

# **COWS, SHEEP, PEASANTS AND LANDOWNERS. THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF ANIMAL SPACES IN A RURAL REGION OF WESTERN SPAIN**

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## **Summary**

*This paper analyzes the human management of animal spaces in a rural area of Western Spain : the Sayago region (province of Zamora). This land is well known in the Spanish ethnographical literature because of its agrarian collectivist uses, in spite of the many changes that have happened in the last three decades. The author studies the traditional structures and contemporary systems, as well in the smallholding exploitations as in the large rural states, the so-called dehesas.*

## **Résumé**

*Vaches, moutons, paysans et propriétaires fonciers. La logique sociale des espaces animaux dans une région rurale de l'Espagne occidentale.*

*La région de Sayago (Zamora, Espagne) est connue par certains textes ethnographiques qui portent sur ses pratiques agraires de caractère communal ou collectiviste, ainsi que par la rusticité de ses habitudes. Néanmoins, sur ce territoire il y a eu, depuis les premiers siècles du Moyen Age, un grand nombre de propriétés rustiques privées, les dehesas, ayant des caractéristiques très particulières. Dans cet article on présente brièvement les modèles d'appropriation et d'exploitation du milieu par les populations rurales et les populations des dehesas, ainsi que les différents systèmes d'organisation des espaces humains, agricoles et d'élevage.*

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## **Key Words**

*Collectivism, Peasants, Large rural states, Cattle raising.*

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## **Mots clés**

*Collectivisme, Paysans, Grande propriété, Elevage.*

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This article can be considered as a brief synthesis of some of the questions previously treated in two books by the same author, both dealing with the Spanish region of Sayago. The first of these books (Sánchez Gómez, 1991) studies the livestock culture of Sayago considering both the so called " traditional period " and recent economic changes. The second one (Sánchez Gómez, 1993a) deals with a specific model of a large rural estate, the *dehesa*, that shares the territory of Sayago with the traditional small property system of the villages.

## **The geographic space**

It is out of the question that the relationship between humans and animals has historically involved, with very few exceptions, the transformation, occupation and usurpation of

animal space. It is obviously in the rural environment where the connections between human and animal spaces are more evident. This is especially true in those areas with scarcely mechanized farming systems which are characterized by the breeding of a wide variety of animal species in a range of geographic and social environments.

The geographical area with which this study is concerned is located in Western Spain, more precisely in the province of Zamora : the region historically called "Tierra de Sayago" (Land of Sayago) or simply, " Sayago". This area has been prominent in Spanish ethnography after the research carried out by Joaquín Costa (1981, 1983) at the end of the last century. He first made known the collectivism of Sayago, which consisted of a set of communal labour practices and, especially, some

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communal methods of appropriation and exploitation of the pasture, the farmland and the forest<sup>(1)</sup>.

The result of these considerations has been a simplistic image of Sayago, as an autarchic economic regime mainly based on farming and shepherding. This model is only partially true.

According to these views, the economy of Sayago was based on the growing of cereals -rye, barley and a little wheat- and vegetables in small private plots in the surroundings of the villages. In addition to that, rye was also exploited in communal lands which were yearly divided among the neighbours. These cereals were used for both bread baking -wheat and rye- and as animal feed, either as greens, grain or flour. Agriculture was complemented with cattle raising or, more precisely, with shepherding. Most Sayaguese people owned a yoke of cows for ploughing, a couple of donkeys for transport and drawing, one or more pigs for domestic use, and a small flock.

The typical image of Sayaguese people as shepherds derives from this last activity which never was either exclusive or distinctively relevant for the economy of the region. It is true, however, that this flock of sheep -around 20 and 40 animals in most cases- provided its owners with wool, some money from the sale of lambs and rams and, above all, with high quality fertiliser for their farmlands. These activities were complemented by the exploitation of the communal forest. This provided pasture and both oak and holm acorns for the cattle, firewood from the trees mentioned above and from bushes of cistus, and a few other secondary resources such as game and stone (granite) for building houses.

This depiction of Sayago is historically accurate only to a certain extent. Its economy has not been by any means as autarchic as those studies describe. Be that as it may, the Sayaguese world has changed radically in the last thirty years due to the emigration of its inhabitants and the almost complete integration in the capitalist system of those Sayaguese who stayed.

Sayago never had an exclusively communal and mainly autarchic small property system. Together with this model, there has been for centuries in Sayago an example of large estate exploitation that in Spain is called *dehesa*<sup>(2)</sup>.

The owners of the *dehesas* from Sayago have been historically the Church (cathedral councils and religious orders), the aristocracy and, in more recent times, the bourgeoisie. Although some of these *dehesas* were larger in the past, today their area fluctuate between 500 and 1000 hectares. In 1993 there were 53 private property *dehesas* in the region, all of them being of more than 100 hectares, which covered an area of about 25815 hectares. Fifteen of them -27,77 %- were rented, and the rest -72,22 %- were directly exploited by their owners. Considering that, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, the region of Sayago has an area of 147914 hectares, the *dehesas* cover 17,45 %. Before the disentanglements of the XIXth century, the *dehesas* occupied almost 28 % of Sayago. We shall explain now the way human and animal spaces are articulated in the two main models mentioned above : on the one hand the communal and private lands owned by the peasants and, on the other, the large estates or *dehesas*.

### **The social logic of animal spaces in the rural environment**

The organization and distribution of both animal and human spaces have followed fairly stable rules until the sixties. For the previous two centuries there was what could be called a traditional structure, defined by a specific landscape organization which has completely disappeared in the last decades. Leaving aside the realm of large private estates (to which we shall refer later), most of the fifty-four villages of Sayago followed a very similar model of spatial organization. The buildings within the village used to be rather distant from each other due to the private yards and small fenced areas called *cortinas* -kitchen gardens, small meadows or farmlands- existing between them (Fig. 1). There is usually a yard in front of the house with animal spaces at both sides : mainly the pigsty, the chicken coop and the stalls for the working cows or the donkeys. The other adult bovine cattle usually spent the night outside the stalls, enclosed in a *cortina* at the outskirts of the village. The small sheep herd owned by each family was kept in private meadows or farmlands, being used so that their dung fertilized the fields. There was a covered shelter -the *tenada*- available for the sheep in case of special

<sup>(1)</sup>There is a rich bibliography about the Iberian communalism or collectivism giving different interpretations. Concerning Spain, in addition to the works by J. Costa already mentioned, there should be mentioned the studies by Cabo Alonso (1956) Arguedas (1987), Behar (1986), Freeman (1970 ; 1991) and Sánchez Gómez (1991). For Portugal, the works by Dias (1983 ; 1984), Portela (1986), Pais de Brito (1990) and O'Neill (1984 ; 1991).

<sup>(2)</sup>In order to understand the particularities of the *dehesa*, with regard to other large estate models, consult the studies by Teijón Laso (1948), Martín Galindo (1966), Comité Español del Programa M.A.B. (1978-82), Campos Palacín (1984), Equipe de Recherche (1986), Gómez Gutiérrez (ed.) (1992) and Sánchez Gómez (1993b).



**Fig. 1 :** *Cortinas*, village of Villamor de Cadozos.

necessity, but this was usually separated from the house. All the cattle was usually nourished through herding, using different areas for the different species of cattle.

### Communal pasture lands

The *valles* and *riveras* - “valleys” and “brooks”- were and still are the main pasture lands in Sayago. Neither of these two words has the same meaning in Sayago as in standard Spanish or English. *Valle* in Spanish -as “valley” in English- means a plain between mountains. *Rivera*<sup>(3)</sup> -as “brook” in English- means a small flow of water. In Sayago, however, *valles* are the open areas located between the *cortinas* : they are both pasture lands and cattle tracks which spread out to the limits of the forest. *Riveras*, on the other hand, are the areas of green pasture surrounding the

brooks (Fig. 2 and 3). *Valles* and *riveras* are usually rich in grass during spring and autumn. The *valles* are the most valuable of the two due to the fact that the *riveras* are frequently flooded. *Valle* often has a more specific meaning referring to the pasture lands located within the cultivated area. These *valles* are closed -*cotados*- most of the year, only those kept as fallow lands remaining open. All these pasture lands have been exploited according to a system of openings and closures by which people and animals have or have not access to the lands and valleys in different seasons. This is a complex system which not only affects the pasture lands, but also the farmlands and stubble fields.

In order to understand how the process works it is necessary to refer to the cultivation system. Except for the small private fenced lands, most farmlands are communal. Every year these communal lands are divided into portions called *quiñones*, *vecindades* or *labranzas* among the legally recognized inhabitants, the *vecinos*. These open lands are scattered among the forests and valleys, which are exploited according to an alternating annual -*año y vez*-cultivation system.

This system has been working in Sayago since the end of the last century<sup>(4)</sup>. According to it, the communal and private farmland is divided into two *hojas* or sections. One of them is cultivated and the other remains fallow. The year after, the fallow section is the cultivated one, and so on. When the sowing starts, in September or October, the land left fallow is legally closed off -*cotada*- from both men and animals. The closure can be continuous until May, but an opening for a fortnight between December and January is quite usual to allow the cattle to profit from the new grass.



**Fig. 2 :** *Rivera* and *cortinas*, village of Gáname.



**Fig. 3 :** Sheep pasturing in a *valle*, Gáname.

<sup>(3)</sup>The meaning of the Spanish word *rivera* is different from *ribera*. The later means riverside or river bank.

<sup>(4)</sup>In earlier periods the cultivation system was mostly organized in three sections.

From May onwards, even during the harvest period, there are some valleys open to the cows and equine, which can only pasture for a specific time -usually two or three hours- in the evenings. Once the harvest is finished, the stubble fields from both communal and unfenced private farmlands are left free for the cattle. The harvested section then enters its phase as fallow land and remains open until the next sowing. However, there is one more exception. Some specific valleys of the open section cannot be exploited -the *gadañas* or *guadañas*<sup>(5)</sup>. These areas are closed between March and May, being destined after this period to nourish the working cattle. Nowadays, however, nobody ploughs land with cows and the cattle is exploited exclusively for commercial purposes.

Closure normatives do not only affect the dates, but also regulate the entrance to and the exit of the cattle from the valleys. Till not long ago, it was usual in many villages that the entrances to the valleys were guarded by vigilants or bell ringers, *campaneros*. A first chime announced the exit of the cattle from the stalls, and a second one was the sign for the entrance to the valleys. This system hindered the cattle of the *vecinos* living near the valley from always entering before the others.

During the period we have called "traditional", the closure regulations, as described above, were generally accepted. The reservation of the pasture for cows benefited most of the people, because almost all the villagers had a yoke for work. There were obviously some problems, but these were mostly related either to the dates of openings and closures or, more frequently, to the breaking of the norms of closure by allowing the entrance of animals to the closed section. The situation has changed quite a lot in the last decades due to the rupture of the existing balance between the cattle and the sheep. Nowadays, the working cattle have almost disappeared and sheep exploitation has changed radically. Most of the systems of exploitation that less than 20 years ago mixed sheep and cows (even though these were only for work) have now become specialized units of either sheep for their meat and milk, or cows mostly for their milk and more rarely for the meat. As a result, we have a radically different consideration of the closure system depending on its use for cows or sheep. On the one hand, the bovine stockbreeder tries to preserve the traditional model, because it keeps the pasture of some valleys for the cows both in the closed and the open sections. On the other hand, the sheep owner wants to cancel the system or, at least, to reduce the pastures

reserved for the cows. Consequently, the conflict between them is almost permanent.

Valleys and stubble fields are not, however, the only pastures. The other main source of pasture is the communal forest that is placed beyond the ring of *cortinas* and shares some spaces with the communal farmlands.

The most usual trees of the forest are the evergreen oaks and the gall oaks, whereas the kermes oaks, brooms, *cistus* and thyme are the most usual shrubs. Although the forest vegetation obviously does not produce high quality pasture, evergreen oak leaves and *cistus* shoots provide the food for certain animals. The evergreen oak acorn, however, is the main nourishing resource produced by the forest. Because of the high qualities of this fruit for swine breeding, until the beginning of the XXth century it was not directly exploited by shepherding but picked up by hand and delivered to the community, since this method allowed a more intensive exploitation. Nowadays, pigs are no longer fed with acorns, but nourished with fodder and traditional mashes of potatoes, cabbages and other cooked vegetables. Acorns are not picked up from the trees anymore, but they are taken directly from the ground by the sheep, goats and cattle, for which they provide good nourishment in winter.

Forest exploitation has always participated in the section system of cultivation, the entrance of animals being regulated by the same method of closures. Furthermore, until the 1960s most of the forest area was still divided into pieces among neighbours for cultivation. It was thus necessary to organize the exploitation of this space both as pasture and as stubble. It was usual in the past, and still is even now to a lesser extent, to forbid the entrance of goats to this space except for certain steep areas, the so called *los Arribes* or *las Arribes*. These are mainly the riversides of the rivers Tormes and Duero that flow through narrow valleys surrounded by very steep slopes up to 300 meters high, where shepherding is quite a difficult and dangerous task.

The depopulation process of the last three decades has provoked the progressive withdrawal of cultivation in forest spaces. As a result, this space has lost the traditional human character to recover some of its original savage qualities, such as the uncontrolled growing of shrubs that makes the forest almost impenetrable. The former human space has become a land of "wild beasts" and even wolves -nearly extinct for many years- have returned. The Sayaguese interpret this as a sign of decadence, and some elderly people even claim that this return to savagery is being promoted by the government. They believe that the

<sup>(5)</sup>Despite *guadaña* means sickle, the grass of these valleys is not cut. Probably the word derives from the portuguese *gado*, "cattle", Sayago is close to the borderline with Portugal.

administration is deliberately introducing wolves and wild boars in order to expel the people from their lands and villages and to transform the region into a sort of zoological park for the enjoyment of the people from the cities<sup>(6)</sup>.

### Private meadows and farmlands

The use of communal pasture lands is complemented by the products derived from the exploitation of private areas : grass, fresh and dry cereals -barley and rye- and turnips. There are other less important fodder plants, such as alfalfa, radish, beet, oat and carob beans. Most private meadows and farmlands are walled parcels, *cortinas*, as we already saw. These spaces are only exploited privately and they are used most of the year to enclose the cattle at night. The quantitative importance of the walled meadows has been (and still is today), quite limited. We say "walled" because this has been the way they have traditionally been delimited. However, there are also private meadows without walls. These derive from the *dehesas* some villages bought by the second half of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth, which resulted in the formation of private meadows that only exceptionally were walled. Some of these unwalled lands are also partially cultivated and their owners have organized an association to exploit the pasture and stubble communally. There is -or was- an established system by which every owner would pay cash according to the meadows and farmlands owned.

The private cereal farmlands -*cortineo*- mentioned above have a more relevant role than the walled meadows. These are still the main suppliers of nourishment for the cattle alongside the natural pastures, and their importance has been gradually increasing in recent years. As in the communal farmland, rye has traditionally been the most intensively cultivated cereal in the *cortineo*. The methods of exploitation, however, are quite different in each case. Whereas the rye of the communal land is only harvested dry in summer, in the private lands it is harvested both dry in summer and fresh in winter-spring. Barley follows rye in importance and is also exploited both dry and fresh. The lesser importance of barley with regard to rye derives from the more complex care needed for the former and the double use of the latter, both as brown bread for human consumption and as fodder -fresh, as grain or as flour- for any sort of cattle. Nowadays the situation is quite different since the baking of rye bread disappeared about thirty years ago, and because of the better quality of barley both as fodder -fresh and dry- and as straw.

As we already said, the organization of both private and communal spaces has radically changed in the last decades. The abandonment of the lands is all the more evident in the forest and the old communal farmlands which have been occupied by a more or less wild nature. Only a few private meadows and lands located near the villages are still exploited with some intensity. The cattle have lost their traditional spaces, and now they are occupying lands placed much closer to the village than ever before. The reasons for this are both the savage condition of the forest and communal lands and the attention demanded now for cattle provoked by the substitution of the autochthonous breeds, the daily milking and so on.

### Animal and human spaces in the *dehesas*

Most *dehesas* were rented by their owners to wealthy cattlemen until the beginning of the XXth century. These wealthy tenants bred their sheep and cows in them and also had some parcels of land cultivated by servants. Neither landowners nor tenants used to live in the *dehesas*, only the servants and shepherds. It was usual for the villagers located nearby to be communal tenants of the *dehesas* ; in that way they could increase their old private and communal properties with new pastures and farmlands. In this case the rented *dehesas* were assimilated with the cultivation system already studied, same regulations and restrictions upon the use of pasture, cultivated land and stubble fields being applied. This was possible because very few *dehesas* were walled.

The situation changed during the first third of the XXth century and especially after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Traditional absentee landlords were replaced by a mercantile bourgeoisie that could not afford a mere collection of rents. The new owners progressively gave up the renting of the *dehesas* and started their direct exploitation. These changes obviously affected those wealthy tenants who had to look for new pasture lands for their herds, but the negative consequences of this were especially acute for the tenant villages, whose population had very much grown during the period 1940-1960 and now lacked the farmland to sustain them. Emigration was thus the only way out for many families.

The spread of direct exploitation resulted in a well known model of " traditional *dehesa* ". Like the *dehesas* in other areas of the Iberian peninsula, the *dehesa* of Sayago became a large agricultural and livestock estate exploited in a very extensive way. The main resource was the cattle

<sup>(6)</sup>This opinion has to do with the plans for creating the *Arribes del Duero* natural park which would include the riverside cliffs of the Duero in Zamora and Salamanca, by the Spanish-Portuguese border line.



**Fig. 4 :** Dehesa of Llamas, house of the owner.  
Municipality of Cabañas de Sayago.



**Fig. 7 :** Sayaguesa cow.



**Fig. 5 :** Shepherd house (left) and tenada (right),  
dehesa of Llamas.



**Fig. 8 :** Morucha cows.



**Fig. 6 :** Swineherd house and pigsties, dehesa of Llamas.



**Fig. 9 :** Churra sayaguese sheep.

-sheep, cows and pigs- together with the forest -firewood, coal and cork, agriculture being less important and mainly geared for fodder production. Despite all these changes, the new owners never lived in the *dehesas*. There was a person -the *montaraz* or *guarda*- charged not only with guarding the forest and the pastures but also with representing the authority of the landlord when he was not in the *dehesa*. Under the supervision of the *montaraz* -a very prestigious employee- there was a large and highly hierarchical labour structure with cowboys, swineherds, shepherds, peasants and so on, most of them receiving very low salaries and living in the *dehesa* in very hard conditions.

Human and animal spaces are perfectly delimited in this model of *dehesa*. The house of the landowner was located in the most accessible place, but it was only used for very short periods (Fig. 4). Next to it, there were usually the house of the *montaraz* and those of the peasants, the stalls of the cows destined for work, warehouses, the pigeon lofts and so on. Shepherd's houses were usually in other areas of the *dehesa*, next to the *tenada*, the place where lambs and sheep ready to lamb stayed overnight (Fig. 5). The other sheep used to spend the night in enclosures in the open air, fertilizing that way the pastures and farmlands. Finally, if there were pigs in the *dehesa*, the swine houses and pigsties were in a separate location (Fig. 6).

At this point it is necessary to make an important remark about the cattle of the *dehesas*. We said above that they were mainly cows, sheep and pigs ; that is, the same species as those we used to find in the traditional environment. Their breeds, however, are different. The mercantile scope of the *dehesa* and the extensive character of its exploitation made convenient the replacement of the autochthonous *Sayaguese* cow (Fig. 7) by the so-called *Morucha*<sup>(7)</sup> (Fig. 8), smaller and easier to feed than the former and not as strong for working, but more suitable for a half-wild life. Sheep breeds also varied (Sánchez Belda and Sánchez Trujillano, 1986), the *Sayaguese churra* (Fig. 9) has been replaced by the *Castellana* sheep (Fig. 10), which not only provide a better quality wool and more abundant milk but also produce good lambs for sale. With regard to swine, the most common breed of the *dehesas* has been the Iberian, or *Cerdo Ibérico*, traditionally crossed with some improving breeds such as the Large-White. However, the Iberian breed has disappeared from the villages as people have preferred the less greasy, and less tasty -but bigger- "white pig". As a result, the *dehesas* and the villages exploited and yet exploit



Fig. 10 : Castellane ram.

-although with some variations- distinctly different breeds of cattle. These circumstances make clear the great socio-economic differences existing between the two systems - *dehesas* and villages- despite their common environmental features<sup>(8)</sup>.

During the so-called "traditional period", all the areas of the *dehesa* were in some way productive. The sheep herds used the pastures of the woodlands where they could move more freely than within the communal lands of the villages, because there was no other rule than the interest of the landlord, who also owned the herd. The most humid valleys and the stubble fields were thus reserved for the cows.

To optimize exploitation, many landowners ordered the building of inner closures which allowed the distribution of the cattle among the different pasture lands without the constant surveillance of herdsman. When the landowner was a good farming entrepreneur and had some interest in the forest, he used to order the cleaning and pruning of the trees and the scraping of the shrubs, favouring with this labour a good development of trees and pastures and the generation of an important source of income from the sale of the wood and the production of charcoal. All these activities turned the traditional *dehesa* into a geographic space similar to the African savannah, characterized by abundant pasture lands and scattered forests.

From the 1960s onwards, this structure began to crack and finally collapsed after a very short interval. The *dehesa* extensive exploitation system stopped being profitable. Manpower became expensive and the market demanded more productive cattle races which could not be easily

<sup>(7)</sup>For more information about autochthonous cattle races in Spain, see Sánchez Belda (1983).

<sup>(8)</sup>Obviously, the cattle exploited in the *dehesas* traditionally rented to the villages were of the same kind as those brought up in their own lands.

brought up in a natural pasture land. The maintenance of the forest -of both pastures and trees- became more and more difficult due to the lack of either individual workers, or firms ready to do it at a reasonable cost. The result of this crucial transformation was the disappearance of the traditional *dehesa*. Nowadays, in Sayago as in the other regions of the Iberian peninsula, most *dehesas* are directly exploited by their owners : as happened before, they only exceptionally live in them, having just one or two permanent employees or, in some cases, only occasional workers. These employees take care of a few hundreds of autochthonous animals crossed with improving races, such as the Charolais. Only very few properties still breed sheep and even fewer combine cows, sheep and pigs as they traditionally did. Farm works has been mechanized and, at the same time, reduced

to the minimum necessary to produce fodder. Most *dehesas* are losing or have already lost their typical humanized landscape. The traditional animal and human spaces have disappeared, turning into wild spaces occupied by "beasts", as peasants say. Wild boars, foxes and even wolves have become the new lords of the land. Even the remaining cattle have been assimilated to a great extent with the wild environment. The exploitation is now so extensive and the contact between man and animal so rare that the cows avoid human contact and have to be treated nearly as if they were bullfighting cattle.

In few words, the richness of human and animal spaces existing in Sayago is irredeemably disappearing, both in the village environments and in the *dehesas*. The old Mediterranean forest is recovering its lost land.

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