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Between Trade, Religion and Ethnicity: The Catholic Church's Ethnic Institutions in the Spanish Empire, 16th-19th Centuries

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Throughout the era of the Spanish Empire of the 16th-19th centuries, immigrants from the same regional, cultural or national origin tended to create associations of their own in most of the cities and ports in which these immigrant groups had formed colonies. One of the distinctive features of these institutions is that almost all of them were linked to the Catholic Church, usually in the form of religious confraternities or brotherhoods under the name or protection of a particular saint or devotion linked to their places of origin. Before the creation of the modern day meaning of nation and ethnicity, these immigrant communities were primarily based on the medieval concept of nation which is deeply ingrained with Catholicism in the case of the Basque territories. The Basque case provides a window into the world of these early forms of voluntary associations: revealing a general view of the creation, evolution and common features of these institutions, their principal activities and aims, namely to project to protect and promote mutual aid among members, as well as to protect the distinctiveness of their cultural heritage and the attachment to the land they or their ancestors came from. By understanding the role these institutions, one discovers how they served as gateways to better integrate their members and co-nationals into the new host societies.

Ethnic institutions before ethnicity

One of the most commonly and extensively repeated effects of massive migratory processes between different nations is the creation of a veritable web of voluntary associations by and for the newcomers in order to fulfill their needs when facing the challenges of integrating into a new social, political and economic environment. But this is not only in the common, narrow meaning of a nation as an "independent state," but as an aggregate of people who believe they share common and distinctive features.[1] When members of the same ethnic, national or even "cultural" group settle down in a definite, foreign space, there has been a tendency to develop strategies that include the establishment of a series of "ethnic institutions," that are often comprised of a vast array of categories and purposes from mutual aid associations to

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[1] According to the American Heritage Dictionary of English, 2000 edition (updated 2009; available at http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/eref/), "nation" can either be "a relatively large group of people organized under a single, usually independent government; a country" or "a people who share common customs, origins, history, and frequently language; a nationality".

"immigrant enterprises;" from elitist, culture- or politics-oriented small circles to popular sport clubs or mass festivals or celebrations.[2]

Beyond differences, they all share many guiding principles that permit us to unite them under this common definition of ethnic institutions: that they are promoted by and primarily directed to a specific foreign community living outside its homeland. At present, we can hardly understand any migration process without their presence. When a large number of people from the same origin move with the intention of settling in another country, a collective perception of them is usually created, in which cultural issues mix with the way these immigrants have historically arrived and their degree of integration into their new host society. These collective social entities are often known as communities, a term that clearly reflects their main feature: the fact that individuals are included under common prejudices applied to the whole of the group. An immigrant community would thus be defined as a non-spatial concept, in which people from the same origin are included, who share a common culture and identity, and present themselves to the rest of society as a closed group, with different levels of participation and integration into the host society. Ethnic institutions would therefore be, in this scheme, the top level of organization (for the inside) an visibility (for the outside) of the group, in both cases providing its members the "firm, clear sense of identification with the heritage and culture" that constitutes the basis of individual and collective self-affirmation (Dreidger, 1976: 131).

The concept of ethnic institutions has been intensely developed by social scientists, as well as historians devoted to the research of international massive migratory currents in the last two centuries, that is, during the times of establishment, evolution and maturation of the major outlines of our contemporary society, at least in what is commonly known as the Western world (Higham, 1982). Because of this, the development of such a concept has usually been linked to two other concepts that seem to be inseparably connected to it: "ethnicity" and "nation." Although both terms have a long-standing presence in Western culture from their Greco-Roman etymological origins, ethnicity and nation are relatively young in historical terms, at least in reference to their current meaning in social and political sciences. Ethnicity is, above all, "a social construction and a means of social classification," whose social significance lies in the mutual perception of the "objective" cultural differences from one ethnic group to another (Camus-Etchecopar, 2008:45). On the other hand, after the "awakening of the nations" that took place in Europe and the Americas starting at the beginning of the 19th century, nation and ethnicity have turned from primarily cultural or social definitions into highly politicized issues. The theories that once claimed the divine right of power were replaced by new ideologies that underlined that the people, instead of God, were the main source of political legitimacy, which gave nations the basis for legitimizing the political structures of government, and even for the justification of the existence of states as the highest political units of national self-government. Since the mid-19th century, most states in Europe have tended to present themselves as real nation-states, or in the case of territories with a plurality of nations, nationalistic movements have emerged to confer statehood on stateless nations (among others, Penrose, 1994).

The study of the migratory processes in Europe and the Americas before that date, in comparison with the most recent ones, presents some weaknesses both in the knowledge of the facts themselves and in the development and use of conceptual tools to manage them as well as their causes and consequences. It is really quite difficult to apply contemporary terms

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[2] "Immigrant enterprises" as defined by Pieterse (2003: 7).

and concepts without any adaptation to social practices that, although similar, were produced within a society whose rules, values and mechanisms were not the same as today (Feros, 2008). This is the case in the analysis of ethnic institutions. Is it acceptable to use this term for a period in which there were no nations or ethnicities, at least in our contemporary sense of these concepts? The word "nation," in that period, was in some cases used to define who these associations were addressed to, as was the case, beginning in the Late Middle Ages, of some of the most important European universities, such as those in Paris, Bologna or Salamanca, whose students were formally organized into *nationes*, defined both by political and cultural features (kingdom of origin and/or language). As Feros states (2008), we have to be aware of the fact that until the 18th century, "nation" was often used as a synonym of gens, another Latin word that "reflects an ancient way of understanding a nation not as a social or political unit, but as a group linked by origin" (Hudson, 1996: 248).[3]

To a certain extent, there are many similarities between many of these associations and those that would be created after the breakout of mass movements of population, both internal or international, in the context of the social changes promoted by industrialization and urbanization. In both cases, we find that sharing a common cultural background, or what we would define today as a common ethnic identity, lies behind the main structural principles that organize foreign communities by reason of migratory currents. Historians that have researched the origins of the modern concept of nation and the birth of nationalism have debated over whether or not to emphasize the discontinuities between these pre-modern ethnic identities, that Smith (2001) regards as "confusingly labeled 'proto-national' bonds," and the more recent ones from the 19th century onward. Are national and ethnic identities only a product of modernity, as defended by authors such as Hobsbawn (1990) or Breuilly (2002), or must we, on the contrary, highlight the evolutionary path that supposedly led from one to the other? (Smith, 2001). Even if we agree that there is not any kind of "perennialism" in ethnic identities, and that pre-modern religious, linguistic and regional communities are by no means to be considered the direct progenitors of modern nations, it is otherwise accurate that some elements of collective identity used by modern nationalisms to define the limits of their own desired groups were not only present in those previous communities, but were also operative in the way those societies reflected on and organized themselves. Language, religion and other kinds of common characteristics that could be used to define the border between "us" and "them" actually had relevant and applicable value even when modern nations and political ethnicities had not yet originated.

So, returning to our main question, the query can be reshaped to examine the continuities and differences that ethnic institutions linked to migration and settlement of foreign population present in both Early Modern and Contemporary periods.

Trade communities and the origin of ethnic religious institutions in 15th-16th century Europe

The first examples of ethnic institutions in Early Modern Europe date back to the 15th century, and are closely linked to the appearance of colonies of foreign merchants in the most active ports of both the Mediterranean and Atlantic region of the continent. In the case of the

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[3] We use the original Latin term, rather than the English word, which are only by chance morphologically similar to each other. From now on, we will highlight this word in italics when referring to the Latin term. See Kibre, 1948; Tamburri, 2000. These medieval organizations continued well beyond the Middle Ages, lasting for several centuries, in some cases until the first third of 19th century (Moroni, 2000).

Spanish crown, one of the best-studied processes is the early creation of a web of professional and devotional associations by English traders that had settled in Andalusia (Seville, Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Huelva and Cadiz), as well as in Valencia. Most of these merchants were present from the middle of the century, engaged in the quite lucrative slave trade. By 1493, merchants and ship owners from Bristol[4] decided to create the Chapel of Saint Clemens of Alexandria in their hometown, in order to organize the international projection of Bristolian trade (Sacks, 1993: 90). From its inception, this chapel was far more than a simple place for worship and devotion: within its premises, the members of the Bristolian merchant community also created a space for sociability and self-protection by offering several social services and performing varied charitable activities for the members of the group, especially those trying to gain the protection of the English crown (Silva, 1992; Varela, 1998).

Soon after, these merchants exported the same organizational model to their own British communities overseas. Consequently, in 1517, the British slave traders of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, with the permission of the Duke of Medina Sidonia, the lord of the town, created the "Brotherhood of Saint George" (Andrews, 1999), which further developed the model that was shortly adopted by other foreign merchant communities. These brotherhoods and proprietors of chapels tried to offer these groups of professional immigrants, under the umbrella of the Church, a way to get legal protection, spiritual aid, economic mutual support and, ultimately, an indefinite sense of community that was enhanced by the existence of both a physical space (usually a reserved chapel within any major church) and some kind of internal governance for the control of the behavior of the group (in this case, a consul whose main task was to act as a judge in civil and criminal affairs that occurred inside the English community). The brotherhood also succeed in creating a network of buildings and properties in the port's area, usually near the chapel itself, including business premises, warehouses and houses, for the use of its members. Before long, this brotherhood strengthened its ties with the "Andalusia Company" (1522), a legal entity created during the reign of Henry VIII in order to unite most of the English merchants that were actively engaged in the Mediterranean trade during the 16th century (Connell-Smith, 1954). However, some internal confrontation appeared in the early stages of the Company, when a group of Bristolian traders tried to create their own "Spanish Company" in 1577, whose aims and objectives were almost the same: to assure the royal protection for all English subjects living in the Iberian peninsula, a very sensitive objective in the context of religious clashes during the Protestant Reformation (Sacks, 2001: 206).

However, the British were not alone. Most of the other examples of early formation of ethnic or nation-based institutions in other ports of the Iberian Peninsula followed along the same lines (as, for example, the case of the Flemish in Cadiz, studied by Croft, 1973). Similarly, the merchants from Castile and Aragon also created their own associations when they settled abroad (Casado Alonso, 2003). In the case of Basque merchants, whose presence in the primary European ports can be traced back to, at least, the mid-15th century, the network of associations that were created within a century and a half was composed of two main types of institutions: commerce consulates and religious brotherhoods (consulados and hermandades). Most of their members were usually traders, managers and delegates of companies, sailors, pilots and captains. Consulates had their roots in some Late Medieval institutions: they started as representation offices opened by foreign traders in ports of other kingdoms. The main objectives of the consulates were, at first, linked to commerce: security, juridical protection

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[4]   Let's remember that after the loss of Aquitaine and the city of Bordeaux, Bristol had turned into the most important hub for English sea trade (Sacks, 2001).

and the formation of relationships of trust for their members (Ferrera Priegue, 1995: 233-239; García de Cortázar, 1966: 264). One of the typical advantages provided to its members by these consulates was the existence of private spaces for the use of the community, not only for trading but also for socializing. For instance, the Basques of Bruges were concentrated from 1493 in the sector of the city known as Biskayers Plaatz (the Plaza of the Biscayans), in which most of their establishments were based[5]; in the heart of this plaza the Basques constructed a building called Mareminne, to serve as a meeting point for the traders and the consuls, who had obtained autonomous jurisdiction to judge internal disputes within the community (Guiard, 1913:XLIV-XLV).[6] This also contributed to the spatial visibility of the community, especially in the cases where foreigners were not confined to live in specific neighborhoods, as was the case with some religious minorities like the Jews.

Religiosity was also a core component of all these institutions. Perhaps one of the most visible differences between the models of ethnic association before and after the start of the Modern Age can be observed in the relevance given to religiosity as a main component of both identity construction and the everyday life of these foreign communities. In fact, as Feros says, "until at least the nineteenth century, in all European languages ethnic and ethnicity referred to religious otherness, in other words it referred to 'heathen, pagan'. At least in Spain, it is impossible to find the word étnico [ethnic] used in reference to Spaniards or other Europeans" (Feros, 2008). It is actually not only hard but also meaningless to try to make a clear separation between what were no more than the two sides of the same coin. Religion was a central element of every self-definition that we can consider today included in (or near to) the current semantic field of ethnicity.

In the case of the Basques for example, most of the institutions created by immigrants of this origin in Europe and the Americas from the 15th to 18th centuries, if not all of them, were closely linked to the Catholic Church. Even though there were some active Protestant groups in the northern side of the Basque Country during the early period of the Reformation, the Catholic reaction was so strong that it created a kind of identification between being Basque and being Catholic that almost lasted until the first decades of 20th century.[7] By 1465, the small Basque merchant community of Nantes in Bretagne, organized under the name of "Confrérie de la Contratacition," had been granted the right to display the coat of arms of Biscay in the Chapel of Saint Francis. A few decades later, the Basques of Bruges, along with their plaza, had also built their own chapel in the Convent of St. Francis. The Franciscan community of Seville also hosted the seat of the "Hermandad de los Vizcaínos" (Brotherhood of the Biscayans), created at the end of the century in order to "protect the fueros [rights] and privileges" of the Basque people living there, as well as "to organize, regulate and guard the religious activities of the Brotherhood (Fernández González, 2003: 289).[8]

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[5] It is interesting to remark that the Basques of Brugges were institutionally separated from the rest of the Spanish merchants under the same crown of Castile, which were organized around their own Spanjaard Platz.

[6] Guiard also states that this consulate was used to offer an unified platform for negotiating with local authorities such as the Kings of France, the Duke of Burgundy or the Count of Flanders.

[7] There are plenty of secondary sources on the social relevance of the Catholic Church and the close links between traditional Basque cultural identity and religion, that did not break until the formation of modern Basque nationalism. See among others: Altuna (2003 and 2006). This identification, on the other hand, applied equally in the Basque territories of both Spain and France.

[8] Between 1477 and 1583, a College of Basque Pilots also existed in Cádiz. It also had a chapel and, a cemetery where the Basques celebrated their own festivities, meetings and religious rites (Garmendia Arruebarrena, 1984). Cádiz was also, during the entire Early Modern Age, one of the most international cities of Castile, with merchants from almost all of the countries of Europe, attracted by the monopoly of the commerce with the Spanish Indies (Sancho, 1960. Also Villar García and Pezzi Cristóbal, 2003).

The importance of these sacred spaces went beyond the idea of religion as a mere expression of faith. Their members were usually granted fiscal exemptions and ecclesiastical privileges to have their own cemeteries,[9] priests and confessors, as well as to celebrate their own festivities and maintain their own religious rites and customs. So the image of the community got reinforced as it had its own social, business and religious spaces (Elliot, 2006). The idea of defending a kind of "religious autonomy" lay behind all these attempts of obtaining separate ecclesiastical institutions as a way to enhance both the union of the group and the difference from the rest of foreign nations or ethnic groups that shared the same space (Casado, 2003: 84-85).

The transfer of a model: Ethnic brotherhoods in Colonial Latin America
The example of the Basques

During the first decades of Spanish rule in the American territories, the main divide that structured colonial society was formed along the clear line between white and native. In the very first moments of the conquest, those who had come from Europe to take part in the process of military occupation of the territory were extremely few in number, in comparison with the large populations of native kingdoms and empires that were ultimately conquered. Additionally, some glimpses of internal division among the conquerors could be noticed in very special situations (as, for instance, the civil war between the partisans of Almagro and Pizarro, the two heads of the hueste that overcame the Incan Empire in 1542). Sometimes, personal loyalties were linked to cultural or even ethnic loyalties, as most of the members of the huestes were usually recruited among people from the same geographical origin as their leader. In a second stage, once the colony was firmly established, new immigrants came from Europe in order to participate in the structuring of economic development of natural resources (farming and mining, principally), as well as in the newly organized routes of intra-American and inter-Atlantic trade.

As colonization followed conquest, and immigratory currents from Spain grew due to the attractiveness of the New World as a place in which both economic improvement and social mobility were more likely to be achieved than in the mainland Spain, the composition of the "republic of Spaniards" --the usual denomination for the white population of the Americas and their legal privileges--became more complex in terms of regional or national origin in Europe, and also in cultural and even ethnic backgrounds. This context led to the establishment of new social and religious institutions based on the same regional origin and/or similar cultural features of its members. Consulates, colleges and brotherhoods were the three main examples of institutions that, depending on the local context, had been used in Europe to organize these communities. However, the laws that were applied in Spanish America were slightly different from those that ruled in mainland Spain. Consulates could only be established by groups that were not subjects of the crown of Castile; on the other hand, there were strict regulations on

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[9] For instance, Basques in Valladolid, when this city was the administrative capital of Castile and seat of one of the main Supreme Tribunals of the kingdom, founded a chapel on the premises of the Church of Saint Peter, with the main purpose of serving as burial place for all the Basques who died in the city. Other regional groups from Castile presented the same behavior: as Herzog (2000) states, from 1476 on, a numerous group of merchants from the city of Burgos in the northern part of the kingdom had established themselves in the port of Seville, within a range of streets that quickly became known as "the Castilian neighbourhood" (*barrio de los castellanos*). Soon these "Castilians" created their own chapel (Capilla de los Burgaleses) within the Church of Our Lady of Concepción (Casado, 2003: 61-62).

the migratory flows from Europe, making it very difficult for the arrival and settlement of newcomers from regions that did not belong to Castile, turning them into very small minorities.[10] So the Basques, like other regional groups of the Castilian crown, had to address this situation and therefore strengthened the religious side of the associations they created: they returned to an old institutional formula taken from the Ecclesiastical right: the cofradías or confraternities. Therefore, most of the merchants that settled in the most important Latin American cities and ports organized themselves through religious confraternities according to the nations they belonged to (Martínez del Cerro, 2006). Moreover, this practice was also adopted by the natives of the colonial Spanish American territories, merging their traditional mutual-aid customs with the features of Spanish cofradías (Megged, 1997).

Traditionally, the cofradías were primarily a sort of non-clerical pious association, managed by the Catholic Church and ruled under the exemptions of the ecclesiastical legislation, which allowed them to be somehow exempted from the control of civil legislation. The roots of these associations can be found in the Middle Ages: medieval cofradías had been voluntary associations of laics, united to promote the public cult of their patron saint and to practice piety and charity among their members, usually through mutual aid and in conformity with their rules or constitutiones (Gelabertó Villagrán, 1993). The membership of these cofradías was normally determined by the professional specialization of their affiliates. The main difference in the new Indian cofradías lay upon the fact that the principal uniting feature of their members would no longer be their profession, but their ethnic extraction. As in the case of the medieval cofradías, in this new model (sometimes also known, at least in Spain, as cofradías de naturales),[11] all members shared the same necessity of having a common space for mutual understanding and material help, in which the background of familial relationships and common cultural origin would emerge and be sustained publicly (Angulo Morales, 2010a).

Nonetheless, the first recognized examples of such institutions did not appear until the beginning of the 17th century: as stated previously, this occurred when the conquest of the territory was almost completed and the veritable process of colonization had begun. In the case of the Basques, the process started in Lima on February 13th, 1612, when close to a hundred Basque residents in the city, most of them merchants, decided to create a new institution in which only Basque natives (from the Señorío [Biscay], the Province [Gipuzkoa], the Brotherhood [Araba], the Kingdom [Navarre] and the Four Cities of the Coast [the current Spanish autonomous community of Cantabria][12]) and their overseas-born descendants could participate (Igartua, 2002). Under the name "Our Lady of Aranzazu" and with the protection of the Catholic Church, the main purposes of the newly formed "Confraternity and congregation" were:

> (…) to unite and associate (…) in order to execute works of mercy and Christian charity among members and those of their same nation, in life as well as after death (…) to visit whichever poor ill compatriots there are that originate from the (Basque)

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[10] We must remember that the American territories were incorporated into the crown of Castile (Manzano, 1942). This meant that the subjects of other kingdoms of the Spanish monarchy, beginning with the crown of Aragon, did not have the same rights to emigrate, settle down and obtain positions in the imperial administration as Castilians had, at least during the first two centuries of colonial rule (Mira Caballos and González Rodríguez, 1998).

[11] On the contrary, this term is often reserved in the Latin American historiographical tradition to name the *cofradías* created by the native population.

[12] Those are, by order, former denominations of the current Basque territories of Biscay, Guipuzcoa, Alava and Navarre, as well as the Spanish province of Cantabria, located west of Biscay.

provinces (…) to visit jails to see if any person imprisoned among them is from said provinces (…) to defend them and petition their cases until they are liberated (…) to strive to be aware of the arrival of newcomers from the nation of said brotherhood, especially those who have or have had close family in it, as a means to accommodate them in the best way possible in this city or to help direct them outside of it.[13]

The example of Basques in Lima gave birth to a tradition of naming that was repeated in almost all the rest of the Basque confraternities that appeared in other Spanish American cities until the time of independence, under the same protection of the Gipuzkoan Virgin of Aranzazu[14]. Although these Basque confraternities of Aranzazu differed in size and number of members depending on many factors, such as the concentration and wealth of each local Basque community, it is also true that the biggest and best known of them were those that had been created in the most important cities all across the Hispanic empire: besides Lima, the most powerful and long-lasting of them were those of Cádiz (1626)[15], Mexico City (1681)[16], Manila (first decade of 18th century), and finally Madrid in 1715 (even though its model is a bit different from the rest, as we will see later).

As Barahona Arévalo says, "kinship, ethnic solidarity and attachment" to the homeland were the three pillars of all of them (1991:26). In fact, Basque congregations were so common in the Americas that Juan Antonio de Zamacola, a Biscayan writer of the early 19th century could state that:

> Biscayans and other Basques love each other with extreme fondness wherever fortune takes them, and they create close bonds together as to help each other when they are in need, making them appear to be individuals from a sole family rather than natives from a single province. This virtue is particularly visible at a greater degree between Biscayans that have left to the different regions of America, who still preserve the use of the Basque language: they gather amongst themselves and as they are composed of members educated by the same maxims of education and virtue, they cannot live unless they are united by said fraternal love, which bound their hearts in their youth. (Zamacola, 1818: 55).[17]

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[13] "El fin desta Hermandad y congregacion (..) es Unirse y confederarse (.) en horden a exerçitar entre si y con los de su nacion obras de misericordia y caridad christiana asi en bida como en muerte (..): visitar a los enfermos pobres que Ubiere (..) orixinarios de las Prouincias [vascas] (..) visitar las carzeles a ber si ay en ellas alguna o algunas personas (..) de las dhas prouincias presas (..) defendiendolas y haciendo sus causas hasta liberarlas (..) procurar saber de los recien llegados de las naciones de dha hermandad, especialmente los que tubieren o Ubieren tenido parientes zercanos en ella, y acomodarlos lo mejor que se pudiere en esta ciudad o abiarlos para fuera della". Constitutions of the Illustrious Congregation of Our Lady of Aranzazu, approved in Lima (July 1635), published in Lohman Villena (1990: 206-207).

[14] A collection of the most recent research conducted on those congregations, in Álvarez Gila and Arrieta Elizalde (2004). Also see Zaballa Beascoechea (2005).

[15] This is one of the few exceptions of Basque confraternities not having the name of Aranzazu, as it was officially created as the "Cofradía del Cristo de la Humildad y Paciencia" (Fernández Pérez, 1997).

[16] There is an excellent study on the history of this confraternity, by Luque Alcaide (1995). The Royal Confraternity of Our Lady of Aranzazu in Mexico was located in the Convent of Saint Francis of the capital city of New Spain.

[17] "Se aman los Bizcaynos y los otros Bascos con una afición extremada adonde quiera que la fortuna los conduzca, y se ligan tan estrechamente entresí para socorrerse unos a otros, que más parecen individuos de una sola familia, que naturales de una provincia. Particularmente se ve esta virtud en grado superior entre los Bizcaynos que han marchado a las diferentes regiones de América, y que todavía conservan el uso de la lengua Bascongada: entre ellos se juntan, y como están formados con unas mismas máximas de educación y virtud, no pueden estar jamás sin que los una aquel amor fraternal, que enlazó sus corazones en la juventud."

As had occurred since the times of the first Basque consulates in Nantes and Bruges, a relevant part of their members were primarily linked to trade and commerce in all of these confraternities. The core of their membership was usually composed of merchants, shippers, pilots, commissioners, factors (commercial correspondents), delegates of European companies and even, in a few cases, shopkeepers and sailors. But a second category of members soon started to prevail: bureaucrats of both Church and State administration, who were closely related to the process of extension and growth of the colonial bureaucracy. In contrast with the lowest levels of colonial rule, medium and high-ranking officials of the Spanish administration were appointed by the High Council of the Indies in Madrid and, because of this, they were frequently given to people with close links and smooth relationships with the Court and its members. This relational capital soon had great relevance even for the development of the activities and external projection of the confraternities. The prominence of the institution itself was primarily based on the prominence of its members; on the other hand, the quality of being co-members of the same institution--one of whose main objectives was to enhance the good name of the whole group by means of the mutual aid between its members, both to promote and not to let any of them fail--provoked the intensification of the links between them. This process helped to convert what at the beginning was no more than a union of separate kinship groups into one, more elaborated, ethnically defined identity. Familial links and local identities soon merged into the wider concept of Basqueness, a mixture between shared cultural features and common interests. It can be said that many of them did not become fully aware of their "ethnicity" until they emigrated: there were of course Basques in the homeland, but the unified concept of Basque identity could only be developed abroad (Angulo Morales, 2010b and 2011).[18] Within this context, as Megged says (1997), confraternities served as devotional associations, financial institutions, and spaces for the reinforcement of internal links and collective identity of their members.

In the heart of the Empire. The special case of Madrid.

After being elected in 1561 by Philip II as seat of the Castilian court, and with the only exception of a short period of few years at the beginning of the 17th century, Madrid has been the seat of the main instances of government and power of the Castilian crown, and the Spanish empire afterwards. Most of its development has historically been determined by its political functions as capital. This also converted the city into a very attractive point for immigration, not only from the rest of the territories of the crown, but also, during the golden era of the empire, from other European kingdoms.

As a true immigrant city, Madrid soon experienced both the presence of active groups of new inhabitants and their organization using similar models of association as in other towns and commercial ports of Spain. Foreigners and nationals were engaged in the same processes. But there was an apparently slight, but actually quite definite, differences between these two groups: their nature as subjects -or not- of the Spanish crown. For those coming from abroad, Madrid was probably nothing more than a good business destination; but for the rest, the city also had a political relevance that could not be ignored.

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[18] Inside the Basque country itself, group identification was traditionally related to local spaces (the village, the valley, or the province). In all of these cases, the group was defined "politically," by the existence of a territory whose inhabitants had a common set of rules, enjoyed some legal privileges and/or had common government institutions. Other basic ethnic markers, like language, did not seem to play a major role in these definitions. On the same idea and its development in the 19th century Basque migratory diaspora, see Alvarez Gila (2011).

Returning to the case of the Basques, by the last two decades of the 17th century, two main associations were created in Madrid: the "Real Congregación de San Ignacio de Loyola" (established in 1683, and under royal patronage from 1715 onward) and the "Real Congregación de San Fermín de los Navarros" (created in 1684). These institutions presented two divergences with the model applied so far. First of all, instead of a united institution, in the case of Madrid, the Navarrese preferred to create their own, separate association. Secondly, the names of the new institutions were no longer cofradías (confreries), but a new one: congregaciones (congregations). What was the difference between a cofradía and a congregación, if any existed? According to its actual, legal meaning inside ecclesiastical law, they would be almost synonymous: as stated by the Spanish Academy, a congregación is above all "a devotional brotherhood", that is, the same as a cofradía. But in reality, the two Basque congregations of Madrid were not at all similar to the previously existing Basque confraternities elsewhere.

What happened in Madrid during the last quarter of 17th century that led to the implementation of these two congregations? This moment has sometimes been described as "an assault on the court" (Angulo Morales, 2012). According to Fernández González (2000), after several decades of development by Basque communities in the New World, composed initially by a predominance of merchants, there had been a change in their composition, when a growing number of Basque people had started to integrate into the bureaucracy, the militia and the Church. This confluence of interests from all the corners of the Empire was finally concentrated in Madrid as the main center of power, already during the reign of the Habsburgs, but also after the arrival of the new dynasty of Bourbons at the beginning of the 18th century.

Other main features of both congregations can be noted in their process of creation. Unlike the previous cofradías, these new institutions were not solely promoted by immigrants -or, at least, not only by Basque residents in Madrid-, as the local authorities of the Basque provinces also took part in the process. It is known that the Navarrese that gave birth to the Congregation of Saint Fermin had to ask in advance for a permit from the Diputación or main government of Navarre. In the case of the other congregation, the connection with home rule institutions is even more evident, as the three diputaciones of Biscay, Alava and Gipuzkoa themselves conducted the two attempts of creating and managing the royal patronage for it. Therefore, it seems clear that politics, in the wider sense of this term, was also involved in the sort of reasons that brought them into being.

Without forgetting other common purposes such as the protection of young Basque immigrants coming to the city and the promotion of their careers in all levels of the administration, the congregations were above all testing ground for the possibilities that the conjunction of the Basque communities abroad could offer on behalf of their homeland and its governmental institutions. On the one hand, the congregations tried to present themselves as the head of a veritable "general brotherhood" for all the Basques living in any part of the Empire, endeavoring to sustain a web of institutional relations with the rest of Basque immigrant associations, especially from the Americas. In the case of the Congregation of Saint Ignatius, an "Agent for the Indies" was nominated in 1746 with the main duty of doing his best to "get the knowledge and manage all the questions related to these territories", in order to help the members and other compatriots with the answers they would demand. Moreover, the second chapter of its constitutions stated that "any compatriot living outside the Basque provinces can use the services of the Congregation for anything they need in this Court and

thus must be admitted and helped as it is said" (Angulo Morales, 2010b). This aid was also extended to the Basque governmental institutions, whose delegates and commissioners in Madrid usually had close relationships with its members and the congregation itself.

Conclusion

In 1912, a substantial group of Basque immigrants living in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, decided to call a meeting to be held on the premises of the Spanish Circle to create their own association, open to any person of Basque origin, with the main purposes of helping each other, creating spaces for the recreation and enjoyment of its members "following the Basque use," and promoting the good name, accurate knowledge and cultural features of their homeland. Its name was quite simple: the new institution should be known as Euskal Erria ("The Basque Country" in Basque).[19] Even though Euskal Erria had no official affiliation with the Catholic Church, it maintained close links with religion: its members were convened for the celebration of the festivity of the Basque Saint Ignatius of Loyola as the most important annual meeting, and even in 1922, when Euskal Erria decided to create a new school for the children of its members, it was put in the hands of a congregation of Basque nuns.

Three hundred years had passed from the Lima to the Montevideo events, and even though many things had changed, starting with the language itself, those Basque immigrants--separated by more than twelve generations and inserted into very different historical contexts--had practically taken the same decision: to get together, using a very similar tool with very closely related purposes, to meet the needs they had by living abroad, far from their homeland. Hence, some questions quickly come to the researcher's mind. Why did they behave so similarly? What lies beneath the strong power of attraction exhibited by the same idea of forming associations of immigrants, that can remain virtually unchanged for ages in its core elements, despite the transformation of the historical context--whose only constant is change--and that can be able to attract--and be seen as the best solution for their interests by people in so many different times and spaces? Such questions still await further research.

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[19] Editor's note: the more common spelling today is Euskal Herria.

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