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**The Consumer Culture and the Culture as a
Consumption Good:**
An overview towards the commercialization of the
Basque Culture in the last years

Student: Mikel Artazcoz Garcia
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Index

1. Introduction	1
2. The Commodification of the Basque Culture	3
2.1. From the Anthropology of Tourism: Theoretical and Methodological Framework	3
2.2. A brief historical introduction to the origins of the Basque Tourism.....	4
2.3. A short historical context of the emergence	5
3. Two cases of study.....	7
3.1. The Guggenheim Bilbao Museum or The Miracle of Cinderella in Euskodisney ...	7
3.2. Euskadi Basque Country Brand (2014).....	10
3.3. The Basque Touristic Products: The Grand Tour and The Confidential	12
4. Two Considerations about the Basque Culture Commodification.....	14
4.1. The Basque Fetish	14
4.2. Euskadi Basque Country Dream	15
5. Final Remarks.....	17
6. Bibliography.....	19

1. Introduction

The following research will examine the current emergence of the mass tourist industry in the Basque Country, identifying two main events that show when and how this process of Basque cultural commodification occurred. This investigation will depart principally from the theoretical works on anthropology of tourism to analyze this social, cultural and economic phenomenon highlighting some of the consequences of this process of commodification. The two examples presented that illustrate this transformation, are the inauguration of the Museum Guggenheim Bilbao (1997) and the subsequent inauguration of the Euskadi Basque Country Brand (2014). Both events are consecutive on the historical time and are constitutive of the same process. They show the actuality of the Basque political and economic exercises as well as the current Basque society's transformational process.

Before starting, it is necessary to clarify some statements that will help delimit this research's framework. First, it is necessary to objectivize and generalize concepts such as Basque Culture, Basque society, or Basque political articulation.¹ This previous exercise helps to identify the research objects, always aware that this generalization and objectification of the cultural patterns do not symbolize all the different perceptions and meanings of these terms. However, this previous exercise is fundamental to correctly access the researched inquiry.

Conversely, speaking about one unified Basque Country's political exercise and a concrete Basque Culture, ethnicity, or identity is hazardous. *Euskal Herria* (Basque Country) is an officially non-recognized state constituted by seven provinces: four of them are included in the Spanish state, and three are inside the French judicature. In Spain, *Guipuzkoa* (Guipúzcoa), *Bizkaia* (Vizcaya), and *Araba* (Álava) conform to the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC or *Euskadi*). At the same time, *Nafarroa* (Navarra) was established as an independent community within the Spanish territorial autonomy organization. This geographical area that lies south of the Pyrenees is known as *Hego Euskal Herria*. In the north and inside the French jurisdiction,

¹ "Societies and cultures do not exist as entities in the world of nature, though social science continually objectifies sociocultural process by embodying it as the thing that we call society or culture." (Handler et al. 1984: 57)

the provinces of *Lapurdi* (Labort), *Nafarroa Beherea* (Baja Navarra), and *Zuberoa* (Soule) conform *Ipar Euskal Herria* or *Iparralde*.² Finally, to have a correct approach to this research it is necessary to divide what *Euskadi* (the Basque Autonomous Community) and *Euskal Herria* (Basque Country) mean, to have a correct understanding about this both differentiated sociopolitical articulations.

The commodification of the Basque Culture in recent years is more recognizable in the Basque Autonomous Community because of its economic disposition and political context.³ Moreover, the Basque cultural elements are more easily identified in this territory. However, focusing principally on this region does not mean that the commodification of the Basque Culture has not occurred in the rest of the territories. *Nafarroa*, as well as the territories in *Iparralde*, are both regions strongly oriented toward cultural commodification.

The analysis of the commodification process and the emergence of the Basque tourist industry in the last decades will be approached using the theoretical works on anthropology of tourism. These works, offered by authors such as Jon L. and Jean Comaroff, Dennison Nash, Davydd J. Greenwood or Joseba Zulaika, provide insights into the tourism phenomenon and its particularities. Moreover, and in conversation with this anthropological works, the official documents offered by the Basque government in the last years indicate the direction taken by official institutions in BAC demonstrating that the cultural commodification is a well-established reality.⁴ The combination of both resources—the theoretical works on the anthropology of tourism and the official documents of the Basque government—compound the *corpus* in which this analysis will be sustained. Finally, one last part of the research will highlight some consequences of this process of cultural commodification in recent years.

² In Basque, *Hego* means south and *Ipar* means north. *Euskal Herria* represents the Basque society's aim to conform to an independent and legitimate political subject.

³ In 1979, the statute of autonomy (*Estatuto de Gernika*) was firmied between the Basque government and the Spanish state. In the Spanish juridical and political organization, the statute, "is a chart that reflects the competences that correspond to the respective autonomous regime in different political, legal and administrative areas." (Egaña 1996: 267)

⁴ Some of the documents used for this research are, the [Euskadi Basque Country Strategy 2020](#) (2017) and the Basque plan for Culture (2005). Both are official documents published by the Basque government.

2. The Commodification of the Basque Culture

2.1. From the Anthropology of Tourism: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The emergence of the Basque Country as a tourist destination must be approached principally from the emergence of the mass tourist industry in recent decades.⁵ For this reason, this analysis of the Basque tourist enterprise starts identifying the historical context and the previous conditions that conform to the contextual background of this historical economic phenomenon. (Manera et al. 2020: 158). In other words, a broader examination of the origin and development of mass tourism in Basque Country will require a multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach that will help to identify the different aspects of this phenomenon that currently is considered one of the most apparent forms of globalization. (Held et al. 2003: 360)

In recent decades, the tourist industry—based on the leisure economy—has been considered one of the main economic activities worldwide. For some countries—those at a stage of economic growth—the tourist industry is the engine for economic development, while for some other industrialized countries—the Basque Country, for example—the reinforcement of the touristic activity in their geographical territory offers the opportunity to regenerate the economy activity adapting it to the new global economic and political scenario.

What is known today as tourist industry is a consequence of the socioeconomic transformations and the appearance of mass consumption in some Western countries since the 1950s. (Pi-Sunyer in Smith 1989: 191) Some of the principal factors associated with the origin of mass tourism were the increase in productivity (leisure), the expansion of psychological mobility (the broadened horizons), and the extension of transport and communication facilities (Nash in Smith 1989: 41). Therefore, mass tourism has improved in recent years because of several factors, such as the increase of flight facilities, the promotion of tourist destinations on the internet and social media, and the different accommodation

⁵ Mass tourism is strictly a phenomenon that originated in the XX century. It represents the end of the monopoly of the upper-class members over leisure travel by the involvement of the middle-class population in the travel industry. (Greenwood 1976: 130)

options and travel destinations suitable for all budgets. The combination of these factors helps to promote and stimulate the tourist industry all over the world.

In anthropology, it was after the decades of 1970s when the interest in tourism as a research inquiry began.⁶ While some researchers focus their attention on the cultural interaction between host and the guest and the "acculturation" processes result from this cultural exchange (see Theron Nuñez for example), some others attended the contextual economic and political factors that leave behind the origin of the mass tourism (see Oriol Pi-Sunyer). The different forms of interaction between host and guest and all contextual particularities of the different touristic activities show that tourism is an emergent global heterogeneous phenomenon that must be observed using multiple perspectives. For this reason, the following research will focus mainly on the economic, social, and political transformational context that supported the emergence of the Basque Country as a tourist destination in the global market.

2.2. A brief historical introduction to the origins of the Basque Tourism

While in the XIX century, the tourist attraction was strictly reserved only for the members of the European aristocracy, it was from the 1950s onwards that the expansion of public policies, the conformation of the European welfare state, and the development of infrastructure policies provided the conditions for the birth of recreational tourism in Europe. (Manera et al. 2020: 157) In Spain, between the 1960s and 1970s and under Franco's dictatorship, political and economic strategies reinforced the tourism industry's search for external currency for Spanish territory. (Martínez 2012: 275) One of the best examples of the onset of Spain's tourist enterprise was the "explosion" of the Costa Brava (on the Spanish mediterranean coast) in the 1960s. (Pi-Sunyer in Smith 1989: 188)

Basque Country, as a tourist destination, shared history with the rest of the European countries: In the XIX century, the palaces and second residences on the French Basque coast,

⁶ The journal *Annals of Tourism Research* (1974-1986) or the book *Host and Guest*, directed by Valen L. Smith (1977), are some of the first works focused on the anthropological examination of tourism phenomena, especially in North America and northwest Europe.

for example, in Biarritz or the palace of Miramar in *Donostia* (San Sebastián), were famous destinations visited by the European aristocracy. (Lacy & Douglass 2002: 6)

Between the 1960s and 1970s, Franco's public policies focused their attention on the Basque territory. However, in this case, the Basque Country and its cultural particularities were sold as an "exotic and rustic" attraction for the Spanish and French visitors. With the Statute of Guernica signed in 1979, the Basque Autonomous Community was formed as an officially recognized autonomy part of the new Spanish territorial organization. Accordingly with this political articulation, the tourist competencies were transferred from Madrid to the autonomous community of *Euskadi*, promoting administrative decentralization and giving the Basque government the capacity to develop its own touristic policies. (McCannel in Guasch & Zulaika 2005: 23) In other words, it was after the 1980s when the fundamental impulse towards the reinforcement of the tourism industry in BAC began.

2.3. A short historical context of the emergence

The departing point of this research argues that the breakup of a large part of the industrial network—primarily located in the area of *Bizkaia* and to a lower extent in the area of *Guipuzkoa* and *Araba*—in the late 1970s and especially in the 1980s, was followed by a deliberated impulse towards an economy based on the reinforcement of service industry oriented to the national and the international tourist consumers. This new economic and political turn carried out in the BAC also extended to *Nafarroa* and the French North Basque Country provinces to a greater or lesser scale.⁷

The solid industrial development of the BAC had a significant tradition back to the XIX century. This economic transformation was placed notoriously in the *Nerbioi* River (in *Bilbo*) area because of its localization and the large amount of iron and steel in its mountains. (Uranga & Etxeberria 2000: 522) This strategic location opened to the sea facilitated the importation of

⁷ After the 1990s, in *Nafarroa*, for example, the plan "*Reyno de Navarra, Tierra de diversidad*" presented in 2005 was one of the main aims for developing the tourist industry in this community. Visiting the official website, this impulse through the tourist industry can be easily identifiable <https://www.visitnavarra.es/en/>; In *Iparalde* and supported by the French government, the Basque cultural commodification is also recognizable. See, <https://www.en-pays-basque.fr/en/>

coal and the exportation of ore to England. In this context, some historical industrial companies such as *San Francisco*, *Altos Hornos de Bilbao*, and *La Vizcaya* dominated the exportation of iron and steel, converting *Bizkaia* into one of the biggest manufacturers of such minerals in Spain. (Zulaika 2003: 27) Therefore, it was also at the end of the XIX century when the financial and political power of the Basque oligarchy was firmly established and when the first Basque nationalist party was born.⁸ At present, the Basque nationalist party (PNV) is the principal political party and the first actor on the Basque economic development.

In the last years of the 1960s, the Spanish economy experienced an expansive phase. In this decade, the Basque agricultural sector diminished while the service and industrial sectors grew. (Uranga 2003: 42) Bilbo's city transformed into an industrial city-region, (Zulaika 2003: 7) becoming a symbol of the conversion from the rural economy to a well-established industrial-based city. However, this heavily industrialized economic model highly depended on international economic fluctuations.

After several crises occurred in the late 1970s, the Basque economy went through a deep economic recession, and finally, in the 1980s the industrial model was completely undergone. (Douglass & Zulaika 2007: 323) The shutdown of leading international shipbuilding companies such as the *Euskalduna* shipyard (1983), the rise of trade union struggles and social conflicts because of the dismantling of the industrial sector, the intensification of the armed conflict between ETA and the Spanish and French states,⁹ as well as the deep crisis on the international scenario dealt the Basque society into a deep post-industrial depression. This research asserts that this is the contextual framework from which the process of Basque cultural commodification and the emergence of touristic activity in Basque territories must be approached. Thus, the transformation of a solid industrialized economic activity towards a service-oriented economy results from this sociopolitical and economic context. However, it does not mean that today, all the economic activity in BAC is only oriented towards a service

⁸ In 1889, Sabino Arana Goiri and other partners formed the PNV (*Partido Nacionalista Vasco*), the first nationalist party in Basque History. The consequences of the high industrial economic development and the rise of European nationalist movements offered a perfect context for creating the first Basque political actor in the Spanish state. (Egaña 1996: 610)

⁹ Born in 1958, *Euskadi ta Askatasuna* (Euskadi and freedom) was a Basque armed organization fighting for the national liberation.

economy: The industrial activity still being intense in the geographical territory, but the economic transformation towards a service economy—especially in the big cities and oriented towards the touristic activity—is a well-established economic and political exercise.

3. Two cases of study

The following research will analyze two main events related to this cultural commodification: the inauguration of the Museum Guggenheim Bilbao in 1997 and the subsequent inauguration of the Euskadi Basque Country brand (2014), in which the aim to internationalize and expose the Basque Country as a tourist destination is recognizable.

3.1. The Guggenheim Bilbao Museum or The Miracle of Cinderella in Euskodisney ¹⁰

With its first stone in 1993, the construction of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (1997) was the result of the combination of two main factors: On the one hand, the aim to internationalize and to conform a transnational museum franchise by Salomon R. Guggenheim Foundation¹¹ and on the other hand, the transformation and renewal of the city—as a representation of the Basque society's modernization—from a postindustrial decadence phase to internationalized modern society.

Not without opposition from many Basque artists and intellectuals, the museum's construction was the product less of cultural policy than of economic policy. (Fraser in Guasch & Zulaika 2005: 47) The construction of the museum was accompanied by an ambitious urban renewal of a 1.5 billion \$ plan (Zulaika 2003: 10) composed of several urbanistic projects that conformed to the newly renovated city region: the subway net designed by Norman Foster

¹⁰ What in Bilbao was baptized by the New York Times newspaper as a Miracle (see "[The Miracle in Bilbao](#)" in [the New York Times Magazine on September 1997](#)). However, for the internationally recognized Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza, the "Guggenheim phenomenon" was the Cinderella in the Basque Disneyland (Oteiza 2021: in the beginning of the Prologue 2).

¹¹ In 1989, the director of the Guggenheim Museum, Thomas Krens, drove the reinvention of the Museum through aggressive financial and marketing strategies. Not without being criticized, Krens searched to relaunch the economic situation of the Museum, presenting the Museum Franchise as a valid strategic model (Zulaika 2003: 90). After this museum-franchise transformation, some other cultural institutions such as Louvre Paris followed the same strategy (see for example, [Louvre Abu-Dhabi](#)).

and first built in 1996, the expansion of the airport by Santiago Calatrava in 1994 or the *Abandoibarra* masterplan in front of *Nerbioi* River by Cesar Pelli in 1998. Therefore, this masterplan was orchestrated by the efforts of a group of public-private investors "in charge of the renewal" of the city of Bilbao as a metropole.¹²

In this sense, the city followed the old idea of being conceived as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*¹³ sintered by the conjugation of aesthetic refinement, modernity, and humanistic contemporary ideals. In this context, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao was the central masterpiece of this transformation with a solid functional and symbolic charge: ¹⁴ Where the *Euskalduna* shipyard was located earlier—the symbol of the industrial past—, now the Frank Gehry's monumental architecture served as a flagship of the progress exposing to the international and national communities the actuality of a regenerated cosmopolitan Basque society and culture.

Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum masterpiece is functional in three different spheres: the economic level, political articulation, and cultural transformation. These three are interrelated and constitutive of each other.

The economic functionality of this international icon was highly strategic: it helped to turn the city's main economic activity into a service-oriented city that generates new employment opportunities, especially in the areas surrounding the museum. Therefore, and as a central tourist attraction, the museum served as a platform not only for the touristic-leisure-travelers but also as a call for the congresses and fairs that will help to attract foreign investment to Basque companies.

According to the political functionality of the museum, the international media obtained a new reference when talking about the Basque country, displacing the attention that the armed conflict between ETA and Spanish and French states had for years. (McCannel in Guash

¹² See [Bilbao Metropoli30](#). The dialogue between public institutions and private investors is one of the principal exercise promoted by the Basque government in the last decades.

¹³ Paris, New York, or Barcelona: "It was in the 1920s that the city started to be conceptualized as artwork". (Delgado 2007: 74)

¹⁴ "They are all symbols, or they function symbolically. It is their "symbolic" that makes them stand out from others of their class as objects of veneration." (McCannel in Guash & Zulaika 2005: 21)

& Zulaika 2005: 24) In other words, the Museum's construction offered an image of peace and stability in the international scenario. Moreover, this new project symbolized political empowerment to the Basque self-government: the Basque executive proved to be capable of betting on major international projects at the international level, establishing a dialogue between the regional Basque actuality and the international global institutions. (Aza in Guash & Zulaika 2005: 76)

Observing its cultural functionality, Bilbao—a representative of a renewed Basque culture—consolidated itself as a cosmopolitan city dressed up with the elements of global culture. Thus, its glittering cultural center transcended national and regional boundaries through a new institutionalized art form. (Fraser in Guasch & Zulaika 2005: 47) In this context, the exposition was mutual and bidirectional: The museum franchise demonstrated its functionality as a valid business model, and a Basque Culture was finally exhibited at an international exhibitor's stand.

The culture of capital and elites, service, sales and consumption, real estate, and concrete culture finally helped to consolidate the new image of the Basque contemporary society. If Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum is a significant symbol for Basque society, what the building represents and contains—in all meanings and references—should be conceived as a part of the actual Basque Culture.¹⁵ The construction of the Guggenheim Museum was a cathartic ritual for Bilbao city and the Basque society: The ritualization of space-territory as a consequence of a political project of identity construction is complemented by the ritualization of space-time, which also seeks to conform in front of symbolic cohesive resources. (Delgado 2007: 76)

¹⁵ "Chartres is made of stone and glass. But it is not just stone and glass; it is a cathedral, and not only a cathedral but a particular cathedral built at a particular time by certain members of a particular society. (...) You need to understand also—and, in my opinion, most critically—the specific concepts of the relations among God, man, and architecture that, since they have governed its creation, it consequently embodies. It is no different with men: they, too, every last of them, are cultural artifacts." (Geertz & Darnton 2017: 57)

3.2. Euskadi Basque Country Brand (2014)

Between 1991 and 1998, the number of travelers visiting Euskadi increased by 67.8% (half of the growth occurred between 1996 and 1998),¹⁶ and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao was the principal catalyst of this improvement. After its construction, the museum's success proved the validity of the Basque government strategy, demonstrating that the impulse towards tourist activity was a valid engine for the territory's economic growth. Its construction represents the new beginning of Basque economic activity. For this reason, this research situated the Guggenheim phenomenon at the center of this transformation and argues that all forthcoming activities that had reinforced the tourist industry in BAC in the last years followed this metamorphosis.

Through joint work between public and private entities, the tourist industry was firmly considered an active part of the Basque economy.¹⁷ While some projects sustained the increase of business tourism in BAC, such as the Palace of *Euskalduna* in Bilbao (1999) or the *Kursal* Palace in *Donostia* (1999), others, like *Chillida Leku* in Hernani (2000) or the restoration and enlargement of the *San Telmo Museum* in *Donostia* (2007-2010), were more opened to leisure travelers.

After the inauguration of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, Basque tourist improvement was a constant exercise following one specific goal: to reinforce the service-oriented economy on the territory and promote the actuality of Basque society. After the Guggenheim phenomenon, the strategic campaign of the Basque government, "*Euskadi atsegin handiz-con mucho gusto*" (1999), was a firm commitment to impulse the leisure-touristic industry in the Basque geography following a central idea: to define a differentiated and commercialized touristic product¹⁸ targeted to all kinds of consumers.

¹⁶ Source: [Informe del turismo vasco \(1999\)](#)

¹⁷ In 1999, the Basque government formed the Department of "Industry, Commerce, and Tourism," proving the importance of tourism for the Basque economy. See [Karo Garmendia Galbete \(Vice-secretary of tourism\) in Euskal Etxeak magazine 2003](#).

¹⁸ See [Informe del turismo vasco \(1999\)](#) p. 12-15.

However, international tourism requires pace and stability, (Crick 1989: 325) and the ETA's armed activity was the main obstacle to this development. After the announcement of its dissolution in 2011, the improvement of the touristic activities in the Basque geographical territory maintained a progressive growth, expanding the offer from the capitals (*Donostia*, *Gasteiz*, and *Bilbo*) to coastal and rural areas. The expansion of the offer was possible by articulating different aspects such as the development of transport and infrastructure facilities, the increase of accommodation supplies oriented to the different economic rates, or the constant promotion of touristic destinations in fairs and social media.

Approved in 2014, the Basque government presented the Euskadi Basque Country Strategy 2020 to adapt the Basque economy, society, and politics to the challenges of globalization and the geopolitical context. Among other aspects, this plan formed Euskadi Basque Country as a commercial brand in which the Tourism strategy occupied a central position.

Through the set-up of an integrated internationalization strategy in which the Basque touristic industry was consolidated as a fundamental engine, the Basque government addressed the direction that the Basque society will follow in the forthcoming years, setting one main goal: The internationalization of the Basque Culture through the development of the Basque profile on the international stage. In the words of the *Lendakari* (Basque Premier between 2016 and 2024) Iñigo Urkullu.

"Progress towards internationalization is a goal that has been taken on board by public institutions, chambers of commerce, universities, businesses, and technology centers and an ambition of Basque society as a whole." (in Euskadi Basque Country Strategy 2020: p. 3)

Being opened to the international market and affronting the sociopolitical transformations that the European Union was challenging, the strategy of the Basque Government—in cooperation with international economic cultural entities—was to consolidate the Basque Country as an internationalized benchmark model of quality-of-life, resilience, excellence, social cohesion, innovation, and competitiveness of the territory.¹⁹ In other words, it sets the new image of the Basque Country in the global market.

¹⁹ in Euskadi Basque Country Strategy 2020: p. 13.

Euskadi Basque Country brand was—and still is today— a form of territorial marketing,²⁰ and its touristic strategy signals the current commodification of Basque Culture. Following the work of John L. and Jean Comaroff, the national branding—Nationality Inc.—has natural copyright over its heritage-as-property, becoming one of the main sources of empowerment. (Comaroff 2009: 131)

"The goal of the Strategic Plan for Tourism 2017-2020 is to consolidate the Basque Country as a "boutique" destination and make it one of Europe's top 20 premium destinations." (Euskadi Basque Country Strategy 2020: p.40)

This strategy follows two main directions: First, it seeks to improve tourism in Basque territory, promoting the position of the BAC in the economic and strategic segments, and second, through the commodification—objectification— of the distinctive Basque-specific cultural patterns, it tries to find a particular niche on the international touristic market. In this sense, this commodification—the ethnic and national—offers new means of producing value, recognition, sovereignty, and an effective form of belonging. (Comaroff 2009: 142)

3.3. The Basque Touristic Products: The Grand Tour and The Confidential

The Basque product rests on the ideals of sustainability, attractiveness, modernity, quality, excellence, or the uniqueness of the competitive identity. If the Guggenheim Museum was the catalyst of the new economic, political, and social strategy, what today is observable on the official Tourism Webpage ²¹ shows that the development of cultural commodification is a constant economic and political constitutive project.

Euskadi Basque Country Grand Tour²² was presented in Madrid at the FITUR (International Tourism Trade Fair) encounter in 2024, offering an extended touristic route as an amusement park to experience the Basque Culture in *Euskadi's* geographical territory. This experience is

²⁰ "The Territory can be organized but it is also a commodity to be bought and sold through various economic activities (...) it is an extremely valuable tool for competing regions in competition." (Ferrás et al. 2001: 68)

²¹ See [The official website of the Basque tourism.](#)

²² See [Euskadi Basque Country Grand Tour](#) and the official [promotional video](#).

divided into eight stages, and the product consists of three main axes, which represent the backbone of Basque's tourist offer: the environmental and geographical richness, the internationally renowned gastronomy, and the diversity of its cultural distinctiveness. The goal of this new marketing strategy is on the one hand, to deseasonalize the touristic product and on the other hand, to extend the touristic activity throughout all the geographical area. Therefore, being oriented to different national and international visitors (families, groups, or couples of all ages, adventurous, excursionists, or history enthusiasts), the idea is to extend the visiting period, establishing *Euskadi* as an affordable long-term touristic destination.

However, if the Euskadi Basque Country Grand Tour is more oriented to diverse customer segments, the Euskadi Basque Country Confidential presented in 2022,²³ awoke the interest of those who sought the exclusiveness and the exceptionality: It is "an exclusive proposal for special travelers".²⁴ More oriented to a specific social segment, the product offers helicopter or sailboat rides, dinners in Michelin award-winning restaurants, luxury hotel accommodations, golf, contemporary art, shopping, or thalassotherapy.

Both examples illustrate the actual Basque tourist offer. The tourism industry's reinforcement in BAC has been developed as a strategic instrument to promote the internationalization of the Basque economy, politics, and culture, which is an attractive destiny for international investors. Thus, some of the questions that arise regarding this promotion of the Basque cultural product are: Which sector of the Society profits from this commercialization? What are these touristic strategies' demographical, social, and economic repercussions? How can the environmental impact of tourist activities in the geographical territories be addressed? Or what about the problem of gentrification—impact of the touristic activities—in the cities and towns?

²³ [Euskadi Basque Country Confidential flyer](#).

²⁴ Note taked from the Euskadi Basque Country Tourist website.

4. Two Considerations about the Basque Culture Commodification

4.1. The Basque Fetish

If the whole world is made to pass through the cultural industry filter, (Adorno 2009: 171) the Basque Culture— as a complex system of meanings and representations—is also susceptible to be commodified through the branding. The tourist industry is part of the logic of the free market economy in which anything can be priced and sold. In this sense, all the diverse cultural aspects can be trod as a commodity. (Greenwood 1976: 173) The Basque fetish is dressed up with the ideals of the exceptionality, uniqueness, and incomparability of its particularities. These aspects ignite the desire to experience the Other-Basque, and in this exercise, the tourist-consumer sees the native-other and their cultural particularities as a desirable fetish. (Comaroff 2009: 25)

Behind the Basque touristic product, several elements of culture are objectified and finally, commodified. Thus, this process of commodification—based on the economic equation of supply and demand—establishes what is rentable—valuable—rejecting the aspects that are not. Finally, this essential practice of the market enforces a referential axis of value: What is not sold is not valid.

For this reason, this research argues that Basque fetishism—through the commodification of its diverse cultural elements—affects and transforms the cultural self-understanding, refiguring the identity at the individual and collective levels of the community. Therefore, this process of cultural commodification also ignites the question about the ethical dimensions of the commercialization process. The selected cultural aspects, which will be adapted and sold in the market, are the elements that will, on the one hand, be consumed by the external visitor and, on the other hand, glorified by the local community. In this sense, fetishism follows two different directions: first, it becomes a fetish for the external visitor/consumer who wants to experience—to have it—because it is offered as an exceptional—the essential—part of the visit. Second, the local community perceives the cultural elements as something exceptional— "unique"—because of their treatment as a fetish. Thus, through the commodification of the culture, the internal logic of the market transforms the meaning and perception of the cultural

aspects, converting them into goods ready to be consumed and this transformation affects the individual and social self-perception of the culture. In other words, this constant process converts the Culture into a sector that is part of the global trend for economy and politics.²⁵

4.2. Euskadi Basque Country Dream

"The mission consists of putting Basque Culture, the Culture of the Basque men and women, in a position capable of responding to the great cultural challenges of the 21st century."²⁶

This research offered some references to the official documents that show the strategy to accommodate the Basque society to the new emergent transformational context of globalization. The principal goal of the Basque government is to internationalize the Basque Culture and society, transforming it into a solid socio-economic model that can confront the challenges of geopolitics, the digital transition, or the consequences of climate change. To reach this goal, the touristic activity and the territorial and cultural promotion left behind serve as a central exercise: they help promote and sell the actuality of the Basque society.

The political and economic strategies presented by the Basque government were conceived to take advantage of the opportunity to highlight the role of sub-state organizations and stateless nations in the European Union. Following David Held's work, globalization is associated, on the one hand, with deterritorialization, which asserts that economic, political, and social activities are no longer organized according to a territorial principle. On the other hand, the global processes intensify the reterritorialization of socio-economic activity in the form of subnational, regional, and supranational structures. (Held et al. 2003: 28) Thus, the Basque government strategies move in a dialectic horizon between the global/local, the public/private or the tradition/modernity dialogues. In that direction, both examples presented in this research follow the same dialectic movement: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao dialogues between the local and the global economic, political, and cultural levels, and the Grand Tour as well as the Confidential touristic offers inscribes themselves on the

²⁵ Presented in 2004, The Basque Plan for Culture shows the strategy that the Basque government proposed for the future of Basque Culture in the forthcoming decades. Note tacked from p. 20.

²⁶ From The Basque Plan for Culture 2004: 53.

international touristic circuit showing that the Basque tourism can compete at the international level.

The reality behind this process is that cultural policies are supported by economic policies that simultaneously find their ground in political decisions. Thus, culture, economy, and politics are constitutive from the same matrix: To adapt the society to the contemporary historical context. In the emerging context, the idea of the Euroregion—as a borderless sociopolitical and economic space—is modeling the internal and external political exercise, and to be well adapted to the international contextual requests means establishing a directional political goal. In this sense, the Euskadi Basque Country Brand and its strategy is a directional and constitutive political and economic project that will sculpt the Basque society's future.

Officially compounded in the year 1979, *Euskadi* is a nationalist institutionalized project (Beck 2006: 510) in the form of an autonomous community in Spain's geographical organization, while *Euskal Herria* (Basque Country) has become a socially established myth in which the seven providences—three in BAC, *Nafarroa* and three in France territory—conform *Euskaldunon Herria* (the town of the Basques). Today, what *Euskal Herria* means is still not being clearly defined. However, by translating —and selling— Euskadi as a Basque Country, this socially constituted common *ethos* (*Euskal Herria*-Basque Country) is threatened. Perhaps this translation does not have many repercussions for those who visit and try to experience the Basque Country. However, in a community where internal political disagreements have been hurting the social coexistence for many years, this transformation—supported, promoted, and reinforced by the international market—imposes a new challenge for the conformation of a successful social cohabitation on the Basque territory.

5. Final Remarks

This research opens a small space for reflection on Basque culture's commercialization and the emergence of touristic enterprise—principally focused on the Basque Autonomous Community—in the last few years. Thus, the identification of Basque fetishism and the social implications of the Euskadi Basque Country strategy are only two of the reflections that can be done about this new transformational context. However, they are still not enough.

The Basque Culture commodification is today a well-established reality not only in BAC but also in *Nafarroa* and *Iparralde*. This is why a correct approach to cultural commodification demands a broad examination. To evaluate the process and its consequences is necessary subsequent research which will analyze first, the historical context, second the aspects of this commodification and finally the consequences of this commodification process on its different levels. Moreover, to identify the actors involved in this process will show the political and economic intentionality behind of this enterprise. It is for this reason, that this research asks to open a new space for reflection from which the actuality of the Basque Culture and society can be critically analyzed and engaged with.

The combination of both sources—the theoretical reflection on the anthropology of tourism and the official documents presented by the Basque government—made it possible to identify a pre-established strategic plan for Basque Culture and society, underlining a predominant trend towards the internationalization of culture, the incursion of the Basque economy in the global market, and the political articulation behind these exercises.

The two examples are not the only ones. In the future, development plans such as the new controversial Museum Guggenheim in *Urdaibai* biosphere, the construction of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) in the Basque geography, or the new territorial reorganization of the *Euskal Hiria* project will be at the forefront of the current political and economic agenda. They show the transformational context in which Basque society is immersed.

The aim of this research is to serve as a directional exercise: Identifying, analyzing and evaluating these processes. In a historical context where the particular tends to dissolve into the general and where profitability and market value are erected as referential axes, the question that arises is: What about the Basque Culture and society on the XXI century?

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