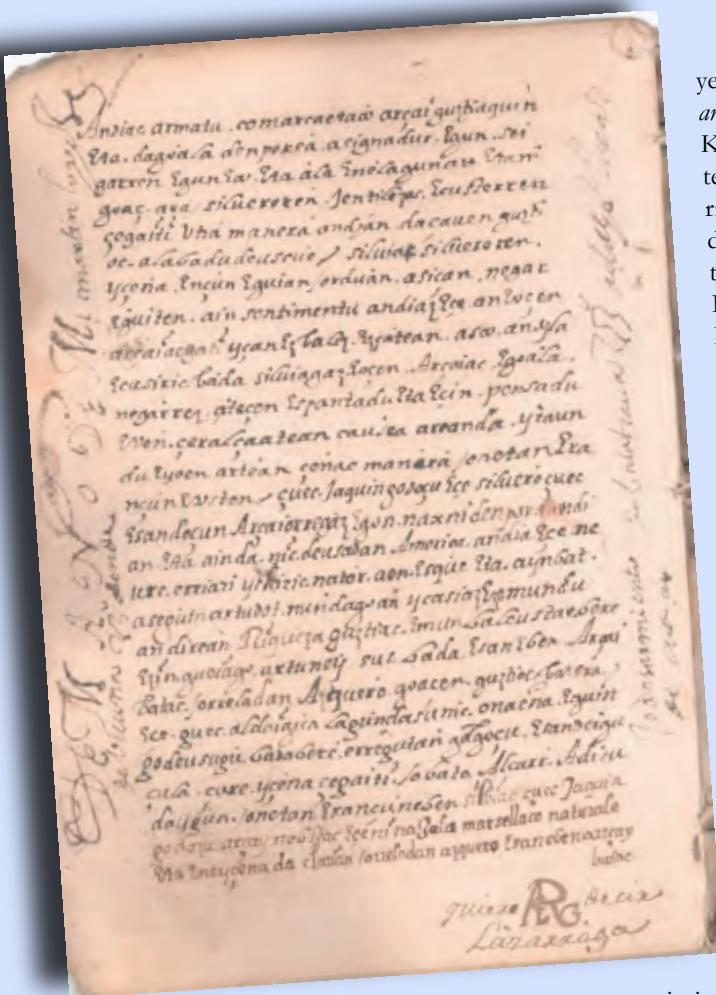




Basque Writing 7

A Short History about the History of the Basque Language



We have met many friends from all around the world during these years. When we meet, we use the typical courtesy: *"What is your name? Where are you from?"* The answer to this question is usually one word, if you are Kenyan, German or Canadian. Those without our own independent country, tend to give one or two more explanations. And if your nation is surrounded by a long history and mystery, the explanation becomes longer by default. By now we are able to differentiate the courtesy expression from the real interest, *"oh, Basque, such an ancient country, special language..."* Our PEN member **Lutxo Egia** has done a huge work on the history of the Basque language these last years. This number of *Basque Writing* has given us a magnificent opportunity to show the synthesis of that work.

"Nobody told me how difficult it is to be Basque", says one of our most prominent musicians, in his song *"Take care of what you love"*. As the founding of Basque PEN, that song is a response, too, to the closure of the only newspaper in our language. Indeed, sometimes it is difficult, being Basque gives us a bit of loneliness , when it is shown on maps with a special colour and we read *"Basque – Isolated"*. When we have been placed among the Hispanic (more than in the French-speaking) group, we remind people that Russian or Persian are closer to Spanish than Basque is. *"How stubborn you are"*, used to tell me a linguist from the Caucasus *"Hungarians are always trying to find relatives, and you do the opposite, mistrust anyone suggesting the slightest connection, proud of your isolation"*. Our language is isolated, but we the Basques always kept

relations with our neighbors, old Basque whalers even wrote dictionaries and created pidgins with distant neighbors that lived in Iceland or the Native peoples in North America. The mystery is not where we come from, but how we have managed to reach here, keeping what is ours, whilst taking from others.



Urtzi Urrutikoetxea
President of the Basque PEN Centre



Foreword



What makes a language important? The number of speakers? The position it enjoys in society? Having spread to more than one country? Or its antiquity perhaps?

For us Basque speakers the antiquity of our language has always been tremendously important. Among the surviving languages, our language is one of the world's oldest. It may even be Europe's oldest. And we say it may be, because no one knows exactly how old the language is. Linguists have no problem affirming that it is a Neolithic language. But after that, what?

Perhaps we Basques have attached too much importance to the antiquity of our language. Although English is in no way an old language, today it is the most widespread and

- Before God was God and boulders were boulders, Basques were already Basques*

about how ancient their language is. Perhaps we should ask ourselves this question: What is the point in having an extremely ancient language that is in a minority and difficult situation?

Until now, the mystery of our language has been precisely that: we do not know either when or where it originated. What is more, Basque has no known relatives among the world's language families. It has emerged as an isolate in the genealogical tree of languages. How mysterious!

But despite being isolated and alone in the eyes of linguists, Basque has always coexisted with other languages and other cultures. And these languages and cultures have down the centuries brought their influence to bear on our language in many different ways. The community of Basque speakers has lived alongside many peoples, like the Celts, Romans, Franks, French, Irish, and has often been dominated by them. So it is not true that Basque survived to this day because the Basque community has to a certain extent been isolated.

It was the linguist, the late Koldo Mitxelena, who made us see that the true mystery of Basque lies not in its origin, but in its survival. In other words, how the speech community has clung onto its language from one century to the next, how it has not been lost after enduring



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influence of other stronger languages. In other words, the history of a language is in fact that of its speakers.

Today Basque is in a very delicate situation. Even though knowledge of the language has increased over the last few decades, no progress has been made in its use. And in actual fact, the language community that has preserved the language down the ages is offering up some clues indicating how we should act in the future.

The true mystery of Basque lies not in its origin, but in its survival

The origin of Basque

Above the laws and administrative boundaries, the Basque Country is the land of the Basque language. It is spoken in three provinces in France (Lapurdi, Lower Navarre and Zuberoa, in other words, in the Continental Basque Country) and in four provinces in Spain (Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Araba and Upper Navarre, in the Peninsular Basque Country).

But of course that has not always been the case. This administrative division is quite modern. The land of the Basque language has not always been the same, and this is something that occurs with any language.

As pointed out already, we can make two assertions about the origin of Basque:

Today nobody knows anything about the origin of Basque, neither when nor where the language emerged. As the archaeologist Jose Miguel Barandiaran and other linguists have pointed out, Basque may have originated right where it is without having arrived from elsewhere.

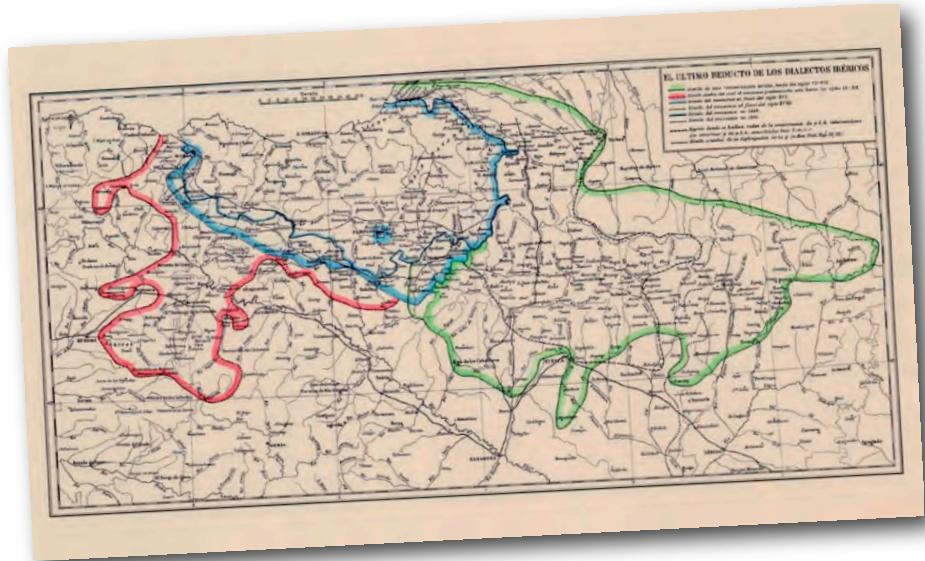
That leads us to the following assertion. Throughout history, Basque has been linked to more than one language: Iberian, the Caucasian languages, the Hamitic languages, the Finno-Ugric languages... Yet no relatives of Basque have been found among other language families.

The history of a language is in fact that its speakers

The history of a language is in fact that of its speakers



Early evidence



The first evidence of Basque (written evidence) dates back to the times of the Roman Empire. It has appeared widely on gravestones and altars, and not all of them in today's Basque Country. In fact, the territory of the Basque

The Basque Country is the land of the Basque language

language was bigger at that time than it is today.

The Romans arrived in the Basque Country during the 2nd century BC. These very pieces of written evidence discovered indicate therefore that Basque was spoken here before they arrived. But since when? We cannot as yet give a precise response to that question.

The Roman Empire fell at the start of the 5th century. In the course of nearly seven centuries the Romans conquered our land completely. And of course they brought Latin and imposed it. But Basque did not disappear in our land, unlike other languages in other lands that had had a Roman presence. All the neighbouring languages (Gaulish, the Celtic languages of the Iberian Peninsula, Iberian and further south Tartessian) vanished. Yet the Basque speech community hung onto its language. That prompts an interesting question: Why did Latin swallow up all the other languages and not Basque?

Among a whole host of languages.

Throughout the Roman Empire Basque retreated in some places, for example in broad swathes of Aquitaine (France) and in the south of Upper Navarre. Yet over the centuries following the fall of the Empire many territories (in Rioja and Burgos, in this case both in Spain) were repopulated; in parallel, Basque spread until there too it was totally replaced by the later Romance language.



During the Middle Ages, the Latin of the ordinary people developed and changed according to each place. It was a slow evolution that took many centuries. By the 10th century, as a result of these changes, the Romance languages were clearly distinguishable in many parts of Europe.

Four Romance languages grew up around Basque: Gascon (a variant of Occitan) to the north; Aragonese and Navarrese Romance to the East; and Castilian to the south.

But in the Middle Ages there were other languages (in other words, other speech communities) that existed alongside Basque, even though the majority language was Basque. Hebrew, Latin, Arabic and Occitan, for example, could also be heard. So there was a great wealth of cultures, intensified by what was brought by the pilgrims on their way

The Romans arrived in the Basque Country during the 2nd century BC.

to St. James of Compostela from the 12th century onwards.

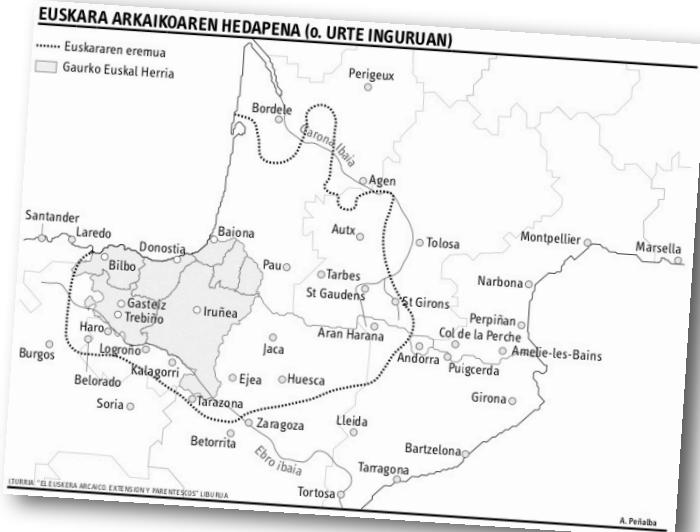
The Romance languages gradually began to replace Latin in texts. Yet the presence of Basque continued virtually non-existent. But Basque could not be hidden, and it turned up everywhere in documents. And that clearly shows that the people spoke in a language that was not written.

The spread of the written word directly influenced the speakers. Until then, there was no problem in being a monolingual Basque speaker. But from then onwards they had to rely on translations in administrative and ecclesiastical matters. This situation naturally favoured the non-Basque language and fostered knowledge of it, while Basque was relegated to limited functions.

That time saw the start of the process still in force in the C21st. The beginnings of the internal imbalance within the speech community.



The written language makes its first appearance



In the 16th century under the influence of the Renaissance, a movement in favour of French and Castilian Spanish began. In Spain, particularly after the Castilians had conquered Navarre militarily, Castilian Spanish became stronger in the administration.

At the same time, however, Basque was tearing down its frontiers. Firstly, it appeared in the written sphere where it had had no place up until then. In 1545, the Garazi-born (Continental Basque Country) clergyman Bernart Etxepare produced the first book in Basque: *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae*, i.e. the Beginnings of the Language of the Basques. Aware of the damage caused by writing in French or Spanish, he was the first to call for the normalisation of the language: «Basque, go out into the square!»

During the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation against the Church of Rome also took place. Protestantism had a highly positive effect on several European vernacular languages. It was against this background in the Continental Basque Country that Joannes Leizarraga led a group of clerics and together they translated the Bible into Basque. The text was the first attempt to unify Basque in the Continental Basque Country.

Leizarraga's Bible was, however, soon abandoned because Catholicism prevailed. So this plan to create a unified model and make the people literate came to nothing.

On the other hand, Basque spread to new territories. Since the end of the Middle Ages Basque fishermen had been in the areas of Newfoundland and Labrador. But in the 16th and 17th centuries, in particular, relations with the local peoples were intensified with the Innu and the Mikmak peoples, especially.

Some little Icelandic-Basque dictionaries were produced in the 16th century

The result of these relations is the pidgin created in the areas of Canada and Iceland, in other words, a language that develops when two human groups with different languages come together. What is more, in Iceland some little Icelandic-Basque dictionaries were produced in the 16th century. Four have been passed down to us.

In the 17th century, in an anti-protestant atmosphere, the Catholic Church started to require knowledge of doctrine. So, in the Continental Basque Country, especially, they decided to use the local languages and ordered that doctrine be taught in a way that the people could understand it.

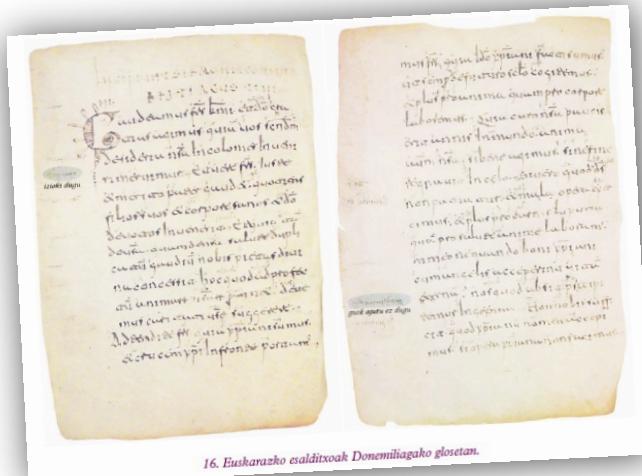
This situation, among other things, enabled local literature to flourish, because it led to the development of a refined, academic written Basque which became known as classical literary Basque. A group of writers met in the St. Jean de Luz and Sara area (Lapurdi, Continental Basque Country) and it became the centre of the literary renaissance. The movement became known as the Sara School.

On the other hand, in the 17th and 18th centuries the Church encouraged the setting up of schools known as "Ororen Eskolak" ("Petites Écoles") or Small Village Schools in some towns and villages in the Continental Basque Country. The main aim of these schools was to teach doctrine, but literacy in Basque was also taught.

The French Revolution set about implementing a firm policy in a favour of a single language (French)

This schooling exclusively in Basque came up against an obstacle at the end of the 18th century: The French Revolution set about implementing a firm policy in favour of a single language and identity (French).

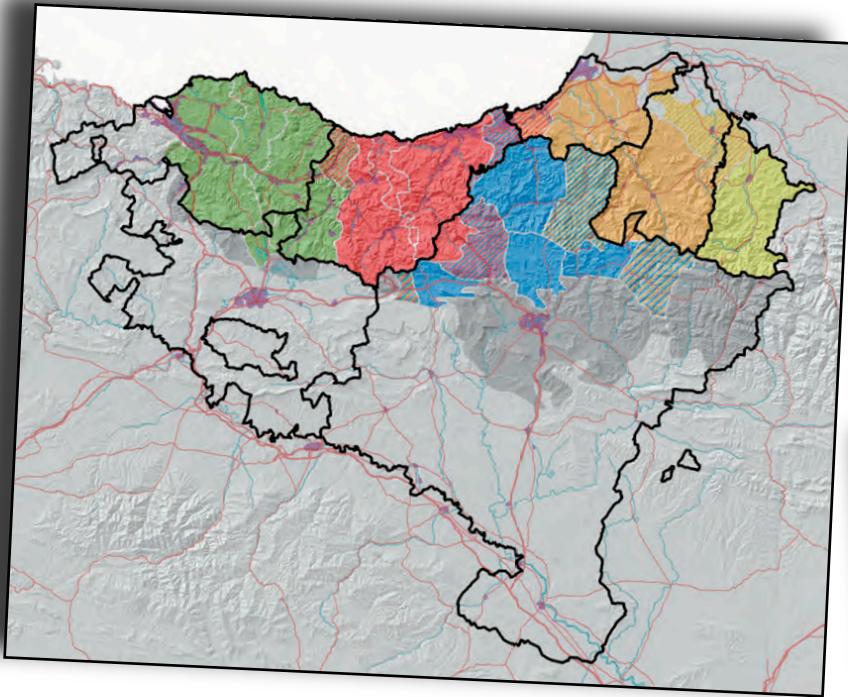
By that time, the Spanish government in the Peninsular Basque Country had passed decrees whereby Spanish only was to be used in schools, the administration and in publications.



16. Euskarazko esalditxoak Donemiliagako glosetan.



If a speech community is to survive



In the Modern Era French and Spanish, in particular, took over large areas from Basque. Early in the 19th century, on the other hand, the retreat of Basque had started to gather considerable speed, particularly in Upper Navarre and Araba (Peninsular Basque Country).

Yet in that century value began to be attached to local popular cultures and languages. Many foreign researchers (Wilhelm von Humboldt, Louis Lucien Bonaparte...) and local ones (Agosti Xaho...) acknowledged the name and location of the Basque language in Europe as well as in the Basque Country.

Curiosity about popular culture aroused Basque language loyalty among a number of people. The loss of the Charter or special laws, the centralist policies of Spain and France, the intensifying of the imbalance of Basque or the population changes brought about in the cities by the industrial revolution, among other things, all had much to do with this.

Within a few years that Basque language loyalty produced its first amazing fruits: the first newspapers and magazines exclusively in Basque; the first associations in support of the Basque language and culture; the first attempts to create a standard Basque, etc.

At the start of the 20th century the winds of change soon died down in the Continental Basque Country. The First World War was useful in further strengthening French centralism. In the Peninsular Basque Country, however, this loyalty was kept up until the Spanish Civil War [1936-39]. Basque and its culture saw a “Revival” during the 1920s and 1930s. But the Spanish Civil War and the coming of the Franco dictatorship destroyed it completely. Even before the war was over, the first decrees and laws against the use of Basque appeared. Basque was to be persecuted in Spain over the decades to come.

Albeit gradually, the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of movements in favour of Basque and its culture. They came about under the shadow of the dictatorship and managed to escape from it mostly clandestinely. The first “Ikastolas” (Basque-medium schools), publications and mass media during the Dictatorship emerged. What is more, the bases for unifying Basque were also put in place.

In the Peninsular Basque Country, Basque began to spread to territories which it had lost a long time previ-

ously, particularly in the south. At the same time the presence of the language was growing and it was also starting to win over new spheres (work, university, etc.). In the meantime, the language continued to lose speakers in the Continental Basque Country.

Over the last few decades Basque has won over thousands of new speakers. Knowledge of the language has increased in most places. Today, the biggest challenge is the use of the language. If the speech



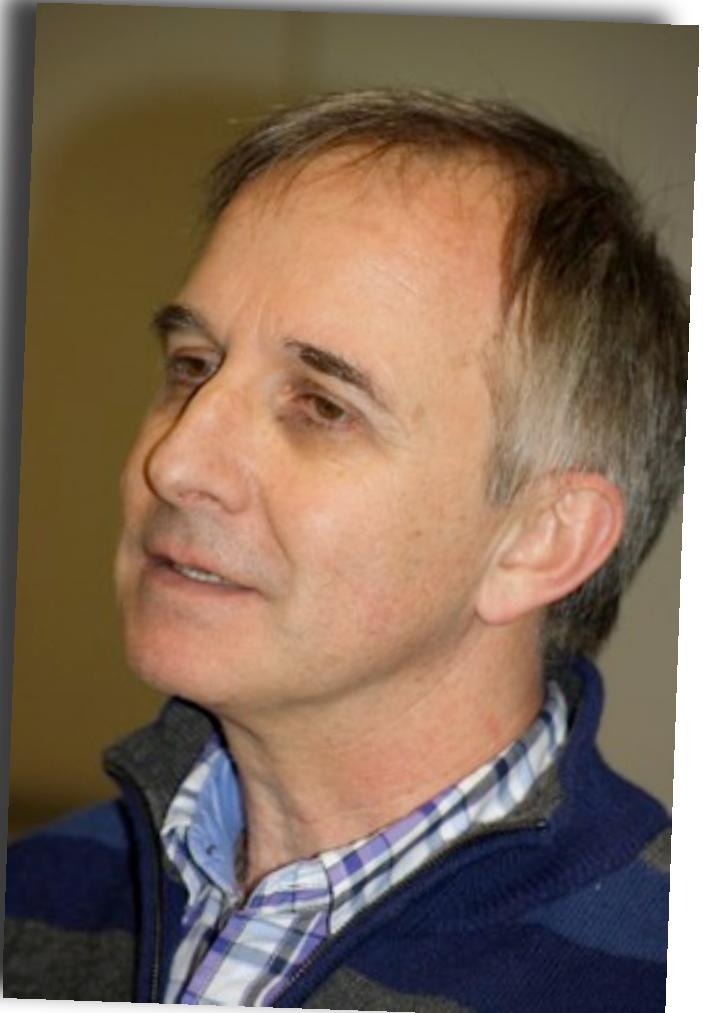
community is to survive, Basque speakers will need to adopt Basque as the dominant language, in other words, to use the language every day in any sphere of life, just as they have always done.





Talking to "Xamar"

The name of this Navarrese teacher is in fact **Juan Carlos Etxegoien**, but he is better known by his nickname *Xamar*. In keeping with an old tradition, he was given this nickname because he had been born in the Xamarrena family home in Garralda. He has written a number of books to spread our culture: *Orhipean, Gure Herria ezagutzen* (1992), *Orekan. Herri eta Hizkuntzen ekologiaz* (2001) and *Euskara Jendea. Gure hizkuntzaren historia, gure historiaren hizkuntza* (2006). They all focus on Basque and its culture, but not to say the same old things. On this subject he says that the time has come to start calling a spade a spade, because, as he sees it, the panorama is not at all good in the Basque Country. He states very clearly that the problem of Basque is not a school or education problem, but a social problem, a political problem.



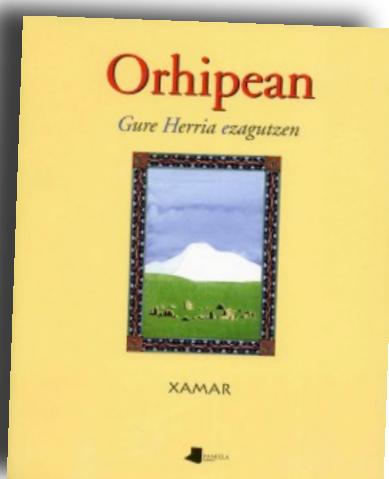
In the book *Euskara Jendea* you take a look at our history, from Prehistory up until today.

It takes a look at our history, but from the perspective of our language and culture, in other words, how the events of history have affected the language itself, the speech community, its development and culture.

Why the title?

In our country we have tended to treat the language as if it were something outside us; for example, "Basque has been attacked in such and such a way". But it isn't

the language that suffers; it is we, the speakers, who are having to put up with the situation. The language outside us boils down to two books: the grammar book and the dictionary. That is a task for philologists. But we are the living language, Basque is not something separate from us. That is what I wanted to highlight in the book, in other words, we people are Basque, we speakers are the language.



It has often been said that the mystery of Basque lies in its unknown origin.

We keep going on about the origin of Basque. But I don't find that particularly interesting. If the mystery were solved one day, it would of course be very important. But right now the real historical mystery is how we have survived, how the community of Basque speakers has managed to survive. How it survived in Pre-history. How it kept going during the time of the Roman Empire when all its neighbouring languages had disappeared. At the end of the day,

how it has managed to survive down the centuries to the present day. That is the only "mystery".

"There's no such thing as an isolated culture in the world"

We Basques have often wanted to transmit the idea that this happened because the Basque Country remained isolated for a long time.

That's utter nonsense, of course. The survival of our speech community is amazing historically. Thinking that it was by pure coincidence, that it was the result of being an isolated country forgotten



among the mountains is daft; it also shows that we know nothing about history and geography, among other things. Today we say that it has had to interact with other languages and cultures. But that has always been the case. There's no such thing as an isolated culture in the world.

What a culture that has managed to remain alive has done is this: it has maintained contacts with those around it, it has taken and adapted things from them and has also discarded things. If it is alive, at least. What people say about us is that we have survived in a pure state. If that were so,

we'd still be living in mountain caves hunting and painting, and that's clearly not the case. That has not been possible, because we are located on one of Europe's most important crossroads, at a natural crossing point through the Pyrenees. So that idea, of an isolated people, that idea that says we have not been conquered, is false. We Basques have lived alongside many different peoples down the ages, and we have always managed to adapt to new situations, to unite.

"Successful demonstrations are often held in favour of Basque culture. But how many people consume that culture?"

the kind of language awareness that has been present here is clear, whatever the historical and political situation may have been. Yet today, unlike in the past, everyone is bilingual, and Spanish or French are basically the only official languages, and that has its consequences. So we live in a dichotomy between what we want to be (ordinary Basque speakers in a normal country) and what we are (not particularly balanced bilinguals in a sea of non-Basque languages). As an example, successful demonstrations are often held in favour of Basque culture (the life or death issue of the speech community). But how many people consume that culture? We need to be more consistent in everyday matters.

What is the state of health of the Basque language as of today?

That of a community which is ill. On the one hand, it displays some good symptoms, and on the other, some very bad ones. The Basque community has done tremendous work over the last fifty years: it has united the language, it has organised and spread education and literacy, basic education and higher education, mass media have been created (radio, television, the newspaper *Berria*, magazines, etc.), it has adapted tradition (it has updated

"Basque language displays some good symptoms, and some very bad ones"

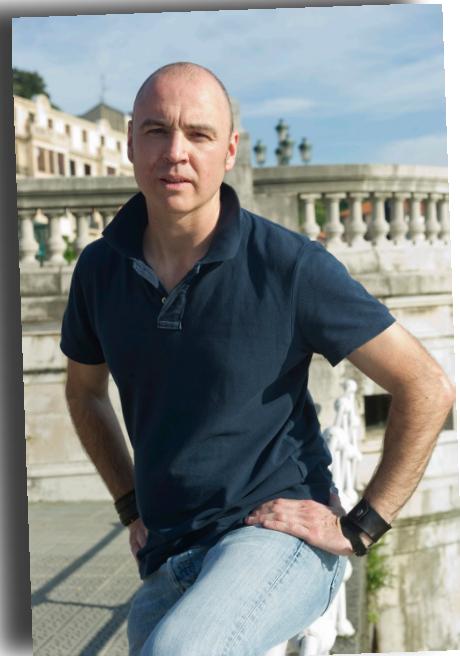
songs, extempore Basque verse making and has developed new areas of music, etc.). The bad things are these: the bilinguals –in other words, the Basque speakers– continue to be in the minority in their own territory, the use of the language –when it is Basque– is a personal choice, while the non-Basque languages (Spanish or French) have to be mastered and used; nowhere in its territory does Basque enjoy official recognition...

All this weakens the community and naturally motivation is lost.

Does the culture motivate people to learn Basque?

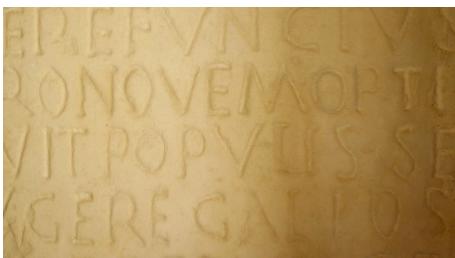
Two years ago I was in Argentina, and some women who were teaching Basque said this to me: "In the group we decided to learn Basque after reading *Orbipean* in Spanish." What? "That's right, we read the book and decided 'this is worthwhile'". They learnt the language and today they are teaching it. This is the greatest praise that can be given to this work, and incidentally it shows that knowing about the culture can motivate people to learn the language. Something like that has never happened to me in the Basque Country.

Lutxo Egia writer





The history of the Basque Language in 6 Documentaries



The documentary series *The Basque-Speaking People: the history of their language, the language of their history* is being produced by the Ibaizabal-Mendebalde and Zenbat Gara cultural associations.



The starting point of *The Basque-Speaking People* is the book of the same name, written by Xamar and published by the Pamiela publishing house in 2006. This production seeks to fill the gap in the media sphere by taking advantage of the capacity this medium has for dissemination.

The dissemination work comprising six medium-length episodes sets out to present the history of the Basque language and its people to a wide audience. So, *The Basque-Speaking People* is seeking to explain the main lines of the history of the Basque-speaking speech community.

To tell this story, the participation of many experts in the documentaries has been essential. Many historians, linguists, archaeologists and cultural players have led us down the paths of the history of the Basque language. Alongside them in this documentary series produced for dissemination purposes, we will come across images of significant places and corners of the Basque Country and abroad (some of which have never appeared before in any kind of production), short dramatic sequences to provide the background to each historical period, attractive illustrations, and graphics as well as music to fit each episode.

The Basque-Speaking People, if anything, is a piece of team work. Even though the main team is formed by Mikel Arredondo, Hibai Castro, Adur Larrea, Xamar, Lutxo Egia (member of the Basque PEN centre), Lon Fernandez and Maria Uriarte, there is a broad network of collaborators around it.

The Basque-Speaking People is available in the following languages: Basque, English, French, Spanish, Catalan, Galician, Italian, Welsh and Japanese. The 6 DVDs of *The Basque-Speaking People* documentary series are available www.euskarajendea.com

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