

1979

## The Name of God in Basque Literature

Leonard Bloom  
*The College at Brockport*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los>

---

### Repository Citation

Bloom, Leonard (1979) "The Name of God in Basque Literature," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 6 , Article 15.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol6/iss1/15>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literary Onomastics Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).

## THE NAME OF GOD IN BASQUE LITERATURE

Leonard Bloom

University of Bridgeport

In terms of etymology, Latin nominative deus provided the subsequent Romance derivatives, Sp. Dios, Fr. Dieu, Port. Deos, It. Dio, and Daco Romanian, Dumnezeu. Curiously, in Basque, whose linguistic classification is that of a non-Indo-European speech, we find that the words employed to designate God do not, therefore, owe their existence to Italo-European tongues, despite historical and geographical contiguity with Mediterranean neighbors. It is true that the Romans, during periods of Iberian occupation, influenced to no small extent the Basque language and its civilization, but euskera, as it is called, did not primarily turn to Romance traditions or even identify lexically with classical religious nomenclature. Part of this postulation may be explained by the fact that the Basques did not convert to Christianity until around the twelfth century. Before that time, only divine symbols associated with the physical universe, to wit, the sky or Basque zeru, the sun or Basque eguzki, or in certain cases, Thor, the god of thunder in Norse mythology, together with other abstract super-

natural forms, served as supreme forces affecting human conceptualism.

The fascinating but intricate world of variants in the Basque language, notably with respect to a myriad of words designating God, involves a careful examination of phonetic rules and their application to the structure of each term. For this kind of study, particular interest lies in the investigation of semantic distinctions among terminologies found in the various dialects and sub-dialects of Basque, as well as in their curious phonetic variations. Furthermore, lexical and orthographic similarities, in addition to their apparent compounds, suggest a popular etymological connection between most of the variants used for God in this ergative tongue.

For our onomastic purpose, any preliminary study of Basque literature and language, commencing with the earliest written manuscript, Mosén Bernart Dechepare's Linguae Vasconum Primitiae (1545), a short book of ascetic poetry, or Larramendi's monumental lexicon, the Diccionario trilingüe del castellano, bascuence y latín (1745), or Azcue's Euzka Izkindea ("Basque Grammar") (1891), including numerous other sources, discloses a surprising quantity of terms to designate God. Among the most popular paradigms are as follows: Jaungoiko(a), Jainko(a), Yinko(a), Yainko(a), Inka, Yintzo, Jangoikua, Jauna, Jaungo, Janeiko(a), and Goiko jauna.

Each variant and its successive compound forms are derived from the same element or radical, "jaun," signifying "lord" or "master." In antiquity, two other words existed in the language to designate God, namely Ortzi and Urtzi, both of which are primitive denominations of Urcia (v. Urtci). The original spelling Urcia first appeared in the Codex Calixtinus, also styled Liber Sancti Jacobi, of Aymeric or Aimery Picaud, a twelfth century French pilgrim, whose religious guidebook provided a Basque vocabulary for wayfarers journeying from France to Santiago de Compostela. Today, rather interestingly, the indirect term ortzi is retained in the language bearing the general value of English "atmospheric" or "tempestuous heaven." Other definitions given include "celestial" or "heavenly body," and even "thunder." Although Spanish "Dios" and "cielo" are concepts that have a narrow relationship between themselves, it is believed that Aimery Picaud, at one point in asking for God, pointed to heaven with one hand, and in so doing, erred in recording the latter in Basque instead of the former.

Throughout the Spanish Basque provinces of Guipúzcoa and Upper Navarre, the French Basque region of Labourd, and the major portion of Lower Navarre as well, one encounters wide diffusion of the variants Jainko(a) and Jaungoiko(a). All other lexical references to the deity are used with less frequency. For instance,

the variant Jinko(a) is preferred in daily address by those inhabitants of the valley of the Baztán (Upper Navarre), by others from rural areas of Lower Navarre, and incorporating the eastern province of Soule as well.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most widely accepted term for God throughout the regions that dot the Pyrenees is Jaungoiko(a). Its origin, etymologically speaking, has often created a schism of scholarly thinking on the subject in linguistic camps analyzing the historical role of religion in the Basque country. The basic English translations of Jaungoiko(a) are "Lord on high," and "Elevated Lord," while their Spanish counterparts are rendered as "Señor de lo alto," and sometimes "Señor luna." Larramendi and Novia de Salcedo, two celebrated historical grammarians, espoused the theory that Jaungoiko(a) was a primitive word, whose variants were but syncopated forms of it alone. On the other hand, Unamuno disputed their theory by claiming that its origin was of a later date and that perhaps it was formed by missionaries who introduced Christianity into the Basque country to fill a void.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Unamuno's theory is based on supposition or hypothesis, because one can trace the term "jauna" to designate God back to remote times.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, for Unamuno, the Spanish translation "Señor de lo alto" is a weak if not totally an inaccurate one, and that the inverted designation, Goiko Jauna

would be more appropriately the lexical solution to the problem. In contrast, Antonio Tovar disagrees with his compatriot by adducing that it is well-known that this Basque name of the divinity signifies "Señor de lo alto," and that it could very well be a copy of the Christian concept Deus in excelsis.<sup>4</sup>

The redoubtable task of determining historically the evolution of both Jaungoiko(a) and Jainko(a) is indeed a difficult one. The problem can be more easily resolved, however, by investigating the primal designation. To accomplish that undertaking, we must turn to an inexact time in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, when near the city of Abadiano, in the Spanish province of Biscay, the following sepulchral inscription was observed on a tombstone: IAUNINCO NE EGO IEI NO.<sup>5</sup> The first word was thereafter adopted by the Basques to designate God, and at some later date in the Middle Ages, manuscripts were found in which the original spelling was slightly altered to read Janinco. Further, around the year 1380, the terms jaun goikoa were first noted in print in a document ascribed to Andrés or Arnaldo de Barbazán. Interestingly, from the eighteenth century to more recent times, a vestige of Jauninco in the form Inko(a) (v. Jinko(a)) has been retained in daily speech by villagers of Ainhoa (Labourd), while the other variant Inca has been employed in oral and written

would be more appropriately the lexical solution to the problem. In contrast, Antonio Tovar disagrees with his compatriot by adducing that it is well-known that this Basque name of the divinity signifies "Señor de lo alto," and that it could very well be a copy of the Christian concept Deus in excelsis.<sup>4</sup>

The redoubtable task of determining historically the evolution of both Jaungoiko(a) and Jainko(a) is indeed a difficult one. The problem can be more easily resolved, however, by investigating the primal designation. To accomplish that undertaking, we must turn to an inexact time in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, when near the city of Abadiano, in the Spanish province of Biscay, the following sepulchral inscription was observed on a tombstone: IAUNINCO NE EGO IEI NO.<sup>5</sup> The first word was thereafter adopted by the Basques to designate God, and at some later date in the Middle Ages, manuscripts were found in which the original spelling was slightly altered to read Janinco. Further, around the year 1380, the terms jaun goikoa were first noted in print in a document ascribed to Andrés or Arnaldo de Barbazán. Interestingly, from the eighteenth century to more recent times, a vestige of Jauninco in the form Inko(a) (v. Jinko(a)) has been retained in daily speech by villagers of Ainhoa (Labourd), while the other variant Inca has been employed in oral and written

Basque in Aldudes (Lower Navarre), and in the neighboring towns of Upper Navarre as well.<sup>6</sup> Relative to the variant Jainko(a), Julio de Urquijo, a celebrated twentieth century Basque scholar, once asserted that this term was probably the first utilized by Basques to designate the Lord. He similarly concurred with the aforesaid Larramendi and Novia de Salcedo on the viewpoint of the antiquity of Jaungoiko(a), but he, as has his distinguished protégé, Luis Michelena, conceived this term to be secondary to Jainko(a) and probably due to popular etymology.<sup>7</sup> With respect to the adoption of Jaungoiko(a), Ortega y Gasset once attempted to offer an explanation by stating that the Basque people viewed God as a political and mundane power, a civil governor who intervened in their lives and thus placed the pure idea of divinity into their minds and hearts at the time of their conversion to Christianity.

In Dechepare's Linguae Vasconum Primitiae, the French Basque poet indicated that the spellings Jainko(a) and Jeinko(a) were the most widely distributed variants in the sixteenth century. However, he occasionally opted for the somewhat unique spellings geynco and ieynco in his poetry. Essentially, in matters of historical phonetic evolution and its relevance to modern Basque, one cannot truly pinpoint the exact or even approximate date(s) when both diphthongs ai and ei were reduced to i in the variant



Jinko(a). It is important to state that apart from trying to determine specific periods of phonological changes for the purpose of linguistic identification, perhaps of more interest and value in this regard is the consideration of the possible influence of Basque on Castilian, particularly as it concerns the use of initial j. Some scholars express a strong opinion that the existence of all Basque variants to designate God beginning with j to be due to Castilian, while others proffer distinct viewpoints on the subject.

A phonetic anomaly peculiar nowadays only to the French Roncales dialect, but whose original source of phonological influence dates back to eighteenth century Labourd, concerns the force of metathesis. In dialects of both regions, the otherwise normal diphthong au has been transposed to read ua, so that jaun > juan, Jaungoiko(a) > Juangeikua (Labourd) and Juangoikua (Roncal). Although ua has been retained in present-day Roncal, for one dubious reason or another, the modern orthography of God in the Labourdin dialect is Jaungoiko(a). At this point, one might notice within the same variants the flexibility of vowel substitution, namely oi > ei and oa > ua. In short, the transposition of sounds in any given Basque word is a characteristic not only of dialectology, but also one that aids to distinguish one regional speech from another throughout the regions of Spain and France

that comprise Euskalerria, or the Basque homeland:

The velar plosive c for modern k in oral and written Basque was in evidence through the middle of the nineteenth century. This fact is noted from reading any early work in the language, such as Landuchio's Dictionarium Linguae Cantabrigiae (1562), Garibay's Refranes y sentencias comunes en bascuence (1596), Axular's Guero (1643), and sundry others in the literature. For the first three hundred years of literary works in Basque, such authors as Dechepare, Lardizábal, Duhalde, and their contemporaries, mostly members of the clergy, primarily employed consonant c in the variants Jaungoico(a), Jangoico(a), Jainco(a), and Jinco(a). By the year 1853, the use of Latin c was yet traced as a dative suffix in Martin Hiribarren's (1810-1866) celebrated poem Euskaldunac or the Basques. At some uncertain date thereafter, letter c was dropped from the written tongue, even though the original sound was retained before all the vowels. Regarding the vowels e and i, modern Basque k before the former is less frequent than either a, o, or u, but more common preceding the latter. Moreover, the tendency to aspirate intervocalic consonants in Basque helps to explain why the sonorization of -k does not occur before a front or back vowel.

In glancing through some literary texts in Basque, both old and new, one realizes that the popular variants to designate God, Jaungoiko(a) and Jainko(a), have maintained their original spellings throughout the ages with scarcely any phonetic modifications. Other terms, however, employed in the past for God were subsequently dropped from the language. For instance, in Leizárraga's Iesus Christ Gure Iaunaren Testamentu Berria, a sixteenth century translation of the New Testament, one discovers the frequent orthography "Ianicoa." Similarly, in Axular's aforementioned work "Guero" or English "Afterwards," apropos somewhat akin in its asceticism to Fray Luis de Granada's "La guía de pecadores," the no longer existing variants "Ianicoa" and "Iaincoa" appear with considerable textual frequency. Among latter-day French Basque authors, citing, for instance, Francisco Laphitz (1832-1905), Pierre Topet (1786-1862), Manuel Inchauspe (1815-1902) and others, the most common variant for God appearing in their writings is Jainko(a). This same variant is invariably used by various Spanish Basque writers, including Juan Antonio de Ubillos (1707-1789), Sebastián de Mendiburu (1708-1782), Francisco de Lardizábal (1806-1855) and others, while the form, Jaungoiko(a), is the designation found in the works of Domingo Aguirre (1864-1920). Parenthetically, a variation of the latter spelling, Juangoikua, is found throughout

the works of Juan Antonio Moguel (1745-1804) and in the aforesaid Biblical translation of Leizárraga. Lastly, the variant Iaungoiko is discerned in the fecund texts of the Franciscan monk, Pedro Antonio de Añibarro (1748-1830).

The diffusion of Basque variants for God can readily be observed in everyday phraseology, as well as in compound or prepositional terminology. For example, the common expression "God willing" may be translated into Basque in any of the subsequent ways: "Yaungoikoak nai ba," "Jaungoikoarenkein," "Jainkoa lagun," "Jainkoarekin," "Yainkoaz onez," and "Jaungoikoak gura dadau." In each of these applied expressions, one notices that the definite article -a is attached to the principal term for God; however, in other expressions such as "Holy God," and the like, the same article agglutinates with the adjective rather than with the noun, hence, "Jinko maitea." Concerning prepositional phrases, the variant Jaungoiko(a) is widely diffused in these paradigms: "Jaungoikoaren" (God's), "Jaungoikoarekin" (with God), "Jaungoikoatik" (from God), "Jaungoikoari" or "Jaungoikoara" (to God), "Jaungoikoatzat" (for God), "Jaungoikoagatik" (for the sake of God), "Jaungoikoarengana" or "Jaungoikoarenganontz" (toward God), and "Jaungoikoarengatil" or "Jaungoikoarentzat" (about or against God). All of these lexical examples further illustrate the role

that suffixes play in the Basque language.

In conclusion, the multiplicity of variants found in Basque to designate God creates a problematic situation for linguists and literary experts in their attempts to determine historically the nature and significance of word usage. The curious evolution of the term Jaungoiko(a) and its phonetic variants exemplify the flexibility of this inscrutable tongue in terms of its dialectal structure and consistent predilection to cling to pristine forms and religious traditions. Sometimes, nonetheless, this important aspect involving phonetic variability, and in some cases, semantic contrasts, reflects the unavoidable pitfalls into which investigators, irrespective of their diversified range of knowledge, expertise, or judgment, frequently do fall. While contrasting one language with another, we note that English contains several expressions for designating God, each with distinct roots and other word elements, to wit, the Lord, the Almighty, the Supreme Being, the Eternal, and so on. However, variants in modern Basque are derived from one essential radical, "jaun," excluding for all intensive purposes the older designations, "ortzi," and "urtzi." In short, therefore, at the dawn of their civilization, the Basque people originally maintained astrological concepts of the nature of the universe. For them, their religion, if one were just in naming it so, was not

based on any monotheistic philosophy, but rather on the different phases and movements of celestial bodies. The mere existence and rotation of the moon, the sun, and certain additional extraterrestrial forces affected their fundamental beliefs and ordinary convictions. Yet, apart from the semantic and phonetic questions that might be raised and answered regarding all the variants described above in the designation of God in euskera, one learns that throughout their relatively sparse literature as in life itself, this ancient and proud race has steadfastly expressed a deep-rooted understanding of a single divine force controlling life and death.

#### The Name of God in Basque Literature

Leonard Bloom

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Antonio Tovar, El euskera y sus parientes (Madrid: Ediciones Minotauro, 1959), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>Miguel de Unamuno, "La raza y la lengua," in Obras completas, IV (Madrid: Aguilar, 1968), p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Tovar, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>7</sup>This information is contained in a letter written by Julio de Urquijo to his colleague and friend, Justo Gárate. Essentially, Urquijo relates to Gárate his comments on a hypothesis formulated by the German vascólogo, Gerhard Baehr, in reference to the origin of the variants Jaungoiko(a) and Jainko(a). Cf. Justo Gárate, "Astros, y meteoros en vascuence. Herr Gerhard Baehr," Revue Internationale des Études Basques, XXIII (Paris et San Sebastian, Janvier-Mars, 1932), pp. 139-142.