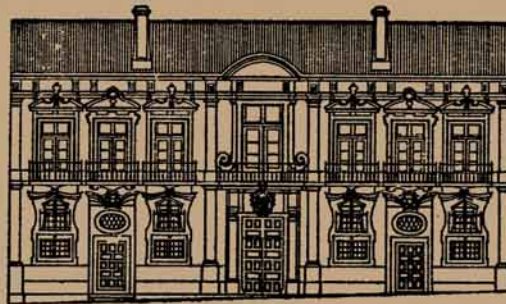


LUCILE ARMSTRONG

LA VAQUEIRADA

at La Braña de Aristébano, Luarca, Spain, on the
28th July 1968

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JUNTA DISTRITAL DO PORTO

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ON a broiling hot day, coach loads of tourists and innumerable cars wound their way up an extremely dusty road, along the 17 km into the mountains from Luarca — a pretty port and beach, on the Atlantic coast of Asturias.

We had to leave early as there was to be a wedding up in La Braña, and a Mass at midday, and it was important to get up there in time to have a good place from which to watch the celebrations and the procession way up in the summer pastures of Aristébano.

This was a herdsmen's festival. 'Vaqueiros' (cowherds) and 'Vaqueiras' (cowgirls) took part, not 'pastores' (shepherds) as at Lago de Enol, a few days previously, in Eastern Asturias. This was Western Asturias.

In the high 'Brañas' life is hard, and a radical change in the way of a festival is required to keep cheerful. The word 'Braña' is said to come from Latin. People who live in these high villages (hamlets is a better word), are very out of touch from urban centres, and frequent inter marriage has left its mark on the inhabitants. In some cases delinquency or even madness is the result.

Once a year the «Fiesta del Vaqueiro» takes place in Aristébano. People come from far and wide. There is nothing on the mountain top of Aristébano, where the festival takes place. It looks just like a high rounded knoll raised above the surrounding mountaintops. There are no trees here — only a tiny chapel built in 1963. The air is fresh, and one can see far away

other green round-topped mountains on the horizon, but this one seems the highest, which is a good reason for holding the festival on it. The hamlet of Aristébanu is a mile away, looking beautiful crowning the top of the next mountain, with a few trees round a chapel, and small white houses clustered together behind walls. The lane from the hamlet is bordered with stone walls just like an English lane. A large wooden platform was built on our hilltop for the marriage ceremony that is part of the festival, and later for dancing — and of course for speeches. According to tradition the wedding procession was late — nearly two hours after the time announced — so all late arrivals had plenty of time to push their way in front of the first arrivals who had taken up positions to get a good view of the ceremony on the platform.

At last rockets announced the departure of the wedding procession from the hamlet and immediately a sea of people blocked the view. The bridal procession of some thirty horses came slowly riding along the lane, to near where we stood close together in the broiling sun. Everyone in the procession wore Asturian dress. First came the herald's horse, with drum and decorated horse-cloth. Then the bagpiper, also on horse back, then the bride's horse carrying her chests containing her household linen and utensils, a huge mattress rolled up on it with hens and ducks tied on, followed by the bride and her parents, the groom and his relations, the godmother and best man, then a motley group of friends closed up the ranks. It was a long procession, but only the tops of people's heads were visible as they went by to the little chapel, to offer a prayer and ask for happiness and prosperity.

On the platform flags were flying and a radio blared forth. The sermon would be 'brevísimo' (extremely brief) announced the priest, and so would the ceremony. The sermon lasted an hour, while we were all quickly reduced to a lifeless mass in the burning sun, unable to escape.

After the sermon songs were sung. It is customary among many country folk at weddings — in Western European countries — to sing bawdy songs. This brings mirth and is fertility magic, it is believed — so much needed on these occasions. This custom was not forgotten at La Braña, and it was the elderly women who sang loudest, accompanying themselves to the tambourine. One verse is sung by a man and that is answered by a woman. Which sex starts off is immaterial so long as the other sex has a chance of answering. The custom is very ancient and much laughter and 'double entente' shows off adroitness and skill among the singers.

After this part of the ceremony everyone fled to the numerous booths dotted about the mountain for the day, and the next few hours were devoted to rest, eating and drinking of cider, wine and Pepsicola. Cider is the traditional drink in the North. It is poured from a bottle high above the left shoulder into a glass held low in the left hand. In this way the cider is said to become aerated and to taste better.

The official programme announced that dancing was to start at 4 pm, but it turned out otherwise, for the bagpiper played, and spontaneous dancing of «Jotas» started up among the dance groups which had come up for the day. But who cared for the official programme?

Speeches were most important; by the Civil Governor of Luarca, by the mayors of the three towns of Luarca, Tineo and Belmonte de Miranda, who had come up for the traditional festival with busloads of dancers. All these important people and the dancers, wore Asturian dress. Each speech lasted half an hour, so by the time the dancing started on the platform it was much cooler. First the few real cowherds danced their ring dances, very much in the style of Portuguese dances, with a Pas-de-Basque step, the ring moving anti-clockwise. (A Pas-de-Basque can be interpreted in several ways, but fundamentally it is stepped to $3/4$ or $3/8$ time, taking three steps to the bar, one foot crossing over in front of the supporting foot on the second beat). In some dances partners turned to their own partner, moving forward, then turning inwards to the partner behind, moving backwards, and then back to their own partner, each time. An excellent way of becoming acquainted with all the dancers. This is also found in some Portuguese dances. Other dances consisted of dancing in a ring, facing partner (girls moving backwards) and a man would go and 'robar' (steal) another partner. The man who was displaced had to go and 'robar' someone else's partner. (This type is also found in northern Portugal). All the time a Pas-de-Basque step was used. (A Tambourine accompanying singing, is the usual style of music among the Vaqueiros). The 'robar' dance caused much laughter and enjoyment both among the spectators and dancers. After this, groups of little girls danced extremely well, taught by teachers of the «Seccion Feminina». Luarca was the only town that sent adult dancers with a varied programme. All the amateur groups danced very well, keeping time and moving in consort. Some dances were of the longways type, crossing over to opposite place and turning, and back again, while others were of the individual couples type, like Aragonese 'jotas' but with less complicated steps.

The costumes of the mayors and dancers were splendid Asturian ones. The women wore rich jet and sequin embroideries on green, red or yellow skirts, and black silk aprons, white blouses and red capes with black velvet bands. These little capes were also wholly embroidered. They wore white kerchiefs on their heads, while the men wore colourful waistcoats (at the back) while the fronts were made of black velvet. They wore short black trousers below the knee with white cotton underpants showing, or frills of 'broderie anglaise' lace. Both men and women wore white knitted lace stockings and black shoes with silver buckles. The men's headgear were impressive 'monteras', black felt bonnet with an upturned brim to one side, sticking up in the air about six inches, topped with a black pompom. Some 'monteras' were decorated with criss-cross multi-coloured tapes on the upturned brim. The cowherds, on the other hand, wore everyday dress, and only the bride and groom wore Asturian costume — it has almost disappeared except in remote country places or for old people.

As the dancing began very late, the sun set fast, so it was wise to set off for home very soon — there is no lighting in the mountains.

So the festival ended and the thousands of sightseers who had come up for the cowherds' celebrations came down again, having seen only a few real cowherds and their horses. These little horses are of the ancient Astur ponies stock who roamed wild for centuries in Asturias. Even now some herds of them are kept in semi-wild state and rounded up to be branded and counted and sold. These little poneys appear to be of the same stock as those painted 15 to 20,000 years ago in those deep, sacred caves, in Asturias and Cantabria by neolithic man.

SINGING, MUSIC AND MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Music varies within the districts.

The 'Vaqueiros' traditional instruments are the 'rabel' (a kind of two-three or four-stringed violin), a tambourine, called 'pandeiro', and frying pans with keys. The 'rabel' has fallen into disuse, for shepherds, like cowherds, now each have their own transistor music-maker, so do not bother to make a rabel. The tambourine is usually circular with jingles, but square ones are also found with jingles inside, and skins on both faces. These are larger about 18 inches across (or sometimes more). The skins are kid skins and at times the hair is left on. Older women play these tambourines and

accompany their singing with an agile beating of special rhythms peculiar to Vaqueiros. Eduardo Martinez Torner, quoted these 'Vaqueiros de Alzada' over 40 years ago, as having rhythms of their own. He collected many of their tunes and rhythms. Most of them were published in his 'Cancionero Asturiano'. Vaqueiros' rhythms are much faster than those from further South in the Burgos region, and the technique of playing is also different. Here the thumb plays an important part, then the fingers beat a quick roll like a drum along the skin of the tambourine. Further South the middle finger is held straight at an angle from the skin of the tambourine, and 'rubbed' up the skin, so as to make a nimble 'roll', while here the fingers of the right hand beat quickly and vibrate along the tambourine face. Square tambourines are hung in the chimneys to 'keep longer' — away from damp and pests, like hams.

Vaqueiros also use the handles of their frying pans as a 'requereque', by rubbing door keys along the handles up and down in peculiar rhythms. There are special rhythms for these strange instruments, as there are for every instrument.

Asturian bagpipes are (and were) only for those able to pay, and summer pastures are not the place to find enough money for pipers' fees, so instead, frying pans and door keys were used. Some of the handles are 3/4 metre long, some are shorter, all are made of iron, and some handles have grooves cut along one edge to add to the different sounds.

CONCLUSIONES

We must be grateful to the Tourist Office of Spain for giving us the opportunity to see the remnants of these festivals. Without backing from government offices, they would surely die out. As it is, the Bride is difficult to find every year, as most brides now wish to celebrate their wedding privately, not in public, in spite of the official donation of 15,000 pts (about £90 in English money) and another present from the Mayor of Luarca as well. How few cowherds are left is borne out by the few that came from the hamlet. Their contingent had to be strengthened by those from other hamlets. And how few danced anyway! It is the amateur dance groups who have saved the dances from oblivion. Some of the music, however, is still sung by the older people, and there is still much patient work required here from collectors. For it is not sufficient to just go there and hope to

collect, not knowing the language properly and expect to get results. That is not the way one can save the treasury of lore still alive in these mountains. One has to know everything possible about the people and take an interest in their customs, know their language and some of their own tunes already, before their confidence is won. Country folk despise townspeople who come to copy them. It is the same problem everywhere for collectors, of whatever field a collector may wish to cover. Hard plodding and patience is required if serious work is aimed at «It is an arduous task, but offering rich harvests for the right, patient person. Who will do this and preserve these age-old treasures of man? Once they are lost they can never be retrieved.»

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