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# A Fisherman's Festival at Cape Finisterre, Spain

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by LUCILE ARMSTRONG

CAPE FINISTERRE, in Spanish Galicia, is nearly the most westerly point of the Iberian Peninsula. Its peculiar shape and situation made it a place of pilgrimage long ago. It is a promontory extending in a southerly direction from the mainland, and it forms an arm of the Bay of Finisterre and the Corcubi6n river. To withstand the onslaught of Atlantic gales and stormy waves up to thirty metres high and more, it has to be of very hard rock. It is granite. The cliffs fall almost sheer down to the sea, covered with tufts of dwarf gorse, coarse grass and those dear little wild pinks which grow between boulders, and whose sisters grow on the shore of Finistère, in Brittany.

A powerful lighthouse on the tip of Cape Finisterre, watches over the fishing fleet as well as the numerous large ships that pass its rough and rugged coastline. This coast is called *la costa de la muerte* — the coast of death — because every year ships are wrecked along its treacherous cliffs, dented by the ravages of the ocean. A Roman watch tower, or lighthouse, was erected in the vicinity but a large part of the cape is now a military zone so visitors are not welcome.

The village of Finisterre nestles comfortably on the side of the bay facing the mainland. It is picturesque, has steep and narrow streets, and possesses two harbours protected by a derelict fort. Its main focus of interest is concentrated on fishing — like the other pretty little villages dotted along the opposite side of the bay, squatting in their green romantic landscape. The lush vegetation and mellow colouring is reminiscent of parts of Wales and Ireland. It is a Celtic land full of legends and superstitions of undoubted common parentage with the ancient main stream of Celts. Two waves of Celts came over the Pyrenees across the northern part of

the Peninsula during the eighth and sixth centuries B.C. bringing iron with them.

Finisterre village is one of those delightful places where — as in many Welsh villages — everyone is known according to his occupation: 'José Electricity' 'Maria Postcards', 'Francisco Tobacco' and 'Carmaña Shop'. If you want to communicate with someone you call a child playing on your doorstep or outside the window and give your message verbally, and off goes the child. Everyone knows everyone else, his abode, and often his business — at times better than he does himself.

We first saw Cape Finisterre on a warm summer's day on the 5th August, 1970 just as the setting sun was shedding its golden rays across the Atlantic making it look like a shimmering river of gold. A most impressive sight.

On our way back to the village, a little romanesque church by the roadside attracted our attention. A smiling guide politely motioned us in. This guide, José Luis, was remarkable in that his upper jawbone protruded beyond the ordinary, giving him a simian appearance. Was he a throw back from Magdalenean times? This protruding upper jaw was not uncommon in this westernmost part of Galicia.

The church was dedicated to *Nuestra Señora Santa Maria de las Arenas* — Our Lady of the Sands — or *La Virgen Santa Maria*, the patroness of fishermen in Finisterre. The little church has undergone several alterations since it was first built, but its romanesque origin is evident. It used to have a pilgrim's hostel to shelter the crowds who flocked to the Easter Sunday festival, but it is now in ruins, like the other out-buildings which had once housed the clergy. Times have changed. Along the aisle two round arches are carved with foliage, syrens, fish and animals. It was difficult to see in bad light, but two female figures there were in unmistakable postures of giving birth.

On entering this church the visitor is expected to admire a figure of Christ on the Cross. It is life-size and the statue wears a purple velvet skirt studded with gold decorations. This skirt on a figure of Christ is not peculiar to Finisterre, but is seen in Burgos, Seville, Málaga and other large cities of Spain. The main aisle has a transept, one arm of which is shorter than the other, and there, high up on a stone ledge, is the *Virgen de Piedra* — the Stone

Virgin — or the real *Virgen de las Arenas*, patroness of fishermen. This statue is of polychrome granite and is carrying the Child Jesus. She seems to date back to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Until about twenty years ago, she reigned on a stone pillar placed on the altar, and during High Mass on Easter Sunday, the pillar on which she stood was swivelled round to show her back to the congregation. She is hollow, and her back view disclosed a *viril* (phallus) inside her, to assure the congregation they would have a fruitful harvest both of fish and in the fields. She is the real patroness of the fishermen. The guide José Luis, fully explained all this to us, and he seemed sad that the Virgin he had known in his youth had been dethroned and given a minor place where people could hardly notice her. Fishing is Finisterre's main source of livelihood, so this ritual 'turning of the Virgin' was received with relief by the congregation, who sang in praise and thanks to the Virgin for looking after them. After Mass the Virgin was carried on a float to the terrace beside the church and there she presided over a girls' stick dance.

However, some twenty years ago 'it was decided' to bring this ancient fertility custom to an end. A modern polychrome wooden statue was ordered, and when she arrived she was fair-haired, blue-eyed, and was called *Nuestra Señora del Carmen*. Very many girls and men are now called after her: *Carmen* and *Carminiña* for girls; *Carmelo* for men. This new Virgin is firmly installed on the altar which pivots no longer, neither is there a pillar on it. *Nuestra Señora del Carmen* rests on a lavishly decorated roccoco altar with a canopy and ornate electric lamps and artificial lilies are placed before her. She wears a gold crown but the characteristic Spanish tradition of dressing the Virgin in stiff robes making her look like a cone, has been made obsolete. Her ornate figure shows up the milk-white skin and pink cheeks.

Meanwhile the dethroned Stone Virgin was hauled up by a pulley on to a niche at a tiny window above the main aisle. José Luis was one of the four men who pulled her up there. Later she was taken down again and placed over the arch of the shorter arm of the transept on a stone ledge, so high up one can hardly make out her blue mantle and the Child in her arms, Her hollow back can be seen no more.

A new priest, anxious to let his parishioners forget the Stone

PLATE I



NUESTRA SEÑORA LA VIRGEN MARIA DE LAS ARENAS  
FINISTERRE 1970

(Photo by Peter Crossley-Holland)

Virgin arranged for a pageant<sup>1</sup> to take place on Easter Sunday, enacting the Resurrection at the Tomb, the angel and the three Marys. This is performed on the hillside behind the church. A hut, high up, represents the Tomb, and a child is inside, and miraculously 'found' when the 'stone is rolled back' (when the door is unlocked). The innovation was an effective way of christianising the ancient fertility cult. The girls' stick dance is performed after the pageant, to the accompaniment of two bagpipes and a drum, after which everyone goes down to the main square in the village to watch the other two traditional dances performed there.

Some villagers say there used to be a men's sword dance as well, danced before the Virgin. This would not be surprising since other fishing villages like Marín, Redondela and Carril, still retain these fishermen's dances along the Galician coast.

We had been told that there was a girls' stick dance here, but the question was who were the dancers. By asking in bars where we could locate them, we were lucky enough to find Carmiña Olveira, almost at once. Carmiña turned out to be the leader and teacher of the dance group. Her father owned a grocer's shop and in his youth had had an excellent reputation as a dancer. He had taught his daughter. Carmiña was charming and co-operative and agreed to get her dancers together for the following night to perform for us 'as they do on Easter Sunday, for the Festival of the *Virgen de las Arenas*' (the Virgin of the Sands).

So on the following evening, after work and great preparations, young girls and three fishermen came to the school house and danced 'just as they do on Easter Sunday', Carmiña assured us. They performed three dances, and here is a description of them.

#### 1. The Stick dance — "*Danza de los Palos*"

Twelve girls, in the regional costume of Finisterre, came up in two straight lines, processing slowly as if towards the statue of the Virgin, taking 1 step to each two beats (2/4 time). As they walked they clicked their stick to mark time, ending up on one knee as they sang with bent head. The words of the *Salve* they sang ran:

<sup>1</sup> Information by courtesy of Sr. Luis Caxide, Coadjutor priest at Finisterre.

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“Salve Virgen Pura      (We salute Thee, pure Virgin  
Salve Virgen Madre      We salute Thee mother  
Salve Virgen Bella      We salute Thee beautiful Virgin  
Reina Virgen Salve”      Queen Virgin, Salute)

During the processing a soloist sang the verses.

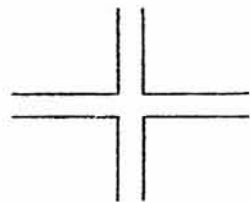
Immediately this *Salve* ended, they got up and broke into a quick dance in  $2/4$  time. The stick hitting went like this: hit own sticks together; hit opposite partner's sticks; hit own sticks at waist level; hit own sticks above head. This accompaniment of stick hitting was kept up throughout the dance.

*The sticks* were about 18 inches long, of hard, dark wood, a coloured ribbon was entwined round them from end to end and the top of each stick had a bunch of ribbons tied at about 3 inches from the tip. The bunch was no longer than about five inches.

*The step* consisted of the following: step, hop, on counts 1 and 2, swing the leg to the side keeping the foot in the air, on count 3, keep it there during the hop on the supporting foot on count 4; repeat the order but swinging the other leg to the opposite side for the next sequence of four beats.

*The figures.* For the verse partners faced in two long rows. After eight-bar phrases, the girls at each end of the rows ‘cast out’ (swung out and round to meet each other) while those in the centre crossed over and changed the direction of the two rows. Thus, they ended in a position at right angles to their formation for the first verse. This first verse was repeated so the rows changed direction at right angles once more, then again, for the third verse, and the verse was again repeated a fourth time to bring the dancers to their original positions. Like a Double-Cross figure, which is a frequent feature in men's ritual stick and sword dances in northern Spain.

At the finish, the *Salve* was repeated as at the



beginning of the dance, the girls kneeling with bowed heads.

*The costume* consisted of the usual wide red flannel skirt with two black velvet bands at the hem, a long-sleeved white blouse with frills at neck and cuffs, a black *dengue* (short cape), or a red

*dengue* with broad black velvet bands crossed over the breast and tied at the back with long ribbons. A black velvet apron with sequins was worn and a flowered merino wool kerchief tied on the head, like the Portuguese kerchiefs, but without fringes. The way the kerchiefs were worn was peculiar. It was folded in a triangle, placed on the head with the ends falling at the back, the ends were then crossed in the nape of the neck and brought forward up the sides of the face and tied at the top of the head. These kerchiefs were bought in Portugal. White stockings and black shoes finished off the charming costume.

*The music.* Bagpipes are the usual instruments used in Galicia. If no bagpiper is available, then it is sung to with a tambourine accompaniment. The tunes are thrilling.

When this dance is over, Carmiña told us, everyone goes to the village square for the two other traditional dances. These are the *Danza de los Molletes* and the *Danza de las Patelas*. *Molletes* appears to mean 'chunks of bread'. *Patelas* are fishergirls' baskets.

#### *The Danza de los Molletes* — (dance of bread, or loaf).

Eight girls came from opposite sides of the dance space, four from one side, were wearing broad-brimmed straw hats with a black velvet band which hung down the back, over the kerchief, and four others wore kerchiefs only without the hat. [This difference indicates that originally there were four men and four girls but now girls only perform this dance]. A semi-circle or horseshoe, was formed, which was the basic formation.

*The step* consisted of a pas-de-basque throughout, while dancers faced inside the horseshoe. The leader — also performing the pas-de-basque — came up from behind, went from one end of the line to the other, dancing before each girl in turn. She carried a round loaf of bread about eight inches across, on her head, and disappeared still carrying the loaf, while the girls continued to dance several figures such as 'casting off' (like a fleur-de-lys figure), circles and figures of eight, or a 'hey'. The leader then came on again, still carrying the loaf on her head, but this time it was cut into eight triangular chunks — like spokes of a wheel — and as she danced before each girl, she handed her a chunk of the loaf.



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The dancers placed the chunks on their heads while they continued to dance, then, after a 'weaving in-and-out of the crescent, or horseshoe' figure, they went off preceded by the leader. Their steps were very smooth indeed or they would not have kept the bread on their heads.

The third dance was the *Danza de las Patelas* — (dance of fishing baskets).

Six girls and three men took part, two girls to each man. This is called a *tresillo* (dance for three — not infrequent in the peninsula). The girls held a *patela* on their heads with one hand, the other hand being on the hip. A *patela* is a flat round wicker-basket about fourteen inches across. It is usually carried about for hawking fish from house to house.

The girls danced in two by two in a pas-de-basque step, from opposite sides of the hall, crossed each other and, facing the (place where the authorities would have been) 'front' put their baskets down on the ground side by side in a row. They took up their positions in two opposite rows. This introduction gave the impression that they were making an offering to some divinity or important personage. The baskets however were empty on this occasion.

Several figures were performed, like circles, crossing over of straight lines then a crescent-shape was formed and the three men came bouncing in to a leaping pas-de-basque and did some solo steps before each group of two girls. Together they then danced some 'heys', or figures of '8', and circles. To end the dance the girls came forward to pick up their *patelas* in the same order as at the beginning, and all went off in their groups of three.

*The costumes* were those worn regionally by fishergirls, that is, the usual red flannel skirt with two black bands at the hem, but the skirt was tucked up at the waist to show the petticoat, a white long-sleeved blouse and black apron like the peasants' costume. The kerchiefs were different, worn simply over the head and tied in the nape of the neck, the ends hanging down the back. All went barefoot. The men wore navy trousers turned up to the knee, a white shirt and black sash.

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*The music.* These Galician dancers are usually accompanied by bagpipes and drum. Scallop shells are frequently used by fishermen for percussion.

### CONCLUSIONS

The hollow stone Virgin of Finisterre — *Nuestra Señora de las Arenas* — is a relic of paganism, probably of the Earth Mother. It is a possibility that before her, there existed some cult similar to what still exists today in Elche (Alicante, on the Mediterranean coast), and in Cintra (30 km from Lisbon, in Portugal). In Elche the Church of Santa Maria celebrates its 'mystery' twice a year. *The carxofa* (artichoke — symbol of fertility) hung from the ceiling above the High Altar during Mass, is lowered, and a child in white, representing an angel, steps out, as the 'artichoke' opens out like the sections of an umbrella. Up to about 40 years ago, the 'artichoke' contained a phallus (*un viril*)<sup>2</sup>.

In Cintra, instead of an artichoke they have a large pine cone which is hung from the ceiling, and during a New Year celebration, the dancing couples are showered with bunches of violets, pigeons fly out and sweets fall to the ground (new seed, in olden times, presumably) as the pine cone opens out in sections, as at Elche.

Violets were attributes of the fertility god Adonis, of Asia Minor. Pine cones were considered fertility symbols since earliest times both in Asia Minor and the Middle East, and continue to be so considered in some parts of the northern Mediterranean coast. There are several kinds of pine, the Maritime Pine, *Pino Manso* is the one which provides pine kernels, eaten in profusion around the Mediterranean basin. This pine was considered a Tree of Life by the ancients.

Perhaps our hollow Virgin of Finisterre replaced some similar spring rite as those of Elche and Cintra, and that to Christianise the ceremony she was put on an altar, and her body was hollowed out since she could not very easily be made into sections, like an artichoke or an orange.

It is not surprising that Finisterre — placed as it is on a westernmost tip of the peninsula — was a centre of worship in ancient

<sup>2</sup> Information given to the writer by Professor Eduardo Torner, in 1940.

times. The Land of the Dead, or of the West: the Land of the setting Sun, which played an important role in legends, was across the Atlantic, somewhere. Finisterre's cliffs and difficult coast line must have been at the root of propitiatory ceremonies for seafaring folk who wanted good catches of fish and a safe return from northern lands where they sought tin, skins and other trade exchanges.

Some sheltered coves, centres of fishing fleets, have kept up fishermen's sword and stick dances in Galicia. It would be intriguing to know whether Finisterre's obsolete sword dance had been similar to those of Carril, Marín and Redondela, which contain a few remnants of sacrificial intent, or whether it was of a sun-worship symbolism like that of Hio (Pontevedra). Here, it is a round dance with long staves. 'Pilgrims' have taken over the rite. It seems akin to the *Trawantel Dance* of Belgium, where a hoop in the centre of the eight dancers, is taken up on the sticks, and each dancer has to thread himself through it, still holding his two sticks which link him to the ring. Each dancer in turn has to thread himself through this hoop, never letting go of the sticks, and pass the hoop on to his neighbour. This threading through the hoop seems to be a purificatory rite.

*The Danza del Mollete* is not confined to Finisterre, it exists in several parts of Galicia. It is sometimes called *La Regueifa*, and is danced either by men only, but usually by women only, and sometimes it is performed at weddings in the Rias Bajas (along the southern coast of Galicia). The loaf is cut like the rays of the sun and is round, like the sun. Was it a combination of sun symbol and of plenty, at one time?

*The Danza de las Patelas* has its counterparts along the northern coast of Spain and in some Portuguese coastal villages. Many fishing centres all round the peninsula have their rituals several times a year. Sometimes Saint Peter is taken in procession (and dipped into the sea if fishing is bad) or the Queen of the Sea is carried in procession, or she is taken by boat to a particular sacred spot — usually where there is a large stone or rock — and in some places a special sword dance is performed, with sacrificial intent. Fishermen lead dangerous lives and need special protection. A careful study of their rituals, before these die out because of modern technical advance, would be rewarding work.

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It seems most appropriate to end this sketch of the customs in Finisterre during the Easter Sunday festival of *Nuestra Señora de las Arenas*, and the ritual dances performed on that occasion, by a heartfelt acknowledgment of thanks due to Carmiña Olveiro and her group of dancers and the singer, who gave up their time so graciously and generously for the pleasure and satisfaction of total strangers. We shall never forget them.

