

Cannibal Basques: Magic, Cannibalism and Ethnography in the Works of Pierre de Lancre

Matteo Leta

Italian Institute for Philosophic Studies, Naples, Italy

Correspondence: leta.matteo.93@gmail.com

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Abstract

*This article will show the importance of cannibalism in the description of the sabbath among the Basques, in the *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons*, written by Pierre De Lancre. The Basques were often linked to magic and demons; however, this work constitutes surely the most completed document about such an association. In the *Tableau* there is a sort of ethnographic analysis of the Basques, who started to be compared to the savages of the New World. Witchcraft and cannibalism are the evidence of a demonic complot, aimed at fighting Christianity and, in some way, the central features of mankind. At any rate, such religious controversy is used also in a totally laical perspective: De Lancre is the representative of the King and his role consists in the affirmation of the French power throughout the region. The purpose of such stereotypes, applied also to other marginalized peoples in Renaissance Europe (such as the inhabitants of Southern Italy portrayed by the Jesuits missionaries), justifies implicitly the necessity to repress and integrate them within the civilization and the forthcoming capitalistic system.*

Keywords: De Lancre; Basques, Renaissance; witchcraft; sorcery; witches; New World; Jesuits; ethnography; renaissance literature

The Basque Country: Borderland

Pierre de Lancre arrives in Labourd in 1609 in order to investigate the presence of the witches. The region, inhabited by the Basques, had a large autonomy from the French power, due to its peripheral position, close to the Spanish border. In the *Tableau de l'inconstance et instabilité de toutes choses* (published during his residence in Labourd) De Lancre described the Spanish people as melancholic and influenced by the presence of the Arabs, Gypsies and Jews. Indeed, they would have been respectful of the Christian faith only due to the harshness of Inquisition (**De Lancre, 1610: 406 r**). Starting from these assumptions, De Lancre attacks the Spanish imperialistic pretensions, founded on the alleged role played by the Iberian State in the evangelization of the New World and in the spread of Christianity. It is exactly during the journey in the Basque Country, that an eminent Franciscan friar reveals to the writer that the Spanish crown is filling the American continent with miscreants. In fact, among the peoples which are more engaged in the colonization, there would be the Africans (who rarely survive during the journey) and the Moors, who, obviously, have no intention of spreading Christianity in the new lands (**De Lancre, 1610: 413 r-413 v**).

Spain is a combination of different peoples, pooled only by their greed and desire of provoking civil wars. In De Lancre's opinion, the Iberian state represents an imminent danger for France, that has not to make the mistake of 'opening the doors and to lower the drawbridge for them'. A potential danger for the stability of the French kingdom is represented also by Labourd people, who are not totally submissive to God as well as to the king. So, the proximity of Spain has contaminated the Basques — especially the lower classes — making them 'indifferent to good manners, habits and affections', as De Lancre affirms in his *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et demons* (**De Lancre, 1612: 57**), consecrated to the description of the Basques. Such closeness enables the diffusion in the region of immoral dances, repeated also during the sabbath, which apparently weaken the moral fiber of this people:

Dancing is ever dirted and more depraved at the sabbath. Here we can say what Arnobius says. He seems almost to explain the immoral dance movements that are performed at these ill-conceived assemblies, these base and filthy desires, that the Devil inspires in the hearts of countless young virgins who are present there. Right before their eyes both the Devil and countless witches openly practice their diabolic couplings (**De Lancre, 1612: 218**).

This closeness with Spain is the reason why, during the persecution, lots of the suspects seek shelter in Spain, making difficult De Lancre's work as well as that of the Inquisition on the other side of the Pyrenees (**De Lancre, 1612: 393**). The Basques, for the French writer, suffer the fragmentation of their territory, and in particular they suffer the influence of three different kingdoms (France, Spain and Navarre), of three languages (French, Spanish and Basque) and also of two dioceses (Dax and Navarre). In such a chaotic context, the devil can easily swagger and take possession of them:

*And in order to show clearly that natural conditions are in part to blame for the presence of so many witches, it is important to note that this is a mountainous country that shares borders with three different kingdoms: France, Navarre, and Spain. The mixture of three languages — French, Basque, and Spanish — marks the enclaves of two bishoprics because the Diocese of Acqs extends well into Navarre. All this diversity affords Satan excellent opportunities for organizing his assemblies and sabbaths in this area, especially since the seacoast makes the people rustic, rough and badly controlled (**De Lancre, 1612: 51-52**).*

Thus, sorcery becomes the result of the weakness of the State and it represents also a danger for all the community, either from a religious and political point of view. In such a perspective, heresy should be persecuted by both lay and clerical judges (**De Lancre, 1612: 489**). In this respect, it is no accident that De Lancre is sent in the Labourd by the King of France. Thus, sorcery becomes a problem for the State and the demonology should not be conceived simply as a part of the theological debate of that time, even if De Lancre, as we will see, deeply utilises the ideological patterns elaborated by the catholic missionaries in the New World.

The Basques as the Indians of the Old Continent

The missionaries experience in the Indies spreads Christianity all around the world. Nevertheless, this process makes aware the monastic orders of the need to convert also the Europeans, who often integrate the official religion with unorthodox rituals. In this perspective, we should interpret the attempt of the Jesuits to renovate the faith in the so-called *Indias de por acá* (Indies of down here), *id est* the regions of the New World which seemed still dripping with paganism (**De Martino, 1961: 39-59; Tacchi Venturi, 1910: 269-270**). Moreover, this denomination shows also the deep malaise of the European missionaries, who feel foreign even if they are in a land geographically closer than the New World. Pierre de Lancre seems to be influenced by this cultural pattern also because, as we know, he is strictly connected with Jesuit spirituality (**Dardano Basso, 2011: 2-5**). Thus, as the Jesuits in Southern Italy, De Lancre feels himself as a foreigner among Labourd peasants and mariners. That is the reason why the *Tableau*

de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons is the product of the dismay of a French writer who conceives Labourd as much more mysterious and indecipherable than a foreign country (Céard, 1996). Moreover, De Lancre represents the otherness of the Basques taking into account even the descriptions of the missionaries of the New World. According to him, the expansion of Christianity in the Indies would have provoked the retirement of the demons from those regions towards Europe, especially in the Labourd, to find new victims. Consequently, the devils have become the lords of this territory, having conquered above all the children, the women and the local clergy:

This makes me believe, that after the devotion and the good instruction of so many devout religious figures chased the demons and the evil angels from the Indies, Japan and other places, they were unleashed on Christendom in large numbers. And having found that both people and the terrain here are well disposed, they have made it their principal abode. And little by little they are making themselves the absolute rulers of the country, having own over the women, the children, and most of preachers and pastors. They found a way to relegate the fathers and husbands to the New World, to a place where religion is totally unknown, in order to establish the devil's reign more easily (De Lancre, 1612: 60).

De Lancre portrays a sort of a demons' procession through the Ocean from the New World to Europe, where they settle in the marginal and less developed regions. This sort of emigration is provoked by the successful preaching of the missionaries. At any rate, the demons transform their new victims whom rituals and practices could be compared to the Native Americans' ones. This overlapping of Basques and Indians is clear as they both share some rituals and manners, such as using psychotropic drugs during their demonic rituals. In fact, the Indians make use of the herb Cohoba which provokes a sort of trance, an essential element in the savages' religion. On the other hand, even the Basques consume tobacco to daze themselves and please the devil:

And, just as the Indians in Hispaniola, who, when they smoke a certain herb called cohoba, become disturbed and, putting their hands between their knees and lowering their heads, remain for a time in a state of ecstasy, then rise, completely lost and confused, telling of the marvels of their false gods whom they call Cemís, so it is with our witches who return from the sabbath. They also use petun or tobacco, for they all have a few plants of this kind in their gardens, however small they may be. They smoke it to clear their minds, sometimes sustaining themselves against hunger. I do not know if this smoke numbs them as

the herb does the Indians, but I do know for certain that it makes their breath and their body smell putrid (De Lancre, 1612: 58-59).

The assimilation between Basques and New World is facilitated also by the fact that this people used to fish in the area of Newfoundland. This isle and its environs are, for lots of cosmographers during the Renaissance, a sort of dangerous territory haunted by demons. Not surprisingly, even Newfoundland is, according to the witnesses collected by De Lancre, the place of the Sabbath for the Basques (**Lestringant, 2008: 99-125**). In fact, the sixteen years-old Jeanette d'Abadia confesses that the isle is the meeting point for all the Labourd inhabitants, who create massive storms and destroy their own ships thanks to their magic powers.

[Jeanette d'Abadia] said that she was very often carried to Newfoundland by Gratiane, the woman who customarily led her, and that it might have been six months ago or so that she transported her there through the air. [...] Once there, she saw nearly all kinds of people from Labourd who stirred up storms to make ships and other vessels sink. In fact, they made this happen to a boat belonging to Maricot de Mignelcorena of Cibure, who, being a witch, himself aided in its loss (**De Lancre, 1612: 155**).

Gripped by the demons, the Basques devastate the only instruments for their survival, because they cannot practice agriculture due to the sterility of their homeland. The infertility of the Labourd would be the result of the Basques, who 'throw themselves in the inconstant activity of the sea, depreciating the constant work of the land'. In this refusal of agricultural activities, Luciano Parinetto discovers another reason for the demonization of this people. At the beginning of an epoch marked by 'the new ethic of the accumulation and the birth of the capital [...], those people, who do not understand the dignity of work and who prefer mendicancy and misery to professional engagement, must be a sorcerer people' (**Parinetto, 1997: 224-226**). De Lancre is 'obsessed by the menace of social dissolution' and the Basques represent exactly this danger. In fact, it deals with a people unwilling to work, incestuous and disrespectful of the family. In such a perspective, witchcraft is only the symptom of the menace embodied by the Basques to the political, religious and also natural order (**Jacques-Chaquin, 1982: 27-29**). This menace, as we will see, is confirmed also by their attitude to the cannibalism during their magic rituals.

The Basques and the Indians: Sorcery and Cannibalism

Jean de Léry has equated the rituals of the European witches with those of the Brazilian savages. In fact, in the third edition of the *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*, he has analysed the behaviours of indigenous women thanks to the thesis exposed by Bodin in the *Démonomanie des sorciers*. According to Léry, the sorcerers in the Ancient and in the New World are 'possessed by the same spirit of Satan: the distance between the places and the long journey in the sea cannot avoid the demon to operate here and there on the souls assigned to him by the fair judgement of God' (**Lestringant, 1990: 50**).

The description of the Cannibals spreads in Renaissance literature and art, and a sort of equivalence between them and the European witches seems to be established thanks to the common practice of anthropophagy, as the etching *Saturn and his Children* by Crispjin Van de Passe could show (**Zika, 2007: 210-212**). In this respect the image of the indigenous without law, religion and work culture is reused by De Lancre for his ethnographic description of the Basques. This assimilation is founded on the deep connection between this people and the New World; thus, the Labourd becomes a sort of demonic enclave in Christian Europe. The refusal of Christianity is also a refusal of the natural, political and economic order; magic and cannibalism exemplify this irreconcilable anthropological diversity. Not surprisingly, the sabbath of the witches takes place in front of the churchyards in order to offend God or in places traditionally associated with bewilderment as crosses and forests:

Ordinarily crossroads are the preferred meeting places, as was reported by Isaac de Queyran, who testifies that he had been at the crossroads at the Gallienne Palace, close to the city of Bordeaux, or at the public squares in front of the churches [...]. In addition, they normally take them to a deserted and wild place, such as in the middle of a heath, a place away from all the traffic, neighbors, houses, and people (**De Lancre, 1612: 93**).

During this ritual, the dances are a very important element in their rituals and they annihilate men's rational skills as well as women's fertility power. In fact, according to the French writer, 'the witches' dances are different, for they cause men to become practically wild, and most often cause women to miscarry' (**De Lancre, 1612: 220**). Moreover, those ballets anticipate the sexual union between the devil and the magicians. Satan prefers sodomy because he wants to offend God and nature, dishonouring also mankind:

Jeannette d'Abadie, aged sixteen, said that at the sabbath she saw men and women engage in promiscuous activity. The Devil would command them to form couples and have sex, giving each of them all that nature most abhors, that is to say, the daughter to her father, the son to his mother, the sister to her brother, the goddaughter to her godfather, the penitent to her confessor, without regard to either age or social standing, or degree of kinship. [...] She said that women never became pregnant from these copulations, whether they were with the master or other witches (De Lancre, 1612: 238).

Promiscuity seems to be a central feature in the sabbath, because the demon incites the sorcerers to copulate without taking into account any religious or natural interdiction. However, these orgiastic rituals are barren and the infertility of sabbath could be associated directly to the infertility of the Labourd land. Thus, the pact with the demon deprives Basques of the power of fecundity; in this respect their existence is even more incompatible with the economic and natural order, forcing men to reproduce themselves and contributing to the regeneration of their sources of sustenance.

The contrast between sorcery and nature turns out also in the particular attitude of the Basques to infanticide and cannibalism, two other central features of the Sabbath. In fact, these crimes are carried out because the grease of the babies would constitute the main ingredient of the unguent that allows the witches to fly and to join the sabbath. According to De Lancre, Satan could transport them avoiding this unnecessary bloodshed; however, the infanticide is a superfluous malice imposed by the demon to his subjects:

Satan could very well transport these women without using a salve, but he adds this unnecessarily spiteful act to what he does in order to give the witches the will and the means to kill the children right way, persuading them that without this ointment they cannot be transported to the sabbath. And he wants the ointment to be composed of the flesh of unbaptized children, so that deprived of life by these cruel witches, these innocent little souls remain deprived of the glory of paradise. And in order better to satisfy his cruelty and attain what he desires, he makes them believe in the beginning that the novices merely have to borrow some of his salve. Then he tells them that they have to prepare it themselves. To do this, the woman must kill a child with their own hands (De Lancre, 1612: 135).

Cannibalism becomes the symbol of the dehumanisation and the bestiality imposed by the devil to the witches. In fact, Satan persuades them that a potion made up with children's hearts could save their lives, avoiding them confessing their crimes to the inquisitors. In fact, 'the Devil makes the

female witches understand that it requires a certain number of children's heart to make some concoction. If they eat this substance, no torment can make them reveal the secrets of witchcraft' (**De Lancre, 1612: 144**). Thanks to the testimony of Marie de la Ralde, De Lancre states that they do a sort of pastry with black millet and the powder of children's liver in order to hide their alliance with the demon:

She [Marie d'Aspilcouëtte] further stated in order never to confess the secret of the school, they make a paste of black millet at the sabbath, mixed with the powder of the liver of some unbaptized child. The liver is dried and then mixed with this paste, which has the power to reduce a person to silence, so whoever eats it never confesses (De Lancre, 1612: 150).

Moreover, during the sabbath, Satan shatters a human heart, giving its pieces only to his protégés among the sorcerers. In this regard, cannibalism consolidates the relation between the devil and the magicians who, thanks to the anthropophagy, are convinced that they can save their lives and that they can get on well with Satan. However, this ritual is also a sort of necessity, because only cannibal dishes are effectively present during the sabbath. In fact, as Jeannette d'Abadia confesses, the demonic meal presents a huge collection of foods; at any rate, they are only an illusion created by the devil and the only food really present on the table is the cannibal one.

She [Jeannette d'Abadia] saw tables piled with many kinds of food. But when people wanted to take some of it, they found nothing in their hands, except when children, baptized or unbaptized, were carried there. For she had very often seen both types of children served and eaten, even one whom people believed to be the son of Maître de Lasse. They are cut into quarters at the sabbath in order to have several parishes partake to them (**De Lancre, 1612: 154**).

The illusory meal reveals the illusory nature of magic. In fact, the witches believe to see every kind of good dishes, with bread, salt and wine and everything would stay on a golden tablecloth. All this abundance is only a trick, because during the sabbath the witches can only feed on toads, flesh of hanged men, cadavers just unearthed, children and animals died of illness. These dishes, as De Lancre states, are not only forbidden, but they are also a horrible offense to men, beasts and to the nature itself. The witches, according to him, 'had made themselves servants of Satan, had eaten and feasted with him; in despicable company they had eaten meats that are not only prohibited but also are loathsome to men, wild animals, and nature' (**De Lancre, 1612: 437**). In this perspective, magic arts are only vain promises of richness and deceptions excogitated by Satan in order to dehumanise those people who are both materially and morally miserable:

Some of our witches told us that the table at the sabbath is set, that the tablecloth appears to be gilded, and that all sorts, and that all sorts of good food are served with bread, wine, and salt. But the majority of witches who were heard most often confess that it was entirely different. They say that only toads, the flesh of people who were hanged, carrion flesh that was dug up and torn from newly dug graves, the flesh of unbaptized children, or that of dead animals whom they had killed were served. They said that no one ate anything that was not tasteless, given that nothing was ever salted. [...] These are false meats, false cooks, and false servants, and their bread is some horrible black cake made of black millet and some other drug with which they trick the children (De Lancre, 1612: 211).

Diabolic magic establishes its rituals on the human flesh and, particularly, on the children's one, who becomes the central target of the witches. De Lancre does not spare the smallest detail about their cruelty, telling about the son of a witch whose cadaver has been founded in the centre of a room, without the brain and the bottom, devoured by the sorcerers. Facing this scenario, the French writer wonders if it is an illusion of the rest of a witches' banquet. In this perspective, De Lancre satirises the medical explanation about witchcraft which tried to reduce this phenomenon to a simple self-illusion made up by naïf women. In fact, according to him, even if the witches are tricked by demons, their actions are absolutely real:

Another witch in Bayonne had a child of her own who was given away out of charity and put to nurse at the home of an honest woman beyond reproach. Several days later the child was found in the middle of a bedroom with his brain and his buttocks eaten. Is this a fantasy? Was this anything but the remains of some sabbath flesh? (De Lancre, 1612: 212).

At any rate, the macabre tales are not only utilised by De Lancre in order to show the reality of witches' sabbath. In fact, the cannibal meal has a precise role because it shows the complete dehumanisation of sorcerers made by the demon. During De Lancre's persecution, also in Spain the Inquisition cruelly repressed and executed the Basques in order to destroy all the alleged magic rituals. Thus, De Lancre inserts in his *Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons* also a brief account about the sorcerers' activities on the other side of Pyrenees, focusing on their anthropophagical rituals. In fact, even during the Spanish sabbath, the Basques are sorcerers as well as cannibals, because they prepare meatballs with human legs. Moreover, the participants to the demonic meeting boil human flesh, eating all of it until puking:

Normally they serve the legs of male and female witches and of little children, chopped up. They drink the blood of the little children through their heads, their navels, and their penises. [...] They serve a broth of human flesh that they find so delicious that they eat until they are so full that they vomit (**De Lancre, 1612: 402**).

Even this action could show the inhumanity and the monstrosity of the sorcerers, whose horrible meals stops the normal circuit of food's assimilation. The Renaissance culture attributes exactly to the digestion and the fecal expulsion a regenerative and fertilising power which are evidentially opposed to the witches' vomit (**Bakhtin & Robel, 1970; Fabre, 1986: 15-39**). This feature should be put in relation with the agricultural and sexual sterility of the Basques who would become a really dangerous presence for the natural order. Their cannibalism as well as their infertility represent an apocalyptic menace that can destroy both political and divine laws.

Conclusion

Basque country is a barrel and magic land where Christianity has not effectively taken root. According to De Lancre, Labourd is marvellously devoted, but only apparently. In fact, 'the area of Labourd and the entire coast of France and upper and lower Navarre is extremely religious in appearance and has churches that are as ornate and elaborate as one could see anywhere' (**De Lancre, 1612: 423**). This semblance of faith hides in the very deep of the Basque soul and land the alliance with Satan. In fact, he is called by the natives as *Monsieur de la Forêt* (Lord of the forest). The devil would appear in this way, as De Lancre discovers interrogating a young man alleged to be a werewolf. The boy shows a superficial faith that is limited only to the execution of everything the priests ask him. However, his obedience to the clergy and his obsession for the sign of the cross are only exterior appearances. In fact, the Lord of the Forest has corrupted him with the promises of richness to such an extent that the young boy confesses freely to still have the inclination to eat the human flesh and especially the girls' one:

He seemed a bit dazed — not that he did not understand what he heard or failed to do promptly what he heard or failed to do promptly what the good fathers asked of him. Rather he was hardly devout, and he did not seem to understand easily even simple things that only seemed commonsensical. [...] He confessed to me also, in a straightforward manner, that he still wanted to eat the flesh of little children, and that he found the flesh of little girls particularly delicious. [...] He also told us that the Lord of the Forest twice came to see him at the beginning of his confinement in the monastery, that he had been afraid, but that he left right away because he made the sign of the cross many times and

continued to do so every day so that he would stay away, and he never came again. And as he said these words, he made the sign of the cross for us. And asked what this Lord of the Forest said to him, he told us that he offered him many riches and asked him if he did not want to return to his service, and that he said no (De Lancre, 1612: 329-332).

In this region of cannibals and witches, De Lancre feels himself as a foreigner in his homeland (Céard, 1991: 31-39; 1996: 79-100). This sensation could be associated with the fear that a demonic and magic people could contaminate and destroy the delicate equilibrium in France, a nation bled out by religious troubles. In an epoch where complot against God and complot against king corresponded, sorcery and anthropophagy have an apocalyptic function and they are able to totally ruin mankind. De Lancre is simply scared of this and calls for the hardest severity against everyone alleged to have made a deal with the devil.

Currently I am a researcher at the Italian Institute for Philosophic Studies (Naples, Italy). I have obtained a Ph.D candidate in French and Comparative literatures at Sorbonne Université (Paris, France) with a dissertation – whose publication is expected at the end of 2020 by Les Belles Lettres – about the charlatan in the Italian and French Renaissance Literature. I am publishing several articles about the Italian Renaissance Comedy in Italian and French revues and my research interest is the relationship between the accusations of sorcery and the social marginalisation in the early modern literature.



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