

## **The photography of Eulalia Abaitua as a study of the identity of Basque women**

### **La fotografía de Eulalia Abaitua como estudio de la identidad de la mujer vasca**

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#### **Abstract:**

The article is based on the photographic archive made between the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th by Eulalia Abaitua (1853-1943) one of the first women photographers in the Basque Country, in which she recorded a large part of the customs, traditions and way of life of this area. Considering her work as a documentary photographic record, the cultural and identity aspects of Basque women are reviewed since much of Eulalia's work is aimed at the female sector.

The analysis is based on the portraits made of working women, thereby constituting a paradigm shift in the vision established at the time, where women go from being an object of contemplation of the male gaze to the category of subject. Thus, the working class is treated as a worthy motif and its repertoire turns these anonymous people into representatives of their profession. That is why they are interpreted as extracts or samples of society and serve to analyze its influence on the life of this region.

#### **Resumen:**

El artículo se fundamenta en el archivo fotográfico realizado entre la segunda mitad del siglo XIX y la primera del XX por Eulalia Abaitua (1853-1943) una de las primeras mujeres fotógrafas del País Vasco, en el que registró una gran parte del costumbrismo, las tradiciones y la manera de vivir de este pueblo. Considerando su trabajo como un registro fotográfico documental, se revisan los aspectos culturales e identitarios de la mujer vasca ya que gran parte del trabajo de Eulalia se dirige hacia el sector femenino.

El análisis recae sustancialmente en los retratos realizados a mujeres trabajadoras constituyendo con ello un cambio de paradigma de la visión establecida en su época, donde la mujer pasa de ser un objeto de contemplación de la mirada masculina a la categoría de sujeto. Así la clase obrera es tratada como un motivo digno y su repertorio convierte a estas personas anónimas, en representativas de su oficio. Es por ello que se interpretan como extractos o muestras de la sociedad y sirven para analizar su influencia en la vida de esta región.

**Keywords:** Eulalia Abaitua, Documentary; Basque Country; Woman; Working Class.

**Palabras clave:** Eulalia Abaitua; documental; País Vasco; mujer; clase obrera.

## 1. Introduction

The work of Eulalia Abaitua Allende-Salazar is presented as a documentary photographic record. Her archive is linked to the people who lived in the Basque Country at the beginning of the 20th century and serves as a study sample to review the cultural and identity aspects of its people. It is not known precisely, but it is estimated that she began to take photographs in the last decade of the 1890s, thus becoming one of the first women photographers in the Basque Country, and her production lasted until around 1930. Her collection of more than 2,500 photographs, which is kept in the Euskal Museoa - Basque Museum of Bilbao, is made up of traditional images of the people around her, i.e. her closest relatives, workers in Bilbao and the surrounding villages, as well as other people who were passing through these areas. We also know of the existence of two different collections of images: on the one hand, photographic albums and notebooks kept by the Urquijo-Olano family and, on the other, an archive (belonging to the *Basualdo* archive) in the care of the Sancho el Sabio Foundation in Vitoria-Gasteiz (Jiménez, 2021).

For this article, we initially contacted the Euskal Museoa - Museo Vasco de Bilbao to gain access to the complete collection of photographs, but this was not possible because the building is currently being remodelled, and the collection is not available for consultation at the moment. This is why initially access has been gained to *Museotik*, the Basque Museums portal, where 253 digitised photographs reside. A further 205 photos can be viewed in the three catalogues of the exhibitions held at the Euskal Museoa - Basque Museum of Bilbao in 1990, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2005, and 2010. In chronological order, 68 photos appear in: *Eulalia Abaitua Allende Salazar. Gure aurreko Andrak, Mujeres del ayer* (1990) directed by Karmele Goñi Auzmendi, and 65 others in: *Eulalia Abaitua. Kresalibaia, behinolako irudiak - Kresalibaia La Ria, imágenes de otro tiempo* (1991). The exhibition *Eulalia Abaitua Allende Salazar. Senitartea - La Familia* (1994) had 62 images and was also directed by Goñi with documentation by Maite Garai. Three more publications were added, including the 1998 publication with a prologue by Patxi Cobo, university lecturer, researcher, and photographer from Bizkaia, with the title *Lehenagokoen Begiratuak. Miradas del pasado / Eulalia*

de Abaitua (1998), in 2005 under the name of *Begoña 1900. Errepublikak eta Santutegia / Republic and Sanctuary* (2005) with 90 images, and finally in 2010, the exhibition entitled *Eulalia Abaituaren emakumeak / The women of Eulalia Abaitua* curated by the historian Maite Jiménez Ochoa de Alda with 34 photographs.

Jiménez's curatorial work is accompanied by various publications on Eulalia, making her a clear reference in her research. The following publications from 2010 by this author have been consulted: *La fotógrafa Eulalia Abaitua (1853-1943)*, *Eulalia Abaituaren emakumeak / Las mujeres de Eulalia Abaitua*, and also *Eulalia de Abaitua y Allende-Salazar, pionera de la fotografía en el Bilbao del 1900*. To which is added another article from 2011 entitled *Eulalia Abaitua (1853-1943): photographic memory of our past*. Likewise, María de los Santos García Felguera together with Jiménez published an article in 2009 entitled: *Eulalia Abaitua y Amélie Galup: Dos fotógrafas aficionadas en el fin de siglo*. As a result of all these consultations and readings, around 500 photographs have been analysed.

As a contextual note, Eulalia was born fourteen years after the appearance in Paris of the daguerreotype in 1839 by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851). Subsequently, it was the French government who bought the process so that it could be used freely, and this led to informative writings such as the Spanish translation published by Eugenio de Ochoa in 1839: *El daguerrotipo. Explicación del descubrimiento que acaba de hacer; y a que ha dado nombre M. Daguerre* (Jiménez, 2010). A year later, William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) patented another technique based on the negative on paper (calotype or talbotype), thus opening the way to the photographic copy (Coleman, et al, 2001). Other names such as John Frederick William Herschel (1792-1871), Louis Desiré Blanquart-Evard (1802-1872) and Frederick Scott Archer (1813-1857) reinforce, improve and amplify photographic knowledge.

Portraiture is booming, and wealthy families request these services, creating a demand and a niche market. It is common for the partners of these men to work together in the family business and for the women to dedicate their time to the laboratory, since the chemical process is related to the typical tasks associated with the role of women, such as sewing or embroidery, where technique and

manual labor are at the forefront (Jiménez, 2010). When photography was born, it was a minor art, it did not have the category of an artistic discipline and surely for this reason, the existence of women in laboratories was enabled. As a matter of fact, in England and France women were admitted in societies considered as amateurs. An example of this is the Photographic Society of London, which since its foundation in 1853, admits women as integral members (Onfray, 2018). In the early nineteenth century, the incursion of women in public schools or professional institutions was null, being systematically rejected, which led in some cases to create their own associations such as the *Society of Female Artists*, in London, or the *Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs*, in Paris. Alternatively, in Paris, they were admitted to some of the so-called 'académies payantes', i.e. paid workshops run by well-known artists (usually by professors from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts) provided they paid a much higher tuition fee than men (Mayayo 2003). In Spain, it was not until 1873 that M.<sup>a</sup> Elena Maseras Rivera entered the Faculty of Medicine in Barcelona, the first woman to enrol at a university. As for artistic studies, that same year, Teresa Madasú was the first woman to enrol at the San Fernando School of Fine Arts in Madrid (Cabanillas, 2019).

In Eulalia's case, the accessibility of a laboratory and having her own camera enabled her to experiment with the medium. In addition to the thousands of photographs archived today, she took stereoscopic photographs, double exposures, and some collages. To situate and juxtapose other female photographers who preceded and were contemporaries of Abaitua, we can initially mention precursors such as Anna Atkins (1799-1871), Constance Talbot (1811-1880), Franziska Möllinger (1817-1880), Clementina Hawarden (1822-1865), Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879), Geneviève Disdéri (1817-1878) and Isabel Agnes Cowper (1826-1911). The French Amélie Galup (1856-1943) and Jenny de Vasson (1872-1920), and the Americans Emma D. Sewall (1836-1919), Gertrude Käsebier (1852-1934) and Elizabeth Alice Austen (1866-1952) are known as creators of the same period. According to De los Santos García and Jiménez (2009), of all of them, the woman who has the most parallels with Abaitua is Galup. Both enjoyed a well-to-do position and economic stability, as well as being married to men who worked in important areas of society; Abaitua to an engineer and Galup to a judge. They approached photography from an

amateur approach, setting up their photographic laboratory in their own homes and taking portraits of peasants, people ploughing the land, reaping or shepherding, as well as artisan trades. The two also constructed with their photographs a visual chronicle of the industrial change of the time when they photographed mines, blast furnaces, and paper mills. Both portrayed nearby subjects and recorded holidays when the citizens of Bilbao and Paris held pilgrimages or dances. They even died in the same year; 1943.

In Spain, the first women photographers are considered to have been foreigners: the French daguerreotypes Madame Valepery (?), Madame Senges (?), and Madame Fritz (1807-1876), who visited the country to make portraits in the mid-19th century. The Spanish pioneers in professional portrait photography were Alejandra de Alba (1838-1910) and Josefa Plá Marco (1830-1870), together with Dolores Gil de Pardo (1842-1876). María Cardarely (1845-1910) also stands out, recognised for becoming one of the first women to have her own photographic studio in Spain and the first in Galicia (Agustín & Esteban, 2018). Also worth mentioning are Alejandrina Alba (1838-1911), Fernanda Pascual (1838-1868), María Pastora Escudero (1842-1875), Teresa Amatller (1867-1960) and Sabina Muchart Collboni (1858-1929).

Most professional photographic studios were run by men, but it was common for women to work in them. Many of them followed by mimesis the same type of portrait photography, especially after 1860, when the semi-industrial development led to the rise of the 'carte de visite' (carte de visite), also called 'Tarjeta Álbum' or 'Retrato Álbum' in Spain (Hernández, 2010). In the eyes of those who had always been excluded from the labour market, relegated to the domestic sphere, and consequently dependent on the family for their financial support, working in a studio seems to be a positive thing. However, as Onfray (2018, p.34) mentions, 'the acceptance of the commercialisation of their image and their lack of control over it, facilitated the implementation of representative codes that were highly damaging to women's identity, thus compromising their influence in the construction of contemporary society'.

From within the photographic studio, understood as a controlled and controlling space, the photographs that are taken distinguish gender roles through poses and the type of elements that appear depending on the portrayed person. In the case

of portraits of boys and girls, this is more latent and accentuates the prevailing thoughts of society. Onfray (2018) states, for example, that in Spain, boys, representing masculinity linked to action and economic progress through work, are photographed with hunting rifles or in military costumes, while girls are placed in a conservative, passive position, close to religion; submissive and docile.

In adult women, the oppressive clothes (peepholes, corsets, ...) those that under an aesthetic and classist purpose limited freedom of movement and exercised certain violence against women's bodies, have traditionally been analysed from the unique prism that places the photographer or creator as 'the centre of the action and the woman as the object available for the fantasies of the former' (Onfray, 2018. p.27). Thus, evoking the already well-established tendency to represent the female body linked to the projection of male desires or interests (Mulvey, 1989).

Eulalia's gaze, in this sense, breaks with this tradition and that is why this analysis is based especially on the great burden of Abaitua's collection directed towards the female working class. Eulalia's photographs place plain, working-class women on a whole new level in her time, thus constituting a change in the paradigm of the established vision of her time, in which women went from being an object of contemplation for the male gaze to the category of subject. In addition, the working sector, personified anonymously, is understood as a motif worthy of being photographed, making these people representative of their trade.

This study proposes a reflection on Basque female society at the beginning of the 20th century through the analysis of photographs of working women to discuss their influence on life in this region. Thus, Eulalia's work is particularly useful to identify the role of women associated with shepherding and, above all, with the sea, where their presence is fundamental in the development of Basque society, both economically and socially.

It is also valuable to rescue and analyse the concept of the 'Basque matriarchy', a concept that has been maintained over time until the present day, closer to a perceptive sensation rather than reality. This sensation is initially perceived because each 'baserri', that is, the Basque farmhouse, is attributed a family name or surname, which, by tradition, is passed on from generation to generation as a key element to be maintained and cared for. Thanks to this custom, the



inheritance was passed on to the first son or daughter, regardless of gender, or the son or daughter who was best at taking care of the farmhouse was chosen, so that on many occasions the woman became the owner and a singular figure of power within the house (Carvalho & Andrade, 2020). Simultaneously, female power also has its ties to the culture and paganism of Basque mythology. The goddess 'Amalur' (mother earth) is a mystical being related to the feminine energy from which all forms of life are born (Ituarte, 2015). Moreover, the work of the farmhouse was shared equally; women and men ploughed the land, harvested the crops and shared the household chores. This is an indication that at least the *etxejaun* (lord of the house) and *etxeakoandre* (lady of the house) recognised each other as equals. These roots of Basque tradition and imaginary combine in a mistaken idea of the woman as the matriarch of the house. Far from reality, Basque women were not legally entitled to economic freedoms unless their husbands allowed them to do so. This is why, despite the existence of a preconceived image of women's power in Basque society, it was not strong enough to confirm the existence of a matriarchy.

## **2. Eulalia Abaitua: a brief biographical note**

The bibliographical data collected is due to the Uquiyo-Olano family and to the in-depth compilation of this material by Maite Jiménez Ochoa de Alda. This is how we know that Eulalia Abaitua Allende-Salazar was born in Bilbao on 25 January 1853 under the name of Elvira Juliana. Her mother died shortly after her birth and in her memory, the family began to call her by the name of Eulalia (EAEKM-MAEHV, 1990). She grew up in a family belonging to the Basque bourgeoisie, which was involved in trade related to maritime transport. This allowed her to have a comfortable life, a good patrimony to her name and sufficient resources to be able to invest her time in photography (Jiménez, 2011).

During these years Eulalia came and went to Bizkaia and became the mother of four children: María Carlota Victorina (Bilbao, 1872), Luis María Andrés (Gordexola, 1874), Luis María Javier (Greenwich, 1876) and María Concepción (Begoña, 1878) (Jiménez, 2010). In 1879, she returned definitively to the Biscayan capital and settled in the Anteiglesia de Begoña (today belonging to Bilbao), where she built her residence called 'El palacio del Pino'. She imported

both the building materials and furniture from England and set up her own photographic laboratory in the basement of the house. Proof of her economic power, as stated in the notarial deed, is that both the *Palacio del Pino* and an adjoining house destined to be the gymnasium were paid for with cash belonging to the private capital of Doña Eulalia de Abaitua (Jiménez, 2011). Therefore, 'the capital was the property of Eulalia and Juan Narciso was her administrator, the one who authorised contracts and represented her in trials and litigation'. (Huarte, 2017, p8). Thanks to her dedication to photography, she works closely with the photographic studio 'Casa Amado' which was initially located in the Casco Viejo and later moved to the Gran Vía Bilbaína. (EAEKM-MAEHV, 1990). In 1909 her husband died and in 1941 she moved to a flat on Bilbao's Gran Vía. She died at the age of 90 in September 1943 and was buried in the pantheon of the Olano-Abaitua family in the Begoña cemetery in Bilbao (Jiménez, 2021).

### **3. The legacy of Eulalia Abaitua's photographs**

It should be noted that Eulalia did not work as a professional photographer. She acted without having a photographic shop where she had commissions, a timetable and clients to satisfy. For all these reasons, her photographs are not subject to third party restrictions, she was free in how, when and whom she photographed. Her repertoire includes photographs related to the urban landscape; gardens, parks, 'baserri-s' (Basque farmhouses) and building façades. To a lesser extent, she photographs natural motifs, but when she does, they are usually coastal, such as beaches and steep areas bordering the sea. Except for a few experiments with double exposure and collage, the scenes in which human figures appear stand out above all, mostly women carrying out different tasks, in moments of celebration, rest and also portraits of family members or friends. As Alberto Schommer points out (EAEKM-MAEHV, 1990. pp. 3-4) 'she is not looking for art for art's sake, nor for the play of light or elaborate compositions, she is a true reporter, who would now be a great photographer for the Magnum Agency'. Thus, a large part of the subjects she portrayed were ordinary, hard-working, anonymous people, which makes them representative of her profession. They function as extracts or samples of the society of the time in which they show their appearance, clothing, tools and the tasks associated with their trade.



Likewise, the architecture implicit in the urban photographs can be recognised by comparing the present and the past, as well as distinguishing the materials and constructive forms in the foundations of the farmhouses or other elements such as bridges, stations, industrial ovens, shipyards and fountains of the period. Even the handwritten notes on the back of the photographs in Eulalia's handwriting help us to know the specific village, the precise event or event to which they refer, such as protests, pilgrimages or festivities, as well as the names and surnames of the people who appear in her photographs by way of identification. This is why the extensive collection of photographs produced has today become a valuable archive for the sociological study of the period.

It is curious how the photographs of a non-professional person become documentary heritage, but as Hernández (2002, p. 112) points out, if we take Law 26/1972, of 21 June 1972, for the Defence of the National Documentary and Bibliographic Treasure and later Law 16/1985, (specifically Article 49. 2), the Spanish State conceives as documentary heritage 'documents older than one hundred years, generated, preserved or collected by a natural person or a private legal entity, without any reference to the function of the person or legal entity'. Thus, the sum of all the photos of Eulalia Abaitua acquires the status of documentary heritage and therefore, according to Article 52.1, the owners of these assets have 'the obligation to conserve them, protect them, put them to a use that does not impede their conservation and keep them in appropriate places' (Hernández, 2002, p. 113). It is here where institutions such as the Euskal Museoa - Basque Museum of Bilbao carry out a fundamental task in their conservation and dissemination.



F1. *Lavanderas, Bilbao, 1905*. Fotografía de Eulalia Abaitua.  
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It is important to note that, as Jiménez (2010) points out, the compilation of photographs is made under Eulalia's condition of being a woman. When an artistic creation is produced, the life experience of the creator conditions and articulates her way of understanding her surroundings, and consequently, her interests, her creative process and her perspective will be different (Jiménez, 2010). This photographic work was born from the point of view of a woman of her time, and this must be borne in mind whenever one wishes to analyse one of her photographs. The historical circumstances, patriarchy, her social position, her chores and obligations are implicit in the photographic shot and make up a specific context. As Jiménez (2010, p.21) emphasises, 'the feminine ideal promoted beauty, self-sacrificing dedication to the world of the home and the family, the exercise of motherhood, subordination to the male (be it the spouse or the father), complacency'. This is why it is necessary to understand her socio-political context and the determining factors that directly or indirectly influence in a personal way when Eulalia defines a frame.

In the same way that the role of the woman is a determining factor in the photography, social class and purchasing power is another very important characteristic. Eulalia comes from a wealthy, business family and moves to a different country as a teenager. This provides a broader perspective and marks a wealthy lifestyle, with a positioning close to the elite and away from the working class. Her home in the *Palacio del Pino* is a tangible sign of the family's economic power, so that when Eulalia takes photographs of washerwomen or fisherwomen, she also does so from her status as a wealthy person and a position of power. Having access to photographic material at the time was not within the reach of many, let alone having a personal studio at home to develop photographs that were not for profit. For all these reasons, it is quite possible that she invaded people's space when she took the photographs in the workers' own place. It is not known whether her presence was well received, whether she was accepted in an affable manner by the sitters or whether they saw her as a character far removed from her class who maintained the distance between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, so that Eulalia's attitude to her approach to other people in terms of her behaviour, whether it was classist or not, is formulated as an unsolved enigma.

As for Abaitua's photographic interests, there is a marked tendency in his work towards portraits of people who, circumscribed in a specific territory and social context, favour the attainment of a panoramic view of the everyday life of the Biscayan people of the time. The weight of his photography lies in capturing and putting a face to the people around him. In this sense, his field work also stands out when it comes to recording the people in the workplace, thus carrying out an unconscious work of documentary photography. It should be noted that from the middle to the last decades of the 19th century, realism was an artistic and literary movement which, in the words of Wellek, aimed at 'the objective representation of contemporary society' based on the observation of everyday aspects (Pegenaute, 2004, p.397). This movement arose in contrast to Romanticism, which glorified the portrayed characters in an expressive way and was attributed to be an individualistic, subjective and idealistic art. As Camila Bejarano (2006, p.2) points out, these attributes define for realists an 'art far removed from real life and the adequate representation of the world of the moment'. For realism, the working class and everyday scenes are worthy artistic subjects and propose to reflect everyday life objectively and faithfully. If we analyse Eulalia's photographs, we can see a parallelism that coincides with the realist trend, as many of her photographs show the environment of the working class during their working hours, especially in trades related to the rural and maritime world. It is also connected with naturalism, a stylistic and literary trend associated with the idea of reproducing reality objectively in a documentary manner, which is temporally located in the last decades of the 19th century. The ideology that connects with naturalism is close to the 'determinist ideology that arose as a consequence of the advance of the biological sciences and the irruption of positivist sociology' (Rest, 1979. p3). Eulalia, with her photographic series, formulates a documentary action, photographing the subjects where they work or live, with their clothes and with the tools or utensils they have at their disposal. She shows the reality of the times and therein lies her value. In this way, from her bourgeois condition, she carries out an action related to empiricism, since she does it through experience to carry out her hobby. And not only that; in order to have evidence (another fundamental notion of empiricism), she does it through sensory perception, in this case visual, when she positively studies the shots (Hempel, 1965). Thus, her documentary work serves as a source of knowledge about the lives of his time.

There is a clear intention to portray mainly women, mostly working women. This puts the focus where an artist or photographer of that time would have hardly put it. The role of women in art history is linked above all to their representation and not as an active entity in the creative process, while the image of a sexualised and docile woman is also associated with the idea of a fragile and submissive being in the eyes of man. In the photos of Eulalia, on the other hand, we see women performing tasks that require skill and strength. Moreover, the poses, looks and gestures place women on another very different plane, from being a mere object of contemplation for the male gaze to the category of subject. The vigour and firmness of the *labradoras*, *sardineras* or dairy cows is reflected in the body language where they commonly appear statically erect and in a frontal way or in three-quarters, facing the camera and showing their tools of work; *layas*, hoes of wood and metal, jars, wicker baskets, "pegarras" and "chantaras".

By focusing on these people in addition to dignifying their work, their representation is reinforced by the angle that Eulalia chooses, consciously or unconsciously, because the horizon in their photos is usually at least aligned with or below the eye line of women. It may have been the height of the tripod that she used on many occasions or perhaps it was a fortuitous thing, but the fact is that these women are seen as a strong and robust figure who expresses experience in this type of trades.

What can be assured is that those who were aware of the camera took a different stance and changed their attitude. The mere approach with a camera and its presence among people influences the attitude of the individual, who, feeling observed, changes his state depending on what it provokes. The look towards the camera, the appearance of smiles and the poses facing the photographer are very common, which implies that Eulalia did not catch unprepared people who appear in small groups. Somehow, they were warned that the photo would be taken and became aware of it. It may also be that she chose the poses or indicated whether she preferred a smile, a more serious look or one pose or another. In some photos you can guess that it directs the subjects to take a certain position, for example when several people are totally frontal to the camera performing the same gesture, ordering them into line positions and guiding their looks to appear off-field or cross between them. Within the photographic aspects of the report

without manipulation in post-production, Eulalia's photographs approach a behavioural interventionism, associated with the pose and further away from the unconscious snapshot of the portrayed.



F2. *Layadoras, circa 1900*. Fotografía de Eulalia Abaitua.  
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The technique used for his photographs is based on 4.5 cm x 10.7 cm positive plates A. Lumière & Ses Fils and Guilleminot & Cie, in black and white, with gelatine bromide emulsion. In many cases, she made them in a stereoscopic way, that is, through a process that two images are separated by objectives arranged at slightly different angles. This allows a three-dimensional sensation to be perceived by combining both images during their visualization through a stereoscopic, a tool that allows the attachment of two independent images and a commonly mobile glass that serves to magnify and focus. Thanks to the mental processing system called "estereopsis", the two two-dimensional photographs are interpreted as an image close to three-dimensionality, forming a sense of greater depth in the image (Arredondo, Castro & Rivas, 2017). The exclusivity and high cost of these plates leaves latent the economic capacity of Eulalia, especially because its purchase was not supported in a business investment with a return or purpose for obtaining an economic return. The use of this material was for personal use, without paying tribute to anyone and without obligations.

The lighting in photographs is natural, both indoors and outdoors. There is very little light modulation for portraits. Reflections on reflective elements such as



walls or light fabrics do not stand out. It is intuitively understood that in the diffuse light shots, the climatology itself disperses the rays of light and generates softer shadows. Sometimes actively seeks a contrast with the background by using a fabric that varies depending on the need between dark and light, which can be seen completely together with the location in which the photo frame is made.

The lenses used in portraits make up a frame between 400 and 650, which means that it would be equivalent to a focal length of 25-70 mm. As for the types of shots that Eulalia makes for her portraits, they usually fall between the full shot and the short half shot. For urban and natural shots, instead, it often uses the general plane. Your photographs are sharp, unshakable, static and position the point of interest normally centred. Thus, the focus of attraction of the gaze coincides with the union of the diagonals, establishing their interest concentrically. In her portraits, the depth of field varies depending on the plane; if it is a full plane the depth of field is large; you can see for example in those images of peasant women with their *layas* (image 3), giving presence to the location and thus formalizing a specific space. If the plane is medium or short, the depth of field is reduced and the background is brought closer to the pictured by walls, fabrics, doors, resulting in a flatter image. In these cases, the space can be recognizable without being abstract, but it limits the information of the location.



F3. *Layadoras*, circa 1900. Fotografía de Eulalia Abaitua.  
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Eulalia offers us a different look, since a large part of her photographic interest focuses on portraying working-class women. This perspective and choice of subjects portrays a part of society without which the story of history, folklore and traditions of Basque culture would be incomplete.

The identity of the Basque people is built on their natural location and their resources; rural, maritime and steel making, while culturally possessing a mythology and language. Part of this industrial and naval growth led the Basque society to turn to fishing and charter ships across the Atlantic to Iceland and Newfoundland (Canada), forming an industry of great importance and significance within the Spanish economy and society of the time. Brought riches in the form of whale and cod oil and with the management of shipyards, the development of Basque metallurgy and later with the industrialization of the Altos Hornos. All this influence of the economy has a weight and impact on the way of life that certainly Eulalia collects forming a personal archive. The *costumbrismo*, nature and way of life of the citizens living around them were the substrate and germ to make his photographs. Thanks to this, we can now contemplate, know and confirm its characteristics. A work that is born from intimacy with its closest environment and starts towards a curiosity for the stories of the people who make it up, thus making a documentary and historical photography work that serves as support for the study of anthropologists and sociologists.

#### **4. Basque matriarchy**

The concept of "Basque matriarchy" is closer to a perceptive sensation or an idea generalized by society than to a substantial and objective fact. A reflection similar to a collective memory in which there are residues in the form of ideas related to the hierarchical power of women in the family and economic nucleus, but far from being seen as inherent in Basque society, neither in its legal functioning nor in its instruction.

It can also be seen that in circumstances where the wife was left without the support of the husband for a time as is the case with sailors or those who were widowed, were subjected to, for example, the barbarity that soldiers did to them

in the guest houses without having support from the justice system, as Aspiazu mentions in the case of 1608 in Hondarribia. There is also discrimination in mining-related jobs, evidenced by the wage distinction to the detriment of women.

The established idea of the Basque matriarchy is linked to respect for the maternal figure, thus forming a symbolism with the roots of the Basque mythology of ancestral origin. It should be borne in mind that the Basque population has remained in the north of the Iberian peninsula and the south-west of France since before the arrival of the Romans in the third century B.C. This geographical enclave is currently divided into three administrative realities: the Basque Country in the Spanish zone, the Basque Country in the French zone and Navarre. Historically Basque people have maintained both its own language, Basque (which does not come from Latin), as some pre-invasion mythological traditions and beliefs that focus the communal grouping on the idea of "female energy" under some mystical precepts in the same spirit or emblem; the goddess "Mari" also called "Amalur" (Ortiz-Osés, & Mayr, 1988).

Thus, as Leire Ituarte comments, the Basque mythology is built "on the claim of a primeval matriarchalist-naturalistic (quasi-pantheistic) worldview founded on the cult of the ancestral archetype of the Basque goddess Amalur" (Ituarte, 2015, p.3). In fact, the terminological composition of the name "Amalur" comes from "ama", mother, and "lur", earth. Thus, this goddess is conceived as the nucleus and germ of all life forms, "whose fertilizing energy propagates to the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdom manifesting itself in the various zoomorphic, vegetal and geological epiphanies that personify it" (Ituarte, 2015, p.5). Unlike Christianity, which connects with a heavenly god, Mari associates with the earthly and inhabits an underground world accessed through caves, grottoes and caverns, these being natural enclaves associated with female sexuality.

According to Ramón Nieto, Christianity and paganism coexisted in the Christianization for many centuries, which led to maintain this cosmology (Nieto, 1996). However, as Boguszewicz and Gajewska write, supported by Teresa del Valle Murga, the symbolic heritage of women's power, linked to the extraordinary energy of "Mari", is moving away from the real power of women in Basque society, Remaining as an idealization that is permuted through mythology and popular

beliefs (Boguszewicz & Gajewska, 2020), so that the Basque matriarchy remains as a latent idea in common perception, but far from being a supreme authority. This perception of women as a relevant figure in society could be closer to two realities that have their "the equality between spouses within marriage, and the hereditary transmission without discrimination of sex, in contrast to other Spanish regions" (Carvalho & Andrade, 2020, p.106).

The "baserri" or hamlet, together with its farmland and livestock, found the home of the Basque family and is commonly associated with a surname. In the words of Karmele Goñi (EAEKM-MAEHV, 1994, p.2) "family and village are an inseparable binomial in Basque society" and adds that "the village, the house and its members constitute the material heritage of the family, a unit that links the present with the past and the future and even gives it a name". This place is kept connected to the family by the thought of safeguarding and preserving the "baserri" above all, leaving it in inheritance only to one of their sons or daughters. According to Carvalho and Andrade, the parents make heirs of the daughter or son born first, regardless of gender, so that she continues to live in that household and thus establishes a succession that is sustained over time. (Carvalho & Andrade, 2020). This conception of the inheritance of the household, regardless of whether it falls on a woman or a man, made that in many cases the female figure was associated with the matriarch of the house. This connects with the idea of past times that links female mysticism between "Amalur" and the earth, composing an analogy with woman and house, determined by a term that defines the "lady of the house" in Euskera as "etxeakoandre", coming from "etxeako", home, and "andre," woman. There is another theory that, according to Boguszewicz and Gajewska based on a text by Aranzadi, the heir or heiress was designated depending on the abilities of either son or daughter to lead the farm, where women were not excluded from the election process. (Boguszewicz & Gajewska, 2020). This in no way explains that women had any privilege but refers to an egalitarian tendency which does not understand gender as regards their role within the Basque families.

What is clear is that the traditional Basque village and family are part of the same nucleus. Ander Manterola (EAEKM-MAEHV, 1994. p.4) states that the use of the term "etxeakoak" (those at home) in Basque is proof of this, which refers to a

domestic group composed of different generations living and working under the same roof and sharing the same fire. As an example, you can see in the following image (no4), a scene of a series of people who could represent the concept of "etxeakoak" at the gates of a "baserri". Image-centred, a woman sitting in the chair, apparently the oldest of the group, leads the composition between the two columns that mark a clear grid in composition with the upper floor. She is the only person sitting, which gives her a privileged position compared to the rest and besides, she is situated in front of the most Vekaran man in the image. Except the children of the upper floor, all other people close to her hold a weight in their arms, which as symbolic elements, function as representation of work (storage and food transport utensils) and care of the home, as the woman holding a small child. She could be understood as the "etxeoandre", and her position within the frame, where all other elements are set around her, exercises in her figure a position of power. For the man of the house there is also a term in Basque called "etxejaun", although when dividing it morphologically acquires a different meaning in Spanish because "etxe" comes from home and "jaun" from owner. Here the word "jaun" linguistically positions man over woman.



F4. *Grupo ante la puerta del caserío, circa 1900*. Fotografía de Eulalia Abaitua.  
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As we see in the photos of Eulalia, women worked the field regularly, and both this job and household tasks were shared by the members of the "baserri", which implies, according to Nieto, that the master and the lady of the house are on the same plane (Nieto, 1996). This is how the treatment of husband and relatives

towards Basque women has been maintained, being understood as a relationship between peers. Even in the 16th century, when the signing of legal actions or the sale and purchase of money, a "By adding to the contracts, allowing married women or minors to issue these documents, women were placed in a position of legal responsibility very similar to that of men" (Huxley, 1982, p.).

Today, the Basque matriarchy is still a concept that is maintained in an ideal as an important symbolic reference, but far from being a reality, the female power in Basque society constantly seeks its reaffirmation (Boguszewicz & Gajewska, 2020).

### **5. The Basque woman, in the context of Eulalia Abaitua.**

During the 19th century, the war of independence (1808-1814) and the Carlist wars (1833-1839 and 1872-1876) had an impact on agriculture, where its consequences were seen both in the deterioration of the land and in the mobilizations by the people. Conscription for war led to a de-capitalisation of the countryside and a diversion of labour, evidenced by reduced harvests. In industrial terms, however, the region underwent a fundamental transformation with the export of Basque iron, especially from the mid-19th century onwards, when blast furnaces were set up. Thus, the steel industry and shipbuilding of shipyards represent a vital impulse for the Basque Country, which is one of the most important industrial territories in the Iberian Peninsula (Molina, & Pérez 2015). Thanks to this, a wave of immigration is emerging in northern Spain, which is why Sabino Arana (1865-1903), leader and symbol of the PNV (Basque Nationalist Party) founded initially in hiding in 1895, establishes a germ of hatred. His deep anti-Spanish-ism, evidenced by the rejection of "maketos", a disqualifying term used to refer to the Spanish immigrants who arrived in the Basque country at the end of the 19th century, evolves with his concept of the Basque nation, Based on race, Forism and the Catholic religion (Granja, 2006). Arana takes the Basque language, shared between the administrative territories of the Spanish and French Basque Country along with Navarre, and distinguishes an identity race of the Basque people based on genetics and surnames. Mostazo (2019, p.175) emphasizes that this singularity is real in the case of the language, but "imaginary, in the case of racial characters, which as they were impossible to

confirm somatically, were defined by some exclusive surnames of the Basque language", hence the eight Basque surnames and adds that "this singularity allowed them to be defined as something unique, very ancient, and therefore the most authentic, the most primeval, and which as such would guarantee the radical right to difference and independence".

As for the vision towards women, referents of the moment like Arana or Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), writer of the generation of 98 born in Bilbao, they maintain the misogynistic thought belonging to the catholic tradition, latent in their writings as "A la señora Mab" where it formalizes phrases such as:

"The woman's organism is designed to conceive, to give birth and to breastfeed the child, and the inconveniences inherent in pregnancy and lactation mean that women can no longer follow men from the wild villages into war and hunting, where intelligence is particularly keen. The woman stays at home and her intelligence becomes homely, domestic, diligent and thorough". (Arza, 2020. p9)

Arana, for his part, is guided by these thoughts, as shown for example in 1893's writings where he states that "women are no more than a piece of men, a companion, the man being the personal type of the human species" (Arza, 2020. p9). Despite this view by some, the work of women in the Basque territory was an important factor, since it played an active part in the development of its wealth, both economic and social. Especially in the coastal zone, women took over the care of children and the house but also the economy when they were widows or the "arrantzale" (fishermen in Basque) fished for months. It was customary for husbands to delegate money to their wives so that they could provide it independently, and it must be considered that in the sixteenth century men who went to sea accounted for about a third of the population, leaving the more manual jobs in the hands of women. In addition to the commercial relationships established at the dock, such as fish auctions, women are linked with larger businesses such as boat manufacturing, ownership of ships and galleons, as well as financing for the charter of boats to Newfoundland (Huxley, 1982). In the words of Humboldt, that women bear the weight of the household economy is an identity trait of the coastal Basque woman when he mentions that:

"The wife of the sailor can, according to that, the maintenance of the economy of her house, which it bears on its forces alone, and the concern for her husband,



pending continuous dangers, easily give a more severe and manly countenance, which gradually becomes the national physiognomy of a working coastal people" (Humboldt, 1922, pp. 24-25).

The female figure as an agent of power is thus more latent in the villages of the northern coastal nineteenth century. You can see him in trades as a carrier of the fishing cargo, where he will later handle fish and sell it not only on street level but also as "bentera", job assigned to the people who auctioned the boxes of fish and also as "pishonera" (women who were engaged in fish accounting). As for salting and canning, the "bishigueras" are known; name from the Basque "bisigu", that is, bream and "marinade", women who were dedicated to pickling; the preparation of a sauce or adobo between oil, salt, vinegar, laurel and other species, that according to José Antonio Azpiazu (2016, p.816) allowed since 1580 "to hold as consumables for a certain time, perfectly adapting to its fishing and preparation in winter".

The "sardineras" were a very popular figure as representation of the working class of the left bank of the estuary and from which they proudly made popular songs that still today resonate in the collective memory, especially of the Biscainese, such as the well-known "From Santurtzi to Bilbao", which refers to the journeys made by these women parallel to the Nervión estuary. The song has no specific origin, and the author of its verses is unknown, but the depth that it has had from generation to generation is formulated as a heritage of a fishing past, fundamental in the territorial economy that flows into the ports.



F5. *Sardineras*, circa, 1900. Fotografía de Eulalia Abaitua.  
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Eulalia took many pictures of *sardineras* working and posing for her. In one of them (image 5) two *sardineras* appear with the Vizcaya Bridge or also known as Hanging Bridge at the bottom (first industrial monument in Spain recognized by UNESCO in 2006) while they load on their head the fish willing to sell. Dated after 1903, the photograph serves as documentary evidence of the journey that these barefoot workers made on a soil between sandy and muddy, but definitely, uneven. You can also see the side facade of the train station of Portugalete and in the background the sculpture by Victor Chavarri on a pedestal.

The position of the arms in jar of both women and the arrangement in parallel with the same pose looking at camera with a slight smile, betray complicity with Eulalia, who apparently supports the camera on the wall that delimits the promenade with the estuary and which also serves as a seat for a railway operator. As in many of his photos, he could have made it centred; positioning the *sardineras* in the centre of the image and orienting his body towards the camera but for some reason, although the protagonist element of the photo are the two women, decided to add more information. The vertical post separates and counterposes two planes: that of the *sardineras*, standing, working, looking at camera, which occupy more than half of the composition juxtaposed to the railway worker, presumably working by wearing his uniform, but resting, sitting, whose eyes are lost out of the field. This means that there is a narrative, something very different from the portraits he usually composes. Two different planes are created: the left one, which occupies about three quarters of the image, and the right one, which occupies the remaining quarter. The first is that rests the weight of the image composed only by women, you can even deduce from their clothes that at the bottom of the image there is one more. A repetitive rhythm is felt both in the poses of the foreground and in the outline of the building where lines and other geometric elements are repeated following the path that leads to the point of escape. The right side provides the concrete context of the location in an evident way by showing one of the sides of the structure of the Pendulum Bridge of Portugalete on a clear and flat background, thus highlighting with greater notoriety in the image. The figure of the man, with his railway uniform, helps to understand what the purpose of the adjacent building is providing more information about the location of the street. This area of the image contributes a

notorious portion of space void built with the sky, leaving an open front through which the image breathes.

Although both blocks suggest a statistic in the main figures, the attitude of women takes a remarkable strength, because despite being still, their body language shows rigidity and hardness, standing with active muscles to support the head load in a tensioned manner. Instead, the man is sitting and shows a relaxed and flabby position, in a state of rest and inactivity. The looks also reinforce this tension, the *sardineras* keep contact directly with the objective while the male loses his look to the left of the image outside the plane. Thus, initially the visual journey is directed towards the two women who play a leading role in the image and then towards the rest of the location context.

Another trade exclusively linked to the sea were the "callers", women hired by each boat in order to wake up the sailors in time to go to sea. On handling boats and other naval means of transport, the women participated as "barreleras" and "gabarreras", typical of municipalities with rías where it was usual to carry people, animals and different loads of iron and stone from one side to the other (Azpiazu, 2016). This craft today can be seen for example in Pasaia (Gipuzkoa), where a small boat crosses the narrow port mouth between Pasai Donibane to Pasai San Pedro and vice versa.

On the other hand, it was common for women to run the accommodation established in the ports. This accommodation service was very dangerous, as many of the clients were military personnel who abused their power in the months that the male population was normally fishing at sea.

To the point that in the words of Aspiazu (2016, p.819). on a case of 1608 in Hondarribia (Gipuzkoa) where 400 soldiers had to be housed, he comments that "The request of the council calls attention to the requirement that the inconveniences and sins committed by soldiers with poor and orphan women and widows in whose houses they are staying be excused". This helps to understand the lack of protection for women by institutions and the ease with which soldiers could do and undo without having a criminal consequence.

Away from the coast, but with a transcendental value in the industry of the Basque Country, are the trades associated with the steel industry. The work in the mine

was quite hard, with very adverse conditions and, especially for women, very poorly paid, so that volunteering in this area was only done in cases of severe need. Therefore, the extraction of the mineral was a masculinized work, but, as Práxedes Zancada points out, as referred to in the work of Pérez-Fuentes (2004, p.66). the woman from Biscay "unloads iron and coal ore at the quays on both sides of the Bilbao estuary" and adds that she also made "packing irons and works as a worker in the factories for nails, tin foil and paper". Humboldt (1922, pp. 22-23). also echoed this profession when he notes that "in Bilbao they carry the heaviest weights on their heads when unloading ships from the river to the warehouses, particularly iron bars, which are frequently traded there; even in the forge they use the hammer and anvil". They worked in the mineral washes, in the transport with baskets or as "carts", but really their role was key in facilitating the housing and nutrition of men who emigrated to work in the mine. Over 1900, that is, in full bloom of mining operations, Pilar Pérez Fuentes (2023, p.31). notes that "two-thirds of the mine workforce was kept in this domestic organization regime by paying for bed, cleaning, washing and food preparation".

Basque society was also known for its art of sewing, where women made and assembled garments, mostly of linen. The production of a material of excellent qualities for its robustness and resistance to the passage of time was distributed throughout the country, and it was exported to other continents. Selma Huxley, relying on the words of F. Borja Aguinagalde, assures that "they sow and take from it in great quantity, and they spin it, and weave with particular primor and thus being provided the earth of delicate linen, and white clothes, provides for mantles, *beatillas* and other kinds of webs" and notes that these high quality garments were sent both through Spain and to the former West Indies (Huxley, 1982, p.164). Aspiazu also echoes the quality of the fabrics of the so-called "lenceras", that is, those women who create items related to quality lingerie, when he mentions Larramendi saying; "there are no better or more esteemed canvases than those of Guipúzcoa for their strength and duration, and for their healing for the bodies" and adds that, in addition to weaving and creating these garments, women managed the orders, transport and storage (Aspiazu, 2016, p.826).



F6. *Dos mujeres en el portal de casa, una de pie hilando lino con rueca de mano y huso, ca. 1900.*

F7. *Dos mujeres, una sentada hilando lino con rueca de mano y huso, circa. 1905.*

F8. *Mujer hilando a mano con el huso y la rueca, circa 1900.*

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Eulalia shows another series of photographs of women spinning linen helped by a hand and spindle spinning wheel around 1900 (images 6,7,8). They appear in a familiar environment, usually in the vicinity of a village. You can see in many of them the material used as the spinning wheel provided with the "gorutxapel" (rocker in Basque) that holds the flax flake and how they have winding the thread that they are spinning. These images show the creation of a home production where the combination of people working on the realization of these textiles does not exceed numbers of four people working simultaneously, so it follows that it was a slow and manual production. There is no trace of a machine that helps and speeds up the work of these women; the dedication and work is done by hands from the harvest of the flax to the manufacture of the textile. In addition, both distribution and sale remain in the same hands, so that Basque flax is fully associated with women's work.

It is important to stress that during certain jobs such as those related to the sale, preparation of fish, arrangement of fishing gear or clothing and textile manufacture, women's gathering and socialization arises spontaneously, where a relaxed atmosphere is created (Merino, 2000). In this sense, Eulalia manages to make a series of shots where this socialization is latent. An example of this is a 1908 image in Lekeitio (picture 9) which shows how the cleaning of the squid brings together a large group of women of different ages within an inner courtyard with porticos, where they are gathered in small groups of three or four sitting around a bucket. You can also see in the background how other girls carry the load in large baskets that they carry on their heads. The image has little empty space and suggests a place of vividness.





F9. *Limpiando calamares*, Lekeitio, 1908. Fotografía de Eulalia Abaitua.

F10. *Grupo de mujeres jugando a cartas*, Elorrio, 1905. Fotografía de Eulalia Abaitua.

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This socialization was not confined to the working environment. The women's meeting to play cards together was also photographed by Eulalia. Popular games such as *mus* and *brisca* were used as entertainment in leisure time. Whether on the street or in a more intimate setting, women registered by Eulalia gather around a wooden table to play games. In the attached photo (image 10) you can see up to twelve women and the partial silhouette a nose that could be of a thirteenth. Except the two elderly women leaning on the wall, they focus their attention on the circle formed by the game and on the table, where some cards are placed. Even other women who appear on the balcony towards the vanishing point of the image also observe the departure, crossing their gaze with the diagonal lines of the wall and floor. In this way, the street Erreka of Elorrio (Bizkaia) composed of cobblestones and a smoother sidewalk, serves as a stage to gather a group of women who live in the public space, giving it a community use. A playful end that fills the neighbourhood with life and generates curiosity to other people who witness it.

Something as seemingly simple as playing in public space, it establishes bonds and forms a neighbourhood community. In this case, a group of women gathered create a relaxed atmosphere, giving the street a sense beyond that of transit, forming a small ephemeral settlement in collectively. The use of this way of the street, unites people with the territory in which they live because "make life" in that place and are those same people who unify culture and their folklore with a concrete land.



## 6. Conclusions

Eulalia's life is set between the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, where photography in a playful way is available to very few. The economic power of her family gave her a privileged position that offered her the possibility to produce photographs with some autonomy and establishing his own conditions and rules, without having to comply with the guidelines and mandates of potential clients. As a mark of her production, she sometimes wrote in her photos the letter A of Abaitua, so that she signed and ratified her authorship, which implies a positioning as an author either out of pride or pure awareness of her authorial quality. Again, she shows here that she is within the subject condition, just like the women she photographs.

Eulalia's choice in part of her work by portraying fish, sardines, dairy, carriers etc. Women workers are given a central role. Because of Eulalia's condition as a woman, her gaze, curiosity and direction of the motives to be portrayed were different. This photographer portrayed the working class as a worthy subject to photograph, thus establishing a parallel with the artistic and literary movement of the late nineteenth century where the everyday scenes are worthy artistic themes and objectivity by portraying the costumbrismo, traditions and way of living of the people is one of its most outstanding characteristics. Práxedes Zancada emphasizes the work of women in Vizcaya as an important factor "that contributes most powerfully to the general welfare observed in this province and to the development of its wealth" (Pérez-Fuentes Hernández, 2004, p.66). When Eulalia values the female working sector, she constitutes an act of empowerment and vindication of the role of the working woman as something worthy of being portrayed and documented from the intimacy of the "baserri" to the achievement of economic investments and chartering.

These images also serve to corroborate those tools used in the cultivation of the Basque soil such as *laya*, a tool associated with agricultural labours in the Basque Country since the 16th century, as well as some animals used in the plough such as oxen. These elements can be seen in the material still used today in the "herri kirolak" (village sports), such as the "aizkolari"-s (competition with axe), "segalari"-s (competition with scythe), the "txingas" (competition with milk), the "idi dema" (stone-hauling by oxen) or the trawlers' regatta, among many others,

which represent an important part of the current Basque culture and tradition. Heritages from the past such as folk songs, board games and boats like the barge are also present in Eulalia's photographs.

The construction forms and materials of houses, squares, boats, shipyards, dry docks or machinery and cranes can also be analysed. The atmosphere of the time, the pilgrimages and the clothing used also provide information in the form of a visual testimony capable of serving as evidence and justification for other research motives. As Maite Jiménez points out (2011, p.749) "Eulalia, consciously or unconsciously, was a visual anthropologist since in her photographs she recorded behavioural events in their normal context, social and physical that are revealed to us today as guidelines of the culture of that community". Therefore, the archive of Eulalia Abaitua forms a supply of great documentary and historical value in a graphic way.

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