



TXANKAREKU is a historical dance which tells of a fallen hero in battle. Performed by the Oinkari Basque Dancers. Photo: Ralph Rinzler.

BASQUES

by
William A. Douglass
Coordinator
Basque Studies Program
Desert Research Institute
University of Nevada

The Basques inhabit a small, mountainous corner of southwestern France and northern Spain—an area which includes a portion of the western Pyrenees and the lowlands along the Cantabrian Sea. The Basques have long been regarded as the mystery people of Europe. They are both racially and linguistically distinct from neighboring European populations and scholars are still unable to explain when or how they came to occupy their present homeland. The evidence for Basque racial uniqueness is based upon their distinct physical type and their unusual blood-type frequencies (*vis-a-vis* other European peoples). Spoken Basque, despite centuries of efforts by philologists and linguists to relate it to other tongues, remains unique within the world family of languages.

Historically, the Basque country consisted of the area presently constituting four provinces in Spain (Guipuzcoa, Vizcaya, Alava, and Navarra) and three provinces in France (Labourd, Basse Navarre,

and Soule). Since the Middle Ages, however, there has been a steady erosion of the Basque language and culture—notably in the Spanish provinces of Alava and Navarra. Today there are somewhat fewer than 100,000 Basque-speaking people in France and a little over 500,000 Basque-speaking people in Spain.

The fact that the Basque people, while few in number and occupying a small area that is in turn divided politically between two major nations, have managed to retain their distinct language and cultural heritage is ample testimony to their resistance to outside influences. The Basques were quite successful in defending their homeland against the invasions of the Romans, Visigoths, Franks, Celts, and Moors. When the nations of Spain and France emerged, the Basques were successful in retaining a degree of political autonomy which was formalized in local charters. These charters, dating from the Middle Ages, were the basis for a strongly



ARKO DANTZA—Hoop Dance, performed by the Oinkari Basque Dancers.
Photo: Ralph Rinzler.

democratic form of local government through popular assembly. The most famous of the assemblies was that of Guernica (province of Vizcaya) where legislative sessions were held beneath an oak tree. Periodically, the king of Castile (or his representative) was required to travel to Guernica to pledge beneath the sacred oak to respect the charters of Vizcaya. To this day, the Oak of Guernica is of importance to Basques as the symbol of their political autonomy. This tradition of resisting

outside influence lives on in the active Basque nationalist and separatist political movements that provide opposition to the French and Spanish governments.

The Spanish Basque provinces of Guipuzcoa and Vizcaya constitute one of the major industrial regions of Spain, and tourism is an increasingly important factor in the economy of the entire Basque country. The two ways of life most characteristic of the Basques, however, are seafaring and agriculture. The Basques have a longstanding

tradition of seamanship. They were the earliest whalers in Europe. Long before Columbus, Basque fishermen were traveling to the coast of Greenland. Juan de Elcano, a Basque, was the first to circumnavigate the globe. Many of the corsairs who terrorized shipping in both European and Caribbean waters were Basques. This seafaring tradition continues. There are many important fishing villages and major port facilities along the Basque coast, and their seamen serve in merchant fleets around the world.

The interior of the Basque country is dotted with small farming villages where, for centuries, peasant families have practiced agriculture on small, single-family landholdings. The mountainous terrain and cool, humid climate make farming difficult, limit the availability of suitable land, and rule out mechanization of agriculture. These difficulties, combined with the custom in Basque society of naming a single heir to the farm in each generation, have produced a long-standing tradition of emigration out of the peasant villages. Many of the dislocated Basques played important roles in the establishment and administration of the Spanish Empire. Beginning in the nineteenth century many Basque emigrants came to the American West where they rapidly established themselves in sheep-ranching. Today, the sheep industry in the western United States is largely controlled by these interests and the majority of sheepherders are imported under contract from the Basque country. The members of the Oinkariak dance company are descendants of early Basque settlers in Idaho.