

Voices from the Mountain: Histories and Memories of a Disappearing Form of Rural Life

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With the acceptance of Spain to the Common European Market in the 1980s a rapid phase of changes in agricultural legislation led to a dramatic transformation of rural villages in the Principality of Asturias. In this essay we discuss first, the origins and characteristics of the millenarian agricultural-pastoral system and the historical events that led to its disappearance as remembered by the last individuals participating in it. This essay includes, secondly, a selection of segments of life histories representing how migration and the economic forces generating it rendered the traditional system of land management unviable and radically transformed. Lastly, the essay considers the role played by memory in the reconstruction of the events leading to this historical transformation.

Introduction¹

With the acceptance of Spain to the Common European Market in the 1980s, a rapid phase of changes in the agricultural market legislation led to a dramatic transformation in Spain's rural villages, and in the entire Principality of Asturias.² The physical layout of this mountainous region in northern Spain, and a significant and continued presence of human settlements throughout the centuries, had created an agricultural and pastoral culture based on extensive cattle herding and a systematic use of natural resources. The long-standing and continued presence of this practice determined the emergence of a mountainous space, rich in artificial grasslands, bed grounds locally known as *mayadas* or *brañas*, and of many semi-permanent human mountain settlements along short and long cattle herding routes. This study focuses on the history of the mountain valley of Biango, communally owned by members of the village of Porrúa in the region of

¹ We would like to thank countless people who gave us their time, dedication and profound knowledge of Asturias, Biango, and Oral History that made this piece possible. We are particularly indebted to Alexander Freund for his generous guidance in the revision of drafts, Rina Benmayor who gave us valuable feedback and editing suggestions, María Valladares who helped in the processing of the original interview materials. They have done their best to spare us embarrassment, and we, of course, are the only party responsible for any mistake or imprecision in this text.

² Tanja Börzel, "From Competitive Regionalism to Cooperative Federalism: The Europeanization of the Spanish State of the Autonomies," *Publius* 30/2 (Spring 2000): 17-42.

Llanes, eastern Asturias. While in Asturias large tracts of land were directly owned by the nobility and the local aristocracy, communal ownership of land was also a regular occurrence. The possession of parcels of communal land was then allocated to individual families according to local custom. In the case of Porrúa and the valley of Biango, it was common to obtain possession of land parcels, yet it was not full ownership, since there were private use restrictions governed by the interest of the community as a whole. Most transactions were sanctioned orally and through witnesses, without the need for legal documents. The word carried tremendous weight amongst villagers.



Fig. 1. Asturias, in the context of the Iberian Península

The memories of the transformation of Biango need to be framed by a substantive description of the way of life that disappeared, and the individual recollection of life around this transformation. Each individual has a different sense of the meaning and relevance of change based on intimate connections with the place and its transformation. The older generation went through the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and its aftermath in Eastern Asturias. While the war experience certainly left profound physical and emotional marks that can still be seen today, it was the hardships and dramatic events of the postwar period that seem to have a strong impact on the way in which people recall their experiences and narrate their memories. The next generation is the generation of emigration. In the fifties and sixties, the youth of Spain looked to other countries as a way out of poverty and hardship. Many left dreaming of fortune and yet, while they were away, continuously longed for their motherland. They often returned to a place that had been radically transformed not only *in* their absence, but *by* their absence.

The place and the stories of place that follow illustrate something that is often established in oral history: it is a memory that tells more about the meaning of the event than about the event itself. While the disappearance of the agricultural and pastoral way of life in northern Spain is a well-documented historical event, much remains to be documented regarding the meaning of such transformation.



Image 1. View of the Valley of Biango, in the Cuera Mountains, Asturias (image by the authors)

There are many voices telling these stories. Notable are the efforts of the Archive of Oral Sources for Asturian Oral History (AFOHSA) that between 2003 and 2005 conducted over 85 interviews recording life histories in Asturias.³

³ AFOHSA is an academic endeavor hosted at the University of Oviedo. While all of the interviews used in this article were collected independently of AFOHSA, the AFHOSA collection is demonstrative of the relevance that oral tradition has had in Asturias and of the growing interest among scholars to preserve and disseminate these sources. The selected video clips attached to this article were generated by the authors with a special contribution from María Valladares. The majority of the interviews were recorded in video as the original intention was to utilize the materials for instruction, and for dissemination in multi-media rich environments such as this journal. As the authors were planning the recording sessions we trained our camera to what we perceived to be the core of the stories. In some instances this took us to film in the mountains, on other occasions we focused on the non-verbal expressions of the informants that often escape the written rendition. See Irene Díaz Martínez, "The Archive of Oral Sources for Asturian Oral History (AFOHSA)," *Bulletin of the International Oral History Association* 17/2 (June 2009): 46-47.

In this piece, we focus on interviews with five members of the community.⁴ Vitorina Tamés is in her early eighties. She and her husband have lived in Porrúa all of their lives and, unlike many others, never left. They lived off their land, and their cattle at times consisted of a flock of more than eighty sheep and eight to ten cows. That allowed them to live well, “without much stress.” Vitorina’s world revolved around her village and sporadic visits to the provincial capital city of Oviedo. Her life was marked by a difficult but steady peasant experience, the war, and the hardships of life after the war. Her life was also marked by the gradual transformation of her community from an agro-pastoral, contained world into a community opened to the world, first by emigration and then by a profound structural economic transformation of Europe, particularly during the decade of the 1980s. Not unlike Vitorina, Manuel Gutiérrez lived and worked in Porrúa most of his life. He is now in his late eighties and belongs to the generation that last lived off the land. When he contemplated the possibility of leaving to find work and fortune in the Americas, the Spanish government would not allow people to leave the country unless they were being claimed for family reunification by relatives in Venezuela or another country. Not having the opportunity of out-migration, Manuel decided to stay and focus his energy on working and acquiring land that others were leaving behind.

Lupe Sordo belongs to the younger generation that sought fortune and a better life beyond the confined world of the village. She was born in the mid-fifties and after attaining her basic general education, there was nothing else the community could offer her. She traveled to Venezuela to join her husband Joaquín, who had gone there to work and save money, hoping to return one day with enough capital to start a new and more prosperous life in the village. Simón Ramos is a man in his early seventies. You can see him every day, walking the length of the community, back and forth. He is no longer in a hurry. The second-oldest of nine brothers, he was born in the family home known as La Fuente, in Villa de Caldueño, on September 17 of 1935. His father was Celestino Ramos Tamés and his mother was Rosaura Alonso Amieva. Simón emigrated to Venezuela in 1954, two years after his older brother, Silvino. Simón returned to Asturias after 30 years in South America and with enough money to enjoy his retirement in his hometown.

⁴ This article is accompanied by short video clips of three of the five informants. The conditions surrounding work with each informant were quite different. In the case of Lupe, she was not comfortable with taping any of the sessions. Ironically, she was in many respects our main informant. We took careful notes of our conversations and transcribed immediately, making every effort to reproduce her voice as accurately as possible, reflecting both the meaning and style of her conversation in our notes. Lupe was instrumental in leading us to the different informants that were interviewed for the project. In the case of Manuel we were able to videotape but on conditions of light that rendered images of low quality. We could, however, transcribe and use the recorded voice.

The Setting: Past and Present of an Asturian Village

The road that links modern Spain's highway system to Porrúa cuts across ever-green fields and winds along different neighborhoods to the main church and public areas. As you travel into the community you see the small, manicured fields, small paddocks with piles of freshly cut hay. A man is working on a stone wall and the cattle are parsimoniously grazing behind the wall. Everything is intensely green and Celtic in this lay.



Image 2. A typical Asturian house of Porrúa and the neighboring Póo in Llanes, Asturias. To the right, a typical *Casa de Indianos*. This one, in Porrúa, is known as *The Castle* (images by the authors)

As you enter Porrúa, a prominent construction dominates the view. It is a large house known as The Castle. Houses like this one were built by successful migrants who traveled to Mexico, Cuba, and Venezuela during the 19th and 20th centuries in search of wealth and prestige. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw an out-migration to the Americas at an annual rate of 12.5%.⁵ This flow only stopped when political instability in Spain, and the events leading to the Civil War in 1936, made it dangerous or downright impossible for people to travel abroad. In their display of wealth, the *Indianos* (those who had migrated to the Americas and returned) did much more than create temporary employment. Many *Indianos* heavily invested in the creation of local schools and academies creating opportunities for education of the youth in their hometowns. The migrants also created a culture of aspiration among the youth of the community, a culture that eventually led to the massive out-migration. This aspiration was still present among the young during the difficult years following the Second World War, when restrictions on migration eased.

5 M. Lloredén Miñambres, *Los asturianos y America. Arquitectura de indianos en Asturias* (Oviedo: Consejería de Educación, Cultura y Deportes del Principado de Asturias, 1986).

While many of the migrants traveling to the Americas failed to strike it rich, some returned having amassed a great deal of wealth, and in some cases true fortunes. This wealth was symbolized in large, lavish houses, often ostentatiously built in the very small and humble villages the migrants had originally left behind.⁶ Indeed, the single most important symbol of the success of the *Indiano* was the construction of the large estate.⁷ The house has been identified by anthropologists as an element of central importance in most societies, particularly in those societies known as “house societies,” where a moral person holding an estate perpetuates through it the transmission of his name by means of the house, a representation of an array of economic, social, and symbolic values.⁸ The remaining houses in Porrúa are made out of stone, and were built following the pattern of an extended family compound, that is, houses built by members of the family next to each other. Most of these houses shared walls and displayed the traditional open-air solariums and external corridors on the second floor (see image 2).



Image 3. The Mountain Range of *Cuera* (image by the authors)

6 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990).

7 Marta Llavona Campo, *Una Arquitectura de Distinción. Análisis y evolución de la casa indiana en el concejo de Llanes entre 1870 y 1936* (Oviedo: Real Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, 2007).

8 See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks* (London: Johnatan Cape, 1982); *ibid.*, “Maison,” in P. Bonte and M. Izard, eds. *Dictionnaire de l’ethnologie et de l’anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 434–436. See also Alfredo González-Ruibal, “House Societies Ss. Kinship-based Societies: An Archaeological Case from Iron Age Europe,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 25/1 (2009): 144-173; Cesar Parceró Oubiña and Isabel Cobas Fernández, “Iron Age Archaeology of the Northwest Iberian Peninsula,” *E-Keltoi. Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies* 6/1 (2004): 1-72.

A surprisingly small tractor speeds out of the community pulling a cart filled with grass while a dog runs behind it, trying to keep up with it. There are a couple of taverns along the road that are a mixture of a bar and a restaurant where people go for a beer, a soda, or for finger food famously known in Spain as *tapas*. These places are open to the entire family and are always packed with visitors during the summer months. As a visitor in the first decade of the 21st century, we see the economic life of the community resting on tourism, some mining and light industry, cattle and dairy production.

Porrúan cheese is famous all over Spain, and is the result of a vibrant rural life style still linked to dairy production and farming. Contrary to many other communities in the region that succumbed to the demands of the new rules imposed on the rural producer by Spain's integration into the European Market, Porrúa was able to keep its agricultural and cattle raising economic base strong. The community was able to continue producing cheese by radically transforming its economic base. Members of the community are today the main producers of milk and cheese in the entire region, through a form of production that is no longer based on the traditional peasant domestic unit, but on a capital-based system of intensive production. This entrepreneurial stance, coupled with an emerging but significant tourist infrastructure developed by members of the community, earned Porrúa the title of Cultural Village of Europe in 2005, awarded by the European Union.

The backdrop to this display of vitality is the imposing view of the Cuera Mountains. Few outsiders can perceive the profound relationship that existed between the village and the mountain, or are aware of the fundamental role that the summer use of the mountain had in the development of the cultural, social and political life of the community. The annual economic cycle of the community largely depended on the resources provided by the mountain for the maintenance of cattle and, hence the development of dairy production. This production was, in turn, critical to families' ability to acquire – either through direct trade or through the market system - clothing, tools, and resources imported from other regions.

Culturally, the symbols and routines that organize community and domestic life cannot be fully understood without paying close attention to the traditional summer/winter cycle. During the summer time the entire village used to move up to Biango, the mountain valley. The winter was spent in the more temperate lowlands, near the sea, where the village is located. The symbols defining not only Porrúa, but the entire Principality of Asturias, are largely symbols that represent a traditional relationship between its people and the land, the mountains, the cattle, and a peasant family lifestyle. For Porrúans, the mountain was an intrinsic space, an integral part of their experience. The valley was formally shared with at least two other villages of the region (Parres and Cabrales) enabling families to interact well beyond the confined circle of the

village. Our contention is that, to understand Porrúa's present, one has to look up to the mountain, to Biango, where its past was, not long ago, left behind.

Land, Culture, and Change

The community came to depend upon a system that utilized resources available in different agro-ecological niches, including the agricultural lowlands, where grains and vegetables were produced during the spring, summer, and autumn. The community also relied heavily on forests with plants and animals at the mountain's lower altitudes. Lastly, the community traveled to the mountain where cattle could thrive and multiply, providing the population with meat and milk throughout the year. No less important is the fact that life in the mountains enabled the families of the community to connect with other groups and villages, generating a healthy exchange of individuals through new relationships of fictive and biological kinship.⁹ The pillars of the economy were, without a doubt, the management of cattle for the production of meat and dairy products, combined with a seasonal collection of natural products.

While the village was for the most part self sustaining, there was always a need for trade and surplus to obtain important consumables. Any surplus became part of a barter system with other communities, particularly those producing other desirable objects of consumption, such as fabric, fish, and tools, that were also critically important for the survival of the compound and the village. In terms of demographic shifts throughout history, it is well documented that the village went through different moments of expansion. In particular, the expansion of the late 17th and early 18th centuries led to a wave of out-migration as a response to scarcity. The mountains today show the scars of the demographic pressure of years past, in the form of so-called "areas of disruption," that is, areas where the native vegetation and growth have been transformed by human intervention. Many of these areas are now gradually going back to a state in which the best adapted native plants take over the grass and other plants introduced by humans.

Before the valley was abandoned sometime after the 1950s, depending on weather, the yearly productive cycle started as early as during the month of March, as soon as the snow began receding. People started the new agricultural year by traveling up the mountain to repair and prepare the cabins for summer occupation. Most cabins were relatively small and made out of stone, wooden beams, hay, and clay tiles for roofing. A cabin would normally be built on a slope, in order to generate two stories. In the lower section of the cabin, the shepherds

⁹ By fictive kinship we refer to the extension of biological kinship obligations and domestic prerogatives to individuals that otherwise would not be part of the group. In traditional societies, fictive kinship is established to generate strong bonds between two different families.

kept cows, calves, and pigs, while in the upper section they had their living quarters and a space for hay storage.



Image 4. Mountain Cabins in the Cuera Mountains. Notice how the cabin is build on a slope with an entrance to the upper floor (a little window on the left hand side) to deposit hay, and an entrance to the lower story on the other end of the cabin (image by the authors)

This arrangement made it easier to tend to animals in the lower section of the cabin, while the animals would provide some level of natural heat for the families above. The cabins varied in size but, compared to modern Western standards, were no bigger than a small room (four meters by three, six meters by five). By early May, the entire community was already up in the mountains. The families traveled up the valley with all of their domestic animals (birds, pigs, dogs, cats), their cooking and working utensils, and, of course, with all the children that would soon start contributing to the subsistence of the entire family. The work in Biango had to do with a number of basic necessities. The main activity was the care of the cattle, the production of milk and cheese, and the collection of hay to provide sustenance to the animals inside the cabin. More importantly, the hay was treated and dried so that it could then be transported by men to the village silos for the following winter.

Collection by gathering was also an important activity which was in part dictated by the season and by the availability of fruit. While many wild berries are maturing in mid summer, other important products such as chestnuts had to wait until autumn. Because of the region's weather, apples became an abundant resource that eventually were transformed into juice, and then fermented into cider. The summer was used to repair the round stone structures used for drying chestnuts and protecting the crop from bears and other animals.

The summer was also a time of freedom for the children. First the bear and then the wolf were gradually disappearing with human seasonal occupation of

these mountains, so the children were free to roam around the valley, to stay with friends and family in different cabins during the long and pleasant summer nights. During the summer, as is the case in many agricultural societies, the villages in the area held an annual celebration of their patron saints, or *romerías*. *Romerías* were short processions, often in and about the community, led by members of the community carrying the statue of a saint or the Virgin Mary. The procession would travel throughout the village, gathering followers as it made its way back to the main church. On the day of the *romería*, girls and women, boys and men, all dressed up in their best. Bagpipes sounded, and fermented apple cider flowed, allowing people to forget, if at least for a moment, the hardships of the entire year or season. All other villages were invited to these festivities which ritualized the different productive cycles and allowed for members of the communities to get to know each other and generate new kinship ties. An important tradition that emerged, and that we have been able to trace back to Biango, is the *foguera*, a celebration that consists of making a large bonfire that lasts throughout the night.¹⁰

By the end of the summer, most households would have stocked enough hay to survive the winter season, and were ready to take the animals down to the village. The hay was collected from the specific areas of the valley allocated to each family. Families had multiple parcels that were carefully tended throughout the summer: during the summer time the grass grew fast and tall, and was painstakingly sown, reaped, and dried. It was then collected into piles and carried, as they say in the native language known as *bable*, *a jumbo*, on the men's shoulders, down to Porrúa, to be stored for the winter. Men were proud of being able to carry the heaviest loads of hay down the mountain as fast as possible.

As the mild weather of summer gave way to autumn, oftentimes towards the end of September, the carefully measured small family land parcels were turned back into communal land. The entire community could use any space of the valley as grazing lands for all animals. Shepherds kept the cattle grazing up in the valley until the first snow made it hard for the animals to feed. At that point, and perhaps with one or two new calves to show for a year's worth of work, the families traveled back down to the village to endure the sometimes long and tedious winter.

Winter was the time when many of the tools were repaired and re-crafted. A traditional activity was carving the emblematic wooden shoes, locally known as *madreñas*. These shoes were used to walk on the streets and household areas filled with mud and animal excrement that characterize a wet cattle region. These wooden shoes have three wide heels, one beneath the heel of the foot, another under the arch and another under the toes, so that the foot is always two to three

¹⁰ Informal interview with elders and members of the community of Mazucu, in the Cuera Mountains (January 4, 2007).

inches above the muddy ground of this green and rainy land. The madreñas are wide inside, allowing people to wear comfortable, thick socks made out of wool or cotton known as *alpargatas*.

Romantic and idyllic images of rural life aside, life was extremely hard for people in these communities, hardships that would only be compounded by other factors that were impacting the millenarian tradition of these northern Spanish villages in radical ways. Overwhelming geopolitical events and the domination of the industrial world over agricultural societies gradually turned the tide against this age-old way of life. The narratives from Vitorina, Lupe, Simón, Manuel, and Joaquín bring back memories of the events that affected their lives during these intricate years of transition.

Lupe Sordo: Everyday life in Biango

What was life like for the last generation of Porruanos spending the summer season up the mountain? Lupe Sordo left the hardships of life in the mountains to spend over fifteen years of her life in Venezuela. Born in the mid-fifties she is one of the last children of Biango, and she is a member of the last generation that made the trip up the mountain during the summer as part of the traditional economic life of the community. Her memory of those days is a mixture of joy for the place and sadness for the hardships that eventually led her to out migrate.

We interviewed Lupe on several different occasions at her business located in the main plaza of Porrúa. One question triggered much of her memories: *What was life like when you were growing up?*

Women often had to walk down from the valley to Porrúa and Llanes¹¹ to trade cheese for food and money. In order to carry the loads of cheese, women had to use wide baskets that they would balance on top of their heads. We had to keep the head as still and stiff as possible so that the cheese would not fall. I remember a dream one night, asking the doctor to look at my neck, but the doctor would see me and say ‘There is nothing, you are fine,’ but I knew I was in pain.

Then one day as I was walking up the Gildo Path¹² towards the valley a countryman that was having difficulty herding his cows to another meadow on the mountain asked me if I wouldn’t mind taking care of his donkey for him. He was missing some of his less experienced cows, and the donkey was not helping at all. That donkey was the devil and soon the food that I was carrying on my head went rolling down the road, the cheese, the lard, everything... my problem was that I was having difficulty

¹¹ Llanes, with roots in medieval times, is the main city of eastern Asturias and the political and economic center of the region.

¹² The Gildo Path is the main path people used to travel from Porrúa to Biango and back.

holding onto the donkey while the food was on the ground. The food was prepared by women of the community for two countrymen working up the mountain.

Lupe was overwhelmed by strong emotions that the memory brought back. It is a memory of hardships of a life that was left behind:

In those days people would stay in Biango until late winter. They used to make the journey up the mountains with the cattle as early as May and they would not be back until late June, during the festival of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. According to people of Porrúa, the last man on record to continue making a living off the mountain was known as El Campetu and he died around 2002. People would say of him that he was a bit crazy because he would eat snails and call them 'countryside sausages.'

Old rules and regulations established what to do with the cattle and sheep and when to do it. For example, people should not release the sheep for free grazing before June 20th, and people would continue working, cutting and storing hay until the festivity of La Guía. After the second visit to Porrúa, people would return to Biango on a third journey that was known as La Toñada, which was the time when the corn was tall and people would go up to *afolgar a las cabañas*, which is to spend some leisurely time at the cabins, right about the time when the nights are long. To illuminate the path up to the cabins people would use thick burning wooden sticks which they would constantly wave from side to side to keep them burning. The families would move with everything from pots and pans, to domestic animals, the hens and rooster, the pig, the four or five cows. Many other men continued occupying the cabins at the mountain until very recently: Lino continued going up to Biango until shortly before he died. They would collect hay from the small assigned parcels until October, during the festivity of La Derrota, when all the valley was open for all the animals to graze without restriction. There were boys from Porrua, Parres, and Pereda. As there was no priest coming up the valley we were able to collect hay on Sunday without being interrupted or scolded. I used to be the youngest and it was my chore, to take milk to the policeman that sat a small post in one of the cabins as they were trying to find *maquis*.¹³ As small children we used to play, chasing and taming wild horses. Boys were really good at it. One day a countryman from Purón came to talk to us about chasing and taming one of his wild horses. We told him that the animal was no longer a wild horse, as we had taught him how to dance, and of course he was amazed and in disbelief. We knew we

¹³ A *maqui* or *maquis*, were members of the anti-francoist guerrilla in Spain in the period following the Civil War.

were much better at it than the boys and men from other communities. Angel collected hay the last time in 1980.

The adults would carry on their shoulders those heavy loads of hay for the winter. All cabins had tile in their roofs except for a few that still had hay. Some people would use natural caverns that are up there in the mountain.

All of the town would move up to the mountain, except for those who were unable to walk and those in charge of the meadows nearby the town. They would walk up later. In my house an uncle would stay with two cows to play, although he would still spend a substantial amount of time up there. Most people would have between four and eight cows. Those with twelve cows would have a *criado*.

The valley used to have now and then the so-called tides, which in reality were the accumulation of water. The valley has no natural drainage, so sometimes the water level is higher to the point that some animals drowned. There are a few small natural drainages or holes that will take some of the water until the level comes back to its habitual level.

The fiesta (La Derrota) re-started six years ago (2002) with the *ramo* or floral offering at the cabin of a member of the community who lives in Venezuela. They took the provisions with horses but they had many more people than they thought they would including local and long distance shepherds who wanted to have a remembrance of the old times of Biango.

Miguel, another old countrymen, went up until about ten years ago, until he died at 75 years of age. He spent 35 days not seeing anyone, because he would go up to the isolated cabin all summer long. He would walk every day down to a cabin half way to the community to get some bread and some other foods that people used to leave for him to pick up there.

Lupe remembered these details with interest, but she was also clear in her emotions and decision to leave behind that existence and look for a way to improve their lives.

So, the last time that I went up the mountain was that summer of 1971, when I decided to marry by proxy¹⁴ my husband and travel to Venezuela to start a new life with him. At the airport in Madrid my mother looked at another woman traveling in the same plane and she said. Look, I need to ask you to look after my daughter. She is going to Caracas, are you? Will

¹⁴ *Casarse por poderes*. Lupe's fiancé Joaquín had already left for Venezuela. For her to be allowed to join Joaquín she had to be married. They choose to do it at a distance by power of attorney. This story has a wonderful touch of romanticism that is part of the culture of Spanish migrants to the Americas as represented in songs, stories, and novels.

you look after my daughter? The woman accepted the charge and we talked all the time for the duration of the flights. I helped her with her children and at the end we exchanged addresses and agreed to try seeing each other while in Caracas.

The next day, once at the apartment where I will be living with my husband I opened the window to see Caracas for the first time. As I looked out I realized that I was seeing across the street, at another window no other than the woman of the airplane! Those rarities of destiny, while the addresses we exchanged were of different streets, the houses looked at each other from the back. It was great to have someone to relate to while in Caracas. It was a good start.

Vitorina Tamés: The Meaning of the Land

Lupe Sordo is special to the history of Porrúa because she was part of that last generation that labored and spent the summer time in Biango, taking care of the animals and making a living as part of a domestic unit. Her life, and the life of the community, was being transformed by intangible, yet overwhelming structural forces of the new European economy. These forces only gradually drove the traditional connection between the mountain and the community, which effectively disappeared sometime towards the end of the 1970s. The transformation was deeply rooted too in other historical conditions of regional and national origin, more pointedly in effects of the bloody Spanish Civil War. Vitorina Sordo's perspective and memories provide evidence of this deeper historical connection.

Vitorina's story points to land and its meaning as the one fundamental aspect of the transformation of Porrúa and its relationship to Biango. While the traditional economy of Porrúa made Biango a location open to use by Porruans through intense work and hardship, the new European economic system, wants the mountain to become an open resource, whose fundamental objective is to remain *natural*, or untouched, for future generations. The land of Biango, as Vitorina and her generation understands it, had been managed and transferred from generation to generation in a remarkable balance of communal and individual interests, and it was destined to serve the people of the land. Now, with only a handful of Porruans keeping their cabins in Biango and tending to their land parcels, the mountain and its valley seem irrevocably destined to be "given back" to a wilder state.

Vitorina Tamés Gutiérrez lives in a small house in the area of Porrúa known as *La Jorcada*. She has lived there her entire life. She has been a point of reference for her family throughout the years of out-migration. She became a widow while she was young and she had to do it all, from milking the cows to

taking care of the land parcels and caring for her children. In the long summer nights of the 1940s and 1950s in the valley of Biango, children like Lupe learned from the older generation – in her case from her mother, Vitorina - the stories and traditions of the community, particularly the stories of the Civil War and the scars it left on the people of the village. Vitorina remembers the story of her uncle Gabriel. He barely escaped death when he deserted the defeated Republican army: “He was born in 1917 and he was at the town of Mazucu in October of 1937, the year the war was fought directly in our village. Our mountain cabin was located close to the water spring known as Peyu, right where the long gorge that dissects the Cuera Range into two parallel ranges opens up into the valley of Biango.” These stories are much more vivid in the memory of the members of Vitorina’s generation:

My uncles Gabriel and Angel were both up in the mountains when the [civil] war broke out here. They both were drafted and had to go to war but eventually returned. Gabriel escaped the Republican Army, as it was being defeated by the rebels, at San Vicente de la Barquera. He came back and hid with the Haces Family for a while, before going up to the mountains, where he thought nobody would come to get him [being, as he was, a deserter]. However, the Republican Army came and they took him prisoner. Angel had also been made prisoner. Then they made Angel walk down to the village of Mazucu with a wounded man and that is when he decided to escape. In the meantime Gabriel [seized by militia men] was spending the night in our cabin in the mountains. While he was there, he was able to talk to another person from the village that was put in charge by the militia to look out for him that night, telling him “I must escape, because they will kill me.” They agreed that at the moment when the villager would walk out at night to pee, he would jump through the window and escape. Since Gabriel knew the mountain well, he was able to escape, although the guards were shooting in all directions trying to take him down. He spent days and nights without food until the militia abandoned the area.

The presence of thousands of armed men during just a few days of war in Biango left the economy of the area devastated. Different sources provide an understanding that the battle of Mazuco – a small community between Biango and Porrúa - was fought between thousands of Republican and Nationalist soldiers. The remnant of the once mighty Republican Army was in retreat from the Basque Country and Santander towards the east of Asturias. While heavily reduced in size, the number of Republican soldiers camping both at the outskirts of Porrúa and in Biango was well over twenty thousand men. Everything edible was confiscated and consumed: corn, meat, milk, cheese, seeds. Only the age-old knowledge of the mountain allowed the peasant families to resist and save some

of their resources, cattle and otherwise, to continue making a living during the hard years after the war.

The Civil War of 1936 led to a dramatic impoverishment of the region in a way that, as Vitorina so vividly remembers, even the people of the city “would come to our orchards to steal some of our fruit. We would let them, even though everybody knows that each tree has its owner.” Vitorina is the voice of those who stayed, sometimes as a decision to make things work, but mostly as a result of the impossibility of leaving. They were the ones keeping alive the cultural ethos of the community. In a way that many would not realize, they were Asturias for those who migrated, keeping alive the traditions and places the migrants were longing for while making a living in distant places.

“How was life in Porrúa before things started to change?” When we asked this question, Vitorina started right where she wanted, in the present. The land parcels that were traditionally part of her and her husband’s inheritance were now being seized by the government, as the entire region of Biango is being transformed into a national reserve by the conservationist movement and legislation of the day. For many of those parcels owned for decades by Vitorina and her family there are no papers, as the transaction was sanctioned verbally as it was customary. She has only witnesses from the community – most of them quite old but ready to testify to the veracity of Vitorina’s rights to those land parcels. Since the modern government does not recognize any other than notarized documents, she feels dispossessed and abused:

I first have to tell you that these fellows from the government are going to take me to prison because now they say that those properties that are not already formally registered nobody can touch. They do not allow you to touch one single tile, or to fix it or anything. Those folks of the Environmental Agency pretend they are the owners, and they boss you around more so than the government. And it is best if I do not see them, because if I see them I am sure that I am going to tell them what I think for real.

A grandfather of mine, he would go to that place every night to fix it. He was a postman during the day, but at night he would walk and circle the prairie. His mother was one of those who used to like to taste coffee, so she actually mortgaged the property and they opened up a bar or a tavern as they used to call it. In any event, he had to work so incredibly hard, taking all of the materials up on his shoulders, from the wooden poles, to the tiles... and now, they simply come with a plastic sheet and there is nothing you can do to fix it. Anything that is not already enclosed in your meadow, that is no longer yours. Do you think that is right?

Biango is a large extension of land and everything was divided in small parcels that we call *hazas*, small land parcels that people had

scattered all over the valley. We used to have five or six, others would have four, three or only one. Everything was enclosed with a stone wall and inside each one had their property. There were also people from Parres. These parcels were inherited and I inherited three. The way the parents would bequeath their children was easy. In our case we had a paper signed by my parents indicating which parcel corresponded to which son or daughter. But these papers mean nothing to those from the government because if this is not formally registered then it means it has no owner. So if I see them I will insult them. If you hear that I am in prison, that is because I have insulted them.

When I was born I know that I started going up there when I was really young. My memories are of always being up there at Biango as if that was my main home. That is normal, those were happy years, we were happy when we were there. But also, you were looking forward to coming back down to Porrúa. Up there in Biango you used to live in a small cabin, with only enough room for a small bed, maybe two, with a small hearth to cook there on the floor. We used to have a small area arranged with stones that served as a freezer, there the water, there the firewood. We were four siblings and the parents. The parents would always sleep in the bed, we the sisters would sleep in the other bed and the boys, as they were older, they would sleep on top of the haystack. As it was summer time they would get a blanket and go to sleep anywhere else, so we used to live very much like gypsies....

People did not live off Biango, people lived in Biango. There were many who died up there, and then they will have to carry them down to Porrúa to be buried. I do not remember Biango as happy memories and there is no longer much to see up there. It is interesting that there are people that will remember Biango as a harsh past and others with yearning. I think it is those whose main memories are memories of childhood, because of the freedom there was, how they used to come and go without much control, how they would sleep wherever they wanted, and how they would tame the wild horses. On other occasions the children would start working when they were ten. I used to take care of the cattle when I was ten, six or seven cows that you would have to milk. And then you would produce cheese and drink the milk. Before the land was open to *realengo* [that is open to all members of the community], each parcel was designated and it was tended. I collected hay since I was ten and it was very hard work. At ten I had to sow the hay and I had to do all the work. Sometimes I was there only eating what you can raise at first. You would eat rice, potatoes, milk and bread, and basically that. I was born on April 15 and in May I was already up there in Biango. They carried me up in a

basket, one of those that we used to carry cheese down to Llanes to sell at the market. I stopped going up to Biango because the brothers would send money from Venezuela and things started to change for the better.

People used to have lots of sheep. We used to have lots of them and each family would have a way to mark them by cutting their ears in certain ways. We used to do a round cut, some would perform a long cut. We had eight to ten cows and we used to live just fine, without much anguish. This until 1935, the year in which my father died. He started feeling ill and then he died in April, something that had to do with the heart. I had been to Oviedo up to seven times. When my father got really ill, then I was ill and in those days you could use the train or even a car. The last time I thought we would die because the driver of the train would travel at high speeds and the train will move back and forth from one side to another. I promised that day not to travel on a train ever again.

In order for a person to buy land this person had to get a loan from someone else. One thousand pesetas in those days. There was interest charged, but it was fair and you would pay in a year or as soon as you were able. In those years if you had four cows you had enough to build a house. Not now.

The very last time that I went up to Biango was because of a disagreement. The cows of the village escaped from the area where most had been left for free grazing. When we saw the gate open we came to Porrúa to let people know that someone had left the gate open. People asked my brother if he was responsible or if we had been responsible and they wanted to know if the gate was closed. I decided to go up again to close the gate, and I did it fast so when I returned I simply told them, the gate is now closed. But it was painful as my joints were already suffering with arthritis, so I never went back up again. This happened some 21 years ago. People stop going because we all started having a different life. The cattle was gradually sold, many people went to Venezuela, and then they left the mountain on its own.

Manuel Gutiérrez: Riding Along

Manuel Gutiérrez started going up to Biango early in his life and did so for at least another long 25 years. Manuel was born in 1925, and worked most of his adult life as a shepherd and cattle rancher. In retrospect, Manuel's memories are in many respects an extraordinary window onto the complex richness of the apparently simple life of a peasant village. His narrative is uniquely thick, with its memory of play, work, and life. Manuel's memory of language is fundamentally important as it embodies the richness of a world that has all but disappeared:

The mountain is filled with names, just like Madrid. We used to live just like we did 200 years ago. Down in the valley we used to plant corn, and during the winter we would take hay from the mountain on our shoulders. The cart was used more in the valley to take care of *cuchu* or cow excrement. Up on the mountain there were shepherds even during the winter months. [In years past] the snow reached the lowest ranges [400 meters] seven or eight times every winter. There were bigger blizzards than today, but we also had good days as we have now. Some young boys used to not go to school as they would stay up in the mountain from March through May. Only the better off would stay in the mountain after May. In May the meadows in the mountain will start yielding, and the land of the mountain was enclosed until the 20 of June. Life was hard in the mountain. It is only good for those who were born and raised there because you were the owner, you were free.

Manuel's narrative goes deep into the past of the community, venturing to recall events that affected the community many decades ago:

My father used to remember the time when there were bears up there. There is a channel that people know as the Bear's channel. When my father went to check on the calves there was a bear amongst them, but without harming them. People remembered too the time the French of Napoleon¹⁵ were here, and then the Carlistas¹⁶ were in this mountain. They invited the French to play skittles and as soon as they left their rifles on the side to start playing, people went after them with sticks and axes, and they killed them all.

While we had already learned from other informants about the hardships of life in traditional Porrúa, Manuel could help us balance this vision with an image of what it was like to grow up with a level of freedom and happiness that is often hard to conceptualize in rapid pace, urban settings, where children seemingly are always in danger. Summer in Biango was a season of hard work, but it emerges as an image of a season of fascination, of long days with plenty of sun, music, and joy:

People used to play all kinds of different games. They would bowl all over the place. You have *la Trincha*, which was grabbing each other by the belt to see who might take the other one down. *El Ballestu* was throwing two-meter sticks as far as one could. Also the *Cieguina*, which was to blindfold one child that would look for and touch other children. We used to play

¹⁵ The Napoleonic Invasion of the early 19th Century (1807-1814) and its traumatic events remain alive in the oral tradition of Spain to this day.

¹⁶ The *Carlistas* were series of civil wars in Spain from 1833 to 1876 against liberal and then republican governments. Followers of Infante Carlos and his descendants fought for the cause of legitimism and Catholicism. See Holt, E. (1967). *The Carlist Wars in Spain*. London: Putnam.

marbles, but with small pebbles. *Tusa* was done with a triangle, a coin, and a small rock. You had to have the rock falling on top of the coin. People would bring their drums and bagpipes, not many, because the bagpipes were really expensive.

Before the time of the war people used to eat bread with the family every week. At first everything was made out of corn, but then with wheat, and then after the war we had to go back to corn bread. Everyday we would have cornbread or *pulientas* as we used to call them. We also had some animal protein. We used to eat eggs as we would take the hen with us up the mountain. There was milk and cheese.

While the red cows are better, the others would yield more milk. Some of the animals might die when the water was high. We used to light our cabins with candles, oil lamps, and we used to carry the hay on our shoulders, between 60 to 100 kg per load. When I was young, there were private meadows in the mountain. A countryman managed to become the owner of all the *Tornería*. He had a quarryman working for him all year long, and he enclosed everything by 1850, according to my father. There were always cabins, sometimes we would see the remains of the older ones. For the animals there was also the so-called *beyares*, that is, people would make an excavation supporting the planks on top of the main beam and then they would cover the rest with *tapinos*, or they would use concave planks, as tiles. I remember seeing a round cabin, so that people would not have to create corners. Beechwood is not as good but that's all you have up there, so we used to replace it often. Our cows were the best. Everybody wanted cows from Porrúa (Pola, Infiesto,...). In the mountain we used to have *madreñeros* [wood craftsman].

As in the case of Vitorina, the Civil War also marked Manuel's experience. As indicated above, different sources cite 36,000 as the number of soldiers that literally raided the land of Biango and Porrúa in September of 1937. The cattle was decimated, and the villagers had to cope with surviving and pledging allegiance first to the Republic and then to God and the Motherland as Republicans were overtaken by nationalist forces. Manuel remembers the forest filled with troops, a plane falling down in the mountains, climbing to recover the body of the pilot "and bringing down all the corpses to give them burials. Then came the time of reprisals and fear, betrayal and lastly a gradual normalization of life."

Simón Ramos: Emigrant and Immigrant

The case of Simón is a bit different from that of the others. While his father was from Porrúa, he actually grew up in a neighboring community of Villa de

Caldueño. Since they had properties in Villa he would have to stay most of the time in the community. He has fond memories of the festivities of Biango, but particularly the festivity of La Derrota, which literally means the *festivity of the defeat*. It refers to the defeat of the Moors and the fall of the city of Granada in 1492. After the defeat, the lands of the kingdom of Granada, Queen Isabela readied up the city and its adjacent lands to be taken by any and all Christian soldiers participating in the conquest. In time, the word defeat, *derrota* in Spanish, became synonymous with an event during the agricultural calendar when large tracts of land became available for communal use. In Biango, the festivity of La Derrota took place – every year at the end of the summer and until the fall of the first snow - to formally declare that all the land of the valley was now open to any one who wanted to use it.

Like many others, Simón remembers life in Biango as being hard. In the summer he would have to go up to Biango, cut the hay, store it, and tend to the animals. Moving the cattle and use of the space by so many people often generated conflict, but since cattle was the primary source of wealth for the family, the community as a whole developed rules and strategies for coexistence.

Many of those years were marked by poverty and hunger; it was particularly harsh after the war. So for many young men, the only real way out was to migrate, and many did, like Simon, who spent most of his adult life in Venezuela.

According to Simón, his family sold its land in Biango in the 1960s. There was no use having the land anymore. The land used to be transmitted from generation to generation; now the land remains idle in Biango. He used to go to Biango when he was young because of his father's properties in Biango. According to Simón, the family owned a series of land parcels in Villa, Sumidero, La Escalera, Cuadradas, and within La Llosa (Biango). Their cabin was next to the hay fields in Biango. They used to have it partially enclosed with a wall of stone, and another part with a *corcobal*, a section of the enclosure made from a canal and bushes:

When other communities would come to the valley to have their cows take advantage of the open meadows, it was fun to see the cows fight. This would happen during the first days when the new cattle was arriving. There were also competitions to see who was capable of carrying a heavier load of hay all the way to La Tornería. Others would go all the way to Porrúa, to see who would be able to carry more *arrobas* [a measure of weight equivalent to 11.5 kg].

To be able to build your house you would need three or four cows, and with one cow you could buy four tickets to Venezuela.

Women used to carry the so-called *trigueras* or large round baskets, used to transport bread and cheese. This was for women. These

baskets were crafted by the gypsies although some kinds of local arts and crafts were also available.

Things started being particularly difficult after 1948, which is when the rationing began. The families were given ration booklets. So by 1958 we were done and we sold the land of Biango and then bought more land in Freires (Caldueño). There were no proprietors before, so there was little taxation happening. The situation changed. I went to Venezuela in 1958 and returned in 1978 after having sold my business to a friend. Then I had to return for a little while to help the new owner, a friend of mine, who was gravely ill.

Simón's recollections seem to confirm that the transformation of Porrúa and Biango was well on its way soon after the Civil War. His comings and goings during the sixties and seventies seem to support our understanding that the change was gradual and only sanctioned with the new agrarian pact that brought Spain into the new Europe in the decade of the 1980s. The last of the five testimonies brings us back to this final transformation, as understood by a younger migrant that, simply put, had the capacity to understand that Biango and Porrúa were no longer a unit, and to conclude that the only way was to leave and create the means to face the new economic reality of Porrúa.

Joaquín Sobrino: The Drive for Progress.

Joaquín was born and raised in Porrúa in the early fifties. Like many other Porruans, he migrated to Venezuela in search of a better future:

I started coming on my own since I was ten years of age. By 1969 I had already quite a few cows but I decided that this was not enough for me to make a living and to marry Lupe. I started migrating when I was 19, I went to Germany, then Belgium. Life was passing, until one day I decided that it was not worth it, that I wouldn't be able to carve a future for me and my bride. No future here. So I left, like everyone else in Porrúa.

I had a little schooling. There was nothing, no toys, no school. it was only cows and sheep.... Going to Venezuela was creating a future and making something of yourself. If you were hard working, you could make it.

Joaquín migrated to Venezuela when he was 25. "There was just not enough here. I first went to Germany when I was 19 and then to Belgium for a while. Then I came back to wait for a contract to return to Germany or Belgium, and it never came. It was hard to understand them." At that point in time, and despite the fact that he was a successful rancher by local standards, he found himself at a crossroads in his life:

So thinking about wanting a normal life [referring to the current more affluent standard of life in Spain], what was my future here? What can I offer my wife here? My father in law could not believe that I was leaving. 'How can it be that *Quini* [Joaquín's nickname] is leaving.' But it was not worth it here, better not to marry. At a certain point in time you start thinking about your future. What was my future here? Not here. There was nothing here. I like cattle, because that is me, but there' no future in it. This is why I am telling you, everybody left town.

Joaquín worked in Venezuela for many years. The first four years he worked as a waiter in different restaurants. Then he moved up to an exclusive club making a good salary. He was able to save and open up his own restaurant and save every penny until he was able to return to Spain and to Porrúa, with a substantial amount, enough to buy the main restaurant-bar in the community. This, he said, he had always wanted to do. Joaquín is now basically retired, working his bar and some cattle. He goes to Biango, to reminisce and to enjoy. Where in the past there used to be some 150 families in Biango, today no more than fifteen people might go up into the valley.

The Memory and the Legacy of Biango

As the last generation that traveled and worked in Biango gradually gives way to new generations, Porrúa and Biango are becoming something new. Porrúa's economy today is driven by a few entrepreneurial ranchers no longer utilizing the traditional pastoral system, but rather intensive, agro-industrial production of milk and cheese. The landscape has been transformed in a dramatic form, particularly in Biango. As less cattle are moved up to the mountain, and as fewer people tend the meadows, more and more of the mountain turns the vivid green of the pastures into the deeper green of the natural vegetation of the Asturian mountains. The wolf is being reintroduced and large tracts of land, particularly the land of Biango and the Cuera mountains, are now designated as an official area of reserve. The economy now relies more on intensive production and eco-tourism. This is a change that for most in Asturias has been positive. In all respects, the standard of living of the people is much better in all respects: people live longer, eat better, are healthier, and enjoy a modern life in the middle of a breathtaking natural environment. As the traditional economy gives way to complex and advanced structures of resource administration tied to the world outside, the standard of living has dramatically improved. The land attracts tourism, the local production is intensive and highly efficient, and the old ways and culture are now protected as part of the very same cultural heritage of Asturias that is so loved by national and international tourists.

As we collected these narratives we could see the memories bringing the informants to tears and to laughter. Memory has the power to define who people were in the past and who they are today. There are a number of parallels in all the narratives that we have collected. On the one hand, most people remember their childhood as a time of joy and freedom. The joy and freedom of the first years is gradually replaced by hard, backbreaking work year round. The land that is breathtaking as a landscape means hard work and limitations when seen up close. There is a general feeling that the views of these imposing and incredibly beautiful mountains can only be truly appreciated when people understand what it is like to make it produce enough to maintain the family. While there is basic agreement on many of the elements contributing to life in Porrúa and Biango it is also interesting to see how each individual shapes his or her current memory based on a number of factors that have as much to do with their present life as with the past. Lupe and Joaquín are the youngest of the informants that we included in this article. The memory of Biango is one of hardship and of reasons that justify a decision to leave the community, to leave behind a way of life that was unable to support their dreams and ambitions. They left Biango to go to America and save enough to come back with the means to start a new life in the community.

For Vitorina, the memory of Biango is a memory of an entire lifetime with good and bad moments, but more importantly, it is the memory of the family that was able to generate wealth and opportunity in the creation of a land base for the future. Her memories show that the wealth that was then created is no longer understood and respected by the new rules that are replacing old customs. Her memory is a tool to fight a transformation that does not respect the rights – based on backbreaking work – of past generations. For Manuel and Simón, the memory is much more the memory of a place that was amazing, vibrant, and alive, and that only a few today understand or even know ever existed.

For Vitorina and Manuel, the transformation has fundamentally betrayed rights and a way of living to give way to different forms and new rights holders. There is a mixed sentiment, as many of the changes were positive, yet they created a world that is in certain ways very foreign to the land and place where Vitorina and Manuel lived their lives. For Simón, the place continues to be the locus where life is lived and enjoyed, less problematically than with other informants.

In *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place*, Stier and Landres present memory as an elusive concept that “comes and goes and comes back again.”¹⁷ The memory of the Valley of Biango is very much in this sense, the memory of a

¹⁷ Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres, eds., *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

moment of life that had to be replaced to ensure an upward mobility that otherwise would not have happened.

Video Clips of Interviews

- Clip1.wmv Clip 1: Joaquín - *Voices from the Mountain - Main Story* - The story of Joaquín and his decision to leave Porrúa to migrate to Germany first, and then Venezuela.
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-5675982215924399301&hl=en>
- Clip2.wmv Clip 2: Simón - *Land Tenure, Migration*. Land tenure and the so-called miniaturization of property in Asturias, Spain, in the 1960s as a result of population growth created conditions for out-migration. Simón talks about his family, property, and migration to Venezuela.
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1242075190389364880&hl=en>
- Clip3.wmv Clip 3: Vitorina *Transformation of the Economic Landscape and Land Tenure Processing*. The story of Vitorina illuminates the challenges facing local dwellers in rural communities in northern Spain when the land tenure structure that served well an agro-pastoral economy is challenged by a new economic context where tourism and preservation are the new prevailing values at play. Vitorina is looking for ways in which her ancient rights to land parcels in the mountains can be maintained.
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=713271634948520669&hl=en>