

## CUSTOM AND COSTUME AT A LATE 1950s MARIAN SHRINE IN NORTHWEST PORTUGAL

*João Vasconcelos*

This article focuses on the genealogy and instrumentality of a particular item of “folk culture”: Our Lady of the Minho. It is an image of Mary made in the late 1950s in which the iconographic features of the Virgin merged with those of the *lavradeira*, the paramount icon of the Alto Minho region. I attempt to frame the history of this image and its respective cult within the interplay of (1) a local religious folk culture, (2) a Minhoto regionalist movement particularly active from the 1920s onwards, and (3) ecclesiastic cultural and political trends at international, national, diocesan and parish levels. By means of this framing, I try to understand not only how the fusion of an image of the Virgin with the *lavradeira* became possible, but also how it has been open to different kinds of appropriation and significance.

The research agenda that we share in this volume invites us to focus on objectified folk culture and analyze it as something instrumental, something that is deployed within the politics of identity construction. This is undoubtedly a pertinent approach to folk culture. But I think it is also symptomatic of a certain discomfort with the concept of culture (to say nothing of the notion of folk) that has been affecting anthropologists for the last two decades.

Anthropology, especially North American anthropology, has for a long time now defined itself as the study of culture. In the 1980s, however, anthropologists began to realize that just about everybody was using that word. As Roger Just noticed ten years ago “all cultures now have a ‘culture’” and this can be “a little disconcerting” for us anthropologists, who may feel that cultures talking about “culture” “are nevertheless not always talking about quite the same things as ourselves” (1995: 286). As always, whenever a concept hops from academia into the streets, many academics begin to get worried. People down in the streets are talking too much about culture and are taking it all too literally – they are essentialising culture. Now, literalism or essentialism is one of the things academics are the most anxious about, to the extent that some of them have gotten into that peculiar habit of hooking their index and middle fingers in the air whenever they say words that are not to be taken literally or as meaning what they ordinarily mean.

Sometimes I feel that many of us have given up constructing our own representations of other cultures and started deconstructing other people’s representations of their own cultures, not only because they actually do construct those representations of themselves, but also as a means to bypass some uneasiness that the traditional anthropological use of the word culture has

been causing us. We are still talking about “culture,” but we are no longer so naïve as to think that the thing inside the inverted commas exists.

In this article,<sup>1</sup> I will deal with the politics of “folk culture” in a tiny corner of the Lusophone world. I will concentrate very specifically on the genealogy and instrumentality of a particular cultural item: Our Lady of the Minho, an object made by the merging of an image of the Virgin Mary with the folkloric symbol of the *lavradeira*. *Lavradeira* is the feminine form of *lavrador* and both names stem from the same Latin root as the English words *labor* and *laborer*. Still, the most accurate translation for *lavradeira* would be *farmwife*. Until two or three decades ago, *lavradores* and *lavradeiras* were the men and women who belonged to what we might call the well-off peasantry of northern Portugal. They were landowners of small to medium-sized properties, which they toiled ideally on a self-sufficiency basis. Women were in charge of the household, raised their offspring and did most of the daily farm work. Men used to migrate seasonally or for longer periods in order to get some extra income in cash. What concerns us here, though, is that for almost a century the *lavradeira* has been the personification of the provincial identity of the Alto Minho region. By embodying the *lavradeira*'s iconography, Our Lady of the Minho can also be seen, partly at least, as an instance of cultural objectification.

However, in order to comprehend the genesis of this symbol and the politics of its respective cult history, I will not eschew the old anthropological concept of culture without inverted commas. In fact, the broad argument that I wish to illustrate here is that one cannot analytically detach objectified cultural items from the living cultures within which they are displayed. For it is only within these cultures in motion, and also through their mutual discrepancies, that those items can have any significance and thus be of any political use. In the case under study, I will pay special attention to what we could schematically call (a) a religious folk culture, (b) an ecclesiastic religious culture, and (c) a regionalist cultural movement that is, in our case, largely subsidiary of the nationalist trend that spread throughout Europe from the nineteenth century onwards. By means of an historical and ethnographic enquiry, I will try to show how the cult of Our Lady of the Minho has been molded by the interplay of these cultural settings.

## Legendary beginnings

The cult of Our Lady of the Minho began in the mid-1950s in the heart of the Alto Minho, the northwest region of Portugal whose territory overlaps the

---

<sup>1</sup> Translation from the Portuguese by Carole Garton revised by the author.

Viana do Castelo district (which I will henceforth also refer to simply as Viana, following local usage). The shrine of Our Lady of the Minho is located in Chã Grande, a mountain plain some 800 meters above sea level on the top of Serra de Arga. There are at present two ways to reach Chã Grande by car. One can get there from the northwest on a dirt track road that starts near the São João de Arga chapel. However, the easier and more usual route is the forest road that goes from São Lourenço da Montaria, a parish halfway up the mountain slope, and winds its way eastward along the sierra for eight kilometers. The air grows thinner as we go up and the trees give way to clusters of rocks and boulders.

I dreamed or then someone told me  
 That one day  
 In São Lourenço da Montaria  
 A frog asked God to be as big as an ox  
 And the frog was  
 It was God who exploded  
 Leaving rocks and more rocks spread out on the hills  
 Leaving that quiet atmosphere of sensitive ruins  
 Leaving an overwhelming desire to abandon our fingers on the edges of the  
 craggy hills  
 Leaving our breath light, relieved from the weight of above.

This is the beginning of “Proto-poema da Serra d’Arga” by the Surrealist poet António Pedro (1948). And it is what the Serra de Arga heights look like: granite boulders covered with pale green and whitish lichens jutting out everywhere; heather, gorse and broom shrubs and tufts of golden grass growing in between them. The whole sky is spread out above and on clear days one can see almost the whole region below: to the west, the Atlantic coast from Viana all the way up to Caminha; to the east, far away at a great distance, the misty shape of the Serra do Gerês.

To narrate the story of the cult of Our Lady of the Minho I will rely on a number of fieldnotes, recorded interviews and literature that I collected in the summers of 1992 and 1996 during two periods of fieldwork in Serra de Arga.<sup>2</sup> I first heard of it in 1992 on the occasion of my first stay in Serra de

---

<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 1992, I spent two months in Arga de Baixo with my wife, Catarina Alves Costa. We lived in the parish house, which had been unoccupied since the last live-in priest abandoned the job to go after a girl from a neighbouring parish he had fallen in love with. During our stay, I collected material about many festivities in the area for an inventory of Portuguese pilgrimages that I was then preparing (Vasconcelos 1996 and 1998a). Between July and September 1996 I spent some more weeks in the Serra de Arga, doing research on folklorism and the patrimonialization of peasant culture for my master’s thesis (Vasconcelos 1998b). Parts of these previous works are rephrased in this article. It is pretty old material, and I wouldn’t have returned to it if it hadn’t been for João Leal’s kind invitation to participate in the conference on “The Politics of Folk Culture” (Lisbon, 12-13 March 2004). I thank him very much for it and hope to make up for the age of my notes and observations by trying out a new approach. I am also indebted to Andrea Klimt, whose criticism and editorial comments have helped me to improve considerably the first manuscript.

Arga. The annual pilgrimage to the Chã Grande shrine had taken place on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, just a few days prior to my arrival, but it was still the topic of conversation in the mountain hamlets. I knew nothing about the cult, so I acted like an ethnographer and began to question people about its origins. Those I spoke with fulfilled their role as ethnographer's informants, and conversation after conversation they all told me more or less the same story.

Some said that the chapel of Our Lady of the Minho had existed for a long, long time. Others said that it only dated back to their time. I noticed that their statements didn't depend on their age and I thought this strange. Some in their fifties said that Our Lady of the Minho had started in their time while some older people said they had no idea as to its origin. People's memories are definitely not the best source for establishing objective facts and accurate chronologies. On the other hand, they are an extraordinary mine of information for other things – for instance cultural mnemonics, such as folk models of story-telling.

Regardless of the antiquity attributed to the cult, everyone agreed as to how it appeared. The image of Our Lady of the Minho, so I was told, was discovered by some women who were tending their goats and sheep in Chã Grande. The day grew hot and the women sat in the shade to rest when they noticed a light shining in the distance. They went to see what it was and found an image of the Virgin half hidden in a hole. The villagers then had a small chapel built there. From then on, there have been annual celebrations and the people from the neighborhoods started developing a devotion to Our Lady of the Minho.

The primitive chapel is still there. It is primitive in both senses of the word, because it is the older temple and also because it is such a simple construction: a small shelter made entirely of stone nestling between rocks. Its front opens in an arched entry protected by an iron gate through which one can see an altar with the image of Our Lady of the Minho flanked by small jars with flowers (see Fig. 1). This is the *true image*, as everyone says to distinguish it from the two images made later that are to be found in the more recently built chapel standing a hundred meters away. I was told that the true image was once polychrome, but time and inclement weather had worn the color away and covered the stone image of Our Lady in moss.

Despite the green patina, the Virgin's face and form are still discernible. She looks straight ahead, her right arm is raised and her hand poised to bless, while her left arm is bent on her lap and clasps two corn-ears. A long mantle falls from her head down to her feet. Under the mantle, she is wearing a white linen blouse, woolen waistcoat, skirt and apron, white socks and open-back shoes, the traditional festive attire of *lavradeiras*. This costume, known as the *lavradeira's*, Viana (*vianesa*) or regional costume, has been the



Fig. 1 – The *true image* of Our Lady of the Minho covered in moss and sheltered in her little stone chapel.  
(Photo by J. Vasconcelos, 1996).

symbol of the Alto Minho region for over eighty years. No other apparel could be more appropriate for that Virgin Mary.

As an ethnographer, I was sufficiently familiar with the historical and anthropological literature on “folk” or “local” Catholicism. So I knew that the story of an image of the Virgin found in a hole on the top of a sierra by some shepherdesses drawn there by a shining light was a word for word replication of a recurring legendary model that has been around in Christian Europe since the ninth century (cf. Christian 1981a and 1981b, Velasco Maillo 1989, Turner & Turner 1978: 41-45). The tradition of *inventio* (finding, discovery) of images of the Virgin Mary has been handed down from the older tradition of the *inventio* of saints’ relics, and has for centuries been a folk custom – a part of folk culture.

However, I was aware that the cult to Our Lady of the Minho was relatively recent, and, naïve ethnographer that I was, I also thought that if such a tale was told of a shrine only a few decades old, then perhaps there could be an element of truth to it. So, I did everything I could to find who those supposed shepherdesses were. I traveled around the sierra hamlets in search of information about them. I wanted to know how many they were, what their names were, how old they were and where they lived. But the only thing that people sometimes told me was that the shepherdesses were from the parish of São Pedro dos Arcos. Whenever I tried to find out more about them, they seemed to vanish like frightened ghosts. In the end, I came to the conclusion that there had never been any shepherdesses at all.

### More matter-of-fact beginnings

Then someone advised me to seek out Dona Conceição Cerqueira. She lived in Estorãos and had for a long time been the housekeeper of Father José Augusto Alves, the old priest of that parish who had died a few years before. She could give me the information that I wanted about the shrine's origin. And so this is what I did.

Dona Conceição welcomed me into her house and we both sat down by the table in the room. There was a framed photograph of the late priest on a bookshelf. Seeing me look at it, Dona Conceição opened a drawer and took out more photographs and a medal she kept in a case. That medal, she explained as I examined it, had been given to Father Alves in 1966 by President of the Republic Américo Thomaz. It was an award of agricultural merit that he had received for his work in persuading farmers of Estorãos and other four parishes as to the advantages of the re-allotment of land, a modernizing policy actively promoted by the *Junta de Colonização Interna* (a sort of Home Colonization Board). Dona Conceição put the medal back into its case and sighed. She had been Father Alves' only family for over thirty years.

José Augusto Alves was born in 1906 in a village near Melgaço, in northeastern Alto Minho. He was appointed Estorãos parish priest in 1946 and remained there until his death in 1988. Estorãos' major hamlet lies at the foot of Serra de Arga, but the parish territory includes the land up to the heights of Chã Grande. One of Father Alves' favorite distractions was to walk to the top of the sierra and enjoy the fresh air and views. In about 1950, he decided to Christianize that wild spot and had a granite cross put up there. In 1954, to celebrate the centennial of the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, Father Alves and his fellow priest in the neighboring São Pedro dos Arcos had a statue of Our Lady of the Conception erected in Chã Grande. Shortly afterwards, Father Alves decided to have a

chapel built next to the cross – the primitive little granite chapel that is still there to this day. He himself supervised the work, which was carried out by António Silvães, a stonemason from Estorãos.

Erecting shrines on top of mountains is a recurring tradition in many religious contexts, as shown in the work of the historian of religions Mircea Eliade (e.g. n.d.: 49-53). But perhaps this phenomenon lends itself more to a structuralist or systemic reading than to the nominalist symbolic interpretation that Eliade's theory of archetypes proposes. While in northwest Portugal the mountains and hills are the most commonly chosen locations for holy sites, it also happens that in the southern regions of Beira Baixa and the Alentejo, the most important pilgrimage shrines are usually found on the plains. This seems to indicate that the issue is not the orography in and of itself, but rather the value it acquires in the context of a socialized landscape. In the northwest, human settlements spread mainly along the fertile lowlands, whereas in the south, they are typically concentrated around ancient fortified towns located on hilltops. The mountaintops in the northwest and the vast plains in the south have thus a homologous positional value. In both areas, the chosen sites for the foundation of sacred places are significantly in no man's land – "institutional deserts," as Jacques Le Goff (1988) termed them.

In order to choose an invocation and an iconography for the image of the Virgin he intended to place in the chapel, Father Alves sought out Monsignor Moreira das Neves, at that time one of the leading figures of the Portuguese Catholic Church, and asked his advice. In the words of Moreira das Neves, "it seemed to us that the most fitting would be Our Lady of the Minho, dressed in the Viana fashion. [...] The difficulty only lay in the artist ensuring that the sculpture depicted Our Lady and not just a young woman from the Minho, as those in folkloric parades and *romarias* of the northern province."<sup>3</sup> To make sure that the balanced syncretism he had in mind was achieved, Monsignor Moreira das Neves entrusted the sculptor António Duarte with the clay model of the work.

António Duarte was a well-educated sculptor trained at the Lisbon Fine Arts School, who had received many state and church commissions. The artist based the Virgin's dress on an old *lavradeira's* costume on display in the Leite de Vasconcelos Ethnologic Museum in Lisbon. Monsignor Moreira das Neves was enchanted with the result:

the still damp clay glowed with the spirituality of the Virgin of Nazareth, her serene maternal face, her hand raised in a blessing gesture and her complete

---

<sup>3</sup> This and the next quotation were taken from "Como surgiu a invocação de Nossa Senhora do Minho," a short article written by Monsignor Moreira das Neves in the January 21<sup>st</sup> 1981 edition of the regional newspaper *Diário do Minho*.

*Minhota* costume. The corn-ear is a very appropriate attribute as it is the region's main produce as well as a meaningful symbol in well-known classic instances... The kernels that make up the corn-ear could well be an allusion to the inner unity that can be seen in the life of the Virgin as in that of the Church.

The first image of Our Lady of the Minho (the *true image*) was sculpted in stone by an image-maker from the neighboring parish of Arcozelo and based on António Duarte's model.<sup>4</sup> In 1958, the image was put in the chapel and the first annual festivity was held. The official name of the Virgin of the Serra de Arga became *Nossa Senhora da Conceição do Minho* (Our Lady of the Conception of the Minho). Again a thoughtful balance between referents was reached. In order to fuse a Marian archetype with the regional symbol of the Minho, a great deal of care was taken in measuring the iconographic ingredients into the right quantities so that they wouldn't blur into each other. The choice of a name to give this hybrid was likewise carefully thought out. An invocation that conveyed a strong folkloric and regional flavor (Our Lady of the Minho) was tempered with a more churchlike and national one (Our Lady of the Conception). On the one hand, Our Lady of the Conception has been the patron saint of Portugal since King João IV has proclaimed her so in the mid-seventeenth century. Any regionalist excess that might be read in the invocation of *the Minho* was thus framed within a broader nationalist referent. On the other hand, Our Lady of the Conception is also an invocation intimately associated with the ecclesiastic movement for the resurgence of Marian devotion that spread throughout Portugal and the whole of Catholic Europe in the mid-nineteenth century.

### **The modern tradition of Marian pilgrimage**

The first clear sign of this Marian revival was the intensification of apparitions that were supported or at least not opposed by the Roman Catholic Church. The first took place in La Salette (1846) and Lourdes (1858), and both had substantial apocalyptic contents. The Virgin Mary came down to Earth to reproach her children and remind them of the need to observe religious rules (attending Mass regularly, daily prayer, fasting at Lent), to repent and perform penitence for the salvation of sinners. In the La Salette apparition, which was more eschatological than that of Lourdes, Our Lady even threatened that if the people of the region failed to amend their sinful ways, she would not be able to hold the heavy hand of God away from them much

---

<sup>4</sup> Information supplied by Conceição Cerqueira, which I was unable to confirm with other sources.

longer. In this and other messages typical of this renewed Marian piety, there began to take shape a Virgin with certain salient attributes: mother-refuge of her children struck by the adversity of the world, intercessor before a righteous God, defender and bastion of the Church. These were not new attributes, but became paramount at that time in the context of the new Marian piety and the Church's discourse.

In 1854, between the La Salette and Lourdes apparitions, Pope Pius IX established the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Roman Catholicism at that time felt threatened by secularism, rationalism, scientism and the loss of the Papal States. Pius IX forged ahead out of this siege stressing the extra-worldly and non-rational foundations of the Roman Church by imposing a novel dogma that, although rooted in old theological and folk traditions, openly scorned modern common sense. In 1858 the Virgin appeared in Lourdes and presented herself to the clairvoyant Bernardette Soubirous as the "Immaculate Conception." In 1870, Pius IX decreed another dogma, that of papal infallibility, and the words of the Virgin at Lourdes were then interpreted by the ultramontane clergy as proof both of the dogma that had been established in 1854 and of the pope's new faculty. From then on, ultramontanism (that is to say, the doctrine that upholds Roman centralism in the Catholic Church and the Pope's infallibility) and Marianism were closely linked in ecclesiastic culture.

This modern Marian fervor is referred to in ecclesiastical circles as the Age of Mary. According to Father Fernando Leite (1991), the Age of Mary begins with the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception. Henceforth,

papal teaching grows much more frequent, caring and theological in inculcating devotion to the Mother of God. New liturgical celebrations emerge and old ones are revived, many religious institutions place themselves under the protection of Mary, Mariological congresses and societies study her prerogatives, popular piety is revitalized with new devotions, pilgrimages and festivities, apparitions of the Mother proliferate, some explicitly approved and others permitted by the ecclesiastic authorities (Leite 1991: 10).

These new Marian devotions and pilgrimages were genuine invented traditions, in the way Eric Hobsbawm defined them as being

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past (1983: 1).

Although inventing traditions is probably a process to be found at all times and places, Hobsbawm adds, "we should expect it to occur more frequently

when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed" (1983: 4). This was precisely what was happening within Roman Catholicism in the mid-nineteenth century. The ecclesiastic renewal of Marian devotion and the invention of modern Marian pilgrimages came as a result of the position in which the Catholic Church found itself having to face "new political and ideological challenges and major changes in the composition of the faithful (such as the notable feminization of both lay piety and of clerical personnel)" (Hobsbawm 1983: 5).<sup>5</sup>

In Portugal, the first center of the new Marian devotion was the shrine of Our Lady of Sameiro, which is still today the second most popular pilgrimage site after Fátima. Considering that Pope John Paul II's pontificate was marked by a further ecclesiastic revival of the Marian cult, it is no surprise that these were the two shrines that he visited when he first came to Portugal in 1982. The Sameiro shrine dates back to the 1860s and is located at the top of a hill above Braga, a town often referred to as the "city of archbishops." A local priest, Father Martinho Pereira da Silva, was the main promoter of the Our Lady of Sameiro cult. According to one of his biographers, he "was viscerally devoted to the immortal Pius IX" (Luís da Silva Ramos, cit. in *Memoorias...* 1882: 81).<sup>6</sup> After the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Father Martinho had the idea of putting up a commemorative monument on the top of Mount Sameiro. To this end, he got together a committee composed of local members of the aristocracy and clergy. The monument, a marble sculpture of the Immaculate Mary three meters in height on a granite pedestal, was unveiled in 1869. At the opening ceremony presided over by the archbishop of Braga, the following hymn was sung:

Over there, on those heights  
They will read in coming ages  
Protest against the outrageous  
And false doctrines of evil;  
And from faraway lands  
People will come on pilgrimage  
To render homage to her  
Gathered around her pedestal.

Pilgrimages to Our Lady of Sameiro began in 1871. They take the form of well-ordered processions and are still hugely attended today. These processions are organized by Catholic associations in Braga, and bring together

---

<sup>5</sup> For more on "post-industrial Marian pilgrimage," cf. Turner & Turner (1978: 203-230).

<sup>6</sup> On the work and life of Martinho Pereira da Silva, cf. also Leite (1964) and Ramos (1878).

many thousands of people who walk the five kilometers from the city cathedral to the shrine as they intone prayers and hymns. For the brotherhood who ran the cult in the late nineteenth century, the pilgrimages to Sameiro were “a public testimonial of the religious feelings of a people who still glorify the honorable title of Roman Catholic,” and “a solemn rejection of the rampant impiety that thinks it can do away with the everlasting guiding light of Faith in humanity’s heart” (*Memorias...* 1882: 69). This new form of public cult quickly spread from Sameiro to other shrines, especially in the north, that were either brand new or duly transformed by the clergy.<sup>7</sup> In the early twentieth century, the writer and journalist Alberto Pimentel noticed this phenomenon and observed that “pilgrimages are a form of cult that has been modernly adopted in Portugal” (1905: 138). A genuine invented tradition.

### Re-Christianizing Portuguese *romarias*

This century-old ecclesiastic tradition clearly influenced Father Alves in 1954 when he had the monument to the Immaculate Conception built on the top of Serra de Arga. But there was also a more recent ecclesiastic trend at play. It was the *campaign for the re-Christianization of romarias*, a crusade that was pursued between the 1930s and the 1950s, again with special fervor and success in the dioceses of northern Portugal. Although etymologically the word means a pilgrimage to Rome, *romaria* is the name commonly given to popular festivals held at country chapels or shrines on major pilgrimage days, usually organized by confraternities (*confrarias*) or brotherhoods (*irmandades*), or more unofficial festival committees (*comissões de festas*) that consist mostly of lay people but are presided over by local priests. These festivals typically include the payment of promises, Masses, processions and a number of activities such as open-air markets, fun fairs, auction sales, music playing, singing and dancing, picnics, barbecues, and drinking.<sup>8</sup>

In the early 1930s, the Portuguese Roman Catholic Church managed to consolidate anew its hegemony that had been badly shaken by the fiercely anticlerical First Republic (1910-1926). Under the dictatorship of Salazar, the Church was now in a position to embark on a number of policies in coalition with the means and interests of the New State (*Estado Novo*). One of these joint policies was the campaign for the re-Christianization of *romarias*. This was a priestly, political and often policed movement aimed at ridding those festivities of what most upset the prevailing ecclesiastic sensibility as well as bour-

<sup>7</sup> On the history of some other modern Marian pilgrimages in Portugal, cf. Pimentel (1905: 138-169) and Vasconcelos (1996: 61-65, 68-73, 84; 1998a: 294-295, 305-316).

<sup>8</sup> The best account of Portuguese *romarias* in English can be found in Sanchis (1983b).

geois order and morality. The campaign was mostly directed against the *arraiais*, the so-called profane side of the *romarias*. It is noteworthy that this selective and sometimes violent repression of certain elements of folk culture that were seen as backward, inappropriate or transgressive, went together with an equally selective folklorization and monumentalization of other peasant folkways – and at many *romarias* both processes occurred simultaneously. The celebration of depurated folk customs and costumes was indeed one of the main ingredients of the nationalist ideology under Salazar’s regime.<sup>9</sup>

The campaign for the re-Christianization of *romarias* has been comprehensively described and analyzed by Pierre Sanchis (1983a). I will just offer here two short but vivid illustrations of its practical implementation. The first concerns the *romaria* of Our Lady Aparecida at Balugães, near Barcelos. Father Bartolomeu Ribeiro, the parish priest, described how he looked upon the festival in the early 1930s:

late nights with fireworks, bands playing music, a large showy fair sprawled out on the grounds around Our Lady’s chapel, which was filled with barrels of wine, stalls selling sweets, lupin seeds and refreshments, a bit of dancing here and there, groups of lads and young girls singing to the sound of harmonicas, timbrels and triangles – a very nice *romaria*, or so the Christian carousers called it (1975: 44).

For Father Bartolomeu, the churchyard of Our Lady Aparecida had become the “devil’s yard” (1975: 44). So he set in motion “the transformation of the *romaria* of Balugães into a pilgrimage of devout followers of Our Lady Aparecida” (1975: 61; author’s italics). His aim was clear: “we must get rid of these light-hearted *romeiros* and drive out the pagan believers to give place to devout Christian pilgrims. This cleansing process requires persistent though silent, peaceful and gentle action” (1975: 45).

Meanwhile, Father António Molho de Faria was starting up the very same kind of campaign at the *romaria* of São Bento da Porta Aberta in the mountains of Gerês. He found that “the people just abandon themselves to all kinds of profane behavior, lascivious dancing or singing only when the collective acts are finished, when there is no concert or firework display, etc.” (1985: 130). Therefore, the way to prevent people from falling into lasciviousness was to provide an exhaustive and varied program with very few and short breaks. It was to consist of Masses, processions, concerts, prayers, exhibition of folkloric groups and brass bands and so on. The people would no longer be the stage performers but spectators. In a passage that deserves

---

<sup>9</sup> There is an extensive body of anthropological, historical and sociological literature on the confluence of nationalism and folklorism under the New State. See, for instance, Brito (1982), Alves (1997), Melo (2001), and many contributions to the collective volume edited by Castelo-Branco & Branco (2003).

to be fully quoted, Father Molho de Faria explains the importance of modern technological equipment in the re-Christianization of *romarias*:

It would all have been impossible if it hadn't been for the loudspeakers. It was thanks to powerful microphones cleverly installed and each one devoted only to serve the holy cause, [...] that we managed to stay in contact with those crowds. We had them in the palms of our hands. They immediately and joyfully obeyed. By playing records of fit and proper music and songs, the crowds were also entertained. But it was in transmitting the religious services that the loudspeakers were really irreplaceable. And there was also another great advantage: even if they failed to get everybody's attention, they made enough noise to quench any desire for certain indecent or undesirable sorts of entertainment. Certain singing and dancing lost their appeal when contrasted with the loudspeakers. As a rule, the strongest always won (1985: 137).

When Father Alves placed the image of Our Lady of the Minho in the chapel at the top of the Serra de Arga, he wanted to make it a shrine for pilgrims and not a place for *romarias*. More than this, and according to some priests I spoke to, one of the reasons why Father Alves invented the new cult was to start a pilgrimage that would be immediately distinguishable from one of the most popular folk *romarias* celebrated in the surrounding neighborhood: the *romaria* of São João de Arga.<sup>10</sup> This *romaria* was primarily famous (and still is) for the *arraial* that starting in the afternoon of August 28<sup>th</sup>, goes on all night until dawn of the following day (the Feast of the Beheading of St John the Baptist). It's held near a chapel lost in the middle of the sierra on an unpaved yard with some old cork trees, on a sort of promontory overlooking a valley. At the end of the 1950s, due to the isolation of the small mountain parish that organized this festivity and the fact that the local priests seemed to show little concern for it, the *romaria* of São João had hardly been affected by the re-Christianization crusade.<sup>11</sup> The *romaria* was really the nocturnal *arraial*. The overwhelming importance of the night-time celebrations was well captured in the early 1970s by the ethnologist Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira:

As night falls, the revelry quickly gets going: in growing disorder, concertinas start to play everywhere, groups gather around them and dancing begins again, alternating today with the loudspeakers or then simultaneously with their booming noise. There's a great deal of coming and going: people have

---

<sup>10</sup> I owe a great deal of what I know about the history of the Our Lady of the Minho cult to the information I was kindly given by some priests in 1992 and 1996. I would especially like to thank the then Estorãos parish priest, Father Artur Coutinho and Monsignor Sebastião Pires Ferreira, the Vicar General of the Viana diocese.

<sup>11</sup> Arga de São João, commonly known as Santo Aginha, is the mountain parish to which the festival committee that organises the *romaria* belongs. It was only in the 1960s that this parish, along with those of Arga de Baixo and Arga de Cima, could be reached by road.

a coffee, a drink, a snack or sweet on sale there; they pile up on verandas and steps of the “lodgings” round the chapel to watch the revelry. Fireworks go off in the middle of the night; but singing and dancing immediately start up again ceaselessly in the spaces left free by those who fall asleep on the ground, while others make their prayers and fulfill their promises in silence inside or around the chapel – until dawn (1984: 236).<sup>12</sup>

Now this was exactly what Father Alves did not want for Our Lady of the Minho. The new chapel was to be the center of a pious pilgrimage. Festivities would be limited to religious ceremonies and the payment of promises by the faithful in the morning, followed by picnics in the countryside and then everyone was to go back home. Fair people were to be discouraged from gathering in large numbers and *arraial* festivities were definitely out. There were certainly never to be any nocturnal festivities. Maybe this new pilgrimage model might even have a pedagogic effect on the festive habits of the people in the area.

Besides this, Father Alves also dreamed of making Our Lady of the Minho the modern Marian sanctuary that was lacking in the Ponte de Lima borough (*concelho*) to which the Estorãos parish belongs. One man alone could never accomplish a project of this scale. In effect, Father Alves was able to rely not only on the help of Monsignor Moreira das Neves, the sculptor António Duarte, the Estorãos stonemason who built the first chapel and the Arcozelo image-maker who sculpted the first statue. He also set up and presided over a confraternity to administer the cult and got together a fine group of supporters in the Ponte de Lima borough. One of them was his fellow priest at the neighboring parish of São Pedro dos Arcos, Father Armando Martins Pereira – although, as we shall see, they later had a falling out. Two other priests who became quite involved in promoting the new cult were Canon Correia, parish priest of Ponte de Lima, and Father Benjamim Salgado, who wrote the Our Lady of the Minho hymn that is still sung at the annual pilgrimages. On the material level, the financial support given by an important Estorãos landowner and a wealthy shopkeeper from Moreira do Lima was crucial.

Pilgrimages to Our Lady of the Minho were held every year in July after the chapel was built. In June 1960, the regional newspaper *O Lima* announced the approach of “another pilgrimage to the top of the Serra d’Arga

---

<sup>12</sup> The description the ethnologist Veiga de Oliveira makes of the São João de Arga *arraial* contrasts remarkably with Father Molho de Faria’s description of the one at São Bento da Porta Aberta. Whereas the former doesn’t hide his fascination with the confusion that reigns over the *arraial* and his discomfort with the “loud noise coming from loudspeakers,” the latter deplors the “popular and lascivious dancing and singing” and praises the magnificent results of amplifying the sound. For more on loudspeakers at the *romaria* of São João de Arga, cf. Vasconcelos (1997). Besides Oliveira (1984), also Coutinho (1997: 15-22), Garrido (1984) and Vasconcelos (1998a: 332-339) give lengthy descriptions of the festivity in different epochs. For an abjectionist sketch of the *romaria* in the 1940s, cf. Pedro (1948).

where there will be an open air sung Mass, addresses, sung Rosary, blessing of the Holy Sacrament and a low Mass." The writer of the article hoped that "thanks to the Reverend Father José Augusto Alves, his zeal and persistence [...], the Serra de Arga Cenacle will in future become another living shrine in permanent journey to the Patroness of Portugal." This hope, however, was never fulfilled. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the annual festivities of Our Lady of the Minho did become part of the festive customs of the people who lived in the area of Serra de Arga, but never achieved the municipal scale to which its promoters had aspired.

At the end of the 1970s, Father José Augusto Alves and Father Armando Martins Pereira quarreled. I haven't succeeded in finding out the full extent of what happened. According to the little information I managed to gather, Father Pereira allegedly started claiming that the chapel had been built on São Pedro dos Arcos territory, and thus proceeds coming from the cult belonged to its parish committee (*comissão fabriqueira*). Father Alves and other members that headed his confraternity refused to accept this and henceforth feelings of animosity arose between the estranged Estorãos and Arcos priests and spread to the people who lived in both parishes. As we will see, this quarrel did not last long. It was surpassed in the early 1980s when the Viana do Castelo diocese, set up in 1977, took over the leadership of the confraternity. But before we go on to this last chapter of the story, let us pause for a moment and look at the dispute between the two parishes over their rights to the cult.

### **Folk and priestly politics of local religion**

Disputes of this kind are far from unusual. In fact, they configure a persistent tradition to be found in all epochs at many pilgrimage sites in Portugal and elsewhere. There are two immediate reasons for this. The first is the fact that *romaria* shrines and chapels are always a source of supra-local renown and also of income for the parishes that own them. The growth of a shrine's popularity subsequently tends to arouse the envy of neighboring parishes. There is also another factor. Pilgrimage and *romaria* sites are usually built in remote unpopulated areas where land rights happen to be easily disputable. In these no-man's lands, even if the boundary between parishes is set down in a written record, recognition of the rights depends on the identification of certain orographic features and other natural landmarks such as crags or springs. Now, this identification is open to different interpretations and doubts and confusion occur very often, intentionally or not. At times, the name under which some craggy rock was registered at a certain time is no longer in use and is replaced by some other. At other times, the same name

is used by different people for different boulders or crags. This can be genuinely fortuitous, but then again it may be deliberate whenever it might strengthen a person's or group's claims over some piece of land.

I do not know the details of the disagreement between the Estorãos and the Arcos priests nor do I know which of the two was right, or even if one or the other could have been right. As far as I was told, what started as a dispute between priests soon grew into a quarrel between parishes. Localism can be defined as that sense of community grounded in the fact of belonging to a given place – be it a parish or any hamlet within it. Localism has been a traditional and pervasive element in the politics of identity in the Alto Minho, and it grows especially visible when enacted in situations of inter-local rivalry, whether ritualized or not.<sup>13</sup> Like all forms of identification, localism is mostly transmitted informally and is often dormant, but it can be stirred and awoken under certain circumstances – such as a quarrel between parish priests over control of a cult. This is what happened in Estorãos and Arcos at the end of the 1970s.

And this now takes us back to the legend of the origin of the cult that I heard in the summers of 1992 and 1996. As I mentioned earlier on, the people I spoke to had little to say as to the identity of the shepherdesses who had purportedly found the image of the Virgin. The only thing they would sometimes say was that they came from the parish of São Pedro dos Arcos. In the 1950s, Chã Grande, the mountain plain where according to legend the image was found, was used as a pasture for sheep and goats owned by people from the neighboring mountain parishes such as Estorãos, Arcos, Montaria, Arga de São João, Arga de Baixo and Arga de Cima.<sup>14</sup> It is tempting to wonder why the legend, at least the versions I managed to collect, became so insistently fixated on shepherdesses from one of these parishes.

I am inclined to think that this is no accident and may be connected with the dispute between the Arcos and Estorãos parishes at the end of the 1970s. Estorãos had obvious historical rights over the shrine, since everyone knew (or at least could easily find out) that it was their priest who had it built. The Arcos claim, in turn, was based on alleged land rights: the shrine was built on parish territory. Perhaps the legend of the shepherdesses had been

---

<sup>13</sup> For more on the salience of localism in the Alto Minho society, cf. Pina-Cabral (1986: 126-134). For an ethnographic account of some paradigmatic manifestations of inter-local rivalry in Serra de Arga, cf. Cerejeira (2003: 41-43 and 71-75).

<sup>14</sup> Raising goats and sheep to sell was at that time an important source of revenue for people living in the Serra de Arga villages. Some of them had large collective flocks that consisted of animals owned by various households and were taken out to pasture on communal land (*baldios*) on a rotating basis of turns (*vezeira*). Each household had turns in proportion to the number of animals they owned. From the 1940s onwards, State Forestry Services engaged in a forestation policy for communal lands that decreased the pastures substantially and made the work of keeping watch over the animals more difficult. Until then, goats spent most of the year on their own in the mountains in a semi-wild state. For more on the local impact of forestation in Serra de Arga, cf. Cerejeira (2003: 55-57).

invented within this scenario to strengthen the territorial claim with a (legendary) historical one. If the *vox populi* said that the image of Our Lady of the Minho had been discovered by some shepherdesses from Arcos, this gave the Arcos parish another reason for it to administer the cult and reap any subsequent benefits.

The available evidence allows only conjecture and more research is needed before a proper hypothesis can be presented. However, for the sake of my conjecture, one could call to mind the fact that in many other places, disputes about rights over isolated shrines and chapels often have a legendary translation. In the Ponte de Lima borough not far from Estorãos, for instance, there is the story that the Senhor da Saúde shrine was built (in the seventeenth century) after the discovery of a statue of Christ on the Cross that had been forgotten and was by then hidden in the forest. The crucifix was found exactly on the dividing line between the parishes of Calvelo and Friastelas and this immediately set off a dispute between them about who owned the image. The tale is told that to end the dispute, they took a couple of oxen that had never been yoked before to the site and got them to pull a cart with the stone crucifix in it. They decided that the rightful owner of the image would be the parish the oxen walked to. The oxen took off in direction of Friastelas, but then stopped in a clearing halfway there and refused to continue. So the chapel was built on that exact place and the cult came to be administered by the Friastelas parish.<sup>15</sup>

So, it is neither impossible nor exceptional that the inhabitants of Arcos fell back on a legendary idiom, as had their Friastelas neighbors, to validate their rights. On the contrary, it would fit in completely with the customary politics of local religion.

### **Diocesan politics of folk religion**

Let us now continue on firmer ground. In the early 1980s, as I said before, the leading posts in the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Minho were taken over by the recently-created bishopric of Viana. Father Alves no longer presided over the brotherhood and was replaced by Monsignor Sebastião Pires Ferreira, the Vicar General of the diocese. There were two consequences of this change and both were intentional. The first was to put an end to the disputes between the Estorãos and Arcos parishes, which seemed to go on forever. The second was to raise a place of cult whose founder had merely aspired to making it a municipal pilgrimage site to the status of diocesan shrine. The bishopric of Viana was separated from the archbishopric of Braga

---

<sup>15</sup> For more on this legend and cult, cf. Vasconcelos (1998a: 355-356).

in 1977 at the end of nearly fifty years of continuous petitioning to the Holy See (in 1926, 1940, 1964, 1970 and 1976) and lobbying by clergymen from the Alto Minho who held posts at the Braga See together with young Minho seminarists at the St Barnabas Seminary in the same city. A sector of the Alto Minho clergy felt they were subaltern to and even colonized by Braga, and the movement for a Viana diocese took on a regionalist and anticolonialist discourse.<sup>16</sup>

The first steps to set up a diocese were taken at the same time as the Alto Minho was being defined as an area with a provincial identity. Although the Viana district had existed since 1835, the designation “Alto Minho” only became common in the 1920s.<sup>17</sup> According to António Medeiros (2003: 48), the configuration of a provincial identity that coincided with the administrative district was begun at that time by intellectuals and politicians in Viana within the framework of regionalist demands. Aspirations for ecclesiastic autonomy began at the same time, but took a long time to achieve. This was as much due to the pace of the Catholic bureaucratic machinery as the unwillingness of the Braga archdiocese to give up such an important part of their territory. The new diocese was eventually institutionalized by the Holy See on November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1977.

As soon as it was emancipated, the new bishopric got down to creating its symbols and promoting a sense of identity among the Catholics in the area. According to what I was told by the Vicar General of Viana, the diocese’s promotion of Our Lady of the Minho cult had from the start “both a spiritual and a sociological objective”.<sup>18</sup> The spiritual objective was to intensify people’s devotion to the Virgin Mary. The sociological objective was to create a sense of community and fraternity among Alto Minho Catholics. This might be more accurately described as a political goal, since it has mostly to do with the politics of ecclesiastic identity.

The idea of upgrading the cult of Our Lady of the Minho to a diocesan level intensified with D. Armindo Lopes Coelho, the second bishop of Viana

---

<sup>16</sup> Father Carlindo Vieira (1996) provides important information about lobbying that went on to set up the Viana diocese between 1926 and 1977. His book is mainly about what was known as the Viana Colony (*Colónia de Viana*), an unofficial association created in 1931 by young seminarists studying in Braga but who came from the district of Viana. One of the Colony’s former leaders called it “a regionalist and spiritual movement set up for mutual support, entertainment and, at the same time, to petition for the diocese” (Father Artur Coutinho, quoted in Vieira 1996: 57). The name of the group clearly expressed its autonomist intentions: “the Viana people were being colonised by Braga” (*id. ibid.*: 57). From the standpoint of the Colony members, it was a typical colonial situation: by their territorial control over Viana, the Braga archdiocese “soaked up more profitable advantages than assumed responsibilities” (Vieira 1996: 69). The Viana Colony was organised into an authentic proto-diocese, or if you will, a “shadow diocese” with a bishop (called the bishop of Viana), Vicar General, dean, canons and all the other positions proper to a chapter of a cathedral (cf. Vieira 1996: 79-81).

<sup>17</sup> The Viana district was created in the same way as the other Portuguese districts during the administrative reform of the Portuguese kingdom that ended the old *comarcas* and *provincias*.

<sup>18</sup> Comment made by Monsignor Sebastião Pires Ferreira in an interview in July 1996.

(1982-1997) and several means were used to achieve this end.<sup>19</sup> One was building a new shrine in Chã Grande, a large temple still under construction. Another is that starting in 1983, the bishop has nearly always presided over the religious celebrations of the annual pilgrimages. Other regional dignitaries in the civil service also attend, such as the district civil governor (*governador civil*), municipality presidents or their representatives, and the Alto Minho Region Tourism Board president, who recently gave a great boost to the cult's publicity by putting a picture of Our Lady of the Minho on the cover of *Alto Minho em Festa*, a tourism guidebook published in 2002.

Finally, the most effective way to inculcate the new devotion in the hearts of Alto Minho Catholics was an invented tradition. From 1983 onwards, the annual pilgrimages have turned into convoys of cars and coaches that leave from one of the boroughs of the Viana district every year. In the weeks before the pilgrimage, Our Lady of the Minho does the rounds of the parishes in that particular municipality and remains one or two days in each parish church so that the people may see her and pray to her.

As we know the reasons behind the diocese's commitment to the regionalization of this cult and the means used to achieve this, we may still ask ourselves what were the circumstances that led to this choice and investment.<sup>20</sup> And we may find several possible answers. First, Our Lady of the Minho was a recent cult site run by a confraternity where local clergy have predominated from the start and was thus easier for the diocese to penetrate than other more established shrines with brotherhoods or festival committees used to greater independence from the ecclesiastic machinery. Besides this, the dispute between the Arcos and Estorãos priests was an excellent pretext for the higher powers to intervene. Another important factor for the choice was the actual location of the shrine. The Serra de Arga is the meeting point of five municipalities that form the western half of the diocese – Caminha, Paredes de Coura, Ponte de Lima, Viana do Castelo and Vila Nova de Cerveira. As I have already noted, practically the whole of the Alto Minho can be seen from the top of the sierra. Another factor to take into account are the experiential and allegorical potentialities of the landscape. When pilgrims to Our Lady of the Minho are asked what brings them there, many speak of the quietness of the place and the beauty of the views. The diocesan clergy must have had this in mind also, as we can see in Bishop D. Armindo Lopes

---

<sup>19</sup> D. Armindo Lopes Coelho left the Viana diocese in 1997 and was appointed bishop of Oporto. The present bishop is D. José Augusto Fernandes Pereira, who was born in Valença do Minho. The first bishop of Viana was D. Júlio Tavares Rebimbas.

<sup>20</sup> Making Our Lady of the Minho into a diocesan shrine was not a consensual decision for all Viana clergy. There were priests who thought that the choice should have fallen on a more popular shrine such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Mount of Santa Luzia (in Viana do Castelo) or the old shrine of Our Lady of Peneda at Gavieira (near Arcos de Valdevez).

Coelho's words during his homily at the 1983 pilgrimage: "in this atmosphere of untouched countryside, of purity and faith, of heights that invigorate and cheer us, as well as an atmosphere of faith that unites us, it seems as if the words of Christ to His disciples echo here and now with special profundity and hope: 'The Kingdom of God is come nigh unto you'" (1985: 3).

Finally, there is another factor that seems far weightier than all the others. It is obviously the iconography and the name with which Monsignor Moreira das Neves baptized the Virgin of the Serra de Arga in the 1950s. Could there have been a more fitting image than that of Our Lady of the Minho dressed in a regional costume with which to pontificate in the shrine of the Viana diocese (see Fig. 2)? Hardly.



Fig. 2 – One of the most recent images of Our Lady of the Minho, as depicted on a contemporary devotional print.

## The *lavradeira* and provincial identity in Alto Minho

Hardly in the 1970s to be more exact. For in the early twentieth century, the clergy would probably have thought that dressing the image of Our Lady in those clothes and displaying her thus to the faithful was a completely foolish or even blasphemous idea. According to Manuel Couto Viana, most priests in the areas around Viana do Castelo censured their women parishioners who wore what was called the *lavradeira's* costume on festive days. This flamboyant costume, which seemed to give women's busts and hips a life of their own was "much too 'eye-catching' and thus incompatible with the sense of discretion and modesty that women should conform to" (Viana 1990: 72-73).

But time changes everything. In 1973, an anecdotic but very enlightening controversy arose in the church bulletin *Serra e Vale* – a publication edited by the priests of five Serra de Arga parishes. In the July edition, one of the local priests wrote an article in which he regretted that the girls in the sierra hamlets were abandoning their regional costume and had begun to attend local festivities in slacks and light summery dresses bought in town. In the following edition, a young woman born and bred in a sierra parish, Natalina Araújo, who was studying in Lisbon and regularly contributed to the bulletin, criticized the priest for his ideas. She said that the traditional woolen skirt and waistcoat were hot, heavy and uncomfortable to wear and that to impose them as the festive dress was a senseless anachronism. The local priest replied in the September bulletin. Girls had not stopped wearing the costume because it was ugly or uncomfortable. It was "because they thought it made them look like rustic and backward provincials." For the priest, what was at issue here was woman's vanity, pure and simple, and "the wish to look important." He added:

Natalina, if today you saw going by in downtown Rossio in Lisbon the doctor you once consulted or even that TV actress you so admire dressed as countrywomen in traditional costume you would certainly say: How eccentric! They can't be right in the head! Well, we could say the very same thing about country girls who dress up as those haughty ladies. That's why I said that everything has its place... [...] Of course I agree with light summery dresses when worn by weighty heads and not an affront to decency and good habits. I also agree with slacks when they are worn with the right intentions. But is this the case?

It is obvious that between 1900 and 1970, the clergy's preoccupation with things being in their right place and about women's modesty remained unaltered. Both these concerns are undoubtedly salient features of clerical culture, but I will refrain from inquiring into the reasons here. The manner in which priests look upon the *lavradeira's* costume, however, has changed dramati-

cally: what in the 1900s was a provocative and indecent costume became in the 1970s and in the words of the priest I just quoted, “the immaculate costume of our grandmothers.” How had this happened?

The viewpoint did an about-turn mainly because of what was called the *campaign for the revival of the Viana costume*, begun in the 1920s by members of the intellectual elite in Viana do Castelo. At the head of the campaign was Manuel Couto Viana, born into a wealthy industrial family. He was an illustrator, self-taught ethnographer and held important positions in New State organizations aimed at folklorizing popular culture.<sup>21</sup> Other members of the local bourgeoisie and aristocracy, full of regionalist fervor, joined in the campaign. They were also, in most cases, partisans of conservative social politics and sympathizers of the monarchist cause.

These intellectuals were very familiar with a literary and pictorial tradition started in the last decades of the nineteenth century that had established a set of clichés about the Minho, a tradition put in motion by other intellectuals who held a rather more central position in Portugal’s socio-political geography. António Medeiros (1995 and 2003) carried out a thorough examination of these embryonic discourses and imagery of Minho identity and showed, among other things, that very early on they had insistently focused on the region’s country folk and most especially on the *lavradeira*.

The reasons behind the choice of the *lavradeira* as regional icon certainly deserve further study.<sup>22</sup> At this point I would venture to say that the success of that female symbolization of the Minho must be due to a number of factors. It may well be the result of a fortunate aesthetical agreement among people from different social backgrounds with correspondingly disparate ideas and motivations. The emblematic *lavradeira*’s costume was a festive attire, the costume *lavradeiras* wore on special occasions and celebrations. Strikingly colorful with its gold chains and jewelry, it probably matched many country folks’ images of beauty and wealth.

The fact that the Minho was personified as a woman may be the result of various circumstances. In the first place, personification is a form of symbolization typical of both national and regional modern imageries (cf. Löfgren 1989, Medeiros 1995: 99). Furthermore, we have already seen that in the rural areas of Alto Minho the women held a central social position, something that runs counter to the gender patterns typically described in anthropological literature on “Mediterranean societies.” Early in the twentieth century, Manuel Joaquim Gonçalves de Castro wrote the following about the inhabitants of the Soajo hamlet:

<sup>21</sup> For more on Manuel Couto Viana and his work at the *Junta Central das Casas do Povo*, cf. the biography written by his son, António Manuel Couto Viana (in Viana 1990: 183-191), and also Reis (1993).

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Pereira’s article on “cultural regionalism” (1989) is a notable landmark on this topic.

The women do the agricultural work including sowing the fields that they so skillfully plough. Men from the age of 17 to 40 earn money during the eight months of autumn, winter and part of spring as bakers and orange sellers in Lisbon or the Alentejo. During the four months they spend in their home village, they pass their time playing the stick game and going to fairs and *romarias* (Castro 1907:65).

Many years later, João de Pina-Cabral wrote that “numerous authors have referred to the ‘matripotestality’ or ‘matriarchy’ of Minho” (1986: 86). Drawing on fieldwork he conducted in two parishes in the region in around 1980, he added that “while we may disagree with their formulations, evidence does suggest that, in rural Minho, the position of women is different from that in other regions of the country” (1986: 86). The pre-eminence of women in the Minho peasant society is thus a widely acknowledged fact, even if the theories advanced to explain them differ. In the *lavradores* social group in particular, it was the farmwives who ensured that the household carried on properly. Until the 1960s, it was mostly women who remained on the land while the men came and went. For this reason, many intellectuals who nurtured social projects of a conservative nature (which, as previously pointed out, was the majority of intellectuals who formed the Minhoto regionalist elite) regarded the Minho woman as the bulwark of tradition and autochthony, values that were in some of their eyes being threatened by foreign ways introduced by the men-folk. The comments of Conde de Aurora describing the Ponte de Lima fair at the end of the 1920s illustrate this view:

Carts, baskets, sacks, bundles – all the weight, all the work is for the Woman to do. The lads go about with sweet basil behind their ears and hackberry stick in hand, usually holding a black umbrella, when not wearing a town straw hat or a panama of someone who has been to Brazil, or then a manly khaki shirt and leggings from American stores in France. [...] That Portuguese men, that Minhoto men, should be like this! If they emigrated to England, they would return wearing a dinner jacket and play golf on the terraces along our river banks. What saves us is the heroic, traditional and lovely Minho woman. God bless you, Woman! (Aurora 1929: 176)

Leaving aside the reasons that led to the regionalization of the *lavradeira* icon, it is worth noting that according to Medeiros, the same kind of synecdochic process that made the *lavradeira* the symbol of the Minho likewise made the Minho the symbol of Portugal. Around 1900, “of the several provinces, only the Minho emerges as understood as a whole [...] as a national landscape” (1995: 98). And, as Medeiros also argues in his contribution to this volume, even today, a century later, the *lavradeira* keeps having “important allegorical uses as a symbol of the Portuguese nation as a whole (Medeiros, page 71 in this volume).” These uses are noticeable not only within Portugal, but also

among Portuguese emigrants throughout the world, as both Andrea Klimt and Kimberly Holton refer to in their articles published in this volume.

Let us go back now to the beginning of the last century. Writing in the 1920s, the Viana do Castelo ethnographer, Cláudio Basto, showed how the *lavradeira* stereotype had been vulgarized by that time among tourists and travelers from other parts of the country:

There are people who having traveled through the Minho are astonished never to have come across the famous “Minho” costume. Deceived by the “Minho” denomination, deceived by photographs in magazines and postcards that nonsensically show village women richly attired in Viana costume busy at their domestic or agricultural tasks, these people expect to clap eyes at every corner [...] on impeccable young girls in that famous costume! Pure fantasy! (1930: 44)<sup>23</sup>

According to Cláudio Basto, nowhere in the Minho in the early 1920s was there “just *one* typical regional costume for women, or anyone else,” not even in the Viana municipality. What postcards showed as the Viana or *lavradeira*’s costume was “a woman’s festive attire, a ‘gala’ dress only used on special occasions and by young girls from *some villages* in the borough of Viana do Castelo” (1930: 7-8, author’s italics). Moreover, he added, the costume had changed with time and the “full *de rigueur* costume was nothing but a certain *phase* in its evolution” (1930: 39, author’s italics). What is curious is that this same ethnographer who exposed in so critical a manner the discrepancy between objectified and living folk culture in the Alto Minho was also one of the people who battled against it. According to him, if the *lavradeira*’s costume were allowed to evolve naturally, it would end up being no longer worn at all. And this was something Cláudio Basto did not want. So he encouraged town people (“who so influence village people and their ways”) to “show the costume all the admiration and esteem it so deserves” so that “the nice and clever girls” of the region should learn to “maintain with love the most elegant and beautiful costumes of the Minho – and of Portugal” (1930: 54).

This was exactly what Manuel Couto Viana began to do with his campaign for the revival of the Viana costume. Among the reasons that the *lavradeiras* were ceasing to wear their festive flamboyant dress was the fact that bourgeois ladies in Viana were beginning to wear it as a fancy

---

<sup>23</sup> Although the book *Traje à Vianesa*, from which I took this passage and the following ones, was published in 1930, the author informs that the essay “was first sketched in 1923 and a short extract came out of it [...] entitled *Do Traje à Vianesa em Geral e do Traje de Afife em Especial: Notas Regionais*” (Basto 1930: 54, n. 1). This first opuscle was published in 1925.

dress. Consequently, one of the things that Couto Viana succeeded in doing was “that the authorities forbade women wearing the Viana costume from going to Carnival balls, as a way of dignifying the regional costume” (Viana 1990: 76). But this was just one of the policies that were put into action.

The campaign was staged mainly in the *romaria* of Our Lady of Agonia, which is held every year in mid-August in the city of Viana. Celebrations that began in the second half of the eighteenth century as the local fishing community’s religious festivities had slowly grown and attracted other social groups in Viana and many country people from the surrounding areas. In the 1920s, the Viana elite took over the *romaria* and turned it into what the Conde de Aurora called “our National Festivity of the Minho” (1929: 185). Manuel Couto Viana drew the posters for the *romaria*, always using “the *lavradeira* in her charming attire” (Viana 1990: 75) as the main motif. A costume competition was also set up which has now become the Costume Festival. Then in 1933, an ethnographic parade (*cortejo etnográfico*) was organized, which at first exhibited the traditional costumes and folkways of the Viana parishes but now includes all the district boroughs. The *romaria* of Agonia has thus become the most spectacular display of the Alto Minho provincial identity.<sup>24</sup>

The campaign for the revival of the Viana costume was very effective and had long-lasting results. The costume in its many variations started to be worn everywhere in the Alto Minho, and not only by folkloric groups (*ranchos*) that proliferated from the 1930s on, but also as ceremonial dress in non-folkloristic events. In the Serra de Arga hamlets, for instance, this clothing did not exist in the early twentieth century. But nowadays there are not many girls who do not have a regional costume, even those born in Lisbon but whose parents continue to spend their summer holidays in the sierra (see Fig. 3). They wear it at certain local festivities and when they go to the São João *romaria*. So thanks to the revival campaign, the Viana costume has been successfully and authentically provincialized. This is why in the mid-1950s Monsignor Moreira das Neves was in a position to consider it the most fitting apparel for Our Lady of the Minho. And this is also why twenty-five years later, the hierarchy at the Viana bishopric thought it proper to promote a chapel that sheltered a hybrid made up of a Virgin Mary and the Minhota folk symbol into a diocesan shrine.

---

<sup>24</sup> For more on the campaign for the revival of the Viana costume, see Manuel Couto Viana’s “Quando e como ressurgiu nas lavradeiras de algumas freguesias do concelho de Viana o gosto pelo uso do seu lindo traje de festa.” This text was written in 1940, first published in Melo (1941: 46-55), and later republished with minor changes in Viana (1990: 71-79). Cf. also Martins & Gonçalves (2000) for a comprehensive historical account of the *romaria* of Agonia, and Silva (1994) for a rich sociological portrait of the festivities in the 1990s.



Fig. 3 – Young women from the Serra de Arga wearing Viana costumes carry a saint stand in a procession during their hamlet annual festival. (Photo by J. Vasconcelos, 1992).

## Conclusion

Let me now conclude. In the bishop of Viana's homily at the first pilgrimage he presided over at Chã Grande on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1983, he spoke to the people there in the following manner:

As the Universal Mother, Our Lady does not belong exclusively to any one people or any one region. If you wished to attire her in the costume of the girls and women of the Minho and call her Our Lady of the Conception of the Minho, it was not meant to lessen her universality or to diminish her role before the Son, who died for all. Rather it was a way for you to draw close to her, to approach her with a daring and humble plea, to receive her at home and in your families, to open your souls and hearts to her, to have the sensation that you can hear her and thus speak to her (Coelho 1985: 8).

Now we know that it was not the audience listening to the bishop that wanted the Virgin to be dressed as a Minho woman, nor did they name her Our Lady of the Conception of the Minho. We know that it was one of the highest dignitaries in the Portuguese Catholic Church of the time who has done it. Was the bishop unaware of this? I did not ask him, but I would bet

he was not. I think that D. Armindo's words reveal very candidly what is a persistent disposition in the ecclesiastic politics of folk religion – that of having double standards.

In their relationship with religious manifestations of the masses focused on the cult of the Virgin and the saints, the clergy typically adopt at one and the same time an attitude of active promotion and patronizing distancing. By means of encouraging what it calls “popular” or “folk religion,” the Roman Catholic Church acknowledges devotional traditions that would, through informal and familiar ways, reproduce themselves in any case to a certain extent independently of the Church's teaching. On the other hand, by maintaining a certain distance from this same “folk religion” (as when a priest decides to dress a Virgin in peasant clothes and years later a bishop comes along and suggests that it was the folk, the peasants, who did it) the Church is approaching the elite's secularized “world of the critique” (cf. Latour 2002 and Claverie 1990), whose recognition is also important for the sake of the Church's social prestige. In that sober and serious world, proper religiousness should be an inner religiousness, a matter of consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

To summarize a great part of my argument, I would say that there is really something we could tentatively call a religious folk culture – a number of conventions socially transmitted that are called up when an invention occurs. The establishment of a chapel and an image on the top of a mountain is an invention that follows such cultural conventions. And the people respond to it by carrying with them to the heights of Chã Grande many customary habits – their ways of paying promises and praying, their transistors and concertinas, their five-liter flagons of wine and picnic baskets. They even re-enact a century-old legendary tradition of *inventio*. At the same time, this re-enactment of folk conventions is not entirely opposed to or even totally independent of priestly regulation. On the contrary, there is, as there always has been, an ecclesiastic politics of promoting folk religion.

I have also sought in this article to demonstrate how the initiatives taken by successive ecclesiastic promoters of Our Lady of the Minho cult were themselves deeply embedded in a number of cultural traditions and political trends. I focused on The Church's revitalization of the Marian cult that began in the second half of the nineteenth century, the regionalist movement that turned the *lavradeira* into the personification of the Alto Minho, the policy to de-paganize the *romarias* that reached its peak around 1950, and finally the setting up of the Viana diocese.

---

<sup>25</sup> As François-André Isambert (1982) reminds us, even the expression “folk” or “popular religion,” which began to be used in the Catholic Pastoral vocabulary before it started being used in the social sciences, is a result and a symptom of the duplicity I am talking about. The noun “religion” keeps a large number of Catholics within the legitimate field of religion, while the adjective “folk” or “popular” disqualifies them in that same field, thus saving the face of the Church that turns to secularized minds – be they also religious or not.

By means of framing the origin and development of the cult of Our Lady of the Minho within all these cultural settings and political trends, I tried to understand not only how the merging of an image of the Virgin Mary with the paramount icon of Alto Minho folk culture became possible, but also how it has been open to different modes of appropriation and meaning.

As a final remark, I should add that ecclesiastic dignitaries have been prone to exaggerated expectations regarding this cult. Ten years after the first pilgrimage presided by D. Armindo Lopes Coelho, the theologian José da Silva Lima published his PhD thesis on the contemporary reality of Catholicism in the Alto Minho. There he refers to Our Lady of the Minho as “an icon in project whose material and ideological foundations are already there” (1994: 46). Echoing the bishop of Viana, he adds that “this unification of the cult in an important place of the diocese, made through the elaboration of a collective symbolism, ‘will progressively shift the sites of external pilgrimage [i.e. the sites of *romaria*] to a secondary position’ and will lead to a ‘historical testimony’ of the faith of the Minhotos” (1994: 46).

Despite the bishop’s and José da Silva Lima’s hopefulness, another ten years have passed and Our Lady of the Minho continues “an icon in project.” The investment made by the ecclesiastic authorities in upgrading the new pilgrimage center has not as yet led to a significant increase in people coming to the shrine, a number currently at between two and three thousand on pilgrimage days. So, if there was to be a moral of some kind to this story, it could well be that it takes more than a provincial costume to make a provincial cult. At least, it also takes time.

#### REFERENCES

- ALVES, Vera Marques, 1997, “Os Etnógrafos Locais e o Secretariado da Propaganda Nacional: Um Estudo de Caso”, *Etnográfica*, 1 (2), 237-257.
- AURORA, Conde de, 1929, *Roteiro da Ribeira Lima*, Ponte de Lima, Author’s Edition.
- BASTO, Cláudio, 1930, *Traje à Vianesa*, Gaia, Edições Apolino.
- BRITO, Joaquim Pais de, 1982, “O Estado Novo e a Aldeia Mais Portuguesa de Portugal”, *O Fascismo em Portugal: Actas do Colóquio realizado na Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa*, Lisbon, A Regra do Jogo, 511-532.
- CASTELO-BRANCO, Salwa El-Shawan, and Jorge Freitas BRANCO (eds.), 2003, *Voices do Povo: A Folclorização em Portugal*, Oeiras, Celta.
- CASTRO, Manuel Joaquim Gonçalves de, 1907 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), *Namoros do Alto Minho*, Oporto, Typographia Universal.
- CEREJEIRA, Domingos José, 2003, *Memórias da Serra d’Arga*, Caminha, Caminh@2000.
- CHRISTIAN Jr., William A., 1981a, *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- , 1981b, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- CLAVERIE, Élisabeth, 1990, “La Vierge, le Désordre, la Critique: Les Apparitions de la Vierge à l’Âge de la Science”, *Terrain*, 14, 60-75.
- COELHO, Armindo Lopes, 1985, *Senhora do Minho em Mensagem à Diocese de Viana do Castelo: Homílias de D. Armindo Lopes Coelho, nas Peregrinações Diocesanas à Senhora do Minho em 1983 e 1984*, Viana do Castelo.

- COUTINHO, Artur, 1997, *Mosaicos da Serra d'Arga*, Viana do Castelo, Paróquia de Nossa Senhora de Fátima.
- ELIADE, Mircea, n.d. [1956], *O Sagrado e o Profano: A Essência das Religiões*, translated by Rogério Fernandes, Lisbon, Livros do Brasil.
- FARIA, António Molho de, 1985 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), *São Bento da Porta Aberta*, Rio Caldo, Irmandade de São Bento da Porta Aberta.
- GARRIDO, Maria Teresa Santiago, 1984, *A Romaria de São João d'Arga*, Caminha, Câmara Municipal de Caminha.
- HOBBSAWM, Eric, 1983, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", E. HOBBSAWM, and T. RANGER (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1-14.
- ISAMBERT, François-André, 1982, *Le Sens du Sacré: Fête et Religion Populaire*, Paris, Minuit.
- JUST, Roger, 1995, "Cultural Certainties and Private Doubts", W. JAMES (ed.), *The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and Cultural Foundations*, London, Routledge, 285-308.
- LATOUR, Bruno, 2002, *Jubiler, Ou les Tourments de la Parole Religieuse*, Paris, Les Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond.
- LE GOFF, Jacques, 1988, *The Medieval Imagination* (translated by Arthur Goldhammer), Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- LEITE, Fernando, 1964, *História do Sameiro*, Braga, Confraria de Nossa Senhora do Sameiro.
- , 1991, "A Influência do Sameiro na Piedade Mariana, 1869-1962", *Theologica*, 22/23 (1/4), 3-18.
- LIMA, José da Silva, 1994, "Deus, Não Tenho Nada Contra...": *Socialidades e Eclesialidade no Destino do Alto Minho*, Oporto, Universidade Católica Portuguesa & Fundação Eng. António de Almeida.
- LÖFGREN, Orvar, 1989, "The nationalization of culture", *Ethnologia Europaea*, 19, 5-24.
- MARTINS, Moisés de Lemos, and Albertino GONÇALVES (eds.), 2000, *The Lady of Viana Festivities: Life and Memory of Viana Town*, Viana do Castelo, Grupo Desportivo e Cultural dos Trabalhadores dos Estaleiros Navais de Viana do Castelo.
- MEDEIROS, António, 1995, "Minho: Retrato Oitocentista de uma Paisagem de Eleição", *Revista Lusitana* (new series), 13/14, 97-123.
- , 2003, *A Moda do Minho: Um Ensaio Antropológico*, Lisbon, Edições Colibri.
- MELO, Daniel, 2001, *Salazarismo e Cultura Popular: 1933-1958*, Lisbon, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- MELO, Pedro Homem de, 1941, *A Poesia na Dança e nos Cantares do Povo Português*, Oporto, Imprensa Portuguesa.
- MEMORIAS do Sameiro, ou Narração Circunstanciada da Origem e Realização das Obras do Monumento da Immaculada Conceição da Santíssima Virgem e da Capella Commemorativa de Definição Dogmatica da Infallibilidade Pontificia Projectada no Monte Sameiro, Suburbios de Braga, 1882, Braga, Confraria de Nossa Senhora do Sameiro.
- OLIVEIRA, Ernesto Veiga de, 1984 [1971], "A romaria de São João d'Arga", *Festividades Cíclicas em Portugal*, Lisbon, Dom Quixote, 229-238.
- PEDRO, António, 1948, *Proto-poema da Serra d'Arga*, Lisbon, Confluência.
- PEREIRA, Benjamim, 1989, "Regionalismo Cultural: A Propósito da Reedição de 'Traje à Vianesa' de Cláudio Basto", *Cadernos Vianenses*, 9, 1-11.
- PIMENTEL, Alberto, 1905, *As Alegres Canções do Norte*, Lisbon, Liv. Viúva Tavares Cardoso.
- PINA-CABRAL, João de, 1986, *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve: The Peasant Worldview of the Alto Minho*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- RAMOS, Luís da Silva (ed.), 1878, *Sermões Selectos do Fallecido Padre Martinho António Pereira da Silva*, 4 vols., Braga.
- REIS, António Matos, 1993, "Introdução", *Minho: Desenhos de Manuel Couto Viana*, Viana do Castelo, Câmara Municipal de Viana do Castelo.
- RIBEIRO, Bartolomeu, 1975 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), *Nossa Senhora Aparecida de Balugães: Primeira Aparição Mariana em Portugal, 1702*, Balugães, Confraria de Nossa Senhora Aparecida.
- SANCHIS, Pierre, 1983a, *Arraial, Festa de um Povo: As Romarias Portuguesas*, translated by Madalena Mendes de Matos, Lisbon, Dom Quixote.
- SANCHIS, Pierre, 1983b, "The Portuguese 'Romarias'", Stephen WILSON (ed.), *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 261-289.
- SILVA, Augusto Santos, 1994, "O Jogo Indeciso entre Símbolos, Práticas e Políticas Culturais", *Dinâmicas Culturais, Cidadania e Desenvolvimento Local: Actas do Encontro de Vila do Conde*, Lisbon, Associação Portuguesa de Sociologia, 683-721.
- TURNER, Victor, and Edith TURNER, 1978, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, New York, Columbia University Press.

- VASCONCELOS, João, 1996, *Romarias: Um Inventário dos Santuários de Portugal*, vol. 1., Lisbon, Olhapim.
- , 1997, “Tempos Remotos: A Presença do Passado na Objectificação da Cultura Local”, *Etnográfica*, 1 (2), 213-235.
- , 1998a, *Romarias: Um Inventário dos Santuários de Portugal*, vol. 2. Lisbon, Olhapim.
- , 1998b, *Usos do Passado na Serra de Arga: Tradição e Objectificação da Cultura Local*, unpublished master’s dissertation, Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon.
- VELASCO MAILLO, Honorio M., 1989, “Las Leyendas de Hallazgos y de Apariciones de Imágenes: Un Replanteamiento de la Religiosidad Popular Como Religiosidad Local”, Carlos ÁLVAREZ SANTALÓ, et al. (eds.), *La Religiosidad Popular*, vol. 2 (*Vida y Muerte: La Imaginación Religiosa*), Barcelona, Editorial Anthropos & Fundación Machado, 401-410.
- VIANA, Manuel Couto, 1990, *Ferro-velho: Memórias e Estudos*, vol. 2, Viana do Castelo, Câmara Municipal de Viana do Castelo.
- VIEIRA, Carlindo, 1996, *A “Colónia de Viana”: 1931-1977*, Viana do Castelo, Paróquia de Nossa Senhora de Fátima.

## João Vasconcelos

### TRAJE E COSTUME NUM SANTUÁRIO MARIANO DO NOROESTE PORTUGUÊS DOS ANOS 1950

*Este artigo analisa a genealogia e os usos de um item particular da “cultura popular”: Nossa Senhora do Minho. Trata-se de uma imagem de Maria concebida no final dos anos 1950 que combina elementos iconográficos típicos da Virgem e da lavradeira, o símbolo regional do Alto Minho. Procuo situar a história desta imagem e do seu culto no cruzamento de (1) uma cultura religiosa popular local, (2) um movimento regionalista minhoto particularmente activo a partir dos anos 1920, e (3) orientações culturais e políticas eclesíásticas operando aos níveis internacional, nacional, diocesano e paroquial. Através destes enquadramentos, pretendo compreender não só como foi possível fundir as imagens da Virgem e da lavradeira numa só, mas também como o resultado dessa fusão se tem prestado a diferentes tipos de apropriação e significação.*

Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon  
joao.vasconcelos@ics.ul.pt