

## CATALONIA BACKGROUND INFORMATION [SERIES E / 2014 / 8.1 / EN]

**Date: 26/09/2014**

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### THE VAL D'ARAN, THE OCCITAN IDENTITY OF CATALONIA

#### Geographic Context, Introduction

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The Val d'Aran, with its 600 square kilometres and 10,000 inhabitants, is located at the centre of the Pyrenees Mountains, where Occitania and Catalonia meet. The former, on the north, with which it is naturally communicated through the Garona River. Catalonia, to the south, is blocked by the mountains, but artificially communicated through the tunnel of Viehla.

The sentiments of Aran are weaved from both its Occitan soul and its Catalan spirit. Throughout its history, particularly the past 700 years, Aran has repeatedly demonstrated its attachment and free association with Catalonia. Throughout the centuries, Aran has been and is Catalonia. However, Aran speaks Occitan, participates in the construction of the distinctive character of its language, and validates the notion that language is the expression of a way to understand life. Aran sees itself as Occitan and knows itself as Catalan.

Aranese, the language of Aran, the name given to Occitan in Val d'Aran, was the language of the troubadours, that which in the Middle Ages magically enchanted all of society and for centuries served as a reference of civilization, culture, maturity, and intellect. The troubadours were creators of poetry, they were the poets of the cult of the woman as a venerable being, and towards the end of the Middle Ages they developed a unique technic and a splendid quantity of poems for all of Occitania, Catalonia, and beyond.

Occitan has enjoyed the Nobel Prize winning work of Frederic Mistral and still today produces literature of the highest standard that is translated into all the languages of the world. The linguistic territory of Occitania occupies around 200,000 square kilometres, mostly in the French state, and contains approximately 16 million people. Part of Occitania, with approximately 180,000 inhabitants, is located in the alpine valleys of the Italian region of Piedmont.

#### Historical Context

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The north-south relationship throughout the Pyrenees has been a constant, eventually enduring a severe repression, which culminated in the 1213 Battle of Murèth (a town south of Toulouse), where the French troops, aided by the

Croatians, defeated a Catalan-Occitan coalition. The French troops, with the participation of the Church of Rome, initiated a process of repression against the Cathar heresy that took root in Occitania. This process, which rapidly transformed into a crusade, represented the desire of annexation of the Occitan territories by France. The various Occitan territories requested the help of King Peter I of Catalonia, he acquiesced and these territories thus came under his protection. This meant that for the first 9 months of 1213, this alliance of territories could henceforth serve as a precedent for what could have been an Occitan-Catalan state in Central Europe. Unfortunately, on the 12 of September of that same year, the Occitan-Catalan troops lost the Battle at Murèth, and as a consequence Occitania entered a long period of decadence and repression.

The Val d'Aran has always sought adhesion to Catalonia; it has always understood that its distinctiveness, personality, and necessities would be better understood by Catalonia.

After the Treaty of Poissy, signed on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April of 1313, which returned the Val d'Aran to the Catalan-Aragonese crown, the Val d'Aran was handed over as a possession to representatives of James II of Aragon by representatives of the King of Mallorca. The same year, a delegation from Aran travelled to Lleida to pledge allegiance to James II of Aragon. That August, the King ratified the privileges of the Val d'Aran, which had been recorded since ancient times in the renowned document of *Era Querimònia*. In this document the King recognized in Aran a series of privileges in the use of public properties, social issues and its structure, while assuring it an exclusive administration, separate from that of Aragon. *Era Querimònia* recognized particular judicial principles. Such as the right of *Torneria*, a sort of acquisition right, or *Mieja Guadanheria*, an act of matrimonial conviviality, which together with other principles of Aranese civil law have survived to the present day and are recognized in different compilations.

With its autonomy now recognized, disassociated from Aragon, Aran initiated a process marked by diverse events in which the people of Aran demonstrated their adhesion to Catalonia. Fruit of the advances made by Aran in its relation to Catalonia, Alfonso the Kind authorized Aran to use the currency of Barcelona in 1328. Later, in 1381, Peter IV of Aragon pledged to never again separate Aran from Catalonia and of the County of Barcelona. Aran found the conciliatory and consensual character of Catalan institutions strongly appealing.

In the War of the Spanish Succession, at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Aran fought on the side of Catalonia in favour of Charles III of Austria, for which it would later be severely punished. A minority group led by the Baron of Les, took the side of Phillip V, who when victorious, proclaimed the Baron governor of Aran, a title from which he could carry out his vengeance.

Throughout its history, it is worth underlining the sentiment of autonomy and possession that characterizes the people of Aran. Its natural isolation in the mountains reinforces the necessity of Aran to sign and comply with agreements reached with their neighbours. It is worth remembering that the Treaties called *de Lies e Patzeries*, renewed throughout 500 years, were instated despite the

policies of the state. The people of Aran reached agreements to share pasturing lands and to maintain peace with the neighbouring valleys.

## Sociolinguistic Context

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During 800 years, the language of Aran had kept itself insulated, naturally entrenched by the snow and the marvellous landscapes. Now, with democracy and next to Catalonia, Aranese, the local variety of Occitan, has obtained strong institutional protection. Aranese is now the language used in all the schools of the Val d'Aran where children become literate in Occitan. A majority of the children in Aran are not born there. There are children that have as mother tongue Catalan and others Spanish, some of whom come from South America. There are also many children who speak Romanian or who come from North Africa, mostly speaking Tamazight. There is a great ethno-linguistic diversity, which also includes small groups from other places such as China, Korea, Nepal, etc... In such a diverse linguistic landscape, the language of cohesion, of the schools, is the native language of the territory, Occitan. This does not pose a problem for the children and there exists a serene consensus regarding language.

Aranese is also strongly present in the public administration, city council meetings, activities of the *Conselh Generau d'Aran*, on street signs (where it is the only language used to designate topography), and to a lesser extent it is also visible in the media with some radio and television programmes in the institutional media of the Catalan Corporation of Radio and Television, on the channel of the city of Barcelona BTV, and in the private channel Lleida-TV, where it is present every day for about half an hour.

Aran maintains the spirit of Occitan-Catalan relations and consolidates its relationship with Catalonia all while demonstrating and continuously reiterating its distinctive personality. Its language, despite being subject to strong protection, is suffering from a grave decline in its use as common language. Although it is true that in formal aspects and prestige it enjoys the most potent consideration in all of its history, in its informal use as a language of common everyday communication, it is suffering from serious issues that are bringing it to its lowest level of use in the past thousand years. The Castilian language, with an enormous pressure and capacity for linguistic substitution is increasingly occupying space. This phenomenon starts in the private spheres and extends to public use. The territory of Aran is too small to achieve the minimum required structures in a globalized world. Socio-linguistically, for a language to survive, it needs a conscience, protection and certain conditions in a sufficiently large demographic space. This space is what is missing in Aran. Occitania has the space, but it is missing all the rest. It will be necessary for the perseverance of the people of Aran and the assistance of the Catalans to help reverse this impetus.

## Relations Between Aran and Catalonia

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The 1979 Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia recognizes the need to promote the Aranese language and recuperate its historic institutions. In 1990, legislation of the Catalan Parliament re-established the *Conselh Generau d'Aran* as it had existed throughout the past. In the same legislation, Aranese was declared the official and native language of the Val d'Aran, and the regulation of this competence was granted to the *Conselh Generau d'Aran*. It is the first time in history that the Occitan language is declared official. The *Conselh Generau d'Aran* has effectively exercised this competence, mandating the teaching of Aranese, promoting its literature, facilitating courses and implementing campaigns. The language has led to the recovery of a traditional and centuries-old government, a government which has been assigned the task of protecting the language.

These considerations were precursors of a more important recognition, since in 2006, the reform of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, the Occitan language, or Aranese, was declared an official language in all of Catalonia. This unprecedented act created an extraordinary space of promotion and respect, granting official status over a population of seven and half million people, to a millennial language based in a territory of only ten thousand inhabitants. Catalonia showed the rest of the world that, with regard to language, size does not matter and dignity does not depend on the number of speakers.

The Statute of Autonomy passed several stages of democratic approval, the Parliament of Catalonia, the Spanish Congress of Deputies, and the referendum in Catalonia. Occitan is thus an official language by acceptance of these three democratic institutions.

In the same process of declaring the official status of the Occitan language, the Parliament of Catalonia approved that Aran is an "Occitan national reality". Catalonia again demonstrated a special sensibility to the small population of the people of Aran and their distinctive personality. Unfortunately this declaration did not pass the filter of the Spanish Congress of Deputies. Catalonia, once again, demonstrated to the world its social psychology regarding identity. Finally, in the Statute of Autonomy, there remained only a reference to an "Occitan reality". The "national" consideration was eliminated by the Spanish Congress.

With the aim of developing its official status as stipulated in the Statute of Autonomy, in 2010, the Parliament approved the Occitan law (or Aranese in Aran), outlining the rights and duties, perceptions and interpretations regarding the native language of the people of Aran. As a consequence of the development of this legislation, in January 2014, the government of the *Generalitat* of Catalonia promoted a Decree establishing the Academy of the Occitan Language, in the Institute of Aranese studies, the sole institution of its kind with recognized linguistic authority over Occitan.

The institutional recognition of Aranese has effects that go beyond the territory of Catalonia, since the declaration of official status means it is also the fifth

official language of the Spanish state. This circumstance entails certain positive repercussions internationally, for example, that it can now be used in certain European forums or in the Spanish Senate. These secondary effects of having official status are surely insufficient; however, keeping in mind that they emerge from a small territory of only 10,000 inhabitants, they are certainly considerable.

In France and Italy, Occitan maintains a certain production in literature and music, but does not have any consideration beyond the cultural level.

Occitania is alive in Catalonia, alive in Aran. Catalonia is the successful part of Occitania.

## Conselh Generau d'Aran

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The *Conselh Generau d'Aran*, a historic institution of Aran, with a documented existence going back to the Middle Ages, has recently been re-established to serve as a form of self-government that has as chief competence to foment and promote the native language of Aran. Given the understanding that language manifests itself in all spheres of life, the government of Aran has competences in a diversity of social areas, because a government that has language as its sole competence would not be properly considered a government. Now is possibly the time in its history, in which it has held the largest share of competences.

The *Conselh Generau d'Aran*, as recorded in history, is currently constituted by thirteen councillors, directly elected by each of the six *Terçons*, which are the historic administrative territorial units. The thirteen councillors then elect among themselves a president, the *Sindic d'Aran*.

The *Conselh Generau d'Aran* guarantees the protection of Aranese in its territory, and also participates in efforts to promote it. For Occitan, such efforts are undertaken by the *Generalitat* of Catalonia.

## Conclusion

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Despite the defeat of Murèth, despite the difficulties in which the local language finds itself north of the Pyrenees, despite the displacement of Aranese by Spanish in common use, the natural relationship between Catalonia and Occitania has been constant. With the arrival of democracy Aran has wanted to be the standard-bearer of these relations. The *Conselh Generau d'Aran*, with the support of other administrations, particularly the *Generalitat*, organizes key acts, such as the meeting of mayors of paired Occitan-Catalan towns, Occitan-Catalan conferences, as well as a variety of demonstrations. The *Generalitat* on its own account also promotes important aspects such as the maintaining of the *Grop de Lingüística Occitana* and the Advisory Council of the *Generalitat* on the Occitan language, formed by specialists from all over the territory. Other administrations, such as the City Council of Barcelona, maintain a strong

presence of Occitan in their cultural events, as for example, in the information sheets in all of their museums. It is also worth noting the efforts of the Deputation of Lleida (Lleida province council), which promotes the literary competition in Occitan with the highest monetary prize. The conscience of the Occitan language is, in these times, a value established throughout Catalonia.

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