STUDIA HISTORICA GEDANENSIA

TOM XV (2024)

Katarzyna Mirgos
(Uniwersytet Gdański)

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4596-5028

From stigma to choice: Illegitimate children in Basque culture

DOI 10.4467/23916001HG.24.015.19530

Słowa klucze: kultura baskijska, dzieci, dzieci nieślubne
Keywords: Basque culture, children, illegitimate children

In traditional Basque culture, having children was of paramount value. As the Basque saying has it – without them there is no family, no home (*eztai etxerik, ez duena aurrik*).[1] But how were illegitimate children viewed? According to some researchers, extramarital relationships and the children of such unions were fairly common, especially in rural areas, and were rather accepted. Other data do indicate, however, that illegitimate children brought shame upon entire families and such children were often were left in foundling homes or even abandoned at crossroads.[2]

In this article, I examine the situation of illegitimate children in Basque culture. In addition to presenting this this issue from the perspective of traditional culture and history, I also focus on the changes that have happened in the region today following the political transformation in Spain. What concerns me is to identify the cultural shifts in society and the images of illegitimate children and their mothers. This article was written based on the analysis of sources from and interviews conducted in the Basque region.[3]

[1] Ander Manterola, *La familia tradicional de Bizkaia* (Bilbao: BBK – Bilbao Bizkaia Kutxa, 1994), 25.

[2] Pedro Berriochoa Azcárate, *Como un jardín. El caserío guipuzcoano entre los siglos XIX y XX* (Bilbao: Servicio Editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco, 2013), 342–343.

[3] This article was written as part of the National Science Center, Poland, project entitled "Nowa rodzina baskijska? Tradycja, polityka kulturowa i nowe formy życia rodzinnego" [The new Basque family? Tradition, cultural politics, and new forms of family life], project number: 2016/21/B/HS3/00045.

Pregnancy and childbirth in traditional culture

Parisetik, from Paris, is the response Basque children often heard when they asked how they came to be in the world. This is the answer many of my contemporary interlocutors also heard. According to reports from the region, explanations of purchased or found children were widely known. In many instances, it was the fathers who either purchased or found these children (fishers found them at sea and shepherds in the mountains). Sometimes children were told that they had been delivered by storks or that they had simply come from heaven (Basque *zerutik ekarriak*).[4]

Louis Lande writes that nowhere had he seen as many children as in the Basque region.[5] As reported by researchers, the family was of fundamental importance in Basque culture[6] and was linked with other institutions, inter alia, the *baserri* or farmstead. The birth of children was a great joy, their absence a great misfortune and a threat to the continuation of the family (women were usually blamed for infertility[7]). When the first born child was a son, it was cause for great joy.[8] Rituals were performed to ensure female fertility and the birth of male heirs.[9] Some of these were local in character or associated with local sanctuaries, but certain rituals were linked with daily activities such as pregnant women eating the heels of bread to ensure the birth of sons.[10] It was also believed that expectant mothers should not be denied anything as this could harm the child. According to one story, a pregnant woman from Aguilar asked her neighbor for a piece of bread three times. The neighbor granted her request twice, but refused the third impatiently. That same night, the woman gave birth to triplets, two were alive and one was stillborn with an open mouth.[11]

Until the mid-twentieth century, childbirth (*erditzea*) was primarily at home, surrounded by female relatives and a midwife. After giving birth, women stayed at home until undergoing the purification ceremony (*elizan sartzea*). Godparents played an important role and even had the right to choose the names for children (although there was also a custom of naming children after a saint whose feast day was celebrated on the day of their birth).[12] Some researchers have pointed out the existence of the practice of couvade in the Basque community, but this is not

[4] *Atlas Etnografico de Vasconia. Ritos del nacimiento al Matrimonio en Vasconia*, coord. Gurutzi Arregi (Bilbao: Instituto Labayru, 1998), 79–85.

[5] Iñaki Egaña, *Mil noticias insólitas del País de los Vascos* (Tafalla: Txalaparta, 2001), 238.

[6] José Antonio Azpiazu, *Mujeres vascas. Sumisión y poder. La condición femenina en la Alta Edad Moderna* (Donostia-San Sebastián: R&B Ediciones, 1995), 43–44.

[7] Teresa del Valle, *Las mujeres en Euskal Herria. Ayer y hoy* (Bilbao: Orain, 1996), 17; Berriochoa Azcárate, *Como un jardín*, 339.

[8] Berriochoa Azcárate, *Como un jardín*, 339.

[9] *Ibidem*, 339.

[10] Sylvia San José, *El pan y su trayectoria vasca* (Bilbao: Caja de Ahorros Vizcaina, 1984), 42.

[11] *Atlas Etnografico de Vasconia*, 128.

[12] *Ibidem*, 63–64.

confirmed by others.[13] When newborns were weak and thought to be near death, they were baptized at home often by the women who delivered them.[14] Babies who died before baptism or those who were stillborn were buried near the home in a what was referred to as the *etxekanderearen baratzea* – "the housewife's garden". Some believed that these babies went to purgatory.[15] Interestingly, until the sacrament of baptism, babies were considered unclean, and it was considered a sin, for example, to kiss them as they were not Christians.[16] Unbaptized babies could also easily fall victims evil eye (*begizkue*); hence, taking them outside the household was avoided, and amulets (*kutunak*)[17] were used to protect them. Young girls, of just 10 to 11 years old, were employed to take care of babies, often for a small sum or just for a small afternoon meal.[18]

Illegitimate and abandoned

Extramarital pregnancies could result from long-term engagements, a moment of passion during the holidays, or rape. In some instances, the fathers of illegitimate children were clergymen, and sometimes widows gave birth.[19] In the Basque Country, illegitimate children were referred to variously as *borte* (in the province of Navarra), *entenaos* (in Arceniega and Araba), *bardaliegos* (in Carranza and Vizcaya), and *biltiko umeak* or *bastartak* (in Hasparren and Labort). *Eibarko Hiztegi Etnografikoa* (Ethnographic Dictionary of Eibar) includes terms such as *sasikuma*, *sasiko*, *ixilkuma*, and *sasipoi*.[20] Other, more specific terms indicate that the child was born of adultery (*campix*), of an unmarried woman and a married man (*fornecido*), or of two unmarried people (*ganancia*).[21] The terms *sasiko* and *sasikumeak* were often used; one of my interlocutors indicated that these are pejorative and are insults. In traditional Basque culture, an individual was identified through the prism of belonging to a place, home, and family. Being from here meant being

[13] *Ibidem*, 125.

[14] *Ibidem*, 140.

[15] *Ibidem*, 120–121.

[16] *Ibidem*, 141.

[17] *Ibidem*, 141–145.

[18] *Ibidem*, 225–226.

[19] One such case was described in the town of Astigarraga in 1718. A widow living there had a relationship with a man (the people around her knew this), and she became pregnant. The child she gave birth to was abandoned in another town, on a farm the residents of which had no children (according to reports, they adopted the child and hired a wet nurse). Roquero Ussía Charo, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria. Del Viejo Reino al Antiguo Régimen* (Tafalla: Txalaparta, 2019), 203–206.

[20] Serafin Basauri, Asier Sarasua, *Eibarko Hiztegi Etnografikoa. Natura, Baserria, Lanbideak, Ohiturak* (Eibar: Eibarko Udala, 2003), 186.

[21] *Atlas Etnografico de Vasconia*, 670–673.

"ours," which was further reinforced by the practice of endogamy. Many researchers emphasize the importance of the concept of home, which was closely related to the idea of "we" and "our." A child born out of wedlock, on the other hand, was someone from nowhere (*sasikume* can be translated as a child from the bush), and using it against someone was an offensive accusation, even more so when we consider the importance of being part of the community.[22]

It was common for young unmarried women who became pregnant to be pressured into marrying the fathers of their babies as soon as possible; these ceremonies were very modest with only the closest relatives in attendance and no reception was held. The fact that women had conceived out of wedlock could even be used against them later, perhaps during arguments.[23] If married women delivered prematurely, they could be suspected of having conceived out of wedlock.[24] If the men refused to recognize their paternity and marriage, the fates of pregnant women were more complicated. Such mothers were sent to other towns, to family, or to work, while the babies were sent to foundling homes, if the family was poor, or if they were rich, the babies would sometimes be given to rural families to raise. Sometimes newborns were placed in the care of their grandparents or other relatives, while the mothers were sent to work as domestic servants or wet nurses. Single mothers found it difficult to marry, and men who decided to marry them were usually older or widowers. Illegitimate children were baptized in secret either very early in the morning or very late at night. If they were not recognized by their fathers, they would be given their mothers' names.[25]

Unmarried women who became pregnant often met with rejection even in their closest communities. In some cases, these women were forced to confess publicly to their "sins". It was also not uncommon for them to be cast out of their family homes, and, according to reports from Guetaria and Beasáin, this occurred into the mid twentieth century. This was also one of the reasons that newborns were abandoned.[26] The fact that extramarital pregnancies were condemned by both the state and the church also contributed to this.[27]

Unwanted babies were left in churches or foundling homes that would care for them. Sometimes they were left on the doorsteps of houses in which breastfeeding mothers resided or even at crossroads where there was heavy traffic thus increasing the chances that the babies would be taken in. Information about the babies was

[22] Carlos Martínez Gorriarán, *Casa, provincia, rey. Para una historia de la cultura del poder en el País Vasco* (Irun: Alberdania, 1993), 114–116.

[23] Children could have received similar insults, for example, from their peers. *Atlas Etnografico de Vasconia*, 673.

[24] Women who became pregnant after being raped were also criticized for not having protested enough, *ibidem*, 670–674.

[25] *Ibidem*.

[26] *Ibidem*.

[27] Roquero Ussía, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria*, 205–215.

sometimes left with them, for example, that they had been baptized. Sometimes babies would be left at households that were childless where often babies would be taken in and cared for. Basque households often took in children from foundling homes, and sometimes even adopted them. Pedro Berriochoa Azcárate reports there were several reasons for this behavior from the prospect of receiving funding provided for the care of orphans or having cheap physical labor to medical or moral motivations stemming from the death of one's own child to the clergy encouraging acts of mercy.[28] While deep bonds developed between adoptive parents and children,[29] numerous reports indicate that children were also treated poorly.[30]

In some cases, men who refused to marry women they had impregnated and to whom they had promised marriage had to pay compensation and were sometimes threatened with imprisonment or exile. In 1674 in Donostia/San Sebastián, as many as four women reported that the same man had proposed marriage to them; the court ordered him to marry the first of the women, which, however, the accused ultimately did not do.[31] In the early twentieth century in Bilbao, Jesusa Pujana, who became pregnant with her fiancé, murdered him when she discovered he was planning to run away with another woman. Although many condemned the murder, especially since the murderer showed no remorse, many women stood in defense of Pujana, feeling solidarity with the mistreated, abandoned young woman.[32]

Some women who wanted to end their unwanted pregnancies turned to midwives, who not only delivered babies, but also helped women who did not want to give birth, or folk healers, who administered herbs or spells.[33] Infanticide was also practiced.[34] Conversely, extramarital pregnancy was not always widely condemned. For example, in the town of Zerain, in the province Guipúzcoa, such pregnancies were viewed as introductions to marriage and accelerated parenthood (*Lanak aurreratu ditue*).[35] In Éibar there is a saying that illegitimate children are

[28] Berriochoa Azcárate, *Como un jardín*, 343.

[29] One of my interlocutors from Guipúzcoa province told me about an adopted girl who grew up on her grandfather's farm. He always thought of the girls as as his sister and became indignant when anyone said that she was not from the family. Another interlocutor gave the example of his grandmother, who was raising a girl from another baseri, which would happen in large families when one of the children would be placed in the care of childless relatives or friends. When she grew up and her parents complained about her, her grandmother took her back, but upon returning the grandmother suffered a heart attack and died. "Everyone said her heart broke with grief," reported the man. On the other hand, some interlocutors talked about the negative experiences some adopted children had and who, as adults, broke off contact with their guardians.

[30] Lola Valverde, "Los niños expósitos y sus nodrizas en el País Vasco (siglos XVIII y XIX)„" *Vasconia. Cuadernos de Historia-Geografía, Eusko Ikaskuntza* 17 (1990): 235–249.

[31] Roquero Ussía, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria*, 224.

[32] Aresti Nerea, *Las trabajadoras vizcaínas (1870–1936)* (Bilbao: BBK, 2006), 113–116.

[33] Roquero Ussía, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria*, 203–211.

[34] *Ibidem*, 203–209.

[35] *Atlas Etnografico de Vasconia*, 673.

often smarter and prettier or more handsome since, without fathers, God himself looks after them (*Sasikumiak sarrittan argixak eta ederrak, aittan ordez, Jaungoikuak begiratu dabelako eurengan*).[36] Such instances were decidedly less common. Usually, illegitimate children, just like their mothers, were rejected by society, marked by sin, or raised in foundling homes.[37] Abandoning illegitimate children was viewed as atonement for the shame that such pregnancies brought upon women.[38] This indicates that the consequences of social condemnation fell upon women--mothers and the children they gave birth to; women were fallen, their children the fruits of sin, while men often bore no responsibility.[39]

It should be emphasized that not all abandoned children were those born out of wedlock; some children were given up owing to the difficult financial situations of their families.[40] In some instances, it is clear that care was taken to ensure that no harm came to abandoned children or that attempts were made to give them good homes, for example, by leaving them on the doorsteps of wealthy households.[41] In these instances, abandonment was a way to save children and the tragic decision of people who had no means of providing for them.

Contemporaneous criticism of pregnancy out of wedlock was also noted. One of my interlocutors, a woman in her seventies and a resident of Vitoria-Gasteiz, recalled how her unmarried friend became pregnant during the Francoist dictatorship when pregnancy out of wedlock was stigmatized.[42] Since the father of the child refused to take responsibility for the situation, the woman filed charges against him; however, all of the members of his *cuadrilli*, or groups of friends, testified that they too had had relations with the woman so it was impossible to prove that the man she claimed was the father was responsible for the pregnancy. This male solidarity worsened the young woman's social situation and standing by labeling her as promiscuous. Ultimately, she decided to leave her hometown and found employment in another location. When she gave birth to a son, my interlocutor recalled that he was living proof of paternity because of his incredible likeness to the man who had denied responsibility for the pregnancy. In these situations, women

[36] Basauri, Sarasua, *Eibarko Hiztegi Etnografikoa*, 186.

[37] Top-down attempts have been made to remedy this situation. See: https://repositorio.bde.es/handle/123456789/4198, accessed on 23.02.2022.

[38] *Ibidem*, 204–207.

[39] Aresti, *Las trabajadoras vizcaínas*, 112–113.

[40] Abandoning legitimate children was stigmatized. Valverde, "Los niños expositos y sus nodrizas en el País Vasco": 250.

[41] Roquero Ussía, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria*, 203–204.

[42] María García of the Isadora Duncan Foundation, who became pregnant at 17 years of age in 1972, described feeling universal condemnation and was expelled from school run by nuns for being a bad example. Julia Fernández, "Madres solteras hoy y hace 50 años," *El Correo* (3.09.2020), https://www.elcorreo.com/vivir/padres-hijos/madres-solteras-anos-20200903163336-ntrc.html, accessed on 22.02.2022.

were to blame, and as my interlocutor recalled, when she was young it was believed widely that men had certain needs while women were to be models of morality.

With regard to the perception and social position of unmarried mothers and their children, it is worth examining the category of stigma Erving Goffman discusses and describes as an attribute that severely discredits individuals.[43] He points out the importance of prevailing social norms and the ways members are categorized, some of whom, because of their characteristics or behaviors, may be rejected or stigmatized. This was how, for example, representatives of certain professions (executioners, butchers, prostitutes) or people breaking social regulations are perceived.

Goffman also identifies three basic types of stigma. The first is physical ugliness, or various physical deformities. The second includes character defects attributed to weak will, untamed or unnatural passions, dangerous or dogmatic beliefs, and dishonesty, the defects of which are manifested in mental disorders, imprisonment, addictions, alcoholism, homosexual orientation, unemployment, suicide attempts, and radical political behavior. The third type of stigma applies to racial, national, and religious groups that is passed down from generation to generation and imposes the same stain on all family members.[44]

The belief that contact with stigmatized persons was threatening or defiling meant that these persons were alienated and discriminated against.[45] Relatives of the stigmatized person could also share in the stigmatization. Women who became pregnant outside of marriage were met with social exclusion and isolation. Women would avoid any contact them as relationships with such women could affect how they themselves were perceived, and there was always the risk that they would also be seen as misbehaving. When unmarried pregnant women became visibly pregnant, the belly became a symbol of shame and stigma, while fathers' guilt remained invisible.[46] Children born of these pregnancies were also stigmatized and were often described as bastards.[47]

Foundling homes and wet nurses

The first foundling homes that cared for abandoned babies were established in Spain in the sixteenth century, and three centuries later, they had been established

[43] Erving Goffman, *Piętno. Rozważania o zranionej tożsamości* (Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2005), 31 *et al.*

[44] *Ibidem*, 34.

[45] Some of these people undertook various strategies to gain social acceptance and improve their situations, as well as attempts to hide stigmas. There are interesting examples of communities that ignore the fact that they are seen as stigmatized groups; Goffman points out Roma, ultra-Ordodox Jews, Mennonites, and criminals, *ibidem*, 37–52, 122–146.

[46] *Ibidem*, 79–87, 114–115.

[47] *Ibidem*, 35, 64.

throughout the country.[48] Initially, they were located in hospitals and run under the auspices of the church, while city authorities would later take responsibility for them. Children could stay in these places until reaching the age of majority, of course if they survived. The mortality rate in these shelters was within a terrifying range of 70 to 80% and even 100% in times of famine or epidemic.[49] Babies were usually abandoned after dark. Some places had a movable mechanism thanks to which, when a bell rang, the person on duty opened a special niche into which a baby had been placed. Typically, abandoned babies were under a month old, and sometimes a message was included, such as why the babies were abandoned or that they were baptized. Sometimes a personal item was left with them. Some babies were nearly naked, sometimes they were in poor physical condition, but there were also those whose appearance indicated that they were from the upper classes. These babies may have been abandoned to avoid scandal, and this was more common in large cities such as Madrid. Infants abandoned in areas without foundling homes were transported to the nearest one, but these were not always close by; for example, babies abandoned in the province of Vizcaya were sent to Pamplona, while those from Guipúzcoa to Zaragoza. Many of these babies never reached their destinations having died en route from difficult travel conditions.[50]

Providing abandoned babies with food – human breast milk – was a particular problem. Infants in foundling homes were fed by wet nurses employed for this purpose, but when breast milk was in short supply, animal milks were used. Some wet nurses took babies into their own homes, for a fee, and often boys were chosen over girls. Instances are recorded of wet nurses returning several times for yet another baby citing the death of the previous infant and collecting wages each time. Wet nurses in poor health who fed several babies often infected them with various diseases.[51] Women were also known to leave their own babies in foundling homes, and then to take work as wet nurses in these same institutions. In order to eliminate such abuses[52] and the potentially unfair treatment

[48] In the case of the Basque region, the major foundling homes and branches of them located in Calahorra, Logroño, Vitoria, Bilbao, and Mondragón were established in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. See Pilar Unda Malcorra, "Le exposición en Vizcaya en el sigio XIX: nacimiento y problematica financiera de la Casa de Expósitos de Bilbao" in *Enfance abandonnée et société en Europe, XIVe-XXe siècle. Actes du colloque international de Rome (30 et 31 janvier 1987)*, Publications de l'École française de Rome, vol. 140 (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1991), 1153–1167, https://www.persee.fr/doc/efr_0000–0000_1991_act_140_1_4491, accessed on 22.02.2022.

[49] Pedro Trinidad Fernández, "La infancia delincuente y abandonada" in: *Historia de la infancia en la España contemporánea 1834–1936*, dir. José María Borrás Llop (Madrid: Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez, 1996), 501–508.

[50] Roquero Ussía, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria*, 207.

[51] Valverde, "Los niños expósitos y sus nodrizas en el País Vasco": 237–246.

[52] In some cases, these were probably the result of families' difficult financial situations, indicating mothers' desires to take care of and feed their children and to earn a living. Therefore, this

of the children being fed, France, in 1834, introduced the principle that infants abandoned in given foundling homes would be cared for in other facilities,[53] and this rule was in force at the foundling hospital in Pamplona.[54]

It is important to focus on the differences among wet nurses. The healthiest among them who enjoyed good reputations, confirmed, for example, by local clergy, and could hope for employment in respected families nursing legitimate children, which would be well paid work under good conditions. The poorest wet nurses, who often suffered from various diseases, were employed in foundling homes, where wages were often low and each wet nurse was expected to feed several babies. These women were usually unmarried. Another group of wet nurses included those women who would take children into their own homes; experts recommended that children be raised in the countryside.[55] Women who undertook this type of work included those who had abandoned their own children, those who agreed to nurse their own and other people's children, and those who had been forced to give up their own children to other wet nurses, to feed them with animal milk, or even to wean them early.[56] In some instances, women whose own children had died would undertake wet nursing as recommended by doctors. Lola Valverde also points out cases in which being wet nurses was a way of life to the extent that women would become pregnant intentionally and then abandon or even kill newborns in order to hire themselves out as wet nurses.[57]

Among wealthy families, hiring wet nurses was confirmation of their status, and looking after one's own children and breastfeeding them were inappropriate occupations for women of the higher classes.[58] As Elena Soler notes, these activities were associated with low social status and poverty.[59] Women to be employed as wet nurses were often sought out in rural areas[60] as they were thought to be in good health.[61] In her analysis of wet nurses in the nineteenth and twentieth

---

could have been a dramatic care strategy undertaken by women who did not want to abandon their children.

[53] Trinidad Fernández, "La infancia delincuente y abandonada" in *Historia de la infancia en la España*, 503–506.

[54] Valverde, "Los niños expósitos y sus nodrizas en el País Vasco": 237.

[55] These children were often not well treated, and their mortality rates were high especially among those fed by wet nurses in foundling homes, *ibidem*, 235–249.

[56] Roquero Ussía, *Historia de las mujeres en Euskal Herria*, 209.

[57] Valverde, "Los niños expósitos y sus nodrizas en el País Vasco": 233–234.

[58] The current situation is often different with women being pressured by society and the medical community to breastfeed with those who cannot or do not want to breastfeed being labeled bad mothers. Elixabete Imaz, *Convertirse en madre. Etnografía del tiempo de gestación* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2010), 314–325.

[59] Elena Soler, *Lactancia y parentesco. Una mirada antropológica* (Barcelona: Anthropos Editorial, 2011), 137.

[60] They introduced certain element of rural culture to these children including rural lullabies, stories, and beliefs, *ibidem*, 150.

[61] Imaz, *Convertirse en madre*, 39.

centuries, Nerea Aresti reports that wet nurses traditionally from rural areas[62] were employed for periods of approximately two years, and sometimes they would be hired several times to nurse subsequent children. In addition to wages, which would improve the situation of their families, wet nurses would be given appropriate clothing that would be worn in the company of the employers' families indicating their occupation; during this period the hiring of wet nurses could also be criticized as immoral.[63] The treatment of wet nurses in wealthy families and the meals they would receive differed from that of other servants, which could make them objects of jealousy with additional remuneration or gifts given for children reaching milestones such as the appearance of the first tooth.[64]

It is worthwhile to examine how breastmilk and breastfeeding were perceived in historical and cultural contexts. In wealthy families which employed wet nurses no significance was attached to children being fed with the milk of a stranger. Conversely, wet nurses employed to feed the children of well-to-do families could benefit from the special positions they held.[65] In some cultures, breastmilk and being breastfed by the same woman could established kinship ("milk siblings" and "milk kinship"), but it also imposed limitations such as on the possibility of marriage, strengthening alliances and relationships, and even attenuating hostilities.[66] Breastfeeding was associated with nature, biology, the creation of kinship, and finally with ethics and marketability,[67] but also with the desire to help others.[68]

Nothing of one's own. Not even a name

While conducting research and interviewing inhabitants of the Basque region for this article, I noted that many people had family histories of abandoned children. Very often when I mentioned research on illegitimate children, including abandoned children, many of my interlocutors interrupted to tell me that this had been the fates of their grandmothers or grandfathers. I had the opportunity

[62] Wet nurses from the Basque Country were among the most highly regarded in large Spanish cities. Aresti, *Las trabajadoras vizcaínas (1870–1936)*, 78.

[63] *Ibidem*, 75–82.

[64] Soler, *Lactancia y parentesco*, 146, 159.

[65] *Ibidem*, 134.

[66] Soler writes about various aspects of breastfeeding and kinship in *Lactancia y parentesco*.

[67] Today, in this context, we sometimes discuss surrogacy as the exploitation of women from poorer countries and an element of reproductive tourism. Conversely, surrogacy is also choice or an act of altruism. Jorge Grau Rebollo, *Nuevas formas de familia. Ámbitos emergentes* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2016), 78–84.

[68] Currently, an element of female solidarity is seen in initiatives for breastfeeding mothers to share and donate surplus milk to babies deprived of this valuable food, for example when women cannot produce milk or must stay in hospital etc.

to hear one such story in July 2021.[69] My interlocutor shared the story of her grandmother, which she had learned of coincidentally when she became interested in the genealogy of her family. Among the documents she found information about an abandoned child, which came as a surprise: "My mother died two years ago at the age of 94, and this was not something that had ever been discussed in our family…I believe that my mother never knew that her mother was an abandoned girl".

Searching for clues in existing documentation permitted my interlocutor to reconstruct partially the fate of her grandmother, who was abandoned in February 1892. According to an extant description, the baby girl was dressed very modestly and wrapped in a "old white cloth," which, according to my interlocutor, indicated the baby's poor origins. As my interlocutor learned, no identifying elements were found with the baby. One year before my interlocutor's grandmother was abandoned, the local authorities issued a document describing the procedure to be follow with such children. My interlocutor explains:

> One of the things that is particularly moving is how these children were named. Prior to this, naming was, let's say, unregulated, and often surnames were taken from specific places, for example Tolosa or San Sebastián, or these children were simply named Abandoned,[70] which explains why there are such surnames… but then the authorities ordered that surnames be made up and in Basque so they would not stand out. Today, a century later, these surnames are common, but from a linguistic perspective, they are just made-up words.

In the case of her grandmother, her given name of Marta was not very popular in the Basque region, which is likely why she quickly began to be called Martina. Her surname in subsequent official documents also appeared differently, and finally on her death certificate it differed from the name given to her at the beginning of her life: "[…] for me this symbolized very well or reflected how life was for these children. They almost didn't have their own names or surnames since they were made up. In fact, these children were nobodies".

This little girl, like many children in similar situations, was taken in by a family from a nearby farm, and her name appears as "Marta – a child abandoned in San Sebastián" in the registration documents of the inhabitants of this household. In later registration documents, yet another child's name appears that this family cared for.[71] My interlocutor noted that the authorities would propose

[69] This interview was conducted in Zarautz (Basque Autonomous Community) July 22, 2021 in Spanish. I would like to thank my interlocutor for sharing the story of her grandmother with me – *Mila esker Karmele*!

[70] Abandoned, rejected, cast aside (*expósito*). This is how children who were unrecognized, rejected, abandoned at birth, and placed in foundling homes were referred to in Spanish, https://dle.rae.es/exp%C3%B3sito, accessed on 26.02.2022. See also: *Słownik łacińsko-polski*, red. Marian Plezi (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007), 443.

[71] Earlier I discuss the various reasons families decided to take in abandoned children.

that a given family adopt or foster a child that was in their care, and they would also monitor whether the child was alive by requiring regularly showing the cild to a clergyman; however, fraudulent practices were noted here such as showing another child so as to not lose the the income as a result of the death of the child in their care. The fact that when the grandmother of my interlocutor was more than seven years old she was no longer noted in the registration documents of this household indicates that she was neither adopted nor fostered: "I don't know what happened to my grandmother from the time she was seven until she married… I don't know what happened or if I ever will know".

My interlocutor suspects that her grandmother could have been sent to work on another farm as was often done in similar situations. The marriage prospects of such girls were poor, which is why the authorities granted them a certain dowry. Once married, my interlocutor's grandmother lived in a very modest house, and her husband was also very poor. The grandmother could not tell her story to her daughter, my interlocutor's mother, because she died shortly following a subsequent birth when her daughter was barely two years old. At the time of her death, there were five children in the family. The widowed grandfather quickly remarried, interestingly to another woman who had been abandoned as a child. My interlocutor reported that her mother always referred to the woman as second mama (*bigarren ama*), although she did note differences in the treatment of herself and her siblings compared to that of the woman's own children. My interlocutor's mother, the interlocutor's grandmother, was sent to work on another farm at the age of nine years old. At that time, children were treated differently. "It was a different world," one in which her grandmother did not sign her own marriage certificate, and in the space where her signature should have been was a note: "She did not sign because she does not know how". My interlocutor conducted an intense and difficult search and overcame subsequent obstacles to discover small details about the fate of her grandmother and is intent on "giving meaning to her life. The family has changed their surname to that which their grandmother used originally.

Stolen children. Perfect victims

In the early twenty-first century, increasingly open discussions were being held in Spain concerning the likelihood of children having been stolen and illegally adopted in the country under the Franco regime from the 1930s until the end of the twentieth century. Increasing numbers of people learned that their experiences were similar to those described in the media, discovered ambiguities in their documentation, and realized that their current identities appeared to be uncertain. Numerous organizations throughout Spain are active in bringing together people who believe that they were victims of this practice. Some researchers believe that

the number of Spaniards of "changed identities" could be as high as 300,000.[72] However, others claim that the scope of this practice was far less widespread and that it is difficult to speak of thefts and child trafficking, although illegal adoptions might have taken place.

During the Franco dictatorship, ideology often motivated taking newborns away from mothers who were politically against the regime, and placing these infants with families loyal to the system. In later years, the financial aspect became key as these practices were highly lucrative.[73] Many childless parents dreamed of offspring, and especially of adopting healthy newborns. Doubtless, some believed the assurances that these infants were the children of women who either had not desire or were unable to take care of them.[74] The moral aspect was also significant; newborns were frequently taken from "fallen" single mothers who could not model appropriate parenting, and they also lacked familial support and were often defenseless. Among those who became pregnant out of wedlock there were women for whom giving babies up for adoption was a good solution for a difficult situation. Many woman never consented to adoption and never learned what happened to their newborns. When twins were born, sometimes families were told that one of the infants had died because it was weaker or it had contracted an infection.[75] Surprisingly, families were usually informed that the stronger of the twins was the one that died suddenly.[76]

The pattern of action emerging from numerous accounts shows certain regularities. First, the situation of the women–victims was significant. They were often single mothers, and, if married, they were poorer and less educated women. Second, there was the question of the position of the perpetrators, and hospital and church personnel, who had both authority and power, that were engaged in the practice.[77] Biological mothers were informed that their babies died at birth or shortly thereafter. Rarely were they allowed to see the bodies and were sometimes informed that the burial had already taken place, or that the institution "would take care of everything," which was a phrase that was repeated in many accounts. Next, documentation was often questionable with gaps, falsifications, incorrect dates, conflicting information, and the incorrect sex of the baby. Although the issue of child trafficking is no longer a secret in Spain today, victims often speak of their helplessness, the lack of support from state institutions, difficulties in obtaining

[72] González de Tena, *Nos encargamos de todo. Robo y tráfico de niños en España* (Madrid: Clave Intlectual, 2014), 233.

[73] *Ibidem*, 12–15.

[74] Neus Roig, *No llores que vas a ser feliz. El tráfico de bebés en España: de la represión al negocio (1938–1996)* (Barcelona: Ático de los libros, 2018), 221.

[75] González de Tena, *Nos encargamos de todo*, 123–127. On this topic, see also Jesús Duva, Natalia Junquera, *Vidas robadas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 2011).

[76] Neus Roig, *No llores que vas a ser feliz*, 39.

[77] González de Tena, *Nos encargamos de todo*, 167.

documentation, or problems stemming from the fact that some hospitals no longer exist and the people involved in given cases have died, and many stories mention the names of the same doctors and nuns.[78]

In his book entitled *Nos encargamos de todo. Robo y tráfico de niños en España*, Francisco González de Tena collects a variety of testimonies from people who were victims of child trafficking. One woman came from a family that supported Franco, which meant that her family was even more disapproving, because even though a pregnancy out of wedlock was shameful, the father of her child was Black.[79] In another case, Liberia Hernández Rodríguez was adopted by a couple who wanted to have someone to care for them in old age, and who, she relates, never treated her as their daughter. She was not only the victim of name-calling and poor treatment, but she was also molested. Years later she learned that her biological mother had left her in care for personal reasons following the death of her first husband and the inability of her second partner to accept the infant. The mother had thought this to be temporary, but when she attempted to reclaim the child, it was impossible.[80]

Neus Roig also addresses the topics of child trafficking, theft, and illegal adoptions in her book, which was based on her doctoral dissertation, entitled *No llores que vas a ser feliz* (Don't cry because you're going to be happy). This references letters allegedly written by mothers to the children they gave up for adoption. Identical wording appears in different letters as if all women thought in exactly the same manner.[81] In other cases, there was no trace of adoption because pregnancy and even delivery were simulated, and sometimes doctors certified that children had been born at home. Biological parents received perfunctory, contradictory, and illogical information concerning what had happened to their newborns and their bodies. Simultaneously, Roig notes, during democracy the victim profile shifted. Babies were taken not only from political opponents, including inmates that had been raped, and single mothers, but also from young married women whose babies were seen as valuable, like products.[82] Roig collected a range of testimonies, examined documents, and analyzed the mechanisms of how the perpetrators operated. The families she interviewed suffered constantly from not knowing what had happened to their children and not being able to mourn them.[83]

Similar testimonies also come from the Basque region. While conducting research in the Basque Autonomous Community, I heard the stories of woman who belonged to an organization for the victims of child theft and illegal adoption. Their accounts included elements that I describe above, namely false information

78 *Ibidem*, 14 *et al.*, 138–139.
79 González de Tena, *Nos encargamos de todo*, 43–69.
80 *Ibidem*, 77–85.
81 Neus Roig, *No llores que vas a ser feliz*, 25–26.
82 *Ibidem*, 32–46, 96–99.
83 *Ibidem*, 27.

or the lack thereof in documentation, inexplicable infant deaths, no infant bodies, factors that predisposed women to be victims such as lack of education and being unmarried.[84]

One of the most well-known cases[85] was that of María Dolores Chumilla, who was cast out of her family home because of the extramarital pregnancy. She and her partner decided to go to Bilbao (she was originally from Murcia), but he abandoned her and she ended up under the "care" of people who looked after pregnant women in similar situations. Chumilla lived in a shared home with other young woman, and because her financial situation was difficult, she was forced to work to cover the costs of her stay. Her baby disappeared after its birth as did all traces of her stay in the home and at the clinic. Unofficially, she learned that her daughter had been sold for 200,000 pesetas, and she obtained a photograph.[86]

Some people knew they were adopted, but they had no idea that these adoptions could have been illegal. Sometimes when seeking information they learned that their mothers were prostitutes and that they should not try to find them. Sometimes falsified documentation made it difficult to find any trace at all.[87]

Single motherhood in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

> Eta iristen da momentua – niri iritsi zitzaidan, behintzat -, "inoiz ez" erantzuna galdera bihurtu zena: "inoiz ez?", lehendabizi, eta "zergatik ez?", gero. Erantzunak aurkitzen saiatu nintzen. Bakarra aurkitu nuen. Bederatzi hilabete geroago.[88]
>
> Arantxa Iturbe

Attitudes about sexuality and motherhood have changed fundamentally in modern times. Motherhood is no longer perceived as a woman's destiny thanks to second wave feminism and especially the writings of Simone de Beauvoir. Some authors view motherhood as a form of oppression, while others identify being a mother as an option, a choice, and a unique experience and focus on issues of care or the relations of nature and culture with respect to what is female and male.

---

[84] Katarzyna Mirgos, *Gure. Historie z Kraju Basków* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2020), 92–108.

[85] Among others sources, such cases gained notoriety from media interviews with wronged parties.

[86] González de Tena, *Nos encargamos de todo*, 91–96.

[87] *Ibidem*, 99–102.

[88] And the moment comes – at least it came to me – when the answer "never" became a question: first "never?" and later "why not?" I tried to find answers. I found only one. Nine months later (from the Polish translation by the author of this article). Arantxa Iturbe, *Ai, ama!* (Irun: Alberdania, 1999), 16.

Authors that can be mentioned in the context include Adrianne Rich, Luce Irigaray, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, Henrietta Moore, and Sherry Ortner.[89]

Shifts in morality accompanied the changes that followed the end of the dictatorship in Spain. During the Franco period, the model woman was a Catholic wife and mother who was dependent on men, either her husband or father, and focused on looking after the home.[90] Xavier Roigé notes that among Franco loyalists the family was the key element, with Spain itself portrayed as one great family. Women were encouraged to have many children, and their destiny lay in making a home and in motherhood as rearing children was synonymous with shaping the nation spiritually. All other forms of family life were inappropriate. Co-education, sex education, divorce, abortion, and birth control were all viewed negatively. After taking power, the Franco regime annulled divorces that had been granted during the Republic, and some divorced couples found that they were once again married.[91]

The fall of the dictatorship brought legal changes, but also moral transformations. Fights commenced for gender equality, the right to abortion, the rights of single-sex couples to marry and adopt children, and now, finally, discussions are being held about trans children and how motherhood is more than just a woman's experience.[92] Perceptions about single mothers and women as the heads of single-parent families are changing.[93] This refers not only to women who choose to leave the fathers of their children, but also to women who want to become mothers without any partner at all and take advantage of the medical support offered by new reproductive techniques. In Spain, including in the Basque region, there are associations of independent mothers that support women who have decided

[89] A detailed description of the authors, works, and problems discussed is beyond the scope of this article; an example of such a discussion can be found in the book Imaz, *Convertirse en madre*, 73–116.

[90] Pilar Primo de Rivera warned that the reason for men leaving could be a lack of attention to the details of everyday life (unpalatable coffee, lack of opportunities for rest after work, poor housekeeping). María José Villa Rodríguez (castellano), Unai Belaustegi Bedialauneta (euskara), *Berdintasunerako bide luzea: Euskadiko emakumeak XX. mendean/Un largo camino hacia la igualdad: Las mujeres en Euskadi en el siglo XX*, dir. Mikel Urquijo Goitia (Madrid: Sílex Ediciones, 2020), 93–116.

[91] Xavier Roigé, *De la Restauración al franquismo. Modelos y prácticas familiares*, in *Familias. Historia de la sociedad española (del final de la Edad Media a nuestros días)*, dirs. Francisco Chacón, Joan Bestard (Madrid: Cátedra, 2011), 725–732.

[92] Within family studies, the terms of kinship, taking into account, for example, relationships resulting from new reproductive techniques must be rethought and redefined. Among others, see Linda Stone, *Pokrewieństwo i płeć kulturowa* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2012), 384–390.

[93] In the Spanish context, some point out that a single/independent mother (*madre soltera*) is not the same as a a mother as the head of a single-parent family (*familia monoparental*). The former can be unmarried but in a relationship, while the latter can be divorced but retain sole custody of the children. A woman who decides to become pregnant without a partner and the birth certificate does not include a father's name is both a single mother and the head of a single-parent family, https://familiasmonomarentales.wordpress.com/, accessed on 9.02.2022.

to become pregnant and raise their children independently and actively pursue their full rights in this regard, including for parental leave.[94]

Consequently, within a short span of time the Franco era society in which the traditional, large family[95] was the norm has now become one of the most open to a variety of family relations, and this includes new legal possibilities. New family models that include same-sex, single-parent, and extramarital are becoming increasingly common, and it is also possible to register civil partnerships.[96] My interlocutors, whose youths were spent under the Franco dictatorship, noted these changes. When they compared the times of their youth and the reality in which young people live today, they mentioned fundamental changes. One recounted that when she was young everything was a sin, but today her granddaughter lives with her boyfriend without being married.

The contemporary Basque community is ageing. It has one of the lowest birth rates in the European Union, which is accompanied by increasing life expectancy. The emancipation of young people also occurs later in the Basque region in comparison to all of Spain and other European countries.[97] Simultaneously, birth rates are declining in the Basque region as they are throughout Spain following the baby boom in the 1970s, and currently, birth rates among immigrants are likely to be higher than among locals.[98] The reasons to delay or decide not to become parents are many and range from economic and climate considerations to fears of change, an end of youth, and the responsibilities that are inherent in having children.[99] This also indicates that the most important values and expectations in relationships are happiness and love over stability, marriage, and procreation.[100] In modern Western societies, the institution of marriage is no longer associated with the interests of the family, it has become a consequence of an individual's choice. Simultaneously, with the liberation of women from traditional roles their social positions have changed as has the central role of children in families.[101]

---

[94] Other associations reflect the diversity of contemporary forms of family life, https://elkarteak.org/noticias.php?c=berriak&a=berri&i=1840&, accessed on 9.02.2022.

[95] This was also accompanied by opposition to abortion and divorce, and married women were to be free of professional work and encouraged to focus on family life that provided the greatest fulfillment and realization of their destiny. Imaz, *Convertirse en madre*, 46–48, 66–71. Rodríguez, Bedialauneta, *Berdintasunerako bide luzea*, 93–131.

[96] *Políticas de apoyo a las familias en Euskadi: análisis y propuestas, Informe extraordinario de la institución del Ararteko al Parlamento Vasco* (Vitoria-Gasteiz 2014), 49.

[97] *Ibidem,* 41–45.

[98] Imaz, *Convertirse en madre*, 118–120.

[99] Among others on this topic, see *ibidem*, 121–156.

[100] *Políticas de apoyo a las familias en Euskadi*, 43–44.

[101] Joan Bestard, "Familia y transformaciones en el parentesco" in *Familias. Historia de la sociedad española*, 977–978. A woman's choice also includes not having children. Being a mother is not seen by many women as their destiny or fulfillment. Moreover, women who regret becoming mothers

The numbers of single-person households and of couples without children increased significantly in the Basque Autonomous Community over the 1991–2006 period.[102] The traditional family of a heterosexual couple with children is today just one of many options. In 2001, over 20% of households were of single persons, slightly more than 18% were of couples without children, and just under 12% were headed by single parents. Fewer than half (44.4%) were families that could be described as traditional.[103] Data from the past few years indicate there has been a significant increase in the numbers of children born outside of marriage. While in 1975, such births were 1.5%, in 1990 they were 7.7%, in 2001 – 16.3%, in 2011 – 34.3%, and in 2016 as high as 43.1%.[104] The age of women giving birth has also increased, and in 2016 most women giving birth were over the age of 34, while among foreigners, 37.5% had not yet turned 30 at the time they gave birth.[105]

The number of women not in relationships that decide to give birth has also increased. In the Basque province of Vizcaya, the numbers of women using the services of reproductive clinics who decide to get pregnant without a partner has risen over the past five years threefold to about 20% of all patients (data from 2020). These women are usually over the age of 35 with stable professional and financial situations.[106]

Today, the triad of sexuality–marriage–procreation is separate, and these phenomena do not have to occur together.[107] Current definitions and perceptions of relationships, parenthood, and childhood, new reproductive techniques, and political and moral shifts in Spain, and the social situations of women have influenced how motherhood is planned and experienced in the Basque region.[108] The diversity of family models also means that children who were born intentionally outside of marriage no longer experience rejection or stigmatization. Research in Spain and specifically in the Basque region indicates the growing acceptance of new family models, accompanied by new legislation that responds to these social changes.[109]

In the past, the lack of men–fathers, which often resulted from choices these men made, had a substantial impact in the rest of the lives of women and their

---

are also starting to speak out. See Orna Donath, *Żałując macierzyństwa* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Kobiece, 2017).

[102] *Políticas de apoyo a las familias en Euskadi*, 40.

[103] Itziar Alonso-Arbiol, "Sarrera" in *Amatasuna eta aitasuna. Proposamen berriak*, coord. Itziar Alonso-Arbiol (Bilbo: Udako Euskal Unibertsitatea, 2006), 7–8.

[104] *Panorama Demográfico 2018*, Eustat. Euskal Estatistika Erakundea/Instituto Vasco de Estadística (Donostia–San Sebastián, Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2018), 20.

[105] *Ibidem*, 19–21.

[106] https://www.elcorreo.com/familias-bbk-family/madres-solteras-eleccion-20200212180156-nt.html, accessed on 8.02.2022.

[107] Jorge Grau Rebollo, *Nuevas formas de familia. Ámbitos emergentes* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2016), 49–52.

[108] *Ibidem*, 11–20.

[109] *Políticas de apoyo a las familias en Euskadi*, 40–41.

illegitimate children. Today, many women decide to become pregnant without a partner and sometimes have no plans for being in relationships. Having children outside of marriage has ceased to be cause for shame or crisis situations, and these children are no longer defined by their mothers' marital status, they are no longer bastards or foundlings, but are simply children.

Katarzyna Mirgos

From shame to choice: Illegitimate children in Basque culture

Summary

The article analyzes the situation of illegitimate children in Basque culture from a historical perspective. To do this, the author examines the place of parenthood in Basque value systems and customs, as well as the position of women, including unwed mothers, and perceptions of illegitimate children, both in the past and the present. Attention is also drawn to the nature of institutional care for abandoned children. Based on field research, the author presents the fate of a specific abandoned child. Additionally, the text addresses the issue of newborn trafficking and illegal adoptions in Spain, as well as the cultural changes that have occurred in this country and in the Basque region in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.