



EUSKAL KULTUR ERAKUNDEA

INSTITUT CULTUREL BASQUE

Château Lota Jauregia - 64480 Ustaritz - Uztaritze
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Egilea - Auteur : Xalbador (Fernando Aire)
Iturria - Source : Extrait du livre «Odolaren mintzoa» liburutik hartu zatiak - Editions Sendoa Argitaletxea (1976) - Itzulpenak - Traductions : Kattalin Totorika-Phillip Basterra - Hautaketa - Sélection : Daniel Landart
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Words by ... XALBADOR

Shepherd by trade ...

It is working as a shepherd that I really blossomed, but I wasn't allowed to take care of the herd until I expressed my wish to do so. Nevertheless, at the age of fourteen I was already doing all the farm work. Until my father died, my main job was as a shepherd, then I had to take care of everything.

The pleasure of singing ...

Sung mass was also held during the week, and I used to sing to accompany the priest. I took great pleasure in doing this because at that time I enjoyed singing. I found it easy to learn church hymns, although I didn't understand what I was singing because everything was in Latin.

Later on, I became interested in Basque songs. I learnt some of them from my shepherd friends, but mostly from copies collected here or there. Most of them were given to me by my aunt Mariana. This is how I learnt many Basque songs. Sometimes I even hummed away to tunes amongst my sheep. They also seemed to appreciate my singing.

Behind the songs, writers ...

Then I began to think that someone was behind these magnificent songs and I even learnt that they were called improvisers. I found this astonishing and difficult to believe because I didn't think that I had such a talent. I was fascinated by the thought of these mysterious characters.

I had however for a long time known that not all our marvellous songs are necessarily the work of improvisers and I had also understood that writing songs and improvising verse in a public square or an inn are two very different things.

The special talent of an improviser...

Once I surprised my late father talking about improvisers with one of my uncles. They said that they had a special talent and that they used many words which were not commonly used. It was obvious that they both had great admiration for improvisation.



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My father's father apparently also sang a little verse, although I don't know to what extent he was an improviser. However, he probably enjoyed verse. Who knows what he would have been capable of if he had been helped like we were. I am therefore not the first in our family to enjoy versification.

The wish to sing verse, but not the ability ...

I've already mentioned my desire to become an improviser, but I didn't feel at all capable. I never tried to create any verse, even when I was alone the thought never even crossed my mind. I'd heard some of my friends say that in inns some improvisers competed against each other with verse and that when they heard them they laughed heartily. At that time I didn't go out to inns.

Improvisers at the village inn

One year, on the second day of the village fête, I'd arranged with my childhood friend Lorentzo Tolosa to go to the dance that evening. The dance was to take place in front of the *Angelesainea* inn.

What I remember is that just as we were going to leave, we noticed four or five men improvising in the inn's kitchen. Lorentzo and I observed them from the window. It was the first time I'd ever heard improvisers, but they were not how I'd imagined them and not as good as the writers whose songs I'd learnt. I was surprised. There's no doubt about it, I didn't see them as improvisers. In other words, what they said would never be repeated.

First improvisation at the age of sixteen ...

They were having a tremendous time doing as best they could, and when I thought about myself, I thought that I could also do as well as them!

Once they had stopped, and almost against my own will, I sang them a verse from the window. They all looked at me and, like dogs, came at me. They didn't want a snotty-nosed boy to join them.

I fled into the mountains with Lorentzo as if I'd done something wrong.

That was my first improvised verse. I was sixteen years old.

At inns we improvised with determination ...

Although I improvised my first verse outside the inn through the window, I began to earn my place inside, and also to improvise more.

I can't say since when, but at the time in bars in Urepel it was common for certain men, after drinking a few glasses, to enthusiastically start improvising.

I watched them doing this, and I did the same thing, with four or five friends around a table with a glass of wine and ... whoever didn't manage to finish his verse had to pay the next round of drinks. I never had to pay, I always managed to finish my improvisation.



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A tradition from Gipuzkoa ...

I think that this tradition of improvisation in taverns was brought by a shepherd from Zaldibi, in Gipuzkoa. His name was Joxe Tolosa. His wife was also from Gipuzkoa. They were Lorentzo's parents, who I've already talked about.

Dear Joxe ... When he began to get warmed up, as he said himself, he began to improvise.

And if, as I believe, he was the one who brought this tradition here, it's also thanks to him that I began. So, although I don't want to give them all the credit, people from Gipuzkoa played a major role from the beginning in my becoming an improviser. So I suppose they could say "after that, no comment".

Training for improvisation ...

Between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, I sang many improvisations. Even if I was not up to the same level as those improvisers who I admired so much, I practiced, and believe me, I had to make a great effort in order to achieve something.

When I was alone I never stopped trying. I improvised whether it was any good or not, then taking my time, I tried to arrange and improve my verses. I had more success using this second method.

Tragic events ...

I was nineteen years old when I was hit by two events on almost the same day: the death of my father and the start of the war in France.

From that point on, I hardly sang at all. The most difficult period during the war almost put out the flame in me which was just beginning to grow strong. It wasn't a period for singing verse. This was undoubtedly very detrimental to my development as an improviser. A plant won't grow as it should if it's hit by a storm during its growth.

Nevertheless, I had already begun to get a certain reputation.

The championship in Saint-Jean-de-Luz...

After the war, when Ernandorena began to look for improvisers locally, he contacted me. He took me to the championship he had organised in Saint-Jean-de-Luz.

I went with Iriarte and Zubikoa, from Banka, but I have to admit that I didn't know any of the others there.

It was also on this occasion that I met our dear Mattin, Etxahun and the late Errexil. That day in Saint-Jean-de-Luz was very important for me, and I'm not ashamed to say that it was thanks to Ernandorena that the Basque Country discovered us, Mattin and myself. What's more, it's with him that we went to Paris.



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People began to ask for us ...

Following the Saint-Jean-de-Luz championship, Ernandorena organised other similar events. This created a kind of passion for improvisation. People began to ask for us for local village fêtes, events and other occasions.

At the beginning, I went with Iriarte, but he quickly lost interest before stopping forever.

I also thought about stopping, saying to myself that I'd no longer go. We didn't earn a penny, and getting around was difficult because we didn't have a car! Sometimes there were people around to take you, but rarely to give you a lift back home. There aren't even any trains in our isolated villages, and at the time it was difficult getting back home when we were away.

At home, they put up with a lot due to my persistence to become an improviser. It wasn't very good for our health either.

Mattin...

After the death of Iriarte, Mattin became my regular companion, or perhaps it was the opposite. It depended!

I wasn't always very at ease improvising with Mattin. We didn't do things the same way. I was no good at making people laugh. Even though I inevitably tried, it never really worked. On the other hand, this was one of Mattin's trump cards. I myself laughed on more than one occasion listening to his retorts.

Luckily, I quickly learnt that it was better not to be offended by him. Otherwise, that's too bad for you: he took delight in seeing you hurt and this only made him continue. So, the only solution was to start laughing yourself.

Apart from that, Mattin is more than anything a good pleasant man. We, his friends, all loved him.

The future ...

At present the improvisers who perform most often on this side of the border with Mattin and myself are Xanpun and Ezponde. They are both very talented and the best friends you could wish for.

Recently, young improvisers have begun to appear here. They don't know how much pleasure they've given me. Alkhat, Mendiburu and Arrosagaray are the most well known.

No matter what, the veterans amongst us at least have the pleasure of having passed on improvisation to the next generation. Provided that they also pass it on to the following generation.