Bitoriano Gandiaga's Basque wine, or the art of frugal innovation

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Foreword

It is clear to everyone who visits Arantzazu that the 1960s and 1970s were a richly innovative period in Basque culture. But how did the people living and working in Arantzazu feel at that time?

Basque philosopher Joxe Azurmendi once wrote that Arantzazu Seminary was thought of as the «university of the poor» at that time (2009: 41). For many Basque families the Catholic Church was the only way their sons and daughters could leave home to learn to earn a living, and that was indeed the case for Azurmendi and for Bitoriano Gandiaga, his somewhat older friend at the seminary. But times were changing, and in 1968 Azurmendi published a groundbreaking poem in Basque literature: *Manifestu atzeratua* (Delayed Manifesto). It begins with a harsh acknowledgment of poverty: «Our country has no legends./ It is poor. It only has/ a couple of little pirates,/ some suffering workers,/ many absurd borders,/ a thousand misfortunes./ That's no small thing».

So it is not surprising that when you go into the basilica at Arantzazu there is no gold or any precious stones, just a massive bluish void, a vibrant yet serene space formed by air, wood and stone. I think

it is actually quite appropriate for it to be like that. But why so?

* * *

We should start by remembering that poverty –understood as austerity rather than as deprivation– is part of the Christian *ethos*, specially the Franciscan one. In the Encyclical *Laudato si'* Pope Francis reminds that «less is more» is a «an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible». The Pope proposes «growth marked by moderation and the ability to be happy with little», reframing Christian spirituality as «a return to that simplicity» in which being «serenely present to each reality, however small it may be, opens us up to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment» (2015: §222).

I think this theme is clearly visible at Arantzazu, especially today in the midst of a global ecological crisis that is increasingly recognized not only by religious leaders, but also by the scientific community and political leaders such as António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations. With only a few years left to achieve the 2030 agenda, the UN Development Programme is looking beyond busi-

ness-as-usual to accelerate «learning from the margins», and find new approaches that fit the complexity of current challenges. One of those approaches is called «frugal innovation»: learning from communities who have managed to solve problems using simple, frugal means.

Frugal innovation is the development of simple, affordable, and sustainable products, services and processes that meet the needs of people with limited resources. The concept of frugal innovation was a consequence of observing that many people in developing countries have to make do with very little, but are still able to create innovative solutions to their problems. There is more and more literature about the concept of frugal innovation, but in synthesis we could say that it comprises the «means and ends to do more with less for many or more people» (Bhatti *et al.* 2018: 181).

There are many reasons for frugal forms of innovation, but my point here is that there are also many precedents: frugal innovation has been at work for a long time, here as well as there. In a certain way, the cultural change that Gandiaga and his generation experienced could be construed as a case of frugal innovation, one that is worthy of further study. I do

not have space here to make my case at length, so I will turn to poetry to illustrate my point, and this is where looking at Gandiaga's archive may help us.

The drafts included in this booklet were written after Gandiaga's first book *Elorri* (Hawthorn), published in Arantzazu in 1962. A Franciscan monk then in his forties, Gandiaga had given up writing, but Jorge Oteitza came to Arantzazu in 1967, and he began encouraging Gandiaga to write poetry again. This led to his second book, *Hiru gizon bakarka* (Three men alone). Published in 1974, it was relatively successful, and many passages were adapted for songs recorded in the 1970s and 1980s.

The first and second sections in *Hiru gizon bakarka* are called «The Txakoli Celebrations» –a poetic-dramatic liturgy using txakoli, the slightly sparkling, very dry white wine traditionally made at Basque homesteads until the 1980s– as its literary conceit. Gandiaga was a deeply religious man, but here he used txakoli as a secular symbol. To what end? I think he was writing on at least two levels. On the first, most obvious one, txakoli is a symbol of Basqueness itself. Gandiaga and Azurmendi –the monk and the philosopher– described it in that way in a conversation that was included as afterword in

the revised edition of *Hiru gizon bakarka*: txakoli is «a marginal wine. Immature. And the fact that we are immature is obvious. 'Bitterness in the Basque Country burns the *soul* just as txakoli burns the *mouth* with its bitterness. It is a poor wine'» (Gandiaga 1991: 202).

On a second, deeper level, txakoli works as a symbol of the need for togetherness in a difficult time for the Basques: the end of Franco's dictatorship after nearly 40 years of political repression. Social isolation and individualism are as much a problem in Basque culture as elsewhere, both now and then. Gandiaga thought hard about this, wrote about it, and in the conversations with Azurmendi he interpreted his own symbol. The challenge is what he used to call «the peasant social problem»:

> They can't unite. That is the reality of their lives today. There are Basque patriots ['abertzaleak'] all over the place, I don't know how many groups of them, all kicking each other. The three men alone in my literature represent just that. It's the same role in three installments. They are three guys who are saying the same thing time and again, but not listening to each other. Firstly, as part of a ritual, they all come together at the two *Txakoli Celebrations*. But then they separate again. When the rite is over, everyone goes back to their group mentality. But these three guys, being alone, have the same problem. They suffer the same misery. Only that

> they do not want to be aware of it either, they do not want to get together, they would rather be the lone dog sitting at Gomistegi's door than come together. It is the same old story again and again. (*Ibid*.: 204)

More than thirty years have passed since Gandiaga said that, and some things have got better. Txakoli certainly has, but individualism and loneliness have not. Which is why learning and trying out new ways of being together could be, after all, the most important frugal innovation in the Basque Country today, and a big contribution from this small nation to the wider world.

But what kind of contribution would that be? In Gandiaga's texts there are at least four features that resonate with frugal innovation. Firstly, the kind of Basque innovation that Gandiaga represents is not an easy technological fix, but *awareness-based* and difficult as such: «Without awareness we are nothing. Leaves carried by the wind. But such awareness is bitter. It is painful and demanding» (*ibid*.: 203). Secondly, it is radically *bottom-up*. Gandiaga describes the innovative movement as that of the sap moving from «one thousand roots» up the vine's stem. Thirdly, it is *language-dependent*: the txakoli liturgy aims to bring people together by means of language and art.

Fourthly, it is regenerative and *life-preserving*: without language, the community itself dies. But «we love life. One's own and the community's life, whatever part one loves the most» (*ibid*.: 198).

* * *

The txakoli liturgy in *Hiru gizon bakarka* is a long poem in two parts and, as far as I am aware, it has never been translated into English. It would be nice to have something in that language for visitors and friends of Arantzazu to be able to read and get a taste of his art. But where should we start?

Instead of choosing a passage from the published book, I have decided to translate some short drafts. This is because, for me, he was not a «writer» but, rather, a monk who sometimes wrote poems and read them to friends such as Oteitza or Azurmendi. Written on scattered pieces of paper, those humble drafts bear witness to Gandiaga's way of doing poetry. As they are unfinished pieces, the passages contain alternative versions and deleted or unreadable words. Still, I find them charming and even beautiful in their simplicity, and they help to imagine Gandiaga's contribution, both in style and substance, to a number of universal themes: people, nature, suffering, hope, change.

Some of the texts eventually made their way into publication. For instance, the text describing Egaña's paintings was written for an exhibition of Franciscan art in 1978 at San Telmo Museum in Donostia, thus combining poetry and the visual arts. The paintings he described can still be seen in the basilica, but you have to look for them carefully.

After Gandiaga's death at Arantzazu in 2001, Paulo Agirrebaltzategi –himself a Franciscan and a member of the Jakin Group along with Joxe Azurmendi, Joseba Intxausti, and Joan Mari Torrealdai– classified the manuscripts left by his friend and led a critical edition of his literary works. The unpublished materials include about 1,650 texts. Which ones to select for a small, frugal, non-profit edition such as this one? Agirrebaltzategi's editorial work has been very helpful to me as he categorized the texts using themes and sub-themes, and by using those I was able to identify those dealing with txakoli and the Basque Country. The following eight texts are those categorized by Paulo using both tags. The originals reproduce Agirrebaltzategi's version exactly, including typos and spelling mistakes, but editorial notes have been omitted from the translation for ease of reading.

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Eight leaves from Gandiaga's literary works archive

1

A friend gave me a bottle of txakoli yesterday.
I've kept it on the table in my room until this afternoon.
I've often looked at it, sometimes for a long while,
while the lovely drink stood just there.
I recognized its lively, acidic tang.
I've also held it in my hands,
picking it up and putting it down.
I started up the warming spark inside its coldness.
It reminded me of the skin and soul of the people I love.
As if a mirror it reflected me somehow taller,
somehow thinner,
more spiritual.
If the impulse that makes me live wanted
to bring out the inner joy it used to give me
and tell no lies, the ***
that idealism used to give us
a true image
beautiful, reciprocal conversation,
the sweet give-and-take of pictures,
quiet and without a stir

2

I look out
and the day gets better each time.
Every year the grapes ripen
enough to make at least a little txakoli.
One takes events too personally, perhaps,
too seriously, or with some farmer's doubt at dusk.
But I have to admit that every year
still there are some
new grapevines held up by chestnut posts
and Basque people
still like their txakoli.
And who knows
if txakoli will still be enough to quench
the thirst of the whole Basque Country.

3

These vine's long shoots,
these vine's wide leaves,
these ripe grape clusters,
take them from me – the stem
is what I am looking for now.

4

The vine's stem!
To be just a vine's stem
with one thousand roots
to suck up the earth's sap!

On the Basque hillsides
grapevines hold onto the ground,
grapevines holding the earth,
the earth nurturing the grapevines.

I would like to be the vine's stem
in the people's vineyard
to be soaked by the sweet water
coming from the stem.

The deeper the stem,
the more beautiful the clusters.
The long shoots, oh my,
have nothing but leaves.
The first vine's stem
has an identity of its own
because it is true
to the earth that makes it live.

The vine's stem
makes a fine song,
but the vine's stem
is also a fine symbol
for those who want to understand it.

In Erribera we have fine wine,
by the coastline we have txakoli.
As a people the Basque Country
is a fruit still to ripen.

5

«From the vine stem it comes,
and sweet water it has,
let's drink a full glass,
click, a full glass.
I salute you, and you do me,
and soon the glass will be clean.»

Our truth
is our People.
The thirst
to live as People.

6

Some day,
from the roots
of so much willing
the fruit may eventually
come.
May the wine
flow
alive
some day
from the press
of so much impossibility.
Some day
may we rise,
our hands high
with fruit
to celebrate.

7

Egaña's paintings are reddish and greenish.
They set your teeth on edge.
Egaña makes no dull paintings.
He sets angry colors one against the other,
He sets up a fight between them.
What would Egaña want to express
with that noisy mixture of harsh colors?
A sense of drama, a sense of accident, a sense of action
is in each one of his compositions; lively activity
his images show; it is a raw color
that he puts on them.
Is he denouncing a human world that is too wicked,
is he reporting on the motley tragedy
and inner contradiction of human life itself
with all that agitation in his paintings?
Egaña's paintings create an uneasy feeling,
they loudly proclaim thirst, a yearning to grow
by a people not yet mature.
His results are harsh and bold.
They have a power of bitter grace,
just like txakoli.

8

When I say txakoli
I know what I mean,
I know what I want,
what I'm looking for,
what makes me live,
what moves me,
what keeps me awake,
looking at life with attention
to this fight;
why I have on my tongue,
in my palate, in my soul,
this bitter, acidic taste
from the spark.