

Zoe Bray

The richness of *noka*

Basque American scholar Begona Echeverria calls for a celebration of *noka* as an age-old opportunity for Basque speakers to address women and girls with as much linguistic richness as they do boys and men.

When I was taking my first Basque lessons years ago, the teachers introduced us to *hika*, the informal form of address for second person singular which consists of using *toka* for male and *noka* for female. For the sake of simplicity however, students were encouraged to just learn the neutral form of address: *zuka*. I welcomed this as one thing less to deal with in learning the language. I also liked that it didn't require you to have to think about the sex of the person you are speaking with. Gender neutrality in language can help to free us in key situations from being reduced to our sex or gender.

But then recently I discovered the work of Begoña Echeverria which brought my attention back to the value of *hika*. Echeverria is a Sociolinguist and Professor at the University of California Riverside's School of Education, and recently published "*Witches and Wily Women: Saving Noka through Basque Folklore and Song*" with the University of Nevada Reno's Center for Basque Studies. The book examines the place of the feminine in Basque language and culture, and specifically the use of *noka*. Echeverria noted that while *noka* and *toka* are linguistically equal in that they occupy the same place in the language, sociolinguistically they are unequal. *Noka* once was a familiar form of address used for speaking to a girl or woman with whom one felt trust, but over the years, *noka* has come to be considered rude and has few positive associations in Basque culture. And while in some Basque circles *toka* is being revived, *noka* by comparison, is fast disappearing.

Echeverria is the daughter of Basque immigrants, from the Baztan, and grew up speaking Basque in Chino, near Los Angeles. There she heard *noka* being used amongst the older Basque immigrants. Echeverria documented the differential use of *hika* in the Basque Country and in historical texts since the 15th century. In Basque folklore, she observes the uses of *noka* and *toka* are varied and more egalitarian. Changes arise with the Protestant and later the Catholic translations of religious texts into Basque. In the Protestant texts, *noka* is used for every kind of interaction: positive, negative, and everything in between. By contrast, in the Catholic texts, *noka* is used exclusively for negative purposes. The Catholic church clearly contributed to the vilifying of *noka* and erasure of female agency.

Echeverria notes the differential use of *hika* is emblematic of a male bias in modern Basque society, where men tend to be celebrated as the main protagonists in history and producers of culture, while the accomplishments of women get overlooked. Today *toka*, when used, has become increasingly employed as the generic, and *noka* is marginalized to exclusively -- and often derogatively-- female.

Some younger speakers today seek to counter this androcentric bias by creating a gender neutral form of *hika*. Losing *noka* however would be a shame, argues Echeverria, because it provides unique perspectives on the world that would be lost without it: the abandonment of *noka* would deprive Basque speakers of the opportunity to address women and girls with as much linguistic richness as they do boys and men.

Together with fellow Basque Americans Andrea Bidart and Cathy Petrissans, Echeverria is also a singer-songwriter with NOKA , the musical trio that they created over twenty years ago. NOKA specializes in singing about Basque culture, gender and identity. Many of the songs use and celebrate *noka*. Hopefully these and Echeverria's work will inspire more people to do the same.

One of Echeverria's songs, NOKAnta, ends like this:

<i>Chinoko alabak gaitun gu</i>	- We daughters of Chino
<i>Hemen euskera aditua</i>	- Heard Basque here
<i>Gure xedea</i>	- Our wish
<i>Dun famatzea</i>	- Is to celebrate
<i>Eskual kultura mundura</i>	- Basque culture
<i>Nokaren aberastasuna</i>	- As well as the richness of <i>noka</i>
<i>Kantuetan govestea</i>	- Through song
<i>Erabilera onartzea 'ta</i>	- To make it acceptable to speak
<i>Ahalbada zabaltzea</i>	- And, hopefully, to spread its use.