

Katarzyna Mirgos

Death in Basque Culture

Studia Europaea Gnesnensia 7, 71-86

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Katarzyna Mirgos
(Gniezno)

DEATH IN BASQUE CULTURE

Abstract

The subject of the article is reflection on the manner in which death is perceived in Basque culture. The issue is presented in relation to the beliefs and customs of the Basques, the position of women in the Basque society, and in terms of the national current.

Key words

Basque culture, death, beliefs, woman in the Basque Country, nationalism

In one of the poems by a Basque poet Gabriel Celaya, the lyrical subject addresses his motherland, the Basque Country, towards the end of a long life, just as all Basques who leave the land yet “always return”. He speaks of his fatigue, his old age, though he feels that inside him there is the “child that he has been”, enlivened by the power of the Basque landscape perhaps. In the closing lines of the poem, some exceptional words are spoken *Euzkadi, vengo herido/ ayúdame a morir* (“Land of the Basques, I come wounded, help me to die”)¹. What does death mean to the Basques, those people, as Celaya writes, so full of valour and life, so different from the “Castilian spectres” (“que nosotros no somos fantasmas castellanos/ sino vascos alzados, luchadores y vivos”)²? Federico García Lorca stated that “in Spain, a dead man is more dead than in any other land of the world”, emphasizing the Spanish distinctiveness, austerity, but also pensiveness and sorrow, found already in lullabies sung to children. However, he clearly set the Basques apart³. The renown Basque anthropologist and historian Julio Caro Baroja wrote that a Basque is not a “sorrowful man, enamoured in sombre poetry”, though he remarked that Basques “have great respect for the dead”⁴.

DEATH IN BASQUE BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS

Death has occupied a significant place in the Basque worldview. First of all, one emphasized the value of a “good death”, according to the principle “there is no good life without a good death”. Anuntxi Arana, a Basque anthropologist and researcher of mythology, observes that in Basque tales, one does not encounter the desire of immortality or eternal persistence, but of good death, while the fear of difficult departure is more vivid than the fear of the end itself⁵. “Beautiful death is one which confirms the positive aspects of life” — claims Louis

¹G. Celaya, *El retorno*, [in:] J.Á. Ascunce (ed.), *Trayectoria poética. Antología*, Madrid 1993, p. 304–305.

²G. Celaya, *Euzkadi, mi Amor*, [in:] J.Á. Ascunce (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 360.

³F.G. Lorca, *Od pierwszych pieśni do słów ostatnich* (wiersze, proza, listy, wypowiedzi), selected and transl. by Z. Szleyen, Kraków 1987, p. 215–216.

⁴J.C. Baroja, *Los Vascos*, Madrid 2000, p. 252.

⁵A. Arana, *Mito hurbilak. Euskal mitologia jendeen bizitzan*, Baiona 2010, p. 56, 59.

Vincent Thomas, discussing the notions of ideal death in various traditions⁶. In the Basque Country, it did happen that those who wished to help the dying in an easier “journey beyond” resorted to prayer — the neighbours would pay for a mass said for the person in question (in some myths the human prayer is indispensable at the death of *lamiak*, mythical beings which resembled women in appearance and inhabited the banks of rivers and streams⁷). Arana, discussing the various activities intended to succour the dying, and drawing on the concept of Arnold Van Gennep, spoke about “magical euthanasia”⁸.

It was believed that a bad, difficult death may have resulted from magical intervention (“the evil eye”) which was the domain of witches (*sorgin*)⁹. Hence, people used amulets to protect themselves or called upon the “good witches”. Incidentally, it might be noted that the very perception of witch in the Basque culture has changed to negative under the influence of Christianity, according to some authors. Formerly, witches were women with extensive knowledge of the healing properties of herbs or midwifery for instance. However, some researchers adhere to the view that the fear of dangerous witches had existed earlier, and therefore did not develop only as a consequence of the new religion¹⁰.

Also, death was not always perceived as an unexpected occurrence, as there had been signs portending its coming, such as crowing of a cock in the middle of the night or barking of a dog¹¹. Other events were similarly interpreted — for instance crows circling the dwelling or a case when a hen crowed like a cockerel¹². The “fates” of the dead could have been easily guessed from the weather at the moment of their passing — rain was a good omen, while storm might have meant damnation¹³.

⁶L.V. Thomas, *Trup. Od biologii do antropologii*, transl. by K. Kocjan, Łódź 1991, p. 80 et seq.

⁷A. Arana, op. cit., p. 54–56.

⁸Ibidem, p. 57.

⁹According to Bataille: “For the archaic people, violence was the cause of death: death may have been caused by magic, there was always someone responsible for it, it was always a homicide”, G. Bataille, *Erotyzm*, transl. by M. Ochab, Gdańsk 2007, p. 52.

¹⁰A. Arana, op. cit., p. 48–50; K. Mirgos, *Mit Mari. Jego źródła i miejsce w kulturze Basków*, Wrocław 2010, p. 74–81.

¹¹W.A. Douglass, *Muerte en Murélagu*, Irun 2003, p. 45.

¹²J.C. Baroja, op. cit., p. 252.

¹³Ibidem, p. 252–253.

In the Basque myths, death is interwoven with life, or love is combined with it. Arana quotes two versions of the myth of *lamiak*, which differ in the content: in the first a dying *lamia* is given help, whereas in the second, *lamia* gives birth to a child¹⁴. One of the motifs found in Basque mythology is also death by love. This was a frequent ending to the failed, misunderstood and condemned relationships between representatives of two worlds — humans and mythical beings, such as the *lamiak*, creatures which were deceptively similar to women, with the exception of having duck's webbed feet.

Death itself was called *Erio* (*Balbe* in Biscay), sometimes it was given a specific shape — J.C. Baroja mentions death represented as a cockerel without feathers, an effigy found e.g. in southern Navarra¹⁵. When discussing Basque beliefs connected with death and the latter's imagery, one must not forget about *Mari*, a Basque witch or goddess, which is also interpreted as personification of death (her symbolic is exceedingly complex). In this aspect, the cave she inhabits symbolizes the passage from the world of the living to the world of the dead (who dwell deep below the surface). In turn, the love affairs of *Mari* has with mortals may be understood as the death of the latter. Thus the wine she offers to humans would be a food of the underworld¹⁶. Arnold van Gennep mentions this element in the context of the "ritual of integration with the beyond" which may make us resemble the dead, or be closer to them (hence the numerous taboos)¹⁷.

The possibility of resurrection is an interesting theme. Such a potential lies in the bones of the dead, which, according to a major Basque myth, served a girl to raise her brother from the dead; the brother had been killed by the mother and eaten by the father (the story is interpreted by reference to the matriarchic nature of the Basque society). The return of the boy to life was feasible as he had been buried in a plot of garden adjoining the house, which had magical power of sorts, as it was believed. It would be worthwhile to mention the custom

¹⁴A. Arana, op. cit., p. 54–55.

¹⁵J.C. Baroja, op. cit., p. 252.

¹⁶The figure of *Mari*, as well as some of the issues addressed in this paper (related to the significance of home or woman in Basque culture) was discussed at length by the author in the book *Mit Mari. Jego źródła i miejsce w kulturze Basków*, Wrocław 2010.

¹⁷A. van Gennep, *Obrzędy przejścia. Systematyczne studium ceremonii*, transl. by B. Biały, Warszawa 2006, p. 166.

of burying children who died unchristened in such a location (perhaps it was believed that consequently they would be born again?)¹⁸.

J. Caro Baroja wrote that for the Basques not only the soul could materialise as something akin to breath or waft of air, but the dead themselves led a kind of existence. It was therefore necessary to provide them with sustenance and light. Also, death was by no means an end to the persons' earthly affairs¹⁹.

To a considerable degree, the Basque home was associated with the phenomenon of death. This was not exclusively about being the place where a person breathed their last, which is a contrast to the contemporary marginalisation of death (isolating the dying, transferring them to a hospital²⁰), but seeing the deceased as one who belonged to the house, the family, dead though they were. Hence the custom of burying the dead within the household/farmstead (grounds belonging to the family, the vicinity of the dwelling, or even burial underneath the floor of the house). On a symbolic plane, home was perceived in a strict relationship with the cemetery, as well as with the church, being a site of particular sacred power, a kind of temple (with the woman-housewife as its singular priestess²¹). The later burials inside churches are seen as continuation of burying the dead inside, or near the house²² (around the 14th century, the right to interment in the church expanded beyond the clergy and nobility²³). The symbolic family tomb in the church, called *yarleku*, or *sepulturie* was a place of great ritual significance (the customs associated with it will be discussed later on).

As may be seen, the location of burial has a fairly diversified character in Basque culture. So far, we have discussed the burials inside and in the vicinity of dwellings, inside churches or adjoining cemeteries. In addition, the Basque Country is strewn with dolmens and cromlechs; another characteristic element of the funeral space were tomb steles, mostly circular in shape and placed on a plinth (trapeze-shaped for instance) and fashioned from stone. Sometimes

¹⁸K. Mirgos, op. cit., p. 83–84; A. Arana, op. cit., p. 52–53.

¹⁹J.C. Baroja, op. cit., p. 255.

²⁰Medicalization of death and its perception as “ailment” which requires a doctor rather than priest was discussed by Lindsay Priori, see Z. Bauman, Śmierć i nieśmiertelność. O wielości strategii życia, Warszawa 1998, p. 166–167.

²¹J.M. de Barandiaran, Mitología vasca, San Sebastián n.d., p. 70.

²²B. Aretxaga, Los funerales en el nacionalismo radical vasco. Ensayo antropológico, San Sebastián 1988, p. 26–27; A. Manterola, La familia tradicional de Bizkaia, Bilbao 1994, p. 41–43.

²³A.A. Sorondo, Tierra y gentes. 75 temas vascos, Donostia 2002, p. 85.

they bore the symbol of the cross, or a name of the house from which the dead originated (in Basque tradition, the “name” of the house was frequently more important than family name; a person would be identified as belonging to a specific household, while failing to remember sometimes what their actual name was), or a symbol associated with their profession. Interestingly enough, such tombstones were erected not only in the site of the burial, but also in an open space, intended for the victims of robberies and assaults, who could not find peace without a burial²⁴. According to F. Marcel Etchehandy, the Basque tomb stele symbolizes the opposition earth-heaven (the plinth representing the latter). At the same time it highlights the significance of circle and centre in the Basque culture — in the dances, the customs of the shepherds, games or in the Basque language itself²⁵.

The significant position of the ancestors (defined as *gure aurrekoak*) in the life of the community is manifested by the custom of bringing the fiancé or the bride to the cemetery, so that she may be symbolically “introduced” to the dead, admitted into the family (sometimes after the wedding the newlyweds visited the place where their relatives were buried, in order to pray together; at times the young wife herself would go there with flowers or candles)²⁶. The cult of the ancestors was one of the female duties.

THE BASQUE WOMAN AND DEATH

In the funeral rituals, the woman takes a particular place, as the one who lays out the dead (washes the body with holy water, dresses the hair and places the candles in the hand of the deceased), acts as a hostess to the mourners, is obliged to participate in the rites (e.g. the vigil and prayer and the side of the dead, presence at numerous masses, and the need to appear publicly as little as possible during the period of mourning). In principle, the mourning was to

²⁴A.A. Sorondo, op. cit., p. 84–85.

²⁵F.M. Etchehandy, *La estela funeraria. Simbolismo cósmico*, [in:] E.A. Echebarria (direcc.), *Euskal Herria emblemática. Geografía simbólica. Cultura de los espacios*, Lasarte-Oria, n.d., p. 180–182.

²⁶J.M. Zunzuegi, *El cementario lugar simbólico*, [in:] E.A. Echebarria (direcc.), op. cit., p. 176–177; A.A. Sorondo, *La mujer en la religiosidad popular: Las Seroras*, Sukil. Cuadernos de Cultura Tradicional 1, 1995, p. 107; A. Manterola, op. cit., p. 41–42.

last at least a year²⁷; it began with the ceremony of *Argia*, which should have taken place on the first Sunday after the death of a person, preceded by the *bederatziurrune* — a series of nine services. In view of the short time between those events (the funeral and the *Argia*), more than one service would be held daily. Upon termination of the mourning, the ceremony of *Ogistia* would usually take place. Such intensity of prayers stemmed from the conviction that the dead is in a dangerous “interim state”²⁸. When analysing funeral rituals, A. van Gennep drew attention to the significance and the elaborate character of the rites of passage, as well as rituals of inclusion, which served the admission of the deceased into the world of the dead. In his opinion, during the mourning, the relatives of a late family member are also in a “transitional” state, suspended between the worlds (hence the need for them to be readmitted to the community once the mourning is over)²⁹.

The Basques believed for instance that the dead were able to appear before the living and express their dissatisfaction, plead for or demand things, or else produce noises at night. Researchers such as José Miguel de Barandiaran, or Resurrección María Azkue, collected accounts of such “visitations” from the dead. One of those is related with the conflict between the father and the son. On his deathbed, the father called the son but the latter did not come. Since then, strange, horrifying noises began to be heard in the son’s house. The soul of the departed parent manifested itself in this fashion, having failed to make amends in their relationship before departing. The situation was remedied by a series of services for the late father³⁰.

In this context, one should mention a denomination used to refer to the departed members of the household — *aiharra-haio*, which may be translated as “domestic demons”³¹. The belief in the ancestors visiting the family home

²⁷Baroja wrote: “Los lutos eran largos y rígidos. Las viudas aún se visten de negro para el resto de su vida en muchas partes. Por padres y madres se conservan de dos a tres años, y en la misa, mientras duran, hay que permanecer sin levantarse al tiempo del Evangelio”. J.C. Baroja, op. cit., p. 257.

²⁸B. Aretxaga, op. cit., p. 28–29.

²⁹According to van Gennep, the rituals of passage comprised three stages — exclusion, transitional period and inclusion. See A. van Gennep, op. cit., p. 151 et seq.

³⁰M. Azurmendi, *El fuego de los símbolos. Artificios sagrados del imaginario en la cultura vasca tradicional*, San Sebastián 1988, p. 154–155.

³¹Orotariko Euskal Hiztegia, http://www.euskaltzaindia.net/index.php?option=com_oeh&view=frontpage&Itemid=413&lang=eu (last access: 13.07.2012); M. Azurmendi, op. cit., p. 154.

was popular among the Basques, although they were not always perceived as dangerous or troublesome guests. In a poetic book by Karmele Saint-Martin there is a story of a lonely mother, living on a remote farm, who having died became a caretaking “shadow”³² of two children, until the neighbours, alarmed by the woman’s absence, came over and took care of the children³³.

The focal element of the Basque funeral rituals is the aforementioned symbolic headstone — *sepulturie* (or *yarleku*) found in the church, a place which symbolically commemorates all ancestors and is simultaneously perceived as an extension of home³⁴. In mourning, it is covered with a black cloth, and adorned with many candles³⁵. This is also the place where the woman or women of the deceased’s family sit. Concerning the *sepulturie*, William A. Douglass wrote thus:

“Sepulturie es fundamental en el ciclo del luto riguroso. Es el escenario donde se dramatiza la relación entre el difunto y el grupo doméstico. El difunto ocupa la escena durante el primer año que sigue a su muerte. Pero con la terminación del período del luto riguroso, ingresa en el reino de todos los muertos que son recordados en una determinada sepulturie”³⁶.

A traditional alternative for the candles on the symbolic headstone was *argizaiola* — a small, flat piece of wood (sometimes straight, sometimes shaped like a human body, or copiously embellished) wrapped in wax³⁷. It was believed that the dead needed an offering in the form of light. For this reason, people would address bees with the plea to prepare more wax. According to local custom, the news of death in household was passed on to the family and the neighbours, as well as to the animals in the farmstead (all, or selected creatures, such as the aforementioned bees, which played a special role in the Basque

³²J. M. de Barandiaran observed that use of the term “shadows” to refer to the late ancestors was particularly popular in the province of Bizkaia. J.M. de Barandiaran, op. cit., p. 67.

³³K. Saint-Martin, *Nosotras las brujas vascas. Relatos y leyendas de Euskal Herria*, San Sebastian 1999, p. 85–87.

³⁴B. Aretxaga, op. cit., p. 25–26.

³⁵W.A. Douglass, op. cit., p. 51–80.

³⁶Ibidem, p. 85.

³⁷A.A. Sorondo, *Tierra y gentes*, op. cit., p. 116–117.

culture). The departure was also announced by the church bells (the ringing differed depending on who died: a woman, man or a child)³⁸.

The mirrors in the house, as well as the effigies of the ancestors would be covered with a black cloth, the clocks were stopped³⁹. In some localities people would open a window, so as to let the soul out. The route by which the dead was carried to the church and the graveyard (as well as the route by which a clergyman arrived to administer extreme unction) were not accidental. It was called *hil-bidea*, *gorputz-bidea*, *anda-bidea*⁴⁰. It was widely held that no houses should be built by that road⁴¹; it was also the site (or at a crossroads) where the bed of the dead was ritually burned, a custom described by many authors⁴². Anton Aguirre Sorondo also mentions the custom of photographing the deceased (frequently one of the two “opportunities” to do so, besides the wedding⁴³).

There is yet another funeral custom which deserves attention. The representatives of the families participating in the funeral, usually the *etxeoandrie* — the lady of the house from each household (again the explicit prominence of women), pays a specific sum of money to pay for the service for the deceased⁴⁴. One of my informers has told me about similar collections conducted during the wake, which were nevertheless intended as aid for the afflicted family (especially when underage children were left without a parent). A. Van Gennep emphasized the role of ceremonies taking place after the funeral and the later ones, performed in memory of the departed, as an element which consolidated the bonds within a group⁴⁵. In the Basque case, not only familial but also neighbourly ties would thus be strengthened.

José Antonio Azpiazu, who studied the standing of women in the 16th century, noted the social significance of the funeral rituals as a manifestation of unity and solidarity of the family. Not infrequently, the status of the family would also be demonstrated at the same time, which according to some researchers is particularly eloquent in view of the contemporary commercialisa-

³⁸J.C. Baroja, op. cit., p. 252–253.

³⁹A.A. Sorondo, *Tierra y gentes*, op. cit., p. 118.

⁴⁰*Ibidem*, p. 118; J.M. de Barandiaran, op. cit., p. 64–65.

⁴¹J.C. Baroja, op. cit., p. 254.

⁴²A.A. Sorondo, *Tierra y gentes*, op. cit., p. 119; J.C. Baroja, op. cit., p. 253.

⁴³A.A. Sorondo, *Tierra y gentes*, op. cit., p. 119.

⁴⁴W.A. Douglass, op. cit., p. 68.

⁴⁵A. van Gennep, op. cit., p. 166.

tion of death (William A. Douglass, who conducted research in the Basque Muréлага described four kinds of funerals, differing in festiveness and, naturally, in price⁴⁶).

An interesting element featured in the cortege (whose participants followed a strictly prescribed order) were paid mourners (called *erostariak* or *nigar-eguileak*). The custom of loud lamentation and display of grief by a group of women (in some localities the role of the mourners was limited to a noisy, spectacular demonstration of despair, whereas in others “they intoned elegies”⁴⁷) is sometimes seen as an element of the cult of the dead with pagan roots, which as such was to be criticised and banned by church authorities⁴⁸.

A number of researchers sees the obligation of women to become involved in almost all matters relating to the death of a family member as a particular burden, and therefore attesting to the lower status of women in the traditional Basque culture. Others are of the opinion that the contrary is the case — they quote it as an argument supporting the social eminence of Basque women, their equality with regard to men⁴⁹. It should be noted that according to tradition, the woman “is responsible for the well-being of the living and the dead members of the household”⁵⁰; in a way she is treated as an intermediary between the worlds (though not exclusively; A. Aguirre Sorrondo observed that “Durante la misa, la mujer representaba el vínculo entre familia e Iglesia”⁵¹). She was universally assigned supervision over the entire sphere of the sacred. Besides funeral rituals, this encompassed sacred or “magical” rites and duties in the household (making amulets, ritual purification of the house and livestock, various medicinal or health-related activities, seeing to the hearth, a thing also indispensable for the departed family members⁵²). One cannot ignore the significant contribution of women in the life of the Basque church, which is most vividly exemplified in the institution of *serora* (one might also mention *beatas*

⁴⁶W.A. Douglass, op. cit., p. 65–66.

⁴⁷J.C. Baroja, op. cit., p. 254.

⁴⁸J.A. Azpiazu, *Mujeres vascas. Sumisión y poder. La condición femenina en la Alta Edad Moderna*, Donostia 1995, p. 285–291.

⁴⁹See e.g. B. Aretxaga, op. cit., p. 31; T. del Valle (direct.), *Mujer vasca. Imagen y realidad*, Barcelona 1985, p. 156.

⁵⁰B. Aretxaga, op. cit., p. 33.

⁵¹A.A. Sorondo, *La mujer*, op. cit., p. 108.

⁵²B. Aretxaga, op. cit., p. 96; A.G. Marcaida, *La mujer en la medicina popular vasca*, Sukil. Cuadernos de Cultura Tradicional 1, 1995, p. 114–122.

or *freiras*) — a lay woman who performs multiple functions at the temple (although many authors quote numerous examples of marginalising or separating Basque women from the men in the life of the Church). In those cases where there was fear that a newborn may die before the priest arrived, the woman had the right to baptise it (the woman would also be the one to carry the child to christening in the church)⁵³.

The idea that the sphere of the sacred is woman's most appropriate domain (in traditional Basque culture there was a fairly clear-cut division of work depending on the gender) with regard to her social standing or the stereotypical image, is ambiguous in evaluation. Here, one could draw on the notion of *indarra*, analysed by Begoña Artexaga, which stands for strength and constitutes one of the key Basque values (referring both to physical as well as mental capacities). The concept of *indarra* presumes that the female strength is to be manifested, among other things, in the ability of bearing the anguish of mourning and of being supportive⁵⁴.

A woman, mother in particular, played a notable role in the funeral ceremonies of the radical nationalists. The figure of a mother acquires special attributes and, according to B. Aretxaga, "it is combined with ideas which extend beyond the human dimension, such as Homeland, Euskara, the Earth, the Virgin"⁵⁵.

DEATH AND NATIONALISM

"Eusko Gudariak gara
Euskadi askatzeko,
gerturik daukagu odola
bere aldez emateko"⁵⁶.

Txabi Etxebarrieta, one of the most popular leaders of ETA, died on June 7th, 1968. His death was symbolic, as he had been "the first member of that Basque organisation who killed and the first to be murdered by the Guardia

⁵³A.A. Sorondo, *La mujer*, op. cit., p. 106, 122.

⁵⁴B. Aretxaga, op. cit., p. 92–95.

⁵⁵*Ibidem*, p. 75.

⁵⁶"We are the Basque soldiers / To liberate the Basque Country / We are ready to shed our blood".

Civil”⁵⁷. Etxebarrieta’s funeral gathered masses of people, and some skirmish with the police ensued⁵⁸. Jorge Oteiza, a famous Basque sculptor, was so moved by Txabi’s death that he created “Piedad” — a “Pieta” on the facade of the church in Arantzazu⁵⁹ (later, he decided to design a monument dedicated both to ETA’s leader as well as to his victim, the policeman he killed⁶⁰). According to Juan Aran Cobos: “Etxebarrieta’s death is not a mere killing, not even a murder; it is a sacrificial and, hence, religious death. He died for a newly coined religion of the oppressed motherland. Following the New Testament, Christ died for our sins; Etxebarrieta takes his place in Arantzazu”⁶¹.

In the national context, death may be perceived as a symbol. The funeral rituals of the Basque nationalists are its vivid example. Some interesting studies were carried out by B. Aretxaga, who analysed the obsequies of ETA members in the 1980s (times after Franco’s death but simultaneously the period when GAL was active, a dark page in the history of “democratic” Spain⁶²). Their common feature was presenting the deceased as a hero, a fighter for the freedom of the Basque country, a departed son of the Basque nation. The ceremony would be held in the public space, in the centre of a given city or town — on the main square, at the pelota pitch, with virtually everyone attending and paying homage to the “fallen”. Typically, national symbols would be used, such as the Basque flag — *ikurriña*, or the patriotic song *Eusko gudariak*. The ceremony was accompanied by music and dancing (sounds of the *txalaparta*, improvised pieces — *bertsolariak*, the respectful *aurreku* dance), and poetry (at times poems in honour of the dead were recited by children too). The members of the deceased’s family would speak about him, newspapers published articles dedicated to his person (the aforementioned Txabi Etxebarrieta, aged 24, student and poet, was described by his brother as an exceptionally sensitive and

⁵⁷M. Kurlansky, *The Basque History of the World*, London 2000, p. 240–241.

⁵⁸L. Bruni, *ETA. Historia política de una lucha armada*, Tafalla 2006, p. 93.

⁵⁹B. Aretxaga, *op. cit.*, p. 97–98.

⁶⁰http://elpaip.com/diario/2003/09/24/paisvasco/1064432411_850215.html (last access: 12.07.2012).

⁶¹J.A. Cobos, *J. Oteiza, Art as Sacrament, Avant-Garde and Magic*; a thesis submitted in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno 2008, UMI 3307711, p. 90.

⁶²See e.g. M. Kurlansky, *op. cit.*, p. 288 et seq.

affectionate young man, loving son, an admirer of nature, who devoted many of his poems to love, including those referring to his beloved Isabel⁶³).

The author advances a very interesting thesis, namely that the death of a fighter was not presented as a blow to the group but something which strengthened it (the dead would frequently be referred to through the metaphor of the seed⁶⁴, emphasizing his continued presence in the Basque community⁶⁵).

Cees Nooteboom, travelling across Spain, described a nationalist Basque funeral from the 1980s. His analysis is very interesting, not only due to the valuable observations, such as the remark that the participants to the ceremony give the impression of being a family, while the attending elderly women do not look like “enemies of the state”, but also in view of the parallels to the antique tragedy he pointed out. The valediction of the fighter (Polyneikes) was compared to the actions of Antigone, while the Spanish government plays the role of Creon. Nooteboom wonders what kind of Creon state should be, what are its possibilities⁶⁶.

To all appearances, national manifestations during the funerals of radical nationalists are not a thing of the dictatorship era or the transformation period. When depicting a funeral of an ETA member in 2003, Ainhoa Peñaflorida observed that the atmosphere was solemn, while the deceased was presented as a talented young man, “a model for the Basque youth”⁶⁷. Txabi Etxebarrieta is honoured until today as a Basque patriot⁶⁸ (see Aretxaga about squares or streets named after the fighters)⁶⁹.

Joseba Zulaika remarked on the duality in the perception of ETA members, noting that for some they are murderers and heroes for others⁷⁰. Aretxaga has also mentioned the ambivalent manner in which the fighters are presented:

⁶³T. Etxebarrieta. *Poesía y otros escritos. 1961–1967*, Tafalla 1996, p. 16.

⁶⁴M. Eliade was one to write about the departed as “seeds”; see *Traktat o historii religii*, transl. by J. W. Kowalski, Warszawa 2000, p. 369–372.

⁶⁵B. Aretxaga, *op. cit.*, p. 41 et seq.

⁶⁶C. Nooteboom, *Drogi do Santiago*, transl. by A. Oczko, Warszawa 2009, p. 263–273.

⁶⁷http://elpaip.com/diario/2003/09/24/paisvasco/1064432411_850215.html (last access: 12.07.2012).

⁶⁸<http://euskalherriasozialista.blogspot.com/2012/06/aniversario-de-txabi-etxebarrieta-por.html> (last access: 12.07.2012).

⁶⁹B. Aretxaga, *op. cit.*, p. 19, 76 et seq.

⁷⁰J. Zulaika, *Terrorismo y tabú: la remitificación terrorista*, [in:] J. Beriain, R.F. Ubieta (co-ord.), *La cuestión vasca. Claves de un conflicto cultural y político*, Barcelona 2011, p. 87.

either as terrorists or martyrs, whose death became an opportunity to highlight the strength and solidarity of the nation. The same man, the same event is seen by two sides of the conflict from entirely divergent perspectives. At the same time, the vision propounded by “the others” is treated as untrue and a proof of cruelty typical of the “others”.

Zygmunt Bauman stated that the exclusion of the dead from our space is a universal strategy of avoiding the danger of which they are a synonym⁷¹. In many communities there have been rituals intended as protection against the dead or entreating them not to return, or else asking that their activity in the world of the living was positive — for instance, increasing fertility (the headstones were to “stabilize the soul of the deceased”⁷²). One might say that here, the departed has the status of the other and the threatening. The way the dead are perceived in the Basque tradition seems a slightly different strategy of dealing with death. On many occasions people would underline the fact that the departed ancestors belonged to the family; their names would be quoted while their descendants believed that they visit the family home, usually in order to protect the living family members (sometimes the dead would be solicited for advice) and in a way continue their former existence⁷³. Among the Basques, the boundary dividing the dead and the living seems to be considerably thinner.

Still, the former values and rituals, not only in the Basque Country, seem to fade into obscurity nowadays. J. Caro Baroja noticed that transformation, the vanishing of the world of tradition, rites and beliefs in the Basque culture⁷⁴. It seems that one of its elements were the elaborate funeral rituals, which helped to cope with the difficult moments occasioned by the loss of a loved one. According to Philippe Ariés, death has become a singular taboo nowadays; we find it embarrassing and abhorrent. Even when confronted with it, we pretend that “everything is still possible”. Today, showing bereavement tends to be treated

⁷¹Z. Bauman, *op. cit.*, p. 33–34.

⁷²M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 236–239.

⁷³A. Manterola, *op. cit.*, p. 41–44, J.C. Baroja, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

⁷⁴J.C. Baroja, *Baile, familia, trabajo*, San Sebastian, pp. 139–141.

as annoying weakness, while the contemporary civilisation, albeit so advanced, does not offer an explicit answer how to behave in the face of death⁷⁵.

At the same time, one cannot ignore the emergence of new funeral rituals and new attitudes towards death, not only the death affecting others (the policy of dignified death⁷⁶), but also one's own. My informer has told me about the growing popularity of alternative forms of burial in the Basque Country — for example in one's own garden or by scattering the ashes in places that the dead had enjoyed, such as the mountains or the sea. G. Celaya, who died in Madrid in 1991 and who wrote that "only death is eternal"⁷⁷, had his ashes scattered in the Basque Country, as provided for in his will⁷⁸.

Katarzyna Mirgos

ŚMIERĆ W KULTURZE BASKÓW

Streszczenie

Problematyka śmierci zajmuje istotne miejsce w baskijskim światopoglądzie. Związane z nią były liczne wierzenia i rozbudowane rytuały, najważniejszą zaś rolę w ceremoniach funeralnych odgrywała kobieta, będąca zdaniem części autorów pośredniczką pomiędzy światami i swego rodzaju kapłanką. Współcześnie można jednak zaobserwować zmianę w sposobie postrzegania śmierci oraz zjawisko tworzenia się nowych rytuałów pogrzebowych. Jednocześnie ważnym zagadnieniem jest sposób wykorzystania śmierci w ideologii narodowej, jako narodowego symbolu i elementu solidaryzującego grupę w jej dążeniach (przykładem tego mogą być pogrzeby radykalnych baskijskich nacjonalistów).

⁷⁵P. Ariés, Śmierć na opak, [in:] M. Szpakowska (ed.), *Antropologia ciała. Zagadnienia i wybór tekstów*, Warszawa 2008, p. 297–304.

⁷⁶M. Vovelle, *Śmierć w cywilizacji Zachodu. Od roku 1300 po współczesność*, transl. by T. Swoboda, M. Ochab, M. Sawiczewska-Lorkowska, D. Senczyszyn, Gdańsk 2008, p. 711 et seq.

⁷⁷G. Celaya, *El Apócrifo de Ixil*, [in:] J.Á. Ascunce (ed.), op. cit., p. 377.

⁷⁸<http://www.gabrielcelaya.com/biografia.php?act=1&urte=1981-1994> (last access: 22.07.2012).

