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(En)gendering Basque Culture: Musical Notes from the Archives

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“The Basques are the people who sing.”

As the quote above suggests, Basques have long been associated with their purported ability to sing. And, indeed, the corpus of Basque oral literature—all sung poetry—is voluminous and its topics wide-ranging. Consisting of ballads, war songs, funeral dirges, and verbal ritual improvisation (“*bertsolaritza*”), Basque oral literature addresses religion and history, daily life, illness and death, politics and relationships (Aulestia 1995). Historically, oral literature has been an important conduit of Basque language and culture, as most of the Basque population remained illiterate well into the 19th century.

However, it is almost exclusively men who have been allowed to thus opine through song. While historically women were hired to improvise dirges honoring the dead at funerals, a law prohibiting the practice was passed in 1452 (Aulestia 1995: 69). A similar law was passed against *profazadas*, women who went from town to town “invent[ing] couplets and ballads with the intention of defamatory libel” (Ibid). And, until recently, social convention proscribed women from attending—much less participating in—the *bertsolaritza* contests, as they were often held in venues such as the tavern or cider house. (Although, it must be pointed out, the 2009 winner of the *bertsolaritza* contest in the Basque Country was a woman, Maialen Lujanbio).

Yet no research has systematically examined the extent to which the oral literature emerging from these domains is gendered, even though previous research has demonstrated the androcentric bias inscribed in other Basque cultural forms, texts, institutions and language practices (cf. Amorrortu 2003; del Valle and Apalategi 1985; del Valle 1999; White 1999). This gap in the literature is particularly curious as women were often the sources of the songs collected for the many compendia of oral literature collected over the centuries—but while the names of the compilers (i.e. Jose Miguel Barandiaran, Resurreccion de Azkue, Padre Donostia¹, Antonio Zavala) are well known and feted throughout the Basque Country (as well they should be), the names of their informants remain tucked into footnotes. Similarly, when an author of a song is known, which is not very often for songs transmitted orally, it is usually male.

Drawing on Basque song texts written since the 16th century, when the first Basque songs were documented, in this article I show that women and girls in selected songs exhibit more agency and a wider variety of emotional stances and attitudes than the secondary, “traditional” roles usually ascribed

them in the cultural mainstream (Echeverria 2003, 2010). To contextualize this argument, the next section briefly summarizes the kinds of gender roles most commonly ascribed female characters in Basque culture and Basque texts.

Gender in Basque society & culture

As in many societies, gender differentiation is a key feature of Basque culture. Historically, women have been primarily responsible for the domestic realm in addition to working alongside men to work the land, or selling the fish on shore that men caught at sea (Bullen 2003: 72). A woman was expected to marry and lauded if she was “a good mother, hard worker, helpful neighbor, [dutiful daughter-in-law], sober, willing to serve, a good organizer and administrator, clean, healthy. Negatively sanctioned traits are nosiness, vanity and ostentation” (Ibid: 62). Her role as the primary transmitter of the Basque language and culture was expected, but seen as “natural” so that women were given little public recognition for these efforts (Bullen 2003; del Valle 1999).

Indeed, when it comes to efforts to maintain the language and transmit the culture, men have been those most feted. Prestige adheres to male-dominated activities like the Basque Language Academy, ritual verbal improvisation and sports like handball, rock-lifting and wood-chopping. Images in the public domain and in curricular materials celebrate the “Man of the Plaza,” who “stands out and knows how to act in public” (Fernandez de Larrinoa 1997: 83) through self-possession and feats of strength. Images portray women not as active agents in their own right in the public sphere but playing supporting roles to others in the private realm despite the in-roads women have made in the educational and occupational spheres in the last fifty years (Bullen 2003).

Sources and Methodology

As suggested above, oral literature has been the main conduit of Basque culture for centuries and it comprises an important part of the lessons students are expected to learn in their Basque language and literature classes. Bernard Etxepare, a priest from Donibane Garazi (St. Jean Pied de Port, the capital of Lower Navarre) wrote the first book published in the language in 1545. *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* (The First Fruits of the Basque Language) consists of several poems: ten about romantic love; two on religious themes; two about freedom; and “the last two which lax lyrically over Basque” (Etxepare 1995 [1545]:184). Indeed, Basque priests like Azkue, Barandiaran, Donostia and Zavala have been the main compilers (and sometimes composers) of song.

Thus, we cannot easily investigate gender by examining the texts that women themselves produced. Further, the corpus of Basque oral literature overall is voluminous—thousands of songs documented since the 16th century—making an exhaustive examination of its entirety as it relates to gender beyond the scope of this paper.

The approach I take here—of uncovering submerged “voices,” so to speak—is to delimit the corpus to those songs most pointedly addressing the female listener and/or audience. In the Basque case, this is indicated in the use of the singular, second-person pronoun, “*noka*.” In Euskara or the Basque language there is no grammatical gender (“she” or “he” for animate objects) or natural gender (“la” or “el” for inanimate objects, for an example in Spanish), However, when the addressee is the subject of a transitive verb (or is the indirect object) then the auxiliary verb marks that the addressee’s gender: if

female, with an ‘-n’ (this form is called “*noka*”); if male, with a “-k” (this is called “*toka*”). Further, the inflected verb agrees with the addressee’s gender even when the addressee is not an argument in the sentence (Oyharcabal 1993: 90). For example, the sentence “A friend sees me” would mark the gender of the addressee in the auxiliary verb even though “you” is not in the sentence.

ADITZ TRINKOAK: ORAINALDIA									
NOR					NOR-NORK				
	EGON	JOAN	ETORRI	IBILI		EDUKI	JAKIN	ERAMAN	EKARRI
ni	nago	noa	nator	nabil	nik	dau(z)kat	daki(zki)t	darama(tza)t	dakar(tza)t
hi	hago	hoa	hator	habil	hik	dau(z)kak/n	daki(zki)k/n	darama(tza)k/n	dakar(tza)k/n
hura	dago	doa	dator	dabil	hark	dau(z)ka	daki(zki)	darama(tza)	dakar(tza)
gu	gaude	goaz	gatoz	gabiltza	guk	dau(z)kagu	daki(zki)gu	darama(tza)gu	dakar(tza)gu
zu	zaude	zoaz	zatoz	zabiltza	zuek	dau(z)kazu	daki(zki)zu	darama(tza)zu	dakar(tza)zu
zuek	zaudete	zoazte	zatozte	zabiltzate	zuek	dau(z)kazue	daki(zki)zue	darama(tza)zue	dakar(tza)zue
haiek	daude	doaz	datoz	dabiltza	haiek	dau(z)kate	daki(zki)te	darama(tza)te	dakar(tza)te

ADITZ TRINKOAK: LEHENALDIA									
NOR					NOR-NORK				
	EGON	JOAN	ETORRI	IBILI		EDUKI	JAKIN	ERAMAN	EKARRI
ni	nengoen	nindoan	nentorren	nenbilen	nik	neu(z)kan	neki(zki)en	nerama(tza)n	nekarren/nekartzan
hi	hengoen	hindoan	hentorren	henbilen	hik	heu(z)kan	heki(zki)en	herama(tza)n	hekarren/hekartzan
hura	zegoen	zihoan	zetorren	zebilen	hark	zeu(z)kan	zeki(zki)en	zerama(tza)n	zekarren/zekartzan
gu	geunden	gindoazen	gentozen	genbiltzan	guk	geneu(z)kan	geneki(zki)en	generama(tza)n	genekarren/genekartzan
zu	zeunden	zindoazen	zentozen	zenbiltzan	zuek	zeneu(z)kan	zeneki(zki)en	zenerama(tza)n	zenekarren/zenekartzan
zuek	zeundeten	zindoazten	zentozten	zenbiltzaten	zuek	zeneu(z)katen	zeneki(zki)en	zenerama(tza)en	zenekar(tza)en
haiek	zeuden	zihoazen	zetozen	zebiltzan	haiek	zeu(z)katen	zeki(zki)en	zerama(tza)en	zekar(tza)en

In this grammar table the *hi* (intransitive) and *hik* (transitive) forms in the second line of each table, exhibit the male/female designations with ‘k’ for male, and ‘n’ for female.

No research to date on Basque song has specifically focused on those which use *noka*; that significant social meanings likely undergird such songs is indicated by the marked nature of *noka* not only in contemporary speech but also in the archival record. While *toka* has positive associations with solidarity, trust, masculinity and Basque “authenticity,” *noka* occupies in a much more ambiguous semantic space. Rarely used even by native speakers, today it is often considered disrespectful, “looked badly upon”—rarely associated with positive interactional uses. But we cannot assume the norms for and uses of *noka* today applied to the past. What kinds of interaction is *noka* used for in Basque song across the centuries? What kinds of people, emotional stances, cultural activities and gender roles are linked to *noka* usage? The remainder of this article shows that there has been much variability in *noka* usage over time indeed.

Findings

Despite the enormity of the corpus described above, I only found a total of 98 songs that use *noka*. Most of these I translated myself. I found a wide range of topics and gender representations among them: in five, a man pines for a woman he loves; twenty-eight portray parents and daughters negotiating suitable marriage partners, or women fighting over suitors; thirteen recount married life; another thirteen chide women for unsuitable behaviors—or condemn them to death for greater offenses; nine show women

enjoying themselves drinking or gambling; another nine discuss religious themes; ten are about witchcraft; and eleven others opine an a miscellany of themes.

If we take the first three categories together, we see that almost half (46 of 98) of the songs have to do with the vagaries of love or romantic relationships. This is perhaps not surprising when we consider that in “traditional” Basque society, “marriage was considered to be the desirable state for both women and men” (Bullen 2003: 64).

The rest of this paper, then, will focus on these songs². Specifically, I examine one example from each song category. As indicated above, most dialects have at least one song represented in each category. When dialects had more than one song in each category, I narrowed the possibilities to one based on its contextual information and understandability to me. That is, some songs not only use archaic language (hard to understand even to a professional translator I consulted for these songs) but have difficult-to-decipher historical clues. In addition, some songs have more contextual or historical information provided for them than others do. For some, the only documentation is the text itself; no information is provided (perhaps even known) about the author or the context in which the song was written. For others, the compiler(s) provide quite a bit of information about provenance—not only the province whence it comes, but sometimes even the city or village, the reciter or author, as well as its historical context and cultural significance. When deciding upon songs in the same dialect opining on the same theme, then, I chose the song whose linguistic, cultural and historical context I understood best.



NOKA group members Cathy Petrissans, Andréa Bidart and the author, Begoña Echeverría. This group sings contemporary and traditional Basque songs, with special interest in those about women. See www.chinoka.com

Love Me Tender

Of the five songs portraying a man pining for a woman—“Argia Daritzanari” (“To the one who is light”), “Beltxaranari” (“To the dark-skinned one”) and “Xuria Daritzanari” (“To the called White”)—three appear in *O'ten Gaztaroa Neurtitzetan* (“Measuring the Youth of O”) by Arnaud Oihenart (1592-1667). A lawyer and historian from Zuberoa (the most northeastern province of the Basque Country, near Bearn), Oihenart is considered one of the best Basque poets of the 17th century. Here is one of these poems (**noka** forms are **bolded**):

Text 1: Argia daritzanari (“To the One Who is Light”)³

1. <i>Gauik, egunik</i> <i>Eztinat hunik</i> <i>Hireki ezpaniz, Argia:</i> <i>Hireki ezpaniz</i> <i>Itsu hutsa niz</i> <i>Zeren bai hiz en'argia</i>	By night, by day, I have nothing good Unless I am with you, Light: Unless I am with you I am merely blind For you are my light
2. <i>Hirekil'aldiz</i> <i>Bederak'aldiz</i> <i>Bazter lekutan baturik</i> <i>Nonbanago</i> Nun <i>botzenago</i> <i>Ezi Errege gertaturik</i>	If I am with you Every time I find myself out of the way Anywhere I rejoice more Because I am become King
3. <i>Lagun artean</i> <i>Hel naidean</i> <i>Elhaketan, erhogoan</i> <i>Ez nun dostatzen</i> <i>Ez nun minzatzen</i> <i>Hi beti, beti aut gogoan</i>	When I come Among friends Talking, conversing, I do not enjoy it I do not speak I am always, always thinking of you
4. <i>Nik dudan lana</i> <i>Ezin errana</i> <i>Zer koeinta dudan higati</i> <i>En'ixil, eta</i> <i>Maiz pensaketa</i> <i>Egonak ziotsan nigati</i>	The work that I have Unspeakable What worry I have because of you My secret and frequent thought Being informs it of me
5. <i>Ni, hala hala</i> <i>Tiraz bezala</i> <i>Hik joz geroz bihotzean</i> <i>Hiri gorpitzez</i> <i>Beti, ed'orhitez</i> <i>Narrain, bait'are lotzean</i>	I just so As if pulling When you touch my heart With your body Always, or when remembering You follow me, even when asleep

6. <i>Bana herabe</i>	But timidly
<i>Estakuru gabe</i>	Without excuse
Dinat , <i>Argia, jitera</i>	I say, Light, come
<i>Hir'etx'irira</i>	To your village
<i>Leku agerira</i>	To the open place,
<i>Jenten mintz'eraizitera</i>	To cause people to talk

7. <i>Beraz higanik</i>	So, when I
<i>Egin, jadanik</i>	Run from you
Noiz nakiduna <i>dakidan</i>	Trying to escape from you
<i>Jin, eta nura</i>	Come along
<i>Gorde-lekura</i>	To the hiding-place
<i>Eta hi han bat akidan</i>	And join me there
~(Urkizu 2003b: 111-112)	

While the object of romantic longing here is not specified, she might be Juana d'Erdoy, a widowed noblewoman Oihenart married in 1627; his last romantic poem in this collection is a funeral elegy to her (Urquizu et al 2000: 182). Interestingly, only three of his romantic poems use *noka* in addressing the female beloved; the other fourteen (including the elegy) use the formal pronoun instead. It might seem odd for a pining lover or husband to thus use a formal form of address with his object of his love, but this is the norm nowadays in the Basque case: the relationship between spouses supposedly “preclude[s] solidarity between husband and wife” (de Rijk 1991: 377) rendering familiar forms of address between them inappropriate. Why does Oihenart use *noka* at all in these verses? Unfortunately, no explanation for the pronoun choice is provided in the documentation about his oeuvre. But that *noka* is used to express unbridled passion in these three poems is clear; we shall see below that such positive uses of *noka* are few and far between indeed.

All the Single Ladies

By far, the biggest category of *noka* songs is preoccupied with finding suitable mates for girls and unmarried women, or women fighting amongst themselves for beaux: 28 out of the 98 total. Most of these feature mothers and/or fathers negotiating with their daughters over potential suitors. I begin with a song from the Roncal Valley, whose dialect is now extinct. Collected by Resurreccion Azkue and his “excellent [male] collaborator Mendigatxa” (Azkue 1968a: 217), it is categorized as a lullaby. But I believe its content justifies its inclusion in this “single ladies” category:

Text 2: Aita ttun ttun⁴ (“Lazy Father”)

Aita ttun ttun	<i>Lazy father</i>
Ama ttun ttun	<i>Lazy mother</i>
Ttun ttun dun ere alaba	<i>Lazy, too, is the daughter</i>
Oro tun tun izaiteko	<i>For everyone to be lazy</i>
Tun tun bear dun senara	<i>You need a lazy husband</i>
~(Azkue 1968a:217)	

While the characterization of the daughter in this song is negative, so too is that of both her parents and the male suitor imagined for her. In this sense, *noka* is an “equal opportunity” pronoun with regard to how it constructs women and men in unflattering ways.

Only women are featured in the next song, in which two women of a certain age spar over which of them has more eligible bachelors pursuing them. “Adizan Gabriela” was collected by Donostia in Madrid from a “young man from [the village of Bera] of the Bidasoa” Valley in Navarre in 1921 (Riezu 1994a: 31-32):

Text 3: Adizan Gabriela (“Listen, Gabriela”)

1. *Adizan Gabriela zenbat urte **ditun**
Ogei ta amasei nik geia **baditun**
Baldin oraingo txandan ezkontzen ez **bagaitun**
Geren bizi guziko neskazaharra **gaitun***

Hey, Gabriela, how old are you?
I am older than thirty-one
If we don't get married this time
We will forever be spinsters

2. *Nereak ogeita amalau **ditun** onezkero
Baña neskazahartzerik ez **diñat** espero
Mutillak ezkontzeko ain zebiltzan bero
Beintzat nik **badizkiñat** zazpi zapatero*

I am thirty-four
But I don't expect to be a spinster
The guys are hot to marry me
I have at least seven shoe-makers

3. *Nik ere **badizkiñat** lau trikiratzaile
Zazpi barkilero ta bi piper saltzaile
Eta gañera iru kale garbitzalle
Bi kabo primera ta lau arpa jotzaile*

I also have four accordion players
seven shipmen, two pepper salesmen
as well as three street-cleaners
two captains and four harpists

4. *Nere bizi moduaz nion ernegatzen
Mutil gustokorikan ez **diñat** billatzen
Gorputza asi zaidan pixka bat torpetzen
Neskazaharra naizena zidaten igartzen*

I realize that in my life
I don't attract the guys I like
My body is going to rot
It looks like I'll be a spinster

5. *Soñekorik onena egin **diñat** jantzi
Gainera eskutikan sonbrila ta guzi
Oingo mutil gaztiak ahinbeste malezi
Ni ikusi orduko ziazten igesi*

I wore my best skirt
with a parasol and everything
Today's guys are cruel
They run away when they see me

6. *Oso itxusia **den** neskazahar izena
Aditu utsarekin hartzen **diñat** pena
Oraiñ edukiarren sasoirik onena
Au da lastimagarri gu biok gaudena!
~(Riezu 1994a: 32-33)*

“Spinster” is such an ugly word
It pains me to hear it
when I am at my peak
Our situation is pitiful

The last verse summarizes the negative view held of spinsters in Basque culture as in many others.

A song written by Pierra Topet Etxahun (1786-1862), from Zuberoa, sounds a similar theme:

Text 4: Bi Ahizpak (“Two Sisters”)

<p>1. <i>Kattalina entzun diñat egia segurki Maitia deitañala hik nahi ideki Segretik behar dutun bai utzi hareki Nahi ezpalinbatun olhuak eraiki</i></p>	<p>Kattalin, I surely heard the truth You want to steal the one I love You better leave him alone If you don't want to be hit</p>
<p>2. <i>Maidar, enun ebilten ez ihuren ondun Ez eta huna jiler nahi ihesi jun Ust'ukhen balindadun hirik diel'en'ondun Eztitzañala utzi ebiltera kanpun!</i></p>	<p>Maidar, I'm not chasing anyone or trying to get away with anything If you think those near me belong to you Don't let them out!</p>
<p>3. <i>Ai ahizpa falsia! Ai hi lotsagarri! Ene zopa hunen jaten bethi izan hiz ari! Sorthu hintzan axuri izateko ardi Bena beldar nun egin hizala ahari! ~(Arbelbide 1987: 36)</i></p>	<p>Ai, untrustworthy sister! You are shameful! You are always eating of my soup! You were born a lamb, to become a sheep But I fear you are a ram!</p>

Thus, the unmarried state is so undesirable that even sisters will steal each other's boyfriends to avoid it. Many songs also demonstrate the lengths parents will go to ensure their daughters make marriages suitable to them, especially the mothers, who are shown trying to convince their daughters to marry someone better (older or more hard-working) than the young men the daughters desire. “Amak Ezkondu Ninduen” (“Mother Married Me Off”) is popular even today. It appears in many song anthologies and is sung around the table throughout the Basque Country and the diaspora. Below is a version spliced together by Azkue: the first verse was recounted by Juliana Aurekoetxea of Zugaztieta, Bizkaia; the remaining verses were gathered from Cristostema Bengoechea of Lekeitio, Bizkaia (Azkue 1968b: 58).

Text 5a: Amak Ezkondu Ninduen (“Mother Married Me Off”)

<p>1. <i>Amak ezkondu ninduen Amabost urtekin Senarak bazituen larogei berakin Oi ai neskabila gaztea Agure zarakin</i></p>	<p>When I was fifteen My mother wanted me to marry an 80-year-old man! A young girl like me-- With such an old man?!</p>
<p>2. <i>“Ama, zertarako det nik Agure zar hori Artuta leytikan Jaurti bear det nik Oi, ai! Neure leihotikan Jaurti behar dut nik”</i></p>	<p>“Mother, what good is an old man like that? I'll take him to the window and throw him out? That's right-- throw him out the window!</p>

3. *Neska: ago isilikan*
Aberatsa den hori
Epez igaro itzan urte bat edo bi
Ori ilezkeroztik
Biziko aiz ongi

“Daughter, be quiet!
 That man is very rich
 Just be patient a year or two
 When he dies
 you will live well”

4. *Deabruak daramala*
oilar urtetsua
A baino nayago’t nik
Nere aukerekoa
Oi, ai! Ogei bat urteko
Gazte lorekoa
 ~(Azkue 1968b: 58-59)

But the devil got into me,
 the old rooster:
 “But I would rather have
 one of my own choosing:
 Oh, my! A twenty-year -old
 in the flower of his youth!”

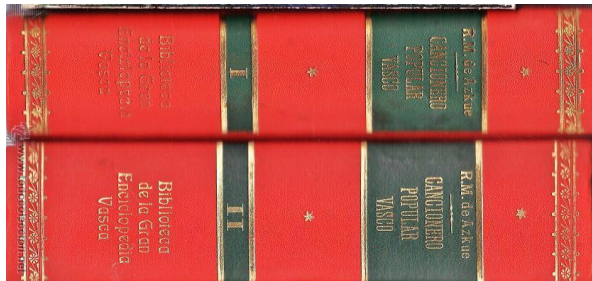
Azkue notes that, in addition to the song “seeming modern,” it appears to have originated in Gipuzkoa despite his having heard it in the Bizkaian villages of Ondarroa and Gorozika as well as the towns indicated above. Further, I have come across a version (written in the Gipuzkoan variety) that has an additional, penultimate verse:

Text 5b: Amak Ezkondu Ninduen: Penultimate Verse

“Neska, etzanala hartu
Dirurik gabea
Bestela izango dun
Nahiko lanbidea
Oi, ai, txorrakerik utzita
Harzan agurea”

“Don’t take someone
 who has no money
 Or you will have
 a lot of hard work to do
 Don’t be so silly—
 marry the rich old man!”

There are also four songs in which fathers and daughters negotiate over suitors. For example, in “Aitak Erran Dio Alabari” (“Father Tells His Daughter”), a father threatens to disown his daughter if she marries a particular boy, but she defies him. In “Artzai Nindagoenian” (“When I Was A Shepherd”), a father chastises daughter for flirting with a shepherd in Mass, arguing that she can do better. In “Aita Nuen Saltzaile” (“My Father Was My Seller”) from Navarre, the female narrator reports that her parents and brother “sold [her] for money; a lot of money; as if [she] had [her] weight in gold; and two barrels of honey.” Her father meets her tears with cold calculation rather than comfort, telling his daughter she should not complain because she will be rich.



R. M. Azkue’s *Cancionero Popular Vasco* (“Basque folk songs”) collection of two volumes, comprising hundreds of songs from throughout the Basque Country, was originally published in 1921.

However, parents and their daughters are not always at loggerheads when it comes to future husbands/sons-in-law. I would like to conclude this section with one example of a song in which the daughter and parents seem to contribute equally to the girl's choice of beau. It hails from the province of Bizkaia, though its author is unknown:

Text 6: Usoak ("The Doves")

<i>Usoak ponporron ponporronila Elorri baten ondoan</i>	A dove goes "ponpor" "ponporra" beside a thorn
<i>1. Guere alaba, gura ete dona Harotz mutil bat senartzat? Ez aita, ez ama Hori ez da nik gura dodana</i>	Our daughter, do you want a carpenter for a husband? <i>No, Father – No, Mother</i> That's not what I want
<i>2. Guere alaba, gura ete dona Hargin mutil bat senartzat Ez aita, ez ama Hori ez da nik gura dodana</i>	Our daughter, do you want a stonecutter for a husband? <i>No, Father – No, Mother</i> That's not what I want
<i>3. Guere alaba, gura ete dona Konfiteru bat senartzat? Ez aita, ez ama Hori ez da nik gura dodana</i>	Our daughter, do you want a baker for a husband? <i>No, Father – No, Mother</i> That's not what I want
<i>4. Guere alaba, gura ete dona Soldau mutil bat senartzat? Bai aita, bai ama Horixe da nik gura dodana ~(Amuriza 2006: 186-198)</i>	Our daughter, do you want a soldier for a husband? <i>No, Father – No, Mother</i> That is what I want

Interestingly, the couplet preceding the song suggests that this choice may not be right after all. The parents and daughter might be like doves settling to coo even beside thorns—when, presumably, what they sought was a rose.

In sum, in Basque songs about the "single lady," we see that there are indeed those portraying women and girls in negative terms because they are unmarried and those presenting daughters as mere pieces of property to be sold to the highest bidder in marriage. But there are also songs showing unmarried girls and women negotiating their marital choices and getting their way (for good or ill). In some cases, they reject outright their marital options or have the upper hand when it comes to the men who would be their suitors. Consonant with the discussion of Basque society and gender above, however, we see that a girl's or woman's unmarried state is the primary topic of songs using *noka*: we know little to nothing about the female protagonist's aspirations, accomplishment or opinions on topics others than the marital.

We do see, on the other hand, that girls and women are active participants on the romantic terrain allotted them. Having fought so hard to have their wishes respected in matters of the heart, how do women fare once married? The section below provides a glimpse.

The group NOKA has been on numerous tours, both in the United States and the Basque Country. Here they are performing at the 2014 NABO Convention in Bakersfield, California with invited guest Mikel Markez.



Love & Marriage: Go Together Like a Horse and Carriage?

As we saw in Figure 1 above, ten of the songs use *noka* (and sometimes *toka*) in songs about or between couples. Recall that use of the familiar address form in this context is unusual today; unlike other languages, the familiar pronoun is considered inappropriate for use between husband and wife. It is notable, however, that most of the time the familiar pronoun is used in songs about troubled relationships featuring bickering, philandering or questionable paternity. Collected by Donostia in Sara, in the province of Lapurdi in 1937, here is one where vitriol spews back and forth between husband and wife (**noka** is **bolded**; toka is underlined).

Text 7: Ene Hauzotegian (“In My Neighborhood”)

1. *Ene hauzotegian bi senhar emazte
Bakean bizi dira hasarratu arte
Goardia elgarrekin behin samurtzetik
Heien xuxentzaileak lan ona behar dik!*

A husband and wife
Live in peace—until they argue
Once that happens
Heaven help is!

2. *Lehenik intzirinka, gero deihardarka
Gero berriz eskainka, azkenekotz joka
Horra zer bizi modu duten maiz segitzen
Dudarik gabegostu diote kausitzen*

They yell, they scream
they plead, they fight
They’ll come to a bad end
if they don’t change their ways

3. *“Gizon etxe galgari, arno edalea
Ahalke behar huke hola bizitzea
Haizen bezalakoa arraila goizetik
Hoakit, higuin tzarra, begien bixtatik”*

“You drunken home-wrecker
You should be ashamed of yourself
running around at the crack of dawn!
Get out of my sight, you disgusting old thing!”

4. *“Nere andre gaixoa, ez bada hasarra
Hi bezalako baten **badinat** beharra
Emazte baliosa ezta, ixila
Holako bakhar batek balio **tin mila**”*
5. *Gizon alfer-tzar, gormant, zikin itsusia
Aspaldien nauk hitaz asetzen hasia
Bethi gerla gorria sekulan bakerik
Infernuan bide duk hi baino hoberik*
6. *“Othoi, ago ixilik, ene emaztea!
Indan, bai, laster gero, biarten bakea
Zer nahi **dun** enekin gerla irabizi
Lehen ere **badakin** nola hautan hezi”*
7. *Emazteak orduan hartzen du erkhatza
Eta ximiniatik gizonak laratza
Batek uma-ahala bertzeak: *ai! ai! ai!*
Oi zein eder guduan holako bi etsai!*
8. *Eltze, zertain, gathilu, oro nahasteka
Lurrerat arthikiak dabilta jauzteka
Joaiten naiz jaun andere haien bakhetzera
Urmaturik hor naute igorri etxera
~(Riezu 1994b: 576)*
- “A dear wife, who doesn’t get angry—
That’s what I need
A wife who’s sweet and quiet
is worth a thousand others”
- “You lazy, old, gluttonous, dirty, ugly man!
I am sick of you!
Always picking fights—
they behave better in Hell!”
- “Watch your mouth, woman!
Or you’ll start something you’ll regret
What do you want? To pick a fight?
Remember what I taught you the last time
- The wife picks up a broom
The husband, a poker from the fireplace
Both throw tantrums
A war between two enemies!
- Pots, pans, dishes, glasses
all over the floor
I tried to make peace between them
But they sent me home!

While the song above is perhaps the most violent among them, there are several songs about husbands and wives fighting with each other. Four feature couples arguing about excessive drinking in particular. Below is an example Azkue collected from Eusebio Santxotena of the town of Bozate in the Baztan Valley of Navarre; Azkue notes that “the poem is a curious dialogue between a long-suffering husband and a wife very devoted to Bacchus” (Azkue 1968a: 154):

Text 8: Aste Luzea (“A Long Week”)

1. *Astea luze gan **dun**, Maria
Non **dun** asteko matazaria?
Matazano bat in diat eta
Tabernarako erdia*
2. *Gainerakoa non **dun**, Maria
Zertaz izain naiz nerau jantzia?
Sukalondoan nengoelarik
Erre zitakan bertzia*
3. *Non **dun** ardatza, non **dun** linaya
Lehen hor baitziren sukaldean?
Linai-ardatzak erabiltzean
Min hartzen diat behatzean*
- A long week has passed, Maria
Where is the week’s thread of skein?
I made one skein
and a half for the tavern
- Where is the extra money, Maria?
Of what will my coat be made?
When I am in the kitchen
I will burn you another
- Where is your spindle, where your stone?
that were in the kitchen?
When I use the stone-spindle
I hurt my finger

4. *Irule baino edale azkar*
Azkarrago aiz, emaztea
Bonbil-ardoaren itzultzean
Atsein hartzen dut bihotzean
~(Azkue 1968a: 154)

You are a better drinker than a weaver
woman, much better
When I turn the cork of the wine bottle
My heart is happy



Noka is a familiar form of address, used only in speaking to women. It literally means to speak familiarly or informally to women, and was used throughout the Basque Country when addressing women or girls with whom one felt familiarity or trust.

Finally, two other songs in this category feature philandering—or at least, extra-marital flirtations—by wives. In “Anton and Maria,” written in the Low Navarrese variety, Anton returns to his village after an absence and is told by his wife that his son was born the night before. He is surprised by this, as he has been gone for two years.

The wife in the song below also finds ways to amuse herself in her husband’s absence. Azkue collected this song in the village of Gobika in the province of Bizkaia; he notes that his informant was Maria Josefa Izpirua, “an excellent collaborator, eighty years of age” (Azkue 1968b: 995-996):

Text 9: Londresen dot Senarra (“My Husband is in London”)

<p>1. <i>Londresen dot neuk senara zirin-bedarrak ekarten Bera andik dan artean gu emen dantza gaitezen Oi au egia! Daigun jira bi Maria</i></p>	<p>My husband is in London bringing bird excrement grass [purging herbs] While he is there We can dance here O, that’s the truth Let’s take two spins, Maria</p>
<p>2. <i>Kapoiak dagoz erreten oilaskotxuak mutiltzen orek ondo ere artean gu emen dantza gaitezen Oi au egia! Daigun jira bi Maria.</i></p>	<p>The capons are roasting The hens are growing While he is among them We can dance here O, that’s the truth Let’s take two spins, Maria</p>
<p>3. <i>Neure oilanda nabara txikara baina zabala ¿zetan oa i auzora etxean oilarra donala? ¡Oi au egia! Daigun jira bi Maria</i></p>	<p>My multicolored hen small but wide what are you doing in this neighborhood? with a hen in the house? O, that’s the truth Let’s take two spins, Maria</p>
<p>4. <i>Neuk ugazaba nekusan Izurdiako zubian Ori zestorik urten artean gu emen dantza gaitezan Oi au egia! Daigun jira bi Maria</i></p>	<p>I see my master on the bridge of Izurdia While he is there We can dance here Oh, that’s the truth Let’s take two spins, Maria</p>
<p>5. <i>Neure mutiltxu txoria ik esan eustan egia: gaur gabean dantzauko zala nire emazte Maria Oi au egia! Iretzat mando zuria" ~(Azkue 1968b: 995-996)</i></p>	<p>My little boy, my little bird you told the truth that my wife would Dance tonight O, that’s the truth For you, a white mule</p>

Interestingly, while *noka* is used in a playful—rather than mean--way in this song, it is used not between a husband to his wife, but to a woman by her “dance partner” (at the very least) other than her husband.

Taken together, we see that unlike the pining between lovers (“Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?”) we find in English literature and in other languages, the familiar form of address is rarely used to express love in Basque song. Rather, men use *noka* to express their complaints to or argue with their wives—who reciprocate in kind with *toka*. The women with whom *noka* is used are not necessarily satisfied with their marital lot. The wife in “Ene Hauzotegian” uses more invective against her husband than she receives. The three Marias featured in the last three songs mentioned resist expectations that they be “The Good Wife” in several ways: fending off her husband’s requests that she attend to her domestic duties (“Aste Luzea”); making merry with other men while her husband is away (“Londresen Dot Senarra”); and making a cuckold of her husband and bearing a child with her lover (“Anton and Maria”). None of these husbands is a dupe---each is well aware of what his wife’s shortcomings or what’s going on. But none of them is able to control or change his wife’s behavior either.



NOKA. Here the author (L) Begona Echeverria with her bandmates Andrea Bidart-Oteiza and Cathy Petrissans. Their group has released two CD recordings of noka songs, and have collaborated with various Basque musicians including Kepa Junkera on the accordion.

Conclusion

I began this article by pointing out the androcentric bias inscribed in Basque cultural artifacts and the gendered nature of Basque society in general, which permeate Basque oral literature as well. Laws and social conventions have excluded women from participating in, much less producing, Basque songs in any significant way until the last few decades. Thus, the archival record we have of women—indeed, gender representations of either sex—has been produced almost entirely by men.

But I have demonstrated that songs using *noka*—the second person pronoun used for a female addressee—construct more varied images of girls and women than those that usually appear in the public sphere, curricular materials and other cultural texts. The songs reviewed in this article portray women and girls engaging in a wide variety of roles and activities—vehemently negotiating potential mates; drinking or partying instead of working; seeking the pleasure of men other than their husbands; resisting the expectations that they be dutiful daughters and wives. Not all of these portrayals are positive, but they certainly show a more complete picture of Basque womanhood than most representations of them in contemporary Basque culture.

Why is this important? Gender equity is about showing the whole range of human experience for both sexes—for men and women—and we are all enriched when the restricted view, or allowable portrayals of one sex (in this case, the female) is expanded to encompass more of the human experience. Even when some of that is not necessarily positive: the underbelly is human, too, and it is patronizing to pretend that women cannot have it too. The fact that this wide variety of female behavior—especially the unsavory—appears in texts that are hundreds of years old suggests that throughout this period Basque people across dialects and region were aware of and commenting upon a wider set of roles for girls and women than contemporary discourses would lead us to expect. In the archives, women show up doing some surprising things.

What can we learn about gender from these songs? We cannot know for sure whether these texts represent actual behaviors by women and girls. Certainly, they can be interpreted in many ways: the female resisting “conventional” roles can be read (or heard) as cautionary tale as easily as role model. But their actions deserve to be deliberated upon—even debated over—as much as do the men and women populating better-known Basque songs if we are to more fully understand Basque culture. And the role of song in producing and contesting it.

End notes

¹ Pen name for the Basque priest, composer and musicologist Jose Gonzalo Zulaica.

² Songs on other themes—i.e. witchcraft and religion—are discussed in Echeverria 2014a.

³ This song was translated by Alan King, for which I thank him.

⁴ “Ttun ttun” refers both to a musical instrument and a person who is lazy or torpid (Azkue 1969:298).

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