

"GLEANINGS" - about Basque Dances -

(from many sources)

The Basque race, who inhabit the Pyrennean border provinces in the North of Spain and South-west of France, are musicians - in their natural way;- and poets (they improvise both poetry and song) - and also, enthusiastic dancers.

They have preserved many old customs; some very <sup>about 60</sup> beautiful traditional airs and songs; several ancient Village Plays, called "Pastorales", and a large variety of energetic and complicated ancient dances. These latter are chiefly for men; singly, or in troupes of varying number.

Those I have seen were of the Province of Soule and among the French Basque race. The Spanish Basques have some -   
*Sword Dance* (or a few?) of these more ceremonial dances, but their popular   
*French Basques do the Fandango also.* dance is the more modern and lively "Fandango" and its kindred dances; danced by men and women in couples (or in fours.)

These Ancient dances are still a living art among the Basque people, especially in the more out of the way and sequestered valleys and villages; but I was everywhere told that they are now gradually dying out, although still extremely popular in the frequent displays given at most of the Annual Fêtes of towns or villages; and also at Carnival time, about Shrove Tuesday; or at Mi-Carême. The Annual Feasts usually fall due in July and August in Pyrennean towns. But it is a sad fact that now, instead of each town and village or "Commune", providing these popular displays with their own dancers, there are only two or three <sup>no, all over the country in almost every town</sup> really expert troupes of dancers, who travel the country to show off their prowess; and these are from the collection of hamlets known as the villages or "Communes" of Barcus and Lacarre in the province of Soule (also the village of Chéranthe). <sup>Assoury, Tardits, Yankin, Litz, Alhany, in the South.</sup>

Perhaps this may only apply to the province of Soule, for there are other dancers who perform other kinds of dances, in the province of "Bas Navarre"; and of these dances I can tell almost nothing, except that they appear to be more akin to Morris

<sup>one dance</sup>  
dances; for the dancers use little decorated wands, and it is called "Makhila Dvantz" or "Danses des Batonnets." The dancers wear bells, and are plaistered with gay tags of ribbon.

(They also appear in these things, and the bells, I was told, at "The Fête Dieu".)

*This is a Soule dance not Béarnais. It depicted a bear attacking lambs. Now forgotten.*

(Authority  
 Mr. William  
 Lilburn  
 of St. Jean  
 de Luz)

In Béarn there is the "Danse de l'Ours;" an ancient National Dance. (Is this not somehow connected with Henri IV?)

*Zorzicos are  
 Spanish Basque -*

There is also (there or? - ?) a more refined dance called "Zorzico", danced with a handkerchief. A sort of minuet, and very pretty. The first man dances to the lady, and then the next couple follow.

There are also Sword dances, "Espada Danza,"

*Gaspizcoa  
 & Urcuaga.*

but I do not know their whereabouts. <sup>no metal</sup> Wooden swords are used.

There is also a "Pigskin dance!" One dancer has the inflated skin on his back; the others dance round him and beat it in time to the tune.

One authority (Mr. William Lilburn) told me that (of St. Jean de Luz)

*Auresco is a  
 single file farandole.  
 another name for it is  
 Dantza Korda.  
 Auresco means  
 Dance d'honneur in  
 Basque not  
 Spanish.*

"Auresco" was a sort of generic name for these, or some of these dances; but no one else knew of it among the French Basques with whom I spoke. Mr. Lilburn is closely connected with Spain - and the name is possibly the Spanish dance-name. (perhaps derived from Mauresco?)

Most of these dances are performed to the "Tabor and pipe," or frequently to the pipe alone.

The Basque pipe or "flûte Basque", is a very simple little wooden flute with few holes. (3). The shepherds use them in the mountains to their sheep. There is also a kind of Bagpipe used (to the Zorzico dance). It is called a "Dulcina". I was told this might be seen at Tardetz; but I fancy this may be a mistake, and that it is more likely to be found in Lower Navarre or in Béarn.

There is also the dance called "Farandole", which I understand to have two forms, the "Dianza Luzia" and the "Dianza Corda".

*Dantza Korda  
 is the Auresco  
 alone.*



These were both spoken of to me, as "la Farandole," or at any rate, that form of them which is in frequent popular use on such occasions as at parties, or after weddings, when the whole party will wind-up the evening by dancing in couples, holding a handkerchief between them, man and woman, all up and down the streets of town or village, escorting the bridal pair home, or simply making a gay dancing procession up and down the town.

yes. In the "Dianza Corda" (am very doubtful of my correctness in calling this a Farandole) the first and last couples must be very good dancers; and the last couple make arches with their handkerchiefs held across, for the rest to pass under.

In Basco Navarre in the At the Carnival times they have "La danse des Volants," or "Cavalcade du Carnaval". The dancers pass two by two in a procession along the roads, wearing white sandals; white pants (trowsers, not knickers). They are covered with coloured ribbons <sup>down the back</sup> across the chest, <sup>Not generally. These flower crowns are Souletin not Navarrais</sup> and wear tall hats trimmed with flowers. They then have also great "Poupées Géants", gigantic figures with a man inside. They also have balls (pelotes) or bladders of skin which they flick about at the crowd, and "fouets" or whips of a bunch of cords. These dancers are always supposed to wear bells when dressed; but curiously enough seem to have omitted this (the bells) in the Souletin dances we saw at the Fêtes of Mauleon.

Only the Basco Navarrais wear bells. In the Souletin teams the Souletin wears sheep bells - no one else wears any. Only the Souletin have a hobby horse. In the Cavalcade of Basco Navarre the side real horses. They are also always supposed to have a hobby horse (and do so, in the Cavalcade,) or "Chevalet," in the troupe (and also another character dress or two,) making up the troupe to 6 or 8 with the other dancers. But at Mauleon these also were lacking in July last, and the troupes were incomplete. The Chevalet had not dressed up; nor the man in the petticoat dress, nor the other man with "fouet". There were but 4 dancers to each troupe; one from Barcus, and one from Lacarre. They danced both in competition, and also in combination.

X Martinville in Basque The ease and power, and graceful, quiet effortlessness of their dancing, were very remarkable. They were very quick

(4)

*The "Saut Basque" is a generic term like "The Morris". They are dances not jumps.*

and agile, and bounded very high in the real "Sant Basque", and its other variations of which there seemed to be a great variety. At Mauleon we saw:-

"La Marche des Mascarades", which was the dancers' entry to the grounds. They circled round the enclosure two and two, in a most fascinating, rather slow dancing step, all round the "place" to the platform, led (I think) by their flutist.) The hobby horse, etc. was much wanting to this procession.

Then a "Concours de Sauts Basques" was held between the teams, each dancing in turn and also together. These were mostly danced in lines, some in figures, but some apparently each man doing the same singly but the 4 together, and these were quite different from the National "Sant Basque" which is danced in a circle, the dancers following each other and frequently reversing. We also saw

"Godalet Dantza" or "Danse du verre," a dance over a wine-glass in front of each man. The glass should be full, and must not be touched by the dancer's foot, or a drop spilled. It had a strong resemblance in its figures to "Bacca pipes Jig."

The "Chibalel Dantza", was on the programme, but as I believe this is the same as the "Danse du Chevalet," or Hobby-Horse, I do not suppose we saw it.

"Danse du Drapeau." This also was, I believe, omitted.

"Danse des Satans." This we saw, an extremely energetic dance.

It appears to be the same dance as performed by the "Satans" who appear and perform many dances in the Pastorales or Village Plays. The "Satans" were intended to represent not only devils, but also Moors and English, <sup>both</sup> the former, traditional enemies of the Basque people.

*one only -  
often repeated, always  
the same.*



La Gavotte Basque. (we saw at Mauleon.)

Very charming and gracefully agile. Danced by four, who stood at corners of a square. Each team (if four) danced it in turn. It has nothing to do with the Court Gavotte, but has high leaps (capers?), as in most of the previous dances. The highest capers seemed to be in the "Danse des Satans". The dancer has to twiddle his feet in the air twice, during the duration of the caper.

entre chats deux.

"Le Sant Basque."

Spoken of as the principal national dance, is danced in a circle, and is rather slow and dignified. The dancers follow round behind each other, and at a given moment, either at a change of the music, or at a signal from the musician (if violinist,) or from the leader of the dancers, they all "turn-about face," to dance in the opposite direction, always keeping the circle, but frequently (not always) changing the steps at each turn. The rhythm of the dance sometimes changes also with the turn. Towards the close the tempo becomes a little quicker, and the turns and changes more frequent. At one moment of the tune, near the end of the dance, all clap hands together three times; this is repeated several times (and the whole of this dance reminds one of the end of "Glorishears". The leaps, or "Sants" at the turns, or at certain intervals of the steps become more and more pronounced, and they end up with a big leap and a shout, (as in Glorishears.) This dance is one of the most important Basque dances, and probably one of the best known of the men's ceremonial dances. It is also adopted as "physical drill" in some of the "Ecoles Communales", and it was at the Ecole Communale of St. Jean Pied de Port, that, by the kindness of its headmaster and mistress, Monsieur & Madame Granjet, I succeeded, at last, in getting my first sight of

Les Sants Basques

There are about 12.  
Only 3 or 4 are usually  
danced. These are  
Monteiko  
Moneindorak  
Laphurtes

It is not a ceremonial  
dance. It is often done  
just for amusement in  
dances etc.

Basque dancing (other than the ordinary Pandago). The pupils, boys, all in black linen smocks, formed a large circle, and went through the dance with great neatness and precision, (but with very little "jump" or enthusiasm) to the music of a violin. The young violinist and teacher of the dance, Monsieur Bentaberry, called out the word of command; to turn, or to change step; turn again and change again, all through the dance, while he was playing the airs, (of which he kindly copied out a set for me). There are many tunes for "<sup>U</sup>Le Sant Basque;" but I could hear of none that are published; all are traditional, or in M.SS. only; and mostly handed on by memory. I secured another set from a musician at Mauleon; a bandmaster, but no doubt the most accurate traditional airs would be those played by the village flute players for their own dancers. It is to these little flutes or shepherd's pipes, with the drum also sometimes, that the dancers much prefer to dance, especially if professional performers. This does not mean that dancing is their profession, but they are the best dancers of the village, chosen to make the displays. The probable reason why the troupes at Mauleon were so incomplete, was that it was the middle of the hay-harvest, and the dancers were too busy making hay. They were evidently great favourites; and were strong, graceful, and some of them tall men. They were very neatly and carefully dressed in the traditional dress of the Souletin dancers. It consisted of a red embroidered Basque cap, or Beret, with a red tassel hanging half way down the side of the head. A red coat, gayly and rather elaborately embroidered with fancy tinsel braids, and gold and silver glass beads and spangles. The fronts of the coats have white vests, cut variously, also embroidered. The short tight knickers - (or shorts) to the knee are of



(7)

*yellow sometimes**No bells  
except the Tcherero.*

dark blue or black cloth, with a stripe down the side seams, and tinsel embroideries and fringe at the knee, also white lace frills. Beads and bells are mingled with the embroideries, and also on the spats or gaiters worn over the white canvas sandals, "Espadrilles," of the country, with soles of plaited jute. The white cotton stockings on their sturdy legs were hand-knitted, in fancy stitches. One man wore a very thick pair, with large knots on the pattern, just like those on old-fashioned counterpanes, and all showed their patterns very clearly, being in very thick cotton. The bells - or "grelots" are all fastened to the gaiters and clothing - not tied on separately as for English Morris. These men carried nothing in their hands; and they did not use their hands in the dance, except in a very few moments of clapping. But there are certainly, other dances to be seen, somewhere - where handkerchiefs (or also little flags) are used a good deal. The "Stick Dance" or "Makhila Dantz" or "Danse des Batonnets" must be of another province than Soule, probably "Lower Navarre" or Béarn, or maybe in North Spain in Labourde; but even after many enquiries at various places, I was unable actually to locate it, even at places where I had been assured it was done, such as St. Jean pied de Port, or at Mauleon itself, or at Sare. The fact is, that only at a few "communes" is the real practice and tradition of the dances preserved, - (Barcus, Lacarre, and Chérante in Soule) but at many <sup>places</sup> (Mauleon, St. Palais, Tardetz, Oleron, St. Jean Pied de Port, etc.) during the great days of annual Fête, or at Carnival, or for a Pastorale, the dances may be seen, and great crowds of people gather to watch the skill of the chosen troupes of dancers

*Danse Navarre  
& Labourde**Makhila Dantz  
is not done at St. Jean Pied de P.**Oleron is not  
Basque.*

and the competitions held between other dancers who enter, clad in their black country smocks. It would seem that many various forms of dances and jigs are included when the programme advertises "un grand concours de Sants Basques". Only men nowadays dance the Sant Basque, but I was told at Mauleon that in olden days there were women who danced it too. The wife of the keeper of the Castle on the hill above Mauleon, told me of a dear old lady still living, at the village near by, of Garandain, who used to dance in the Sant Basque with the men. She was a beautiful dancer, and also a very fine singer in her day, of the old Basque "Chansons". She told me of two of the songs sung by her, but could not remember her real name, only that her "surnom" was "La Parastina." There are many beautiful old songs, often very long, and mostly sad, and very poetical, a few only are printed, but there are now several enthusiasts who are collecting them both in the French and Spanish "Pays Basque." I was told of an Abbé living at Biarritz who has collected 1700 airs himself, and others also are doing it, none too soon; for French music on bands and in schools will murder or muddle the Basque National Music before long, if it is not carefully preserved and noted.

But for the dances, no-one, so far, seems to be collecting them, or noting the steps. I was told of one man who had begun to collect the airs, (but am not sure if this was of dances or songs.) (He is now Chef d'orchestre at Hendaye Plage.) It would need an expert to note the dances, which are so elaborate both in step and figure. The airs are lively and simple, but sometimes of curious rhythm. They evidently, some of them, date back to the 16th and 17th century French music, but neither in songs or dance airs (heard chiefly



at Mauleon) did we notice any special trace of archaic  
modes, as in so much English Folk music. This may be  
 only that we did not hear a very great deal of it, or  
 were too absorbed by the dances to notice the airs. The  
 flutist played his pipe with the right hand only, and  
 got a surprising strength of tone from the little instrum-  
 ent, a regular "skirl" on the upper notes, from sheer  
 force of wind. His left hand hung by his side, or  
 rested on his knee.

*Janet H. Blunt*

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