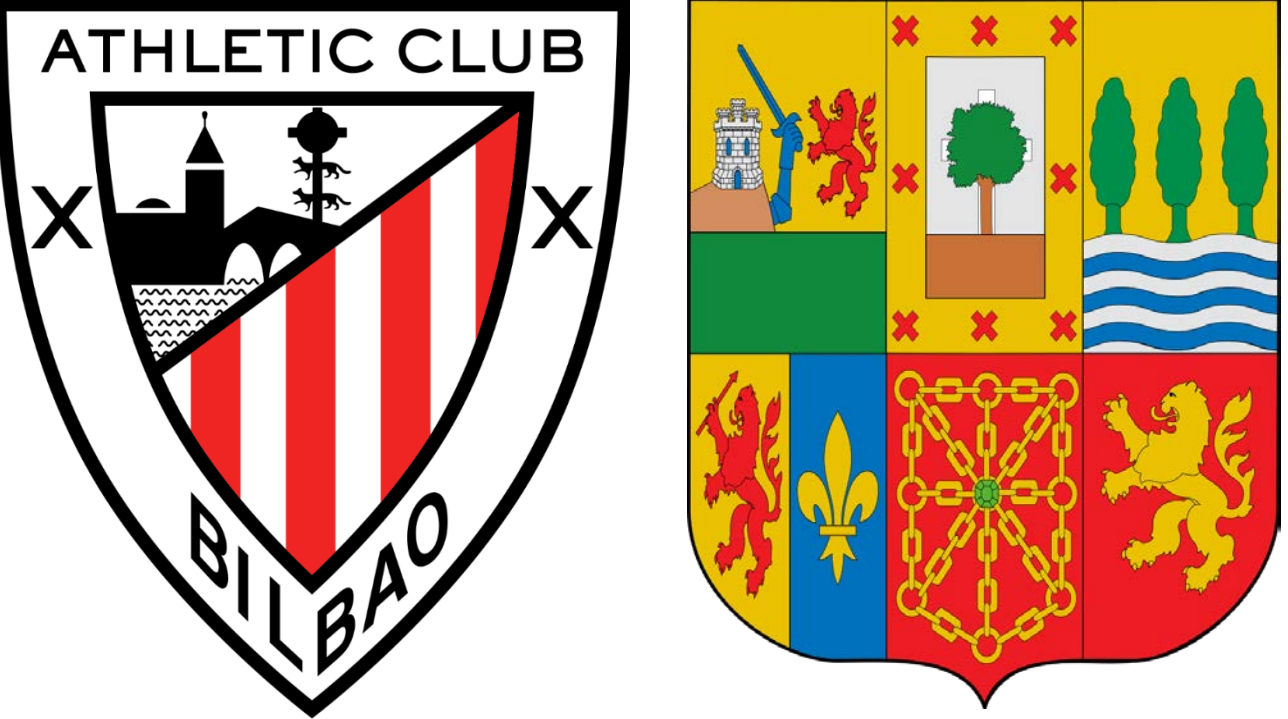




The beginning, political context and forming of Basque identity

Football in Vizcaya (Bizkaia) region emerged at the end of the 19-th century in and around the port town of Bilbao, just two decades after the end of the Second Spanish Carlist War. Its forefathers were a group of British enthusiasts who already lived in the area and young local students. The passion for the new game quickly evolved into the birth of Athletic Club de Bilbao 1898. As Rojo-Labaien states, along with religion and war, football is one of the most powerful means in terms of collective mobilisation and identity expression and have the ability to unite people. In the area, football and nationalism emerged at the same time, Sabino Arana formed the Basque Nationalist Party and created the term *Euzkadi* to identify the Basque Nation. The strong Basque nationalist ideals manifested in a football philosophy that only players born in the Basque country can ever play for the Athletic, *la cantera*. Coincidence or not, football and Basque national identity were to form a symbolic relationship to last (Rojo-Labaien, 2017).

The game’s popularity spread out from the area quickly. Basque youngsters studying in Madrid even formed a brunch football club to represent their Basque identity in the capital, called Atletico de Madrid. Yet, Basque players dominated on the football pitch. Famous with their rough and physical style of play, adopted from its British founders, Athletic went to win Copa del Rey (the King’s cup) 9 times until the mid 1920’s (Gyori Szabo, 2013). Moreover, Basque players formed half of the team representing Spain at the 1920 Olympic games. Although the team won silver medals, they faced criticism from the governance in Madrid for fielding too many Basques. A third of Spain’s population do not consider themselves Castilian (national identity referring to the region of the capital – *Castilla y Leon*), and many provinces are still striving for autonomy and independence from Madrid (Castillo, 2008). Ever since its forming, Athletic’s team was recognised by the locals as the *equipo Euzkadi* and their successful tour in the 1930’s in Europe, Latin America and even the Soviet Union was seen as a manifestation and popularization of the Basque identity worldwide (Giog, 2008). The team was also used by the Basque government as a political tool promoting the *Euzkadi* country during the Spanish Civil War, only to see most of their plans destroyed by FIFA and Franco’s repressive totalitarianism (Zakravsky, 2016).

The Spanish Civil War in the late 1930’s and the following 4 decades of Franco’s dictatorship diminished the success of Athletic. Furthermore, in an attempt to unify the Spanish nation, Franco’s regime prohibited the Basque identity, their flag and their language, and Hispanicize Basque names (Shulman, 2004). Robertson suggest that modern national identities emerge from political and economic systems, and nationalism becomes stronger when oppressed (Robertson, 1992; Crolley and Hand, 2006). That was the case with the Basques and for long time the stadiums were the only places to one can express their belonging and political views. Nationalists movements became so strong that they evolve into extremism – ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*-Basque country and freedom) fought against the dictatorship regime since the 1960’s. Their activity aimed at promoting of Basque culture and identity, but soon became violent and extreme in its methods (Goig, 2008). To understand Basque, it is important one to understand the history background of Basque society and the events forming that identity over the years.



Current Athletic Bilbao players (2018-19).
Picture from: *athletic-club.es*



Aritz Aduriz – *Euzkadi* and *Athletic de Bilbao* (2016).Picture from: *sport.net*

Euzkadi against football globalisation. *Athletic de Bilbao* case study



The Champions team of Athletic Bilbao (1930). Picture from: *athletic-club.es*

Globailsation of football

Gulianotti and Robertson defines *glocalisation* as the difference or similarity between the local and the global in particular cultural environment. As such, *glocalisation* is a feature of globalisation that refers to the process of modifying the global trends for the use of the local community. In football context, that means establishing local traditions in a global football phenomena, such as playing styles, recruitment practice, techniques and different game formats (Gulianotti and Robertson, 2004).

In the case of Athletic, the football club is a social and cultural institution that represents the Basque identity and a local football philosophy, hence it has a strong degree of *glocality*. By fielding only players born and bred in the Basque country, Athletic strengthen its symbolic relationship with its community (Castro-Ramos, 2008). Yet, resisting the process of football globalisation and players’ migration is far from easy for the Bilbao team. In the European contemporary football market, Shulman (2004) suggest that relying only on local talent is practically suicidal. With less than 3 million population in the Basque region, Shulman does have a point, yet Athletic resist the temptation of football globalisation and preserve their long standing traditions.

Bilbainos are extremely proud of what they are in cultural and political context, as they are unique in this sense. Only few examples of similar traditions can be seen in contemporary sport worldwide – St Pauli(Germany), Celtic(Scotland) and Livorno(Italy) has strongly politicised fandom, Piacenza(Italy) and Montreal Canadiens(Quebec) also stand out with their recruitment practices (Shulman, 2004; McDougall, 2013; Totten, 2016; Doidge, 2013; The New York Times, 2017). Political, cultural and identity expression through football can serve as a catalyst for serious conflicts, and the cases of the 100 hours war between El Salvador and Honduras in the late 1960’s and the riots in Zagreb (which led to the war in former Yugoslavia) in the 1990’s, can prove that (Sack and Suster, 2000; Shulman, 2004).

Basque Pride and the “Grassroots post-modernism”

Unique in its philosophy, Athletic were lacking behind competitively in recent years. The last time they become champions was in the 1984 and since then they have not got much success. Certainly, based on their ideals, the team suffers in the aftermath of the Bosman rule. Football market became more and more globalised and Athletic had to be creative in their recruitment thinking, still they manage to be one of the only three teams never to be relegated from *Primera Division*, with Real Madrid and Barcelona being the other two teams (Tunon and Brey, 2012).

Although Athletic were proud of this achievement, and proud of their own traditions and identity, the Bilbao team slightly “relaxed” their strict recruitment policy in recent years (Groves, 2011). From Arana’s Basque by blood only in the early years of the team, to recruiting players developed in the Basque country nowadays, Athletic is finding a path of doing things their way, preserving their identity and adapting to the contemporary trends. Gulianotti and Robertson states that football is the ultimate manifestation of globalisation and the process often refers to fan’s and community’s alienation from their club (Vaszi, 2014). In contrast however, Bilbao apply their concept in a distinctive local pattern by symbolically empowering its community.



San Mamés Stadium (2018). Picture from: *athletic-club.es*

“Athletic Bilbao is more than a football club, it is a feeling and as such its ways of operating often escape rational analysis. We see ourselves as unique in world of football and this defines our identity. We do not say that we are better or worse than others, merely different. We only wish for the sons of our soil to represent our club, and in so wishing we stand out as a sporting entity, not a business concept. We wish to mould our players into men, not footballers, and each time that a player from the la cantera makes his debut we feel we have realized an objective which is in harmony with the ideologies of our founders and forefathers”

Jose Maria Arrate, Athletic President at the club’s 100-th anniversary (Eurosport, 2014)

“Por amor propio” – for the love for oneself!

Unique in the sense of 21-st century football, Athletic stay true to their traditions, Basque culture and identity. Heavily relying on their own community for more than a century they resist the globalisation in contemporary football and are proud on their achievement. Against all odds, *Athletic de Bilbao* remain in *Primera* and is likely to last. That is remarkable and admirable in terms of football romanticism. However, few points need addressing in their case in future: Does Athletic represent the whole of the Basque nation? Are they shifting the definition of Basque identity? Can less than 3 million of population constantly produce football talent in future? Are the fans attracted to the club or are simply just afraid to abandon it, as it represents who they are? MacClancy (in Vaszi, 2014, p. 192) summarize *Euzkadi* as:

“We were different. We knew we were different. We were told we were different”



The unrecognised Basque Country includes 4 Spanish and 3 French provinces (2016). Picture from: *wikimedia.org*

Taking advantage of glocalisation. Giving back to the community

By all means Athletic recruitment policy is unique. Their local Basque rivals from San Sebastian – Real Sociedad, gave up on similar tradition in the late 1980’s (Gyori Szabo, 2013) when they signed a foreign player. It is interesting that globalisation processes of other teams in the Basque country benefited Bilbao too. Since they are the biggest team in the region, they take advantage of other teams academy players as they fit their criteria. Such players are Kenan Kodro who is Bosnian national and Inaki Williams who has Liberian parents and also came through the Basque academies (El Diario Vasco, 2019).

Athletic Bilbao has a strong symbolic relationship with their local community, just as an example: the new San Mames stadium Athletic opened in 2013 was publically funded, managed and built, 100%Athletic was their own local kit brand and when they have finally decided to give up a century old no-logo-on-our-kit tradition, they again stayed local by signing sponsorship contracts with Basque companies (Kirolbet, 2019; Marca, 2008; Reuters, 2008; Visitsanmames, 2019).

On another side, global football market has made it almost impossible for Bilbao to keep their best players, as they are offered better wages elsewhere. Since 2013 just by selling of 4 players (Martinez – Bayern; Herera – Man U; Laporte – Man C and Arrizabalaga – Chelsea) the club assimilated over 200 million euros (Transfermarkt, 2019). With Athletic club’s Fundazioa, started in 2002, the club caters for its local community in a variety of cultural and social projects, such as Bizitegi(football participation), ADSIS(social integration for prisoners), Futbola Buruan(for mentally ill), Bakuva(social inclusion), Think football(film festival) and many more (Athletic-Club, 2019). As Castillo(2007) suggest, Athletic is a living proof that with strong sense of belonging and shared values, the local community can bend the rules of globalisation and persist its traditions and national identity. Indeed, football’s ability to rise beyond social class enables feelings of common goal, which enhance communities’ building capacity (Tunon and Brey, 2012).

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