

Txotxoloak

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To a certain extent, *Ezkiozaleak* brings together the visual accounts of the apparitional phenomenon that took place in Ezkioga, a small town in the Basque Country in 1931. The visions were a reaction to the change of régime. Following the exile of King Alphonse XIII and the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, Spain voted for the Second Republic; the withdrawal of religious symbols from public institutions, the proposition to separate State and Church, universal suffrage and the divorce law were but some of the changes approaching.

Similar incidents occurred and continue to occur in different religions, so we could say that this case repeats a model that is often imitative. The Ezkioga apparitions of the Virgin Mary resemble other modern Catholic apparitions insofar as they occur as a popular reaction to progressive changes. Their uniqueness resides in their media dimension (the press coverage would prompt around a million individuals to visit a location that at the time boasted 550 inhabitants) and their political¹ impact (they were substantiated by Carlists and sympathisers of the Basque Nationalist Party, and would be debated in the constituent assembly). The Church would end up condemning them in 1934. The inextricable combination of culture, language, ethnicity and religion in the Basque rural world was not representative of the rest of the country, which explains why neither were the hierophantic visions.

Contemplating historical processes we note that religious conquests cannot be explained without the images and symbols shaping new identities, making up memories and producing spaces of representation at the heart of the societies that discriminated them. The Ezkioga photographs enabled photographers, believers and seers to construct a chronicle-portrait of themselves, generating a subordinate popular imaginary in the bosom of the Church and a response to the social changes brought about by the Republic. The photographic camera defined reality as a spectacle for the masses, recreating the popular archetypes and models of faith in order to secure the approval of the clergy and induce changes in public opinion, which was sceptical about the apparitions.

Ezkiozaleak attempts to bear witness to the importance of photography and the sale of postal images of visionary phenomena;² to document the existence of those private visual archives in which such images appear as leitmotifs (numerous

photographic records of Ezkioga are still preserved as family memories, for they have not yet entered public institutions³); to place on record the differences between the accounts published in newspapers and printed matter and those contributed to private archives by believers⁴ (the production of these photographs coincided with the birth of the illustrated press in Spain and the introduction of pictures in printed photographic media); to explore through images the power relations between popular and official religion and show how the incipient mass culture was introduced into Catholic beliefs by means of photography.

The Catholic Church has always been belligerent in the field of religious iconography. Both the sale and the distribution of the photographs that make up this volume had been banned because of their heterodox nature, for they brought into circulation a heretical account that simultaneously called into question the monopoly of the Church when it came to mediating with and interpreting the supernatural. For the ecclesiastical orthodoxy, the Virgin Mary wouldn't have chosen chiefly married women with children as the main figures of her intercession.⁵

Three quarters of a century later the photographs are still so controversial that the ban continues to apply.⁶ The difficulties in gaining access to the ecclesiastical archives where images of the Ezkioga occurrences have been deposited reveal that the vision they suggest is still opposed to what is considered the legitimate imagery. An additional suspicion of disobedience hangs over their analysis if it happens to come from the sphere of art.

But where exactly does transgression lie in the Ezkioga photographs? Is it of a semantic or a formal nature? Why does religious doctrine find images that evoke the aesthetic canons established during the Baroque controversial?

The gaze of the photographers who worked at Ezkioga was modelled by the visual conventions and traditions of religious imagery—the iconographical conventions and narratives used by artists to enhance the legibility of facts. By subjecting their images to canons they sought the acceptance and legitimacy of their accounts by the ecclesiastical authorities. The photographs, however, overstep the boundaries established by doctrine, thereby creating a divergent imaginary that reveals passions experienced by adult women and other violations of religious principles and rules. The initial reasons for the ban on the images probably included their ability to induce imitative forms of behaviour, the emotional turmoil they provoked and the fact that they triggered idolatry of the figures portrayed.⁷ This last reason encompassed the

disputes regarding the status of representational images in the bosom of the Catholic Church, a debate that originated in the influence of Semitic iconoclasm.⁸

The existence of private archives such as that belonging to Oriol Cardús i Grau tells us that images were instruments of cohesion for the faithful, for they revealed the motivations and values of the community as well as the belligerency of its beliefs. Their scenes replaced the need for seers, acting as emotional stimuli that aroused pious feelings, while ennobling reality, bringing it closer to the canon by evoking depictions of Christ, the Virgin Mary and saints. As in the case of the images produced in the Baroque, with which they share sensuous impulse, emphasis and sublimation, we could describe them as propaganda;⁹ popular versions, like coloured illustrations, of the visual exuberance of religious art after the Counter-Reformation.

The seers and believers of Ezkioga were stigmatised and branded *txotxoloak* (fools). The Church publicly condemned the visions in conferences held in Vitoria, Bilbao and San Sebastian where the Jesuit José Antonio Laburu compared visionaries with the mentally ill and their techniques with those of spiritualists, projecting three films (two of seers and one of the mental asylum in Santiago de Chile).¹⁰ Civil Governor Pedro del Pozo even confined some to the mental institution.¹¹

The association between religious paroxysm, spiritualism and mental illness derives from German Romantic medicine that recovered the term hysteria. Luis Montiel exemplifies these connections in three women: the miraculous girl of Johanngeorgenstadt, the ghost-seer of Prevost and the maiden Orlach,¹² examples that show how visionary phenomena, which up until the early nineteenth century had belonged to the sphere of religion, would move into the sphere of medicine. Through figures such as Duchenne de Boulogne, Charcot and their associates Bourneville and Régnaud, followed by Pierre Janet, medical science would address the issue of trances from a photographic slant,¹³ using the new technique to bring to light the coincidences between mental illness, ecstasy and possession. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in the case of Ezkioga the Jesuit lecturer should have asserted his authority to judge the phenomenon basing his premises on neurology and photography in movement.

The differences between the hierophantic visions of Ezkioga and similar manifestations promoted by the Church should not be sought exclusively in the field of ideologies but in that of social control. Condemnation of these visions did not derive solely from their contents but from their defiance of authority. Like any

other instance of popular religion they entailed a deviation, often present in the way that a people understands and practices its official religion. The belief in the supernatural and the intervention of the other world is one of the characteristic traits of popular religiousness.

The Ezkioga photographers¹⁴ used pictorial references as a cultural element for authenticating facts, which is why the images stand halfway between pictorialism and realism, impregnated of the former in their search for iconic referents that would guarantee their approval and upheld as ineffable documents of supposed revelations. The Ezkioga photographers did not only record reality but invented it by pointing to certain seers and excluding others, or else preferring certain frames and situations. The reality of the representation infected its referent with reality and contributed to the extensive photographic documentation of the visions.¹⁵ The photographs of the seers in ecstasy proved the authenticity of the visions to believers. The camera recording entailed a psychic change, as the pictures of saints and virgins gave way to 'real' images of seers. Drifting between the allegorical and the real, they reveal emblematic visual symbols, crucifixes and medals that inform us of the passions that such icons aroused in believers, and their mobilising ability. As a result, rather than a desecration of the doctrine these photographs are an affirmation of the intense religious relationship between their protagonists and the other world.

The unique quality of the Ezkioga photographs is the fact that they are more disturbing than the actual facts. The camera condenses a lengthy event in a few pictures, capturing the most relevant moments or those worthy of representation (according to the moral intentions of the photographer), applying the most touching point of view. The event is dramatised by the choice of frames and most poignant poses, before which one feels one is a voyeur beholding moments of rapture and convulsive torment arranged to appear intimate thanks to frames and angles that are by no means innocent. The seers' experiences are revealed in the mobility of their faces and the contortions of their bodies, and yet the presumed findings have been prepared, the supposedly fortuitous situation is contrived and deliberate, the ecstasy is idealised. The photographs, halfway between indexical affirmation and iconic elaboration, progress from presences to revealing essences, simultaneously honoured by codes of representation and brandishing the weapons of truth.

The legends in the photographs tell us how to interpret them. However, if we avoid these suggestions the images reveal the instability of their meaning and new

readings emerge. Their pathos evokes that of other ritual practices.¹⁶ The notes also remind us that the figures in the pictures show the photographers' preference for certain subjects, sometimes even helping us to single them out. In the Ezkioga images attire is a clue to social identification. The hierarchy is obvious in the clothing, and in some cases it reveals how the people portrayed sought to appear worthy of the visual consideration granted them by wearing their finest garments, or else using them to come close to the role photography was supposed to fulfil.

A certain swirl can also be detected around the subject, which ennobles the collective experience. Those accompanying the subject—sensorially unaware of what was experienced in ecstasy—would pose more convincingly to praise and grant meaning to the rapture of the seers. The photographs, triggered by the desire to move as much as by that of addressing presumed truths, would dramatise their subjects, therefore leading them to adopt masks.

NOTES

1. Estornés Zubizarreta, Idoia. "Un episodio molesto: Las apariciones de Ezkioga." *Muga: Revista Trimestral*, No. 2, 1979, pp. 70–77.
2. A press article signed by Antonio Amundarain Garmendia under the sobriquet of "The Ecclesiastical Commission" disavowed the postcards that were starting to sell "as representations that took the truth of the apparitions for granted". See "Sobre las apariciones de la Virgen en Ezkioga." *El Día*, 28 July 1931, p. 3.
3. William A. Christian Jr., an anthropologist specialising in the Ezkioga apparitions, mentions that Joaquín Sicart's glass plates can be found in the barn of a Basque farm. See "The Mind's Eye. Basque Visionaries in Trance." Translated into French by Catherine Rouslin and published in *Terrain*, No. 30, 1998, pp. 5–22.
4. Most of the visionaries who enjoyed media impact were men or boys, and yet the oral accounts and original photographs speak of women. Even if they had no voice of their own, this was a sign of the social protagonism they demanded and/or a way of conveying a heterodox message.
5. The disrepute surrounding adult women's visions dates back to theologians such as Jean Gerson, who felt that their extravagance, lack of inhibition and changeability made them unworthy of trust. Women's supposed weakness and vulnerability had previously conferred upon them the status of mouthpieces of divinity, although in the sixteenth century the same qualities would turn them into instruments of the devil. Although some of them would continue to express themselves as prophets, many more would be accused of witchcraft and heresy.
6. Here follows an excerpt from the e-mail sent by M^a Dolores Lecuona González, head of the department of cultural diffusion at the Diocesan Historical Archive in Vitoria, in response to a question regarding the Ezkioga photographs: "I must inform you that access to the file containing the images you wish to consult is utterly reserved, and therefore is not open to external consultation."
7. The mechanical genesis of photography entailed a new relationship with reality: image and object were partially identified and images were attributed the qualities of real things. In the

case of Ezkioga this identification involved an iconic use of the photographs of seers. Those who acquired and collected them made a talismanic use of them, and they still preserve hidden vestiges of magic.

8. The debate between iconoclasts and iconophiles ended in favour of the latter at the Second Nicea Council in 787 AD, with the approval of the representation of sacred images, eight centuries after the appearance of Christianity and “the licitness of the veneration of images”. See Gubern, Román. *Patologías de la imagen*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2004.

9. The term propaganda “was coined during the papacy of Gregory XV, who in 1622 established the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide.” *Ib.*, pp. 113–114.

10. “Conferencia del P. Laburu en el Victoria Eugenia sobre ‘lo de Ezkioga.’” *El Día*, 22 June 1932, p. 5.

11. Christian Jr., William A. *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996.

12. Montiel, Luis. «Síntomas de una época: magnetismo, histeria y espiritismo en Alemania», *Asclepio. Revista de Historia de la Medicina y de la ciencia*, Vol. LVIII, No. 2, 2006, pp. 11–38.

13. Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Invention of Hysteria. Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*. Translated by Alicia Hartz. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004.

14. The devout photographers who documented the events included José Martínez, Raymond Rigné and Joaquín Sicart. “The Mind’s Eye”, *op. cit.* Among the graphic reporters who visited Ezkioga we could mention Pascual Marín, Photo Carté—who probably sent Aurelio Cabezón, one of the visionaries—and Jean-A. Ducrot and J. Juanes.

15. William A. Christian speaks of over six hundred different photographs. “The Mind’s Eye”, *op. cit.*

16. In the twenties Francisco de la Heras and J. Pastor took photographs of the processions with devil figures in Jaca and Balma, respectively. Regardless of the frames and viewpoints, certain parallels can be traced in the passions displayed by their main characters and those in Ezkioga.