Azcárate observed that the image of a multi-generational, happy family who spend time together is fictitious, because: “too many of its members have been absent for a long time” (2013, p. 386). Indeed, as Julio Caro Baroja noticed: “What is idyllic and simple is almost never real” (Caro Baroja 2000, p. 214).

There was an economic factor which contributed to the fact that only one offspring would inherit the house and land, as it prevented land fragmentation which could lead to poverty. However, this custom was also the cause of internal conflicts in the family: rivalry, envy, even referred to as “cainism” (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, p. 380; Aranzadi 2001, pp. 904–905). In general, the position of the successor was considered the most significant and desirable (this changed over the years and especially along the process of industrialization when the successors began to realise that their siblings living in the city were richer or better educated).

Moreover, the coexistence of many people under one roof, including two married couples (old householders and their young successors), was most probably not easy (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013, p. 364). One of my interlocutors told me a story of her unmarried uncle living in their *baserria*, who was disliked by his sister-in-law,

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<sup>10</sup> Caro Baroja also cites other regional terms for “family” such as *erroyalde*, *echaldi*, *leinu* or *senikera* (Caro Baroja 2000, p. 209).

even though her children loved him. This woman was forced to share everyday life with her brother-in-law, because of whom she had more work: her duties included preparing meals for all household members. In regards to the *baserria*, the woman was associated with the domestic space, while the man acted as the family representative on the outside (Manterola 1994, pp. 39–44). Women’s tasks also included those related to the sacred sphere: ancestor cults, funeral rites, preparing amulets, etc. (Aretxaga 1988, pp. 27–33). The lady of the house (*Etxekoandre*) was regarded as the “priestess of household” and even the personification of the goddess *Mari* (Ortiz-Osés 2007, pp. 52–53).

Ramon Zallo indicates that the processes associated with industrialization and social transformations had an impact on the disappearance of the traditional model of life, the rise of new ways of spending time, work and the emergence of other forms of family (Zallo 2006, pp. 70–71). The nineteenth-century migrations associated with moving to the city in search of work appear to have had an impact on transformations in family life. In the new place, the settlers were deprived of their relatives’ support and, therefore, exposed to dangers, though they also had a chance to enjoy greater independence (Roigé 2011, pp. 667–669). Gradually, the changes began to include the issue of choosing a partner (“from the interest of the family to the feelings of the individual”), or the nature of the relationship between women and men and their roles in a relationship (Bestard 2011, pp. 977–978).

The *baserria* itself also changed. Today, few people want to accept the hardships of living on a farm, though traditional Basque rural architecture is popular and fashionable. Sometimes, as I mentioned, rural homesteads are transformed into places for farm tourism. Many of my middle-aged interlocutors from the cities talked about their dream of spending their old age in a Basque type of house. Previously a privilege, the obligation connected with inheriting a farm is now rejected more and more frequently by the young. This is difficult for the older generation to understand and accept<sup>11</sup>.

#### THE BASQUE MATRIARCHY

One of the “Basque myths” is that of the Basque matriarchy. Its followers speak about the symbolic meaning of women and gender-neutral traditions of inheritance<sup>12</sup> or even the “rule of Basque women” (Ortigosa 2013, p. 427; Aranzadi 2000, pp. 506–535). On the Basque coast, the position of women was particularly strong. Long absences of men (who were often sailors) resulted in many of their competences transferring to women; matrilineal residence was also common in many port towns. At the same time, women were often criticized for working outside the home which

<sup>11</sup> The *Amama* film, directed by Asier Altuna, is an interesting portrayal of the crisis of *baserria* and a family linked to it.

<sup>12</sup> At this point, the concept of “matriarchalism” also appears, describing the dominant position of women in the symbolic sphere, including in mythology (Bergaretxe 2012, p. 203).

was seen as a danger to their morals, but also as leading to “abandoning” children – women who worked in distant localities could not always provide them with proper care (Prado Antúnez 2000, pp. 277–287).

The arguments for the existence of a matriarchy among Basques were backed by the above-mentioned tradition of inheritance and matrilineal residence, as well as matrilineal descent, whose traces were preserved in Basque kinship terminology which distinguishes between relatives on the mother’s and father’s side (Caro Baroja 2000, pp. 215–216). Researchers who are supporters of the matriarchy theory also pointed to the Basque mythology in which female figures played a crucial role (the chief mythological being was the goddess *Mari*), women’s domination in the sacred sphere, and the glorification of the mother’s figure. Both Basque and foreign authors described the importance of women in the Basque social, legal and economic system, and equality in the relations between the genders (Ortigosa 2013, pp. 427–428; Aretxaga 1988, p. 98; Manterola 1994, p. 44).

These elements do not constitute absolute proof of the existence of a Basque matriarchy, but they show the importance of women’s social position. Some authors emphasize that daughters could be chosen as the successors of the homesteads because they were in a closer emotional relationship with their parents – sons were absent more often, sometimes due to the family tradition of emigration (Caro Baroja 2000, pp. 210–211; Fernández Fonseca, Prado Antúnez 2000, p. 280). At the same time, my interlocutors often expressed the opinion that matriarchy has become an element of Basque ideology, and proof of the superiority of Basques (for example over Spaniards, in whose symbolic realm the woman is subordinated to the man), despite the fact that the woman’s imagined “power” is limited only to the domestic sphere (Mirgos 2010, pp. 159–165). Important research on the image of the Basque woman and her real situation was conducted by a research team led by Teresa del Valle (which resulted in a collective work entitled *Mujer vasca, Imagen y realidad*, published in 1985).

Gloria P. Totoricagüena noted that:

In the 1970s and 1980s, Basque anthropologists argued the concept of a Basque matriarchy. Yet while the study of real women was brushed aside, Basque mythology about feminine identities was pervasive. However, Basque feminist anthropologists found that in Euskal Herria the elaboration of the myth of a Basque matriarchy constituted a “gendered tool” that had been used in the development of the ideology related to radical nationalism, and Basque matriarchy provided a powerful ethnic marker. Even though the arguments regarding real female power were dismantled by these analyses, the ideology affected the key issues of Basque identity and therefore continued (Totoricagüena 2004, p. 142).

Additionally, the relationship between women and men and the specificity of local emotional life in the Basque Country is an element of many jokes and stereotypes. The common opinion is that the Basques are not very emotional and romantic, and that it is difficult for them to have a closer relationship with the opposite sex. Few authors oppose such stereotypical depictions of “Basque love” (Camus Bergaretxe 2012, pp. 205–206). At the same time, the phenomenon of the specificity of Basque

emotionality has not only made its way to online forums (that offer advice on how to win the heart a Basque or recognize if he or she is interested in us) or in products of popular culture (for example, the film *Ocho apellidos vascos*, directed by Emilio Martínez-Lázaro<sup>13</sup>). It has also become the subject of cultural analyses which emphasized that romantic love was not a primary value in traditional Basque society and discussed the phenomenon of endogamy among Basques (Ortigosa 2013, p. 432; Arana Williams 1989, pp. 107–128).

#### FAMILY AND NATIONALISM

<i>I shall defend</i>	<i>Against the Justice,</i>
<i>The house of my father.</i>	<i>I shall defend</i>
<i>Against wolves,</i>	<i>The house</i>
<i>Against drought,</i>	<i>of my father [...]</i> <sup>14</sup>
<i>Against usury,</i>	Gabriel Aresti

Metaphors, as well as terms of kinship, related to the family and home are common in nationalist ideologies, not only in the Basque context. In the national ideologies of many groups, the nation and the homeland are portrayed as a family and home, respectively. Their territory is “the land of our ancestors” and compatriots are specifically linked by “blood ties”, as they come from a mythical “common ancestor”<sup>15</sup>. Wojciech Józef Burszta notes that: “Members of a nation are not strangers to each other, but brothers and sisters, parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, etc.; it is a great family living in one common house” (Burszta 2008, p. 94). Likewise, in the Basque region, the connection of family symbolism with national discourses has a special dimension. Here, as it is often emphasized, culture is very much connected with the political sphere.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the rapid transformations associated with industrialization, as well as the loss of local privileges giving the Basque provinces significant independence, the “traditional family” living in the countryside (a refuge of Basque culture) became the quintessence of “Basqueness”. It occupied a special place in the ideology of Sabino Arana, who, presumably, chose his wife because of her “national purity” – rural origin and a number of Basque family which names confirmed the

<sup>13</sup> The Basques are shown in the film as restrained, even in family relations (the meeting of father and daughter after many years is characterized by large distance). Basque women are presented as cold and unapproachable and romantic relationships are characterized by a long period of getting to know to each other before going on a first date.

<sup>14</sup> <http://basquepoetry.eus/?i=poemak-en&b=1427>, access date 25.02.2018, transl. Toni Strubell. One of my interlocutors emphasized a fragment of the poem mentions which the fight against justice. The value and importance of the home, he said, is even greater than the value of justice and objective fairness.

<sup>15</sup> For Basques, their mythical ancestor was Aitor. This figure comes from a legend created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Augustin Chaho (Egaña 2005, p. 27; Santiago de 2016, pp. 42–43).

descent from Basque ancestors (Martínez Gorriarán, Agirre Arriaga 1995, p. 206; Aranzadi 2001, pp. 884–885; Altuna 2012, p. 171). Early Basque national ideologists, such as Sabino Arana, pointed to the importance of the family and women as far as supporting Basque values is concerned. For this ideologist and his followers it was very important not to marry a “stranger” (i.e. a person who is not Basque), use *euskara* in family communication, and cultivate “Basque traditions” (Gurruchaga 1985, p. 316). The “Basque matriarchy myth” discussed earlier was also used by nationalists to confirm the higher position of Basque women, their better treatment, and thus the moral superiority of the Basques in general.

During the Franco dictatorship, the value of the family, preferably a large one, was emphasized. Mothers were supposed to “work as is fit for women”, that is, to take care of the home and bring up children. Parents with record numbers of children were rewarded by meeting General Franco in person. An interesting source material showing the ideal of the “domesticated” woman is the “Guide of a Good Wife” from 1953, in which we can find recommendations how to make the husband’s favourite meal, how to prepare the children and the house before he comes home, also how not to trouble him with domestic problems, because “his affairs are always more important”<sup>16</sup>. A good wife should also understand when he does not return home directly from work, because he needs to relax after a busy day.

A sixty-year-old woman – a resident of one of the villages on the Basque coast, mentioned to me her mother’s disappointment with her at the news that she did not want to have children. Looking after children was seen as equal to the “spiritual formation of the nation”, though, of course, the man was the head of the family. Contraception, abortion, or divorce were forbidden, and an unmarried woman with a child was excluded from the community (my interlocutors described such cases). The decency and morality of women were emphasized (Roigé 2011, pp. 725–732). As one of the inhabitants of Vitoria-Gasteiz observed: “At that time, everything was a sin [...]. It was a sad and grey time”. Another woman compared the times of dictatorship to today’s customs, and talked about her niece who comes to family meetings with her boyfriend: “although they are not married, they sleep in one bed”. She perceived it as a huge change as she compared it to her youth, when her parents controlled her and made sure that she did not behave “inappropriately”.

Domestic duties were primarily the responsibility of women, and many of my interlocutors (women) said that their brothers “did not have to do anything at home”, and that they themselves were even required to clean their brothers’ shoes or make beds for them. One of the women remembered her father’s indignation one day when he said: “There are three women in the house and I have to get up from the table to get some salt”.

At the same time, during the Franco dictatorship, the model of “one big” Spanish culture was propagated, and it caused the repression of minority cultural differences.

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.chicagotribune.com/hoy/ct-hoy-8035814-la-paradoja-de-la-guia-de-la-buena-esposa-fotos-photogallery.html>, access date 11.01.2018.

Therefore, what was represented by the Basques, and especially the Basque-speaking family (*euskara*<sup>17</sup> was largely connected with the family and rural context), was denied (Gurruchaga 1985, p. 324). Children were punished at school for using the Basque language. Some parents therefore decided to stop using Basque at home, considering that “*euskara* will only bring problems to children” or believing the teacher that communication with their child in Spanish would be a remedy for learning problems. Thus, on the one hand, the Basque language ceased to be present and useful in the public space, but, on the other, it turned into a symbol of the Basque identity (Gurruchaga 1985, pp. 324–325).

A special page in the history books of the Basque-Spanish conflict is that written by the ETA organization, the aim of which was to fight for an independent Basque Country, also by means of armed operations. Contrary to popular opinion, the period of its activity is not black and white. Amin Maalouf was right when he pointed out the danger and falseness of recognizing one of the parties as an aggressor and the other as a victim (Maalouf 2002, pp. 39–42). Without justifying violence in any way, and noticing the suffering of many victims, one should also point to other aspects of the “Basque problem”, including violence and abuse by the Spanish authorities (for example the actions carried out by the GAL organization<sup>18</sup>).

Focusing on the subject of the “family spirit of the nation”, one should pay attention to the fact that the family occupied a special place in the Basque nationalist discourse. Begoña Aretxaga analysed the symbolism contained in funeral rituals of radical nationalists, who were regarded as terrorists and murderers by some (the government, the media), and as fighters and martyrs by others: relatives, friends, residents of hometowns (Aretxaga, 1988, pp. 76–81, 99–102). Family members, especially women – mothers or wives (who also played leading roles in campaigns for prisoners) – had an essential place in these rituals. They acted as the personification of the homeland (Aretxaga 1988, pp. 72–73, 91–100).

The funerals described by Aretxaga were not only religious ceremonies, but also acts of homage (for example, often accompanied by the *aurreku* dance, which is an expression of respect) and rituals that united the community. References to the family were also present in the discourse associated with those ceremonies, in which the deceased were called, for example, “sons of the nation”, and the cause of their death was the fact that they “defended their home” (Aretxaga 1988, pp. 64–67). It is worth noting that similar language also appears now, for example, in relation to Basque prisoners serving sentences outside the Basque region: i.e. the slogan: *Presoak etxera* – “Prisoners Come Home”<sup>19</sup>.

The declaration of ceasing armed struggle by ETA in 2011 had a great social impact and was a source of great hopes. Unfortunately, no real dialogue followed.

<sup>17</sup> Basque language.

<sup>18</sup> The group fighting the ETA in the 1980s, kidnapping and killing its members, secretly supported by the Spanish government.

<sup>19</sup> Flags with this slogan can be seen not only during demonstrations, but also hanging from Basque windows or balconies.

The Spanish side indicated the need for further concessions; many Basques emphasized that “Madrid does not want to talk” (international negotiators and experts were called for help)<sup>20</sup>. However, despite the fact that ETA already declared the end of armed activity, many problems resulting from the long-lasting Spanish-Basque conflict remain unresolved. Although some actions are being taken to build understanding, dialogue and peace (e.g. projects in schools<sup>21</sup>), it is a widespread opinion that only one group’s suffering is noticed, that of ETA’s terrorism victims. Such feelings of harm are expressed by the relatives of persons murdered by GAL<sup>22</sup>. People who were on the other side of the conflict are not considered victims (Mirgos 2016, pp. 167–177). It is also indicated that the Spanish government has not admitted to the unlawfulness of some of its actions, including torture and executions (Zallo 2006, p. 53). In consequence, it is difficult to reach agreement and heal the wounds on both sides of the conflict. In 2018, ETA announced the decision on self-dissolution. This resolution marks a new stage in Basque history, but it does not mean solving of all problems (the biggest being that prisoners from ETA are still kept in prisons far away from the Basque Country, which their relatives object to).

During my research, I talked both to people whose loved ones were killed in ETA attacks and who could not forgive and forget about it, as well as to those who suffered similar aggression from the Spanish side. Despair, however, is common to all of them. The suffering of a mother who, after the death of her son, seeks him in his friends, imagining that “their problems could be his problems” before she finally accepts that they are not him, movingly described by Harkaitz Cano in his novel *Twist*, reflects the despair after losing a loved person, one that is tragically universal, independent of beliefs or times (Cano 2013, p. 139). I also met many families in which there are both fighters for independence and pro-Spanish activists. The picture of Basque politics and of families embroiled in a difficult political situation is not black and white. Undoubtedly, however, politics is present in the life of Basque families. It is difficult to maintain indifference or neutrality, and everyday choices (associated for example with a specific model of education of children) significantly affect the nature of one’s family life (participation in specific ceremonies, identity)<sup>23</sup>.

An important element of the conflict, making it impossible to regard it as an exclusively historical one, is the situation of people associated with ETA, who have been serving long sentences in Spanish prisons. There would be nothing extraordinary

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20140119/54398267913/decimo-comunicado-de-eta-desde-el-cese-definitivo-de-la-violencia.html>, access date 2.01.2019; <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2011/11/12/espana/1321104109.html>, access date 2.01.2019.

<sup>21</sup> [https://cadenaser.com/emisora/2018/10/28/ser\\_vitoria/1540718669\\_949338.html](https://cadenaser.com/emisora/2018/10/28/ser_vitoria/1540718669_949338.html), access date 2.01.2019.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/memoria-historica/estado-discrimina-victimas-mayor-atentado-gal-hotel-monbar-baiona>, access date 2.01.2019.

<sup>23</sup> According to some research, children from Basque-speaking schools perceived themselves as Basques to a much greater extent than those from Spanish-speaking schools (see for example: Apalategi, Balluerka, Isasi 2001).

about this (it can be said that this is an element of deserved punishment) if it were not for the fact that they are staying in penal institutions located at a significant distance from their place of residence (often more than a thousand kilometers away). Many people and organizations, including international ones, have been postulating that a prisoner has the right to serve their sentence as close to their home as possible, and mentioning the fact that such a faraway location means additional punishment, for relatives, too, who have to travel long distances for many years (sentences can be decades long), which is not easy, especially for the elderly<sup>24</sup>. The data from the Etxerat organization from 2014 indicates about 498 prisoners, of which 377 are placed in 46 prisons in Spain, 105 in 27 prisons in France, six prisoners are in three prisons in the Basque Country, one is in Great Britain, one in Portugal and seven prisoners are held in special conditions because of their poor health (Etxerat 2014, p. 5).

This situation is particularly tragic for the children of these prisoners. The case of Kepa del Hoyo, who died in prison, was publicly well-known; his son openly spoke about how rarely he had the possibility to see his father (he had been travelling to visit him for nineteen years, the total number of hours of his visits was about nineteen days, which equals to one day a year)<sup>25</sup>. Soon, other young people in the same situation spoke up, pointing to the inhumane way of punishment. In January 2018, the Basque TV broadcast a documentary showing the lives of several Basque children whose parents are serving sentences in faraway prisons<sup>26</sup>. This program was criticized by some political parties and circles, who stated that Basque television should also show a documentary where the children of ETA's victims were the protagonists<sup>27</sup>.

These stories show other aspects of the conflict and consequences of the punishment. Among "children with backpacks" (a translation of the Basque term *motxiladun umeak* used to describe these children), there are those who were born in prison and spent their first years there, and those who know their parents only through rare and short visits to the prison. According to one of my interlocutors, this is the main problem today, as well as the risk of a new escalation of the conflict ("I do not know how I would feel and react to seeing my parent in such conditions, feeling such injustice towards me, too").

The families and friends of "political"<sup>28</sup> prisoners form a community that provides significant support (information, organization of trips to visit prisons, etc.). At the

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.eldiario.es/norte/euskadi/Amnistia-Internacional-conflicto-pagina-ocurrido\\_0\\_617689257.html](http://www.eldiario.es/norte/euskadi/Amnistia-Internacional-conflicto-pagina-ocurrido_0_617689257.html), access date 28.01.2018.

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.naiz.eus/eu/hemeroteca/gara/editions/2017-08-09/hemeroteca\\_articles/sare-da-voz-y-pone-cara-a-los-ninos-de-la-mochila-113-menores-en-total](https://www.naiz.eus/eu/hemeroteca/gara/editions/2017-08-09/hemeroteca_articles/sare-da-voz-y-pone-cara-a-los-ninos-de-la-mochila-113-menores-en-total), access date 10.01.2018. See also: <https://www.loquesomos.org/castigados-la-venganza-ninos-la-mochila/>, access date 28.01.2018.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.naiz.eus/eu/actualidad/noticia/20180110/el-programa-motxiladun-umeak-de-urhanditan-alcanzo-una-audiencia-acumulada-de-112-000-espectadores>, access date 10.01.2018.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.naiz.eus/es/actualidad/noticia/20180111/el-pp-pedira-la-comparecencia-de-iturberpor-el-programa-motxiladun-umeak>, access date 12.01.2018.

<sup>28</sup> Not everyone recognizes them as political prisoners, according to some they are terrorists only.

same time, there is no doubt that the situation of prisoners who have children is very complex. Both they and their partners have to face the hardships of lone parenting, separation and longing, complications in building and maintaining a relationship (Etixerat 2014, pp. 13–21), and the need to explain to their children the reasons of their parent's imprisonment.

The problem of the Basque prisoners in refers to the subject of the family in the Basque Country in a special way. Firstly, due to the terminology used in this context (the Basque country as a home, prisoners as sons of the nation, nation as mother, etc.). Secondly, in connection with the specific family model created by the families of the Basque prisoners, and due to the impact of the political situation on the family life in the region. Thirdly, due to the construction of the kind of „family”, which is formed by the relatives and friends of Basque prisoners (e.g. through associations and support networks). One of the latest examples of such a group are “Parents from Altsasu” (Altsasu Gurasoak<sup>29</sup>), created by parents of seven young Basques accused of terrorism.

#### CONTEMPORARY BASQUE FAMILIES

Today's social changes and cultural, political and economic phenomena have influenced the increase in diversity of family models, but also caused greater acceptance of them (*III Plan Interinstitucional de apoyo a las familias en la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco*, 2011–2015, pp. 5–60). According to the legal Basque definition (*Ley 13/2008, de 12 de diciembre, de Apoyo a las Familias*), a family is “a group of two or more people connected through marriage or a marriage-like relationship, or through filiation or another kind of kinship” (*III Plan Interinstitucional de apoyo a las familias en la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco*, 2011–2015, p. 14). However, presently, the family is more and more often any group that considers itself a family. That is how it was defined, for example, in 2017 by the organizers<sup>30</sup> of a cyclical event for integration of Basque and immigrant families (*Bizilagunak* project). The central meeting of this event is the representatives of the local and immigrant “families” eating dinner together<sup>31</sup>.

At this point, I would like to point out a few threads of family life in the Basque Country. The first of these is related to the declining importance of marriage for Basques today. The second concerns the issue of higher education rates, which result in the possession of fewer children, and consequently the ageing of Basque society. The changes also affect the nature of households. Increasingly, they are created by one person or by a group of non-blood-related people.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.altsasugurasoak.com/es/portada/>, access date 12.01.2018.

<sup>30</sup> CEAR – Euskadi, see: <https://www.cear-euskadi.org/bizilagunak-2017-una-convivencia-culturas-sin-rumores-xenobofos/>, access date 2.01.2019.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.mugak.eu/news/la-sexta-edicion-de-bizilagunak-se-celebrara-el-domingo-en-toda-euskal-herria> access date 10.01.2018.

From the 1970s to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number of marriages in the Basque region has decreased. Cohabitation is more popular, there is also the *pareja de hecho* institution, which provides official confirmation of the couple's relationship status and grants many rights, much like those for married couples (Zallo 2006, pp. 71–72). At the same time, Basques who decide to take such a step (marriage), do so at a later age, and rarely choose a church ceremony. Divorces and separations are also more frequent, there are more single parents and patchwork families. Same sex marriage has been legally recognized in Spain since 2005. Elixabete Imaz indicated that:

It should be noted that Spain was the third country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage (in 2005) and the first state that granted same-sex married couples the possibility of adopting. These transformations occurred precisely in a country that until the 1970s was governed by the National Catholicism principles of the Franco dictatorship, persecuted homosexuals and monopolized a univocal definition of family, which they turned into the bastion of the regime's morality (Imaz 2017, p. 6)

In comparison to the Franco dictatorship period, women's situation has changed significantly. Divorces and single motherhood socially are accepted, as well as abortion and contraception, and women's professional independence. Equality between the sexes has also been legally guaranteed (Zallo 2006, pp. 59, 72). There is a marked decrease in the fertility rate of Basque women (in the 1970s this rate was 2.8, in the mid-1990s it fell to 0.91, in 2004 it was 1.34) and an increase in the age of giving birth to the first child (from 28 years in 1975 to over 32 in 2008) (*III Plan Interinstitucional de apoyo a las familias en la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco, 2011–2015*, pp. 29–32). In the past, as Basque proverbs said, it was the child that made a couple into a family (*familia izan dabe*), and without children there was no home, no family (*Eztai etxerik, ez duena aurrik*) (Manterola 1994, p. 25). Today many couples intentionally resign from having children (sometimes they decide to take in an animal; one of the women told me about the complicated procedure for adopting a cat). The people I talked to state economic hardship (crisis, unstable employment, housing conditions) as the main reason for their decisions, but also talk about the desire to devote themselves to their careers, reluctance to lose independence, and sometimes other motives (like world overpopulation). Consequently, the Basque region, about which Louis Lande wrote that he had never seen so many children elsewhere, today is the European leader in low birth rates (Egaña 2001, p. 238).

One of my interlocutors working as a teacher, criticized late parenthood and pointed out that there were more and more orphans or half-orphans among her students, children whose parents were already mature and who became seriously ill. She also pointed to the differences in the behaviour of children of older parents, as well as their mothers and fathers who chose late maternity and paternity (for example, considerable concentration on the child and disproportionate expectations towards them). Another Basque woman told a story about her friend who gave birth to her children at the age of 40, and for whom the effort involved in taking care of the kids is almost beyond her strength. There is also a change in the way children are raised (greater affection,

less discipline, emphasis on tolerance, and fashion for “natural parenthood”<sup>32</sup>). Meanwhile, in the case of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century families, children were required to respect their father and mother, seen as “representatives of the author of life, which is God” (Rojo Hernández 2004, p. 312).

Today, Basque children spend a lot of their time in educational institutions – they often leave the house around 8.00 a.m. and they return around 5.00 p.m. This is especially so when their schools are located outside their home town, and they commute by special school bus. Therefore, in many families the main meal is supper, and the playgrounds are full of children only in the late afternoon and evening. My interlocutor who teaches extra-curricular classes mentioned that younger children who are brought to her courses are sometimes so tired that they fall asleep during these lessons.

In the latest debates on issues related to having children in the Basque Country, new problems arise, including those related to surrogacy<sup>33</sup>, which is a phenomenon that is growing in the region, and the sexual identity of children. An example is the ethics of surrogate motherhood. Some interlocutors point to a certain post-colonial aspect of this phenomenon, the fact that women from countries with a lower level of development are predisposed to be “wombs for rent”, which is caused by their difficult economic situation. Another issue is new parents’ rights (legality of the procedure, parental leave, etc.) or the situation where a relative offers to help an infertile couple. It is worth adding that there is a need to redefine the concepts of kinship due to emergence of new reproductive possibilities (Stone 2012, pp. 363–392). Another example of current topics related to the discussion on the Basque family is that about transgender children. In this area, the Chrysallis Euskadi organization is very active (educational activity included)<sup>34</sup>.

Another issue is the ageing of Basque society and the spread of alternative forms of households. The increase in the number of people living alone, many of whom are older women (often widows), is very typical. Another new phenomenon, shaping how families are defined, is the increase in the number of households inhabited by non-relatives (*III Plan Interinstitucional de apoyo a las familias en la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco*, 2011–2015, pp. 52–53). In some cases, groups of friends decide to live in such a model; sometimes they are migrants looking for ways to save money. Sometimes, immigrants employed as carers or domestic help live together with Basque families (this situation is a point for reflection on the phenomenon of the global care chain or the position of migrant women in host societies)<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> This concept covers a set of beliefs and practices such as birth without medical intervention, breastfeeding, physical and emotional proximity, sleeping together, carrying a child in a sling, etc.

<sup>33</sup> This problem was discussed, among other things, during lectures organized as part of the Summer University of the Basque Country in 2018.

<sup>34</sup> <http://chrysallis.org.es/contacto/euskadi/>, access date 27.01.2018.

<sup>35</sup> I witnessed many such cases during my research.

## CONCLUSIONS

According to studies carried out in the Basque Autonomous Community, the family is a value that Basque society indicates as superior (the importance of work, as well as free time, is increasing, while the significance of religion is decreasing) (Zallo 2006, p. 58). However, although family is one of the priorities for many Basques, nowadays individuals define by themselves what the family means to them.

When characterizing contemporary Basque families, it becomes clear that their shape has been influenced both by processes that also take place in other European countries (i.e. individualization, feminism, less frequent and later motherhood, new family models and relationships, etc.)<sup>36</sup>, and phenomena related to the history of Spain (i.e. the Franco dictatorship), including the situation exclusively connected to the Basque region (Spanish-Basque relations and conflicts, ETA, the situation of Basque prisoners).

Indeed, a particular element affecting the nature of the “Basque family” is the political situation in the region, as well as its multicultural and bilingual character. It also points to the question of possible differences in the models of bringing up children in Basque-and-Spanish-speaking families, as some research indicates differences in the issue of perception of identity among the inhabitants of the region depending on their mother tongue (Montrul 2013, p. 62). The family has been present in the national discourse, and its everyday life is often involves the necessity to make decisions of a political nature. At the same time, the image of the traditional Basque family, embodied by the inhabitants of a rural farm, remains an important national symbol.

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<sup>36</sup> Although in the past, without doubt, families did not constitute homogeneous constructs.

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FROM THE BASQUE FAMILY TO BASQUE FAMILIES.  
SELECTED ASPECTS OF RESEARCH INTO BASQUE FAMILY LIFE

**Keywords:** Basque Country, family, matriarchy, nationalism

The aim of the article is to discuss the concept of the “Basque family”. The author explores the ideological and stereotypical image of the family and contemporary family models in the Basque Autonomous Community. She also tackles the myth of Basque matriarchy and describes certain aspects of the political situation in the region. The article is based on the results of field research conducted by the author.

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