



The Caves

Amalur-Etxea –Mother Earth’s Home– marks the centre of Basque mythology. Within this earth are wide, open areas with milk-flowing rivers reached from inside the caves. These caves, the chasms of Euskadi, or the Basque Country, abound in legends, mythological numens and spirits controlling life on earth. They are the abodes of Mari and Akerbeltz, among numerous other spirits. The cave was the first dwelling of both men and women; it was their home, their temple and their grave. Caves are the sources of health-procuring waters, of hurricane-force winds and storm clouds.



Rites related to St. John’s Day

The summer solstice marks the renovation of nature, the making of spells and enchantments intended to ward off evil. Purifying fire rites and bonfires over which great leaps are made while crying out spells to keep the spirits away, where old possessions are burned in obvious indication of the desire for renewal. Rites related to water, to blessings, to sources and curative waters. Rites related to the renovation of nature, to maypoles, to the entwined branches and trees of St. John; to the cutting of herbs and branches for curing humans, animals and harvests of all ills.



MYTHS AND LEGENDS

The very survival of the Basque language confirms the deep roots uniting this people to its origins, a connection that has in turn made it possible to hand down a wealth of myths kept alive thanks to the strong Basque tradition of transmission by word of mouth. Scarce Romanization and late Christianization, together with the area’s rural aspect, mean that legends, rituals and the traditional way of life have been kept alive until very recent times.

Prehistoric man believed that the earth covered a never-ending stretch of land forming a horizontal plane interspersed with mountains and seas. Beneath the surface, were enormous areas running with milk-filled rivers communicated by wells and caverns, while any amounts of nooks and crannies offered homes to the spirits of Basque mythology. These spirits took the shape of both zoomorphs and anthropomorphs.

MARI, queen of the spirits, personifies the earth. She and her husband Maju have two children: Atarrabi and Mikelats. The former embodies the spirit of good, while the latter is commonly associated with evil. Sometimes Mari is partnered with the devil and has up to as many as seven children.

Mari’s home is the cave. This, man’s first dwelling, also served as his temple and his grave. He there-fore had the feeling of living inside the earth. Subsequent gradual evolution, however, led him to create his home outside of the cave. Mari is said to have had several homes, all in high mountain caverns, among which are Amboto, Aketegi (in the Aizkorri mountain range) and Txindoki (in the Aralar mountain range), from where she rose to the surface. Mari is an elegant lady, mistress of the depths, of the earth and of meteors. Every seven years she changes home by travelling through the air enveloped in a shaft of light. She fixes her hair with a golden comb, and nobody can come near her; she is extremely strict, condemns and punishes the telling of lies, theft, pride and lack of respect towards others. It’s thanks to Mari that we get so much from mother earth, or Amalur, such as the health-procuring spring water.

Akola Dolmen. Hernani.



SORGINA OR WITCH is a kind of numen who waits upon Mari in her numerous caverns. She often takes on animal form, with the peculiarity that the animal in question is always missing a member, such as an arm or its head. But the most common form adapted by these witches is that of the cat.

THE SUN is a highly symbolic part of our mythology. In addition to its natural properties, it has the power of repelling the evil spirits that exert their power on the world at night. An enormous number of beliefs and practices dating from antiquity still exist during the solstices: the Christmas log burning in the fireplace, or Gabon-Zuzi, the St. John bonfires, etc.

THE MOON is the heavenly body related to the rites of life. It controls the tide, the rain, vegetation, fertility; it symbolises time and fate, light and darkness, life and death. Hil (month in Euskera) and il (death in the same language) have the same root as Ilargi (moon, light of the dead). Hence, hilabete (lunation) or full moon.

AKERBELTZ (a black billy-goat) is a numen who succeeds in gathering round himself a series of beliefs and practices. He lives underground, is the leader of numerous spirits, and has a predilection for whipping up storms. He has the power to cure and a positive influence on the animals entrusted to him for protection. Basque witchcraft placed special relevance on the ancient representation of Akerbeltz. He was adored by the witches and wizards on Friday nights at the Akelarre or coven.

GAUEKO is the lord and symbol of the night who doesn't allow men to work after the Angelus bell.

Library of the Arantzazu Sanctuary



EUSKARA

Basque, or Euskara, is a language of unknown origin, with no known relationship to Indo-European, Uralic or European families of languages. Although the exact date of its origin is unknown, most specialists agree that it is probably the oldest language on the European continent. It has been influenced by other languages, like Celtic, Latin, Romance, Gascon and Castilian, to which it has in turn made interesting contributions. The history of the Basque language, until well into the 20th century, is the history of a language which is gradually losing part of its territory from the south to the north as a result of a number of different historic factors (mainly political and economic). Today it is spoken in the provinces of Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia, Álava-Araba and Navarra, as well as in the French Basque provinces of Labourd, Basse-Navarre and Soule.

The first written literary work dates from 1545, although the first written words in Basque appear for the first time in the 10th century Emilianense annotations, written in Castilian Romance. This is mainly due to the fact that literature and popular tradition have been orally transmitted.

The recovery of Basque initially started in the 20th century with the creation of the first Basque school, or ikastola (1914), the foundation of the Basque Academy, Euskaltzaindia (1918), and the subsequent ikastola movement. It was in this same century that the bases of unified Basque were established (1968).

The revival of the 60s was consolidated in the 80s and 90s, when Basque was added to Castilian as one of the two official languages of the Basque Autonomous Community, and the Basque public institutions began adopting policies aimed at standardising and promoting the language. This means that, over the last twenty years, Basque has experienced the gradual increase in the number of new speakers, and an extension in the social and cultural areas in which it is used: education, university, administration, the media, etc., thus giving shape to an increasingly growing offer.



EGUZKILORE

The "Eguzkilo" (literally: flower of the sun) is a large dried thistle head with a pronounced likeness to the sun which is placed by the door of farm and other kinds of houses in order to protect them against evil spirits, sorcerers, lamiak (mermaid-resembling creatures with bird's legs), the spirits of illness, storms and lightning. It's not uncommon to find a small wooden cross next to the flower as old and new intermingle with one another in Basque symbolism.



BASAJAUN (Lord of the Wood)

This uncommonly strong and agile spirit of human form lives in the heart of the wood. A good spirit, he protects the flocks, is responsible for the introduction of agriculture among the Basque peasants, and is the provider of tools like the saw or techniques like soldering.