

HOU PITXU HOU! VIDEO SCRIPT

We are at the heart of winter, February, the Carnival festive season. Carnival is determined by the liturgical calendar and changes slightly every year; nevertheless, it usually falls in February. The days are becoming longer and Nature will soon start to awaken with the arrival of springtime.

During the next few minutes, we shall learn about a good many celebrations that take place at this time of the year.

Some of these rituals have a Christian origin. Others, in turn, are the last vestiges of pre-Christian beliefs, symbols or customs. In most cases, both viewpoints often co-occur. It is fairly customary for ancient popular events and traditions to be adopted by Christianity and adjusted to the prescribed norm.

CALENDAR: 2 FEBRUARY (CANDLEMAS)

The first holiday of the calendar after Christmastide is Candlemas, *Garbikunde* or *Kandelario* in Basque, on 2 February. On this day starts the Carnival period in many places of Euskal Herria, which will end up with the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday.

On Candlemas Day candles were taken to church to be blessed and later used in a number of rituals within the house and out of it performed mostly by housewives (after giving birth, whenever a member of the family died, when lightning struck...)

CALENDAR: 3 FEBRUARY (SAINT BLAISE'S DAY)

The following day, 3 February, is Saint Blaise's memorial. Thin laces and edibles are taken to mass to be blessed. The lace is worn around the neck for a certain number of days to fend off sore throats, and finally it is burned.

CALENDAR: 5 FEBRUARY (SAINT AGATHA'S DAY)

Saint Agatha has since long ago had a great influence in our popular culture. Saint Agatha's Day is on 5 February, but it is the eve that has traditionally been mostly celebrated in our villagers and towns, and especially by the youth. We could say without any doubt that this saint has somehow been considered the protector of the youth and has therefore been venerated by groups of youngsters since times immemorial.

Agatha was born in Sicily. The prefect of the island wanted to make her his but did not achieve his goal, so he submitted her to endure martyrdom and put her to death at the age of 21.

Saint Agatha's feast is well established throughout the Basque territory. Nowadays, in the afternoon or evening of the eve, 4 February, groups of men and women, boys and girls, led by a soloist and accompanied by the

beats of their walking sticks, parade from house to house singing traditional verses in honour of the saint and asking for a food or money donation. At the door, and after the introductory lines, they sing a couple of stanzas about Agatha's life followed by certain traditional verses called *notak* to finish with a farewell. In some cases the lines on Agatha are eluded, and the introduction gives way to the stanzas addressed to the household.

In the olden times, partying and long bell-ringing took place on the eve of the day. The feast used to be dedicated to married women, who would leave their house chores and walk the streets dressed up asking for alms and poking men with needles.

Saint Agatha's eve wassailers used to have a distinct way of dressing. Although the custom is nearly lost now, in the Bizkaian municipality of Markina and surroundings many still remember it. The walking stick and the beret were decorated with paper and fabric laces, and the singers themselves wore colourful kerchiefs. Sometimes a small bell was attached to the top of the stick. The soloist or *bertsolari* would hold a bell in his hand to set the beat while he sang. Curiously enough these accessories bear resemblance to those worn by boys just about to undergo military service, *kintoak*, in Altsasu.

In Altsasu Saint Agatha's feast was celebrated by boys required for military service. Beautifully dressed and in the company of a donkey or horse, they headed for the girls' houses... On Three Wise Men Day, two kings were elected, and they were responsible for the organization of Saint Agatha's eve events. Boys paired up to make for the girls' houses. The young maids presented the boys with bread-rolls stuck in a stick and danced with the kings.

Carnival is the main and most deeply-rooted celebration of the Carnival cycle, and it follows the above-mentioned pre-Carnival festivities. Depending on the location, the feast is referred to as *Ihoteak*, *Aratusteat*, *Zanpantzar*, *Karnabal*...

Carnival does not have a set date in the calendar. It depends on the moon phases.

CALENDAR: CARNIVAL

The Sunday after the first full moon of springtime is Easter Sunday. Counting seven Sundays or 50 days backwards from that day, it is the Sunday before Shrove Tuesday, *Igande-inaute*, and the rest of the Carnival holydays fall on neighbouring days.

Once upon a time, and according to the lunar calendar, the year used to start in spring. The vernal equinox is indeed a significant time of the year, because around it days and nights are of equal length. In the past Carnival must have been the welcoming of the new year. Later, the introduction of the solar calendar changed the date of the beginning of the year, but many of the ancient rituals were maintained.

The Thursday before Shrove Tuesday is called *Jueves de Lardero* in Araba. On this day children walk door to door holding a cock, singing and requesting a charitable contribution. Yesteryear the cock was killed and eaten. This day is known as *Eguen Zuri* in Bizkaia, where groups of children also sing traditional verses throughout their villages or towns.

Like at other times of the year, wassailing is a usual practice at Carnival. As mentioned above, it occurs on the Thursday before Shrove Tuesday and on most Carnival celebrations we shall make account of.

We have alluded to the singing and the dancing. Indeed, there is room for that at Carnival. The core of the Sunday preceding Shrove Tuesday festival in Mundaka, *Aratusteat*, revolves around singing.

In the morning a team of boys dressed in white from top to toe take to the streets. They are referred to as *Atorrak*. They play music and sing marching through the streets until they arrive at port under the guidance of their conductor. There, from a music stand, they sing amongst others a song specifically composed for the occasion year after year.

And when music is mentioned, we spontaneously think about dancing. Dancing has since remote times been an essential element in any ritual or celebration. So much so that in many places dancing has become the centre of interest of the Carnival event.

In Antzuola a dance called *Sorgin-dantza* is performed on the Sunday before Shrove Tuesday. Half of the boys of a dance team disguise as girls. They all dance and also act pretending to fall out with each other to finally make up and kiss.

In Markina a group of boys perform the *Zahagi-dantza* dance. One of them carries a large wineskin on his back, and while the boys dance, they beat the skin. Whilst the dancing takes place, a popular character is present in the street: *Hartza*, the bear. *Hartzaina* walks it on a leash, but *Hartza* tries to free himself and scare the crowd. The bear is a figure that shows up at Carnival in many of our towns and villages, although in some places the custom has not stood the test of time.

Apart from the bear, certain other animal characters participate at Carnival: sheep, wolves, horses. We should bear in mind that agriculture, farming and shepherding have for long been the bread and butter of our people, and that Carnival rituals are often traditions in tune with Nature and the way of life of our ancestors. Even the most common instrument used for every-day tasks sometimes becomes significant at Carnival. In Ituren and Zubieta, for instance, cowbells, *zintzarriak* or *joareak*, are the focus of the event.

Cowbells are believed to possess magical powers, and their sound wards off bad spirits and protects livestock from disease. We do not know whether the aim is to keep witches away or guard farm animals, but the fact is that either on the last Monday of January or on the first Monday of February, a company of *Joaldunak* or *Zanpantzarrak* from Zubieta armed with enormous cowbells make their way to Ituren. Half way to their destination, they meet their neighbours from Ituren, who join the parade. The following day, on Tuesday, it is the men from Ituren who repay the visit.

In Uztaritz a new element is added to the ancient cult of Shrove Tuesday: fire. The main character of Uztaritz Carnival, *Zanpantzar*, ends up in flames. A large crowd in disguise parade through the streets and take *Zanpantzar* to the square. There he is judged, proclaimed guilty and doomed to be burned. The fire symbolizes a rite of passage and turns up at different times of the year: at Christmas, during Saint John's festival... The burned characters represent the season or the year that comes to an end. Fire is a purifying agent that prepares the ground for the next period.

In Zalduondo *Marquitos* end is similar to that of *Zanpantzar*. On the Sunday before Shrove Tuesday, in the morning, its effigy is placed in front of the palace on top of a long stick. In the afternoon it is brought down, and surrounded by many other Carnival characters, the parade advances towards the site where he will be judged and burned. By means of trial and death, the misfortunes of the past year are purged, and negativeness cleansed by fire. After all, *Inauteriak*, the Basque word for Carnival, seems to derive from *iautu*, which means to clean.

Miel Otxin is the famous Carnival character from Lantz. His end is not sweet either. On Shrove Monday, and as the ancient tradition dictates, the crowd travels around town with *Miel Otxin* leading the way. Other characters join in: *Ziripot*, who can hardly walk; *Zaldiko*, who strives to throw *Ziripot* to the floor; *Txatxoak*, who make every effort to defend *Ziripot*; and finally, *Ferratzaileak*, who succeed to get hold of the horse and shoe it. The parade stops in the square and a *zortziko* dance is performed. On Shrove Tuesday *Miel Otxin* is led to the square, judged and shot dead. Once on the ground, he is burned and *Txatxoak* dance the *zortziko* dance around the fire.

Lantz Carnival is rich in details. Apart from the animals, the trades, the trial, the dancing and the fire, a new element is introduced: punishment. *Txatxoak* provide protection for *Ziripot* but beat the people in the street. Beating and punishment are said to have a purifying effect.

Likewise, in Lesaka a band of *Zakuzaharrak* come out to the streets in the afternoon of the Sunday before Shrove Tuesday. They are men with their bodies covered with fabric, in a like manner to *Ziripot*. They hold a pig's inflated bladder in their hands to hit with it whoever they encounter in the way.

The *Mamoxorroak* of Altsasu cover their heads with a hamper adorned with horns, wear shirts covered in blood and hold a pitchfork in their hands to relentlessly pursue and hit people. Girls disguised as witches run after them.

Unanu *Mamoxarroak* try to seize the local girls armed with long sticks. They even enter the houses looking for them. This happens on Shrove Tuesday afternoon. Nevertheless, the really spectacular feature about these characters is the iron mask they wear on their faces.

Masks have been used in rituals since days beyond recall in an effort to become what you are not, in order to hide behind them... In either way, to conceal one's face for Carnival is quite common. We see it in the *Mamoxarroak* of Unanu, the *Txatxoak* of Lantz, the *Zirtzilak* of Uztaritz, the *Zakuzaharrak* of Lesaka, and so on and so forth.

And last but not least we shall talk about the *Maskarada* of Zuberoa. In it all the elements mentioned up to now form part of it: wassailing, costumes, music, dance, fire, acting, etc.

The *Maskarada* lasts from the very start of January until April or May. Each year a different village or town organizes the event. It is not an easy task, because good dancers are needed. In fact, dancing is at the core of the spectacle. The performers set off for a neighbouring village disguised. Two teams take part in the show: *Gorriak* (*Reds*), neatly and smartly dressed, and *Beltzak* (*Blacks*), wearing dirty and singular clothes.

In the morning the outsiders have to overcome the barricades placed in the way in order to enter the village. In the past they were real obstacles, but nowadays they are symbolic spots where food and drink are offered. *Gorriak*

surmount the barricades dancing, while *Beltzak* do it in a foolish and disorderly manner. The visitors continue their journey through the streets and meet the main characters.

In the afternoon a show is displayed in the square. There are dancers and men and women of different trades. *Gorriak* are the dancers. The main dances are *Godalet-dantza* and *Bralia*. The characters act their part: *Ferratzaileak* shoe *Zamalzain* and *Txerrero*; *Zikiratzaileak* take *Zamalzain* and castrate him; *Zorrotzaileak* sharpen the sword of the master; *Kauterak* will not be able to mend the master's pot; and *Ijitoak* tell long and entertaining stories. All of them will require *Pitxu's* help. *Pitxu* is the most outstanding character from the *Beltzak* group, and his role is to make people laugh. On trying to recover the coin thrown at them by the master, *Pitxu* dies. Towards the end of the play, the doctor brings *Pitxu* back to life. The dancers sing a song and the public join them in a final dance.

We have focused on just some of the Carnival rituals celebrated in Euskal Herria: the most ancient, those with the tightest links with agriculture and farming. These events are rich in symbolism and face the passing of the years untouched, the characters and performances intact. However, Carnival is also enjoyed in larger towns. Some traditional Carnival elements (costumes, masks, music, dance...) are part of urban festivals, but their significance has been forgotten in the course of time, and they keep changing according to the latest demands. The traditional Carnival events are better established and endure any small changes. If we asked how long they have been celebrating, the answer would be forever.